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CHANGES OF FRAMES IN INSTITUTIONAL TALK

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Abstract: *The paper starts from the concepts of frame and participants' alignment as defined by Goffman (1986) and Tannen (1993) and uses them in the analysis of a telephone conference in a multinational company where English is the lingua franca. The purpose of the analysis is to identify the frame changes and the linguistic devices that mark them as well as the possible misunderstandings that such changes can cause for participants.*

Keywords: *institutional talk, frame, alignment, lexical realization, misunderstandings.*

1. Introduction

The paper analyses a telephone conference in a joint company in order to identify the changes of frames and the linguistic devices marking them. It also looks at participants' alignment during the conference.

2. Frame and Alignment: a Theoretical Background

Hofstede (45) defines organizational culture as a type of human behaviour that has mainly an interactional character, and that employees consider acceptable. Communication as interaction has several features: practical, as it accomplishes acts by means of talking, social, as it involves participants that interact, and cultural, as the system of shared practices and meanings are learned and taken for granted. Institutional talk can be oral or written and both forms have as their aim to carry out professional tasks; it is constructed by participants and it is constrained in terms of topics and speech acts.

Very broadly, frames refer to people's expectations about the world, which are based on previous knowledge and against which they compare and evaluate new experiences (Tannen 17). As the definition indicates, frames are culturally determined, which lends them a subjective character. It is by means of frames that speakers interpret the activities they are engaged in and, if the frame is not correctly interpreted, serious misunderstandings may occur. Watanabe (204) states that the theory of frame can help linguists to identify the common elements that interactants share and can also provide a basis for understanding causes of miscommunication if participants belong to different cultures. In their interpretation of frames participants are helped by contextualization clues (Gumperz cited in Watanabe 179), defined as linguistic features that contribute to signaling contextual presuppositions. Watannabe (178) also defines frame as a term that

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refers to *messages defining intentions of communication* and she compares the concept with an actual frame that delimits a picture and helps us to distinguish between what the picture presents and its surroundings.

Another important concept is footing or alignment defined by Tannen and Wallace (73) as the relation that participants adopt to themselves and the others involved in the interaction. Alignments are negotiated during an interaction and they express the way in which the interlocutors produce or receive an utterance (Hoyle 115).

Discussing the linguistic evidence of participants' expectations, Tannen (41) lists omissions, repetitions, backtracks, hedges, negatives, contrastive connectives, modals, inexact sentences, generalization, additions.

In her analysis of frames during a game played by two boys, Hoyle (115) identifies various levels: she describes an outermost frame, in this particular case the play, an outer one, sportscasting, as the two boys pretend to cast a table tennis match, and an inner one, the boys switching from their own self to the assumed one, that of sportscasters.

Schiffrin (231) describes "between frame activities", that mark the shift between one main frame and another, from example from professional talk to jokes and "out of frame activities", which take place outside the frame, an example being the negotiation of turn-taking before starting the actual activity.

Other linguists, such as Schiffrin (233), refer to frame by another term, interactive frames, defined as *what people think they are doing when they talk to each other*. The concept is also related to "knowledge schemata", defined as participants' knowledge about situations, actions and actors.

3. Participants and Setting

The data were collected at an international company, specialized in software, whose main office is in Belgium[1]. The activity is organized in teams and each team has a team leader. The team members have telephone conferences with their team leaders and more rarely face-to-face meetings.

The recording, made in the Romanian branch of the company, is of a telephone conference; the team consists of 6 members, 5 Romanians (R1,2,3,4,5) and a foreign member (F2) and the team leader, F1, of Belgian origin. F1 is based in Belgium and F2 is based in a third location. The length of the conference is 43 minutes. At this conference the researcher (L) is also present; her purpose is to record the meeting.

There are five stages in the meeting – the greetings and the introductory part, then the participants introduce themselves, as F2 is new, then the third part, current professional tasks, where the discussions proceeds as a series of questions and answers interrupted by descriptions; the fourth stage consists of team members describing their current activities and then the meeting is closed.

4. Data Analysis

The outermost frame is that of a meeting, as indicated by the way in which the communication is structured, the topics that are discussed as well as the turn-taking, while the outer frame is a professional one, as indicated by the lexis and the speech acts. Below the other frame changes are analysed, with comments related to the footing and to the lexical realizations of both frame changes and footing.

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4.1. Change from Social to Professional Frames

At the beginning of the telephone conference the participants greet each other, after which the team leader introduces the topics to be discussed.

e.g. 1 R1: HI. XXX Romania here
hello?
R2: hi
R1: // hi F1
F1 : // hi F1
R2: hi F1
F1: are you all there?
R1: //yes
[…]
F1: OK. good.
this call is a bit special
because we have a new err attending called S,
I propose that first we do a tour of the table if I can call it table
(laughter).
then your turn,
it's all you OK?

The transition is marked by F1's saying *OK* and then announcing the special features of this conference – there is a new team member.

Both the beginning and the end of the conference are a combination of social and professional frames, as the participants have a good relation.

The end of the meeting marks the transition from a professional to a more social frame; before saying goodbye F1 clearly states what has happened so far *I see we made the tou*r, makes sure there are no more questions and then closes the meeting:

e.g. 2 F1: I see we made the tour
then any other questions?
R?: //No
R?: //No
F1: OK
R1: see you
R2: bye

In all these instances he acts as the leader, deciding how and when the meeting should start or close, the other participants accepting his decision.

4. 2. Changes from Professional to more Personal Frames

During the first part of the conference, at F1's suggestion, the participants introduce themselves because F2 is a new team member. Each one combines his professional presentation with different frames, such as evaluation, narrative, personal, etc. Below some examples are provided.

F2 combines his professional introduction with narrative and evaluative elements:

e.g. 3 F2: hi actually ere er I joined XXX
from eight nine months
before last August ah,
ah at XXX I joined here
and before that I was working with acoustic group
basically I was working in high frequency acoustics
but but yeah, the the the whole experience
I, I,I have with acoustics
and it was good and that sort of things
and and before joining XXX
I was working in the [unclear] systems for two years er,
and before that I was working
[…]
but my my main experience in [unclear] is
in CAT particularly
and particularly in workbench .

The narrative part is indicated by the times he provides (*nine months, last Augus*t) and connectors such as *before*, and *before that* which are both frequently used. He also evaluates his professional experience by specifying his strengths (*CAT and particularly workbenches*) and the way he felt about the job - *good experience.*

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Unlike F2, who combines description with narration and evaluation, R5 describes his professional experience by listing the activities in which he was involved. He also introduces personal elements, as he mentions the fact that he moves to a different team.

e.g. 4. R5: so in many ways for me this is the last call for structure
because I moved, I was moved to MAV team so
F2: ah, OK,OK yeah OK
R5: and previously I worked mostly for for seven years for a company
which was involved in different a different type of software
mos mostly data transfer over satellite, streaming,
high transfer and multicasting.
F2: OK. thank you R5

He starts his turn with *so,* and then mentions his being transferred, by mixing the active and the passive voice and not finishing his sentence.

R1 adopts a different approach – he starts from a personal level and moves to a professional one; he thinks he has met F2, to whom he is introducing himself, so he says that they met before; both F1 and F2 indicate that they would like to hear about his professional experience, so R moves to that topic. This is a case of misunderstanding, as R1 adopts a personal approach, while F1 expects a professional one, which he indicates by OK; R1 acknowledges the signal and moves to presenting his professional activity, marking the transition with *some some words about, so…*

e.g. 5 R1: hello, I'm R1 .
we knew in err Belgium last year err in december
F1: yeah, OK, yeah?
F2: oh, OK,
R1: Ok, so I think err we know some some words about .
eh so I joined XXX in August last year
F2: OK
R1: err and then we have some we had some er trainings here
and then I worked for IO restraints
then for err Nastran automation test objects,
and then for err offsets
and for Nastran FRS test objects also

Another situation illustrating the same frame change, from professional to personal, is presented below by the exchange between F1 and R5; R5 leaves the team on the day of the conference and F1 marks this by switching from professional to a more personal frame.

e.g. 6 F1: I also want to thank you for the part you had in the structures
so it's a pity that you have to go to XXX
we would prefer to keep you on board of course,
but it's part of the life,
[small laughter]

The change from the professional to the more personal frame is marked by *I also want to thank you,* after which F1 moves back to professional issues.

4.3. From Professional Issues to Jokes

There are many instances when the professional conversation is interrupted by jokes, but the participants return immediately to the duties to be solved.

One example is at the beginning of the conference, when the team leader suggests having a round-the-table presentation of the participants, the round table being a virtual one.

e.g. 7 F1: I propose that first we do a tour of the table if I can call it table (laughter).
then your turn,
it's all you OK?

This change of frame is marked by laughter, as all participants seem to appreciate F1's joke.

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Another example is during the introductions; R5 describes his professional experience and then jokingly implies that his colleagues are not familiar with the current tasks; F2 takes up the jokes and announces his colleagues that he is not familiar with some professional issues either:

e.g. 8 R5: hi, I'm R5.
I've started with XXX Romania from feb from February last year.
I worked in structure team only,
so er I worked on B mesh modelling for seven B,
that was one of the major tasks I've worked on
and here er for so I am not sure if you're very familiar
(laughter)
with all the subcomponents of structures
F2: no, some of the things I already know but OK,
er I'll make familiar with all
(laughter)

The frame is delineated by laughter (twice) while linguistically this change is marked by false starts *and here, er for so I am not sure*.

The last example in this series combines jokes with personal frames; R1 is not clear about his responsibilities and F1 clarifies them for him, indicating that R1 is supposed to do more than he expected:

e.g. 9 R1: all the tasks that are in the err time loggings are err are for mine?
F1: what do you mean for you?
(laughter)
R1: so, err in that time logging there are a lot of tasks.
F1: all for you.
R1: all for me.
OK
(laughter).
Thanks
[…]
R1: OK,
(laughter)
OK thanks
F1: happy?
(laughter)
R4: are you happy.
R1: I am not happy but err what I have to do.
(laughter)
F1: just to keep you busy, eh?
R1: I should drink a beer
(laughter)
(2)

The misunderstanding is clarified by F1 who repeats R1's words *all for you* and then the team leader continues in a joking manner by asking R1 if he is happy (happy can refer to the number of tasks or to the fact that R1 knows the answer now) and next by telling R1 that he has so many tasks to be kept busy.

4.4. Smaller Frames

The overall meeting frame can be divided into smaller frames, such as explaining, giving instructions, describing, sequences of questions and answers.

Below are a few examples, the first one illustrating a change from instructions to explaining.

While F1 is presenting the way in which he would like the team members to fill in the log sheet, R5 interrupts F5 to ask him what happened with his report: .

e.g. 10 F1: and you're back with the final worksheet.
F2: so for you to start the sheet to put the two [unclear] back
R5: F1 I'm R5. I did not receive the weekly report
F1: yes, I know. I just put yours last week is it a problem for you?

R5 announces his interruption by saying who he is and then raising the issue he wants to clarify.

Another example is the change from description (R5 describing his current task) to R3's request for explanation. After making sure that the previous exchange

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has been completed, marked by F1 thanking R5 R1 takes the turn:

e.g. 11 R1: hi F1, I'm R1
F1: hi R1
R1: so I would have to ask you something
uhm so one thinh uhm should I ask
….

There are many frame changes, all caused by Romanian team members, who ask questions about their professional tasks after their turn has passed. They announce that they return to an earlier topic or that they raise a new issue by labelling their turn, as in the example above - *I would have to ask you something*.

These interruptions could be interpreted as misunderstandings, as Romanian team members return to previously discussed issues, while F1 would like the meeting to proceed without interruptions.

4.5. Out-of-frame Situations

Out-of-frame situations relate to participants' organizing their discussion, negotiating their turn or settling things which do not relate to what is currently discussed.

One such example is F1's interrupting the speaker to explain to somebody else something about the speaker: .

e.g. 12 R4: hi, I'm R4
I joined XXX from first of january last year,
I'm also from the beginning in structures team,
[…]
F2: oh OK
F1: R4 and R5 are the two first who joined the structure team
F2: OK,OK

F1's intervention about R4 and R5 means to provide more details about them to the new team member; the intervention is not linguistically marked in any way.

A similar example is the negotiation of the turn: the team leader states the next item on the agenda, presentation of current activities, and invites the team members to start; the team members discuss about who should start:

e.g. 13 F1: can we do now a quick tour, tour the usual one
err to explain what you are doing?
err the tasks,
not in details technically,
but then everybody knows a bit I hope [unclear]
that you are in the team.
[…]
R3: yeah
F1: so who'll start?
[4]
F1: can we start with Brasov?
R?: da
R4: so. should we start or
F1: look, we'll start
R4: OK, I'll start I'm R4

Another example is F1's acknowledging the presence of the researcher (L) who records the meeting:

e.g.14 F1: we also have a professor from the University of Brasov?
L: yeah, I'm here, hello. glad to meet you.
I'm L err and I want to be as unobstrusive as possible
so please
(laughter)
F1: OK
L: OK. thank you
F1: it's possible you know that we also study in the university ?
F2: OK: about [unclear] national and international communication ?
L: Yes
F1: and do you study there [unclear] somebody
coordinator in the University of Brasov?
L: uhuh
F1: a coordinate I would call
L: OK
F1: and to study the way we communicate

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OK?
am I correct?
L: yes. perfectly correct. yes. thank you. thank you.

The team leader wants to make sure he has understood correctly the reason for the researcher's attending the meeting, to study the way the employees communicate; the researcher tries to be as unobtrusive as possible and thanks him, and F1 starts the meeting.

5. Conclusions

The team leader is the one that structures the meeting by indicating the way in which it should proceed (presentation of professional experience, discussion about current tasks, closure of the meeting). He marks these changes by explicit words: *I suggest we do this, I see we made the tour*.

He always leaves time for participants to ask questions or to bring up tropics related to the one discussed - *any questions, any other questions* but he closes their turns when he considers appropriate, usually by thanking them.

The other participants align themselves as team members, changing this footing when they ask questions and thus initiate a new topic themselves. Very frequently these topics bring the discussion back to an earlier subject; the team members' alignment changes – they are no longer recipients of instructions or explanations but initiators of a new topic.

The most frequent frame changes in the meeting are small ones, with participants moving from explaining to justifying, describing, narrating or asking and answering questions. All the new topics raised by all the participants are clearly indicated by words aimed to clarify the purpose of the intervention.

The team members also indicate changes of frame by saying what kind of issue they raise – *I have a question, can I ask you something*. *So* is also frequently used by foreign and Romanian participants, marking the change of frame. There are few instances of conflation, combining professional topics with jokes or personal issues.

There are few frame changes identified in this telephone conference and they never represent large or long shifts from the topic under discussion. The reason is possibly the fact that being a telephone conference, the participants have to make sure that no misunderstandings occur and that everything is clear In conclusion the analysis indicates that no cultural difference affect participant's understanding of what is going in the meeting.

Notes

[1] The data were collected as part of a CNCSIS-funded project whose aim was to identify communicative and cultural practices specific to two multinational companies in the area of Braşov. The whole corpus of data consisted of about 14 hours of spoken interactions in English, out of which this telephone conference is a part. The conference was audio-recorded and then transcribed.

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