

**Ethnic Attitude in Discourse:  
a Competition-frame Analysis**

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

The problems of ethnic prejudice and intergroup conflict have traditionally been a focus of attention in social psychology. In this long research history little effort has been invested in a systematic analysis of the forms of informal conversation in which attitudes towards ethnic groups may be expressed. Yet, everyday talk is one of the most important media for the diffusion of ethnic prejudice (e.g. Van Dijk 1984). One reason for the neglect of this topic is that it requires an interdisciplinary approach. Only when insights from discourse analysis, social psychology and cognitive modelling, particularly work on belief systems, are combined, one can hope to be successful in answering the following closely interrelated questions:

- a) How are knowledge, beliefs and feelings towards ethnic groups organized? A representation model for ethnic belief systems is needed.
- b) What processes operate in discourse involving ethnic attitudes? This entails in fact two questions: 1) how can discourse production generally be analyzed as a strategic process (Van Dijk & Kintsch 1983); and 2) what strategies in conversation are specific to discourse relating to ethnic minorities?
- c) On a social psychological level, the main question is what role informal discourse plays in intergroup relations.

Our analysis of ethnic attitude in discourse is based on an extensive data base drawn from informal interviews conducted in a number of field studies. We cannot deal with the discourse properties of these interviews here (cf. Van Dijk 1984). The (open and unstructured) interviews were held with autochthonous inhabitants of a neighbourhood in Amsterdam with a high percentage of ethnic minorities. The largest minority groups in the Netherlands are immigrant workers (Turks, Maroccans) and people from the former dutch colony of Suriname.

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## 2. THE STRUCTURE OF ETHNIC ATTITUDE

*Ambivalence of Ethnic Attitude.* We assume that positive and negative ethnic attitudes could be represented, as a first approximation, by postulating different **goal trees** (Carbonell 1979) for the "pro" and "con" orientations. However, it has been noted before (e.g. Allport 1954) that ethnic attitudes often give an impression of ambivalence and inconsistency. For instance, it is not uncommon to hear someone argue for equal rights at one time and for protection of majority interests a little later. This would seem to imply that the goals that determine positive and negative attitudes can be present simultaneously within an ethnic attitude. This becomes even more likely, once it is realized that these goals are of a different nature; the positive side appears to be based on general values and norms in society. The negative side, we propose, is based on a general, schematic, representation format for intergroup conflict.

*Competition-frames.* Competition-frames are based on the **Triangle** representation for social conflicts introduced by Schank & Carbonell (1979). A typical fragment from an interview may serve to introduce this notion.

*"Now these are big houses, you can see that. But they are all foreigners that come to live here. Don't we have any Dutch anymore who need a house? (...) Why should the foreigners have all those nice big houses? They all go down the drain, those houses."* (approximate translation)

In a competition two parties, labelled **WE** (e.g. "the Dutch") and **THEY** (e.g. "the foreigners"), are in conflict over some **ISSUE** (e.g. "the distribution of houses"). A third party, the **DISTRIBUTOR** determines the outcome of the conflict.

Some important features distinguish perceived competition between groups from most other social conflicts.

- In a competition it is not a single object that is at stake. Rather, the **ISSUE** is an **ongoing conflict of interests**. This implies that competition might continue as long as the needs of the groups involved remain unchanged and can be settled in a definite way by very drastic means only.
- The groups in a competition need not be proper social actors. Fuzzy categories such as "foreigners" or "autochthonous Dutch" cannot perform social acts. This is an important difference with social conflict Triangles. The latter derive their usefulness as representational devices mainly from the possibility of analyzing social conflicts in terms of a very limited number of basic social acts. Such acts may be nonexistent in the context of competition-frames.
- The **DISTRIBUTOR** slot in a competition-frame is not always filled by an authority. At the extremes we distinguish "closed competition" where the outcomes are completely determined by some authority that is believed to be both impartial and effective, and "open competition" where no authority is believed to have any influence on the outcomes.
- At any moment the state of a competition can be evaluated. We assume such evaluation always to take place from the **WE** perspective. The state of a competition is a function of three elements: the **CLAIM** of each party to a share of what is at stake in the competition; the **GAIN**, that what each party has received so far; and the **RULES**, the distribution rules that the **DISTRIBUTOR** is perceived to use. An evaluation usually takes the form of comparing the present state of the competition to other (past or future) states of the same competition or to other competitions.
- The essential step in maintaining a competition-frame representation for some

social situation is identification with the WE-group. This identification entails more than the categorization of self as a member of this group, it implies internalizing the group interests at stake as personal concerns. The fulfillment of group interests then becomes equivalent to the fulfillment of personal goals.

*Functions of Competition-frames.* The most evident function of a competition-frame is that it enables one to explain negatively valued social situations. For most social problems it can be argued that WE are in a bad position because THEY harm our interests. The wide-spread phenomenon of scape-goating illustrates the point.

Competition-frames further play a role in the interpretation of particular events called **incidents**. An incident is an event involving members of the competing groups that touches upon the interests of these groups in the competition. Everyday events are understood by creating an episodic structure, a "situation model" (Van Dijk & Kintsch 1983) in which specific information about the event is integrated with general knowledge about the context and background of this event. Part of a situation model are the beliefs about the needs and motives of actors used to explain their actions. A common mechanism for inferring explanations of human action is identification; i.e. we understand someone's actions if we feel we would have done the same in his/her place. Competition-frames enhance identification with WE-group members, but **suppress identification** with members of a THEY-group. When interpreting actions of the latter, the mechanism of identification is replaced by an interpretation process that makes use of group interests and characteristics represented in the competition-frame. Thus, when an event such as a Turkish family moving into a new house is interpreted as an incident in the competition for houses, the individual concerns of these actors are not represented in the situation model. Instead, the perceived threat to in-group interests is represented. The result of such an interpretation process may be illustrated in another citation from the same respondent we quoted before:

*"Look, and when a Dutchman gets such a big house, then I say yes, that's.. that's great. But why should those foreigners all sneak into those houses?"*

Competition-frames have a function in the organization of knowledge in memory as well. Competitive relations can be perceived to exist between two groups on many different ISSUES, both material (e.g. housing) and immaterial (e.g. religion, power). We assume hierarchical relations can obtain between competition-frames with the same opposing groups. Specifically, we assume that all such frames are dominated by a high level competition-frame where the ISSUE is left unspecified. Such a hierarchical organization of competition-frames is equivalent to a goaltree.

### 3. COMPETITION-FRAMES IN DISCOURSE

*Polarization Strategies.* Competition-frames have yet another function: they control a speakers contributions to a conversation.

A mayor aim of informal conversation is *self-expression*. People attempt to express their affective evaluation of the topic under discussion as convincingly as possible, so as to make the hearer share their views. The urge to do so is especially strong, we suggest, when the topic has **personal relevance** for the speaker, and when the speaker considers him/herself to have sufficient **expertise** on the topic.

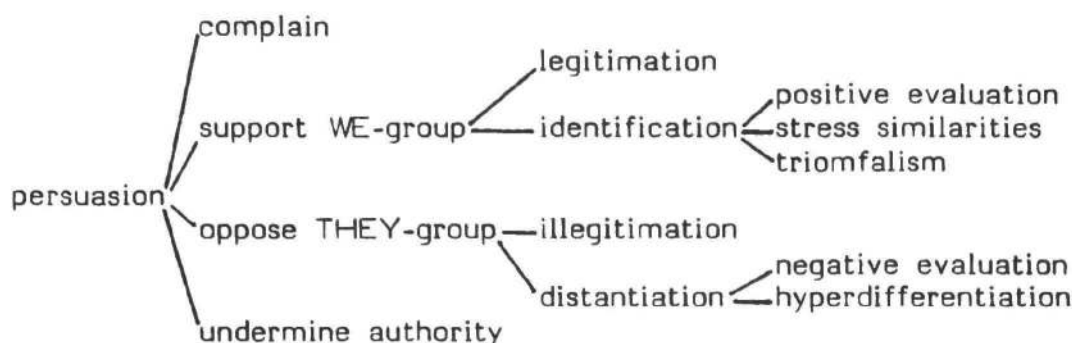
The evaluation of a competition leads to a set of characteristic opinions

regarding the four core elements of the frame:

- The ISSUE is a serious problem.
- WE are in a bad position.
- THEY form a threat to our interests.
- The DISTRIBUTOR is partial and/or ineffective.

The expression of these opinions in conversation is a form of persuasive communication that can be described by a set of *polarization strategies* (see figure 1).

figure 1  
polarization strategies



- By **complaining** the seriousness of the ISSUE is stressed. Incidents are frequently used to illustrate how badly group interests have been hurt in the past, but also extrapolations into the future are effective persuasive moves: "It's getting worse everyday".

- **Support WE-group**; in this strategy it is argued that WE are in a bad position and hence are in need of support. One form this takes is **legitimation**, the legitimacy of the CLAIMS of the WE-group is elaborated upon. Another form is the enhancement of positive **identification** with the WE-group, which branches into a number of substrategies.

- **Oppose THEY-group**; this is the most central polarization strategy. The basic argument is that since THEY form a threat to our interests THEY should be opposed more firmly. Two substrategies here are the inverse of support strategies: in **illegitimate** the CLAIMS of the opponents are played down; in **distantiation** the evaluative distance to the THEY-group is increased. Two major aspects of distantiation are **negative evaluation** of the THEY-group and **hyperdifferentiation**, the underscoring of presumed deviant characteristics.

- **Undermine authority**, refers to attacks against authorities that function as DISTRIBUTOR in the competition. It should be noted that a competition-frame interpretation of social situations almost unavoidably leads to an evaluation of authorities as partial and ineffective.

*a Dilemma.* People in informal conversation have more concerns than self-expression. Another important concern in most social situations is *self-presentation*. People prefer to present favorable images of themselves. In discussing ethnic relations these two concerns can easily come into conflict. Negative evaluations may backfire if insufficiently substantiated. Explicit discrimination and racism are not only generally frowned upon, but actually punishable by law. The strategic problem our respondents face, then, is how to express their negative evaluations of minorities, without appearing prejudiced. This dilemma is apparent in many ways in conversation. Negative remarks are frequently introduced with "positive" phrases such as "I don't have anything against foreigners but...". Negative generalizations are often presented jokingly or in a highly exaggerated form. However, the most popular solution

to the strategic problem is telling stories.

*Strategic Storytelling.* A considerable part of informal discourse on ethnic minorities consists of storytelling. The topic of most of these narratives is a minor everyday incident. On closer analysis some consistent patterns become evident in these seemingly innocent stories.

First, almost all stories concerning minorities have negative complications. Second, almost always members of minority groups are held responsible for the unpleasant events. Third, actors from these groups hardly ever get any further introduction; they are only presented as representative members of their groups. Explanations for their behavior are left implicit, or refer to stereotypical group characteristics. Fourth, the solution category is often missing. The negative impact of the story is thereby enhanced. Sixth, in the coda a generalizing conclusion is drawn from the narrative: "*That happens to us all the time.*" All these features can be explained on the assumption that the main strategical aim of such stories is distantiating.

#### 4. THE ROLE OF DISCOURSE IN INTERGROUP RELATIONS

It may have been noted that a vicious circle is inherently present in what we have outlined so far: competitive interpretations of societal problems trigger the use of polarization strategies, which in turn enhance the belief in competitive analyses, and so on. There are counterforces, such as the system of equalitarian values that, in combination with the concern for self-presentation, also has its influence on discourse.

In ethnic attitudes pro and con orientations are in dynamic balance. Intra-group conversation can be conceived of as the *social switch mechanism* that regulates the degree of antagonism between groups. Detailed analysis of discourse can unravel the many factors that at any moment may tip the balance. These factors include the presence of ISSUES, candidate problems for a competitive interpretation; the -lack of- confidence in authorities that function as DISTRIBUTOR; the saliency of potential THEY-groups.

Most important, perhaps, is identification with the WE-group. Recent social psychological theories assume that social identification is the result of social comparison processes motivated by the need for positive social identity (e.g. Tajfel 1982). This may be correct for the minimal group paradigm commonly employed in experimental research. An analysis of natural discourse, however, favors the hypothesis that people identify with groups in order to acquire a sense of control over everyday concerns.

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