

On “Getting It”: Resistance, Temporality, and the “Ethical Shifting” of Discursive Interaction

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Abstract:

An interactionist theory of discourse offers an explanation of why sometimes—not because they do not understand the language, not because they are unintelligent, and not because they are morally deficient—our interlocutors simply do not “get it,” and no amount of argument will help. Discourse succeeds only when interlocutors allow the resistance to their cognitive expectations they encounter to guide their revisions of signs' meanings by shifting their apperception between and within fields of ethical relationships. These shifts enable interlocutors to account for the temporal orders of events structured by the ethical fields within which their discursive partners act, enabling them to adjust their own discursive actions accordingly.

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Article:

An interactionist theory of discourse offers an explanation of why sometimes—not because they do not understand the language, not because they are unintelligent, and not because they are morally deficient—our interlocutors simply do not “get it,” and no amount of argument will help. Discourse succeeds only when interlocutors allow the resistance to their cognitive expectations they encounter to guide their revisions of signs' meanings by shifting their apperception between and within fields of ethical relationships. These shifts enable interlocutors to account for the temporal orders of events structured by the ethical fields within which their discursive partners act, enabling them to adjust their own discursive actions accordingly.

At the recent Democratic National Convention, criticizing John McCain's pronouncement that he believed the country's economy was fundamentally sound, Barack Obama declared: “It's not because John McCain doesn't care. It's because John McCain doesn't get it.” The implication is that McCain cannot understand the problem, not because he does not know the language, not because he is stupid, and not because he is morally defunct, but for another, more radical reason, one that makes Obama's articulation of the problem eloquently accurate to some but mere empty rhetoric to McCain and others.

What does it mean to “get it” or not “get it”? What has to happen in order for someone who does not “get it” to “get it,” and how will we know when she or he does? To answer to these questions, seemingly so simple, is actually quite complicated. It requires a certain orientation toward discourse itself and an acceptance of this pragmatic doctrine: We cannot separate our meanings from our truths, if our truths are our beliefs upon which we act. Kenneth Gergen has expressed the point succinctly: “Words (or texts) within themselves bear no meaning; they fail to communicate. They only appear to generate meaning by virtue of their place within the realm of human interaction. It is human interchange that gives language its capacity to mean, and it must stand as the critical locus of concern” (263-264).

Discursive Interactionism

But *how* does interchange give “language” its apparent capacity to mean? The answer lies in the fact that discourse is necessarily social, the social is necessarily temporal, the temporal is eventual, and events re-order time. In order to explain that answer, let me describe something of the perspective from which that answer makes sense.

Here I will refer to this perspective generally as “discursive interactionism.” A development of pragmatism, it is the view that the meaning of an intentional event, such as an utterance, is the product neither of its coherence with an already existent linguistic or cultural system of conventions, nor of its correspondence to an already existent set of “real” things, nor of its mere effects upon its perceivers. Rather, the meaning of an intentional event is the relation between the effects the agent expects the event to produce and the effects it actually does produce, so that meaning *continually emerges* as the agents interact. From this perspective—admittedly a radical one to most people—there is simply no such thing as *la langue*, or “language,” in the sense we have come to accept as normative during the last century; that is, there is no *a priori*, abstract entity, no structured, synchronic “system” of rules and conventions we need know in advance to make our *parole*, our concrete utterances, intelligible.¹

Although languages, in the sense of abstract entities that mediate between our minds and our world, are non-existent, what do exist, of course, are the noises, marks, and gestures we habitually use to communicate. From an interactionist perspective, we understand their use in discursive events by means of the same inferential processes that we use to understand other events in our world. These noises, marks, and gestures do not, as traditional language theory claims, re-present the world to us; rather, because they are things themselves like any other things, we use them much as we use tools—to interact with other things—not indirectly, as we do with tools, but directly, as extensions of our very bodies, in order to direct others' attention to the objects and relationships that concern us. As Davidson has argued, “We do not see the world through language any more than we see the world through our eyes. We don't look *through* our eyes, but *with* them.... There is a valid analogy between having eyes and ears, and having language: all three are organs with which we come into direct contact with our environment. They are not intermediaries, screens, media, or windows” (*Truth* 130-131). Moreover, through a recursive process, we use these sounds, marks, and gestures socially; that is, we use them in anticipation of how others will interpret our purposes for so using them.

The most well-known contemporary American theorist of this alternative, causal explanation of discourse is Donald Davidson, and his theory derives from a position he calls anomalous monism, which “resembles materialism in its claim that all events are physical,” but it rejects the materialist thesis that “mental phenomena can be given purely physical explanations” (*Actions* 214).² Anomalous monism undergirds Davidson's causal theory of meaning and his explanation of the method interlocutors use to come to anticipate how their interlocutors will use marks, gestures, or noises in order to effect the responses they intend. This method does not require that we share, in advance, a “language”: what is important to this method is not that our “codes” match in advance of our discursive interchanges, but that we share a similar method of adjusting our use of signs when responses do not match anticipations.³

As Davidson sketches this inferential process, interlocutors engage in a dialogic interplay, with each speaking, writing, or gesturing as she or he anticipates how the other anticipates how she or he will use noises, marks, or actions, and with all participants continually revising their communicative behavior in response to their counterparts' actual responses. The “theory” we have of how the other will respond is giving way continually to another theory in passing.⁴ What makes Davidson's theory interactionist and not merely dialogical is that it regards discourse as an interaction among people and the *objects* of their discourse. By “object” here and throughout I mean “the focus of one's attention.” Thus an “object of discourse” is always the object of a perspective or “attitude”—that is, of a disposition to act toward the object in a certain way. Moreover, as an “object,” its ontological status, for us, depends upon the way we are disposed to act toward it: a “discursive object” may be specified as a concept, person, thing, fantasy, sign, relationship, and so on. In Davidson's theory, the very function of discursive processes is to direct another's attention to those objects and their relations with which we are concerned. However, we cannot attend to nothing, and the objects we attend to have “perspectives” and “attitudes” themselves. That is, they themselves are disposed to act or behave toward things in certain ways: a stone we call “white” is one disposed to reflect light differently from one we would call red; a stone we call “heavy” is more disposed to fall to the ground than one we can carry easily and would call “light.” Objects of our attention therefore “resist” actions, including discursive actions, from perspectives that disregard their own dispositions, and the ways the objects resist under certain conditions is precisely what we can “know” about them.

Davidson thus shares with other interactionists a disdain for the poststructural conception of discourse, summed up in Derrida's notorious dictum, “*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*” (“There is nothing outside of the text”) (*Grammatology* 158). For Davidson, the shareability of the *objects* of communication—not of the conventional *means* of communication—determines what interlocutors can believe their counterparts can rationally intend, and thus what of their counterpart's discourse they can potentially understand. Such objects are shareable precisely because they can resist, in similarly systematic ways, the interlocutors' expectations of them. Another way to put this is to say that an “object”—a focus of the interlocutors' attention—is itself, along with the persons involved, a *participant* in the interaction, a participant that has its own dispositions to act in certain ways. So, just as I will resist your characterization of me as “servile” by responding to your actions in ways that are not servile (as you understand the term's use), a glass of kerosene will resist your characterization of it as “delicious” in much the same way—by resisting your expectations.

Revising to Resistance—Triangulation

Davidson calls the interactive process that produces the conditions necessary for such sharing “triangulation.” Triangulation refers to the response and counter-response of (minimally) two interlocutors to a resistant third object that both human interlocutors can identify as the “common cause” of their respective responses. Moreover, the interlocutors must react not merely to the object, but to the interaction itself. Because “the only way of knowing that...the second creature or person...is reacting to the same object as oneself is to know that the other person has the same object in mind” (*Subjective* 121), the interlocutors must engage in a process of discursive revision that continues until the responses the interlocutors receive are of the sort they expect. Without such an object on which responses can converge—by which the responses to it of one person can confirm or dispute the responses to it of another—there can be no communication. With or without sharing a “language,” an *a priori* system of conventions, in advance, interlocutors must engage in some such process in order for each to know that the other knows that he or she knows, and so on, that they are communicating about the same things.

The reason the process is necessary for each to know that the other knows, and so on, is that what the interlocutors come to know together is the ways the objects resist their intentions toward it. We can describe these resistances as relations within the object, and between the object and other objects. The set of these relations, what the object will come to *be* to the interlocutors, is unified by their common relationship with, or attitude toward, the object. The signs they use during the interaction—their gestures, marks, or sounds—do not constitute the object, for the set of relations that the objects comes to be for them is constituted *neither* prior to comprehending that the sign refers to the object, *nor* subsequently to comprehending that the sign refers to the object they have already perceived. Rather, the constitution of the object, the interpretation of the signs they use to interact with it, and the comprehension of the relations between the object and the signs are one and the same event. In short, the mental events are identical with the physical events.

For example, if you and I come from different social groups and have no common “language,” when I point at a couch and say “couch” you will not necessarily think my word “couch” indicates a “couch.” Such an object may not even exist for your society. You might think that “couch” indicates leather, or furniture, or obstacle, or that it could be translated into your language as “mine,” or “sit down,” or any of a thousand different things until interactions with the object I had indicated to be a “couch” take place, such as my pointing to another couch not leather and saying “couch,” or saying “Sit on couch” and then sitting on the couch followed by “Sit on floor” then sitting on the floor. If you were to join in sitting on things and calling them “couch,” and so on, and observing not only my reactions but the couch’s reactions to the interactions—to its resistance or consent, as it were, to our intentions toward it—before too long we would both have a fair idea of how the other uses the word “couch” as we gradually triangulate upon a common object of the discourse. The important thing to note is that both I *and* the couch “resist” your possible misinterpretations of my use of the sign “couch.” Not only will I resist if you interpret “couch” to mean “edible,” but the couch itself will resist if you try to eat it. The couch, as it were, has its own say in the conversation.

Successful discursive interaction depends upon interlocutors taking a special ethical attitude toward each other—what Davidson calls “interpretive charity”—especially when communication matters most, when we cannot make sense of the other's words. When a speaker's speech and actions violate the anticipations of her interpreter, he will tend to interpret that speech and behavior *as meaning what he would have meant had he said the same*, so that when the interpreter cannot make immediate sense of the speaker's utterance (as when the speaker says “It is raining” when the sky is blue and the sun is shining), *if the interpreter does not extend charity* he will tend to regard the speaker's utterance as being irrational, incorrect, or deceptive, rather than, say, figurative. Under the rule of charity, however, in which speakers and listeners assume that the other is indeed rational and does indeed make sense about the world, even when the other seems to make no sense, this mutual regard motivates the processes of recursive revision that eventually brings interlocutors to a shared understanding of the objects of their discourse (*Inquiries* 136-137, 152-153, 196-197).

Revising by Shifting Ethical Fields

Davidson himself offers us little insight into how this revisionary process works other than to say that it is “a mysterious process” (106) and that a “passing theory” (of how one's interlocutor will interpret one's words) “is derived by wit, luck, and wisdom from a private vocabulary and grammar, knowledge of the ways people get their point across, and rules of thumb for figuring out what deviations from the dictionary are most likely” (*Truth* 107). In *Inventive Intercourse*, I have argued that Davidson's theory “is, in fact, a minimal description of heuristics” and “hardly the 'mysterious process' Davidson seems to think it is” (35). Here I want to go further to argue that what interlocutors often must do before they can successfully interpret—that is, before they can adjust their use of words and their perception of objects to those of their discursive partners—is, above all, to change the “ethical field” within which their respective utterances make their sense.

The concept of a “field” (generally attributed to Michael Faraday, who invented the concept of the “electro-magnetic force field” in order to describe “action-at-a distance” for charged particles) gives us the ability to explain how physical change (or, from a social and rhetorical perspective, behavioral change) can occur without taking recourse to a medium.⁵ Newtonian physics hypothesized such a medium, the so-called aether, to explain the transmission of heat and light through apparently empty space; structuralist (and poststructuralist) linguistics hypothesized such a medium, the so-called language or culture, to explain the transmission of beliefs from one person to another. Einstein clarified the concept of “field” by rejecting “acting-at-a-distance” outright, explaining that the mass of one body does not affect the motion of another either instantly or mediately, but by changing the gravitational field in which both bodies move. In other words, one body affects a distant body only by affecting the field they occupy together.⁶ The field itself is not substantial, and we apprehend it only by observing its effects on the objects within it. How, and whether, a field will affect an object varies. Wood is not at all affected by magnetic fields, for instance. Thus an action that makes no sense with respect to one field may be perfectly sensible with respect to another. Moreover, objects that exist in one field may be non-existent in another, and changes occurring in one field may exert no effects on

another (e.g., atoms simply do not exist for a baseball game, and nothing that happens in baseball can affect the atomic field).

All this is true for the ethical fields with which rhetoric is concerned, as well. Take, for example, a meadow in the middle of Pennsylvania. It can “be” a field of action in numerous ways—a field for the farmer's plowing, for the hunter's shooting, for the developer's building, and so on. Objects there for someone acting in one field—say, the tracks the hunter attends to—simply are not there for another, while the “same” objects—say, the pile of wood that is an obstacle to be removed for the farmer, but “cover” for the hunter—are not the same to each. That is why interlocutors, before they can adjust their use of words and their perception of objects to those of their discursive partners, must be able to “shift” from one “ethical field” within which their respective utterances make their sense to another in which it will make sense to their partners.

The fact that people who are engaged in different purposive activities apperceive different objects is fairly obvious. Here to “apperceive” has two senses: (1) to perceive something while being conscious of perceiving it and (2) to perceive something in terms of prior interactions.⁷ Less obvious is this: Because all purposive activities occur in habitual, prioritized sequences, ethical fields have not only a spatial but a temporal order, and so the “shifting” required to communicate successfully with someone acting in a different field requires us to not only “account” for the objects of their attention but to adjust our actions to their actions' timing. In order to interpret their discursive actions successfully—in order to “get it”—we must re-order time.

Revising by Re-Ordering Time

I have argued elsewhere that one aspect of this temporal re-ordering is that the holistic discursive interactions Davidson describes occur through a unitary, inferential process having *simultaneously* cognitive, ethical, and affective phases.⁸ During these phases, expectations, reactions, and revisions mutually determine one another as interlocutors adjust to events. The acts' phases correspond roughly to what the rhetorical tradition refers to as *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*; however, traditional theorists tend to treat these as elements in a compositional explanation of discourse production, and they tend to explain them by referring to *a priori*, abstract entities as the ground of their occurrence: they explain *logos* by reference to linguistic and logical systems; *ethos* by reference to individual character traits and social systems; and *pathos* by reference to individual mental states and psychological systems. In contrast, an interactionist approach does not accept the existence of such abstract entities: it explains discursive interaction as a continually evolving process of engagement among interlocutors and things.

In this essay, I will focus on the ethical phase of this process. On the one hand, most cognitive and emotive acts take place habitually *within* historically established ethical fields, making *ethos* the phase of discursive action that determines whether or not in the particular case someone will or will not “get it.” On the other hand, in order for someone to “get it” who does not at first “get it,” he or she must shift attention *between* fields—and, as I shall argue, consequently re-order the

timing of their acts. This suggests that to persuade *is* to induce someone to shift attention from one field to another. If this is so, then “ethical shifting” is the central process of rhetoric.

Cognitive action, at its most basic level, produces possible beliefs by assigning a relation between two other possible beliefs. Ancient rhetoric described such simple cognitive acts in terms of syllogisms and enthymemes, and it referred to the relations assigned as *topoi*. Cognitive actions that relate two beliefs to create a third through the topic of implication they called “syllogism”; cognitive actions using other *topoi* they called “enthymemes.”⁹ Whether syllogistic—like “All men are mortal, Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal”—or enthymemic—like “John should play center because he's heavier than Bill”—cognitive acts initiate expectations; they project a future. Whether negative or positive—such as the fear we feel when the car we expect to stay in its lane swerves into ours, or the joy we feel when the child we thought would die recovers—emotive reactions occur when the objects of cognitive acts resist those expectations.

Cognitive acts, accordingly, are proleptic, pulling the future they anticipate into the present, while emotive acts are analeptic, pulling the past that future requires into the emerging present. These apparently opposing temporal movements, one directed toward a future being fashioned, the other toward a past being refashioned, occur in a single moment, a present that in that moment is passing. One inference we can draw here, as Mead has put it, is this: “Reality then is always in a present. When the present has passed it no longer is” (*Present* 57). We can say the same for “meaning”: when the present has passed it no longer means. In an interactionist account of discourse, meanings do not exist prior to acts of utterance—we do not grasp them by referring to antecedent linguistic “systems” or conceptual “schemes.” Nor are meanings a consequence of acts of discourse—they are not at the mercy of any and every subsequent response to them.¹⁰ Meanings are, in Davidson's terms, always passing. Mead, as Hans Joas has said, “defines the concept of meaning, not with reference to the actual reaction of the other, nor to the mere awareness of one's own attitude of response, but rather as the consciousness of the relation between one's own actions and the responses of the other to them, which one can anticipate” (105). In short, the noises, marks, and gestures we use to communicate are *in themselves* meaningless.

Similarly, in themselves, thoughts and feelings are not actions but motions, mechanical causal sequences that machines, insentient organisms, and inorganic material can produce. Motion is describable in Newtonian time, what Mead called “knife-edge presents.” This is structuralist time, what Saussure called “diachronism,” the timeless synchronic slices of a series of structurally describable states whose changes we can understand only by measuring their difference from other slices. Understood structurally, each synchronic slice is temporally vacuous—the present has no temporal extent—and within such “time” the constitution of the past and future within the present is unthinkable.

The reason this constitution is unthinkable structurally is that according to the structuralist perspective cognitive and emotive *motions* necessarily take place within and with respect to a single, already established set of relations. Although both structuralists and post-structuralists attempt to describe discourse by relating discursive acts to such sets, to do so is meaningless. An example, an analogy to discourse which structuralist thinkers as diverse as Saussure and Foucault

often use, is a chess game (Saussure 88; Foucault). The claim is that human discursive actions are like moves in the game. The moves make sense only through their relations to what Foucault calls “positionality”—the already defined roles of the pieces on an already defined field of play with already defined constraints. The consequence is that chess, as such, is “timeless” in at least two senses: (1) the “timing” or pace of moves is irrelevant to the game and (2) the history of the game's moves is equally irrelevant. As far as the game is concerned, it matters not a whit whether the game is played in an hour or a decade, steadily or erratically; and if two people have been playing one another for hours and a third walks up, that third player is just as capable (in theory) of making the next best move as either of the two original players, because the current position of the pieces on the board says it all. Time is irrelevant to chess because chess, as such, even when played by human beings, is nonsocial. It can just as easily—if not more easily—be played by and with machines.

Discourse, however, is necessarily social. “Sociality,” as Mead has defined it, “is the capacity of being several things at once” (*Present* 75). That is to say, it is the capacity to act with respect to *more than one* set of relations (what I am calling here an “ethical field”) at once. The moves of an actual chess game *become* meaningful and not merely mechanically logical to the extent that they enter relational sets *besides* those that constitute the game. For instance, the moves players make may also be actions within the interactions of a tournament, or perhaps moments in a lifetime of competition between two individuals, or even between two nations, or, say, in the case of professional players or of gamblers betting on the game, the moves may be actions affecting various financial interactions.

As Stephen Toulmin has demonstrated in great detail, the logics of practice are field dependent.¹¹ But Toulmin never recognized that because discursive interactions take place among multiple fields of social relations, the logics of these fields can intersect, collide, and merge, and, when they do, the conflict interrupts the repetition of their individual causal sequences—their temporal orders. Such interruptions Mead calls “events.” Events are unique; they do not fit the prior patterns of thought and emotion. An event pulls the past and the future into the present, reconfiguring remembered and expected patterns into a new past that will have conditioned the event and a new future that will have been conditioned by it. Thus time, as Mead says, “can only arise through the ordering of passage by these unique events” (*Present* 62). The present, the locus of reality and meaning, therefore, has what Mead calls “a temporal spread”—neither reality nor meaning can “be reduced to instants,” as structuralism and poststructuralism claim, and the “earlier stages” of meaningful interaction “must be conditions of later phases” (*Present* 62).

When we understand temporality in this way, we can see that meaningful actions necessarily “take place” temporally *between* or *among* ethical spaces, in transitions between what Mead calls “consentient sets” of social relationships, relationships that make sense together from a certain perspective or “generalized attitude.” Perspectives are not subjective impositions upon a world whose objects are independent of perspectives. Perspectives are objectively there in nature. As Mead says, perspectives “are not distorted perspectives of some perfect patterns, nor do they lie in consciousnesses as selections among things whose reality is to be found in a noumenal world”; perspectives “are in their interrelationship the nature that science knows” (*Present* 173). Different perspectives are not, therefore, as from a formalist or structuralist view, understood merely spatially as different “representation[s] of an identical content”; rather, they are

understood spatio-temporally as different “intersection[s] by different time systems of the same body of events.” There is thus “an indefinite number of possible simultaneities of any event with other events, and consequently an indefinite number of possible temporal orders of the same events” (174). Moreover, a social act, and consequently a discursive act, is “an actual organization of perspectives” and so an organization of temporal orders. The limit of discursive action “is found in the inability of individuals to place themselves in the perspectives of others” (174-175); conversely, the potential for effective discursive action lies in the individual's ability to enter into the perspectives of others, that is, to “take their attitudes, or occupy their points of view” (175)—and that is, too, the ability to enter their time. In short, what we *do together*—that is, do for the same purposes within the same times—determines what we notice together and what we can discourse about together.

As we perform acts together repetitively, fields “solidify,” we might say, and the objects we apperceive and their relations appear more and more “natural” as our expectations and responses become more and more habitual. Mead emphasizes that these sets of relationships unified by a perspective or generalized attitude provide the stable ground against which we experience temporal change. As Mead put it,

The consentient set is determined by its relation to a percipient event.... The percipient event establishes a lasting character of here and there, of now and then, and is itself an enduring pattern. The pattern repeats itself in the passage of events. These recurrent patterns are grasped together or prehended into a unity, which must have as great a temporal spread as the organism requires to be what it is.... Such a percipient event...establishes a consentient set of patterns of events that endure in the relations of here and there, of now and then, through such periods or essential epochs, constituting thus slabs of nature, and differentiating space from time. (*Present* 172)

In this way, the history of our interactions determines the future of our apperceptions, so much so that the fields we ordinarily inhabit, to a large extent and in most situations, literally relieve us of the need to think or speak.

For example, when I wash my car, the objects and relations I notice, such as the grime on the wheels and the streaks on the windshield, and the activities I am disposed to perform and their order, such as soaping, scrubbing, rinsing, and polishing, have been adapted to the situation in advance by the history of my past interactions because that history created the field in which my car could be seen as dirty and needing to be washed in the first place. Moreover, because fields are created through *social* interaction, anyone else who has participated in the same field of action will recognize the same objects, same motivations, and same logic. Thus, when my neighbor sees me washing my car, he need not ask me what I am doing or why I am doing it. He knows very well why—he “gets it.”

In such everyday situations nothing needs to be said because everything goes without saying. Ordinarily, when we act and speak together with people who are doing the same sorts of things as we and with more or less the same purposes, we do not act *per se* but “go through the motions.” Others respond to our discursive gestures as we expect them to, and vice versa, and the past flows readily into the present. But here, however, I am trying to explain how we go about

saying when what we need to say does *not* go without saying and when the past must be revised for the future—when, in other words we need to revise our meanings and re-order time if we are to “get it.”

We need to re-order time when our interlocutors are acting within different ethical fields than we because our fields' temporal orders are different: events within them have different temporal spreads, different rhythms or patterns of emphasis, different urgencies, and so on, such that what will constitute an exigency—to use Lloyd Bitzer's term—will be different in each field. Agents in the same Newtonian space and time may well be acting within entirely different fields. When a group of us within the same Newtonian space and time apperceive from within different fields, what one of us says now may be completely unintelligible to others, not because they are using different “languages,” not because they are not familiar with the same concepts, and not because they have different perceptual organs, but because they apperceive the relations among the objects of the discourse differently.

Because we share the world with others who have different purposes from ourselves and who therefore apperceive different significant relationships among the world's objects, we necessarily perform ethical shifts every day. We accommodate their different fields, if we apperceive them, primarily by altering the *timing*¹² of our actions within our own current field of conduct. Sometimes it may be necessary to shift between ethical fields altogether; sometimes we must shift within a field to accommodate the different functions and duties (“roles”) assumed by others. We speed up, slow down, and stop in traffic because of them; we rush our lunch and hurry to a meeting because of them; we adjust our syllabi because of them; we postpone washing our clothes because of them; we wait in line at the theater because of them; and on and on. And, of course, because of them we alter what we say, how we say it, and when we say it.

The Interdependence of Meaning, Truth, and Time

Most of the ethical shifts we make continually all day, every day, are habitual, commonplace events that require no radical revision of the past. We notice the “food” in our refrigerator has spoiled, then we throw the “garbage” into the trash bin; we finish a good “story,” then we sell a “book” at a yard sale; we write a “draft,” then we publish an “article”: in these cases, what was once food instantly becomes (and has been) garbage to dispose; what was once entertainment instantly becomes (and has been) merchandise to sell; what was once a project instantly becomes (and has been) an achievement to announce. The tempo of our daily lives is set by such events. In such quotidian moments the cycle of cognitive expectation, unexpected event, emotional reaction, apperceptive adjustment, re-interpretation, and revised cognitive expectation is familiar and automatic.

Literature, however, provides us with numerous examples of re-cognition scenes, or moments when characters or people must radically re-interpret events, redefine objects, re-evaluate relationships, and so re-interpret utterances—all in an instant. Literature tends to depict the familiar patterns only to highlight the strange because it is in moments of the most intense estrangement that words can exhibit novel uses and become simultaneously significant in

multiple ways. Yet, whether familiarly or strangely, only when they pass between two or more ethical fields can objects be in more than one temporal system at once, and so be more than one thing at the same time, or can we use words to interact with these objects in more than one way at the same time. As Hans Joas summarizes Mead's analysis of meaningful social events, "In every referential system any event can only be of a single kind which is identical with itself." But, Joas continues, "To be of two different kinds at the same time means, therefore, belonging simultaneously to two referential systems." If this is the case, then "...an event is in two referential systems only when it is in passing from the one to the other" (182). This ability to shift our apperception from one ethical field to another and to shift ethical "positions" within a field, adjusting our sense of time accordingly, is what allows us to understand that an event may mean one thing to one person but mean something entirely different to another. Ethical shifting is absolutely essential to our sociality and therefore to our discursive competence.

Such relativism does not entail skepticism, however. Not all ethical stances are equal for the simple reason that ethical stances and their fields mutually constitute one another. As I have argued, objects of our attention, whether inorganic or organic, human or non-human, imaginary or real, have their own dispositions to act, their own attitudes, their own perspectives within their fields. They can, accordingly, *resist* our attitudes toward them and so our expectations of them. Resistances, as Penny Dick has explained, are "products neither of a private interiority..., nor a universal desire to actualize our selves..., but are generated (and transformed) by the fields with which [our habitual patterns of action come] into contact" (340-341.) We become aware of such resistances when our broken expectations compel us to adjust our perspectives and revise our interpretations. For this reason, an interactionist account of discourse—unlike structuralist and poststructuralist accounts—does not separate the concept of meaning from the concept of truth.¹³ Although perhaps so "in theory," in actual situations not all ethical stances are equal and not all possible meanings are equal because not all are equally true; that is, they cannot equally enable us to anticipate future events. Thus, even when we do make an ethical shift in reaction to an object's resistance to our expectations, we do not necessarily make the *most effective* ethical shift—we do not necessarily "get it."

An excellent literary example of a character's making an ineffective shift in reaction to an unexpected event, but subsequently encountering another unexpected event that forces yet another shift, occurs in Herman Melville's novella "Benito Cereno." The tale is a retelling of an actual event related by an early nineteenth-century American sea captain (Amasa Delano's *Narrative of Voyages and Travels*, Boston 1817). The American whaling vessel comes upon a disabled Spanish slave ship, the *San Dominick*, anchored off an island near Chile. The American captain boards the Spanish slave ship to determine what assistance he can offer, and he meets its rather nervous captain, Benito Cereno. The events that transpire are narrated from a perspective sympathetic to the American captain's attitudes, particularly his paternalistic attitudes toward slaves. "In fact," the narrator says at one point, "like most men of a good, blithe heart, Captain Delano took to negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs" (213). Although numerous events on board raise Delano's suspicions, he directs them toward Cereno and his crew, not toward Cereno's highly attentive manservant, Babo, or the rest of the slaves. He clearly assumes that they, like most dogs, are content and loyal to their masters.

The novella's climatic event occurs when Delano leaves Cereno's ship. As soon as Delano orders the boat to shove off, Cereno leaps over his ship's bulwarks into the boat, landing at Delano's feet. Cereno's utterly unexpected act forces Delano to instantly shift his ethical stance toward him—from regarding him as a pitiable fellow ship's officer to a devious marauder: he shouts to his men, “this plotting pirate means murder!” (232). Then, “in apparent verification of his words, the servant, a dagger in his hand, was seen overhead, poised, in the act of leaping, as if with desperate fidelity to befriend his master to the last...” (232).

At this point Melville calls to the reader's attention the compression of time that such a powerful resistance to cognitive expectations necessitates: “All this,” the narrator says, “with what preceded, and what followed, occurred with such rapidity, that past, present, and future seemed one” (232). Yet, even within that compressed moment, Delano is forced once again to revise his apperception of the slave ship's field of conduct. He sees that Babo “was snakishly writhing up from the boat's bottom,” aiming his dagger, not at Delano but “at the heart of his master, his countenance lividly vindictive, expressing the centred purpose of his soul...” (233). Only now, his expectations broken once again, does Delano see that all his inferences and interpretations of the events on board the *San Dominick* that day were a consequence of his faulty apperception of the social relations that actually determined those events—that, in fact, it was the whites on board who were controlled by the blacks, and not the other way around. Finally, Delano “gets it.” Now, the entire temporal spread of the past that had conditioned Delano's experience on board the Spanish ship is revised in a instant: “That moment, across the long-benighted mind of Captain Delano, a flash of revelation swept, illuminating, in unanticipated clearness, his host's whole mysterious demeanor, with every enigmatic event of the day, as well as the entire past voyage of the *San Dominick*” (233).

Moreover, at that moment of the narration, the *reader*, just like Delano, has to shift her or his ethical stance toward the situation, revise her or his apperception of the ship's social relationships, and re-interpret everything she or he has read up to that moment. As one critic has put it, “Benito Cereno' is profoundly ironic”—that is, it means more than one thing at once—“but the narrative presentation is such that the irony is initially occluded; virtually all critics of 'Benito Cereno' note the necessity of a second reading to 'get it'” (O'Connell 113).¹⁴

Examples like “Benito Cereno,” a text whose words indicate one field of ethical relationships when read from one perspective but indicate an entirely different field when read from another, reinforce claims like Kenneth Gergen's that words “only appear to generate meaning by virtue of their place within the realm of human interaction” (264). *Ethos* is, as it were, the sea in which *logos* and *pathos* swim, and its currents' ebb and flow are the temporal dimensions of our discourse. Our proleptic cognitive anticipations and analeptic emotive reactions pull our pasts and futures into the passing present, usually in habitual tempos and ordinary patterns, but often they occur as “events”—those unique moments that do not fit our prior patterns of thought and feeling—that intrude when our ethical field of conduct intersects and collides with another whose resistance to our habitual attitudes forces us to shift our ethical stance, configure a new future, and revise our past.

Yet, as “Benito Cereno” also illustrates, when the speech and action of one interlocutor violates the anticipations the other's habitual patterns of interaction provide him—as when Cereno leapt

unexpectedly into Delano's boat—the other person will tend to interpret that speech and behavior as irrational, incorrect, or—as Delano regarded Cereno—deceitful. When that ethical shift itself proves to be inadequate, the field's resistance to our expectations will continue, and, if we are wise, our ethical shifting will continue, until events again conform to expectations. That's when, like it or not, we will know we “get it.”

Getting It? The Case of John McCain's Temporal Revisions

I began this essay by noting Barack Obama's criticism, on August 28 at the 2008 Democratic National Convention, of John McCain's pronouncement that he believed the country's economy was “fundamentally strong.” Obama had declared: “It's not because John McCain doesn't care. It's because John McCain doesn't get it.” I then asked two questions: What does it mean to “get it” or not “get it”? What has to happen in order for someone who does not “get it” to “get it,” and how will we know when they do? The rest of the article has been a lengthy theoretical answer to those questions, an elaboration of the thesis that discourse is necessarily social, the social is necessarily temporal, the temporal is eventual, and events re-order time. But what does that answer mean in the case of John McCain?

The theory suggests that someone acting purposefully within an inadequate or inappropriate ethical field—that is, someone attending to objects and relations that are inadequate or inappropriate for those purposes in those circumstances—will encounter unexpected events, events that announce intrusive actions occurring in previously unattended fields. It's the way the person temporally orders or reorders her actions in response to an unexpected event that will tell us whether or not the response results from an apperceptual shift between fields. If it does, subsequent events will reveal whether or not her or his shift was appropriate. In the case of apperceptions of the American economy, when unanticipated events occur, someone who refuses to question the field in which she or he had been acting will simply treat them as anomalies of some sort (i.e., “These institutional failures are normal 'adjustments' or 'corrections' to the market”) and continue her or his habitual patterns of action. Someone who does shift, or at least question, her or his apperception of the field, will, like Captain Delano, abruptly halt her or his normal pattern, alter her or his temporal order, and re-order her or his sense of the past. If this ethical shift is an appropriate one, subsequent actions based on it will more adequately anticipate future events.

Thus my question boils down to this: Did McCain ever “get it,” and if so, how do we know? Specifically, during the drama of McCain's campaign, with respect to the nation's economic condition, was there a re-cognition scene, a moment when McCain re-interpreted events, redefined objects, re-interpreted utterances, and re-evaluated relationships—all in an instant? Clearly, something happened in his perception of the nation's economy between his reiteration of his claim that the economy was strong on September 15—on the very day, and after the announcements, that Lehman Brothers had filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, Merrill Lynch & Company would be dissolved and incorporated into Bank of America, and AIG had been seized by the Federal government—and his startling announcement on September 24 that

he was suspending his campaign and might not participate in the first debate with Obama, scheduled for the 26th.

Now, of course, we cannot get into McCain's head the way Melville lets us into Delano's, so without having considerably more evidence than we currently have, no analysis of his discursive processes can escape being speculative and hypothetical. More importantly, McCain is a politician, and with politicians it is always unclear whether their public changes in attitude are actually their own or at the urging of their handlers, and whether such attitudinal changes result from changes in their apperception of the problem at hand (in this case, the collapsing economic system) or merely from changes in their perception of the public's apperception of their attitudes. Indeed, on the very morning of McCain's startling announcement, the latest *Washington Post*-ABC News national poll revealed that Obama had gained his "first clear lead" over McCain and only "9 percent of those surveyed rated the economy as good or excellent" (Balz and Cohen). Easily, McCain's surprising move could have been pure political theater. Nevertheless, if we are to understand McCain's discursive intentions, we must extend interpretive charity, at least initially, and assume that his discursive actions were sincere.

It's also difficult to imagine, if McCain did perform an "ethical shift" of the sort I have been discussing, that the shift was to the perspective from which Obama had been speaking. On the day Lehman's fell and McCain proclaimed the economy strong, Obama responded, while campaigning in Colorado, with a series of questions:

What's more fundamental than the ability to find a job that pays the bills and can raise a family? What's more fundamental than knowing that your life savings are secure and that you can retire with dignity? What's more fundamental than knowing that you'll have a roof over your head at the end of the day? What's more fundamental than that?

As Jared Bernstein had noted on August 24, however, these are the sorts of discursive objects McCain is very unlikely to notice and attend to.

In his *Huffington Post* blog entry, "Why McCain's Wealth Matters," Bernstein had pointed out that McCain's wife's inherited wealth, over \$100 million, "puts the McCain family solidly up there in the narrowest sliver of the richest of the rich." For Bernstein, it was not just that McCain's wealth was unearned that put him "out of touch" with the troubles of people who work to survive, but the fact that he was free from thinking about the issues the non-wealthy must think about, and from the constraints upon their choices that the non-wealthy must confront. Adding to that the fact that McCain simply did not interact socially with the non-wealthy, Jared concludes that "the problem isn't that he's rich. It's that his wealth is part of a package that strongly suggests he can't relate to the economic struggles faced by so many people from households that don't reside in the top 'fractiles' of the income distribution" (Bernstein).

Similarly, I have argued that it's what we *do together* that constitutes the relations among those objects we will recognize, and the way we reason about them (cf. *Inventive Intercourse* 45). If this is so, then it would hardly be surprising if McCain would never get what Obama had been getting at. After all, McCain has never had to weigh which his family needs more today, milk or meat, or whether it would be wiser to buy gas now, instead of either milk or meat, before its

price goes up again. How can we expect a man who, because he never held a job his family's survival depended on, and so surely cannot even imagine what it would mean to lose that job, to grasp Obama's critique? How can we expect a man who would have to lose more houses than he can remember before he would face homelessness to "get it"?

Even so, I think he "got" something. The theory I have outlined suggests that an unanticipated event (in this case, probably McCain's surprise that economic issues would overtake national security issues [cf. "Voters"]) requires, and will be signaled by, revisions of the past in order to account for the present and to project future action. On September 17, McCain clearly still believed that the economic crisis had been caused by, and was limited to, the housing crisis, and that the housing crisis had been precipitated by problems within the Federal National Mortgage Association (Fannie Mae) and the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation (Freddie Mac). These had been rescued in August by an arrangement between the U.S. Treasury and the Federal Reserve in an effort to avoid the stock market plunge such a failure would surely have precipitated. Then, on September 17, in an interview with CBS, McCain said,

Two years ago, I warned that the oversight of Fannie and Freddie was terrible, that we were facing a crisis because of it, or certainly serious problems.... The influence that Fannie and Freddie had in the inside the Beltway, old boy network, which led to this kind of corruption, is unacceptable and I warned about it a couple of years ago. (qtd. in Tapper)

Although the theory suggests that we must revise the past in order to grasp the present and project a new future, it also suggests that revisions that are not true will be resisted by their objects. In this case, as ABC News's Senior White House Correspondent, Jake Tapper, points out, McCain's claim of foresight does not square with his admission to the Keene, New Hampshire, *Sentinel* in December 2007, that he had *not* anticipated the crisis. The *Sentinel* reported had asked:

Well the dimension of this problem may be surprising to a lot of people, but to many people, to many others there were feelings that there was something amiss, something was going too fast, something was a little too hot. Going back several years. Were you one of them?... Were you surprised?

McCain responded:

Yeah...When I say "surprised" I'm not surprised when in capitalist systems that there's greed and excess. I think it was Teddy Roosevelt who said "unfettered capitalism leads to corruption" or something like that, that people have disputed for years.... But I don't know of hardly anybody, with the exception of a handful, that said "wait a minute, this thing is getting completely out of hand and is overheating." So, I'd like to tell you that I did anticipate it, but I have to give you straight talk, I did not. (qtd. in Tapper)

If, on September 15, still proclaiming the economy strong, McCain did not "get" anything, on September 17, he was "getting" something, getting a strong enough sense, perhaps, that the economic field was not how he had thought it had been, or, perhaps, a sense that the public was

not viewing the economy as he had thought it had been. Either way, he was “getting” enough, at least, to start revising his past perceived relations to the economic system.

Yet the September 24 “suspension” was a far more radical temporal reordering than this, indicating a far more serious collision between the fields in which McCain's discursive interactions had been taking place and another. I think he did “get” something, or at least perform some ethical shift—the theory says he would not have “suspended” his campaign and rushed to Washington if he had not.¹⁵ In his announcement of the suspension, he said that he would not return to the campaign “until the crisis is resolved” and would delay the debate “until we have taken action to address this crisis.” He seemed to be focusing on the impact the “historic crisis” would have on American workers, using words and attending to objects similar to those Obama had been. “If we do not” resolve the crisis, he said, “credit will dry up, with devastating consequences for our economy. People will no longer be able to buy homes and their life savings will be at stake. Businesses will not have enough money to pay their employees. If we do not act, every corner of our country will be impacted. We cannot allow this to happen” (“McCain”). Nevertheless, on September 26, although Congress had reached no agreement, McCain announced that he would, after all, attend the debate that evening (Barabak).

If an ethical shift instigated this second alteration of temporal order, it likely was a shift in his attitude toward the party whose nomination he had accepted only twenty-three days before, and possibly a shift from apperceiving the economy as being ideally of a free market, that is, a shift from the “trickle down” economic apperceptions of his advisors. It was becoming clear to most people by this time, and perhaps to McCain himself, that the policies of people on his own economic team were responsible for the crisis. For instance, Phil Gramm, his so-called econ brain (Tully), when a U.S. Senator, had engineered the Commodity Futures Modernization Act, which had legalized “the mortgage swaps distancing the originator of the loan from the ultimate collector,” and the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act, which “destroyed the Depression-era barrier to the merger of stockbrokers, banks, and insurance companies.” These two acts, according to Robert Scheer, “effectively ended significant regulation of the financial community.” Gramm had already resigned as McCain's campaign co-chair after the candidate had distanced himself from him after his comment that “Americans had become a 'nation of whiners' whose constant complaints about the U. S. economy show they are in a 'mental recession’” (Associated Press)—a comment revealing an attitude quite different from the attitude of concern for homeowners, retirees, and employees McCain would project in his announcement of the suspension. At any rate, the House of Representatives rejected the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act three days after the first debate, in a vote that emphasized to many McCain's breach with and inability to lead his own party that led to his ultimate defeat.

I do not wish to claim that this sketchy analysis of the dynamics of McCain's “suspension” of his 2008 presidential campaign during September is in any way definitive. To say so would trivialize both the events and the theory on which the analysis is based. Nor do I wish to imply that McCain is a tragic figure who, like Oedipus, apperceived the relations that truly defined him too, too late. As I said, at this point we have no access to McCain's discursive processes and far too little evidence available from which to make any such inferences and analogies. What I hope this example has demonstrated, instead, is that an analysis of a political discursive event, like that of any other discursive event, must take into account not only the perceived rhetorical “exigence”

that instigates it, but also both the temporal reorderings of the past and future that discursive interactions necessarily undertake in order resolve the exigence, as well as the character of the ethical fields whose conflict defines the exigence itself. All this is just another way to reiterate the pragmatist doctrine that we cannot separate our meanings from our truths, if our truths are our beliefs upon which we act, and to suggest that those meanings are always meanings in passing.

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Notes

¹For an interesting discussion on the question of whether “language” exists, see Agamben, especially pages 39-88.

²Davidson takes the position he refers to as “anomalous monism” within his argument aimed at reconciling freedom with causal determinism. Anomalous monism requires us to accept three principles. The first Davidson calls “the Principle of Causal Interaction”: “mental events are identical with physical events” (209). Not all events are mental events, however, and what distinguishes physical events that are mental from those that are not is “intentionality” (211). Here, Davidson accepts Brentano's sense of the term: events are intentional if they are directed toward an object. Intentions are not necessarily conscious. Second is “the Principle of the Nomological Character of Causality,” the principle that “where there is causality, there must be a law” (208). Science itself depends on this principle. The third holds that mental events are identical with physical events, but no laws correlate them. Although there are no psychophysical laws (such that we cannot reduce moral properties to physical properties or truth to syntactical properties), we can view mental interaction as being dependent, or “supervenient,” on physical interaction.

³I am not, of course, using the term “sign” in the structuralist sense. Jacques Derrida was right when he said that “the signification 'sign' has always been understood and determined, in its meaning, as sign-of, a signifier referring to a signified...” (*Writing* 281), that is, as something that “stands” or “substitutes” for something else, that “re-presents” something else. Derrida was also right that we cannot “reduce” the “opposition between the sensible and the intelligible” (281) by means of this concept of the sign. He was wrong, however, that “we cannot do without the concept of the sign” in this sense (281). For interactionism, because there is no such thing as “language” but only the marks, noises, and gestures we use habitually to direct our and others' attention to relations within, between, and among objects (which may, as now, be marks, noises, or gestures themselves), the intelligible is the sensible—the mental is physical. Signs are causally indicative, not representational.

⁴Davidson reduces this continual dialogic interplay to two distinct phases. The first is the *prior theory*: “...what the speaker believes is the starting theory of interpretation the interpreter has for him” (101). The speaker speaks in anticipation of how he will be interpreted, and the interpreter interprets as she anticipates the speaker will speak to her. Once the utterance is made, each party enters a second phase, the *passing theory*: “the passing theory is the one that the interpreter actually uses to interpret an utterance, and it is the theory the speaker intends the interpreter to use” (101). What interlocutors must come to share, therefore, is not whatever “language” they

may have known before the interaction, but the *passing* theory they develop during the interaction, which they cannot learn in advance but must *invent* as they interact.

⁵John Levi Martin gives an excellent overview of social field theory in his essay “What is Field Theory?”

⁶Cf. Walter Isaacson, *Einstein: His Life and Universe*, p. 319.

⁷A chief claim of interactionist field theory is that shared apperception, and so successful discursive interaction, takes place within and among “fields” of interaction, and that when others misconstrue our intentions, it is likely because the objects and agents with which we are interacting in the field we are currently inhabiting may simply not be “there”—that is, may not be apperceptible—for those with whom we are striving to interact. Moreover, when we do apperceive the same objects as our interlocutors within the same field, our role within the field may be different from theirs, so that our response to events within the field may well differ from their responses.

⁸See Yarbrough, “On the Very Idea.”

⁹For a full discussion of the difference between syllogisms and enthymemes see Dyck. For a summary of Dyck's analysis, see Yarbrough's *Inventive Intercourse*, pp. 40-41.

¹⁰Kevin J. Porter argues that there are only two major understandings of the meaning of meaning: one is his own notion of “meaning consequentialism”; the other is “meaning apriorism.” According to Porter, “The central tenet of meaning apriorism, which informs in one way or another every approach to meaning with which I am familiar, even those that struggle against it, is that the meaning of an “utterance”—which...I use in an extended sense that includes written texts—is to be found always in some sense, logically and/or temporally, prior to that utterance or to any interpretation or that utterance.... (17). The central tenet of meaning consequentialism, in contrast, is that “the meaning of an utterance or text is the consequences that it propagates” (12). Both “meaning apriorism” and “meaning consequentialism,” however, are contradicted by (to invent a term) the “meaning presentism” that interactionist theory forwards.

¹¹There are, of course, significant differences between Toulmin's fundamentally realist conception of an “argument field” and the interactionist conception of an “ethical field” I am describing here (cf. *The Uses of Argument*). Nevertheless, his basic claims that the logics of fields are historically situated and non-deductive are sound.

¹²The issue of “timing” is typically addressed in rhetorical theory with the classical concept of “*kairos*” as a question of the “right or opportune time to do something, or right measure in doing something” (Kinneavy, “*Kairos*” 80; see also Kinneavy and Eskin), emphasizing propriety (*prepon*) and opportunity (*eukairon*), and thus maintaining the false classical dichotomy between space and time. In addition, contemporary discussions of *kairos* generally regard “timing” as either a subjective or psychological matter or as an adjustment of subjective desires to objective constraints, although some contemporary thinkers have attempted to overcome this dichotomy

(cf. Benedikt; Smith). The interactionist account of “ethical shifting” dissolves both these dichotomies.

¹³Cf. Davidson's essay “Meaning, Truth, and Evidence” in *Truth, Language, and History* (47-62) and Mead's “A Pragmatic Theory of Truth” (*Selected Writings* 320-344).

¹⁴Another critic, Charles Swann, makes a similar observation, attending more closely to the temporal dynamics:

On first reading, what is happening (or, perhaps, that should read what has happened or even what will have happened) is concealed as we follow Delano through, watching him, watching with him, as he tries to interpret what seems to be happening—with considerable if biased intelligence.... We *may* guess on that first (forgotten?) reading what the real state of affairs is aboard the San Dominick, but we do not, cannot know—until the leap into the boat.... (316)

¹⁵That “suspension” is quite a complication to this analysis, as McCain's abrupt cancellation of his scheduled appearance with David Letterman and simultaneous scheduling of an interview with Katie Couric [whose interview with his running mate, Sarah Palin, aired that same evening, had proved disastrous] when he was supposedly rushing to D.C., reveals—but that's yet another story of temporal reordering.