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Jennifer Herbert

Connecticut College, jennifer.herbert@conncoll.edu

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

“But That *Actually* Happened!”

Exploring the Speech Genre of Brainstorming¹

Jen Herbert

In the scene below, I am conversing with my best friend, Britt Cangemi, in her dorm room at Conn. As co-captains of the women’s tennis team at school, we are brainstorming for our “Paper Plate Awards,” a tradition in which a silly superlative is created for every team member, written on a paper plate and then awarded to its winner. At the tennis banquet, which was hosted the day after this scene, Britt and I read the plates out-loud one at a time. The team had fun guessing whose belonged to whom, before the answer was revealed and the plate awarded to its addressee. At this moment, Britt and I are the only ones in her dorm room. She is sitting at her desk and I am sitting on the floor at her feet.

- 1 **BC:** Will! 
- 2 (2.0)
- 3 **JH:** ((through giggles)) Most likely to eat every brownie crinkle in Harris!
- 4 (1.5)
- 5 **BC:** Most likely to eat a brownie crinkle off a radiator.
- 6 (1.0) ((JH starts giggling again))
- 7 Yup!
- 8 (1.0)
- 9 **JH:** But that actually happened. I don’t under[stand ur
- 10 **BC:** ((jokingly aggravated)) [I KNOW!]
- 11 (1.0)
- 12 **JH:** (with voice raised to a significantly higher pitch) Is that the funny part about it?
- 13 (1.8)
- 14 **JH:** Because, if it [actually-
- 15 **BC:** [((Cause) Jeff actually bought a pair of shoes, and doesn’t wear them.
- 16 ((earlier in the conversation, we assigned Jeff the Paper Plate Award of “Most Likely to Buy a Pair of Shoes and Never Wear Them”))
- 17 (0.8)
- 18 **JH:** But he will wear them eventually. But he is most likely to never, ever ((starts giggling))
- 19 wear them. .hhh It’s different!
- 20 (4.0)
- 21 **JH:** Of course Will is the most likely to eat a brownie crinkle off the radiator, [because HE
- 22 HAS!
- 23 **BC:** [Most likely
- 24 to-

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25 **BC:** Okay, FINE! ((in an unsure, “brainstorming” tone)) Most likely to eat
 26 (1.0)
 27 a brownie crinkle
 28 (0.5)
 29 made of poop!
 30 (.)
 31 ((defensively)) Hahaha, I don’t know!
 32 ((both burst out laughing))
 33 **JH:** ((through laughs)) That’s the stupidest thing you’ve said!
 34 ((more laughing from both))
 35 ((Britt’s iPhone buzzes, indicating a text message))
 36 **BC:** ((annoyed, looking at phone)) What? Alright Sara, help me here...
 37 ((Britt had texted Sara, the other co-captain, earlier to get her suggestions for awards to assign people))

What I believe makes this excerpt so interesting is its function as a clear and comprehensive example of the phenomenon we all know as “brainstorming.” I’ve never heard the process of conversational brainstorming labeled as a “speech genre” before, but here my analysis of the structure of this conversation as well as what is at stake will prove that brainstorming, too, has a set of conditions to be met, akin to the rules that define genres like greetings and apologies, as explored by Mikhail Bakhtin.

Roman Jakobson (1960) was first to introduce the model of variables within communication (see fig. 1); this includes an addresser and addressee, as well as the context, contact, code, and message that interplay between them.



Fig. 1

Jakobson’s factors (or variables) of verbal communication.

He also outlined a model of corresponding functions (fig. 2):

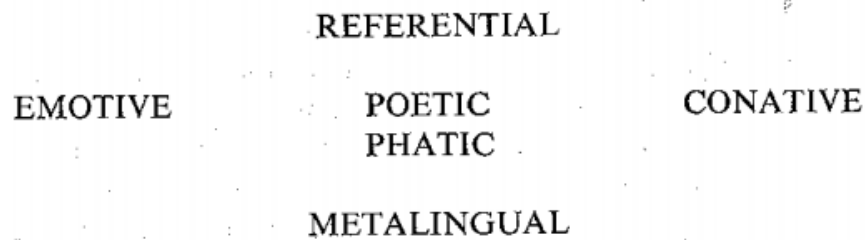


Fig. 2

Jakobson's scheme of functions of verbal communication, corresponding to his factors.

While verbal communication always exists as an exchange of some kind, regardless of function, brainstorming creates another level entirely, in that it is an exchange about *the potential effectiveness* of one's ideas and one's *words themselves*. The first aspect of brainstorming is that we allow ourselves the imaginative freedom to be creative with our ideas in real time. Secondly, as we bounce ideas off of others, we look for positive feedback and encouragement in return to validate our creation. In this way, the speech genre of brainstorming is quite infatuated with a version of Jakobson's "contact" or phatic function, which is the act of questioning whether one's peers are on the same page, or here: whether or not agreement exists between the speakers. That this conversation will be in the speech genre of brainstorming is evidenced in the first five lines when the topic for brainstorming is introduced ("Will!"), there is a pause allotted for thinking, and then I throw out the first idea. Britt reinforces my idea and proves it's on the right track by repeating my words almost exactly, with just a slight alteration of her own. The stakes are low because the two of us find the topic fun, evidenced by our giggling. Because of our close relationship, we also do not feel the discomfort and pressure that some feel in certain brainstorming situations to only throw out quality ideas and not share potentially "stupid" ones.

However, some conditions of the speech genre still must hold. When I do not reinforce Britt's idea as she had reinforced mine, except for more giggling on my end, Britt interestingly reinforces her *own* idea in line 7 with the mock self-confidence of "yup" to fill in the silence gap.

It is here that the conversation turns and a mini misunderstanding/debate is sparked when Britt wants me to check in with her, and the two of us realize we are no longer on the same page. I believe debate, too, is a speech genre frequently embedded in that of brainstorming, ready to emerge when Jakobson's phatic variable makes it clear that agreement does, in fact, *not* exist. In this conversation, the move towards debate is evidenced by an increase in volume of speech as well as the frequency of interruptions and exclamatory sentences.

The topic of the misunderstanding seems to be the function of the "most likely to" superlative form. The two of us become polarized—I analyze myself as being on the side of "Team Semantics" and Britt on "Team Sociolinguistics." The confusion I express in lines 9, 12, and 14 is rooted in wondering why Britt would give Will the reward of "*most likely* to eat a brownie crinkle off of a radiator" (italics mine) if this is an act he has indeed *already* performed earlier this semester. The epicenter of the debate appears to be the word "actually" which is strikingly utilized 3 times, each with strong emphasis, in a period of less than 20 seconds. Semantics would propose that one receives a "most likely to" award for something their personality strongly suggests they *would* do, but they haven't *actually* done yet. My argument reaches its climax after the longest pause in the conversation of 4 seconds (line 20), and then I frustratingly blurt, "Of *course* Will is most likely to eat a brownie crinkle off the radiator, because *HE HAS!*" The debate comes to a close with Britt conceding in line 25, when the tone of her "fine!" pragmatically suggests she recognizes my argument. Brainstorming can ensue again,

for Britt has validated my point with positive, albeit sassy, feedback and we have once again agreed to be on the same page.

I placed Britt on “Team Sociolinguistics” in this mini debate because Britt seems to value the function of the “most likely to” superlative form more for the enjoyable, living experience it will provide during the banquet, rather than each award’s semantic accuracy. While it cannot be directly proven by the contents of this conversation, it is most likely that Britt wanted to award Will with “most likely to eat a brownie crinkle off a radiator” because this is a fun, fond memory of hers that she wished to relive with the entire team during the banquet. In the spirit of Mikhail Bakhtin (1985), Britt was “hearing voices”—and interestingly in this case—hearing particularly how her own voice would function at the banquet the next day to create a particular experience, and hopefully, a good time.

The brainstorming continues with Britt attempting a “most likely to” award that correctly fits the semantic conditions I have presented. Britt appears to be exasperated or struggling at this point, as seen in the long pauses she takes mid-sentence to think, and especially in finishing her sentence with the ridiculous, “throw-away” statement of “poop” in line 29. It is as if she has given up on brainstorming and wishes to do it no longer. Her suggestion is given a striking three forms of feedback: 1). Self-reflection in line 31 (which we saw Britt do earlier in line 7), 2). Mutual acknowledgment, through laughter, of the idea’s silliness in line 32, and 3). My negative reception of her idea in line 33. We laugh not only at the “potty mouth” term, but more for what it represents—the end of our small misunderstanding, our clear mutual struggle in brainstorming a superlative to assign Will, and an enjoyment of our solidarity as friends and the lack of care we have for sounding foolish around each other (as stated previously, brainstorming in groups of mere acquaintances can often be an uncomfortable activity).

The buzzing of Britt's phone functions as a clear, concrete marker that the footing, a notion of conversational stance as outlined by Erving Goffman (1979), of this particular conversation is over. It triggers Britt to break her laughter and the moment we were sharing, and instead whip her head towards her phone. She then continues in line 36 by directing her speech at Sara, the sender of the text that made the phone buzz, although Sara can't obviously hear her. It's the first time Britt's speech is directed towards anyone but me, and especially because the two of us are the only ones in her room, this is an easy indicator that the footing has changed, and brainstorming is temporarily over.

It is curious to note that Will was never ultimately rewarded with a Paper Plate Award that had anything to do with brownie crinkles at all. Instead, he won "Most Likely to Propose Marriage to Every Girl on the Team." At the banquet, this award was easily guessed and was also a crowd favorite, encouraging some of the loudest laughter of the evening. While Will has never *actually* proposed marriage seriously to any girl on the team, he frequently enjoys pretending that different girls are his wife. This inspires silly, mock fights between the girls when they find out that Will has moved on to a new "wife of the day." It fit the semantic conditions I so faithfully wished to adhere to, while it also allowed the team to relive fond memories, providing the fun social experience that was important to Britt.

The speech act of brainstorming thus sheds bright light on the conditions necessary for building and reinforcing solidarity amongst a group. Though one might feel exposed while sharing their creations and ideas with others, positive feedback from the group not only strengthens the validity of the idea itself, but also the camaraderie amongst the group's members. By accepting an individual's idea, the group is essentially also accepting the individual who offered it. However, as the conversation between Britt and I proves, this verbal culture can be

strengthened and enjoyed in many other ways during the brainstorming process: through the debate of ideas, the mutual recognition of the difficulty of brainstorming, and the ability to laugh at less than successful attempts.

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