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Original Article

# Affecting in Discourse: Communicating uncertainly and communicating uncertainty

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**Abstract** We communicate uncertainly, and we communicate uncertainty. This essay argues the ambiguous and indeterminate aspects of everyday talk to be crucial to our felt sense of communication. To make this claim, I bring together an affect- and phenomenology-influenced orientation with close analysis of conversational discourse. Hence, this essay also offers one way in which affect theory can be entangled with language and discourse. Analysis of conversational episodes from fieldwork with teenage music listeners yields three key processes: (i) *Patronage* describes the experiential 'distance' between the 'I' and my own utterance or gesture, reflecting the intersubjective and improvised nature of conversation. (ii) *Zones of indistinction* describe transient pockets of ambiguity, which provide a sense of safety as I navigate uncertain waters conversation. (iii) These affective and reactive journeys through everyday conversation constitute the work of *position-taking*, through which emerges my *style* of being in the world, my subjectivity.

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Communicative uncertainty describes the aspects of conversation that are semantically ambiguous or underdetermined, exceed the linguistic, go half-noticed by our consciousness – but nevertheless make a crucial contribution to our felt sense of communication and meaning-making. A short chuckle comes at the tail end of a comment ... one which was not 'funny' in any conventional sense. A disjointed sentence tumbles along more out of momentum than by design, until it crashes headfirst into the inadequacy of the words at hand; it fizzles out with a shrug and those familiar words, 'well, you know what I mean.' In fact, we often *do* – at least, we feel like we do.

Everyday talk is remarkably open, improvised, emergent. It occurs as an embodied, intersubjective flow to the extent that my own sense of what I mean – what I ‘must have meant’ – is realised recursively (Merleau-Ponty, 1969; Miell and Miell, 1986; Csordas, 2008). Conversation is one of many mundane situations where we are caught in the wave, go with the flow, knee-jerk to provocations, dodge bullets, scramble for words ... and through this real-time responsivity, we learn what thoughts, feelings and attitudes we ‘must have’ had, what kind of person we ‘must be’ relative to the world around us (also see Stewart, 2007, p. 79). This essay examines several conversational episodes for practices of uncertainty, with a special emphasis on the role of laughter. In doing so, it brings together aspects of affect theory, phenomenology, Bakhtinian dialogism and conversational analysis. It intervenes in the ongoing debate over the compatibility of discourse and affect, and thereby to the larger question of how affective processes and concepts entangle with relatively systemised or consciously steered practices.

The ‘turn to affect’ has everyone looking behind and beneath language, consciousness, the subject. In particular, Brian Massumi’s influential reading of Deleuze and Spinoza, joined by proximate approaches like Nigel Thrift’s non-representational theory and the work of Patricia Clough and Teresa Brennan, present a loosely united (see Leys, 2011; Wetherell, 2012, pp. 53–55) set of orientations. Namely, they have emphasised the physical, biological, pre-symbolic aspects of being; ‘the non-verbal, non-conscious ... sensation, memory, perception, attention and listening’ (Blackman and Venn, 2010, p. 8; also see Massumi, 2002; Clough, 2010; Papoulias and Callard, 2010; Figlerowicz, 2012, p. 4). This steers analysis towards processes which subtend and exceed language and consciousness – a pre-individual indeterminacy and potentiality which our interpretation and discourse is always lagging behind (for example, Thrift, 2008; Clough, 2009). Accordingly, many affect scholars have emphasised moments where language is clearly inadequate or incomplete; the dancing body is one favoured case (for example, McCormack, 2003; Henriques, 2010; Purser, 2011; Sheets-Johnstone, 2014). In short, the promotion of affect as a pre-personal, non-intentional force has had, as its corollary, some distancing from language as an explanatory system or enacted discourse as empirical object.

As affect theory diffuses across disciplines, however, this dominant image must be complemented by more hybrid approaches, lest it be locked into a narrow set of styles, topics and methods (see Wetherell and Beer, 2014). A more productive collaboration between affect and discourse has been tentatively attempted by scholars in psychology (Frosh and Baraitser, 2008; Cromby, 2011), cultural analysis (Ahmed, 2010, 2014) and social theory (Stage, 2013), conversational analysis and ethnomethodology (Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2014), and more. Wetherell in this journal has called for renewed conversation between studies of affect and studies of discourse, arguing that ‘fine-grained studies of discursive practice’ can produce the kind of ‘textured, lively analyses of multiple modes of engagement’ that the latter demands (2013, p. 349). Why discourse? Within an

affect perspective, discourse constitutes one of the *media* by which we seek to articulate our affects, and in doing so, make them available to knowing, ordering and sharing. What we ‘apprehend’ in a pre-reflective manner is made intelligible (Butler, 2009). Words and utterances, once performed unto actuality, also become *objects* of affect. Affects ‘stick’ to words, making them into transmitters, amplifiers, interpreters of affect (Ahmed, 2014; Wetherell, 2012, pp. 12–13). I speak – and only by perceiving what I ended up saying, do I understand what I had felt and thought (Merleau-Ponty, 1969). Finally, the production of discourse, in face-to-face conversation or otherwise, is itself a lived *experience* open to the affective dimension (also see Cromby, 2011). If affect theory shows a pre-linguistic circulation of affects at work, such activity must also be present in apparently language-dominated and intentional exchanges of conscious ideas. This presence is not peripheral but crucial precisely because the linguistic and interpretive process (which is usually emphasised as *subsequent* to affection) is itself something we get through in affective, embodied responsiveness to other participants, the conversational situation and my own speaking. Indeed, ‘dialogic’ perspectives in communication, sociology (for example, Shotter, 1993a) and linguistic anthropology have long recognised that conversation and its achievements depend significantly on elements not reducible to Saussurian *langue*. As I discuss below, these theories of language and speech provide indispensable tools for entangling affect and discourse in a way that is applicable to concrete situations.

This perspective opens up many different kinds of analysis, pertaining to the numerous ways in which affect entangles with discourse. This essay focuses on communicative uncertainty in order to address the process by which we achieve, to some sufficient degree, a felt sense of communication (as opposed to any objective criterion of ‘transmission’) in everyday conversation. The sense that we are *talking to each other* – that for minutes or even seconds, a shared feeling, a shared world unfolds (see Stern, 2004, in Wetherell, 2012, p. 77) – as occurring not only *in* language but beyond it. This brings a classic problem in communication theory (for example, Peters, 1999; Carey, 2009) into the affective turn, but only through a further detour or hybridisation with dialogic and phenomenological perspectives. In a strict transmission model, the term ‘communicative uncertainty’ would invoke notions of *failure*, distortion, inefficiency; in the classic Shannon-Weaver model, that which must be eradicated to ensure meaning. But communicative uncertainty is not a failure to take something (my thoughts, my feelings, my being) that is whole in myself and give it to another individual or unto the conversational situation. Rather, it designates the pre-individual, virtual indeterminacy which is generative of our own ongoing understanding of what I ‘must be’ thinking, feeling, *am*. ‘Available discourses articulate, shape and sometimes block an extra-linguistic embodied register of felt experience’ (Redman, 2009, p. 56). This indeterminacy becomes involved in everyday discursive activity, and thus becomes analysable in the form of communicative practices which produce, modulate and otherwise manipulate

*ambiguity* in the meaning of utterances. A short chuckle, a shrug, the logically nonsensical cliché ‘you know what I mean’ – such practices cling thickly to more ordered statements, reminding us that it makes a poor communicator to take things too ‘literally’. Excessive certainty tends to merely render you socially insufferable. If Shannon’s information entropy treats uncertainty in a message as the limitation or absence of contained meaning, the question is how uncertainty *enables*, in its own way, subjects to take away certain impressions and meanings from the experience.

The remainder of this essay will examine communicative uncertainty in three related sections. The first specifies what we mean by ‘extra-linguistic’, drawing on linguistic anthropological research on metapragmatic activity – the part of the conversation which exceeds the semantic elements of the language used. The analysis enrolls Bakhtinian dialogism and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology as tools to bridge this research with our ‘affective-discursive’ frame. The result is the notion of *patronage* – the felt distance between the subject and his/her own utterance/gesture, reflecting the intersubjective and partially out-of-control nature of conversation. The second section analyses several episodes of conversation from my fieldwork with South Korean youths to flesh out what we mean by ‘ambiguity’. The talk is transcribed and analysed using a selection of tools from primarily conversational analysis. The transcription, for instance, makes selective use of the Jeffersonian system.<sup>1</sup> Laughter is identified as a key practice of modulating and communicating uncertainty. The section proposes that such practices instantiate *zones of indistinction* – intersubjective moments of *felt* ambiguity that provides a certain safety for the participants and sutures a felt sense of communication. The final section briefly discusses communicative uncertainty’s repercussions for our understanding of the subject and the experience of navigating (Ingold, 2000) conversations. It describes such navigation in terms of *position-taking*, reconnecting the discussion to the social level.

This is not an ‘application’ of affect theory by any means. Methodologically, the motley crew of conceptual and analytical tools reflect the essay’s development. Its arguments emerged from experiences of communicative uncertainty during the fieldwork, and the tools used have been assembled out of this necessity to explain the empirical matter at hand. Many of them do exhibit historical and conceptual proximity, such as Bakhtinian dialogism and linguistic anthropology. The essay also takes up Wetherell (2012, 2013)’s recommendations for tools from conversational analysis, linguistic anthropology and other studies of language in an affect-oriented work. The conversational episodes were drawn from a set of 42 interviews of a total of 166 participants, mostly aged 16–28, resident in South Korea, between July and August 2012. All conversations were in group of 2–6 well-acquainted friends in order to preserve the ‘natural flow of discussion and ... [the] meaning-making characteristics of everyday conversation’ (Livio, 2011, p. 57). The conversations were semi-structured around questions of music tastes and consumption habits. Somewhat analogous to the use of dance in

affect studies, music is particularly useful to our question (also see Leys, 2011, p. 458). It is particularly difficult to express musical experience in semantic form, lacking a clearly graspable object. Whether in the case of sheet music, a live performance of that music, or talk of that performance, music has ‘nothing but mediations to show’ (Hennion, 2002, p. 82) – making the uncertainty latent in conversation even more pronounced. Finally, although the interviews were conducted in Korean and subsequently translated into English, it will become clear that the analysis does not depend on any language use that is only recognisable in the Korean context. The data at hand will be no more or less ‘generalisable’ than an American sample might be to a French reader. These disclaimers in hand, let us now address *patronage* as a basic relation of communicative uncertainty.

### Patronage

The spoken word (the one I utter or the one I hear) is pregnant with a meaning which can be read in the very texture of the linguistic gesture [...] and yet is never contained in that gesture [...] every attempt to close our hand on the thought which dwells in the spoken word leaving only a bit of verbal material in our fingers.

Merleau-Ponty (1969, pp. 219–220)

Merleau-Ponty thereby identifies a gap, a difference between what I ‘intend’ to say and what I end up saying. Communicative uncertainty characterises this gap as not a difference between a determinate cognition (intention) and an equally determinate actualisation, but as one where the very relationship between me and my utterance or gesture is fundamentally ambiguous. What happens when I say ‘Oh, I like Pink Floyd, too’, then follow up with a short, halting, nervous laugh? It might express the sentiment that what I just said is not *exactly* what I mean – that I may not intend you to take it so literally. But in no way am I telling you what exactly I *do* mean. The laughter in itself does not possess the specificity of semantic content for that task. In fact, the whole point is to leave it all rather imprecise, to laugh in lieu of elaborating further in words. There are numerous practical advantages to such ambiguity, all of which we have learnt to employ tacitly and intuitively. It can save us from having to make ourselves clear – to avoid provoking disagreement, to mask ignorance, to engage a change in topic. It can lubricate our exchanges of opinion by smoothing our affective orientation to each other and the utterances at hand. Patronage designates this ‘gap’ which, at a basic and fundamental level, permits such kinds of ambiguity. Patronage describes the process by which speakers take up a performative stance against their own utterances – a variable and imprecise distance between ‘what I say’ and ‘what I really mean’.

This gap grounds, or is the logical consequence of, the dialogic and entangled nature of speech. Bakhtin (1981) argued that not only are utterances shot through with the ‘dialogic threads’ of pre-existing speech genres and other language forms, (pp. 293–295), subjects’ understanding of their own utterances and themselves as speakers also occurs dialogically (also see Krippendorff, 2003). Every word ‘provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer’s direction’ (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 280) – an ‘inherent responsiveness’ (1986, p. 68, 70). A rationalistic interpretation would suggest that we design our utterances with the interlocutor and his/her response in mind. We could also focus on the role the other subject plays in my own thinking, knowing and speaking; the ‘dialogism’ between human subjects (for example, Shotter, 1993b). The aspect I want to emphasise is my dialogic relation to the non-human or prepersonal milieu of the conversation itself – including my own utterances which are partly other to myself. That is, the utterance itself, as a perceivably distinct object from the speaker, must be accorded a certain independent existence. The speaker can relate to it in different ways and degrees, and in turn be affected by it. Speaking becomes an occasion to be affected as much as to affect (or to express prior affection), an occasion to *become* something else in however small ways. Merleau-Ponty says that one’s relation to the Other is a ‘creative receptivity’ that characterises all perception (see Reynolds, 2004, pp. 8–9). The gap between the I and my utterance, complementing my relation to the Other and to the conversational situation, constitutes the necessary space for the production of meaning and of the felt sense of communication. ‘The meaning [of discourse] occurs at the intersection, in the interval between words’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 42; also see Vološinov, 1973, p. 12; Silverman, 1981, p. 124).

What exactly is happening in this ‘interval’ that results in ‘working’ communication? Alfred Schutz’s phenomenology proposed a practical intersubjectivity, wherein participants assume that they are dealing with the ‘same’ objective reality (Heritage, 1984, pp. 1–2, 54–56), and each experience of speaking involves real-time coordination across participants.<sup>2</sup> Such coordination, however, is never absolute; it does not eliminate the gap, but feeds off it. The very idea of ‘interval’ suggests that what makes conversation *feel* spontaneous, what makes it ‘dialogical’ in theory, is precisely this divergent ‘space’ that allows emergent production of meaning. In the logic of Herbert Simon’s satisficing, participants assume *sufficient homology* to enable conversation, and thus accept some degree of incongruency and uncertainty as a default feature of everyday communication. (Equally, participants may *not* assume sufficient homology, resulting in frequent misunderstandings and other explicitly recognised uncertainties that too characterise everyday talk.) Linguistic anthropology describes this in terms of ‘fractional congruence’ (Garfinkel, 1967; also see Agha, 2007a, chapter 2 for a different approach).<sup>3</sup> It suggests that we need not and often do

not converge on an exactly congruent understanding Consider Agha's own example (2007a, p. 97):

In (4), Dianne is talking about Jeff's cooking. As Dianne begins to characterise the pie as so good, Clacia overlaps with an utterance containing two lexically cohesive predicates (... love it ... love that).

(4)

- 1 **Dianne:** Jeff made en asparagus pie<sub>R</sub>. It<sub>R</sub> was so [ goo : d.  
 2 **Clacia:** [I love it<sub>R</sub>. °Yeah I  
 3 love that<sub>R</sub>..

From our observer's point of view, Clacia does not seem to be talking about the exact same thing as Dianne. She seems to be referring to asparagus pies in general (<sub>R'</sub>) rather than Jeff's (<sub>R</sub>). But, Agha (2007a) explains, they are clearly engaging each other, and their praise is 'aligned' with each other (p. 98). The conversation is able to *proceed* to further celebration of the asparagus pie (which one(s)?) without any performance of confusion or explicit coordination. Participants may sense that they are not quite 'on the same page' (if they are consciously aware of this at all), but still feel that sufficient understanding has been achieved. In this way we establish small pockets of felt stability in a constant stream of calibration. This process of coordination can be explained at two different levels (at least). Agha's notion addresses the degree of congruence *between one utterance and another*, arguing that only at this level is the affair 'empirically decideable' (Agha, 2013, personal communication). But this level emphasises only the aspects of utterance-chains that *do* achieve congruence – Dianne and Clacia's ability to *believe* that they are talking about the same asparagus pie. It is not just the congruent 'portions' that matter in communication; and indeed, we cannot so easily divide a unit of speech into congruent and non-congruent parts. After all, I may think we are talking about the same pie, you may not, in which case the question of whether we are 'in fact' coordinated over the pie object may pass unresolved (and, in many ways, becomes irrelevant). The fact that Dianne and Clacia 'moved on' does not prove full or even significant congruence, either. Factors like etiquette, social relationship between participants and the pace of conversation can nudge participants to 'go with the flow'. Uncertainty does not stop us from performing and even feeling a case of fluid interpersonal communication. Thus, we must deal with not only what is congruent (by whoever's reckoning) and coordinated within a given utterance, but what is left uncertain as well. The inverse of congruence is not the certainty of non-congruence, which would involve a certain kind of understanding (*I am sure* that I do not understand you). Rather, communicative uncertainty denotes a certain 'softness' or variability of meaning.

All this suggests that uncertainty must be schematised in some way to understand how the 'interval' between utterances and participants emergently produce

meaning, and how the underdetermined elements nevertheless contribute to a felt sense of ‘working’ communication. Goffman (1997) argued that social actors’ occupation and manipulation of generic social roles involved a parameter of *role distance* – that is, the variable ways and degrees in which each actor and performance ‘embraced’ and ‘acted out’ a given role (pp. 35–38). This notion can be extended to the intervallic relationship between speaker and utterance. I suggest that we *patronise* our discourse. We establish and modulate the *distance* between ourselves, our utterance, and normative utterance forms (such as speech genres). This distance is not calculable, and usually remains imprecise. Rather, it is a parameter of that uncertain interval. When I laugh nervously after my own comment about Pink Floyd, I am retroactively attempting to calibrate my patronage over my utterance. We might describe that patronage relation as ‘halfhearted’, ‘self-conscious’, or ‘embarrassed’, but we would not be able to pinpoint it (*how much* embarrassed?). Nevertheless, my interlocutors would typically recognise, in a rough and tacit way, my effort to position myself relative to what my utterance turned out to be. Perhaps they would join me in that ambiguous laughter, allowing me (and the group) to *feel aligned* in fractional congruence as did Dianne and Clacia. Now, Goffman’s examples of role distance addressed relatively deliberate and strategic instances. In such cases, one performs partial disengagement from one’s social role in order to offset possible risks associated with that role (that is, the risks of being seen as associated with such a role) (Goffman, 1997, pp. 37–38). Another example is when actors switch deliberately from one linguistic ‘code’ to another within a conversation in order to manage interlocutors’ expectations (for example, see Heller, 1988b). In contrast, the intersubjective calibration of complex patronage relations often occurs without explicit deliberation in discourse.

In practice, then, patronage may be classified as a part of metapragmatic activity – the part of the conversation which exceeds the semantic elements of the language used (see Silverstein, 1976; Agha, 2007a). The indexical (in the fully Peircian sense) relation between the speaker and his/her utterance is not at all static, but can be performed and interpreted in a variety of ways. This modulation of indexical relation is built into the initial act of speaking, a kind of *stance* the speaker establishes with respect to his/her utterance. In the pithy phrase ‘you know what I’m saying’ we find the deeply ambiguous suggestion that what is *communicated* always enjoys a distance with not only the semantic content of the utterance, but the *perceived content and form of the utterance*. Merleau-Ponty (1969) said that ‘my spoken words surprise me and teach me my thought’ (p. 219). Not only that; I relate to my utterance as a distinct *other* in the lifeworld, and take up positions of variable distance against it. We are not dealing here with the question of ‘literal versus practical meaning’, but how one is able to understand both ‘what I say’ and ‘what I really mean’ in the absence of semantic certainty.

## Zones of Indistinction

Having established the basic relation of patronage, we may now examine concrete conversational episodes for communicative uncertainty. Consider laughter. Laughter is ubiquitous in everyday conversation. It often becomes attached to utterances, texturing and colouring their sense in ways that exceed the linguistic. It is highly intersubjective and collaborative (Jefferson *et al.*, 1987, p. 156), a process which itself relies on tacit, historical norms (for example, Billig, 2005). These qualities make laughter exemplary for understanding communicative uncertainty. Existing literature, especially in conversation analysis and ethnomethodology, has primarily focused on laughter that is *normative* (successfully engenders humour and joy) and *goal oriented* (specifically directed at a particular conversational objective, such as the delivery of a joke). Thus laughter is generally interpreted as a technique for achieving a sense of intimacy and in-group association among participants, as well as performing sympathy and agreement (Coates, 2007; Ellis, 2008). Laughter is also seen as a feature of turn-taking, where it can ‘acoustically highlight a ... transition-relevance place’ and ‘invite’ participation in the form of laughter (see Jefferson, 1979, p. 80–84; O’Donnell-Trujillo and Adams, 1983, p. 179; Glenn, 1989, p. 128, 134). All these are, indeed, readily perceivable aspects of laughter in everyday conversation. Perhaps less conducive to explicit description, but equally common, is the use of laughter to establish distance.

### Excerpt 1

- 1 **D:** When I’m angry, like, what is it? Rock, I listen to that kinda  
 2 stuff,  
 3 **A:** When I’m feeling the weight of the [world- ((laugh))  
 4 **B, C, D:** [Weight of the world-  
 5 [((laugh))  
 6 [Its like a proverb-  
 7 **A:** Then, I listen to music a bit, and I feel like it goes away.

A begins her comments with the Korean equivalent of the stereotypical phrasing, ‘weight of the world’ (Line 3), connotatively stuffy and old fashioned for the conversational register of Korean high-school girls. A breaks off with a short, self-conscious giggle as other participants laugh and repeat the phrase (4, 5); one offers the metapragmatic commentary, ‘it’s like a proverb’ (6–7). Nevertheless, A picks up the unfinished sentence and completes it ‘seriously’ to explain her listening habits (8–9). A has engaged in a kind of *double-barrelled discourse*. While speaking a sentence normally construed as ‘serious’, she has also distanced herself through her laughter. This act of patronage communicates her reluctant commitment to the phrase ‘weight of the world’. The guise of unitary and rational semantic meaning is thus preserved for the listeners, even as whether she ‘really means’ what she says is never explicitly disclosed (see Mulkey’s paradox in Fox, 1990, p. 432).

Excerpt 2

- 1 **D:** I haven't been for a year and a half.  
 2 **E:** [Really?  
 3 **A:** [How do you live?  
 4 **F:** I can't breathe if I don't go. [((laugh))  
 5 **E,A:** [((laugh)) me too!

Here, the participants are discussing their enthusiasm for karaoke. F offers a statement whose 'literal' interpretation would be a gross exaggeration, and again 'offsets' this through laughter (Line 4). By laughing *and* agreeing, E and A perform an understanding of both channels (5). It would be fair to guess that F does wish to communicate her unbridled enthusiasm for karaoke, but also to show that she is conscious of the theatricality of the phrase. Of course, we would be 'sure' of this interpretation only as much as we are in everyday conversation: that is, 'sufficiently' convincing for most, but never absolute. In addition, F's patronage unveils an important difference between the work performed by the initial statement and by subsequent laughter. 'I can't breathe' is semantically 'positive' and thus can stand alone. In contrast, this laughter is *negative* – that is, it can modulate the previous utterance when attached to it, but produces this sense only by a parasitic reliance on the utterance. (The designation of positive and negative does not, then, refer to any value judgments.) The laughter relies upon its relation to the previous utterance for its meaning, a meaning which is not clearly defined *and* blurs the definition of the first utterance.

Excerpt 3

- 1 **B:** I mean, mood-wise, everyone's singing ballads, so I feel a bit  
 2 bad singing dance songs.  
 3 **X:** Ah. So you accommodate. Is that true with you {A} also?  
 4 **A:** No, I sing what [I want.  
 5 **B:** [((laugh))  
 6 [...]  
 7 **X:** So how do you end up with 'favourite songs' to begin with?  
 8 **A:** This is a bit complicated. So like, I sing it once, and-  
 9 (pause) not sing it well, ((laughing)) but if I think, oh, that  
 10 wasnt [bad-  
 11 **B:** [((laugh))  
 12 **A:** [yeah, that kind of stuff, those end up sticking...  
 13 **X:** Is there a similar process for you?  
 14 **B:** Just, I think I just sing whatever. ((laughs))

We find patronage at work again in each case of laughter (Lines 5, 9, 11 and 14); an imprecise, ambiguous form of distancing. Each case of laughter, coming

rapidly in the thick of real-time conversation, jerks the interlocutors to and from the motley of *possible* interpretations of the preceding utterance. It intervenes to mitigate impressions of rudeness (4), arrogance, narcissism (8–10), or apathy (14) that the utterances taken ‘literally’ could provoke in others. But, again, where exactly one ‘stands’ relative to those interpretations is only identifiable in a speculative and variable sense.

The distance exemplified in laughter is therefore a kind of *negative* meta-expression. It constitutes a specific form of distance modulation or patronage technique. When attached to laughter, the communicated meaning of the utterance takes the form of ‘x+(not-x)’: ‘I can’t breathe, *and* it’s not quite that I can’t breathe’. This is in contrast to the form ‘x+y’: ‘I can’t breathe, *but* I’m also relieved’, which would be possible in a pairing of two utterances. Laughter, and its own non-linguistic elements (such as duration, volume and so on) only accrue such ‘meaning’ as a *modification* of other semantic meanings. The uncertainty is in this ‘negativity’. We can *feel* that we know what ‘I can’t breathe if I don’t go’ means, and how a combination of that statement and F’s laughter has a different meaning, but we often cannot articulate the exactitude of this difference (Silverstein, 1976, pp. 384–387; Agha, 2007a, pp. 146–147). Hence, understanding does not depend only on congruence; or rather, congruence itself involves an ambiguous aspect, here carried by the material referentiality of laughter (see O’Donnell-Trujillo and Adams, 1983, p. 175; Vettin and Todt, 2004, p. 94). Distance is modified not precisely but ambiguously, and it is in this ‘negative’ or subtractive move that we so often take refuge to navigate the spontaneous and surprising flows of conversation.

Negative meaning, insofar as it adjusts the parameters of distance / patronage, belongs to the communicative uncertainty in our everyday lives. Of course, laughter is only one example out of many practices of ambiguity.<sup>4</sup> Everyday conversation is rife with moments in which questions are answered with seemingly unrelated content. Consider a case where it turns out I had *misheard* your previous utterance, but my answer did not break the sense of fractional congruence; so we proceed. Or a case where we all seem to have different understandings of what we mean by a word or state of affairs, but we continue to debate, and to feel that we are talking about the same thing. Studies in organisational communication have identified how institutional slogans like ‘academic freedom’ leverage such ambiguity in order to enrol different actors and understandings to a ‘common’ group and practice (for example, Eisenberg, 1984). Nobody’s quite sure what academic freedom even *means* – but that’s precisely why it allows a wider set of individuals and interests to stay together in the collective body of the institution. We can see here that the utterances themselves, *sans* laughter or gestures, also carry uncertain aspects. Bakhtin (1986) argued that foreign utterances – which we are exposed to in life – enter into my utterances, which are then ‘filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances’ (p. 91). Moreover, we then *align* ourselves with these voices to

various degrees (Agha, 2007b, p. 331). We never speak purely in one voice, or ‘our own’ voice. When we ‘fish’ for the ‘right word’ we do not do so with a thought in mind, but *complete* that thought through this word (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 186).

We began this analysis by focusing on laughter’s attachment to singular utterances, though embedded in larger sets of talk. Now we are in a position to examine a slightly more composite level – the intersubjective *flow* of the conversation.

Excerpt 4

- 1 **A:** I like Shinhwa. (pause)  
 2 **B:** Man nobody’s agreeing ((laughs))  
 3 **X:** Shinhwa’s no good?  
 4 **C:** [Their songs are kind of bad-  
 5 **D:** [It’s a difference-  
 6 **B:** [Yeah, the songs are bad-  
 7 **D:** [Songs are really bad.  
 8 **A:** Yeah, the songs, the songs are really bad.  
 9 **X:** Then what’s good?  
 10 **A:** {Their} [talk shows.  
 11 **C:** [talk shows. Personality. The people are funny.

This episode demonstrates an extremely common flow of discussion among my respondents. A’s assertion (Line 1) is met by a short pause, prompting B to make the plausible suggestion that nobody supports her view (2). My question (3) then elicits a quick and overlapping flurry of criticism (4–7). Notably, A responds in two distinct ways in these few short seconds. First, she appears to *agree* with *Shinhwa*’s detractors (8); then, by mentioning their performance on talk shows, seeks a way to maintain her original position and reconcile it with others’ (10). One explanation is that A has always held a nuanced view about the Korean boy-band *Shinhwa*, and thus never ‘disagreed’ very strongly with B,C and D. Another equally plausible explanation is that A reacted – without deliberation, given the rapid-fire pace of the conversation – to the flow of opinion by scrambling for ways to reconcile herself with the group. It would not be entirely fair to conclude that A ‘contradicted’ her true opinion in a populist reflex, or that B,C and D ‘exerted’ peer pressure on A over her musical taste. Certainly, one suspects that A might have reached very different conclusions about *Shinhwa* were she in a different group, or engaged in monologue. But this kind of spontaneous and affective flow is precisely the native setting in which many of our opinions are articulated, where our opinions *made known to ourselves* as well as others. (The old joke that most political opinions are born while speaking with the pollsters blooms out of this process.) Again, uncertainty plays a crucial role in this process. In the absence of explicit commentary about the conflicting opinions (except Line 2,

which is *itself offset through laughter*), and thanks to the rapid flow of utterances, participants are able to modify and adjust their positions relative to the topic and other participants dynamically – and/or conceal the fact that they persevere in their disagreement. This is the case for A as much as her interlocutors. Note that C initially criticises *Shinhwa* (4), then, a few seconds later, re-emerges in support of A's hybridised opinion (11). Rather than beginning with a clear set of defined positions, we often retroactively discover our positions (and how they have already changed) in this *non-individual* flow. Communication, understanding, even consensus is thereby achieved in pre-subjective, 'open-ended' social (Massumi, 2002; Clough, 2009) ways.

#### Excerpt 5

- 1 **A:** {excited} I have a little bit of, bit of, like coming home? You  
 2 listen to all the noisy, rowdy stuff now, [then you-  
 3 **C:** [older songs-  
 4 **D:** [older songs are  
 5 better.  
 6 **A:** -the old mp3s and photos, you find them, you think oh,  
 7 that's what I used to listen to-  
 8 **All:** {all throw in names, screams of delight}  
 9 **X:** Uh who? What?  
 10 **All:** ((laugh))  
 11 **D:** You listen to older songs, and the memories about that, you know?  
 12 The people you listened with-  
 13 **All:** {another round of excited agreement and repetition}

This episode comes from one outlier group composed of a higher age range (late 20s to mid-30s). Here, transcription becomes impossible; A's reminiscence has unleashed a torrent of names, words, delight and excitement – with no assurance that any of it has been heard by anyone present (Lines 8, 13). Yet, of course, it is not true that 'nothing' has been communicated. For just a few seconds, we find a live-wire intensity, a pulsing sense of intersubjective connection; what affect theory puzzles over as 'contagion' or 'transmission' (for example, Brennan, 2004), and ritual theory as 'communitas' (Turner, 1969). It brings to the surface many modes of extra-linguistic experience. Bodies lean forward, flail their arms, explode into motion. In combination with the aural bombardment, they motivate in each participant a tension qualitatively different from the conversation of just a few seconds ago. In such exchanges, speakers 'edi[t] out the points of difference or [hold] them as points of "acceptable difference"' (Beech, 2008, p. 56). Even silence does not leave one out of the process, for one still performs the interpellated, the potential interlocutor, and thus another 'author of the emergent narrative' (Ochs and Capps, 1996, p. 21). In short, what we find in this episode is a collective

modulation of the conversation's felt temporality, intensity, and materiality. And one result of this modulation is a sense of communication which energises itself on not only clear utterances (Lines 6–7 or 11–12), but shared moments when language and semantic meaning becomes entirely submerged (Lines 8, 13).

Such moments exemplify something that is latent in less dramatic practices of ambiguity – what we might call *zones of indistinction* (ZOI). ZOI are incorporeal, intersubjective moments of safe, and indeed, communication-enabling ambiguity. They have a wide variety of conversational 'uses', as we have seen in preceding analyses. Laughter can open up a ZOI in that it creates a degree of uncertainty. This allows the speaker to then *re-gloss* one's utterance in a different way, or simply leave it as partially mystified and open to multiple interpretations. ZOI is thus one key way in which we form 'dialogic relationships ... toward one's own utterance as well as others' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 184). As in the case of Diane and Clacia, or of slogans like 'academic freedom', interlocutors can also take advantage of ZOI to hold themselves in partial abeyance to what has been said; they are not forced to make their own position too explicit. ZOI are also lubricants for conversation to the extent that they allow participants to 'safely' manipulate its progression. For instance, analyses of turn-taking have shown how laughter introduces a kind of 'time out', where participants can 'codeswitch' (Heller, 1988a) into a different register or voice, and/or introduce new strands of conversation (for example, see Jefferson, 1984). Finally, the collective excitement in the previous episode also demonstrates how zones of indistinction can supply a felt sense of communication which strongly exceeds and even bypasses linguistic and semantic dimensions. Quite often, we would prefer not to make things so 'clear' – at least, semantically explicit. We know, tacitly if not in theory, that our everyday interaction with others would become much more rigid without it; that this can result in divisiveness, aggression, disagreement and even confusion. Communicative uncertainty thus plays a crucial role in the ways we not only express our thoughts and feelings, but thereby discover who I am relative to others and to our lived worlds.

### Position-Taking

What then does language express, if it does not express thoughts? It presents, or rather it *is*, the subject's taking up of a position in the world of his [sic] significations.

-Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 199

The makeshift, cobbled nature of everyday conversation must not give the impression that it is an entirely chaotic affair where all we are is prey to the impersonal and pre-personal flows of conversation. These intervals, distances, zones of indistinction *do* break down any illusion of the subject in full control of one's own discourse. And it is true that much of our improvised, on-the-flow

navigation of conversations exceeds the grasp of our planning and strategising. At the same time, these practices are precisely how we make language work *for us*. We take advantage of the spaces made open by communicative uncertainty to tell others – and in doing so, tell ourselves – what kind of people we are. In our daily encounter with the world, we accumulate affective *impressions*; conversation is one encounter by which we articulate and interrogate them, resolving them into concrete and socially recognisable emotions, attitudes, opinions (see McCormack, 2003; Ahmed, 2014). What follows characterises these repetitions and aggregations as *position-taking*.

#### Excerpt 6

- 1 **B:** When we {A and B} meet we ((laughing)) sing heaps of Big Bang  
 2 songs (pause) in karaoke. [((laugh))  
 3 **A:** [For an hour. ((laugh))  
 4 **B:** Yeah, all hour long. ((laugh))  
 5 [...]  
 6 **B:** But we are the worst we know. ((laugh))  
 7 **A:** Of course.  
 8 **X:** Out of the people you know?  
 9 **A:** Yeah.  
 10 **B:** Fangirls. ((laugh))

A and B are self-avowed fans of *Big Bang*, a Korean pop/hip-hop group. While it seems safe enough to say that self-consciousness feeds into their laughter, it also enables them to disclose the details of their fandom anyway and to inscribe themselves semiotically. The term ‘fangirls’ (Line 10) is normally derogative in both English and Korean translations; but unsupported by any additional propositional content, the laughter makes unclear just how ‘earnest’ their self-typification is. *Some* indexical relation between the stereotypical figure of ‘fangirl’ and the speaker will generally be made, but simultaneously offset by this uncertainty. The conversation itself flows quickly and smoothly, with no sign that any detailed deliberation and strategising drives this usage. Indeed, it is not necessary that A and B possess a specific objective or even a specific idea of just how they are and are not typifiable as fangirls. Rather, the availability of laughter as a technique of ambiguity *divests* them of the need to articulate such specifics even to themselves. I, the interviewer, have placed them in a situation where they must navigate our shared language to position themselves *vis-à-vis* music, fandom, *Big Bang*. But it has not confronted them with any need to explicitly *think through* their relationship to fan stereotypes in greater detail; they possess conventionalised means to avoid that confrontation. Simply put: that which we may remain silent on, we need not think or know ourselves. The corollary to Merleau-Ponty’s point that ‘speech accomplishes thought’ is that what our language does not

require to be articulated can be *operationalised* without being made ‘known’ to my thought. Grammar is one key linguistic feature which regulates this division of active and latent (or non-) operationalisation (see Whorf, 1956, pp. 88–101; Jakobson, 1990, pp. 325–328).

Excerpt 7

- 1 **A:** So why do comedians have to sing?  
 2 **B:** Then why should actors sing?  
 3 **A:** ((terse)) ‘cos they’re good [enough!  
 4 **B:** [Then why not [comedians-  
 5 **C,D:** [(laughs))  
 6 **A:** [Ahh, it’s my personal  
 7 taste. Leave me alone! ((dramatic))

This example is more conflictive. Immediately before the excerpt, A bluntly criticised comedians that perform covers of popular songs, drawing strong disagreement from the rest of the group. A issues a terse retort (Line 3), which may be construed as the first potentially aggressive prosodic element in the exchange; her interlocutors respond simultaneously with a repartee and laughter (4–5). A’s response (6–7) takes up the ‘escape route’ afforded by this laughter. She issues a theatrical ‘leave me alone!’, the gentler, lingering intonation on the last syllable characterising the outburst as ironic. Some might interpret this result as A’s admission of defeat in the argument. Others would say that A has evaded exactly that admission, deflecting the logical frame with laughter. Her little show, made plausible by preceding laughter, allows her to deflect the interrogation from lines 1–4.

These episodes demonstrate *position-taking* at work. We may begin with a basic observation that each act in a conversation ‘involve[s] the taking of a position of someone toward ... an evaluated thing, an object already evaluated by other speakers’ (Larrain and Haye, 2012, p. 598). At the level of immediate and short-term effects, position-taking is about *responding* to what appears in the form of others’ responses, others’ utterances, the words that I am using to express myself, even my projection of how others might respond. To tell you what kind of commitment I have to *Big Bang*, I need to call myself a fangirl – but wait a moment; I have fished out that word from my inventory, our shared linguistic inventory, but now I have dragged in various possible connotations with it. Well, I want you to understand that I’m a fangirl, but *not in the way you think*. So, with my laughter, my gestures, my facial expressions, I handle my patronage of that word in such a manner that I position my *self*, my identity, as one degree removed from my own utterance. Or: when you disagree so bluntly with my view on comedians, I am suddenly presented with a resistance. When I sense that I may be the only one in the room with this opinion, the situation affects me in a different way – perhaps more

claustrophobic, or more aggressive. It seizes me in tension, an intensity, and compels me to respond – again, to position myself with respect to this situation and my previously expressed opinion. When I opt for the dramatic ‘leave me alone’, I am manipulating zones of indistinction in the conversational flow to give myself a diversion; I will fight for my opinions another day. And when these kinds of responses are repeated across conversations, across weeks and months, they achieve a certain stability. They concretise others’ (and our own) affective orientations towards us; thus our friends or family are able to snap effortlessly into a particular set of expectations about what we can say to each other, what is a joke and what is not, when to interrupt and when to listen. In the same way, I too develop a pre-reflective, habitual responsivity towards specific people, specific utterances or words, which identifies me as a social individual. Position-taking is thus part of our *style* – habituated modes of responding to and handling situations that undergirds conscious and reflective activity (see Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 342).

This affective and phenomenological description of position-taking as style may be compatible with more sociological explanations that also emphasise the role of repetition / habituation, and of micro-level intersubjective interactions. The reactive and improvised nature of position-taking in practices of patronage parallel the relative and emergent ways in which social identities emerge. Bourdieu (1983) argued that any site of socially regularised activity consists of both *positions* that subjects occupy and *prises de position*, ‘position-taking’ (pp. 311–312). These positions are not ‘selected’ by subjects on abstract ideological bases. Rather, the subject would make concrete, specific choices in everyday situations that, over time, would become interpreted and recognised as a cohesive set of ‘interests’ – an identity, a class. Hence, as Bourdieu makes clear in *Distinction*, class characteristics like cultural taste emerge through such concrete encounters, and only retroactively become conceptually organised as a cohesive unit (1984, pp. 101–103). ‘Class is lived concretely prior to being the object of a deliberate will’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 380). A detailed discussion of this sociocultural dimension exceeds the scope of this essay. However, it is crucial to recognise that these wider agglomerations of stereotypes, symbols and cultural capital influence how we are affected by words and utterances in concrete conversational situations. They are what enter into our micro-level games of position-taking via the polyphonic nature of language. Why do I recoil intuitively from my *own* usage of the word ‘fangirl’? When do I feel some ill-defined need to apologise for my own musical tastes, a sense which precedes any concrete signs of disapproval? What is happening when I find another’s utterance fill me, almost instantly, with derision, surprise, delight, anger – so that I react to the name of a band, a political cliché, a biblical quotation, as if it seized my body with a physical force? It is precisely because this larger organisation of tastes and values, which classify and position our being as social subject, is entangled with our affective responsivity to the world.

## Conclusion

This essay pursued two entangled objectives. The first was to describe how, in concrete conversational situations, communicating *uncertainty* and communicating *uncertainly* made critical contributions to our felt sense of communication – and to our ability to navigate conversational situations. The second was to address the points of connectivity between affect theory and discourse, by analysing communicative uncertainty from the perspective of conversation as a real-time, improvised, affective experience. As a result, I have argued that there is a basic gap, a felt ‘distance’ between the ‘I’ and my utterance or gesture; a relationship of *patronage*. The exemplary case of laughter reveals a specific technique of patronage, which we identified as *negative meaning* – a semantically underdetermined modulation of language. The general utility of such practices for subjects is that they generate *zones of indistinction*: moments of uncertainty and ambiguity which give subjects the breathing space, the buffer, to perform agreement, evade confrontation, or simply to amplify the collective sense that ‘I know what you’re saying’, that ‘we aren’t talking past each other’. Finally, *position-taking* describes the reactive and relative nature of these experiences, and the intersection of the world of symbols with the world of immediate affects.

These arguments present a number of implications for how we use affect to think through discursive experience. The most general one is that it is possible to analyse a discursive situation for its affective, experiential dimensions – the processes which subtend consciousness and reason, feelings which are not fully captured by symbols and words – *without* dodging language this way and that. Certainly, conversation includes material and bodily elements; other kinds of senses; undercurrents or atmospheres of affect that may not ever surface into discursive articulation, and indeed, percolate without the need to break into actual, concrete phenomena (Clough, 2009, p. 50). But it is also the case that discourse itself is experienced and even handled in affective, pre-reflective ways. This essay has sought to identify precisely this dimension – but, on the other hand, without interrogating the words themselves (for example, as Ahmed (2014, 2010) does). This is because I have attempted to show the affective in the lining of the discursive, the affective which is truly inseparable but distinct from the discursive. The concepts or terms introduced by this essay are also points of contact between affective or phenomenological visions of experience, and sociological and anthropological traditions of analysing discourse. Patronage and negative meaning bridge what the former calls the affective relationship of the subject to language, with what the latter characterise as the ‘pragmatic’ dimension within language. Zones of indistinction and position-taking, again, seek to align the picture of intersubjectivity as emergent, pre-reflective and even pre-personal, with the undeniable fact that we also live as subjects with some degree of agency. That we take advantage of language to achieve our own goals, and enrol systems of symbolic meaning to make sense of ourselves and others.

Communicative uncertainty therefore relates the affective ‘lining’ of the conversational experience to the concrete production of shared meaning in our intersubjective lives.

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## About the Author

Sun-ha Hong is a doctoral student at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. His current research pursues uncertainty as a world-building resource in the new media society. Domains like state surveillance and data-mining, and their fixation on prediction and simulation, show that such world-building involves a constant rearticulation of the unknown and the uncertain. How are we learning to knit together the immediate experience of technology ‘here’ with a vision of a vaster world ‘out there’ in a way that holds our fantasies and narratives together? What kinds of intuitions, affects, ‘wisdoms’, beliefs do we develop for such a task? For more, please see: <http://sunhahong.org>.

## Notes

- 1 All transcripts use a simplified and modified form of the ‘Jefferson system’, common in conversational analysis. Given that the original conversations were in Korean, notations of prosodic elements have generally been substituted by commentary. All names have been anonymised into alphabetical letters; each excerpt features a different set of participants, making the use of pseudonyms unwieldy. The author/interviewer is always designated as X.

Key:

(pause)	Pause
[word	Overlapping talk
[...]	Omitted from transcript for brevity
((word))	Analyst description of laughter, gestures, etc.
{word}	Analyst description of contextual information

*word* {word} Transliteration, then translation, of the Korean original

- 2 Although Schutz argued each such ‘social action’ required prior planning, I agree with Crossley (1996, pp. 79–80) that such expectations of orientation are of a more intuitive or naturalised order.
- 3 I am applying the notions of fractional congruence and mutual coordination more broadly than Agha’s own definition, using them across multiple types of speech fragments and participant turns.
- 4 The pervasiveness of *ambiguity* in conversation has previously been addressed in existing literature, though not quite in the same way (see Schegloff, 1984).

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