

KEYING AND ROLE PLAY IN BUSINESS ENCOUNTERS. SPATIAL, TEMPORAL, BEHAVIOR AND LANGUAGE CUES

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ABSTRACT: *This study proposes an approach business communication based on Erving Goffman's theory of the relational dimension of meaning, according to which meaning is not attached to the communication process, but generated within the context (frame) of each specific interaction. This automatically involves a complex process of keying, which basically refers to a series of paradigm shifts that individualize each instance of communication. Therefore, the present study aims at tracing the way in which the process of keying operates in business communication where the overlapping frames of everyday informal interactions and of formal, standardized communication generate, under the pressure of culturally inherited patterns, specific sets of spatial, temporal, behavior and language cues that assign well defined roles to the participants.*

KEY WORDS: *business communication; key; keying; frames; spatial cues; temporal cues; behavior and language cues.*

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1. INTRODUCTION. KEYING IN HUMAN COMMUNICATION

Stemming from the conceptual legacy of Emile Durkheim's macrosociological approach and the functional discourse of British social anthropology, Erving Goffman's book, *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, sets as early as 1974 the guidelines of a theory which, almost forty years later, still proves its efficiency by opening new perspectives in the study of human communication under various forms, from literal to artistic interaction. This theory sets forth the relational dimension of meaning based on the idea that the meaning generated in any human interaction is determined by what he metaphorically defines as the 'frame' within which a specific instance of communication unfolds. To be more specific, "... just like

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the picture frame defines an artistic representation of reality as a distinct, unique world, individuals rely on frames, which are culturally inherited forms of organization of experience, to structure the events and interactions they are involved in and invest them with significance” (Dumbravă, 2010, p. 83).

The concept of ‘frame’ and ‘framing’ was adopted by subsequent research in the field and it is still present, as a very productive perspective, in contemporary works of sociology and social anthropology. Although present theories display the concept under a variety of names, such as ‘background’, ‘setting’ or ‘context’, they all converge to the idea that human communication is endowed with meaning according to a set of rules and principles that pertain to the situation in which the interaction occurs rather than to the interaction itself. Under these circumstances, individuals engaged in any face - to - face interaction unconsciously place themselves in negotiating positions using different strategies to manipulate the exchange to their own advantage. The ability to act naturally and effectively within different and often overlapping frames, as well as the flexibility to adapt to different interlocutors and ‘roles’ is generically referred to by using the term ‘social skills’.

Expanding on Gregory Bateson’s observation that “... otters not only fight, but also play at fighting”¹, which points to their capacity to break the boundaries of a basic frame by modeling a pre - existing pattern of behavior, Goffman identifies the very source of social skills in the concept of *key*, defined as “...the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else” (Goffman, 1974, pp. 43-44). In the same sense, the process by which primary frames of communication are ‘transcribed’ with variations meant to loosen their rigid boundaries is called *keying*, a kind of tune of social interaction that turns individuals into efficient social actors. From Goffman’s detailed research on keying, we have selected for the purpose of the present study three elements that are defining for this process, namely:

- the transformation of already meaningful communication units in compliance with a ‘schema of interpretation’ similar to a play script;
- the awareness and acknowledgement of the interlocutors regarding the alterations that re - project the specific interaction within a different frame and assign specific roles to each participant;
- the existence of spatial and temporal cues to guide the development of the process, which also sends to the idea of staging.

The next section of the study will apply these three fundamental dimensions of keying to business communication in order to see how the multiple framing of such encounters determine specific alterations of primary frames and the assignation of roles.

¹ In Bertram Schaffner, ed., *Group Processes*, New York: Josiah Macy, Jr., Foundation Proceedings, 1955, p. 175

2. KEYING IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

Instances of business communication are basically characterized by two overlapping frames - one specific to informal, everyday speech and the other to formal business interaction. Taking into account that in any human exchange participants bring along their own social and cultural heritage under the form of what we generically call 'background', we cannot help noticing the multiple determination of this process. However, if in everyday interaction there are unwritten rules and culturally inherited patterns of verbal and non - verbal language, business interaction has, strict written rules of etiquette, less prone to negotiation. Therefore, business encounters are closer to ceremonial acts, where rituals are precisely outlined in a pre - existing 'script' and failure to observe them leads to breaking the frame and rendering the encounter inefficient. Therefore, within a formal context, the overlapping frames of everyday interactions and of standardized business interactions exert a double pressure on the 'actors' of the communication process, forcing them to alternate the already assumed 'everyday person' role with the 'business professional' role. Thus, the more formal the situation, the more bracketed will be personal identity in favor of the social role to be played. Actually, this is what Goffman defines as "...the dissociation [...] between the figure that is projected and the human engine which animates it" (Goffman, 1974, p. 573).

In this context, keying in business communication involves a precise 'scripting' process during which the primary frames of daily interaction are modeled according to spatial, temporal, language and behavior cues, all meant to foster power relations and different levels of collaboration.

A. Spatial cues

This type of cues refers to space management under various forms, from the efficient use of office space in different situations to rules of proper distance between interlocutors during conversation.

Office space management is a basic item in the 'staging' of a business meeting, as it automatically determines the roles of the interlocutors in the exchange. Office layout will, therefore, make the difference between *informal and collaborative* business relations, if chairs are set around a small table, or at right angles to each other, and *control or superiority* relations induced by someone who sits behind a large desk, facing the guests, seated at 'respectful' distance in smaller chairs.

Sitting position has such a dramatic impact on the development and outcome of business encounters that some specialists in the field went as far as talking about a genuine "language of seating". Thus, communication trainer Lillian D. Bjorseth shows the close relation between space and power management, by outlining the way in which the use of space casts well determined roles to the participants. Thus, chairs in a circle cast equal roles and relations of collaboration; a 'horseshoe' or a 'T' layout places the persons at the head of the table in leading roles, while theater or side - by - side seating encourages the role of listener rather than of speaker. In the same context, a raised speaking platform emphasizes the role of the speaker, but it is thought to lower, as it acts as a barrier between him/her and the audience (Bjorseth, 2000, p. 230).

To conclude, seating arrangements assign two opposite categories of roles:

- Sitting side-by-side or at 90° induces equality, adding psychological security and fostering relations of collaboration. It is not accidental at all that these frames overlap extensively with the one of close relations and small talk;
- Opposite sides mean dominance and competing attitude.

In close relation with seating stands another major spatial cue, namely *proxemics*. Since this issue was detailed in a previous paper², the present study will confine itself to delineating the connections between proxemics and keying. As this spatial cue is subject to double determination - the formality of the business encounter and culturally inherited standards - keying is of a more complex nature in this case. In combination with other non - verbal cues, proxemics adds different degrees of emotional charge to the verbal message. Therefore, 'tuning' involves deep awareness of the cues that enable us to adjust communication distance to the level of comfort specific to each individual and to foster a more positive response and cooperative behavior from our counterpart. In this sense, knowledge regarding the dynamics of personal space increases awareness of the following factors:

1. **Violation of personal space** refers to the discomfort people feel when someone who has not yet gained their trust enters their personal space (120 cm), automatically assuming the role of the invader. The invasion of someone's personal distance without establishing some level of trust first can cause the interlocutor to feel threatened and become defensive, sending out such non - verbal cues as moving away in order to regain personal territory.
2. **Power relationships.** Specialists have come to the conclusion that the way people use space in communication provides relevant information about such social cues as status, power, and confidence. Thus, a greater amount of personal space, under the form of big offices, apart from the rest of the employees, signals higher status and authority. Similarly, confident people are comfortable being permanently at the center of the attention, while lower status or non-confident people tend to withdraw to the back of the room. University studies have even shown that the students who sit front and center of the classroom received the highest grades in the class, while those who sat in the back and at the corners of the room received the worst grades.
3. **Material barriers.** Studies have shown that any object, such as a table, a desk, or even a drinking glass set between the interlocutors is an indication of defensiveness, either in an unconscious attempt to restore emotional comfort, or in a conscious effort to conceal dishonest intentions. (Low, 2003, pp. 211 - 212).

² See "Actions Speak Louder than Words" - *Body Language in Business Communication*, in *Annals of the University of Petroșani. Economics*, vol. IX, Part III, Universitas Publishing House, Petroșani, 2009, pp. 249 - 254

B. Temporal cues

Training consultant Morris Taylor shows that meetings are currently the most expensive communication activity in the corporate world, considering the salaries of participants, preparation costs, and the price of materials, facilities, and equipment. Given the financial considerations pertaining to them, meetings should be organized in such a way as to become efficient, productive activities, worth the time and the resources invested in them. The basic element of keying, in this context, is related with the punctuality of the participants. By modeling the frame of regular meetings, where time boundaries are relatively looser and susceptible of alterations from either of the two parts, the business meeting relies on a strict schedule, whose disruption has a negative impact on efficiency, productivity, and morale. Consequently, communication specialist Alexander Kjerulf suggests the following strategies to be implemented in order to keep the issue of punctuality under control.

1. **The meeting should always start on time**, even if some of the expected participants are late, because doing otherwise would have a double negative impact. On the one hand, it would disconsider the effort of the prompt participants and, on the other hand, it would convey the disruptive message that being late is acceptable, thus reinforcing the negative behavior;
2. **When the meeting begins, the door of the room should be closed** in order to draw attention to the people who walk in late and induce self - consciousness;
3. **The meeting agenda should be sent out in advance** in order to give the participants enough time to get the message and adjust their schedule accordingly;
4. **The most critical items should be placed first on the agenda** to stir the participants' interest and stimulate them to be on time;
5. **Solicit help from the secretaries and assistants** of chronic latecomers asking them to alter schedules or remind their bosses of the meeting time;
6. **Peer pressure** on potential late comers can be achieved by appealing to other participants to the meeting, placing punctuality as an item on the agenda and presenting the topic as a challenge to the group.
7. As an ultimate solution, **chronic late comers should be talked to in private** in order to clarify the importance of their attendance and, in extreme cases, to warn them of the consequences of not improving. (Kjerulf, 2007, pp. 121 - 122).

C. Behavior and Language Cues

In terms of business behavior and language, the keying of everyday conduct and talk takes into account strict standards of etiquette and well defined roles that differ according to the type of encounter. Starting from the premise that, as any human contact, the business relation largely depends on first impressions, keying is made by closely following a 'script' generally referred to as *business etiquette*. In this sense, business communication expert Lydia Ramsey delineates the following strategies meant to ensure successful initial encounters that will be the start of efficient collaborations:

1. **Standing up when we meet someone** in order to engage an equal level, eye - to - eye contact. A person who remains seated sends a message of disrespect to the interlocutor;
2. **Smiling**, because facial expression goes far beyond the verbal message;
3. **Making eye contact** to show people we are focused and interested in them;
4. **Introducing ourselves** and offering information about who we are (job, qualifications, position in the company we work for) as soon as we approach or are approached by unknown people;
5. **Offering a firm handshake** concomitantly with the greeting. According to Ramsey, in order to convey self - confidence and professionalism, such extremes as a bone - crushing grip or a weak, limp - wristed shake should be equally avoided. On the other hand, the expert points out that the contemporary business environment excludes gender related restrictions, as everyone shakes hands with everyone else in business;
6. **Making formal introductions**. In business, like in any formal context, the less important people are introduced. Another important detail is to provide information about each person, so that they should know why they are being introduced and have a starting point for their conversation;
7. **Paying attention to names** when we meet people, as it quite common for people think about what they are going to say next and not focus on the other person. The solution recommended here is to concentrate and repeat the name as soon as we hear it, in order to stand a better chance of remembering it later. (Ramsey, 200, pp. 49 - 50).

Besides adequate clothing and good command of body language, keying in terms of language in business interactions refers to the use of correct, proper language, which is of utmost importance for positive first impression and trust building in any business interaction, because speaking well reflects good education and professionalism. Adapting language to a certain social or business environment is essential because a wrong choice of words and expressions, or inappropriate language can place tremendous strain on human relationships and destroy credibility.

Specialists identify the following language cues that undermine relationships and targeted results either by disconnecting the audience, or generating reluctance or defensive attitude:

1. **The use of pompous language**. Pretentious language and a hyper educated, formal tone, trying to establish a level of expertise, create barriers that induce resentment and disconnect the audience. To avoid this, it is recommended to pay attention to verbal and nonverbal feedback, which will tell us whether the audience is following or not and allows us to switch to more familiar language and establish a rapport of equality rather than of dominance;
2. **Vulgar language** not only betrays a lack of self - control and disrespect for others, but it also has an irreversible negative impact on the reputation and image of the speaker;

3. **Negative tone** is a mixture of condescendence and disrespect that makes the difference between being confident and arrogant. Negative tones undermine communication because they generate pessimism and make people feel reluctant in developing relationships;
4. **Offensive, harassing statements**, as well as inappropriate humor and offensive comments, are both inappropriate and wrong, showing flagrant disregard for the audience's sensibilities and, therefore, generating frustration and negative response;
5. **Being insensitive** involves being unaware of the cues the audience is sending back during a speech or presentation and the consequent inability to change the delivery and/or the topic in case the response is negative;
6. **Abusing qualifiers** such as "*I think*" or "*it seems*" weakens the discourse by ambiguous statements, conveys doubt and makes the audience question and dismiss both the speaker and the message;
7. **Confusing words**, with abstract or multiple meanings, tend to send ambiguous messages and create vague images in the listeners' mind, confusing and annoying the audience. The solution to this problem is the use of concrete terms and specific messages, which generate clear signals and ensure connection and communication. (Laskowski, 2001, p. 10)

3. CONCLUSION

As fundamentally symbolic beings, humans communicate by successive encoding and decoding processes that define their relation with the environment and with one another. This permanent negotiation leads to a paradigmatic perspective on communication, in terms of which meaning is generated within the process itself, in accordance with culturally established systems of values and norms.

This approach, which Goffman refers to as *framing*, opens new perspectives on business communication as an instance of human interaction where the overlapping frames of culturally determined informal and formal interaction generate well defined sets of cues and assign specific roles to the interlocutor. Therefore, as a result of *keying* the primary frame of everyday encounters, the business interaction gets closer to a stage performance and it can be studied in terms of a particular script and well established roles, each with its pertaining spatial, temporal, behavior and language cues.

Consequently, by applying the process of keying and the role play approach to business communication we become aware of it as a double determined process, in which the ability to negotiate the boundaries between informal spontaneity and formal standardized behavior makes the difference between failure and success in business.

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