

Relationship Thinking

AGENCY, ENCHRONY, AND HUMAN SOCIALITY

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Enchrony

Like any form of animal communication, human interaction involves formally ritualized patterns of behavior that bring about relatively predictable effects on others in the social realm. On this conception of social interaction, there is a dynamic relation between a communicative action and the response it elicits. A response will often be a communicative action itself, engendering, in response, a further communicative action in turn. A fundamental claim of the approach outlined in this book is that any sequence of “communicative action and subsequent response” is by nature a unit, not a conjunct. The sequence cannot be derived from independently established concepts “communicative action” and “response.” This is because neither may be defined without the other. They are part of one and the same process. It is the dynamic *relation between* communicative action and response that is critical to defining them both. If we can speak of a communicative action in isolation, it is only because we have bracketed out the notion of response (and vice versa). A communicative action can be known to be a communicative action only insofar as we can imagine it eliciting a relatively predictable or motivated response. And note that communicative actions do not merely cause their responses to occur, as heat causes ice to melt.¹ This is because responses, as interpretants, are oriented not only to the perceptible signs out of which communicative actions are formed but also to their objects: whatever the signs stand for. A response in the sense intended here is a sign’s interpretant, as defined in Chapter 2, and explicated further in Chapter 4. An interpretant is a response to a sign that makes sense insofar as it is oriented to something the sign stands for.

“Response” here is not the more constrained notion captured by the term *answer* (e.g., to a question). It has a more general sense. A response is what follows and is occasioned by, and relevant to, something prior. Consider the B lines in these service encounters:²

(6)

A: Do you have coffee to go?

B: Cream and sugar? (starts to pour coffee)

A: What’ll ya have, girls?

B: What’s the soup of the day?

A: Do you sell key chains?

B: What?

The B turns do not directly address the ostensive content of the questions that precede them, though each is a response in the sense intended here. In its own way, each is relevant to, occasioned by, and makes sense in terms of, what came just before it.

We are applying a broadly semiotic theory, but we constrain its scope here to the experience-near domain of social interaction. Though all communicative behaviors are built out of signs, not all signs are communicative behaviors.³ How is meaning ascribed to communicative behavior by those who perceive it? In turn, how should communicative behavior therefore be formulated in order to secure this ascription? The kind of theory that can account for how social behavior is recognized or ascribed is a semiotic one, that is, a theory that defines the means by which people can use perceptions of their environment as cues for making inferences to things that are not directly observable; e.g., others' apparent motivations and goals. Our concept of communication must incorporate this fundamental dynamic semiotic process of sign and oriented response. When the response is also a swatch of communicative behavior itself, as it so often is, notice what this shows us. Each swatch of communicative behavior simultaneously occupies a backward-looking status as a response to what has just happened, and a forward-looking status as something that elicits a response next. This gives rise to a potentially unbounded sequence of pivoting sign-response relations. I refer to this forward-feeding temporal, causal-conditional trajectory of relevance relations as enchrony.⁴

3.1 Enchrony and Its Scope

Why introduce a new term if we already have adequate analytic concepts and terms such as sequence, adjacency, nextness, contiguity, and progressivity?⁵ A first reason is that each of these existing terms denotes something narrower than what I want to denote by the term *enchrony*. Enchrony does not replace those terms or concepts. It refers to a more general force that underlies their emergence. A second reason for having the term is to situate the idea within a broader, interdisciplinary set of alternative frames for the analysis of human communication (phylogenetic, diachronic, ontogenetic, microgenetic, and synchronic; see next section). An enchronic perspective on human communication focuses on sequences of interlocking or interdependent communicative moves that are taken to be co-relevant, and causally-conditionally related. Enchrony implies types of causal process that tend to operate at a certain temporal grain—conversational time—defining a frame that an analyst of communication may adopt. It is distinct from other possible frames, fitted to other purposes, which focus on other kinds of causal-conditional process and other temporal scales. Many others have emphasized the need to monitor and

distinguish different scales, from researchers of the early last century (e.g., Saussure, Vygotsky) to those of today (e.g., Michael Tomasello, Michael Cole, Donald Merlin, and Joanna Rączaszek-Leonardi).⁶ As psychologist Brian MacWhinney remarks, “we have to understand how diverse forces mesh in the moment.”⁷ I want to emphasize that the distinctions we are talking about are not made in terms of time scale per se, but rather in terms of causal frames—which, to be sure, tend to correlate with different time scales.⁸

3.2 Causal Frames for Understanding Meaning

The phenomena we examine in anthropology and related fields such as linguistics and psychology are biological. We are studying forms of life. So we are not exempt from one of the basic working principles for the study of any form of life, namely that different kinds of research question need to be posed within different empirical and theoretical frames.⁹ As the ethologist Niko Tinbergen emphasized, some research questions concern the development of an individual organism, others concern the evolution of the species, still others concern the proximal cause of a pattern of behavior, and yet others concern the survival or fitness value of some mechanism, independent from the other three kinds of question. See Table 3.1.

It is important to be clear about which frame we are adopting in analysis, for two reasons. First, we need to avoid the error of thinking that we are accounting for an entire domain when in fact we are dealing with just part of it. Second, we need to avoid the common error of confusing one of these frames with another. We cannot demand that one type of analysis, done through just one of these frames, meets the requirements of a different perspective than is actually being taken. Nor should we shift between frames without noticing or flagging such a shift.

To the four frames listed in Table 3.1, drawn from the biological sciences, the study of language has introduced two other methodological frames, following Saussure. He distinguished between two perspectives on the study of language: synchronic and diachronic. Similarly to Tinbergen on the distinctions in how we should study forms of life, the Saussurean view is that we must be clear about which frame is being used, since our questions about language will be posed and answered differently in each. A synchronic perspective on language focuses on the language as a set of relations within a whole system, let’s say as the full set of words, rules, and

TABLE 3.1
Distinct Causal/Temporal Frames for Studying Human Behavior (after Tinbergen 1963, *inter alia*)

Causal	What is the mechanism by which the behavior occurs?
Functional	What is the survival or fitness value of the behavior?
Phylogenetic	How did the behavior emerge in the course of evolution?
Ontogenetic	How does the behavior emerge in an individual’s lifetime?

structures that a speaker of the language will mentally represent at a given moment. By contrast, a diachronic perspective on language looks at how that system came to be the way it is through development of the language in history, beyond the course of any individual speaker's lifetime. These frames from structural linguistics introduce a new dimension to those first-order biological dimensions listed above. This new dimension is culture. Changes in cultural systems like languages happen on a distinct track, running in parallel to the biological changes that continue to take place in the manner of genetic evolution. The coexistence of biological evolution and cultural history constitutes what is called a dual-inheritance system.¹⁰ It is called dual-inheritance because a human child inherits two largely distinct legacies at the same time: a phylogenetic legacy in the form of DNA from the child's parents, and a historical legacy in the form of cultural knowledge from elders and peers.

Research on the psychology of language brings in another frame, the micro-genetic, in which an individual processes the behavior, for example when carrying out operations such as linearization or lemma retrieval during language production and parsing or word recognition during language comprehension.¹¹ When we add all these together, we get a set of frames for studying behavior in human social interaction.¹²

As Table 3.2 shows, enchrony is one among numerous frames that we can adopt in studying events of meaningful behavior. Are any of these perspectives privileged for specific questions? For the questions being asked in this book, I think there is good reason to consider enchrony as a privileged frame. Enchrony is the primary locus of social action. It is the central causal-conditional locus for the learning of language by children, for the carrying out of goal-oriented social behavior, and for the selectional processes that lead to the emergence of communicative conventions in historical processes of language change.

An enchronic perspective is grounded in trajectories of co-relevant actions, something that has been observed by scholars of social action from Schutz and Mead to Goffman and Garfinkel to Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, to Hanks, Clark, Goodwin, Heritage, Drew, and many others since. A communicative action or move has what Schutz referred to as "because motives" and "in-order-to

TABLE 3.2

Eight Methodological Frames for Studying Human Behavior, Each Defined by a Distinct Causal-Temporal Profile

Causal	What is the mechanism by which the behavior occurs?
Functional	What is the survival value of the behavior pattern?
Phylogenetic	How did the behavior pattern emerge in evolution?
Ontogenetic	How does the behavior emerge in an individual's lifetime?
Microgenetic	How is the behavior processed as it occurs?
Diachronic	How does an acquired pattern of behavior develop in history?
Synchronic	What is the abstract relational structure of the behavior?
Enchronic	How does the behavior fit in a contingent sequence of moves?

motives.” *Because* motives are what give rise to a move; they are what occasion it. *In-order-to* motives are the goals of the person making the move, what they hope to bring about next.¹³ I’m picking berries because I’m hungry, and in order to eat them. The behavior is a step in a sequence where each such step interlocks relevantly and coherently both with something that has just happened (or that was otherwise already true in the context of the move) and with something that happens next. This fits hand-in-glove with a Peircean conception of meaning as an inherently dynamic process, and it is distinctly unlike the static Saussurean version.¹⁴ It is the conception of meaning that is now best understood by analysts of recorded sequences of human interaction since Sacks and Schegloff.¹⁵

Communicative actions in enchronic sequences are hooked together in a special way. As both analysts and participants, we incorrigibly take enchrony to be operative, and we go to great lengths to interpret actions as connected by relevance,¹⁶ even when there is no such relation. As the sociologist Harold Garfinkel advised, people will always understand your actions, just not always in the way you intended.¹⁷ A vivid demonstration comes from a 1960s experiment conducted in the Department of Psychiatry at UCLA.¹⁸ Subjects were asked to participate in a new form of therapy where they would pose their problems as a series of questions, to which the counselor’s answers could be only yes or no. Unbeknownst to subjects, the series of yes-and-no responses that they received from their unseen “counselor” had been randomly predetermined. Whether an answer was yes or no had no relation to the question being posed. The “counselor” was simply reading from a pre-written list of yes-and-no answers. Yet all the subjects interpreted the responses as answers to their questions.¹⁹ Garfinkel’s rich discussion of the findings for this notion of an incorrigible projection of relevance reveals the tremendous strength of an enchronic stance adopted in everyday life. It shows up, for instance, in globally attested practices of divination,²⁰ in which essentially random events—such as whether a ritual spider walks to the left or to the right when released from its lair—are interpreted as rationally responsive to questions posed.

This glue or hook between adjacent moves can be characterized as a pair of arrows, one pointing forward from A to B, one back from B to A (Figure 3.1).

These are the two faces of relevance: effectiveness and appropriateness. The forward-pointing arrow represents the effectiveness of A, that is, the sense in which the sign A gives rise to B as an interpretant or relevant response. The backward-pointing

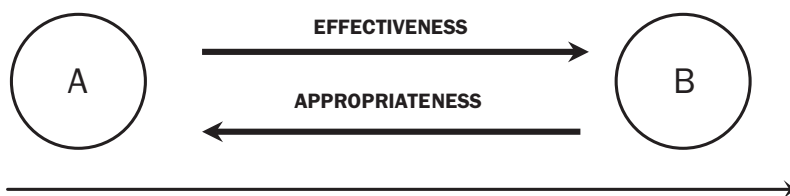


FIGURE 3.1 Enchrony points forward in time insofar as a move has effectiveness, and backward in time insofar as a move is appropriate.

arrow represents the appropriateness of B, that is, the sense in which B is fitting as a next action from A. John Heritage has characterized these two axes as context-renewing (A) versus context-shaped (B).²¹ Note that there is a second-order sense in which the arrows can go in the other direction.²² A move can have an effect on the *prior* move by retrospectively determining which action the prior move has effectively performed. Note, however, that it does this by exploiting the backward-looking relation of appropriateness. Suppose that Turn 1 is ambiguous: say, *The trash hasn't been taken out*, which might be a complaint or merely an observation. Turn 2 could disambiguate it by being a response that is appropriate to a complaint but not to an observation. In this way it would “determine the meaning” of Turn 1 retrospectively. Crucially, though, this is true only so long as Turn 2 is allowed to go through, without eliciting justified surprise or sanction. When people make “pre’s” to offers or invitations (e.g., *What are you doing this weekend?*), this is an opportunity for a response to treat the “pre” as the actual offer or invitation, or at least give a go-ahead (e.g., *Nothing much, Why?*), and if this type of response is not forthcoming (e.g., *I'm going camping with the family*), we need not say that it ever was one.²³ But this is not the same sense of effectiveness as intended here, that is, the sense in which Turn 1 is what causes or occasions or gives rise to Turn 2 having taken place at all.

In each move in a sequence, an agent is “updated”. The knowledge and experience of an agent is constantly renewed, and to the extent that multiple people are involved in the process, then the shared common ground, similarly, is updated at each increment. In an enchronic frame, each move updates the interactional horizon on an array of actual and potential lines, through things like updating the mental state of an addressee, changing an addressee’s status, updating what is mutually manifest, all of which will then cause or allow certain interpretants to be produced next. Each increment changes the *statuses* of the participants (see Chapter 5), including their dispositions, rights, and duties. These changes may be more or less predictable. So if you are an on-duty cab driver and I get into your cab and say, “Central railway station, please,” I can be fairly sure that what happens next is that you will drive me to the station. It’s less clear what will happen, though, if halfway there I remark, “Oh, I left my phone at home”; should you turn around? Was it just an exclamation? You might ask me what I want you to do. The updated horizon includes all varieties of common ground, in the sense meant by psychologist Herb Clark²⁴, as well as the technically specifiable contents of Agent A at any point; e.g., all the words they know, all the ethnographic background they possess, all their personal experience, etc. This is also where a synchronic system is updated, assuming that by synchronic we mean the actual complete contents of someone’s representations of a cultural system at a given moment.²⁵

3.3 Normative Organization

Now, the following point is critical to understanding the anatomy of enchrony: effectiveness and appropriateness are normative notions. Our attention is drawn to these

vectors of relevance only when there are violations of normativity. The less we subprehend a next move, the less likely it is to be appropriate. The more likely B is to elicit surprise or sanction, the less appropriate it is to A, and the less effective A has been in eliciting a response. I am not referring to surprise or sanction at the content of what is communicated per se, but at the relation of relevance or appropriateness to what is being responded to. And note that “what is being responded to” can cover not just prior communicative actions such as the question that precedes an answer but also other types of signs, including preexisting states of affairs such as the physical structure of a grocer’s store and the receptive stance of the shopkeeper that make it relevant for a customer to approach the counter and state what she wants to buy.²⁶

Consider this example from an audio recording of a group therapy session in the United States²⁷:

- (7) 1 Rog: It’s always this um image of who I am
 2 ’n what I want people to *think* I am.
 3 (0.2)
 4 Dan: And somehow it’s unrelated to what’s going on
 5 at the moment?
 6 Rog: Yeah. But tell me is everybody like that or
 7 am I just out of [it].
 8 Ken: [I- Not to change the subject
 9 but-
 10 Rog: Well *don’t* change [the subject. *Answer* me.
 11 Ken: [No I mea- I’m on the subject.
 12 I’m on the subject. But- I- I mean “not to
 13 interrupt you but-” uh a lotta times I’m sitting
 14 in class, I’ll start- uh I could be listening.

In lines 6 and 7 Roger asks, “But tell me is everybody like that or am I just out of it?” The fact that this is in the form of a question sets up a strong normative expectation that an answer be provided next, and when this is apparently not forthcoming—i.e., when the norm is violated—in lines 8 and 9, Roger is evidently within his rights to sanction Ken and invoke his entitlement to be answered, as seen in line 10. In Ken’s subsequent response he acknowledges Roger’s entitlement.

Of course, surprise and sanction are measurable in degrees. Suppose John asks Paul, *Is that a martini you’re drinking?* If Paul’s response is *No*, this will run against a preference for confirmation.²⁸ But at the same time a *no* answer conforms precisely with an anticipation or subprehension that the addressee will respond to the question by giving the information that was asked for. A *no* answer may be mildly inapposite, but it would not be as surprising or sanctionable as, say, if the addressee were to ignore the question and remain silent where response had been due; here, *Hey, I asked you a question* would be a justified pursuit of the normative target by way of sanction—see example (7) above. The possibility space for degrees and kinds

of surprise and sanction is a complex one, and hardly explored.²⁹ It is also a difficult thing to study, given the tacit, buried nature of subprehension. It is not so much that one literally expects to get a particular interpretant; it is rather that one does not expect the alternatives.

When people hold others accountable, normatively expressing sanction and surprise, this helps to regiment, qualify, and reproduce the ever-present properties of appropriateness and effectiveness that are inherent in chains of communicative relevance. From this communicative relevance, we ultimately derive not only interactional sequences³⁰ but also a bedrock of public, norm-governed accountability for each increment in a communicative trajectory. The notions of effectiveness and appropriateness, defined as they are by subprehension and the accountability that may result from transgression of this subprehension, take social interaction and transform it into a morally charged affair.

For all social creatures, a poorly formed or poorly chosen move may be ineffective, but only among humans can such a mismatch lead to moral accountability. Inappropriate responses draw attention, and are potentially accountable. This accountability is natural given the fundamentally cooperative nature of human social life.³¹ Our propensities for moral policing, including punishment, form an indispensable part of maintaining the viability of a cooperative bias in large social groups.³² Not surprisingly, these propensities for moral monitoring and accountability are well expressed in communicative practice. The normative nature of enchryony means that we cannot begin to examine human communication without entering a realm of morally governed social behavior.

* * *

The notion of enchryony is relevant throughout this book, and it will be discussed further in subsequent chapters. Now that we have introduced the basic idea of enchryony, we need to elaborate the semiotic process that underlies it. This will require first pulling back from the experience-near level of enchryony, though we will come back to it in Chapter 6.