

Inequity in the pursuit of intimacy: An analysis of British pick-up artist interactions

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Received 24 June 2011; received in revised form 2 March 2012; accepted 19 April 2012

Abstract

The data presented here come from a collection of surreptitious audio recordings of naturally occurring talk-in-interaction between previously unacquainted women and male 'Pick-Up Artists' (PUAs) in the UK. Our approach draws on close observations of these interactional data to demonstrate how PUAs move from a state of unacquaintedness towards more 'intimate' forms of interactional involvement.

A prototypical PUA is a male who seeks to be successful at 'seducing' women. 'PUA' is not a category label given to the individual, but is one that he claims for himself within an existing PUA Community of Practice. A common community belief is that the means of seduction are not rooted in physical attractiveness, social status or wealth, but *in the interaction*. The claimed 'art' in pick-up artistry may be seen in the relative speed with which the protagonist may gain *INTIMACY* with their fellow interlocutor. The PUA operates, as Goffman (1967b) describes it, "where the action is"; they are every bit the gambler in a high-stakes game where risky plays – which include issues of *im/politeness* and *INEQUITY* – can have high payoffs. The focus of this paper is how PUAs actually play the game.

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Keywords: Pick-up artist; Intimacy; Solidarity; Familiarity; Affect; Rapport management; Equity and equilibrium

1. Introduction

In this paper, we wish to do some very preliminary sorts of things.

We introduce a novel group of language users engaged in their stated interactional goal of 'picking-up' women – as Goffman (1967b:210) puts it – instigating "sexually potential" relationships. The claim of these *Pick-Up Artists* (PUAs) is that they achieve their goals chiefly by how they manage their talk-in-interaction. It is our aim to interrogate and demonstrate the observable ways in which these PUAs go about this activity and to show how its status as a particular variety of talk might be warranted.

In analysing this talk, we offer detailed observation on the establishment of *INEQUITY* (cf. Clark, 1996; Spencer-Oatey, 2008) and ritual disequilibrium (Goffman, 1967a) and in so doing, we show how this may license later reparative action that could not warrantably have occurred otherwise. Critically, we argue that the magnitude of these later actions is also 'greater' than they otherwise could have been, as they are ostensibly employed to offset some prior 'offence' or 'debit'. We suggest that opportunities for doing these objects of 'greater-magnitude' serve as a resource for accelerating the *INTIMACY* in the initial stages of a given relationship – as characterised by solidarity, familiarity and affect (Svennevig, 1999).

In addition, following Haugh (2007), we hope to continue to make a case for using a broadly conversation analytic approach to the analysis of *im/politeness* and face. We also offer a brief argument for a methodology involving retrospective consent.

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Ultimately, however, what we present via our discussion of equity is a means to explain the occurrence of some interactional behaviours where we do not feel a categorical im/politeness analysis is currently adequate.

1.1. *Pick-Up Artists*

A full ethnography of the pick-up community is clearly outwith the scope of this paper (though anyone interested in such details might begin by consulting journalist, Neil Strauss's (2005) reportage, *The Game*). However, because we are confident that many will not already be aware of this group (despite its massive global presence), we first provide a general introductory description.

A prototypical PUA is a male who seeks to be successful at picking-up (or 'seducing') women; this is a categorisation that he claims for himself.¹ The individual PUA invariably operates as a member of the wider 'pick-up' community – a highly organised Community of Practice ('CofP', Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Wenger, 1998) emanating from the USA. While they are likely to self-identify qua PUAs *within* the community, they generally prefer their membership not to be overtly public. A core belief, within this CofP, is that the means of seduction are not rooted in physical attractiveness, social status or wealth, but *in the interaction*. As such, the PUA's primary activities concern developing aspects of their social skills (with men as well as with women). They appear to go about this in three general ways. (1) They engage with the community to learn interactional material and techniques developed by other PUAs. This takes place predominantly online, but may also involve attending seminars and workshops by other PUA trainers. There are many differing schools (methods) of pick-up that co-exist in the community. These schools often exist as PUA-owned and PUA-run businesses which disseminate their own brand of teachings in such forms as books, DVDs, online websites and forums, boot-camps and conferences. (2) They go into the 'field' to practice what they have learnt and refine their methods at picking up women – it is this practical activity that we present in this paper. (3) They report their in-field experiences back to the community (usually online). This appears to serve, in part, as a tool for reflecting on their interactions and discussing – often dialogically – what did or did not work for them.

Undoubtedly, there is questionable morality to some pick-up activities which may be difficult to navigate for a researcher.² However, our interest has only ever been sited in the talk-in-interaction: we take it that the participants' 'realities' are constituted in their talk such that it represents their concerns 'of the moment', and as analysts, those are necessarily the limit of our concerns, at least, for current purposes.

2. Theoretical stance(s)

2.1. *Our own position*

The summary of our own position is this: as interactional sociolinguists, what we are essentially interested in is *in situ* action. We firmly believe that we are not in a position to make grand theoretical claims; we strive only to provide accounts of social behaviours that are grounded in actual instances of actual actions and it is for that reason that we take interlocutors' construal of these behaviours – *as expressed through their talk* – as the primary resource for our analyses.

We believe that it should be uncontentious that a globalised theory of im/politeness is untenable (and that is why scholars are reporting different issues for Western and Eastern practices). However, to our mind, that is simply not going far enough. Nationally (or otherwise geographically) derived models are also unlikely to offer a robust analysis that would necessarily explicate individual behaviours. Tying analysis into the norms of particular Communities of Practice has been suggested as an answer. However, it is not unreasonable that at least two members of the same community may have different views of what was (or was not) polite or impolite in any interactive exchange (see Haugh, 2007:308).

We would argue that even those methodologies that try to tap directly into the agent's view of the world by asking them about it in interview are fundamentally flawed. We concur with Bousfield's (2010:107) assertion that lay users "tend to have an idealised, socially constructed idea of what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in a specific situation and within a given community of practice". Certainly, individuals come to interaction with pre-existing socio-pragmatic methods for interpreting and evaluating behaviour (cf. Davidson, 2006 [1986]) however, we argue (see also section 2.4) that these are not necessarily operational absolutes in the moment of interaction and instead what interactants tend to orient to, are locally, interactionally negotiated practices (cf. also Merrison et al., 2012, section 2.1). Furthermore, any post factum report of an interaction is likely to be an unreliable representation of an individual's

¹ There are women who self-identify as members of the pick-up community, though it appears their involvement tends to be in a training role for other PUAs.

² As with any social group, there is great individual variance in the attitudes and actions of members in the pick-up community and we would argue that pick-up is not necessarily immoral per se.

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