The Dynamics of Verbal Exchange: A Newfoundland Example[1]

BY JAMES C. FARIS

RÉSUMÉ

Basé sur le postulat qu'il existe dans les affaires humaines une motivation commune qui pousse les hommes à rechercher les informations qui pourraient faciliter l'interaction des parties concernées et en même temps fournir une orientation plus précise, l'article présente un schéma de la dynamique de l'interaction verbale dans un petit village de pêcheurs à Terre-neuve.

This paper describes the structure of verbal interaction in a small fishing settlement. Specifically, I want to document and explain the local "rules" which govern successful communication — that is, the dynamics by which culturally-appropriate verbal interaction is insured and maintained. This results in a particularistic analysis, but the explanation I suggest has much more general application and I think rests on quite basic principles of human communication.

Two interrelated assumptions are fundamental to this paper. First, I assume that man cognitively orders his existance and that a powerful motivation in human affairs is continually to order and improve upon areas of potential ambiguity. We attempt, therefore, to perfect our relationships and our interaction — to constantly search for or create information which makes this possible, which facilitates this end. Inasmuch, I think it is widespread that esteem and prestige accrue to those individuals who can most

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successfully and most often provide such information in the context of the milieu in which they are acting. These two assumptions are basic to understanding patterned verbal communication in Cat Harbour.

The Setting

Cat Harbour is a small (less than 300 people) fishing community on the 'roughest shore'[2] of the Northeast coast of Newfoundland. It has been until recently, quite isolated, but in 1961 a road was completed to Gander (the nearest urban center — approximately 90 miles away), and electric power arrived in 1963.

The Cat Harbour year is centered about the intense activity of the summer fishing voyage. Because of the North Atlantic storms and the Arctic ice, it may be that fishermen are able to get on the water no more than two or three months of the year. But for the other ten months, there is plenty of time for talking, and the community's married males are found each evening and several times each day, gathered in one or another of the settlement's small shops to transmit, exchange information, or to simply listen.

Cat Harbour is situated on the end and one side of a mile-long peninsula which juts out into the Atlantic. All houses are oriented toward the respective waterfront, and the two residential sections which result from this topological circumstance are known as 'Dog Cove' and 'Upper Harbour'. Each residential section has a shop which stays open to 10 PM or later, and situated midway between the two extreme ends of the settlement is 'Scarlet's shop' — the "residentially-neutral" shop where information coming into the community is usually received. Scarlet's is the single large mercantile concern in Cat Harbour, and the shop where outsiders come first. This is the disseminating point for most 'news' entering the outport, which is then, in turn, carried to one or the other of the "residential" shops for further discussion and dissection.

[2] Words and phrases enclosed in double quotation marks (" ") are quotations from published sources or indicate emphasis by the ethnographer. Words and phrases enclosed in single quotation marks (' ') are Cat Harbour usage in all cases.

A man attempts, at least once each day, to get to Scarlet's shop to learn first hand 'what's new', for 'news' may be considerably different from what was originally reported in Scarlet's when it is discussed in the evening "residential" shop gatherings. Scarlet's is not open at night.

Transmission

In the present paper I shall not be talking about the *content* of information to any significant degree, nor about *specific functions* of any given communication. The content of any transmission is, of course, important to its very transmission and the situation in which it is transmitted, and the communication may be directed to specific ends; but I hope to demonstrate that the structure of verbal exchange, the dynamics of communication, are largely the same regardless of the particular content or specific functions served. Differences in content are, of course, marked with respect to age, sex, and other criteria of all the participants in the exchange (men, for example, are seldom interested in how clean a particular woman keeps her stove, though this is of primary importance to other females — and females will have little knowledge of the precise techniques of fishing which forms so important a base for male verbal exchange), but the same logic, I suggest, will be operated in any transmission.

Information transmitted locally is of essentially two types: 'news' and 'gossip' — and apart from commands, formal salutations, commemorations in verse and song,[3] and transmission surrounding short term exchanges (such as one man helping another, dyadic contracts or individuals making known purchase desires in shops), there is little verbal exchange save 'gossip' and 'news'. Learning in Cat Harbour is largely by way of observation, not conversation (cf. comments of Hymes [p. 235-236] in D'Andrade and Romney, 1964).

It is sait that 'Only women gossip, men don't gossip, they tell cuffers (i.e., tall tales).' But in actuality, women simply

[3] Cat Harbour folk are excellent balladeers and commemorate everything in song and verse, from storms and ship wreck to my visit.

more often communicate in very small groups or between individuals where 'news' of a more personal and perhaps slanderous nature can be transmitted.[4] 'Gossip' is simply 'news' transmitted privately rather than publically. Information that was 'gossip' in past years becomes acceptable 'news' when introduced in the shop (i.e., the "public") conversation years later — when the individuals involved are not present or are no longer sensitive about the issue. Men, of course, 'gossip', but in the normal course of events they are not in situations where they can transmit or purvey the type of information labelled 'gossip' by the community.

Transmission takes place in the shops, in private, and rarely, on the road (which runs the entire length of the peninsula). If two people meet on the road, there is an obligation to acknowledge one another, and if two in the community are not speaking, they simply avoid meeting — something easy to achieve, for the daily routine of each inhabitant is known to every other. During the first week of my arrival, I forced more than one woman off the road into deep snowbanks simply because they wanted to avoid meeting me on the road and having to acknowledge the encounter. When one does meet, the exchange is usually highly formalized and impersonal. These formalized exchanges are most commonly of the weather or the condition of the sea, and usually the reply is the same, no matter what the initial comment. My introductory greeting of 'It's awfully cold today, isn't it?' was often met with 'Best kind' (short for 'best kind of day' or 'I'm in the best kind of health') or 'Yep, the sea's some heavy' — a reply one would expect to a query about the condition of the sea.

It is not often that information is exchanged on the road unless the parties have something short and specific to speak about between themselves, such as a detail of a previously-established dyadic contract. There is very good reason for this, as I will illustrate below. Choice bits of 'gossip' which must be repeated privately as kinsmen of those involved are undoubtedly

[4] It must be stressed that "personal" information does not mean that the exchange is necessarily intimate or personal in an emotional sense — simply that it involves fewer people and thereby increases the things that can be talked about — items which involve more individuals. "Emotional" expression of any sort is generally avoided altogether in Cat Habour.

in the shops, are not exchanged on the road, but across gates or in kitchens by women and in 'store lofts'[5] by men. Two women may walk down the road together, then one woman will enter her garden, close the gate, and the two will then engage in the bit of 'gossip' — one in the private sanctity of her garden. Or more rarely, they will visit one another in their homes. Men will know by an open window or a 'fire in' (smoke coming from the 'store loft' chimney) that a man is 'on the loft mending twine', and climb up to deliver or receive the particular private item. Exchanges on the road are regarded as being under the surveillance of the entire community, and private conversation is usually avoided.

Women usually avoid the shop — but when they do have to go, they never speak while there, unless in answer to the rare question addressed to them by one of the men invariably present, to which only they can give an answer (as, for example, a query about the condition of the woman's sick husband or the family's dying horse). While they are waiting for the shop clerk to bring the purchases and total the bill, however, they listen intently and inconspicuously to the conversations of the men and carry the information out with them. Often then, from having visited the shop, or via another woman having visited the shop, or from children having visited the shop, a woman will have already heard an item of 'news' before her husband returns for a 'lunch' (one of several each day), bringing what he has just learned.

If children are available, a woman always sends them to the shop rather than go herself, and pre-adolescent children play a vital role in the dissemination of 'news'. Children of this age group have full run of the community and enter any house without knocking. They are not as yet endowed with specific personalities by adults other than their own parents, and form more than anything else, simply a part of the background — the setting. Either alone or in groups, boys or girls come in without a word and take a seat (always in the kitchen), sometimes staying up

[5] The upper story of a two-story fisherman's storage structure is the 'store loft'. The 'loft' is where cod traps are stored and where net mending takes place during the winter. The 'loft' usually contains a small stove for warmth.

to one hour. They require no acknowledgement, and during the entire time will say nothing, simply listen. On their return home, they will be asked where they have been and what is "new', whereupon they will relate all they have heard and witnessed with remarkable detail. In the case of a 'stranger', such as the ethnographer, children were actually sent by their mothers to collect information in this manner and report back. The utility of children in this role cannot be underestimated, for women can often not leave the house because of the numbers of infant children or the weather, so this technique forms a vital method of acquiring 'news'. It is also the case that children of this age category relay information they have seen and heard with considerable objectivity, without bias of interpretation which might characterize the same information if related by an adult or an older child.

Except for 'gossip' of a personal nature and items of interest to women only, all other information sooner or later reaches the shops — particularly the "residential" shops each evening.

The Dynamics of Conversation

For communication to be 'new's' or 'gossip', it must be in some manner out of the ordinary mundane, common and universally-acknowledged store of information.[6] The sea and weather ever-changing thus furnish one valuable supply, but 'news' from outside, or 'news' from within the community is very much in demand and gives the individual possessing it a special status for the time being — he is accorded the floor as 'all hands' listen, demanding as much detail as possible. The clever individual maximizes this advantage and gives out only bits at a time, thus being able to make more, as it were, of his news. This concern was observed by Jukes in the late 1830's, who describes a situation that could easily have been Cat Harbour in 1964:

> One point in the character of most of the inhabitants of Newfoundland seems to be common to the whole of North America, namely, the eager inquiry after news, and the propensity to exaggeration and

[6] "Real" news, as I speak of it in this paper, is simply 'new" news or "fresh" news — that is information about which there has been no previous discussion.

> invention, to use the most polite terms. It is really astonishing how news of the most trifling matters, especially if dashed with a little scandal, flies about, not only in St. John's, but along the coast to the most distant settlements. Reports of the most ludicrous nature — ludicrous for exaggeration, even if they have foundation in fact — gain instant credence. It seems to be a stain on a man's character if on coming into a harbour he has not a budget of news; so that if he knows none, he immediately draws upon his imagination. The seal hunters, and the furriers in the country make a point of giving false information as to the results of their expedition; and they were, once or twice, quite angry with me for telling the truth on these points. "Sure, Sir, what's the use of letting them know what we've got?" "But what's the use of telling a lie about it?" "Faix! and its no lie; what call have they to be asking about it?" The consequence of this indifference to truth is a bad one. Malicious sayings, and tale bearers, reports of private conversations, and remarks with ill-natured emphasis or additions, and all the petty malice or scandal are rife in all the settlements I visited; often introducing the most bitter private dissentions in the community that might otherwise be happy and united (1842, 1:239).

And Rev. Lumsden (a circuit missionary assigned to the Cat Harbour area around the turn of the century) documents the frequent appeals for 'news', as local people were continually asking him "Anything strange lately, Sir?" (1906:97).

On the return from some noteworthy event, such as the return of local men from the 'seal fishery' of 1964 (which brought especially exciting 'news' as one of the vessels was badly damaged in the ice jams and had to return to St. John's) or the occasions when men were caught by storm on the 'offer' (i.e., outside) grounds, the reception in the shops of the individuals involved was most interesting. Such men would individually enter Scarlet's shop (the "neutral" shop where most "real" news is introduced) conspiciously later than usual — long enough to insure the audience that was certain to gather to hear about the venture (it should also be mentioned that too early an arrival would be considered excessively eager).

Almost immediately one or more of the men would, when the present topic was laid to rest (as it was with haste, on the arrival of "real" news), ask, 'How was it out there old man?', the reply to which was in practically every case, 'Well, I can't begin to tell you everything that went on out there. We did it

all, I tell you, we did it all.' This almost formal reply, of course, acts to preserve the store of information, especially if it were feeble to begin with, and thus maximize the interest and esteem of being able to relay, create or possess 'news'. And it forces those of the shop to ask more questions to which the possessor would reply in detail if the audience seemed sufficiently attentive, though if it were clear that a detailed reply at this point could not be used to advantage, a short, curt answer would be given.

Often as soon as those listening had gotten a few of the details,[7] one or more would leave to go to the "residential" shops and thus themselves be the recipients of the attention and esteem of the shop gathering as they repeated the 'news' they had gotten at Scarlet's shop. This secondary transmission may have already been made, so in order to make it 'news' again, an exaggeration or twist might be added. That evening, as the men of the two respective sections of the community gathered in the "residential" shops, the entire episode would be gone over, as well as perhaps several nights following. The more controversial the issue or the interpretation of the issue, the longer it lasts. This is, in essence, the conversation behavior in the shops, and the reason 'news' is rarely passed between two men meeting in the road — it is simply not to one's advantage to relay information to such a small audience.

One case is quite interesting. It, like my own visit, furnished information which was essentially "free for all" — that is, no one was the special or priviliged possessor and the transmitter with the most vivid imagination usually acquired the most prestige — But it must be remembered that anything considered or "made" 'news' locally has to be within local conceptual scope. During the late summer an unannounced group of seismic physicists from a Canadian university set up a small station on the head-

[7] It must be remembered that in the case of the seal hunt, local shop conversation for several days previous to the sealers' return had centered about speculation of its success, the damage to the vessels, and 'what went on out there', so that everything that possibly 'went on out there' had already been gone over. But there is always room for more speculation — which of course, may be preferred to the "facts", I mean, the *necessary* alternatives if not "facts" known. Government officials introducing programs in the outport should keep this in mind.

land just off the peninsula in order to conduct tests of the thickness of the earth's crust in the region. They set up large antennae and a series of small receivers on rocks for several hundred yards in all directions. A ship, some distance offshore, exploded depth charges sending shock waves to the earth's liquid core, where they returned to be measured by the small receivers set on rocks. No local people visited the installation at all (the group spent only about two weeks in the area), but they quickly 'sized up' the group and their activities — which were made all the more suspicious by the fact that the group worked only at night to avoid interference from daytime noises such as trucks, aircraft and explosions, and the fact that two of the group's staff were of oriental parentage.

The speculations (that is, the 'news' transmitted), each with many implications, were that the group were 1) Germans (stemming from the symbolism assigned Germans after the very heavy Newfoundland losses in World War I); 2) Russians (the reaction of the more contemporary — the ethnographer was also suspected of being Russian); 3) hunting for gold — specifically 'Billy Murne's treasure' (a local pirate of the last century who ostensibly buried his gold in the area); 4) hunting for oil (a black organic slime is found in many of the local fresh-water ponds — obviously indicating oil deposit to local people); 5) preparing to drain the bogs and marshes to put them into crop (stemming from the fact the Government had the year before taken an agricultural survey of the area). Even after their purpose was made clear (the group visited the local shop several times for supplies), many people still assumed it was a 'front' for more sinister activity, and there was serious concern that the depth charges of the offshore vessel were to kill all the fish and destroy the cod fishery.

'News' of this sort which *enters* the community and provides *everyone* with the wherewithal to transmit is especially welcome. Even today, with road links to the outside world and access by domestic radio in most homes, it is not always the case that there will be anything considered "real" news and the rather unenthusiastic reception that the community's first television received was simply because little on the screen was culturally-significant 'news'.

This situation was much more common in the past, and a considerable quantity of 'news' had to be manufactured. When this is necessary, the technique of the "cuffer' is used. A 'cuffer' is essentially an exaggeration or a twist — something 'new' — on an old item. This can pertain to the number of seals taken in 1905, the tonnage of a vessel which sunk 25 years ago, or the details of a notable storm of the last century. Although most men will have a general (or even specific) idea of the "facts" of the incident, the 'cuffer' is a technique used to create humour, or, as usually happens, to get an argument started over details of the particular case which will insure that discussion and conversation continue — even an argument about picayune details, when everyone may perfectly well know the exact "facts" (the "facts", of course, may not even be relevant). If a conversation lags, one is likely to hear, 'Tell us a cuffer George', by which it is meant, "Introduce some exaggeration or twist to an item of history or contemporary event in order to keep the conversation going."

I do not think it is without significance that the query Rev. Lumsden was so frequently asked was phrased in the way he reported (see above, p. 241), how in essence, 'news' is 'anything strange' or anything made 'strange' — somehow out of the ordinary. Within certain limits, mundane information can be twisted or exaggerated or otherwise changed to make it 'strange' or 'new'. In the technique of the 'cuffer', all men are usually aware of the extent of the exaggeration and will tolerate it within limits which seem reasonable to keep the conversation going. What is "reasonable" is defined by a number of criteria: the age of the event, the situation in which it is brought up, the relevance for illuminating an issue or proving a point, or the 'cuffer' may simply be an humourous exaggeration — especially welcome if it pokes fun at an issue that in the opinion of many is being taken too seriously. All of this is out of the scope of this brief paper, but one criterion is important: the status of the individual attempting the 'cuffer'.

Not everyone can or is allowed to 'cuffer'. Apart from the ability to "tell a good story" and the possession of material considered "newsworthy", Cat Harbour folk impose another im-

portant qualification on those to whom they accord esteem and prestige for successful verbal interaction. It must be stressed that the 'cuffer' is not regarded as either a lie or an outright falsification. A lie is an unsanctioned moral breach, the 'cuffer' is a licensed exaggeration permitted those firmly subscribing to the rules of local behavior — to those of good standing in the local moral community. Persons having in some way ignored one of the interaction codes[8] or having transgressed one of the many behavior rules stemming from these are not acknowledged in their attempts to 'cuffer', and their exaggerations and twisting of old 'news' to make it acceptable and conversation are met with a marked lack of reaction, or a reaction of a negative sort — as if they were lies or falsifications. Within the moral community, however, the technique of the 'cuffer' is sanctioned and important in the dynamics of conversation. 'Cuffers aren't lies at all, mostly just old gossip', was the reply of one informant, and when I pointed out to him that some men were not acknowledged, that some men could not, in essence, 'cuffer', he replied. 'Only certain fellers can cuffer — some hands make a good story sound like a lie'. Knowing the local reputation of 'hands', however, enables one to predict more accurately the successful story-teller than any knowledge of their particular speaking abilities.

Any arguments the 'cuffer' brings about are regarded as legitimate conversations, and although quite startling to an outside observer, the loud and ostensibly serious exchanges (involving much shouting, wagers, and even threats) during a shop argument are in actuality a formalized and impersonal technique of communication, and it is a serious breach of the technique if men *actually* become angry and genuinely serious in their argument. Although I spent most nights in the shops, very rarely did I see a conversation really become heated. Latent conflict characterized some exchange, but the loud and noisy conversation usually taking place cannot be assumed to be conflict. Men are, very significantly, said to be 'getting black' if they become personal and serious in their argument. Any real quarrel between

[8] These codes — the total corpus of which define the moral community, are detailed in Faris, 1965.

persons is labelled 'black' and to be avoided in Cat Harbour at all costs. Physical violence in the community is extremely rare (there is considerable sham physical contact or horseplay in the form of joking, knee-grabbing, back-slapping and shoulder-thumbing), and in its very long history, there have been no cases of homicide.[9]

Physical encounters have occured, but the incidents are sufficiently rare that the occasion is long remembered and constantly brought out in the 'cuffers'. It is of enough importance when a real conflict does occur. The incident is often marked by the naming of the location after the fight, and most Cat Harbour place names reflect this. 'Scratch-Ass Tickle' is the name given a small 'run' (i.e., passage) between two offshore rocks, reflecting an argument between two of the early settlers, one of whom received abrasions from one of the rocks as a result of the encounter. 'Kinkhorn Valley' is a shallow valley in the nearby forest where forty years ago one local man grabbed another by the larynx (the 'kinkhorn') in an argument over wood.

Obviously, those most often involved in fights are those who are in others respects as well, the least successfully socialized — those who transgress behavior rules in other areas — who ignore the Cat Harbour moral order and deviate from the formalized and rigid role expectations normally characterizing the community. Just as the dynamics of verbal interaction and physical contact are marked by an absence of aggression (or a formalization of it in the loud 'cuffers' and the physical horseplay), so are the dynamics of successful economic interaction marked by an avoidance of economic aggression (or a formalization of it). This is not, however, in my experience, a "ritual rebellion", and I do not see the loud shop arguments as necessary to the "solidarity" of the group (cf. Gluckman, 1955 for a statement of this thesis). On the contrary, the avoidance of overt aggression (or the formalization of it) in Cat Harbour is a real survival response in the tenuous socio-ecological circumstances (see Faris, 1965,

[9] This may be compared with homicide rates documented in the studies of "peasant" communities of other parts of the world, particularly Latin America. Cat Harbour does, however, have a rather significant suicide rate (4 in the past 35 years).

for details). People do 'get vexed' with each other, they do become angry, and there are very real anomosities of long standing in the community. The point is that they are seldom allowed expression and there is a premium on repressing conflict.

The noisy arguments in the shops, then, are simply formalized and sanctioned exchange, and even the loudest arguments are completely unacknowledged at the next meeting of the individuals concerned. But if the shop conversation becomes personal — if men become 'black' — the individuals involved avoid each other and the conflict becomes 'news'.

There was a marked reaction to my own attempts to gossip or attempt the technique of the 'cuffer', and anxiety that, as a 'stranger', my "information was personal and not the formalized and routinized communication of local people. There was not a resentment toward my outside attempts to communicate in the native manner, but there was discomfort. The reaction was essentially wariness of a 'stranger' becoming so familiar, and I suddenly posed a threat from an angle they had not previously considered — I was exploiting a dynamic only allowed those firmly part of the local moral community[10] (I should add that I did not persist in my 'cuffering' attempts — more, however, from lack of sufficient skill rather than community reaction).

'News', in summary, is culturally-determined. As it makes the rounds of the settlement in the way described and is thoroughly discussed and exaggerated, it ceases to be 'news' and is relegated to a dormant store of information which may be activated as 'news' any time by the mechanism of the 'cuffer' — essentially the way conversation and communication is maintained and continued should there not be any "real" 'news'. The person who can either provide the most "real" news or most successfully

[10] This is in contrast to Gluckman's analysis of gossip and scandal (1963), which stresses clique distinctions. This is absent in Cat Harbour, and even though those having violated in some way the codes of the moral order are ignored in their attempts to "cuffer", they meet this reaction as people (of the moral community) assume this "violater" may exploit this interaction dynamic and agress in this sphere as he did in others. An exploitation (agression) of the rules of successful and acceptable local behavior in one area is seen by the moral community as likely to dictate one's actions in other areas. Snobbery is irrelevant here.

'cuffer' is accorded esteem. But individuals are not allowed such opportunity unless they subscribe to the rigid rules of membership in the local moral community.

And it seems perfectly congruent to me that in a society which accords esteem to the successful transmission of 'anything strange', we should find such a marked lack of exchange of information which is considered culturally-mundane and common — even to a lack of verbal exchange in learning processes.

This short essay provides an example of the *use* of language in a particular circumstance. I have tried to outline the "rules" of this use and suggest reasons for this. Quite apart from the specific content and the specific function of a community, it strikes me that the dynamics discussed here may have general application in other societies of the world.

McGill University

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