Impression Management and *Performance* – Points of Convergence between Sociology, Discourse Analysis and the Study of Mentalities

Ana-Maria STOICA
University of Pitesti

Résumé: A partir d'une série de concepts – comme *la gestion des impressions, la performance, la façade, l'expressivité*, etc., – introduits par Erving Goffman, nous nous proposons de mettre en évidence des points de convergence entre la sociologie de la communication, l'analyse du discours, la pragmatique et l'étude des mentalités. Il est bien connu que les ouvrages de E. Goffman constituent le point de départ de quelques études significatives dans le domaine des sciences de la communication, de la pragmatique et de l'analyse de la conversation. Dans le présent article, nous allons démontrer que l'analyse des modalités linguistiques d'expression des mentalités peut elle aussi bénéficier des contributions théoriques et pratiques du sociologue américain tant pour l'étude des interactions courantes que pour la communication dans un cadre institutionnel.

Mo**ts-clés:** gestion des impressions, performance, analyse du discours, pragmatique, mentalités.

Although Erving Goffman's most important works were published almost half a century ago, they represent a cornerstone in approaching social phenomena and continue to arouse the interest of specialists in various fields of research. His inductive methods, as well as his subject matter – the study of everyday life – were at that time unique. As Charles Lemert (1997: 1) states, "To read Goffman was, and is today, to be thus evoked – called out into a netherworld in which the peculiar and the familiar are perfectly joined".

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It would be impossible to offer here a thorough or an exhaustive description of all the aspects Erving Goffman covers in his studies. As a consequence, we shall synthesize the most important notions he introduces in his work with the greatest theoretical and applicative impact – *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) – and which, in fact, reappear more or less in his further studies (*cf.* E. Goffman 1961, 1967, 1969, 1981).

In order to describe the functioning of the relations between individuals, groups of individuals and society, Goffman appeals to the 'life as a theatre' metaphor and compares social interactions with a drama. The dramaturgical model is used to investigate face-to-face interactions. In Goffman's opinion, in order to understand the macro-level of social institutions, the researcher must first study the micro-level, the interactions taking place inside an organization or inside a social system. Using the dramaturgical perspective, the inductive investigation, case studies and small units as the object of research, E. Goffman describes different types of interactions specific to the anglo-american society, as well as its functioning at a certain moments in time. He also gives examples of interactions from other societies in the attempt to avoid false generalizations and interpretative extensions. As L. Vlasceanu (2007: 16, 17) points out, "he prefers comparison because only by comparison we can identify differences and similarities which transcend the borders of time and those of the social and cultural space".

The individual is considered to be an *actor* preoccupied with *playing a part* for an *audience*. He thus becomes a *character*, usually a positive figure. The person who presents himself in front of the others projects a *definition of the situation*, in which the image of the self occupies a central position. In order to produce favourable *impressions*, he engages in an *impression management* process, a process through which he attemps "[…] to conceal or underplay those activities, facts, and motives which are incompatible with an idealized version of himself and his products" (E. Goffman 1959: 48).

The person engaged in an interaction is also a *performer* whose task is to emphasize, through his *performance*, the positive

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features of the character, to outline his *personal front*, "[…] that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance". Thus, the main purpose of the performer is to control the attitude of the others, especially their reactive behaviour at his presence. The *front* is related to social status and manner, to physical appearance and interactional role (E. Goffman 1959: 4-22).

Another important section of Goffman's work deals with the interaction between groups of individuals, called *teams of performers* (a single individual could sometimes represent a team), with the interaction within teams and between performers of a team and *outsiders*. A team is defined as "[…] a set of individuals whose intimate cooperation is required if a given projected definition of the situation is to be maintained. A team is a group, but it is a grouping not in relation to a social structure or social organization but rather in relation to an interaction or series of interactions in which the relevant definition of the situation is maintained" (E. Goffman 1959: 40). Having certain communicative interests, individuals belonging to certain groups cooperate in order to induce and manage impressions connected with a positive group image.

On the other hand, the performance of individuals and teams is analysed with reference to the physical space where it takes place (on the *front stage* – the exposed region or on the *back stage* – the hidden region, where the preparations for the performance unfold) and which determines different types of behaviour or different attitudes (*cf.* E. Goffman 1959: 92-117).

It is well-known that Goffman's studies inspired numerous works of sociology, anthropology, psychology or ethnomethodology. Some of the basic concepts he introduced also lay at the basis of certain significant contributions in the field of communication, pragmatics, discourse analysis and conversation analysis. The connection between Goffman's micro-sociology and these disciplines is obvious: *pragmatics* is roughly defined as "the study of language in context", *discourse analysis*, through an inter-

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disciplinary approach, combines the study of texts with that of the social place in which the text occurs and *conversation analysis* has as an object of study the discourse in interaction (*cf.* Jacques Moeschler, Anne Reboul 1994; Dominique Maingueneau 1996).

A series of works which have been published since 1970s (Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson 1978; Geoffrey Leech 1980; Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1990-1994), focusing on the investigation of *politeness* – one of the most important aspects of communication – start from the terms of *personal front*, *face saving*, *face want* or *face work*.

In our opinion, it would also be possible to associate Goffman's distinction between *actor – character – performer* with *polyphony* and the problem of separating the *enunciation instances* (*cf.* O. Ducrot 1984). It is also to be noted that Goffman's idea of *performers* who cooperate in enforcing one shared definition of the situation very much corresponds to H. P. Grice's (1975: 165-175) *principle of cooperation* which states: "Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by accepted purpose or direction of talk exchange in which you are engaged".

Impression management is realised through what Goffman calls *sign vehicles* (verbal, non-verbal or paraverbal). Impressions are induced by *expressivity*, understood from the viewpoint of its communicative function. Thus, in interaction, a performer *gives expressions* and is preoccupied both with identifying the *expressions* that others *give off* and with maintaining control of his own score, of the inferences triggered by his verbal and nonverbal behaviour. In fact, in Goffman's opinion, interactional life is inferential: "Individuals […] live by inference in their dealing with the physical world, but it is only in the world of social interaction that the objects about which they make inferences will purposely facilitate and hinder this inferential process" (E. Goffman 1959: 3). We can recognise here the connection with the *direct* and *indirect speech acts* (*cf.* J. Searle 1969, 1975), as well as with the study of *implicit meaning*, developed by the French school of pragmatics and discourse analysis (*cf.* Fr. Rastier 1981, C. Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1986).

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It has already been demonstrated that mentalities, which are influenced by individual, cultural, social, historical and geographical variables, reflect in language, that the study of mentalities from a linguistic perspective is perfectly possible and that mentalities reflected in language could be approached with the help of various theories and concepts provided by interdependent fields of research: semiotics, philosophy of language, the analysis of idiolects and sociolects, pragmatics, the theory of enunciation, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, etc. (*cf.* Mariana Net 1994, 2005).

Moreover, the sociology of communication could participate in the study of mentalities. E. Goffman defines the *front* as a "collective representation", as "an expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community". The process of *impresion management* and the *performance* of individuals in society vary according to different "sources of impressions" and depend on models, values, fashion, habits, as well as on the interactional practices which prevail in a certain society, community or, at a smaller scale, in a certain institution. The sociologist also states that "When an individual presents himself to others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so in fact, than does his behavior as a whole" (E. Goffman 1959: 27, 35, 220, 223).

If the *front* represents both a "collective representation" and an "expressive equipment" (verbal and non-verbal) it is obvious that the study of mentalities from a linguistic perspective could benefit from the results of Goffman's work. On the other hand, to give just few examples, etiquette and politeness are social and cultural institutions which vary in time and space. Taboos are also understood differently, depending on epoch, country, culture and a certain world-view of individuals or group of individuals. Social constraints, variable in time and space, reflect in the use of the terms of address. The choice for a topic of conversation or another, for a certain verbal and non verbal behaviour very much depends on the setting in which the interaction takes place, *on stage* or *on the back stage*, in Goffman's terms.

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Therefore, a provisional conclusion of this bird's eye view could be that mentalities, ideologies and the specific means of expressing cultural and social identity are incorporated into and could be studied through a wide range of social interactions and discoursive practices. Yet, another remark to be made is that Goffman's micro-sociology is a pivotal work which continues to offer new perspectives for the study of social phenomena, perspectives which today could not avoid interdisciplinary challenges.

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