The Pragmatics of Avoidance
Speech in Threatening Situations

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1. ‘The Proximity of the Frightening’

“Danger is the proximity of the frightening. Confidence is the hope, accompanied by the mental image, of things conducive to safety as being near at hand, while causes of fear seem to be ... far away.”

Aristotle’s Art of Rhetoric (330 BC: §2.5)
2. Physical Avoidance

We tend to adapt *physically* to objects appraised as unpleasant or threatening by establishing protective distances between ourselves and the threatening object:

(1) *closing boundaries*
(2) *increasing distance*
(3) *avoiding interaction*
(4) *avoiding contact*
(5) *seeking orientation*

Plutchick (1984: 202)
3. Linguistic Avoidance

We tend to adapt linguistically to concepts appraised as unpleasant or threatening by ‘avoiding’ them in discourse space.

Often this is done by framing references to them in ways that are:

(1) non-negative or neutral rather than negative
(2) spatially and/or temporally distal rather than proximal
(3) vague, general, or generic rather than particular
(4) modally or evidentially uncertain rather than certain
(5) small in magnitude, degree, or size rather than large

By such means, speakers use language to figuratively create ‘protective distances’ between themselves & threatening concepts.
4. Avoidance in Psychology

Ego-Arousal
(+/-)

Ego-Control
(+/-)

Ego-Involvement
(+/-)

Daly, Lancee & Polivy (1983)
5. Avoidance in Discourse

- **Ego-Involvement (+/-)**
  - valence: pos/neg
  - immediacy: near/far

- **Ego-Control (+/-)**
  - specificity: (in)explicit
  - certainty: (un)certaint

- **Ego-Arousal (+/-)**
  - degree/emphasis: more/less
  - evaluative coloring of reference (+/-)
  - deictic proximity of reference (+/-)
  - magnitude of reference (+/-)
  - semantic scope of reference (+/-)
  - implied evidential reliability of reference (+/-)

Pragmatics of Avoidance
6. Prototypical Avoidance Patterns: **Evaluative Valence**

**Interpellate:** rename the threatening concept *less negatively.*


Q: A number of times you’ve said US troops do not *torture* prisoners. Doesn’t this new report undercut your claim?

A: I think that... my impression is that what has been charged thus far is *abuse*, which I believe technically is different from *torture*. ... And therefore I am not going to address the ‘torture’ word.


Q: Will you *testify* before the commission?

A: This commission? You know, testify? I mean, I’d be glad to *visit with them*. I’d be glad to *share with them knowledge*. I’d be glad to *make recommendations*, if they ask for some.
7. Prototypical Avoidance Patterns: Deictic Proximity

Deictically relocate the threatening concept outside the ‘here/now’

O.J. Simpson, *Civil Court Trial*, Jan, 1977

Q: We’re just talking about these gloves in the picture.
A: I don’t know what those gloves are.

O.J. Simpson, *Civil Court Trial*, Jan, 1977

Q: Please tell this jury exactly when it occurred. At what point in time did you break this glass?
A: As I’ve told you on numerous occasions, Mr. Petrocelli, it was during the course of going back and forth to pack my bags.
8. Prototypical Avoidance Patterns: Semantic Specificity

Broaden or narrow the **scope of reference** to the threatening concept

Condoleezza Rice, *This Week ABC News*, June 8th, 2004

Q: Who in the US government knew that the uranium claim about Iraq in Bush’s State of the Union speech was false?

A: George Tenet, somebody, or somebody further down may have known. But when this issue was raised, uh, with the intelligence community ... the intelligence community did not know at that time or at levels that got to us that this, that there was serious questions about this report."

O.J. Simpson, *Civil Court Trial*, Jan, 1977

Q: Tell us how she got the welt over her right eye. **Did you hit her?**

A: Well, I had her in a head-lock at one point, trying to get her out the door, so I guess my hand may have been somewhere around her - her face.
9. Prototypical Avoidance Patterns: Evidential Certainty

Make references to the threatening concept evidentially uncertain

G. Tenet, CIA Director, *US Senate Investigation*, Oct 3rd, 2004

Q: Did the CIA tell Cheney that Hussein had nuclear weapons?
A: We did not say he had a nuclear weapon.

Q: You were unaware of Cheney’s statement?
A: I think I’m told the Vice President may have corrected that statement himself. I was not aware at the time.


Q: How do you react to criticism of your failure to serve in Vietnam?
A: I was - I served in the National Guard .... What I don’t like is when people say serving in the Guard is - is - may not be a true service.
10. Prototypical Avoidance Patterns: **Degree/Emphasis**

Minimize the size, magnitude, or importance of the threatening concept

O.J. Simpson, *Civil Court Trial*, Jan, 1977

Q: You continued to have **arguments** with Nicole throughout your relationship, right?

A: We had **a few** arguments, yes.

Q: And around this time you had **another argument** with Nicole...

A: **Slightly**. I can’t say it was an argument.

Q: But there were **bad times** in your relationship, right?

A: **A few**, yes.

Q: **More than a few**, right?

A: Well, like in any long relationship, there was **a few bad times**, yes.
Max Black (1949) claimed that words can be understood as being ‘meaningful’ in two senses:

(1) in the sense of the logical propositions that they may be said to assert about things;

(2) in the sense of the subjective orientations to things that they may be said to depict.

We must thus distinguish, he said, between questions of assertion and questions of depiction.

The pragmatics of avoidance focuses on what Black referred to as “the modes in which subjects [in this case threatening subjects] are depicted or presented” (1949: 207).
12. Related Concepts

- **Footing** (Goffman, 1974)
  
  “... footing is concerned with a participant's alignment, set, stance, posture, or projected self; and especially with a person's level of affiliation to or identification with the words that they utter.“

- **Framing** (Tannen, 1993)

  “Framing is a way of 'showing' as we speak and act, how others should or ought to make sense of what we say and do ...”

- **Stance** (Biber et al., 1999)

  “In addition to communicating propositional content, speakers and writers commonly express personal feelings, attitudes, value judgments, or assessments; that is, they express a 'stance'.“
13. Related Concepts

- **Perspectivization** (Ensik & Sauer, 2003)

“Speakers cannot contribute to discourse without at the same time showing their view on the subject matter of the discourse: the content of a discourse is necessarily ‘displayed’ from a certain perspective. People imply a certain way of looking at things when communicating about them.”

- **The Language Parallax** (Friedrich, 1986)

An utterance about anything in the universe, Paul Friedrichs says, contains the built-in coordinates of a standpoint on the speaker's part: "There is no universe without its observer, nor any observer who is not part of the universe of description.”
14. The Parallax Phenomenon

*Parallax*: astronomical term referring to perceived differences in the positions of stars or planets when observed from different points on the earth. More generally, it refers to changes in the perceived positions of objects resulting from changes in the directions from which they are viewed.
The Language Parallax: Paul Friedrich’s term for differences in our understandings of concepts when they are depicted from different attitudinal perspectives. Two basic ideas: (1) objects of discourse (topics, concepts, content); (2) speakers’ subjective ‘positions’ relative to objects of discourse.
16. Example

Topics or events can thus appear to be literally quite different 'things' when described from different orientational perspectives.

O.J. Simpson questioned about beating his wife

Q: And you got on the bed, with Nicole underneath you, and you grabbed her arms, and you punched her and scratched her, right?

A: No. She jumped across the bed ... she got on the bed and was getting across the bed, and she was yelling at me, and she ended up leaving the room.
17. The Point

Ultimately, it is

- the (subjective) *frame* of reference,
- within the (intersubjective) *context* of reference,
- which gives the (objective) act of *referring* to a topic its full significance.

“The objective meaning of a text can only be understood by appealing to the subjective conditions of its production.”

Jacob Mey (1991: 245)
18. Conclusion

"Whoever reduces the behavioral component of emotion to a mere expression of feeling, misunderstands the ... functions of emotions in human interaction."

Norbert Elias (1990: 337)

"Beyond a certain point, to distinguish between emotional and intellectual structures of an adult is merely to describe the same structures from different points of view."

Marvin Minsky (1985: 328)
References


