

A Frame by Any Other Name: Testing the Taxonomy of Interactional Sociolinguistics

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The terminology associated with interactional sociolinguistics (IS) has been derived from fields as diverse as anthropology, sociology, psychology and discourse analysis. Considering such diverse origins, producing a coherent taxonomy of these terms and their concomitant concepts has proven an arduous task to linguists laboring to make sense of what exactly constitute *frames*, *footing* and *alignment* in interaction. In an attempt to offer clarity, the author traces the epistemology of the various terms associated with IS and offers insights into how they can be conceptualized and applied.

Perhaps more than any other field of linguistics, the terminology associated with interactional sociolinguistics can seem amorphous and redundant to the uninitiated academic. What one author refers to as *footing*, another might call *position* or *role*. Some authors may use the same terms, but in ways that differ significantly from the original usage; or they may define their terms only in relation to other closely related terms. One such example is this definition of *footing* by Erving Goffman (1981), “A change in our *footing* implies a change in the *alignment* we take up...[and] a change in our *footing* is another way of talking about a change in our *frame* for events” (p. 128). If footing is nothing more than another way to talk about frames, which in turn is just another way of talking about alignment, then why bother to have separate terminology? Are the key terms in interactional sociolinguistics (IS) mutually independent concepts that simply relate to one another, or are they so closely interconnected that it is virtually impossible to think of one term without the others? For an applied linguist new to the field, trying to make these distinctions from the literature can often seem overwhelming.

With some notable exceptions (Tannen, 1993a), the growing body of IS literature has only made the task of clearing the air more difficult. In this brief review of the literature, I will attempt to define the two most common IS terms, *framing* and *footing*, and find where it is possible to differentiate between them and where they are mutually interdependent. I will conclude with a discussion of whether it is even recommended to attempt separating the terms (if it is even possible), as well as suggest implications for future research in IS, as well as other related fields.

Framing

Gregory Bateson (1955) introduced the term *frame* to describe the contexts in which interaction takes place. Within a frame, metamesages are sent between interactants which define the boundaries of communication and indicate whether the interaction is serious, playful, ironical or

in some other interactional, social capacity. While observing monkeys at play, Bateson noted that they would often bite each other, an act one would normally associate with aggression. However in that context, the biting was a manifest sign (a metamessage) that they were in fact playing. The idea that interactants send messages to signal how interaction is to be interpreted or *framed*, led Erving Goffman (1974; 1981) to develop a detailed framework for the concept that, in many ways, expanded the concept beyond where Bateson had left it. Where Bateson's research dealt primarily with non-verbal encounters, Goffman grew more interested in exploring how frames were related to and manifested in linguistic encounters as well.

Others have interpreted the concept of framing much more independently and with an eye towards satisfying the needs of their own research, which has led to alternative, parallel meanings. The linguist Wallace Chaff (1977) preferred the term *schema* to frame, which he said is really how one recognizes and interprets an interactive event. Unlike Bateson and Goffman, Chaff's frame was specifically determined through verbal linguistic expression directed at participants in an interaction. Another linguist, Charles Fillmore (1975), favored the term *prototype* which he said referred to the way past experience influences how we interpret and respond to new interactions. Aldo di Luzio (2003), used the term *contextualization* (which he attributed to Gumperz) to refer to the same phenomena, saying it is "the process by means of which speakers relate what is said in an interaction to the context of the background knowledge which is presupposed" (p.4). What all of these definitions share is the underlying concept that, irrespective of the actual term used, frames are defined and constructed based on past experience and an understanding of how particular types of interactions should manifest.

It is John Gumperz, perhaps more than any other figure, who has been most instrumental in defining the concept of framing, and at the same time been most liberal with its application. Gumperz (1982) introduced the more concise terms *schema* or *interpretive frame* to describe "a set of expectations which rests on previous experience [and] form a background with reference to which verbal options, both linguistic and paralinguistic, take on a signaling value to indicate implicit connections among subparts of the discourse" (p.102). This definition, like those of the researchers above, again involves the processing of past experience in order to properly interpret an interaction. He later (1992) defines framing as,

part of the chunking process by which we segment off what we see as belonging together and what must thus be looked at as a subunit within a broader whole. Such chunking is necessary both to speech production and to comprehension. In so much as frames constitute the ground against which communication takes place, they significantly affect how communication is interpreted. (p. 42)

In the same work he goes on to refer to *contextualization frames* (not to be confused with *contextualization cues*, which are signs given off and used to interpret the frame), and *activity frames* (frames that appear in larger interactive encounters). *Conversational inferences* bare striking semantic similarities to frames in that they "signal what the interaction is about and what the expectations are in terms of which coherence is established" (p.46). Gumperz' fervor for compartmentalizing the term (and those related to it) is predictable considering the broad application it has enjoyed in the fields of linguistics and cultural anthropology. However, his mixing of framing, and overlapping it with other terms, takes us away from the comparatively concise definition offered by Bateson and Goffman earlier.

Tannen (1993a) took on the formidable task of disentangling the increasingly convoluted concept of framing by providing research illustrating how framing functions in real discourse. Though she could not resist adding her own contribution to the burgeoning cannon of framing terminology, namely, *structures of expectation*, a term first introduced by R.N Ross (1975), and one which Tannen believes encompasses all of the various, variant strains of the term *framing*. Of *structures of expectation*, Tannen (1993b) explains that “on the basis of one’s experience of the world in a given culture (or combination of cultures), one organizes knowledge about the world and uses this knowledge to predict interpretations and relationships regarding new information, events and experiences” (p.16). Again, the focus is on drawing on past experience to determine how new information is to be processed.

Tannen’s definition, like much of her writing, is refreshingly concise and clear. However, if one is to accept the notion that *structures of expectation* is just another way of referring to frames, then really we have only moved to the realm of synonymy, and are thus no closer to a resolution in our investigation. If we allow that one term can simply be substituted out for another, how are we making the discourse less, not more complicated?

Footing

The concept of *footing* is perhaps the more problematic of the two terms in this investigation because, being so abstract, it is more susceptible to reinterpretation. Employed by several linguists, particularly Erving Goffman (1981), who, in attempting to define it, drew upon several other key terms in interactional sociolinguistics,

[a] participants alignment, or set, or stance or posture, or projected self is somehow at issue...A change in footing implies a change in alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance. A change in footing is another way of talking about a change in our frame for events.” (p. 128)

He goes on to say, “The alignment of an individual to a particular utterance whether involving a production format, as in the case of a speaker, or solely a participation status, as in the case of hearer, can be referred to as his footing” (p.227). Tannen (1986) attempts to clarify the definition somewhat, saying that *footing* is a “kind of frame, that identifies the relationship between speakers” (p.90), but like Goffman, she actually defines footing as being a frame. It would seem, then, that one cannot accurately deal with footing independently of *frame* and *alignment*. Though trying to isolate the meaning of footing, it is not necessary for us to fully discount these definitions. It is, however, important to deconstruct them to some extent, as these rather circular definitions are not at all helpful unless one can clearly conceptualize the process of footing *by itself*. Stephen Levinson (1988) concluded that Goffman’s (and by extension Tannen’s) definition of footing is intentionally cloudy, thus making it prone to reinterpretation, “[footing is] not entirely clear; indeed, it seems intended to have some pretty global and correspondingly vague application” (p.168). He preferred instead the more succinct term *participant role* to footing due to the fact that in Goffman’s terminology, footing and alignment appear to be very analogous phenomena.

Alessandro Duranti (1997) gives a rather coherent definition of footing that, at least, does not

rely upon other established terminology to define it:

Footing...is another way of talking about indexing...the process whereby we link utterances to particular moments, places, or personae, including our own self at a different time or with a different spirit (e.g. emotional vs. distant, convinced vs. skeptical, literal vs. ironic). Footing is a form of metapragmatic discourse...We let the hearer know how an utterance should be taken...(p.296)

Durranti's definition, like Goffman and Tannen's, emphasizes a cognitive process in which the interactants attempt to manipulate or shape how an utterance is presented and taken. Therefore, if something common could be drawn from these definitions it would be that footing is a personal position interactants take to a particular utterance in the process of projecting his or her own agenda into the interaction. It might be accurate to say that one's footing is the way one perceives a particular interaction, which would then naturally influence how he or she proceeds in that interaction. This conclusion would also correlate with Wine's (cited in Beebe, 2006) definition, which clearly separates footing from other related terminology (in particular, framing and *stance*, which ostensibly share considerable overlap with footing semantically), "*Framing* will be how a participant sees or understands a certain behavior or strip of behavior, *footing* will be how a participant really feels about that behavior" (p.11). In Wine's definition, one's footing is not necessarily revealed to others, and in fact may be totally different from what is evidenced in one's behavior. An example of this could be when we have a chance encounter with an acquaintance we do not particularly care for. We may be quite annoyed to have to engage in pre-scripted social niceties, and in fact exhibit behavior that camouflages our true feelings. Though our footing is defensive, our outward disposition (*stance*) may be quite amicable.

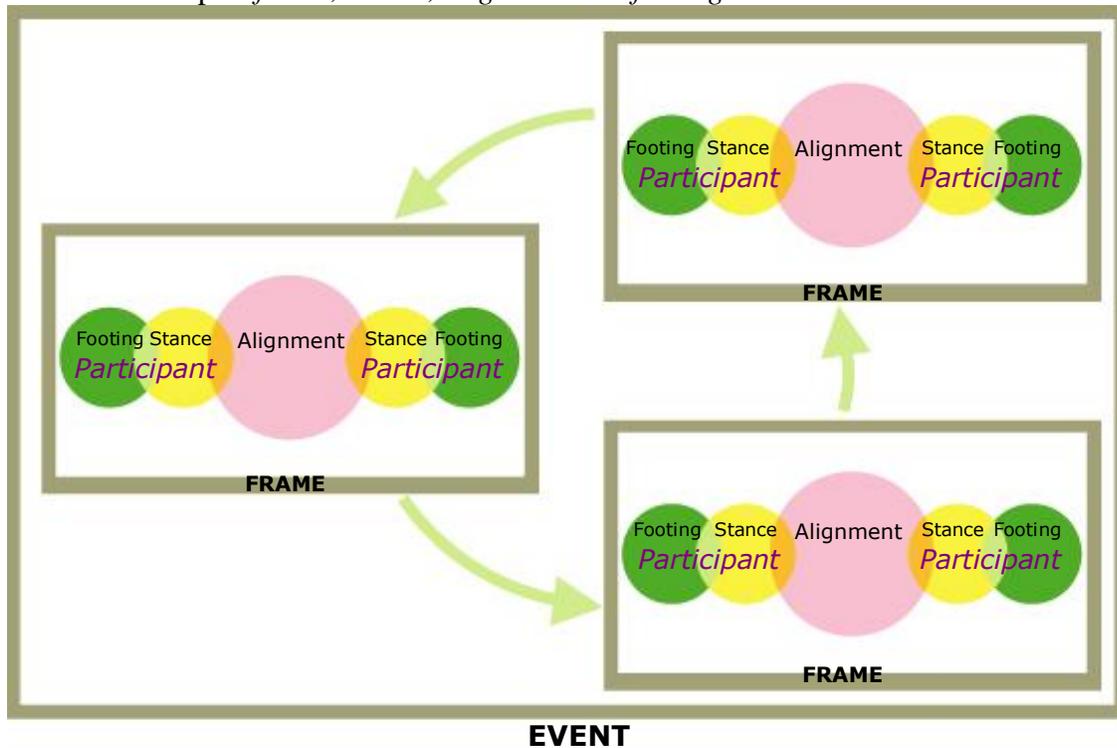
Discussion

So, can one realistically isolate *footing* and *frame* from one another, let alone the rest of the discourse? In the end it may be futile to even try, as rarely will one term serve an author's purpose anyway since concepts are only useful when employed in consort with other related ones. Reviewing the key literature relating to framing and footing, it is clear that authors tend to use these expressions to suit their own purposes. Perhaps then it is better not to think in terms of absolute meanings, but rather of fluid interpretation, where the concepts can shift and change depending on the context. This assumption is only possible when we have a clear understanding of what footing and framing are, and understand how authors tend to work their own terminology around them. Problems can arise when authors use the terms framing and footing without explicitly stating how they are interpreting them in a particular context. When Gumperz (1982) refers to *speech activities* as the circumstances in which *contextualization cues* become manifest, we can logically conclude that a speech activity, then, is a kind of frame. And this only becomes possible when we have a clear understanding ourselves of what a frame is. Bateson and Goffman's earlier, uncomplicated definition is a logical place to start.

When trying to make sense of the subtle nuances of these concepts and how they interact with one other, it is perhaps helpful to create a visual representation (Figure 1).

Figure 1

The relationship of *frame*, *stance*, *alignment* and *footing* which constitute an *event*



In the above figure, the interlocutors have their own footings, which lead to their outwardly displayed stances. Taking appropriate stances will then result in the participants becoming aligned with one another in the interaction. This activity takes place within a frame, which can shift and change (as can one's footing and stance) within any one interaction *event* (after Hymes, 1974). This constant shifting of frames is mentioned by Goffman (1981) and evidenced in Tannen and Wallat's (1993) study of a pediatric examination. In their study, Tannen and Wallat noted that often the doctor, child and parent in the examination room shifted back and forth between different frames (often signaled by shifts in *register*). For example the doctor may engage the child in a playful frame, in order to make the child feel comfortable enough to let the doctor examine her, and the parent in a more serious, consultation frame. The frames alternate and shift back and forth, often overlapping.

Conclusion

What Gumperz, Goffman and others have done is create metaphors for interaction, and like all metaphors, the reader must possess the shared knowledge necessary for understanding and interpreting them. For example, if while posing for a picture, someone says, "do a Napoleon," there needs to be some shared understanding and background to allow the interactant to interpret

this phrase to mean “pose like Napoleon would.” At the same time, however, the fact that these terms are so often substituted for or replaced by others, shows us that Bateson and Goffman’s metaphors, while providing a much needed entry point into explaining sociolinguistic phenomena, are ultimately insufficient. This is a natural consequence of expanding the body of research where the language used to describe and discuss it must naturally evolve to accommodate new theories of interaction. This is compounded by the fact that interactional sociolinguistics is just one of many fields that lay claim to these concepts and their terminology; the others being cognitive and social psychology, anthropology, and sociology.

This list of disciplines may need to expand to accommodate at least one more: the new field of social neuroscience. Researchers in this area (see Daniel Goldman, 2006) suggest that humans “sense” a person’s mood by scanning their face for emotions, which in turn affect our own emotional state- thus laughter or a person’s bad mood is considered “contagious”. It is not a great leap to suggest that the terminology of SI is applicable here, and to say that alignments, footing and frames are created at the neurological level, before linguistic cues are even interpreted. Without a doubt, other fields dealing with social interaction will find these terms useful, and inevitably spin them to fit their own explicative needs.

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