Involvement

Involvement was first invoked systematically as an analytic category in the early 1980s in two areas of socio-linguistic and discourse analytic research. The first of these is the interactional sociolinguistic tradition heralded by Gumperz's (1982) work on discourse strategies and communicative breakdowns in crossethnic and crosscultural interactions. In this body of work, 'involvement' refers to the willingness and ability of conversational partners to initiate and sustain interaction. It is seen as a prerequisite to the success of any conversational encounter, and is rendered possible by the presence of a shared body of linguistic and sociocultural knowledge among conversationalists. The second area of research in which the term 'involvement' was originally used tackles the problem of linguistic variation across modes of communication (principally the differences between spoken and written language). In this body of work, best illustrated in the work of Chafe (1982, 1985), spoken language is hypothesized to differ structurally and stylistically from written language in terms of several functional parameters, including involvement: spoken language, particularly when produced in face-to-face contexts,

differs from written language in that its structure reflects the fact that speakers pay greater attention to the act of communication, to their interlocutors, and to the 'experiential richness' of their verbal output than writers, who are most concerned with 'producing something that will be consistent and defensible when read by different people at different times in different places, something that will stand the test of time' (Chafe 1982: 45). The opposite of involvement in this body of literature is usually referred to as 'detachment' (cf. also Elias 1987).

Seeking inspiration from both these traditions of research, Tannen was the first to propose an explicit definition of involvement. Involvement, according to this definition, is 'an internal, even emotional connection individuals feel which binds them to other people as well as to places, things, activities, ideas, memories, and words' (1989: 12). Tannen shows how involvement is produced and maintained in conversation through the use of various discourse strategies, ranging from the repetition of phonemes, words, and phrases, to the frequent use of images and attention to detail. The use of such devices enhances the coherence of connected discourse and triggers the participants' involvement by highlighting this coherence. The successful use of involvement-marking strategies is closely linked to the persuasive power of talk in many different contexts of social life.

As can be expected when dealing with such a broad category, involvement overlaps with and conjures a great many other categories, some better established in the analysis of verbal interaction than others. For example, work in *conversation analysis* (see *Conversation Analysis*) has shown how conversationalists display, in a highly coordinated fashion, various degrees of 'engagement' (or of its opposite, 'disengagement') with posture, gaze, and the formulation of their utterances (see *Gestures*; *Kinesics*); the amount of engagement displayed by interactors changes rapidly during a conversation, and these changes can dramatically affect the course of interaction (see *Interaction Process Analysis*). Other categories with at least some theoretical relevance to the notions of involvement and detachment include emotional identification (e.g., with the topic of discourse, with interlocutors), high versus low affect, relative distancing, participant status, point of view, and alignment. The relationship of these categories to involvement–detachment remains largely unexplored.

A further potential problem with the use of 'involvement' as an analytic tool is the fact that it does not represent a unified category. As Chafe (1985) points out, one can distinguish between at least three types of involvement: the speaker's self-involvement; the participants' involvement with one another; and the speaker's involvement in the content of the discourse he or she is deploying (see *Discourse*; *Discourse Analysis and Literature*; *Discourse Analysis and Drama*). While the three types of involvement may go hand in hand in certain contexts (Tannen 1989: 139–40), each may have significantly divergent effects on either the discourse or the extradiscursive context of the interaction. For example, the self-involvement of a speaker can easily co-occur with a lack of involvement in the interactive context (see *Context*). If different types of involvement can have independent values and consequences, the validity of

the category as a cohesive unit of analysis must be called into question.

The exact status of involvement remains an open question: is it a psychological category (as tacitly assumed in much of the relevant literature), with an implicit claim to universality, or is it a sociocultural category, which may or may not have a universal basis? While it is likely that, in all cultures, some sort of psychological connection between interactors is a prerequisite for successful communication, the nature and extent of this necessary psychological connection differ greatly across groups, subgroups within societies, and situations. Contrast, for example, cultures in which interlocutors are expected to provide a steady flow of back-channel cues (see *Conversation Analysis*) whenever another interactor is holding the conversational floor (as in many Mediterranean speech communities), and cultures in which a noninterfering, impassive demeanor is the norm associated with listenership (as in much of Native North America). In each context, particular involvement-marking discourse strategies will have dramatically different meanings: it is one thing to express involvement because the norms of one's culture dictate that this should be done as a matter of course, and a very different thing to mark involvement because one is moved to do so in a particular situation, despite the devaluation in one's culture of the frequent marking of involvement. A crosscultural dimension to the question, which the current literature on involvement lacks, further brings into the picture the thorny problem of 'sincerity' (Irvine 1982), i.e., the extent to which communicative displays of emotionality (including involvement and detachment) can be read off as symptoms of 'genuinely felt' emotions. This problem remains largely unaddressed in the literature to date.

Involvement is usually analyzed by focusing on the frequency and prominence of involvement-marking discourse strategies, such as pronominal reference (see *Anaphora*; *Discourse Anaphora*), repetition, and *reported speech* (see *Reported Speech*). But the semiotic status of most involvement-marking strategies is complex: like other affective devices in language, linguistic markers of involvement are indexes (see *Peirce, Charles Sanders*). Thus they are highly polysemic and often ambiguous, and their meaning is highly context-bound. For example, the use of reported speech can add vividness to discourse, which in turn generates involvement (Tannen 1989: 93–133), but it also has many other potential linguistic and social functions. In particular, it aligns the reporter and reported events in a particular manner, which in turn affects the relationship of the addressee to both the speaker and the reported events. Thus, creating and maintaining involvement is only one of the semiotic functions of reported speech (see *Semiotics*), and the prominence of reported speech in a discourse fragment cannot be assumed to automatically generate involvement. In contrast, interactors may be highly involved with particular aspects of a communicative situation, while failing to demonstrate this involvement overtly in language use. For example, spoken and written discourse produced in Western academic settings is typically devoid of affect-marking strategies, a reflection of the emphasis that Western academics (and much of Western middle-class culture) place on reason, skepticism, and disinterestedness (Besnier 1990). Yet many

rhetorical and linguistic devices are available in academic discourse to travesty high personal involvement (and other manifestations of emotional arousal) as 'reason,' which is socially more acceptable than involvement in these contexts (Bailey 1983).

The contrast between involvement and detachment (be they considered to be dichotomous or simply two poles of a continuum) belongs to a longstanding Western tradition of viewing feeling and thinking as fundamentally dichotomous in the makeup of human beings: while feelings are subjective, irrational, and potentially problematic (although useful resources in certain contexts), thoughts are objective, rational, and controlled. In recent years, psychological anthropologists have cast doubts on the universal applicability of this and other related dichotomies (e.g., passion versus reason; heart versus mind), arguing that the contrast is a reification of the Western commonsensical conceptualization of personhood, which many other cultures do not share (Lutz 1988; Lutz and White 1986). While this conceptualization and its components may be useful in understanding human action and interaction in Western settings, their usefulness in other social and cultural settings remains an open question. Involvement and detachment are useful heuristic devices in understanding discourse processes in certain contexts, but their power as explanatory tools deserves further critical scrutiny.

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