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Audience diversity, participation and interpretation

CHARLES GOODWIN

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Audience diversity, participation and interpretation*

CHARLES GOODWIN**

Abstract

This paper investigates how an audience and the interpretive work in which it is engaged are constituted through a dynamic process of ongoing interaction. Analysis focuses first on how the topic of the talk in progress can both provide an arena for displaying competence and expertise, and differentiate members of an audience from each other in terms of their access to that domain of discourse. Second, through its interpretive work and participation displays an audience can shape what is to be made of the talk they are hearing. Typically speakers provide their recipients with an initial characterization of a story they are about to tell which acts as a guide for their understanding of those events. In addition, throughout the telling, the speaker, through his/her gestures, intonation, word selection and arrangement of events, proposes a certain alignment to the story being told. However, recipients through their interaction with each other can offer competing frameworks for both interpretation and alignment which undercut those of the speaker. The meaning that the story will be found to have thus emerges not from the actions of the speaker alone, but rather as the product of a collaborative process of interaction in which the audience plays a very active role.

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at a session on 'The Audience as Co-Author' at the 1984 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Denver, Colorado.

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