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## POWER AND COMMUNICATION

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### 1. Summary

The purpose of this paper is to discuss some of the principle ways in which power relations influence communication. A characterization of interpersonal power is given and the role of power in different types of activity that involve communication is discussed. A distinction is drawn between activities that have a conventional power structure and activities that only have such a structure informally imposed on them. Finally some of the behavioral characteristics of the exercise of power in communication are discussed and it is pointed out that these characteristics are not necessarily exponents of underlying power structures.

### 2. An example

Consider the following example:

(i) What are you doing

Imagine (i) as an utterance in the following three situations A) as uttered in a casual exchange between friends, B) as uttered by a teacher to a student in a classroom teaching situation, C) as uttered by a boss to a secretary in a work situation. For most people the usual activities and role-relations involved in the three cases bring to mind different possible interpretations of (i). In situation A it is quite likely that (i) be interpreted as a straight request for information. In situation B, however, (i) could easily be interpreted as a request to the student to be quiet and stop fidgeting. In situation C (i) can similarly be interpreted as a request for assistance. Thus, what we know about casual chats, classroom teaching and office work, in addition to what we know about the relationships between friends, between teacher and pupil and between boss and employee enables us to quickly embed the utterance

in one of these situations and construct a possible interpretation. An important part of this contextual embedding consists of reconstructing the power relations involved in the role relations and activity forms. It is these power relations in combination with a certain type of activity that primarily are responsible for the fact that the utterance in situations B and C more easily than in A can be interpreted as involving a request, i.e. an attempt to control somebody else's behavior and thus to exercise power. As can be seen from the examples, neither the exercise of power nor the underlying power relations have to be signalled directly by any features of the utterance itself. It is enough that the utterance is part of an activity which is greatly determined by role relations that involve differences in power.

### 3. A characterization of interpersonal power

Before continuing further, it might be useful to try to clarify the concept of power that is relevant to the present analysis by providing a definition of what we might call **interpersonal power**. A power relationship is said to hold between two or more persons if they can control each other's behavior or thoughts. The relationship is asymmetrical if one or more persons can control the behavior or thoughts of one or more other persons in a certain respect without the latter person(s) being able to control the former person(s) in the same respect. Thus, a power relationship between two persons can be asymmetrical in one respect and perhaps be reversed or equal in another, i.e. as you are my boss you give me orders at work but in the political society to which we both belong and of which I am the chairman I give you orders. However, control in one respect often seems to lead to control in another. If a relationship is in all respects characterized by asymmetrical power relations it is a **totally asymmetrical power relation**. All of the power relations discussed below will be asymmetrical but not necessarily totally asymmetrical.

The control of the person(s) wielding power can be exercised directly through positive directions or more indirectly by restricting only certain of a person's degrees of freedom or even more indirectly by a person's own restriction of his or her own degrees of freedom. The difference between the latter two alternatives is that the first involves the controller's superimposing restrictions on the controllee while the second alternative does not.

Thus, a person or a group of persons **have interpersonal power** or are **dominant** if their own degrees of freedom with regard to thought and behavior are increased through the restriction of the degrees of freedom of

others. Conversely, we can say that a person is subordinate if he or she must adapt his or her behavior to that of others and thereby decrease their own degrees of freedom.

For the understanding of power relations it is also important to note that they often conflict with certain ethical principles that can be generated by the so-called "golden rule". The "golden rule" tells us to treat other persons as we want to be treated ourselves. If we suppose that most people want to control their own behavior according to their own motives then they will dislike having to limit their own control in order to accommodate somebody else's wishes. This dislike is probably strengthened if there is a fear of punishment from the controlling person. Thus, the exercise of power involves a breach of the "golden rule", i.e. the person who exercises power will most probably have to treat other persons in a way that he or she (i.e. the exercisers of power) would dislike themselves.

Finally, some remarks on the relational nature of power. According to our analysis the exercise of and the yielding to power are interdependent. There can be no exercise of power unless there is a yielding to power and vice versa. Thus, no power

is exercised if the intended subordinates do not obey and no subordinating takes place if the wielder of power does not in any way use the degrees of freedom provided him by the subordinate. This is in general correct. However, a problem is introduced by the notion of consciousness. It seems reasonable to allow that one can exercise or yield to power without being fully aware that one is doing so. Social structure is often more effectively upheld if its maintenance is not conscious. The price one has to pay for admitting dominance or subordination without awareness is that the distinction between interaction that is characterized by dominance and subordination and interaction of a more egalitarian sort becomes difficult to investigate via interviews with participants and instead has to be almost totally a question of interpretation.

#### **4. Sources of interpersonal power**

The analysis of interpersonal power is also complicated by the fact that in human interaction there are several different factors that induce differences in power between people. Some of the most important are the following: distribution of resources and property, structural position with regard to

kinship, friendship and different institutionalized social activities, prestige, knowledge, charisma and dominant behavior. The most fundamental of these is probably uneven distribution of resources. A person who lacks a certain resource will be dependent on and thus easily subordinate to the person who possesses the resource in question. A special type of resource is constituted by access to sanctions such as punishments and awards. Usually this type of resource is combined with a surplus with regard to other resources and the sanctions can then be used to stabilize and conserve the power relation. The subordinates are prevented from freeing themselves of their dependence by the threat of punishment and are tempted to continue their dependence by awards.

The different sources of power are often combined with each other. There is much overlap between different sources of power and also much clustering of power functions. A certain sort of kinship connections are related to a certain sort of property control and a certain sort of structural position in institutionalized activities. But such combinations are not always the case. A person may own property without having inherited it. He or she may even own it without being to any great extent connected with the activities that are necessary for its maintenance. Or more extreme a person may succeed in exercising power by exhibiting dominant behavior without being connected with any other of the mentioned sources of power.

With regard to the power that emanates from having a certain position in an institutionalized activity, e.g. managing director of a company, things are complicated by the fact that a person may be involved in several different activities in different structural positions. Our managing director Mr. X may for example also be a private in the Salvation Army. Although a person may occupy very different positions in different activities, there is probably also here a tendency towards a clustering of power functions. Mr. X soon becomes an officer in the Salvation Army. At the very least there will often be overlap between activities so that Mr. X as a private will be able to draw on his position in another activity.

## **5. Types of activity and power**

The fact that there are so many different sources of interpersonal power and the fact that neither the wielders of, nor the yielders to power necessarily are aware of their wielding and yielding makes the empirical study of power relations so complex that some simplification is necessary to gain theoretical insight. The simplification I wish to suggest is to say that interpersonal

power, whatever its source may be, is always manifested in some type of interpersonal activity. If we wish to study how power relations are established, upheld or changed we must therefore study different types of activity such as fishing, debating, shopping or gossiping. Since most of them involve communication as their most important form of interaction, we shall therefore also be investigating how power influences communication.

One might here be tempted to suggest that some types of activity like debating or quarreling are purely communicative and others not. I think this would be a mistake since on closer inspection even these activities are not purely communicative. All activities seem to involve both communicative and non-communicative behavior, even though there can be large differences of degree and emphasis. Another question is whether one can analytically abstract the communicative aspects of an activity from the noncommunicative. This I believe is possible and I will in fact attempt to do so, but only after I have considered the influence of power on the activity as a whole.

I will, therefore, characterize the notion of activity somewhat more fully. The most important parameters that determine a certain type of activity are the following:

- (i) the purpose or goal of the activity
- (ii) the set of roles belonging to the activity
- (iii) the behavior and the instruments with which the activity is pursued
- (iv) contextual factors such as time and place of activity and beliefs and values attached to the activity
- (v) the results of the activity
- (vi) the conventional procedures relating and determining (i)-(v).

We can exemplify the six parameters by seeing how they apply to the commercial activity of buying and selling. The main purpose of the activity is to transfer goods from one person to another for monetary profit. The set of roles belonging to the activity are at least those of buyer and seller. The behavior and instruments with which the activity is pursued include at least such things as some means of payment (money, checks) and some type of negotiation involving questions about product, price and terms of payment. The contextual factors include such things as the type of place where one conducts commercial activities and the most appropriate period of time to do so, but also beliefs and values attached to the activity. The conventional

results of the activity include such things as change of ownership. The conventional procedures determine both the parameters themselves (what types of payment can be used, or whether negotiation has to include enquiries about health and consumption of food) and the relation between the parameters (different types of commercial transactions might require different means of payment and different types of negotiation and choice of time and place).

To the extent that an activity is regulated by convention there is thus a strong mutual dependence between the parameters. A certain type of purpose requires a certain type of role cast, behavior and context. It is however, important to realize that this interdependence is normative and that it applies to the activity type as it is given by convention rather than directly to actual activities as such. The actual course of an activity may not be the one prescribed and on the other hand what is prescribed by convention is never totally fixed. There is always room not only for deviation but also for change and accommodation due to characteristics and requirements of the environment and the participants.

The conventional activity types can therefore only be taken as normative approximations of actual activity. Factors such as idiosyncratic purposes, fatigue, aggressiveness, role overlap the overall social structure etc. are essential to the determination of actual behavior.

When it comes to the analysis of power structures we must therefore make a distinction between the power structure that by convention is inherent in an activity and the power structure which exhibits itself in a realization of the activity. The latter is always a result of an interaction between conventional and non-conventional factors. An additional difficulty is that activities may be pursued simultaneously or exert an influence on each other through the beliefs participants have about each other's memberships in other activities. For example, if one goes fishing and simultaneously carries on a debate, the activity will be a result of merging two activities. Similarly, it might make a difference if one's fishing companion otherwise is a policeman or a parson.

Thus, we can see that power structures can be described in two ways, either with reference to a conventional type of activity or with reference to actual occurring activity, where the latter can be seen as a function of the former in combination with other factors. Both types, however, can be described with the aid of the activity parameters mentioned above. The difference being that we for an understanding of actual rather than conventional power structure

take into account the actual purposes, personal identities, behavior, context and result of the activity.

The next problem concerns how the parameters can be used as an aid to determine the power structure of an activity. By considering the first parameter, the purpose or the goal of an activity one can find out if a certain power structure is directly presupposed by the activity. This is clearly the case if the activity is an interrogation or the giving of orders where an asymmetrical power relation is presupposed. Other activities such as shopping, fishing or quarrelling do not presuppose any clear power structure.

By considering the second and third parameters we find out what kind of role cast and behavior is needed to carry out the purpose. Here we can see that activities whose purposes do not require an asymmetrical power structure sometimes get such a structure superimposed on them. For example this is clear with regard to business meetings, debates, seminars and teaching where there exist elaborate procedures which empower one of the participants with the rights and obligations to direct the interaction, even though this strictly speaking would not be necessary. In fact, for most activities that require the coordination of several persons such structures are usually imposed. The fourth parameter allows us to tap the beliefs and attitudes of the participants about each other and about the activity. We can here include beliefs and attitudes that concern factors that are not directly part of the activity and therefore explain why activities such as flirtation, quarreling and conversation, when carried out for example between an employer and an employee, can show evidence of asymmetrical power relations even though such relations are not part of the conventional purpose, rolecast or required behavior of such activities. Actual power structure is often produced by overlap and transfer between activities.

The fifth parameter makes it possible to consider whether participants have had their degrees of freedom diminished or increased by the activity. This can be done by interview or some other method of estimation. If one receives a positive response, one can try to estimate why, by examining the first four parameters.

The last parameter has already been touched upon since it determines the conventional aspects of the preceding ones. The last parameter is interesting especially when one wants to consider discrepancies between actual and conventional behavior.

## 6. Power and communicative behavior

The view adopted in this paper regards the exercise of power in communication as an abstraction from the exercise of power in general in human interaction. This has a consequence that the communicative behavior itself never carries enough information to enable one to determine with certainty whether a certain power relation exists or not. This can only be settled by taking the whole background of the communication into account.

However, even though communicative behavior can be an instrument of power without any overt indications at all, often there are quite clear indications in the behavior itself of a power relation. Generally we can say that power is manifested by the exhibition of what we may call dominant behavior the purpose of which is to control somebody else's behavior or at least presupposes that somebody else limits their behavior in order to yield to the wielder of power. The converse type of behavior - **subordinate power behavior** is manifested by letting one's behavior be controlled or by in different ways limiting one's behavior to accommodate the wielder of power.

A power relation is most clearly manifested when one or more persons behave dominantly and one or more persons behave in a subordinate fashion at the same time. A little less clearly it can be manifested through the appearance of only subordinate or only dominant behavior.

However, as we have argued a type of behavior which looks neutral on the surface can on closer inspection turn out to be controlling or controlled. Conversely, behavior which on the surface seems dominant or subordinate does not have to correspond to any underlying relation of power. As perhaps is clear from the preceding analysis a more full understanding of the manifestation of power relations in communication requires insight into the power relations which are presupposed by the persons communicating.

Let us now look at some of the ways in which power relatively clearly is manifested in communication. Generally one can say that the exercise of power is expressed in two ways in communication: (1) either by attempting to control another person, (2) or by what could be called a lack of inhibition. Subordination on the other hand is mainly expressed: (1) by letting oneself be controlled and (2) by varying degrees of communicative inhibition.



To be a little more specific a power relation can determine how a communicative interaction is established. Often a person who holds a power relation to another person in one field will make use of this in another field by retaining the right to decide whether interaction should be started, what the purpose should be, what the context should be and what types of roles and behavior would be the most appropriate. Since many particulars of the interaction are partly determined by these factors, control of them is desirable. One should therefore expect a certain competition between people to control these factors.

After an interaction involving communication has got going, there are, however, still many ways in which power can be exercised. Let us consider the following aspects of communicative interaction:

- (i) turntaking
- (ii) feedback
- (iii) sequences
- (iv) prevalent types of speech acts
- (v) topic
- (vi) style with regard to:
  - a) syntax
  - b) morphology
  - c) phonology
  - d) non-verbal communication.

With these aspects in mind, I will discuss some ways in which communication can be used as a vehicle for the exercise of power.

Language, our most important means of communication can be used to influence and control in many ways. Our most common moods, the declarative, the interrogative and the imperative are all connected with a certain type of influence. The declarative is characteristically used in statements. A statement, in turn, is usually made to get another person to adopt the belief the statement expresses among his own beliefs about the world. If this succeeds this belief will then be among the beliefs that govern the person's way of thinking and acting. By conveying information via statements to another person one can thus indirectly govern another person's thinking and acting. This indirect control of other people is of course particularly grave when their ability to independently take a stand on the information conveyed to them is diminished. (cf Allwood, 1976). This is for example often the case in school teaching, propaganda and brain washing.

The imperative is perhaps the most characteristic mood of control. By way of an imperative one can directly control different aspects of another person's thinking or behavior. We therefore often find imperatives in activities where an asymmetrical power structure is clear such as in military orders or in the classroom. In general, one can say that all speech acts which involve a difference in control or a difference in information or other resources can be used to establish or maintain an asymmetrical power relation. Thus, permissions, demands, requests, and corrections can all have these functions. The same applies to the interrogative which is used for questions. By questioning somebody one requests an answer and if there is an underlying power relation this request then becomes binding. This is quite clear, for example, in interrogations but also for example in classroom interaction between teacher and students. Another way to mark a distinction in power is to give advice or positive feedback such as praise. This clearly implies that the donor of advice or praise knows better or at least is equal to the receiver of advice or praise.

But power can also be exercised by controlling the turntaking system (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974). This is particularly easy in activities with a role which is specifically designated for turn control as is the case in seminars and business meetings. Here the chairman can control who should speak and for how long. He can also interrupt other speakers should they stray outside the limits he wants to impose. The control usually also extends to the topics that should be treated and the sequence in which they should be treated. A very special type of power can be exercised in some activities by the use of so called performatives (Austin, 1962). These enable a person in a certain social position e.g. a pope, a judge, or a priest, so to speak to create reality by uttering certain words, e.g. the formulae of excommunication, sentencing or baptism.

The general characteristic of the subordinate is acceptance of control. He believes the information which is given to him and tries to carry out the wishes and wants of the wielder of power whether these be directly expressed through imperatives and orders or more indirectly as requests in interrogative or declarative form. He asks for permission and advice, and is in need of praise. In activities with an inbuilt turncontrolling system, he must either wait for the chairman to call on him to speak or find enough courage to want to speak and then demand his turn from the chairman and finally when his turn to speak comes have something relevant to say.

The exercise of power is however not only manifested through attempts to control but also more indirectly by what I have earlier called inhibition and lack of inhibition in communication.

The wielders of power can in general be said to show a lack of inhibition with regard to the means of communication while the opposite is true of those who are in a subordinate position.

By lack of inhibition I mean phenomena such as the following: A wielder of power usually expects others to let him speak. He can often without fear of sanctions interrupt other speakers. He can allow himself to speak longer than other speakers. He can raise any topic he wants in any way he wants. He can expect his choice of dialect, accent, style or terminology to be adopted by his partners in interaction. Non-verbally he can behave freely and in a relaxed fashion. He can use gestures and facial expressions to indicate his pleasure or displeasure.

A wielder of power does not have to use tag questions or expressions such as **eh** to elicit feedback or approval. Consider sentence (2).

(2) It is hot, (eh?, isn't it)

The tag question signals insecurity or the wish for support. It might be of interest to note that expressions such as tags in Lakoff (1975) are claimed to be one of the characteristics of female speech. If this is true there is a connection between female speech and speech which is to be expected from someone in a subordinate position.

Just as power can be expressed by a lack of feedback elicitation it can also be expressed by not giving positive feedback of the type we find in the expressions **yeah**, **umh** etc. Instead one might encounter negative feedback and correction of the other party's speech. The extent to which politeness is required from the wielders of power varies considerably from situation to situation and from culture to culture. But one would in general expect greater directness and less paraphrasing of questions and orders in phrases of politeness. Initial and preparatory sequences can be skipped with greater ease by superordinates than by subordinates.

As was the case with control, the behavior of a subordinate with regard to inhibition is in many ways the opposite of that of the wielder of power. A subordinate does not speak until he is spoken to. This can be advantageous since, in this way, he can find out what the dominating person thinks and adjust to this, if he should so wish. A subordinate falls silent if he is

interrupted and does not interrupt himself. His utterances are brief and he does not insist on any particular topic, style or terminology. If he has to initiate a topic, this can be done by way of long preparatory sequences containing his admissions of insecurity and incompetence. An important case here is when a person needs to communicate in a field where he has low competence in terms of knowledge, style or terminology. He is then forced into silence in order not to break the dominance of the wielder of power by a change of topic or style. This is one of the reasons for the difficulties many people have in communicating with representatives of the bureaucracy or the judicial system.

The person in subordinate position often feels insecure since he has greater reason to attend to what is doubtful in his own utterances. He is therefore in need of positive feedback. However, if his dependence on the power wielder is great he will not dare risk anything by using feedback eliciting phrases such as tags, even though these normally are a sign of insecurity. Both the demand for and the giving of feedback seem to presuppose a certain measure of equality.

A person in subordinate position often feels he cannot afford to be frank so he conceals his criticism or demands in phrases of politeness. Non-verbally this lack of frankness is expressed through inhibited expression of emotions and attitudes. Gestures are often also tense and reticent and tend to make the person seem smaller. In fact, this physical manifestation of lack of power is often part of greeting ceremonies for power wielders. In the classical Orient one was supposed to bow very deeply, sometimes all the way to the floor and then retire, crawling or walking backwards.

From this and other types of evidence one can thus see that the language of submission has a close relationship with the language of politeness. Many of our most common customs of politeness probably have their origin in submission.

However, I repeat that power relations are not always manifested by dominant or submissive behavior, and that dominant or submissive behavior does not always signify underlying power relations. Usually we cannot know if a certain type of communication is an expression of a power relation without investigating its background. I will illustrate this by an example of real classroom dialogue taken from Coulthard (1977). A teacher is playing a tape where a man speaks with a “funny” accent, in order to discuss with his pupils their reactions to the accent.

Teacher: What kind of person do you think he is? Do you -  
what are you laughing at?

Pupil: Nothing.

Teacher: Pardon?

Pupil: Nothing.

Teacher: You're laughing at nothing at all?

The teacher wants his question to be interpreted as a genuine question by the pupils - he wants to know what features of the accent are experienced as "funny", but the pupil, because of his assumptions about the difference in power between teachers and pupils and because laughing is usually met with negative sanctions by teachers, interprets the teacher's utterance as an order to stop laughing and defends himself as he would if he had broken a norm. The teacher has great difficulties in the dialogue, in making the pupils understand that his question is genuine, since this is not compatible with their view of what kind of activity teaching is.

In order to obtain a contrast to this interpretation we can compare the interpretation that would have been natural if we had observed the pupils (who are fairly equal in status) telling stories to each other in the break and a pupil who has just joined the group had asked the others: "What are you laughing at?" The natural interpretation would now be to understand the utterance as a genuine question.

The assumptions one makes about teaching as an activity and the role of the teacher in this activity will thus decide how one interprets the teacher's utterance. The power relations are presupposed and can only be made to appear clearly by studying what the power relations de facto are in the activity, in which the communication is embedded that one is interested in.

## **7. Establishment maintenance and abolishment of power relations in communication**

A question which finally might be of some interest is the question of to what extent participants in an interaction can control a power relation themselves. Most of the factors determining the distribution of power in social interaction and communication may to a greater or lesser extent be controlled or manipulated by participants in different situations of communication in order to establish, maintain or abolish a certain type of power relation. Some factors like the overall socioeconomic structure of a community which to a great extent determines which activities an individual

has access to are very difficult to control or change. Also very difficult to control are factors like personal position in socioeconomic, kinship or friendship structures and factors like personality and charisma, role overlap and role clustering.

The factors that are possible to control, at least to some extent, are those that are involved in the actual exercise of power. In the perspective adopted in this paper this means factors that are related to one or more of the main parameters of an activity. Thus, one can to some extent control the purpose, role cast, behavior, context, results and conventions that govern one's communication with other persons. One can, for example, by domineering behavior attempt to establish an asymmetrical power relation or by submissive or egalitarian behavior attempt to abolish differences in power. We need only think of the consequences the change from a formal pronoun to a more informal one has in many language areas.

Attempts of this sort in the direction of abolishing asymmetrical power relations are important since in general one can say that the presence of an asymmetrical power structure tends to weaken one of the most basic characteristics of human communication, namely cooperation, and mutual adjustment. If one has power one's need to cooperate or pay ethical and cognitive consideration (see Allwood 1976) to other persons can diminish. If the other person cannot adjust properly - too bad for him. Conversely the need for the person in subordinate position to cooperate and adjust increases. How else can he make sure that he will escape sanctions from the person wielding power?

Since cooperation and mutual adjustment are present in communication not only when it comes to the mutual adjustment of interpretations, beliefs, attitudes and purposes, but also in the continuous adjustment of phonological, gestural, lexical and grammatical features which seems to take place in most human communication (see Brenner and Hjelmquist 1975), power relations are probably quite detrimental for any kind of discourse that aims for greater understanding of ourselves and the world around us. They limit the competition of ideas and the giving of feedback which is essential for such understanding.

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