

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42529-2 - Responsibility and Evidence in Oral Discourse

Edited by Jane H. Hill and Judith T. Irvine

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

JANE H. HILL and JUDITH T. IRVINE

To say that a human being, as social actor, is “responsible” is a relatively new way of speaking in English, argues Richard Niebuhr (1963).<sup>1</sup> Deriving from an older notion of “responsiveness,” a quality of participation in dialogue, the newer sense of “responsibility” that has emerged in the modern era indexes the development of an idea of “the continuity of a self with a relatively consistent scheme of interpretation of what it is reacting to ... [and] continuity in the community of agents to which response is being made” (Niebuhr 1963:65).

Such terms are problematic for anthropologists, who have come to recognize that ideas about “continuity of a self,” and “continuity in the community of agents,” are cross-culturally variable. Problematic, too, for some, would be a focus on the individual self and its scheme of interpretations as an analytic isolate, were that focus to overwhelm attention to community and situated response. The essays in this volume suggest, on the contrary, that the “quality of participation in dialogue” is a sense of the term “responsibility” that must remain central. Indeed, its importance extends far beyond the mere definition of a term.

In so arguing we take part in a recent movement in linguistic anthropology that shifts away from paradigms assigning the locus of “meaning” to the individual speaker, toward more dialogic approaches in which meanings are constructed in interactional processes (see Besnier, 1990a, Lutz and Abu-Lughod, 1990, among many other recent statements). Although dialogicality and interaction are themes of current interest in many intellectual arenas, linguistic anthropology joins these themes with a concern for cultural frameworks and linguistic structures. As some recent works in this field (Hill, forthcoming; Irvine, 1990; Urban, 1989; Silverstein, 1977) suggest, many aspects of linguistic form may usefully be seen as having interactional processes profoundly embedded in them. And though not all studies in linguistic anthropology describe “exotic” societies, all are informed by a sense of cultural variability, and ask how such variability may relate to the situated conduct of talk.

This movement toward dialogicality has several intellectual ancestries, variously drawn upon by the authors in this volume. One source is the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42529-2 - Responsibility and Evidence in Oral Discourse

Edited by Jane H. Hill and Judith T. Irvine

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ethnography of speaking, with its focus on the speech event and the contextualization of meaning. Another part of the background to this movement can be found in symbolic interactionism and in the sociological study of conversation, with its emphasis on the negotiated and emergent quality of meanings, and its notion that social structure, institutions, and conceptions of self (or at least some aspects of these) are interactionally constructed and contingently relevant, rather than known and determined in advance. Still other intellectual sources include traditions in literary criticism and philosophy (Bakhtin/Voloshinov in particular) calling into question the authoritativeness – and even the possibility – of any strictly individual voice and point of view. Finally, although the formal investigation of discourse in linguistics has sometimes been seen by anthropologists as an irrelevant or even hostile pursuit, some of our authors find formalist concerns not only compatible with their own, but helpful to understanding how discourse structures reveal a socialized world.

Of central importance to an approach that emphasizes dialogicality and the social construction of meaning is the connection between knowledge and agency. To interpret events, to establish facts, to convey opinion, and to constitute interpretations as knowledge – all these are activities involving socially situated participants, who are agents in the construction of knowledge as well as being agents when they act on what they have come to know, believe, suspect, or opine. For this reason the topic of “Responsibility and Evidence in Oral Discourse” seems to us especially apt for furthering this new direction of work, since “responsibility” points toward the agency aspect of meaning while “evidence” points toward the knowledge aspect. But the two aspects are crucially linked, as the papers in this volume show; and both aspects are nuanced, as well.

We are of course not the first to call attention to these topics. Conceptions of responsibility and evidence, and cross-cultural variability in such conceptions, have been prominent topics in the anthropology of law. In the realm of contract, for example, Gluckman (1965) notes that a concept of accountability beyond a “general demand for faithfulness and generosity” did not exist in English law until the fifteenth century and is irrelevant to the legal system of the Barotse, where the precise terms of “good faith” differ among the various possible types of agreements. Nor do identical types of responsibility figure in the idea of criminal guilt in all societies. Gluckman argues that a doctrine of absolute responsibility (often called “strict liability”), amounting to complete inattention to the forms of intention that English speakers often consider to be “mental,” must be rare; but he finds that the evaluation of “intent” may often be more a political than a psychological process, an assessment of the state of

the relationships between plaintiff and defendant rather than an assessment of individuals' states of mind. Thus, among the Barotse, the attention of courts to *mens rea* spans a continuum between assumption of absolute responsibility at one extreme, and close attention to the state of mind of defendants at the other. The more distant the relationship of plaintiff and defendant, the more likely the court is to rule that liability is absolute; the closer the relationship, the more likely will be scrutiny of the defendant's motives. Barotse "responsibility" is not really a psychological notion, then, but a quality that is linked indexically to the matrix of social relations.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the problem of intention as a possible ingredient of responsibility, assignment of responsibility's locus may be more or less socially diffused. Gluckman (1972) contrasts situations where what he sees as social-structural strains are assigned to individual culpability, as in the case of witchcraft accusations among the Azande, with situations where individual fault is assigned to social structure, as in the case of corporate guilt in Western law.

If ideas about responsibility and agency index ideas about social persons, relationships, and groups, then anthropologists must decompose their terms to determine which, if any, of the components thus identified may be relevant, singly or in combination, at some meaningful moment in some particular human society. We have turned the tools of linguistic anthropology to this task, for reasons grounded both in anthropology and in linguistics. Witchcraft accusations, the waging of disputes in the context of a "public" or "audience" within which persons have to claim their rights and convince others of a position, and the consultation of oracles and diviners, are topics of long standing in anthropology (see papers in Gluckman, 1972); but such discussions of the allocation of responsibility, the marshaling of evidence, and the rhetoric of claims and persuasion bear directly, too, on the analysis of language and discourse. Accusations, consultations of diviners, and the like involve verbal activities, and the available discourse patterns, genres, and linguistic options are of interest for our understanding of how and why the accusations, etc. are framed in a particular way. By such avenues we may approach, through study of the forms of talk, the forms of social engagement. But the study of language itself has also been much concerned in recent years with the evaluation of "intent." Grice's (1957) theory of intentional meaning and the theory of speech acts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) are the most influential accounts of the agency of speakers that have been proposed in the present century, and much work in linguistic pragmatics has built upon their ideas. Yet linguistic anthropologists (perhaps most notably and continuously Dell Hymes [see Hymes, 1974b], but also others such as Rosaldo, 1982) have often noted that speech-act theory may not

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42529-2 - Responsibility and Evidence in Oral Discourse

Edited by Jane H. Hill and Judith T. Irvine

Excerpt

[More information](#)

be cross-culturally portable, and have pointed out that it is rooted in a particular ideology of persons and intentions.

The papers in the present volume explore the problem of agency and responsibility within the context of communicative events. The attribution of responsible agency is seen as an interpretive process that is creative, drawing on the symbolic forms taken by the interpreted behavior, its social setting, its cultural matrix, and the motives and knowledge of witnesses.<sup>3</sup> Many of the papers focus particularly on communicative events in which decisions about agency are at stake: claims (and disclaimers) of authorship or spokespersonship, and decision-making about a course of action, as well as the contexts of legal (and extra-legal) dispute. The allocation of responsibility is thus a centrally important aspect of social meaning constructed in interactional processes, and our purpose is to examine closely the interactional processes and linguistic forms through which this is done. The term “evidence” as well draws us toward the interactional arena. To focus on “evidence” takes the traditional anthropological interest in culturally situated knowledge and casts it in the framework of social action, exploring how claims to knowledge (or ignorance) are made, and how such claims might be used. Attention to evidence shows clearly that culturally situated knowledge is not a matter of clearly differentiated states, of “knowing” or “not knowing,” but is complex in its dimensions, and highly variable in the range of potential dimensions which may be relevant in interaction.

When we first embarked on this collective effort, our interest in responsibility and evidence had two starting-points: on the one hand, the linguistic forms relating to epistemic modality – the speaker’s degree of commitment to the truth-value of a proposition, or qualification of that commitment; on the other hand, the interactional processes shaping the allocation of responsibility for authorship of a message. The sense that these two starting-points, one in linguistic structure and the other in social interaction, were intimately linked led us to explore a range of cases and materials in the present collection of papers.

In so doing, we found that a focus on responsibility and evidence provides an especially useful angle on the mutual embedding of interactional process and linguistic form. The allocation of responsibility in talk is inherently duplex, linking the attributions of agency and evidence referentially constructed in an utterance with their indexical construction in the act of speaking (and in the audience’s act of interpreting). In this duplex process a wide variety of linguistic and interactional means may be invoked, a variety which the papers in this volume explore.

The analyses presented in the volume vary in method and in their particular mix of linguistic and ethnographic concerns. Some papers focus principally on linguistic structures, such as morphology or the

coherence of registers; some papers analyze texts or transcripts, generated in interaction; some papers focus on the relevant properties of social settings and cultural milieux; and others explicitly foreground participant roles and interactive relationships (a consideration entering all papers to some extent).

The papers reveal diversity in the composition of social entities that may be held to account, differences in the kinds of acts (verbal or nonverbal) that are constructed as “accountable,” differences in the contexts where “responsibility” or “evidence” is relevant, and differences in the communicative means by which responsibility may be claimed, diffused, or evaded. All share the aim of focusing on the rigorous specification of these communicative means, and on the cultural contextualizations by which they are made meaningful. Where the analyses converge, finally, is in highlighting the importance of participation frames in articulating social context with linguistic form. All papers find themselves considering, more or less explicitly and in greater or lesser degrees, structures of participant roles whose laminations are key to the dialogic process.

The contributors to the volume also explore various nuances of our core concepts of *responsibility* and *evidence*. Although the concept is not absent from other papers, those contributors focusing most explicitly on *evidence* are Bendix, Philips, and Maranhão. While Bendix presents the linguistic encoding of evidentials, Philips considers properties of a social setting – the trial – and its management, cross-culturally; and Philips and Maranhão each take up the question of cultural and subcultural differences as to what forms of discourse (and nonverbal signs) are admissible evidence of knowledge. It is also useful to juxtapose these studies with Du Bois’ paper on the discourse of divination, a situation where diviners and clients, much concerned about the truth-value of a proposition about the future, focus their attention on divinatory responses as available evidence. Note, however, a further line of comparison. In contrast with the studies by Bendix, Philips, and Du Bois, which in their various ways treat cases where the truth-value of statements is of paramount concern, other papers in the volume play down the question of truth-value as not necessarily what is most at issue for the significance of a particular type of discourse (Shuman, Bauman, Irvine, Maranhão).

Regarding *responsibility*, the papers severally invite us to see many different dimensions of talk and of situation for which a participant can take responsibility or seek to evade it. Some of these dimensions concern acts or states referentially constructed in the discourse. Philips, Kuipers, Duranti, Du Bois, and Hill and Zepeda consider occasions of talk that discuss events of high social or personal import, such as the commission of a crime or the occurrence of calamity. Responsibility for the crime, or

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42529-2 - Responsibility and Evidence in Oral Discourse

Edited by Jane H. Hill and Judith T. Irvine

Excerpt

[More information](#)

for the calamity, is allocated through the discourse in the event at hand, be it trial, ritual, political forum, divination, or narrative. For Du Bois, Bendix, and Philips, the truth-value of an uttered proposition is much at issue, while for Duranti and Chafe, what is more important are the utterance's consequences. Other dimensions of responsibility concern the act of speaking itself. Irvine and Shuman consider the allocation of responsibility for taking on the participant role of utterer or reporter; Bauman, Besnier, and Maranhão discuss how (and whether) a participant assumes responsibility to an audience for a display – of verbal technique or dramaturgical persona (Bauman), of affect (Besnier), or of knowledgeability (Maranhão). In addition, both Maranhão and Philips move onto an analytical meta-level by considering responsibility for determining the ground rules for discourse management in a particular social setting or genre. For Maranhão, the management of discourse in ethnographic writing is itself of concern. Finally, Hill and Zepeda, Irvine, Besnier, Duranti, and Du Bois consider cultural variability in concepts of agency and of the responsible self, and relate these concepts to discourse genres and forms of participation.

While the contributors examine the nuances and complexity of the volume's core concepts, they also explore ways in which responsibility and evidence are linked. A good example of the link is the question of how discourse comes to be seen as authoritative, a question considered by several papers in the volume. Establishing the authoritativeness of discourse – a particular type of discourse, or particular statements or texts – is particularly important when the discourse serves as the basis for a judgment or a course of action having serious social or personal consequences. Thus some authors discuss the discourse that occurs in cases of divination (Du Bois, Kuipers) or of disputation (Duranti, Philips, Irvine, Shuman). The question of authoritativeness arises, too, in cases where a speaker's personal identity or social position is somehow insufficient as a guarantee of a statement's truth or authenticity. A question of authenticity may arise under many different kinds of circumstances: if a speaker is young or low-ranking (Irvine); if a statement has ritual significance and governs the well-being of an entire community (Chafe, Kuipers); if a statement's value depends on its being perceived as handed down from earlier generations (Bauman); or if an ethnographer expects "knowledge" to be displayed in one discourse mode rather than another (Maranhão).

One of the principal ways in which utterances come to be seen as authoritative concerns speakers' ability to create "double-voiced" utterances (to use Bakhtin's term) that manage to add the moral weight of other voices to their own. Many of the papers in the volume thus concern reported speech. In some cases, the ultimate source of the reported speech, or the ultimate guarantor of a statement's authenticity, is located



outside the ordinary human world – in deceased elders or ancestors (Bauman, Kuipers), in the spirit world (Chafe, Du Bois), or even in impersonal forces, such as the Zande poison oracle (Du Bois).

In other cases, however, the function of the reported speech is not so much to enhance the utterance's consequentiality, as to distance the speaker from an utterance deemed somehow reprehensible (Besnier, Irvine, Hill and Zepeda). Here speakers seek to evade responsibility by invoking additional sources for an utterance, rather than seeking to augment their own utterances' force.

Reported speech is an example of a way a speaker claims, in effect, that an utterance has already been co-constructed. Some papers in the volume focus explicitly on the process of co-construction of meaning, and its relation to participant roles in interaction (Duranti, Irvine). In other papers a similar process enters in more implicitly. Even in Bendix's discussion of "evidentials" in Newari morphology – of all papers in the volume the one dealing most specifically with linguistic form and the only one relying principally on linguistic elicitation techniques – it turns out that informants supply reportive frames and presupposed dialogue to account for the grammaticality of the evidential morphology.

Reportive frames and "double-voiced utterances" thus lie at the heart of our concern with the display of evidence and the attribution of responsibility in discourse. Notice the importance of reported speech in the linguistic analysis of evidentials (Bendix), and in the criteria for evidence at trials (Philips), in "taking sides" in a factionalized world (Shuman), in the construction of genre conventions (Chafe, Kuipers, Irvine, Bauman), and in ethnographic reportage (Maranhão). The papers also reveal the complexity such frames can have – what one might call the "laminations" of participant role structures. On the one hand, as Hill and Zepeda show, responsibility for an utterance's occurrence may be divided among a variety of voices co-present in a speaker's text, so that the speaker splits (as it were) into a variety of presences, and her utterance looks toward a story-world as well as a world of ongoing interaction. On the other hand, as Irvine shows, responsibility for an utterance may be socially distributed over many persons participating in a social occasion. We suggest that these kinds of cases, despite some obvious differences, have much in common.

### **Intentionality and authoritativeness in discourse**

We begin our volume with papers by Alessandro Duranti and Jack Du Bois, who argue that theories of meaning in the philosophy of language and linguistic pragmatics must be revised, reoriented away from an ethnocentric psychologism and toward recognizing the social and cultural

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42529-2 - Responsibility and Evidence in Oral Discourse

Edited by Jane H. Hill and Judith T. Irvine

Excerpt

[More information](#)

dimensions of communication. In particular, these contributors focus on Grice's (1957) theory of intentional meaning and the theory of speech acts, introduced by Austin (1962) and elaborated by Searle (1969, 1983). Attempting to detach the "meaning of 'meaning'" from its classical definition in terms of truth-conditions, Grice took the verb "to mean" as transitive, presupposing an intention of a speaker who, in "meaning," tried "to produce some effect on an audience by means of a recognition of this intention" (Grice, 1957:442).<sup>4</sup>

Searle's development of Austin's speech-act theory gives a central place to intention, and assumes some speaker "S" who has wants and intentions that are indexed performatively. These wants and intentions are, for Searle, specifically mental states, essentially devoid of social content:

What is crucially important to see is that for every speech act that has a direction of fit the speech act will be satisfied if and only if the expressed psychological state is satisfied, and the conditions of satisfaction of speech act and expressed psychological state are identical.

(Searle, 1983:11)

Searle has even proposed that these psychological states can be reduced to the biological level, an account that puts intentions not only beyond sociological inquiry, but beyond psychological inquiry as well. Intentional states, says Searle, are states of the brain: "Intentionality is a biological phenomenon and it is part of the natural world like any other biological phenomenon" (*ibid*:230).

As Duranti and Du Bois point out, an anthropological critique of this analysis of intention has been developing for several years because of its limited applicability to non-Western modes of communication. In an influential article Michelle Rosaldo (1982) argued that the Ilongot of the Philippines are little concerned with "truth" or "sincerity" and do not evaluate the felicity of speech acts in terms of the mental states of some person in isolation from relations with other persons. Instead, the successful accomplishment of the prototypical Ilongot speech act, the *tuydek* (roughly, "command"), requires particular differences in social rank, which in turn derive from other qualities of persons achieved in social action, such as a knowledgeable heart. To *tuydek* indexes relationships, not internal psychological states. Criticisms of speech-act theory and the intentionality model have come also from sociologists and linguists working in conversation analysis, who have pointed to the difficulty of identifying speech acts and intentions independently of the socially constructed interaction in which an utterance occurs (e.g. Goffman, 1979, 1983; Levinson, 1983).

Duranti's discussion of the Samoan theory of speaking is a particularly important development of this "antipersonalist" critique of speech-act



theory. “Interpretation” in Samoa does not attempt to determine private meaning. Instead, Duranti writes, “Samoans practice interpretation as a way of publicly controlling social relationships.” Words often do not emanate from “individuals” in the Western sense, but instead from the locus of a positional identity, such as a particular noble title. Certain types of speech acts require the participation of certain types of audiences. For instance, the closest Samoan equivalent to English “promise” – the speech act Searle examines most closely – is the action designated by the verb *folafola*, which designates a commitment or acknowledgment made in public. Words are evaluated according to their consequences, and it is on the basis of these “new realities,” publicly constructed, that speakers are rewarded or punished. As Duranti emphasizes, “for Samoans meaning is seen as the product of an interaction (words included) and not necessarily as something that is contained in someone’s mind.” Examples are given in which, *contra* the intentionalist theory of speech acts, Samoans hold speakers responsible not for intentions that might be imputed to them by their acts of speaking, but for the social consequences of those acts.

This Samoan ethno-theory of pragmatics thus draws our attention to the co-operative work between speaker and audience in constructing the meaning and relevance of utterances. Where the intentionalist theory of speech acts defines meaning in terms of subjectivity, Duranti looks toward intersubjectivity and its linguistic mediation.

Du Bois similarly criticizes the intentionalist theory of meaning on the basis of ethnographic examples. His paper argues that there are forms of discourse regularly occurring in many societies in which the presupposition of “intention” is specifically excluded. The cases cited concern divination and the consultation of oracles, a widespread activity whose particular genres and techniques vary, and may include nonverbal as well as verbal signs. The Zande poison oracle, for example, operates through the medium of a chicken whose behaviors (and possible demise) are observed by a diviner who has administered the poison to it. The oracle is treated as a participant in the verbal discourse: questions are put to it by the diviner, to which it reacts with a meaningful (and unpredictable) response – its influence on the chicken – a nonverbal sign translated and interpreted verbally by the diviner. The oracle is utterly impersonal, more like a catalyst in a chemical reaction than like a personalized being, and its impersonality is the reason for consulting it. It is a responsible agent in the sense that it creates meaningful signs in response to dialogue, but *not* in the sense that any intentionality can be attributed to it.

The discourse of divination also illustrates a complex structure of participant roles, as the diviner, conversing with the client and (sometimes) manipulating objects, casts himself in the role of reporter and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42529-2 - Responsibility and Evidence in Oral Discourse

Edited by Jane H. Hill and Judith T. Irvine

Excerpt

[More information](#)

interpreter of the oracular communication. By “creating” the oracle as author or original source of his words, the diviner shifts responsibility for them away from himself. Developing themes proposed in an earlier paper (Du Bois, 1986), Du Bois considers, as well, linguistic devices used in divination to shift responsibility away from the speaker. These include the use of rhythmic and versified speech, language supposed “archaic,” figurative language, formulaic expression, repetition and parallelism, and distinctive tones of voice to produce what he calls “apersonal authoritative meaning.”

Similar findings emerge in cases examined by Wallace Chafe and Joel Kuipers, who also consider the problem of authoritative discourse. Chafe distinguishes three styles of speaking in Seneca, an Iroquoian language of the United States: conversational style, used in everyday interaction; preaching style, used in recitations of the “Good Message” of the prophet Handsome Lake; and chanting style, used in thanksgiving rituals. The three styles exhibit a continuum in four dimensions: prosodic freedom, formulaicity, sentence integration, and epistemological certainty, which are icons for the location of authority. Conversational style, which locates authority in the speaker, exhibits high prosodic freedom, and the highest scores on the other dimensions. Preaching style is intermediate. In this iconic manner, Chafe proposes, the styles progressively represent a detachment from immediate involvement in the pragmatic present and suggest remote participants – Handsome Lake and the messengers sent him by the Creator – who are ultimately responsible for what is said and for its effectiveness.

Joel Kuipers’ paper examines a lengthy ceremonial process of atonement among the Weyewa of Indonesia. Weyewa oratory functions to mediate a complex structure of authority relations, bridging communicative “gaps” between transgressing living people and angry ancestors. The organization of power in Weyewa is modelled by an image of a tree, and speech must flow properly from the “trunk,” the center of ancestral power, to the “tip.” When speech contains many quotatives, the multiple “tips” of the tree are profiled – a multiplicity of statements and opinions. At a relatively early point in the ceremonial process, while presenting this multiplicity in the form of multiple instances of reported speech, the orator is not disclaiming or diffusing responsibility, but is representing a troubled and disorderly state of affairs. Later in the process, when speech is direct and quotatives disappear, the image evoked is one of smooth relationships, of “trunk” and “tip” in proper alignment. The orator claims, not personal authority, but proper representation of the ancestral voice. The ancestral voice is now so dominant that no explicit differentiation of it from present participants (as would occur, for instance, with quotative verbs) is any longer necessary or even appropriate. Kuipers uses