

## **“BROWN – NOSING” AND COMMUNICATION**

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Speech acts are a kind of cultural concept, not real things out there that are separate somehow from their interpretive use in interaction. Speech acts such as promising, gossiping, brown – nosing cannot be dissected and diagrammed to find their objective essence. In the ongoing interactions that make up our social lives, speech acts entail a pattern of understanding important enough to a com-

munity to be made easily codified. Speech acts are symbolic resources, but they do not represent some tangible referent out there whose static characteristics can be discovered separate from the talk that simultaneously attributes the existence of and makes sense of the speech act. This point is worth clarifying: what constitutes a speech act, for instance brown-nosing, does not rest on some set group of behaviours (or rules for these behaviours).

Brown-nosing, or any other speech act is a cultural concept whose force rests on the system of discursive attributions made about the act and instances in which the term is used as a label to help make the world meaningful. So, the task cannot simply be to go out and gather all those real instances of brown-nosing and dissect them, but instead must explore how the cultural concept is used and understood in everyday life.

Humans use and create symbols, which in turn constrain and enable who we as individual humans are or can be (Bilmes, 1986). Speech acts are culturally loaded concepts and give way to understanding of the world. This way of understanding helps not only make sense of daily events, but actually helps share the sense that can be made. Most communication studies focus on what people do with symbols but ignore what symbols do to people. Relevant speech acts can affect people by conveying implicit messages about the nature of communication, personhood, and sociality in general.

Communication implies common symbolic resources accessible to the interlocutors, behaviours that have the potential to be identified as these common resources, and actions that are behaviours infused with meaning.

Brown-nosing as a cultural concept is related to a variety of other terms that can be culturally substitutable and, therefore, part of the nosing. These other terms, therefore, become interchangeable with the term "brown-nosing" in regards to the attributes and assumptions their use evokes. The following are the terms most frequently met: "kissing-up", "apple-polishing", "schmoozing".

The terms "butter-up" and "sweet talk" are used in very similar manner as the other terms, but they are also distinctive.

A brown-noser is not a particularly nice thing to be called (not nice to say nice things!). Thus, one general behavioural aspect on which brown-nosing depends is excess. Brown-nosers are viewed as being overly verbal. This excessive behaviour can be understood as operating on two basic principals - reciprocity and maximization: reciprocity in the sense that if I'm nice to her she'll be nice to me and maximization in that the brown-noser tries to increase as much as possible his or her own personal value to the boss.

Finally, brown-nosing is perceived as a form of counterfeit work within the organization. Brown-nosing is sensibly contrasted with a "hard worker", "actual achievement", "real results".

A brown-noser is understood as a person who is unable to do good because he or she is too concerned with appearing good: when you are kissing up normally you're not doing the job, you are supposed to be doing. You're putting your efforts in another direction and the job is going unattended.

Communicatively, then brown-nosing is understood as a domain of terms that are used when behaviour is perceived as counterfeit and excessive relative to the person's official duties.

"Personhood" involves cultural understanding about the nature of persons at both a descriptive and prescriptive level. The understanding of brown-nosing evokes certain cultural assumptions about individuals who brown-nose and about the nature of persons in general that answer questions about what is deemed normal (descriptive) and appropriate (prescriptive).

The two assumptions are reflected in two co-occurring clusters of attributions that index brown-nosing. These clusters form a commonsense view of what naturally constitutes a legitimate person and a legitimate organization. These clusters can be called the artificial actions cluster and the selfish motives cluster. These sense-making clusters are evoked for behaviour to be sensibly labeled as "brown-nosing".

Brown-nosers are taken to be presenting an artificial rather than genuine self. Implicit in the label "brown-noser" is the idea that the person is "two-faced". The brown-noser can be portrayed as displaying one image to supervisors or persons with power and another to one's co-workers or those who are not perceived as powerful.

Brown-nosers are people who are expected to be caught acting like they are best friends with someone they hardly know or trying to impress.

Thus, brown-nosing is that which is artificial as opposed to that which is real or genuine. That which is displayed just for public consumption is not really felt inside. To label something "brown-nosing" implies that it is not sincere or actually what is professed to be. A compliment interpreted as brown-nosing is not really praise, but an effort to obtain goodwill from the other person. Even more important is that it implies that the person is not what he or she professes to be.

Behaviours such as addressing others in formal or deferential terms and dressing in ways that mimic the deferential person targeted may also be interpreted as brown-nosing when perceived as artificial. Such behaviours also highlight the understanding that in brown-nosing you strategically kiss-up to them because that person has power.

The description of brown-nosing as artificial also implies an assumed intentionality. Brown-nosing is understood as an active choice, a part of an overall strategy adopted by the brown-noser. Thus, to refer to brown-nosing is not to refer to some natural, spontaneous, or innocent reaction to a situation, but a consciously chosen tool with which to accomplish a selfish objective.

Anything that may be termed "brown-nosing" is properly understood as in service to the self. The concept brown-nosing has two distinct forms: reprehensible and pitiful. The reprehensible type of brown-nosing earns condemnation reflected in either resentment or mockery, whereas the pitiful variety elicits a sadness tinged with contempt and/or a touch of humor.

The most immediate purpose of reprehensible brown-nosing is taken to be getting favourable attention or self-aggrandizement, or in other words, you do brown-nosing by trying to get yourself acknowledged in every possible way.

As with reprehensible brown-nosing, selfish motivations/purposes make the practice of pitiful brown-nosing disagreeable. A key distinguishing factor be-

tween reprehensible and pitiful brown-nosing is that in the latter the person is viewed as motivated beyond sheer greed or narcissism. For example, the overinflated or fragile ego of a supervisor may be taken as fertilizing the interactional ground in which this type of brown-nosing flourishes. Thus, an informant may attribute his or her continued brown-nosing to, and justify it to an extent because of the egoistical enjoyment of the superior.

Thus, this article was an attempt to identify the nature of communication, personhood and sociality suggested by "brown-nosing".

#### **References:**

1. Bilmes, J. *Discourse and behaviour*. New York: Plenum, 1986.