

LISTENING IN VERBAL COMMUNICATION: ASPECTS REGARDING ACTIVE LISTENING IN THEORETICAL MODELS OF SOCIAL WORK

Simona RODAT

Professor, PhD, Adventus University, Cernica, Ilfov, Romania, Email:

simona.rodad@uadventus.ro

Abstract

In communication between people, listening plays an important role. Active listening, which implies giving the full attention to the speaker and showing interest to the communication by using a variety of verbal and non-verbal signs, maintains the communication relations and contributes to mitigating conflicts in different social contexts. Moreover, active listening is the most desirable form of response in the interaction between interlocutors, in activities where communication and comprehension are essential, as is the case with social work. Starting with the delineation of the place of listening in the verbal communication and the outlining of the characteristics of the active listening, this paper deals further with the ways in which the importance and the

roles of listening and active listening are highlighted in the theoretical and methodological models of intervention developed in social work.

Keywords: listening, active listening, verbal communication, non-verbal communication, social work

Introduction

Listening is fundamental in communication. In a sequence of communication, more than half is listening (Dinu, 2000). But not all the receptive behaviours that refer to or involve listening are similar. Such behaviours can be ranged on a continuum from simple hearing to active listening. The latter involves a form of activism on the part of the receiver, he/she expressly following the full decoding of the received message and providing an eloquent feedback in this regard.

Active listening contributes to keeping the communication relations, informs about the expectations of other individuals and can mitigate and stop many of the social conflicts. But although active listening is the most fulfilling form of listening, it is not present in all communication contexts. In fact, in many social situations active listening is absent.

The present paper addresses active listening as essential component in the process of communication. After delineating the place of the listening in the verbal communication, being highlighted in this regard the connections with speech, respectively with langue and parole, the different types of listening are outlined, and then special emphasis is placed on the active listening. The paper discusses mainly the verbal and non-verbal messages or signs of active listening, as well as the techniques and qualities of this form of listening.

Further, the place and roles of listening, especially those of active listening, in social work are highlighted. The paper outlines, chronologically, the theoretical and methodological models of intervention developed in social work and, within them, there is underlined the importance given by each to the listening and active listening in their intervention procedures.

Listening in verbal communication

Over time people needed to use conventional ways to denote experience, in order to be able to cooperate with each other, or simply to cope with the demands of the environment. The sounds associated with certain experiences have begun to have certain meanings, and as a result of this association, their utterance generates the image of the object of experience. The fact that language has emerged in response to a common environment is supported by the observation of the similarity of languages in time and space, and of their relative stability (Ștefănescu, 2009: 52). The events of human life throughout the relatively short human existence are generally universal and give rise to the same processes of perception and reaction.

Verbal communication can be defined in a broad sense as the communication that uses articulated language. The origins of language have remained obscure to this day, and evidence of its evolution is scarce (McQuail, 1999: 72). However, we can understand the process of its appearance by observing the contemporary social life, which allows us to see how variations and modifications of linguistic use appear and how language works in social interaction. In this way we can assume that the origins of language are in the interaction of people living in a common environment, on which they act. In the conception of D. McQuail (1999), language is the specific faculty or

aptitude of humanity to construct sign systems that allow expression or communication. It is non-translatable or universal.

Moreover, verbal communication has a symbolic character, which clearly distinguishes it from all the sound signalling systems within the animal world (Dinu, 2007). Only human speech proves capable of achieving that “displacement” (DeVito, 1988: 81) consisting of the possibility of referring to absent objects and persons or to past or imaginary situations.

According to the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure ([1916] 1974), language is a pluriform, heterogeneous phenomenon, both physically/physiologically and psychologically, and belongs to both the individual and social fields. It cannot be placed in any other category of human facts (apud Caune, 2000: 26). Saussure made the distinction between *langue* (meaning language system) and *parole* (meaning language use, or speaking) (apud Eggert, 2007), both embodiments of the language. The *langue* does not differ from other social phenomena involved in speech acts. It is a component of language, defined as “a social product of the faculty of language and a set of necessary conventions, adopted by the social body, to allow the individuals the exercise of speech” (Caune, 2000: 27). *Langue* encompasses the abstract, systematic rules and conventions of a signifying system, being independent of the individual users, pre-existing them. The *langue* involves the principles of language, without which no meaningful utterance, “*parole*”, would be possible. *Parole* refers to the concrete instances of the use of *langue*. This is the individual, personal phenomenon of language as a series of speech acts made by a linguistic subject (Saussure, 1986: 9-10). The structure of the *langue* is revealed through the study of *parole*.

Parole (speech/ speaking) is, therefore, that part of the language that concerns the subject’s activity and individualizes him/her. *Parole* or speech is

the act by which the linguistic function is exercised. It is the most widely used encoding activity in verbal communication and is inseparable from the bodily and facial attitude, that seems to facilitate it (Dimbley and Burton, 1985: 48-51). The speech has a situational character, which means that each word can have intrinsic meanings and can refer to something (concrete or abstract). Parole is a dynamic temporal and spatial construct consisting of a sequence of sounds and statements. In addition to this characteristic of being successive (involving a certain string of words, a sequence of them in sentences), speech is also rhythmic (implies a certain rhythm), and infers addressability, since speaking is always oriented towards other people.

While, in a language, speech is the activity of encoding, listening is the activity of decoding the communication. Listening is essential in communication. According to M. Dinu (2000: 33), 53% of the total communication sequence is listening, while only 16% is speech, 17% is read and 14% is written. There are three distinct types of receptive behaviours that are similar and refer to or involve listening: 1. “non-listening” – refers to a situation in which someone assumes the receiver status without actually listening; 2. “listening”; 3. “meditation” (or thinking) (Ștefănescu, 2009: 57). Listening has its own internal gradations, being in fact a continuum that varies from non-listening to the level of thinking – in which case reflexivity also appears (Marinescu, 2003: 39). Therefore, listening follows the following phases:

a) *hearing* – the automatic act of receiving and transmitting to the brain of the sound waves generated by the emitter’s speech; expresses the physiological impact that sound waves produce;

b) *understanding* – the act of identifying the communicated informative content, recomposing the sounds heard into words, and words in sentences and phrases;

c) *translation into meanings* – involves the memory, and linguistic, cultural, and speaking experience of the listener;

d) *assignment of meanings to the information received* – it is performed according to the level of operationalization of the language, vocabulary, linguistic performances;

e) *evaluation* – making value judgments or adopting value attitudes by the listener.

Listening fulfils several functions in communication (Watson and Hill, 1993: 104): a) control of understanding; b) encouraging communication – any receiver must have feedback in the communication; at the transmitter's level the reaction of the receiver is as important as the message transmitted; c) ensuring the correct feedback.

According to the same authors (*idem*), there are generally three types of listening:

1. *Pseudo-listening* – is the situation in which the individual perceives the message (meaning, the signs used), but does not perceive the entire flow of messages;

2. *Listening*;

3. *Active listening* – is the type of listening that involves assuming the role of receiver that expressly follows the full decoding of the received language. It involves a kind of receptor's activism and cannot exist outside the idea of feedback. In the real plan it is rarely encountered, and its absence can lead to conflicts between people.

Active listening

This type of listening means that the subject actively take part in the activity of listening, being fully concentrated on what is being said, not just passively hearing the message of the speaker. In active listening not only the listener gives the full attention to the speaker, but also he/she must be seen to be listening. The interest can be conveyed to the speaker by using both verbal and non-verbal messages or signs.

Verbal messages or signs of active listening include:

Positive reinforcement, by using words or phrases such as “indeed”, “very good”, “yes” etc. The best positive reinforcement is when the listener elaborates or explains why he/she is agreeing with a certain point transmitted by the speaker.

Questioning, which means asking relevant questions or/and making statements that build or help to clarify what the speaker has said. By questioning the listener reinforces that he/she is interested in what the speaker has been saying.

Remembering key points, names, details, ideas and concepts from previous conversations helps also to reinforce that the attention of the listener was kept and that the messages sent by the speaker have been received and understood.

Reflection, by repeating and paraphrasing what the speaker has said, is a powerful skill that demonstrates attention and understanding and shows the comprehension of the listener.

Clarification, by using open questions which enable the speaker to explain or expand on certain points, shows that the listener ensures that he/she received the correct message or meaning.

Summarisation, by repeating, usually with own words of the listener, a summary of what has been said back to the speaker. Such a feedback, through the reiteration of the message in a summarized, clear and logical way, not only demonstrates attention and understanding, but also gives the speaker the chance to correct some points of his/her message, whenever necessary.

Non-verbal messages or signs of active listening imply:

Eye contact, which can show the speaker that the listener pay attention; anyway, too much eye contact can be intimidating, especially for more shy speakers, that is why the eye contact should not be too long and should be combined with other non-verbal signs of listening.

Smile can be also used to show that the listener is paying attention; combined with nods of the head, smiles can be used as signs that the message is listened and understood.

Posture is another important way to communicate feedback in interpersonal interactions. An attentive posture may include that the body is leaned slightly forwards or sideways while sitting, or the head is a bit tilted or is resting on one hand.

Mirroring or automatic reflection of facial expressions is also a sign of attentive listening, helping to show empathy or sympathy in more emotional situations.

Showing no signs of distraction: while active listening, someone manifests no tokens of distraction such as fidgeting, looking at the clock or the watch, doodling, playing with the hair or picking the fingernails.

The above-mentioned non-verbal signs are more likely to be displayed by those who actively listen. However, some signs may not be appropriate in all situations and across all cultures (SkillsYouNeed, 2019).

Active listening involves, thus, using the context of communication, but it cannot be practiced permanently (Marinescu, 2003: 39). Nevertheless, in situations where it is necessary to show active listening, a number of *active listening techniques* can be used, such as (Șoitu, 2001: 165):

Paraphrasing the speaker – means that the listener is reformulating the message received with his/her own words. This technique implies that, after receiving sufficient information, the listener re-communicates the message in his/her own words, in order to establish real points of communication with the interlocutor. Paraphrasing ensures a high degree of understanding in communication.

Asking questions – is necessary to discover the subtext and understand exactly what the transmitter wants to communicate. Active listening involves the investigative effort of the listener (the receiver of the message). This does not mean that the receiver has to often interrupt the interlocutor to ask questions, as this would fragment the communication and disturb the transmitter, which may thus lose its string of ideas. This is why it is recommended that the communication partner should be allowed to present all his/her ideas, and only afterwards the questions should be asked.

Following the main ideas is required particularly in extensive speeches and wide discourses full of information and details. This is why active listening should focus not on the unimportant things or on the details, but on the main ideas about which, eventually, additional information may be required (by asking questions, paraphrasing etc.). Also, the focus should be on what is being said, not on what is not being said, and not on some side effects or collateral/accidental consequences that may occur in the communication.

Taking notes – can help the listener to more accurately track the ideas presented and allows him/her to develop a sketch of what has been exposed.

Expressions of interest – means listening so that it is obvious that the speaker is being followed. It is recommended that signals in this regard (both verbal and non-verbal) should be sent to the speaker.

Understanding the speaker's actual state of mind and supporting him/her – implies a positive and encouraging attitude on the part of the receiver/auditor, to enable the transmitter to continue and to help him/her succeed in his/her approach.

Active listening has a number of qualities which include (ibid.: 160-163):

- Can inform about the expectations of other individuals in relation to a particular person. The type of “Self” closed or open depends on the ability to listen actively.
- Contributes to the upkeep of the communication relations that are established with important persons from the point of view of the individual involved in the communication.
- It is important to stop and mitigate social conflicts (nine out of ten conflicts are or can be solved through communication).

Listening and active listening in social work

In the first stage of development of the theory in social work, also called the phase of investigation (Howe, 2001), which can be placed at the beginning of the 20th century, the social workers were those who “executed, not those who thought” (idem). During this period, social work was defined as “the art of helping” or “using common sense in difficult situations” (Goldstein, 1984).

In the 20-30s years of the twentieth century, along with the development of *psychoanalysis*, the theoretical advance in social work entered a second evolutionary stage, the focus being shifted from the practical to the

psychological, therapeutic side of helping. Psychoanalytic therapy has shaped the relationship style of social work, from one directive and based on the exercise of control, to one permissive, open, based on listening. As psychoanalysis influenced the shift of emphasis in social work on feelings, and especially on unconscious factors (and not so much on conscious thoughts and events), psychoanalytic therapy encouraged, through listening, not so much the action, but the seeking of explanations and understanding the personality of the person listened to.

The philosophical current of *humanism* has also exerted an important influence on the theoretical developments in sociology, psychology, and also in social work. The theories and models of practice in social work based on humanist views focus on the idea that human beings are trying to make sense of the surrounding environment and to understand the world they are experiencing. Humanist models take into account the fact that people's self-interpretations, as well as the interpretations they give to the social world, are valid and valuable. Therefore, social workers should help people acquire skills to analyse themselves and to explore the personal significations they give to the perceived world, and which affect them (Payne, 2011: 208).

An important humanistic direction of operation in social work, initially used in counselling, but also in working with families and small groups, is *the client-centred approach*, which is based on the idea that each client should be treated as a unique individual (Rogers, 1951), and social work should focus on the persons and their subjective experience (Wilkes, 1981; Goldstein, 1984; England, 1986). In this perspective, the social worker's approach should be non-directive, tolerant, involving "active listening", "pure empathy" and "genuine friendship". Humanistic therapy in social work should be based on discussions (Howe, 2001: 76), because people, wherever they are, are looking

for other people to listen to their problems, and to share their problems. But beyond listening, human beings must also feel warmth, love, understanding and empathy. In this vision, there is nothing intellectual or complicated in helping others; the basis is, in fact, simple: help is done out of love and goodwill.

Later, a number of theoretical models used in social work, such as role theory, communication theory, narrative theory, were developed within the framework of *the constructivist perspective*. Constructivism played an important role in the revival of social studies in the 70's of the twentieth century, through the innovative character of its endeavours. This theoretical current claims both explanations for the microsocial space (individuals and small groups) and the macrosocial space (institutions, social norms, society). In the constructivist view, the world is made up of institutions, norms, customs, ideas or opinions that precede situations, and that is why the social actors' competences are important in making sense of these situations.

The constructivist practice of social work, especially that developed by *the narrative theory* (White and Epston, 1990), which argues that the "stories" of life make sense only when they are exposed, having the role of structuring people's experience, is based, thus, on dialogue, and on listening to life stories and rebuilding them. Following the vision of M. White and D. Epston (1990), N. Parton and P. O'Byrne (2000) developed a theoretical narrative model and a proposal for intervention that aims to build the positive aspects of people's lives and experiences. The starting point in their theoretical development is the notion of narration. They have noticed that, when describing an event, people try to make the story fit their idea of reality; therefore, their narration represents reality (apud Payne, 2011: 195). The narratives or stories told by people take the public into account, thus the representation of reality is affected by the narrator's perception of those who listen to him/her. Also, the public reaction

affects the narrative and, by extension, the representation of reality. Thus, it can be said that each narration is a social relationship. It describes and represents an event, but the event is interpreted in a social relationship.

Parton and O'Byrne underline that the evaluation in constructivist social work must emphasize the careful listening of the client's narratives and their validation. R. A. Neimeyer (1993) argues that people "make sense" of the surrounding world and their experiences through narrative structures, that is, by "narrating". He talks about the storytelling technique, a procedure by which the interviewer helps the storyteller to get deeper into the complex implications of some self-statements. Another method inspired by this theory is that of oral history, which can help with the structured examination of the meanings and constructs associated with the client's experiences, and which has proved especially useful in working with migrants and those who are part of a different culture compared to the majority.

Since the 1960s, a new trend has increasingly made its presence felt in social work, namely the tendency towards concise, structured and concentrated theories that deal with immediate concrete problems. Thus, there were developed the theoretical and methodological perspectives of individualized social work, i.e. *casework models*, such as crisis intervention theory, task-centred practice, and problem-solving model. Such models are part of the individualist-reformist tradition, which has not paid too much attention to social change, but which reflected the need for short intervention methods in social work practice (Rodat, 2016: 207).

Depending on the number of steps envisioned and the detailing and variety of the steps to be taken, there are several models of crisis intervention. One of these is *the model of the six-step crisis intervention* proposed by R. K. James and B. E. Gilliland (2001). This model emphasizes the importance of

ensuring the protection against the risks, attacks and emotional reactions that can lead to extreme situations, including suicide. As shown in Figure 1, the first three steps of the model are based on listening:

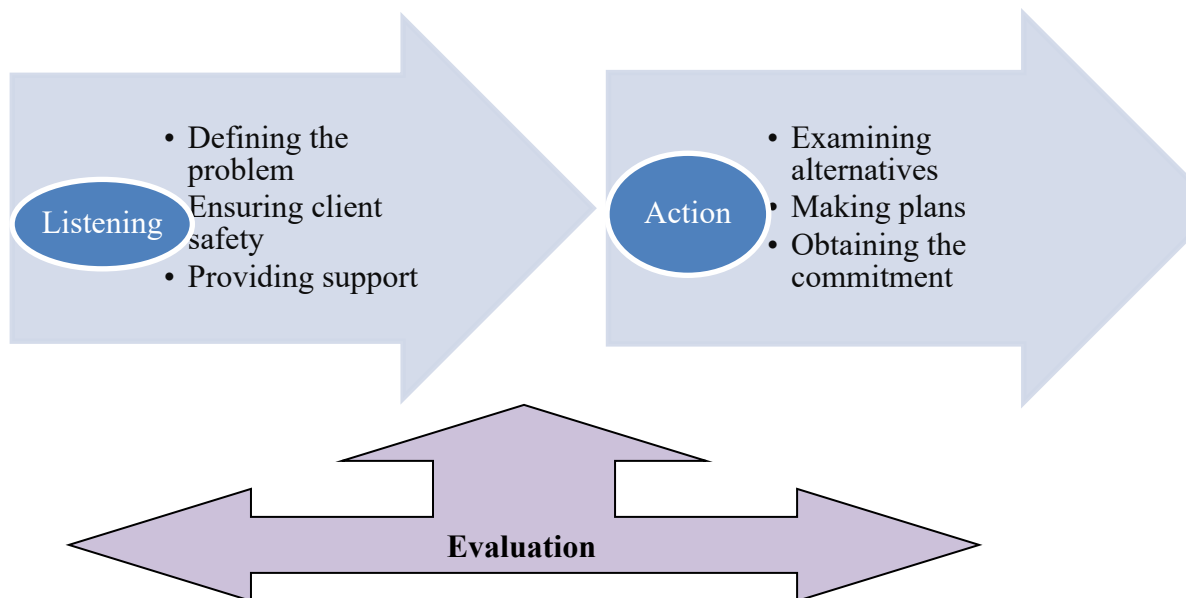


Figure 1: The six-step crisis intervention model proposed by R. K. James and B. E. Gilliland (2001)

Thus, defining the problem, ensuring client safety and providing support must be based on listening. Only after completing these first three sub-stages, there can be moved on to the following three steps, which are based on the action: examining alternatives, making plans, obtaining the commitment. James and Gilliland point out that, during crisis intervention, there is a need for ongoing evaluation, as emotions undergo rapid changes (apud Payne, 2011).

In *the model of crisis intervention in seven-stages* of A. R. Roberts (1991) listening appears also as an important element, especially in the fourth stage, which involves analysing feelings and offering support. This is possible, according to the author, through active listening on the part of the social

worker, which can facilitate the self-disclosure of the client in difficulty. The seven stages or phases proposed by Roberts for crisis intervention are as follows:

1. Evaluation of the crisis (including the extent to which lethality is involved) and the individual's perception of the crisis;
2. Establishing a relationship based on trust and respect between the client and the social worker;
3. Identification of major problems and of precipitating events or factors, as well as of common but inefficient methods of overcoming the crisis;
4. Analysis of feelings and offering support through active listening, and facilitating the utterance in a familiar and secure environment that encourages self-disclosure;
5. Exploring possible alternatives by examining past reactions (less suited to crisis events) and defining appropriate behaviors for crisis resolution;
6. Formulating an action plan by restoring the cognitive function and reinforcing the will to deal with problems;
7. Ensuring readiness to work together in other future crisis situations; agreement and establishment of a monitoring plan.

Another casework model of intervention in social work is *the problem-solving model*. Based on the idea that life itself is a continuous problem-solving process, the intervention proposed by this model focuses on the social worker's concern to help the client and, where appropriate, to teach him/her to define his/her problem and goals, and to acquire and practice the skills needed to reach those goals. Another fundamental idea of this perspective is that the social worker and the client are able to communicate with each other about problems, goals, resources, planning and implementation.

This theoretical model discussed also a number of roles that social workers can assume in the intervention process, depending on the client's situation and needs. Among other contributions, various techniques for implementing roles have been developed and perfected in this model, such as modelling and identification, logical discussion, raising awareness of one's actions and other people's behaviour, orienting and giving advice, encouraging etc. In order to succeed in applying all these techniques, a positive atmosphere of the meetings between the social worker and the client is needed, the latter being given the freedom to express any kind of feelings and thoughts. The social worker must offer understanding and support, convey confidence in the client's abilities, and show patience, reflection of the messages received, respect and, of course, active listening.

Conclusions

In verbal communication listening is essential, fulfilling several fundamental functions, such as controlling of understanding, encouraging communication, ensuring the correct feedback. In fact, in a total communication sequence, listening represents more than half. There are, however, several forms of listening, socially the most fulfilling being the active listening. When a subject is actively listening, he/she is not just passively hearing, but is paying the full attention to the speaker, and is conveying his/her interest to the speaker by using both verbal and non-verbal messages or signs. That means, the feedback is visible and suggestive for the fully taking part in the activity of listening.

In social situation, in communication contexts, active listening is the most desirable form of listening. This is because active listening maintains the communication relations and the interest to communicate further, informs

about the expectations of other individuals, and contributes to mitigating and stopping social conflicts.

Given that the entire process of intervention in social work involves fundamental sequences of verbal communication, the importance of listening, and especially of active listening, is highlighted by most theoretical and methodological models developed over time in this field. Thus, since the early twentieth century, psychoanalysis, whose therapeutic methods were also taken into social work, emphasized the listening to the feelings and unconscious thoughts of the assisted person, encouraging not so much the action, but the search for explanations and understanding the personality of the person listened. In the humanistic perspective, the social worker's approach should be non-directive, tolerant, involving, beside empathy and friendship, active listening. Moreover, the theories developed within the framework of the constructivism, and the constructivist social work practices and methods inspired by these theories, such as for example oral history, underline the significance of careful listening of the client's narratives and their social validation. Furthermore, the casework models, such as crisis intervention theory, task-centred theory, and problem-solving model, developed since the 1960s based on the social work practice, which have proposed concise, structured and concentrated intervention processes, include clear steps to be followed, some of them specifying listening and active listening as basic activities for identifying and defining problems, analysing the feelings and encouraging self-disclosure, ensuring client's safety, and providing support.

In conclusion, listening and active listening are fundamental in all social contexts of communication, and are also basic sequences in the communication between social worker and client. Moreover, as outlined above, active listening represents an activity, or a clearly specified step in most theoretical models and

intervention practices developed in social work, that points out its significance in the field.

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LANGUAGE AS A POWER VECTOR IN BUILDING REALITY - APPROACHES TO THE ANALYSIS OF WORKPLACE DISCOURSE

Ana BIRTALAN

Assistant Professor, PhD, The Ecological University of Bucharest,
Romania

Abstract

This article aims at analysing the natural occurrence of institutional talk in workplace environments, focusing on its characteristics, such as goal orientation, specific constraints, institutional role, but also on the interpersonal dimension it always includes. Workplace talk occurs in a wide range of settings from talk between co-workers, to international business communication. We have focused on the unidirectional and decision-making discourse genre, providing illustrative examples of this frequently used genre in our attempt to show the way in which speakers signal and negotiate genre in the pursuit of transactional goals. Moreover, I have also examined the relational features of workplace discourse, as an ever present component of specific workplace

genres. My final aim has been to show that the existence of relational markers carry out important functions within the workplace discourse, proposing different examples for investigating the participants' both transactional and relational goals.

Keywords: institutional discourse, transactional goal, relational goal, relational markers, workplace interactions

1.1. Language as social interaction

Social psychologists have long had an interest in language, and, watching the current social psychological scene, have focused on the so called “social cognition” (Semin and Fiedler, 1992) Social cognition refers to the mental processing of information about the social world. The term “social” refers to the objects of cognition (that is, people) and the psychological mechanisms which enable the individual subjects to perceive themselves and other people in particular ways in particular circumstances. A more interesting and useful approach of the concept is given by Forgas (1981) concerns the way in which perception and description of the social world are done by people as members of particular cultures or groups and the way in which the social world is thought about or described in the course of social interaction. These different usages of the term “social cognition” have rather different implications for the study of discourse. Discourse analysis, which refers to the production and comprehension of language above the level of the sentence. That sense of discourse is rendered by cognitive processes like span of attention, ability to make inferences, conversational implicatures, the ability to be sensitive to textual coherence and cohesion. The sense of discourse seen as a cognitive work is linked with the social, cultural or political circumstances of its

production. Van Dijk enumerates a number of classic social psychological phenomena which seem to depend on discourse: “*After all, there are few fundamental socio-psychological notions that do not have obvious links with language use in communicative context, that is, with different forms of text or talk. Social perception, impression management, attitude change and persuasion, attribution, categorization, intergroup, relations, stereotypes, social representations and interaction are only some of the major areas of current social psychology in which discourse plays a part*”.(1990: 164)

Thus, interactional linguists and discourse analysts are quite clear in their beliefs that social interaction is the place of language use: what we know and understand about interaction complements our ability to use language. The central goal is the analysis of “language as it is used in everyday life by members of the social order, that vehicle of communication in which they argue with their wives, joke with their friends, and deceive their enemies” (Labov: 1972) Actually, each approach to discourse incorporates this insight into its specific methods and concepts. Speech act theory focuses upon the linguistic actions that we perform towards another person (initiating an interaction). The cooperative principle (on which we will focus later), so important in Gricean pragmatics is a principle applicable to human interactions, relying on the way people interpret one another’s meaning during the interaction with each other. To be more specific, each approach to discourse views language as social interaction in the sense that it is a process where one person has an effect on other. Ochs (1988: 15) stated that “*activity mediates linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge and that knowledge and activity impact one another*”. Moreover, we should add that the activity most pertinent to our understanding of discourse is interactive activity, which is directed to another person and has a potential for affecting that other person.

1.2. Language and power

In what follows, we would like to focus on language seen as, besides a social interaction, an important tool in the production, maintenance and change of social relations of power. It is an attempt to increase consciousness of how language contributes to the labelling, manipulation and domination of some people by others. We will address and approach the problem of how to relate speakers' goals and intention to surface discourse features, the linguistic way they signal and make inferences about communicative goals.

The framework that we have chosen is the institutional environment, focusing on analysing the interpersonal dimension of workplace talk associated with specific institutional roles (employer- employee, manager- subordinate, employee- employee type).

We will see that in different qualitative analyses of a variety of encounters, while institutional role and relative power are important factors, the roles and the identities taken up in the discourse are negotiated, and may or may not correspond to their institutional roles. Speakers, sometimes, invoke identities related to their relational goals which are less asymmetrical than their institutional roles. Relational side sequences, which involve a shift in footing and alignment, are evidence of such identity negotiation. Using a genre- based approach we will try to identify a further type of dominance in addition to institutional dominance or asymmetry: discursive dominance, illustrating the use of certain linguistic mechanisms to render it, on the one hand, and showing that there is a tendency for dominant speakers (due to their superior institutional role) to reduce discursive asymmetry through the use of politeness and solidarity strategies, on the other hand. The concept of "intersubjectivity" might be invoked, assuming that the discourse participants share a co-

conception of the world” (Overstreet and Yule, 1997). Thus, the efforts of the dominant speakers to reduce asymmetry can be seen as an attempt to achieve intersubjectivity. Discourse participants always have a clear goal in any interaction. Tracy and N. Coupland (1990) claim that the speakers usually have several goals, and at least two types of goal are evident: “the “transactional” goals and the “relational” goals. In workplace discourse, the speakers may be primarily concerned with getting things done , therefore, with transactional goals. However, taking a multiple goals approach to discourse means acknowledging that, in most types of discourse speakers orient to both transactional and relational goals, although one goal might be dominant.

Moreover, many linguists claim that the speakers’ relational goals are also important when describing workplace discourse. Manifestations of relational goals in institutional environment often involve the notion of “politeness” or “face-work”, concepts developed principally by Goffman (1972) and Brown and Levinson (1987). “Face” is an “individual positive social value (Goffman, 1972), that is, maintain in one’s own and other participants’ face in the course of an interaction, and avoid or correcting threats that arise. Brown and Levinson n (1987) distinguish between positive and negative politeness, both of them involving the attempt to keep unimpeded one’s face. Many instances of a relational orientation involve either positive or negative politeness, especially when dealing with a boss-employee transactional talk.

2. Transactional goal and interpersonal markers

In what follows, we shall provide instances of institutional directive discourse where the main transactional goals are task-completion delegated by the manager towards their employees, or decision-making discussions, providing an overview of a range of linguistic devices dealing with

interpersonal aspects of language use which are relevant for an examination of the speakers' relational goals. We shall investigate a series of interpersonal markers used in task delegation and decision-making discourses. The following types of interpersonal markers will be analyzed at the discourse level: modal verbs, hedges, intensifiers, vague language, evaluative language, idioms and metaphors. All these lexico- grammatical features could be described as having modal meanings, as they can all express speaker stance, but we will use the term "modality" especially for modal verbs (*could, must, should etc*), modal lexical verbs (*think, want, believe etc*), modal adjectives (*certain, necessary, compulsory etc*), modal adverbs (*maybe, definitely, probably*) and modal nouns (*possibility, opinion, view etc*). They all express the speaker's degree of commitment and a range of modal meanings: possibility, volition, necessity, ability etc. A. Koester (2006) investigated in detail the workplace talk, drawing up a corpus of naturally occurring office conversations recorded in a variety of workplaces . Modal items, he says, "were the most frequent of the lexico-grammatical markers investigated in the corpus".

Another way of expressing either commitment or detachment to an assertion is by using *hedges*. (words or constructions used to lessen the impact of an utterance due to different constraints) and intensifiers. Depending on the context the same adverbs like *sort of, just, really, a bit* can be used pragmatically either as hedges or intensifiers .

Example1: "*I don't know what to add. Let's just say it was nobody's fault.*"

Example2: "I don't know what to add. This is just too much!"

The adverb *just* functioned in the first example as a hedge, giving the discourse a mitigating tinge, whereas in the second example it is used as an intensifier, emphasizing the speaker's commitment to what they are saying.

Another interpersonal marker used in institutional talk is the so called “*vague language*” rendered by vague approximators like *around, about,* vague manners referring to entities (*stuff, thing*)and categories like *something, things like that*. Their role is to make the speaker’s discourse more or less specific, accurate. According to Chanell (1994), there are ten possible communicative functions of vague language , but A Koester reduces the to two big categories: 1. Those that are related to the information state of the participants and serve the transactional function of language and 2. Those related to the relational aspect of the interaction, including self-protection, politeness, power.

One of the major functions of interpersonal linguistic devices is evaluation. Within institutional discourse, evaluative language is mainly used by the management , referring to speakers’ judgments of goodness or desirability , also called appraisal.

Let us examine the following dialogue, part of a business meeting, where A is the manager of the company).

A: *“Hello, Michael! Thank you for coming. I’m sorry to say that the sales last month were sort of disappointing. Can you tell me why?”*

B: *Well, it has been a tough period, the orders have been very difficult getting out....I will show you some numbers.*

A: *Yeah, we’re thinking together on that..... just wanted to tell you about it. Some action should be taken, right?*

This is an instance of a decision-making conversation, covertly directive, an episodic structure consisting of a series of problem- solution patterns stressed put by different interpersonal markers.

Many decision- making conversations follow a problem-solution pattern. Hoey (1983) identifies a textual pattern with the following phases: situation→problem→response/solution→evaluation.

Examining the linguistic manifestation of this dialogue, we may argue that the linguistic system provides the resources for pursuing discourse goals. It deals, obviously, with a transactional goal, but the relational goals are also expressed.

At the opening phase of the encounter, the words *sorry* and *disappointing* provide a clear frame for the interaction, where the manager expresses his feelings, regarding the sales of the previous month. This is a statement based on a fact and he is entitled by his position in the company to analyze and evaluate the situation. However, in order to keep up the positive face, which is a “positive social value”, according to Goffman (1982) of his addressee, A uses a hedge, *sort of*, softening the message that is intended to be delivered to the addressee and, thus, avoiding face-threatening acts , facilitating the task for both parties and, consequently, conveying the message that what the addressee is being asked to understand is not so much an infringement on his freedom of action. Moving on, a query, under the form of a question, introduced by a modal verb follows. As we have mentioned earlier, the semantics of modality is very complex, and different types of meaning can be expressed through modality: possibility, obligation, necessity, volition, intention, prediction, inclination etc. Lyons (1977) broadly divided them into two categories: deontic modality, expressing necessity to perform acts and epistemic modality, expressing degrees of commitment to the truth of a proposition. In the dialogue above, the modal verb *can* functions as a epistemic modal, performing both transactional and relational goals. On the one hand, *can* introduces a query

that regards the feasibility of an action, most frequently used in transactional genres, but, on the other hand, has a relational orientation. The unequal relationship of the interlocutors (boss-employee), which is common in unidirectional genres, often results in greater threats to face. Therefore, this use of the modal *can* has a so called “politeness” function, which involves avoiding or mitigating threats to the face.

Further on, B justifies himself, admits, evaluates and explains the situation, appealing to the in order to express a high degree of commitment to the veracity or accuracy of things. It is both used to announce a future action and to show the commitment of the speaker, implying the idea of volition, determination and personal orientation.

B replies politely, maintaining the positive face of his interlocutor. When discourse participants can be seen to make efforts to preserve their own or others’ positive or negative face, they are clearly oriented to relational goals. It is exactly what A is doing with his reply, reinforcing the addressee’s self-esteem by invoking common ground. Other reasons might be building a positive relationship or creating a pleasant atmosphere or even a feeling of intimacy. Expressions of solidarity, as in the example above, go beyond politeness, and are indicative of an affective dimension of relational goals. Further on, he adds an instance of vague language, which contributes to negative politeness, which, according to Brown and Levinson (1978) has the function of minimizing the imposition caused by a face-threatening act. Thus, the speaker is attending to the relational aspect of the interaction, even in explicitly framing their task goals. It is also true that it also initiates a new phase of the conversation which constitutes an imposition on the addressee’s freedom of action: ” *Some action should be taken, right?* ”

Moving on, another another interpersonal marker that usually occurs in decision-making and discussing genre is the idiom or metaphor, whose first role to play is that of evaluation. As discussed earlier, decision-making always focusses on a problem which needs to be solved and usually follows a problem-solution pattern (Hoey, 1994): the problem phase (*a bit of pain, a real headache, rough day, goin' crazy, hangin' over our heads, being in the red* etc), the response/solution phase (*come up, cook up, sit down and talk, wrack our brains, figure out* etc) and the evaluating phase (*that was close, dead easy, makes sense, it never hurts, works for me, pay for the course* etc).

The fact that these idioms and metaphors are frequently used in different conversations to discuss solutions to different problems is an indication that they have become pragmatically specialized as signaling markers..

For instance, in the following example:

A: Can I have a word with you?

B: You can have a word but I am sure it will not do any good!, the idiom is quite a clear signal that the speaker ,even if, at first, he reluctantly agrees to have a word, evaluates this negatively as surely unlikely to lead to a solution.

So, idioms like *have a word, let's sit and talk*, act, at the discourse level, as signaling devices , because they draw the attention to themselves and thus foreground key elements and phases of the discourse; but they also function interpersonally . Talking about problems and their solution is a highly evaluative business, thus, the idioms used in problem-solution patterns also perform an evaluative function, being markers of subjective stance and are used by the participants in these genres to make evaluations and express judgments and opinions. But, as Powell (1992) explains and proves, idioms function more often as negative evaluation. Moon (1998) found that idioms were used for negative evaluations twice as frequently as for positive ones. She suggests this

is because idioms allow speakers to express themselves more indirectly than with literal expressions, and that they are, consequently, useful politeness and mitigating devices in performing negative evaluation.

Let's take this example, where two colleagues talk about their boss:

A: I heard that the CFO has resigned!

B: That's a blow! But he has been in the red for some time now!

A: Yeah, such is life!

The first idiom is used in the dialogue to evaluate the piece of breaking news. The speaker sustains his first remark using another idiom, explanatory on the one hand, but also mitigating the impact of the piece of news. By using this idiom instead of a literal expression, B is being polite in performing a negative evaluation. By his reply, A creates a bond of solidarity between the speakers.

3. Conclusions

We might argue that institutional talk blends almost always with relational talk. An overview of a range of linguistic approaches which deal with interpersonal aspects of language has been provided in our attempt to examine the participants' transactional and relational goals. We have identified a number of functions which interpersonal devices can perform, focusing on one stance in the institutional environment (manager-employee), among which the most interesting were the expression of commitment/detachment, judgments, opinions etc. A wide range of linguistic devices can play the role of "interpersonal markers", of which we have analyzed the modals, the hedges, vague language, intensifiers, evaluative language.

In the analysis of the interpersonal markers, we tried to show that they play an important role in workplace discourse, illustrating that in decision-making and discussing genres or unidirectional genres, linguistic devices like

deontic modals, vague language, hedges were most frequently used. Even if they primarily have a transactional goal, all these interpersonal markers also play an important role in terms of speakers' relational goals: being vague and using hedges allow speakers to mitigate or minimize the unequal discursive relationship in these genres. These devices perform, therefore, a face-saving politeness function and keeping up the Gricean cooperative principle.

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