CHAPTER 1

Talk and Identity

You are sitting in a restaurant, waiting to meet a friend. To pass the time, you go into people-watching mode. Based on what you see and hear, you create mini-stories about the individuals in the restaurant. You decide who the people are, what they must be to each other, their purpose in meeting, what kinds of political commitments they must have, and so on. Then you begin to focus on the man in the booth across from you. He looks Asian—you think maybe he's Japanese. He's drinking coffee and watching the door. After a few minutes an American-looking couple join him. The woman introduces herself and her companion. You hear the following conversation:

EXAMPLE 1.1 (9:06 A.M., Turley's Restaurant. JI = Jolene Incar, LY = Lee Yamada, RL = Robert Lester)[1]

JI: Mr. Yamada? (Yamada nods.) I'm Jolene Incar (offers her hand) and this is my husband, Robert Lester. (The two men shake hands.) I'm sorry we're a little late. There was a car accident and we had to go the long way around. I hope you didn't have to wait long.

LY: No problem—I've only been here a minute myself. Please join me. The coffee is great.

RL: (as they slide into the booth) Jolene has been telling me about the difficulties your office has run into and I think we may be able to help you. . . .

The woman's speech is accented; you conclude that your initial assumption about her being American was wrong. But the other two certainly

sound American.[2] From this short exchange, you infer that (1) the men are American but the woman probably isn't; (2) the three had not met previously in person, although Ms. Incar and Mr. Yamada probably had spoken on the phone; (3) the husband and wife work together in a business; (4) the trio are meeting for business rather than for pleasure; (5) Jolene Incar cares about being perceived as a polite person; and (6) Jolene and Robert are not a traditional married couple.

In creating this story—in making these particular inferences—you have drawn upon extensive knowledge about how people in American culture talk to and about each other. To know whether your inferences are accurate, you would need to question the three people. However, it is likely that many people would make the same inferences. This is the case because there are ways of talking that routinely go with being a certain kind of person, doing particular activities, and having certain relationships.

Most likely you are already aware of some features of the conversation that contribute to the inferences we have made; probably there are others that you would have a hard time naming. That both of the men are native-born Americans but that the woman probably is not is suggested by the way the three speak English, especially the dialect each person uses. That Jolene and Robert are married is cued rather obviously by Jolene's introduction, in which she refers to Robert as her husband. That they do not have a traditional marriage is suggested, although perhaps more ambiguously, by their differing last names and the fact that a husband and wife having different last names is unconventional in American society. That the trio are business acquaintances is cued by Ms. Incar's formal term of address ("Mr. Yamada" rather than "Lee") and Robert's topical reference to Mr. Yamada's office. That they are first-time acquaintances seems probable because Jolene introduced herself, an act that would be quite strange if she and Mr. Yamada had met previously in person. In addition, the noticeable absence of pleasant inquiries ("How have you been since I last saw you?" or "How's your new system working out?") makes the most sense if the trio has had no prior relationship in which they had an opportunity to share information about each other. The impression that Jolene is a polite person can be tied to what she said and some specific features of the situation. Ms. Incar offered an apology for the couple's tardiness, a reasonable excuse for why it happened, and a statement that indicated her concern about inconveniencing Mr. Yamada. Given that it was only 5 or 6 minutes past the hour—a conventional time when appointments start—it seems likely that Jolene was no more than 5 minutes late. That Jolene did all this conversational work rather than offer a perfunctory apology creates a sense of her as a polite person.

Our purpose in this book is to look at the myriad ways everyday talk reflects, sustains, builds, and challenges who people are. **Everyday talk** refers to the ordinary kinds of communicating people do in schools, workplaces, and shops; at public meetings; and when they are at home or with their friends. It also includes the conversations people have on mobile phones and by text, through e-mail, and in online chats. Who people are is what communication theorists call **identity**. Identity includes the most personal aspects of people, what in ordinary life we refer to as a person's character (*honest, considerate, sleazy*), personality (*overbearing, quiet and thoughtful*), or attitudes (*for the Tea Party, against fracking, a passionate Buffs basketball fan*). It also includes characteristics we take to be relatively fixed, such as ethnic and racial background, age, sex, or nationality. In addition, identity includes the roles we take on with another in particular situations (e.g., supervisor–employee, friend–friend, coach–player, sister–brother, discussion leader–participant).

Why Is Understanding the Link between Everyday Talk and Identity So Important?

Because you have participated in family, school, and work life for many years, you already possess a wealth of experiential knowledge about links between different identities and communicative practices. Much of the knowledge you possess is tacit; that is, it is knowledge you routinely use to make sense of other people's actions and to inform your own communicative choices. But it is not a kind of knowledge you could articulate easily; it is hidden and below the surface.

That knowledge is tacit is unproblematic when exchanges between people go well. But when people have difficulties with each other, it is crucial that they are able to analyze explicitly what went wrong. Only by being able to accurately analyze the character of an interactional difficulty is it possible to create more effective ways of managing such difficulties in the future. The central purpose of this book is to help you transform your **tacit knowledge** about everyday talk into **explicit knowledge**. With explicit knowledge of how talk links to important identities, you should find yourself better able to be the kind of person you are seeking to be and to more satisfactorily manage the social, work, public, and intimate relationships about which you care. In addition, you will be better able to avoid the inevitable and serious danger of tacit knowledge: presuming that what you know is natural and universal, and that what you take for granted is the only way that a particular identity could be linked to a communicative practice.

In the remainder of this chapter we describe one particularly influential view of the purpose of conversation—to exchange information—and argue that this view is inadequate to understand what happens when people talk. Then we introduce four sets of ideas (interactional meaning, identity-work, identities and face, and discursive practices) that are crucial to the argument we make in this book.

The Logic of Conversation: Information Exchange?

One of the most influential views of conversation is the one articulated by the language philosopher Paul Grice.[3] Conversation, he suggested, has many purposes, but its major one is the exchange of information effectively. To accomplish this informational purpose, communicators in their roles as speakers and listeners orient to the cooperative principle. The **cooperative principle** guides how people both talk and interpret, and it specifies that participants should "make their conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged."[4]

In describing conversation as "cooperative," Grice did not mean to say that conversation is only and always nice and pleasant. Conversation is a cooperative activity in much the same way that football is cooperative. For the game of football to work, players need to assume that other players will adhere to the basic logic of the game. Players, for instance, are expected to run toward a particular goal post, not toward the other one, nor up into the grandstands. Moreover, every move in football is to be interpreted by assuming that all players are adhering to this logic.

Conversation's cooperative principle, however, does not stand by itself; there are four maxims that give it meat. These maxims (i.e., rules) specify more particularly what it means to be cooperative. Speakers are expected to (1) say just the right amount (**quantity maxim**), (2) say what they believe to be true (**quality maxim**), (3) make their comments relevant (**relevance maxim**), and (4) be orderly and avoid ambiguous, obscure phrases (**manner maxim**). These rules, rather obviously, do not provide a straightforward description of how people talk. People, rather frequently, make irrelevant comments, say too much or too little, and assert things that are not literally true. If Grice's claim were simply "This is how people talk," he would have been wrong, and his views would not have been very influential. However, his argument was subtler than this. According to Grice, rather than straightforwardly describing conversational action, the cooperative principle with its maxims furnishes an interpretive logic

for conversation. Thus if a man, upon walking outside into pouring rain, comments, "Beautiful day, isn't it?" his partner will assume that he is cooperating to convey information but that he is ignoring the quality maxim. She most likely will hear his remark as giving information about how awful the weather is.

Blatantly ignoring (flouting) a maxim is a way conversational implicatures are generated. **Conversational implicatures** are meanings that differ from what a person said explicitly. For instance, assume that Len has applied for a job as manager of a small store. As part of the decision-making process, his possible future employer telephones his past employer. The past employer says, "Len is a great person. He's always on time." The new employer interprets this comment about Len as being less informative than would be expected for this type of job reference. The meaning she takes from the comment, as she assumes the past employer is following the cooperative principle, is that Len has some habits that might make him ineffective as a manager.

Grice's view of conversation is a powerful one. It begins to explain some of what happens in conversation. Yet, as we hope will be clear to you by the end of this book, information exchange is not the most important reason that people talk with each other.

Interactional Meanings and Identity-Work

Although people do talk with each other to give and receive information, other activities are always getting done. Most important for our purpose is the ongoing way talk is doing identity-work. **Identity-work** refers to the process through which talk makes available to participants and observers who the people doing the talking must be. There are two sides to identity-work:

1. Talk does identity-work. Through a person's choices about how to talk, identity-work is accomplished. That is, people's ways of talking construct pictures of who people must be.
2. Identities shape talk. That is, people are embedded in various communities (e.g., by nationality, ethnicity, age, professional, recreational), and this results in their learning and using distinctive expressive styles. These community-shaped styles become markers of identity categories. Being an American, a teenager, or a Latino leads one to talk in ways that differ from those of speakers of other nationalities, ages, or ethnicities.

We explore this twofold process in detail in subsequent chapters. At this beginning point, however, we need to say a few things about the meaning-making process.

Utterance Content versus Interactional Meaning

In talk the smallest meaningful unit is the **utterance**. Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian scholar writing in the early years of the 20th century, was the first person to argue for the importance of distinguishing the basic unit of speech from the sentence in writing.[5] Utterances, what a speaker utters, may be as short as a single word or phrase or as long as a couple of sentences. But unlike sentences, utterances are always situated, occurring at particular times and places, and directed toward particular someones. For instance, in Example 1.2 there are four utterances.

EXAMPLE 1.2

Yvonne is walking toward Jared and they catch each other's gaze.

Y: Hello, how are you?
J: Not bad, you?
Y: Good.
J: **Goo::d.** Got time to go get coffee?

Utterances are responses to other utterances (Jared's "Not bad, you?" is a response to Yvonne's greeting) or to events in a local environment (Yvonne's "Hello, how are you?" is a response to catching Jared's eye). The audience for any utterance is particular. Jared and Yvonne were addressing each other. Because utterances are units of social life, as well as linguistic expressions (words, phrases, and sentences), they will always have two levels of meaning.

The **content** of an utterance, the first level, is the conventional meaning of the words or phrases that were said. It is the literal or dictionary-level meaning that exists apart from any particular context. For instance, the conventional meaning of the word *hello* is a greeting, a friendly token one person uses in meeting another. But *hello* also has other meanings. If a person says "hello" in the middle of a telephone call, its interactional meaning may be to check that the other person is still on the line. If "hello" is said in the midst of a face-to-face conversation, particularly if the syllables of the word are elongated ("he:h-lo:h"), it may be intended as criticism for making

an unreasonable remark. The **interactional meaning** of an utterance is its meaning for the participants in the situation in which the utterance (or, more usually, a sequence of utterances) occurred. Interactional meaning arises from and depends on the context and may be given or given off.

Communicators may consciously work to create a certain impression or may do so inadvertently. Erving Goffman[6] describes this as the difference between meanings that are intentionally **given** and those that are **given off.** For instance, a person speaking to a group may work to present herself as relaxed and confident and do so by smiling, gazing at everyone present, telling a joke to get started, speaking extemporaneously rather than reading, and so on. However, if in speaking her voice cracks or she pauses after just a few words, members of the audience might see her as being a bit more nervous than she is trying to show. The cracked voice and the inappropriate pause would be meanings that were given off, that is, not intentionally planned by a communicator but revealing nonetheless. In considering the relationship between everyday talk and identities, we are interested in both kinds of meaning.

Linking Content and Interactional Meaning

Every utterance, then, can be analyzed in terms of its literal meaning (the content) and its meaning in context (interactional meaning). Of importance is the linkage between the levels. For the most part, the content level is relatively straightforward and unambiguous. If people share a common language and the physical communicative situation is not noisy and confusing, it is pretty easy to agree on what the content of an utterance was. In contrast, its interactional meaning is not only dependent on what was said but also considerably more ambiguous.

Arriving at the interactional meaning of a sequence of utterances requires examining what was said (the words) in light of how it was said, the people who said it, the situation, and what had previously been uttered. Put another way, the interactional meaning of an utterance arises from the content of a message in combination with the context. **Context,** then, references all the background kinds of information that shape how interactional meanings get assigned to what is said.[7]

For instance, "thanks for your help" means something quite different when it is uttered by one student to another one after sharing notes from a missed class than it does when uttered by a woman panhandling on a corner of a city street to a pedestrian who gazed away and shook his head when she requested money. Saying "thanks" is a conventional way to show appreciation of another. It is also, as Jonathan Culpeper shows, a common

way to criticize.[8] Thanking a person in a context in which she has spilled food on you, commented that your new haircut is "different," or shows up an hour later than promised is likely to be taken (and meant) as sarcasm. That "thanks" can mean the opposite of its literal meaning is humorously cued by a website that offers "Semi-Hostile Thank You Notes for Every Occasion."[9]

EXCERPT 1.3

Dinner Party: Dear Host, Thank you for dinner on Friday. We had a nice time, so please don't worry that the chicken was dry and the piecrust had obviously been overhandled. Best, Guest

Wedding Present: Dear Present Presenter, Thank you for the wedding present. How creative of you to select something yourself when we had such an extensive registry from which to choose! Cheers, Newlyweds

Job Interview: Dear Job Interviewer, I wanted to thank you for meeting with me the other day. Even though based on some of the questions you asked, it doesn't seem like you really know what you're looking for in a candidate. I wish you the best of luck with the process and hope to hear from you soon. Regards, Job Seeker

It is also the case that absence of thanks, given a particular context, may convey negative interactional meanings to certain participants. A school district had "lost" (not accurately budgeted) 14 million dollars.[10] In the public meeting that followed immediately after the crisis was reported, the board announced that a past superintendent known for his financial savvy (Roger Driver) would be returning to help the district sort through what the district needed to do. Consider the concluding comments in two speeches of citizens addressing the Board and the superintendent. In each speech, the citizen had extensively criticized the district for allowing such an error to be made. Then in the final moments each thanked Driver.

EXCERPT 1.4

Mr. Driver I'm very reassured that you came back. The district ran very well when you were here financially, everybody knows that. And we appreciate your effort ((applause)).

EXCERPT 1.5

Finally, uh, I'd like to close by thanking Mr. Driver. The air smells better in here already uh having Roger on board. And uh that's th- the best dollar this board has ever spent.

The citizens' thanks sound sincere. Driver had offered to help out at a difficult time, agreeing to be paid only one dollar in compensation. Speakers' comments recognized his generosity and his ability, and the applause underscored that the audience felt likewise. At the same time the context of the meeting made obvious another interactional meaning of the thanks. The absence of thanks addressed to other district leaders became interpretable as an additional criticism of the Board and superintendent's conduct. This is particularly obvious in Excerpt 1.5, in which the speaker metaphorically references the air quality, but with contextual knowledge of the prior talk and who is being addressed, it is easily inferable in Excerpt 1.4 as well. The particular setting and identities of participants, as well as a person's tone of voice, facial expression, the order in which parts of the message are sequenced, and so on, will shape the situated meaning of an utterance. Importantly, context is not restricted to features of the people and situation; it is also cued through the design of utterances, how they are said—that is, their particular vocalic quality—and the choice of one content-similar word over another (e.g., *inexpensive* vs. *cheap*). John Gumperz refers to these within-speech aspects of context as **contextualization cues**.[11] Figure 1.1 portrays the relationships among utterance content, context, and meaning.

When people use the same contextualization cues—a likely state when people come from the same sociocultural background—a speaker's intended meaning is more likely to be in alignment with the one that a listener assigns. But if people do not share contextualization cues, a problem can arise. For instance, in American English a central way that speakers convey interest in a person or enthusiasm about an issue is through their tone of voice. Thus, if a speaker, in responding to an invitation, said in a monotone voice, "Thank you for asking, perhaps another time," a different meaning would be attached to her utterance than if she emphasized the phrase "Thank you" and had a strong upward vocal inflection at the end of the phrase "another time." In the former case, the American English-speaking listener is likely to infer that the person is trying to be polite but does not really want to spend time with him. In the latter case, the listener may infer that the other person really does want to get to know him

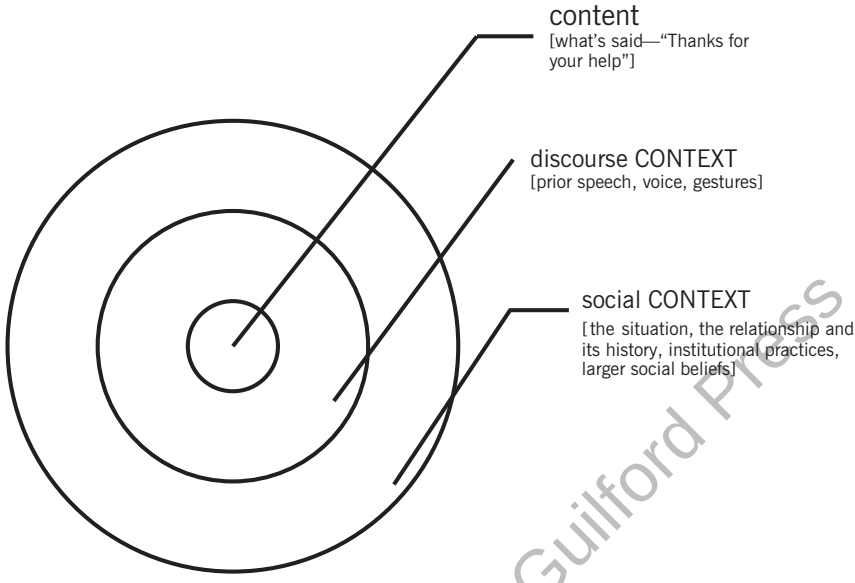

FIGURE 1.1. Relationship among content, context, and meaning.

but cannot accept his invitation at this particular time. The use of voice inflection to signal attitude is a contextualization cue. But voice inflection, as well as other contextualization cues, is not universal. Consequently, if speakers come from communities that use different contextualization cues, they may very well misinterpret each other.

Gumperz describes a number of problems that have arisen between Indian English speakers and British English speakers because of just such different contextualization conventions. For instance, Indian English-speaking women working in a cafeteria were getting complaints from British English-speaking patrons about their rudeness. In looking at their conversational action, Gumperz discovered that the British English patrons were attributing rudeness to the staff because of the workers' intonation patterns when they offered services. Instead of saying "Gravy?" with a rising intonation, as British English speakers would to offer a service and be polite, the Indian English speakers were saying "Gravy" with a falling intonation. For British English speakers, this conveyed an identity message that suggested *you're not important, so just take it or leave it*. This was unintended by the Indian English speakers, whose communicative practices did not include using intonation to convey these relational attitudes.

So far we have discussed interactional meaning as if it were a single thing, but this is not the case. Interactional meaning is best thought of in the plural: interactional meanings.

The Multiple Layers and Kinds of Interactional Meanings[12]

In every communicative situation there are at least two versions of interactional meaning: (1) the meanings intended by the first person speaking and (2) the meanings assigned by the conversational partner. Should there be observing, nonfocal participants, there could be a third set of interactional meanings. Put simply, interactional meanings are positioned and likely to differ across participants. When communication goes smoothly, we tend to think about meaning as unitary and seamless—that what a listener understood is what a speaker meant.[13] But to be able to manage communication well, it is important to recognize that there are always two or more views of what an interaction meant. Often parties' views are similar enough that the difference can be ignored. Nonetheless, they are always there. Differences in interactional meanings may lead to awkward moments or small confusions and sometimes even serious conflict. Consider an ordinary, end-of-the-day exchange between a boyfriend, Don, and his girlfriend, Heather.

EXCERPT 1.6

D: How was school today
H: Okay
(pause)
D: Hhh just okay?
H: Ayup
D: Why what happened?
H: Nothin. It was kinda boring. We left for lunch though
D: Who did
H: Me and Maria and Sean and- and Max Clancey
D: Sean who?
H: Sean ah (1.0) Peters. Maria's- you know Abruzzi
D: Yeah
H: Maria's new boyfriend.
(pause)

15 D: And who?
16 H: A:h his best friend Max
17 (pause)
18 H: We just went to Dunkin's I had to have a croissant
19 D: Yea well you better tell Max that uh:
20 H: Max has a girlfriend
21 D: Yea
22 (pause)
23 H: Plus he has disgusting earrings[14]

Anita Pomerantz and B. J. Fehr analyze this recorded exchange to illustrate the complex layers of meaning inherent in this most ordinary of conversations. They had many interesting things to say; we would highlight just one point. A typical event for families or roommates is for each person to inquire at the end of the day about the other's day. Asking a person how her day went is a small way for one person to show interest in another. Doing so (usually) expresses concern, as it displays that one person cares enough about the other that he is tracking events in her life. At first glance this seems the most obvious interactional meaning of this exchange. Don is engaging in a small caring ritual common among people who live together. At line 19, however, when Don's responds to Heather's recounting of her lunch with the trailing-off comment, "Yea well you better tell Max that uh:" we are led to suspect another interactional meaning. Don's remark sounds like the beginning of a threat, something like "you better tell Max that you're my girlfriend" or "tell Max to leave my girl alone." We, of course, do not know exactly what Don was going to say. He may have intended something quite different. But because utterance conclusions are projectable from what's said initially, it seems likely that the projections we offered could have been meant by Don. More certainly we can say that Heather interpreted Don's comment in this way and took what he said as an expression of jealousy. Her response cues that she assigned this interactional meaning. Telling one's boyfriend that another man already has a girlfriend displays Max's likely lack of interest in her. By adding that Max wears "disgusting earrings," Heather can be seen as doing even more work to reassure Don: Not only is Max not looking for a girlfriend, but Heather doesn't like his appearance.

Interactional meanings are not fixed but can be revamped across time. As a different interpretation comes to mind, one can inspect an exchange

to see whether there were earlier signs that one's interpretation was valid. Heather's lack of response (line 2) after Don's initial inquiry—not treating his question as an invitation to talk about her day—suggests she might have been interpreting his question from the start as sensitive, an act of fishing for information about her connection to other men. Whether a person in an intimate relationship is expressing care for the other, actually being jealous, or is assumed by one's partner to be jealous will be crucially important to the parties. This is the stuff of interactional meanings.

Interactional meaning is positioned and shaped by each participant; it involves layers. These layers can be thought of as answers to three interrelated questions about the meaning of an interaction. At the first layer, the question to ask is, "What act is being performed by uttering a particular set of words?" If a speaker says, "Excuse me," is the action apologizing or reprimanding? **Speech acts** name utterances in terms of their purpose. Is what a person saying (1) giving information, (2) making an offer, (3) complimenting, (4) criticizing, (5) requesting a favor, (6) ordering another to do something, (7) apologizing, or (8) something else? We have more to say about speech acts and how they do identity-work in Chapter 4.

A second layer of interactional meaning is the situation **frame**. This idea, initially developed by Gregory Bateson and expanded by Goffman, refers to the understood label for an occasion.[15] Were Don and Heather doing friendly end-of-the day checking-in or jealousy-motivated monitoring and responding? Frames are broader than speech acts; they are the everyday names we give to speech occasions. Frames include such things as a therapy session, two friends chatting, an interview, a lecture, an advising session, a prayer group, a team meeting, or a coffee break. Some frames would also be described as distinct genres of discourse. We explore these types of frames more in Chapter 11. Frames typically go unnamed, seeming self-evident to participants. It would be quite strange indeed for a college teacher to begin a class by announcing: "The situation we're in is a lecture. This means I'm going to do most of the talking and you get to do most of the listening. If you want to make a comment or ask a question, raise your hand."

Frames are inferred from the physical situation and change through the ways people talk with each other. For instance, imagine a group of eight people in a room. There's a large rectangular table with chairs around it, and off to the side is a small table with coffee and sweet rolls. At one point in time people are standing up, sipping coffee, milling around the room, and chatting in small groups of two to three about such topics as their baseball team's recent loss, a good movie that someone saw, and a coworker's recent engagement. At a later point, all eight people are sitting

around the large table, one person is speaking at a time, and the person at one end of the table is directing the talk of the others with phrases such as "The next item on our agenda is . . ." or "Does anyone have anything else to propose?" The frame for the first kind of interaction is a coffee break; the frame for the second is a work meeting. The coffee-break frame changes to the meeting frame when participants purposefully change how they talk with each other. In a college lecture, if a group of students stood up, shouted at the instructor, held up placards, and shook their fists, the understood frame would change from a lecture to a student protest.

Most often communicators assume the same frame as their partner, but this is not always so. For instance, if one person sets up a meeting with a colleague to talk about a joint project, the expected frame is likely to be a work meeting. However, if in the course of the meeting the person comments positively about the colleague's appearance, touches the colleague's hand a couple of times, asks about the colleague's past weekend, and holds the colleague's gaze for slightly longer than is normal, the colleague might wonder whether the other is flirting. Frames are suggested by the physical context (meeting in a teacher's office vs. meeting in a coffee shop) but are modified and redefined through ways of talking.

Third, a final set of questions we could pose about the meaning of an interaction focuses directly on the people doing the talking. What kind of person is each communicator? How does each one regard the other? What kind of relationship do the two have? Identity-work refers to this kind of interactional meaning; it is the way a segment of talk implicates who the people must be. Consider a segment of talk that Frederick Erickson[16] taped between a physician (an intern) and his supervisor (a senior physician). The situation frame was a "patient presentation," a talk occasion in which one physician (or physician in training, i.e., medical student) presents information to another physician about a patient and gives his or her tentative diagnosis as to what is the patient's likely medical problem. Consider what the intern initially said (Excerpt 1.7), as well as one exchange (Excerpt 1.8) with his supervisor.

EXCERPT 1.7

This is Ned Nagon, a twenty-nine year old black male. He was referred from emergency room with complaints of lower abdominal discomfort, super-pubic discomfort. It's sorta hard to get a clear history. I'll sorta go from the top (*the intern goes on to say that the patient had normal health until two months ago. Then he had a swelling in the right eye—he*

has a prosthesis in the right eye from a gunshot wound—no neurological damage from that wound. He went first to the eye clinic and to the ear, nose and throat clinic.) He was treated five to seven days with "Amox." Intern notes how patient had had a new sex partner and had recently been tested for sexually transmitted diseases by another doctor.

At one point in giving the patient's history, the intern begins to describe medications and the following exchange occurs:

EXCERPT 1.8

I: Let's see, medications. He doesn't take anything. He hasn't taken anything over the counter. No home remedies. He doesn't smoke. He does do, he does smoke some marijuana, thirty dollars a week.

S: (smiles) How much is that?

I: (no smile) I have no idea.

S: (smiles) It used to be an ounce (smiles).

I: (smiles) It's probably a little more depending on where you live (serious face). NO IVDA, no cocaine. He, he's had multiple episodes of sexually transmitted diseases.

S: He's straight or gay?

I: He's straight. He has a girlfriend but sounds like he has other partners as well. His support is, he's on SSI for the gunshot wound.

S: Any history of colonic cancer?

The first thing to be said about this presentation and exchange is that the talk reflects and constructs the two as medical personnel, either both doctors or a doctor and a medical student. These identities are constructed through the accurate use of acronyms and medical jargon (Amox, IVDA [intravenous drug administration]), as well as vocabulary related to social services and funding that are common in urban hospital settings (e.g., SSI). In addition to the jargon, another aspect of the talk that reflects that they are doctors is the patient presentation frame in which they are participating.

This type of impersonal style of describing a patient, in which age and race are mentioned first, followed by a general category description of the person's complaint, implies not only that the speaker is a doctor (or doctor in training) but also that the addressed other is. This is not the style doctors would use in talking with a patient's family to tell family members what

was wrong with their relative. In the language of identity-work, we could say that this segment of talk presents the speaker (I) as a physician and altercasts his conversational partner (treats the person he is talking with) as also a doctor. Anyone with familiarity with this kind of talk could rather easily guess which party is the supervisor and which is the junior doctor. By and large, it is medical students and junior physicians who present patient cases to senior physicians. Thus, in this situation, the amount and content of I's talk is doing identity-work that cues that he is junior to S.

There are other, more subtle identities at stake in this interaction. Case presentations are a major site in which medical students, interns (beginning doctors), and residents (a doctor with several years of experience) seek to present self as medically competent for their level. In case presentations, medical students are quickly corrected by their seniors for errors. They are expected to use, and thereby display that they have command of, the vast array of medical terms. But as interns gain experience, their style of doing case presentations takes on a different flavor. The sign of an experienced physician is the ability to switch back and forth between technical medical terminology and casual everyday vocabulary. "Part of what the intern in residency needs to learn and practice is how NOT to appear as a beginning medical student performing a hyper-correct, stilted version of a case presentation." [17] In Example 1.7, then, through the way the intern mixes the everyday and the technical vocabulary—the phrase "eye clinic" rather than ophthalmology in one breath and in the next the shorthand name of the drug amoxicillin, "amox"—he enacts himself as a relatively advanced doctor.

Finally, we must comment about the most subtle level of identity-work that occurs in the exchange. The intern is an African American man about the same age as the presenting patient; the supervisor is a white middle-aged man. Both men hail from middle-class family backgrounds and have had similar professional experiences (20+ years of school). The patient who is being presented is African American. Given the history of race in the United States, even recognizing the major changes that have occurred in the past 50 years, there is often a degree of tension in encounters between persons of different races. This is especially likely to happen when an upper-middle-class African American professional is in the position of speaking for an underclass African American to a senior professional who is white. Erickson puts it this way:

> The African-American professional may feel a special obligation for advocacy on behalf of the less powerful racial co-member or may feel an obligation to take the position of an institutional officer/professional (the

> vast majority of whom are white) and distance him- or herself from the racial co-member. Whichever side of this tension the African-American professional chooses to play in a given situation there is the potential for face-threat. [18]

Face is the view of self each person seeks to uphold in an interaction. **Face-threat** is the challenge a person experiences to a facet of identity that he or she cares about in a particular situation. We say more about these concepts later. In this exchange, the intern experienced a face-threat related to his racial and professional identities. Erickson works through a detailed analysis of how this happens. Suffice it to say that in Example 1.8 the intern could have used the casual everyday terms ("pot" rather than "marijuana," "shooting up" rather than "IVDA") along with the medical ones, thereby displaying the terminology mix that is the sign of an advanced intern. He did not do this.

Interestingly, though, the intern appeared to be going to use the informal forms. When people change what they are saying in midstream, it is often possible to infer what they started to say but decided against. Consider how the intern began to describe the patient's marijuana use: "He doesn't smoke. He does do, he does smoke some marijuana." It appears, then, that the intern was about to say that the patient "does do *pot*" but rejected this word choice and used the more formal term. In essence, the intern's choice to use a formal term at this juncture made him sound more like a medical student than like an advanced physician. Why might he have edited his talk toward the more formal style? Why was he willing to let his talk imply that he was more of a novice than he actually was? There is no way to know for sure, but one consequence of using the informal drug names is that it could be seen as somewhat dismissive or unsympathetic to a fellow racial member. Or he may have edited what he was saying to avoid displaying the kind of familiarity with street drug usage that could be negatively linked to being African American.

What identity-work was accomplished by the white supervising physician in making the casual remark about the "price of an ounce"? One possibility is that the white physician may have been involved in a moment of stereotyping, presuming the intern's knowledge of street drugs because he was African American. Or the remark may have had nothing to do with race. It may have been meant as a small gesture of bonding, a recognition of similarity between the two men. From this perspective, the supervising physician's remark about the cost of an ounce was an identity-work move that referenced both men's college experiences in which knowledge of marijuana could be presumed commonplace. We do not know what either

doctor intended or interpreted, but we do see that the conversation displayed a moment of interactional discomfort. As Erickson concludes, "It is through just such subtleties—the attribution of a whiff of a hint, whether intended by the other party or not—that interaction can become racialized in collegial interaction in the helping professions in the United States." [19]

Talk reflects who people are and is also the instrument through which people build who they want to be. Talk does identity-work and identities work to shape talk, yet the process is by no means straightforward and certain (if a person says *X*, it means that he or she is a *Y* kind of person; or *Y* kinds of people will always talk in an *X* kind of way). Identity-work is an inherently uncertain process. It is a cueing procedure that involves guesswork, a bit like a detective working to figure out the most likely culprit in a crime. As clues begin to add up and point in the same direction, an interpreter can have greater confidence in the conclusion that is being pointed to. Identity-work, then, is the glue linking identity with ways of talking. Let's examine the concepts that are glued together.

What Does "Identity" Mean?

Identity is a term with many meanings, both in ordinary life and in academic study. It includes the most personal aspects of who people are, as well as group-level identifications. In everyday conversations we routinely talk about people having "identity crises"—being confused about who they are. We also treat identities as things that belong to individuals, possessions that may be stolen—"identity fraud." The term also references the boxes societies use to categorize their members. It is the descriptive stuff that is treated as informative and necessary when people fill out forms (male/female, black/white/Hispanic, gay/straight). When people from these groups fight over who is or is not entitled to resources and respectful treatment, we call the process "identity politics."

Researchers who study communication and identity draw on these meanings, with theories extending and systematizing different aspects of the concept. Some scholars, such as social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner or those influenced by sociolinguist William Labov, adopt a **category approach**, equating identity with group-level categories such as ethnicity, nationality, and social class. Category approaches treat identities as stable aspects of persons that shape how they communicate.[20] In contrast, other scholars adopt a **social constructionist** approach. Social constructionists assume that who people are is created through the actions they choose, particularly their expressive choices. That is, rather than seeing

identity as fixed and stable, identity is regarded as fluid, better referred to in the plural (identities), with various pieces of it often at odds with other pieces. People change identities to suit the needs of the moment. Having an identity is an accomplishment, not a preexisting fact.[21]

In 2000 Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper argued that the term *identity* was being used in so many different ways that it had become useless.[22] Given the many books that have been published since Brubaker and Cooper's article that have "identity" in the title, it appears that their argument was not persuasive.[23] Most truly influential concepts, we suggest, will have contrary threads in their meanings.[24] In an interesting book about the nature of everyday thought, Michael Billig argues for the importance of recognizing how contradictory impulses are not only typical but also a virtue of ordinary thinking. Common sense, as he puts it, "is not unitary but is composed of contradictory aspects."[25] Communicative life is messy and complicated. Contrary proposals about what identity is offer a way to capture that complexity.

Identities, then, are best thought of as stable features of persons that exist prior to any particular situation *and* as dynamic and situated accomplishments, enacted through talk, changing from one occasion to the next. Similarly, identities are social categories *and* are personal and unique. There is no agreed-upon system for describing types of identities. Exactly how identities are categorized varies by authors in light of the purposes they have. Bethan Benwell and Elizabeth Stokoe, for instance, distinguished six main kinds of identity—conversational, institutional, narrative, commodified, spatial, and virtual—whereas Andrew McKinlay and Chris McVittie distinguish seven kinds, only one of which is the same as the ones that Benwell and Stokoe name.[26] In addition to virtual identities, which both sets of authors include, McKinlay and McVittie identify (1) national, (2) ethnic and religious, (3) gender, (4) health, (5) law-linked, and (6) workplace identities. For the purpose of understanding everyday talk, we divide identities into three main kinds.

The first kind, **master identities**,[27] references those aspects of personhood that are presumed to be relatively stable and unchanging: gender, ethnicity, age, national and regional origins. Any particular person is male or female; Asian, Hispanic, European, or African American; 20, 40, or 60 years of age; and so on. Master identities do not change from situation to situation. But although master identities are fixed and preinteractionally given in one sense, in another they are not. That is, what it means to be young, middle-aged, or old or an American, a Colombian, or an Egyptian person shifts across time and interactions among people. Through the ways people with different master identities deal with each other, the meanings

of particular identities are established. Meanings can, and do, change over time and across situations. Of note is the fact that master identities frequently are conceived as **contrastive sets**. The meaning of being male is deeply bound up with the meaning of being female; each gender category informs and contrastively defines the other. Similarly, what it means to be a southerner is understood in terms of the visible ways it contrasts with being a midwesterner, a northerner, or a westerner. Don Zimmerman characterizes master identities as transportable ones, facets of self that are visible to others and carried from situation to situation.[28]

The second kind of identity, **interactional identity**, refers to specific roles that people take on in a communicative context with regard to specific other people. For instance, Jason may be a friend in one context, an employee of Pizza-Plus in another, a college student, a hospital volunteer, a son, or a husband in yet others. Interactional identities may be formulated at different levels of abstraction. They may be formulated at the level of social roles, as just illustrated, or they may be formulated to make visible the particular discourse actions a person is doing. For example, rather than identifying a person as a student, at any moment we could think of him or her as a questioner, a presenter, a discussant, a debater, and so on. Interactional identities are situation- and relationship-specific.[29]

Interactional identities are distinct from master identities but are not independent of them. In American society, for instance, the interactional identities of elementary school teacher, secretary, or nurse are expected to go with the master identity of being female, whereas the interactional identities of surgeon, engineer, or airline pilot are expected to go with the master identity of male. To the degree to which an interactional identity is strongly associated with a master identity, whether it is gender, race, or age, that interactional identity takes on some of the broader master identity features with which it is associated. One consequence of society's deep-seated expectations about which identities are natural partners is that persons who take on identities that are not seen as going together (e.g., a male nurse, a female police officer) may experience some communicative difficulties in enacting both identities satisfactorily.

The third kind of identity is what in ordinary life we think of as individuals' personality and character, their relationships with others, and their attitudes about events, issues, and other people. **Personal identities** include features of self that are treated as relatively stable, even though they may vary from situation to situation. Personal identities reference the "personality" aspects of self: as tolerant or bigoted, serious or fun-loving, friendly or aloof, abrasive or tactful, timid or aggressive, honest or deceitful, competent and deserving of respect or not. Personal identity also includes the

kinds of relationships people have with others—warm or hostile; equal, superior, or subordinate; close or distant—to name but a few of the most important dimensions of relationships. Personal identities related to one's relationships, what we could label *relational identities,* are negotiated moment to moment and are variable. They are what people monitor most to see whether a relationship is improving or disintegrating. As with the other types of identities, relationship-linked identities do not exist apart from other kinds of identities. Persons in an employee–supervisor relationship, for example, would be expected to enact an unequal relationship at least part of the time. However, there may be other occasions—having coffee in the morning, drinking beers after work—in which the personal identities enacted between the two become equal. For many Americans, having equal (or near-equal) relations with a superior on at least some occasions is the mark of a good work relationship. A final piece of personal identity involves the stances people take: Does a person favor or oppose, or have no opinion whatsoever about, same-sex marriage, gun control, or a local governance initiative to raise taxes and build a rail system? We return to the notion of stance in Chapter 9 and explore it more fully. At this point we would note that stance is a more interaction-grounded way to refer to attitudes.

Personal identities are bound up with master and interactional identities in two ways. First, other people hold expectations regarding what kind of personal identities are likely depending on existing master and interactional identities. Cultural beliefs about these links are the strongest for gender but operate for other facets of identity as well. In American culture Hispanics, for instance, are expected to be more *emotionally expressive* than Anglos. Conservative Christians are expected to oppose same-sex marriage more than Unitarians, Jews, or agnostics. *Arrogance* is more likely to be attributed to a doctor or a person in some other high-status profession who disagrees with another person than to a construction worker. Being *cantankerous* or *spry* are identities likely to be assigned to older people, whereas 20-year-olds are likely to be (and be described as) *naïve* or *impetuous.*

Second, what counts as expression of a personal identity is going to depend on a communicator's master and interactional identities. For example, although being *fair* may be valued across situations, the communicative actions that realize fairness will shift across interactional identities. Being a fair judge is going to be different from being a fair friend or a fair group member for a school project. Moreover, what a culture may count as adequately enacting a personal identity may depend on one's master identity. The judgment that a person is *supportive* or *aggressive*, for instance, rests

not only upon the person's communicative actions but also upon whether that person is male or female.

In everyday talk situations, then, communicators have multiple identities of three broad types: master, interactional, and personal. Some of these identities are visible, are brought to interaction, and shape how people talk; others are built up in the interaction through the particular ways each person expresses self and treats the other.

Face, a Particularly Important Facet of Identity

Closely related to the concept of identity is the notion of face. *Face*—a term initially popularized by Goffman, who adapted the original Chinese idea to Western societies—refers to the positive image of self that is desired in a particular situation. Communicators have face wants prior to an interaction, but it is through the interaction that face is either established or threatened. The face that each person achieves, then, depends on what the partner does. This means that face is constructed in an interaction through the self's and others' conversational moves. The kinds of face people seek to construct relate to their desires to be liked, appreciated, and seen as competent and to desires to avoid imposition from others. Debates about whether and how Goffman's ideas should be revised are many, but in all views people's concerns about their own and others' face are seen to be a central shaper and motivator of everyday talk.[30]

Face can be thought of as a kind of personal identity—it concerns people's desires to be regarded as competent, likeable, and deserving of respect. Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, in fact, distinguish between two aspects of face—one kind that focuses on competence and likeability, what they label **positive face**, and a second kind geared to seeking respect and avoiding imposition (**negative face**).[31] What face adds to understandings of identity, whether we think of face in the singular or as comprising two aspects, is summed up in the following:

1. It is grounded in interaction. Face emphasizes what is wanted, as well as accomplished, within specific communicative encounters, and it underscores the importance of others' actions.

2. As face may be attacked as well as supported by the actions of self and others, a focus on face helps us to give attention to how identities are endangered and challenged, as well as supported or maintained.

3. Finally, face is bound up with a strategic view of communication. In highlighting how face may be lost or gained based on what parties do, it draws attention to the consequentiality of communication choices and the importance of choosing wisely.

None of these features is entirely absent in concepts of identity, but they are backgrounded and less visible. For these reasons, we use the term *face* when we want to draw attention to the particular kinds of personal identity noted previously, when a situation involves identity threat or endangerment, and when we want to highlight the strategic character of people's talk. By analogy, then, **facework** refers to how everyday talk practices support or challenges one or the other party's face.

What Are Discursive Practices?

Scholars who write about everyday talk most commonly refer to talk as "discourse,"[32] in which **discourse** means nothing more than a multiutterance unit of talk. Interpreting and analyzing a conversation, a meeting, or a speech, such as we did in the conversation between the two doctors, is the doing of discourse analysis.[33] The concept of discursive practices links to discourse but puts an emphasis on the communicators performing the practice. **Discursive practices** are talk activities that people do. The reason we use the label *discursive practices* rather than *talk* is that it leads us to see talking not just as a single thing but as an activity that has many different parts and kinds.

A discursive practice may refer to a small piece of talk (person-referencing practices), or it may focus on a large one (narratives); it may focus on single features that may be named and pointed to (speech acts); or it may reference sets of features (dialect, stance). Discursive practices may focus on something done by an individual (style), or they may refer to actions that require more than one party (genre). Table 1.1 offers a beginning definition of the discursive practices with which you will be familiar by the end of this book.

Linking Discursive Practices and Identities

The relationship between discursive practices and identities is a reciprocal one. The identities a person brings to an interaction influence how that

TABLE 1.1. Kinds of Discursive Practices

Discursive practices	Description
Talk's building blocks	
Person-referencing practices	Words used to address others and to refer to self/others
Speech acts	Social acts performed through talk: includes criticizing, informing, praising, directing
Sight and sound of speech	Gestures, facial expressions, use of objects while talking Dialect; ways of using one's voice (loudness, rate, pitch quality)
Interaction structures	Expected ways to pair utterances, rules about taking turns
Language selection	The meaning of choosing a language (e.g., English, Spanish, Vietnamese), switching between codes, or embedding phrases from another language in a dominant one
Complex discourse practices	
Style	A set of talk features that go together signaling a kind of identity
Stance	An attitude toward a topic or conversational partner conveyed through linguistic, vocal, and gestural means
Narrative	Structure, content, and style of stories
Genre	Discourse activities that involve an ordered set of speech acts and distinctive vocabularies

person communicates. At the same time, the specific discursive practices a person chooses will shape who he or she is taken to be and who the partner is taken to be. Figure 1.2 presents a visual display of this reciprocal relationship.

Thus far we have primarily focused on the self-presentational side of talk. It is also the case that a person's talk, his or her selected discursive practices, shapes the conversational partner's identities. Identity-work (or facework) always has two sides, a self-presentational side and a partner-directed one. For example, imagine you are sitting outside someplace on a university campus. You hear two people ask for directions to the communication department's main office.

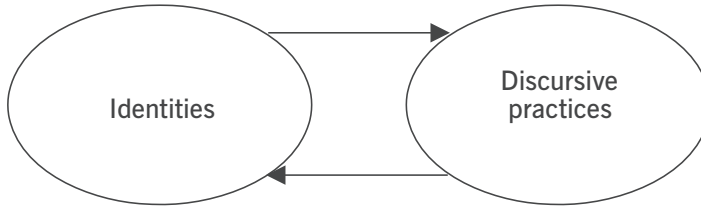

FIGURE 1.2. The reciprocal relationship.

EXAMPLE 1.9

Go to the UMC on the fountain side, across from the door where all the student organization tables are. Across from that door is the university museum, and next to it is Hellems. Go in that door on the ground floor and you'll be right by the communication office.

EXAMPLE 1.10

Go straight up this street. You can see you're going west because it's toward the mountains. Follow this path, you'll have to go around several buildings until you come to the University Memorial Center, that's the student union. On the northwest side of the building, you'll see a fountain area with water spurting up in several places. Kitty-corner to the fountain area, you'll see Hellems. It's right next to the university museum and a bunch of bike racks. Go in the door on the ground floor and you'll be right by the communication office.

In Examples 1.9 and 1.10, the speaker's talk altercasts the recipient of the asked-for directions differently; that is, the speaker's directions create or suggest a picture of who the person must be. In the first case the directions altercast the recipient as a regular member of the university community, a fellow college student, a faculty member, or staff person. That the direction asker is taken to be a university insider is implied in the first set of directions (Example 1.9) by the use of an acronym to identify a major campus building ("UMC" rather than "University Memorial Center"), the reference to a door where certain activities occur (student organization tables), which presupposes familiarity with the setup of the UMC, and the less detailed style. All of these features contrast with the directions in

Example 1.10. As such, the second set of directions altercasts the asker as a visitor, a stranger to the university who is unlikely to be familiar with its landmarks.

That a speaker's talk altercasts a partner to a certain identity does not mean that the partner has to accept that identity. Conversational partners can respond in ways that reject or seek to modify the identity that a speaker implies. In the first case, then, if the direction asker was actually a visitor, she might interrupt the direction giver to say, "What does UMC stand for?" In the second case, if the direction asker was a member of the university community, he might interrupt to say, "Yeah, I know where the UMC is." Thus, although the identities that get constructed are negotiable, each exchange simultaneously offers a picture of who the self is and who the other is taken to be.

Altercasting, then, references the work a person's talk does to maintain, support, or challenge the conversational partner's identities. *Altercasting,* a term initially used by several social psychologists that we have adopted and expanded,[34] highlights how the way we talk to and act toward others (alters) puts them in roles (casts them). Consider a second example of altercasting. Ellen, a student in a communication class, goes to talk to her teacher about some course materials that she did not understand. In this type of communication situation, two identity-relevant issues are likely to be at stake: (1) what kind of student–teacher relationship the two have, which is an aspect of each party's personal identity; and (2) the particular speech acts that are being performed and what the acts signify about the teacher and the student.

EXAMPLE 1.11

Excuse me, Dr. Trintash, I was wondering if you could go over the systems perspective with me again. I wasn't feeling well in class the other day and didn't listen as closely as I should have.

EXAMPLE 1.12

Hi, Jean, how's it goin'? I was getting lost in class when you were talking about the system perspective. Could you explain it to me one more time?

In Example 1.11 Ellen altercasts her teacher as having higher standing than she has and as being distant. She conveys this view by her selection of a titled address form (Dr. Trintash), by beginning the exchange with a token apology for intruding ("excuse me"), and by her lack of a friendly personal greeting. In addition, Ellen's request for help uses a conventional tentativeness marker ("I was wondering") that speakers use when they are not fully sure they are entitled to request something. She also justifies why she needs to make the request—because of unfortunate personal circumstances (not feeling well)—a justification that sidesteps the possibility that the teacher had done a poor job explaining. But if Ellen had talked as we see in Example 1.12, she would be altercasting her teacher very differently. In calling the teacher by her first name ("Jean") and using a friendly greeting that is also quite informal ("Hi, how's it goin?" rather than "Hello, how are you?"), Ellen treats her teacher in a friendly, close-to-equal way. She altercasts Jean as a near-peer, we might say. The speech act of requesting help that Ellen performs after her greeting also has a different inflection. In this case, Ellen is not at all tentative in making the request (a straightforward "could you explain" with no softeners). As in Example 1.11, she justifies why she is asking, but the justification has a critical edge absent from 1.11. In reporting to the teacher that she "was getting lost in class" without offering an account that in any way blames herself, Ellen makes interpretable that the teacher had done a bad job explaining the concept. To imply that a teacher is a bad explanation-giver, although possibly true, is at least a small face-threatening act.

Which way should Ellen have spoken? There is no way to answer this question without knowing more about Ellen and Jean. Either comment could have engendered positive or negative feelings from Jean. If Jean Trintash is a fairly formal teacher who appreciates student displays of respect, she is likely to prefer Example 1.11 and see Example 1.12 as disrespectful. If on the other hand Jean Trintash values connecting with her students—building friendly near-peer relationships—then she is likely to prefer Example 1.12. She may even feel that the slightly critical way the request is made cues that she has been successful in making students feel comfortable. All teachers fail to explain ideas clearly at least now and then, and Jean may be pleased that Ellen feels comfortable enough to make that small criticism. In contrast, if Ellen approached her in the fashion of Example 1.11, she may feel saddened that she hasn't done a good job in her class connecting with students.

Summary

A crucial part of the meaning of everyday interaction has to do with the views of self and other that are being built up and reflected in talk. Talk does identity-work; it presents who people are, and it altercasts the partner. Talk includes a variety of discursive practices—some quite simple, easy to see and label, and others more complicated, bigger units created though pairing and patterns among the simpler units. As we explore in the next chapter, focusing on the way preexisting identities shape discursive practices is taking a cultural perspective; focusing on the way discursive practices shape people's situated identities is taking a rhetorical perspective.

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