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On the Pragmatic and Conversational Features of Venting

Manuel Padilla-Cruz, Universidad de Sevilla

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Juli Thorson and Christine Baker have recently set the spotlight on a verbal activity which, in their view, may yield rather positive outcomes in oppressive or discriminating environments: venting. This is claimed to play a significant role in fighting *epistemic damage*.

Although their discussion is restricted to cases in which women vent to other women who are acquainted with unfair epistemic practices in the asymmetrical and hierarchical social groups to which they belong, in “Venting as epistemic work” the authors contend that successful venting can make people aware of oppressive social structures, their place in them and possible solutions for the epistemic damage that those structures cause.

As a result, venting enables individuals to regain trust in their epistemic practices, author knowledge, and accept their own *epistemic personhood* (Thorson and Baker 2019: 8).

Damage, Personhood, and Venting

Thorson and Baker’s (2019) argumentation relies on two crucial elements. On the one hand, the notion of epistemic damage, which, in an analogous way to Tessman’s (2001) concept of *moral damage*, is defined as a harm curtailing an individual’s epistemic personhood. This is in turn described as the individual’s “[...] ontological standing as a knower”, “[...] the ability to author knowledge for [oneself]” (Thorson and Baker 2019: 2), or, in Borgwald’s words, “[...] the ability to think autonomously, reflect on and evaluate one’s emotion, beliefs, desires, and to trust those judgments rather than deferring to others” (2012: 73).

Epistemic damage hampers the development of a person’s knowledge-generating practices and her self-trust in her ability to implement them (Thorson and Baker 2019: 2).¹ It is inflicted when someone cannot assert her epistemic personhood because she fears that what she says will not be taken seriously. Consequently, the victim suffers testimonial smothering (Dotson 2011) and gets her self-trust diminished and her epistemic personhood undermined.

On the other hand, the authors’ argumentation is based on a differentiation of venting from both complaining and ranting. These three verbal actions are depicted as contingent on the presence of an audience, expressing “strong feelings” and conveying “agitation about some state of affairs or person” (Thorson and Baker 2019: 3), but neither complaining nor ranting are believed to involve expectations for a change in the state of affairs that gave rise to them.

Complaints, the authors say, may be left unaddressed or the solution proposed for their cause may turn out unsatisfactory and leave it unfixed, while ranting is “a kind of performance for someone” (Thorson and Baker 2019: pp.) where the ranter, far from engaging in conversation, simply exposes her views and expresses anger through a verbal outburst without concern for an ensuing reaction. Venting, in contrast, is portrayed as a testifying dialogical action that is typically performed, Thorson and Baker (2019: 4-5) think,

¹ The feminine third person singular personal pronoun will be used throughout this paper in order to refer to an individual adopting the role of speaker in conversational exchanges, while the masculine counterpart will be used to allude to the individual adopting that of hearer.

in face-to-face interaction and where the venter does have firm expectations for subsequent remedial action against a state of affairs: denied uptake, sexist comments, silencing or undermining of cognitive authority, to name but some.

By expressing anger at (an)other individual(s) who wronged her or frustrated confusion at their actions, the venter seeks to make her audience aware of an epistemic injustice –either testimonial or hermeneutical– which negatively affects her epistemic personhood and to assert her own credibility.

Thorson and Baker (2019: 7) also distinguish two types of venting, even if these are not clear-cut and range along a continuum:

- (i) *Heavy-load* venting, which is a lengthy, time-consuming and dramatic activity following a serious threat to epistemic personhood increasing self-distrust. It aims for recognition of credibility and reaffirmation of epistemic personhood.
- (ii) *Maintenance* venting, which is a “honing practice” requiring less epistemic work and following situations where there are “lack of uptake, dismissal, or micro-aggressions” (Thorson and Baker 2019: 7). Its goal is reinforcement or maintenance of epistemic personhood.

Despite their valuable insights, a series of issues connected with the features defining venting and characterising its two types deserve more detailed consideration in order to gain a fuller understanding of the reasons why venting can actually have the positive effects that the authors attribute to it.

Firstly, its ontology as a verbal action or *speech act* (Austin 1962; Searle 1969) needs ascertaining in depth with a view to properly delimiting it and adequately differentiating it from other related actions. Secondly, in addition to length and goal, a further criterion should be provided so as to more accurately characterise heavy-load and maintenance venting. Addressing the first issue will help unravel what venting really is and how it is accomplished, while dealing with the second one is fundamental for capturing the subtleties individuating the two types of venting.

What follows addresses these issues from two disciplines of linguistics: pragmatics to a great extent and conversation analysis to a lesser extent. The former, which is greatly indebted to the philosophy of language, looks into, among others, how individuals express meaning and perform a variety of actions verbally, as well as how they interpret utterances and understand meaning.

More precisely, the issues in question will be accounted for on the grounds of some postulates of *Speech Act Theory* (Austin 1962; Searle 1969) and contributions on complaints made from this framework. Conversation analysis, in turn, examines how individuals structure their verbal contributions with a view to transmitting meaning and how conversational structure determines interpretation. Although Thorson and Baker (2019)

admit that an analysis of venting from a linguistic perspective would be fruitful, unfortunately, they did not undertake it.

1) Venting as a Speech Act

Thorson and Baker (2019) take venting, complaining and ranting to be three distinct speech acts that have in common the expression of anger. To some extent, this is right, as there is much confusion in the literature and researchers consider venting and ranting the same speech act “[...] and use the terms synonymously” (Signorelli 2017: 16). However, venting and ranting could rather be regarded as sub-types or variations of a broader, more general or overarching category of speech act: complaining.

Venting and ranting satisfy in the same way as complaining four of the twelve criteria proposed by Searle (1975) in order to distinguish specific verbal actions: namely, those pertaining to the *illocutionary point* of the act, the *direction of fit* between the speaker’s words and the external world, the *expressed psychological state* and the *propositional content* of the utterance(s) whereby a verbal action is attempted. In other words, complaining, venting and ranting share similar features stemming from the speaker’s intentionality, the relationship between what she says and the external world, her psychological state while speaking and the core meaning or import of what she says. Complaining would then be an umbrella category subsuming both venting and ranting, which would differ from it along other dimensions.

1.1) Pragmatic and Conversational Features of Complaints

Pragmatists working within the fruitful speech act-theoretic tradition (Austin 1962; Searle 1969, 1975) have made illuminating contributions on complaints, which they have classified as *expressive* acts wherewith the speaker, or *complainer* or *complainant*, expresses a variety of negative feelings or emotions. This is a relevant aspect unveiling illocutionary point or intentionality. Such feelings or emotions include anger, irritation, wrath, frustration, disappointment, dissatisfaction, discontent, discomfort, anxiety, despair, etc.

This is another key point, but it shows this time the expressed psychological state (Edmondson and House 1981; Laforest 2002; Edwards 2005). In fact, the expression of such feelings and emotions –a further important issue linked now to the communicated propositional content (“I am angry at/disappointed by *p*”)– differentiates complaints from other expressive acts like complimenting, where the expressed psychological states are positive: admiration, approval, appraisal, etc. (Wolfson and Manes 1980; Manes and Wolfson 1981).

The feelings and emotions voiced by the complainer concern some state of affairs –another person’s behaviour, appearance, traits, mood, etc., an event and, evidently, some injustice, too– which is regarded not to meet (personal) expectations or standards, or to violate sociocultural norms. The state of affairs originating the complaint is referred to as the *complainable* and is assessed or appraised from the complainer’s point of view, so complaints often involve a high degree of subjectivity (Edmondson and House 1981; Boxer 1993a,

1993b; Trosborg 1995). As expressive acts, complaints lack direction of fit: neither do they reflect the outer world, nor is this affected by or adapted to what the complainer says.

However, complaints could also be considered to some extent *informative* or *representative* acts, inasmuch as the complainer may make the hearer –or *complainee*– aware of the unsatisfactory state of affairs, which might have gone completely unnoticed or be utterly unknown to him. If so, complaints would be hybrid acts combining the expression of psychological states and the dispensing of information. Accordingly, they could have a words-to-world direction of fit because what the complainer says matches the world, at least from her perspective.

Complaints can be subdivided in various manners. A first twofold division can be made depending on whether the complainable pertains to the complainee or not. Thus, *direct* complaints concern a state of affairs for which the complainee is held responsible, while *indirect* complaints deal with one whose responsibility lies in a third party, who may be present at the conversational exchange or absent (Edmondson and House 1981; Boxer 1993a, 1993b; Trosborg 1995).

Another twofold distinction may be made depending on whether the complainer simply voices her feelings or has further intentions. Hence, complaints are *retrospective* acts when she just expresses her psychological states about some recent or past state of affairs without further intentions, or *prospective* when she also seeks to influence the complainee and bias his (future) course of action (Márquez Reiter 2005).

In discursive, conversational terms, complaints can be made through just a single sentence that is produced as an utterance counting as the *core* act, or through more than one sentence and utterance, either in the same *conversational turn* or in different ones. Additional utterances make up *pre-sequences* or *post-sequences*, depending on their position relative to the core act, or *moves*, a label frequently used in the literature on conversation analysis.

Since they often lend support to the complaint by offering further details about the complainable, giving reasons for the complainer's feelings and/or informing about her expectations, those moves work as *supportive* moves. A core complaint and the possible supportive moves accompanying it are often arranged in *adjacency pairs* along with the utterances reacting to them, whereby the complainee agrees, shows his own psychological states, elaborates on the complaint or responds to it (Cutting 2002; Sidnell 2010; Padilla Cruz 2015; Clift 2016).

1.2) Characterising Venting

Following this characterisation, venting can be said to be a type of complaining on the basis of the following features: its topic or aboutness, its target, the participation of (an)other individual(s), dialogicality, length, the newness or known nature of its subject matter, and the predominance of the expressive and representative functions or the fulfilment of an additional influential or conative function. Of these, the first three features are fundamental, while the fourth and the fifth ones may be regarded as consequences of the third feature.

Whereas the sixth one facilitates differentiation between types of venting, the seventh enables recognition of intentions other than simply voicing feelings about recent or past states of affairs.

Although solely produced by one individual –the complainer or venter– venting would be an indirect form of complaining that “[...] reveals underlying perspectives [on] a given topic, situation, or individual(s)” (Signorelli 2017: 2) and engages (an)other individual(s) who must share the assessment of, perspective on and feelings about the complainable, as well as be in a position to react in a particular manner or intend to do so in the (immediate) future.

Their sharing such viewpoints and feelings may prompt participation in the discursive or conversational episode through tokens of agreement or commiseration, enquiries aimed at getting additional information about the complainable, further verbalisation of negative feelings through additional censoring, critique or irritated comments, and expression of commitment to future remedial action (Boxer 1993a).

Therefore, venting could be depicted as a dialogic phenomenon that is achieved discursively and requires conversation, to which (an)other participant(s) contribute(s). As Signorelli puts it, “[...] venting is deliberately and necessarily communal” (2017: 17) and can therefore be described as a type of “participatory genre” (2017: 16) with a specific purpose, recognisable moves and characteristic rhetorical strategies (2017: 1).

Its dependency on the contribution of some other epistemic agent(s) makes venting be a *cooperative* action that is co-constructed by means of the joint endeavours of the venter and her audience. Its dialogic nature causes conversation to unfold through more than just one turn or adjacency pair, so venting episodes may be (considerably) longer variations of complaints, which may be performed by means of just one utterance or a brief sequence of utterances that is normally followed by reactions or responses.

Hence, venting would require more effort, time and verbal material enabling the venter to elaborate on her viewpoints, clearly express her feelings, refine, revise or deepen into the subject matter, and/or announce or hint her expectations. Through it the venter seeks to secure her audience’s future collaboration, which renders venting a long form of prospective complaining. In turn, the audience may show understanding, indicate their positioning as regards what is talked about and/or reveal their future intentions.

1.3) Venting and Related Actions

Venting cannot be judged to differ from complaining on the grounds of the likelihood for a solution to a problem to exist or to be plausible, as Thorson and Baker (2019) conjecture. If a solution to a problem actually exists, that is something external, extralinguistic. Whether the solution is worked out or sought for, and ends up being administered or not, are *perlocutionary effects* (Austin 1962) that escape the venter’s control. Indeed, although perlocutionary effects may be intended or expected, and, hence, insinuated and pursued through what is said and how it is said, whether a particular solution to a problem is actually

given or not is something that totally falls under the audience's control. Venting nevertheless displays pragmatic and conversational properties that single it out as a special manifestation of complaining.

On the other hand, venting is also distinct from ranting in that, regardless of whether ranting is a direct or indirect form of complaint, it initially excludes the participation of the audience. Ranting, therefore, is chiefly a monologic speech action characterised by its length and detail, too, but deprived of joint cooperation. It mainly is an “[...] individualistic production of identity” (Vrooman 2002: 63, quoted in Signorelli 2017) that is “[...] rooted in self-styling” (Signorelli 2017: 12) and whose mission is “[...] to establish and defend a position of social distance” (Signorelli 2017: 13).

If something distinguishes ranting, that may be the intensity, vividness and high level of irritation or agitation wherewith the complainable is presented, which results in a verbal outburst, as Thorson and Baker (2019) rightly put it. Relying on Searle's (1975) parametres to classify speech acts, the *strength* with which ranting is performed certainly differentiates it from venting and also sorts it out as a peculiar manifestation of complaining. Ranting, then, differs from venting on the grounds of its narrative nature and emotional intensity (Manning 2008: 103-105; Lange 2014: 59, quoted in Signorelli 2017).

2) The Two Types of Venting

As pointed out, Thorson and Baker (2019) differentiate between heavy-load and maintenance venting. In their view, the former arises when nothing or very little is known about a disappointing, frustrating, irritating or unfair issue. The venter's action, then, seems to be mainly aimed at informing her audience and giving details about the issue in question, as well as at making them aware of her feelings.

In turn, maintenance venting appears to correspond to the sort of *trouble talk* (Jefferson 1984, 1988) in which people engage every now and then when they are already acquainted with some negative issue. This distinction, therefore, may be refined by taking into account the informational load of each action, or, to put it differently, its *informativeness*, i.e. the newness or known nature of the complainable (Padilla Cruz 2006).

In informational terms, heavy-load venting may be more informative because either what is talked about is utterly unknown to the audience or both the venter and her audience are familiarised with it, but have not dealt with it beforehand. Both the informative –or representational– and the expressive function play a major role in this sort of venting: along with conveying her feelings the venter also dispenses information, the possession of which by the audience she considers is in her interest.

The informativeness of maintenance venting, in contrast, would be lesser, as the venter and her audience are already acquainted with a troublesome or disrupting state of affairs because they have previously discussed it in previous encounters. Although this type of venting still fulfils an informative or representational function, this is subservient to the expressive

function and to an additional one: affirming or strengthening common viewpoints and feelings (Padilla Cruz 2004a, 2004b, 2005). This is essential for aligning the audience with herself or positioning them along with her as regards the complainable.

The low level of informativeness of maintenance venting and the affirmation or reinforcement of common viewpoints that it achieves render this sort of venting a *phatic* action in the sense of anthropologist Bronislaw K. Malinowski (1923). It is of little informational relevance, if this is understood to amount to the newness or unknown nature of information, and, therefore, of scarce importance to the audience's worldview. Even if maintenance venting does not significantly improve or alter their knowledge about the vented issue, like phatic discourse, it does nevertheless fulfil a crucial function: creating or stressing social affinity, rapport, bonds of union, solidarity and camaraderie between the venter and her audience (Padilla Cruz 2004a, 2004b, 2005).

These effects stem from venting's implication that the interlocutors brought together have similar viewpoints and feelings about a problematic or unfair state of affairs. Maintenance venting, so to say, insinuates or highlights that the interlocutors may be equally affected by what is talked about, expect a similar reaction or react to it in a similar manner. It fosters a feeling of in-group membership through a topic with which the interlocutors are equally acquainted, which similarly impacts them and towards which they also hold akin attitudes (Padilla Cruz 2006).

Conclusion

Venting satisfies criteria that enable its classification as a manifestation of complaining behaviour. Owing to its target –a third party– topic –some recent or past state of affairs– and fulfilment of expressive, representative and conative functions, it amounts to an indirect prospective form of complaint. Its conversational features make it exceed average complaints made through just one conversational turn or adjacency pair, so venting requires more time and effort. However, if there are characteristics significantly distinguishing venting, these are dialogicality and engagement of the audience.

Venting certainly depends on the presence and participation of the audience. It must be jointly or cooperatively accomplished through dialogue, so it must be seen and portrayed as a communal action that is discursively achieved. The audience's participation is crucial for both the acknowledgement of a troublesome state of affairs and the achievement of the ultimate goal(s) sought for by the venter: fighting or eradicating the state of affairs in question. While dialogicality and participation of the audience facilitate differentiation between venting and another type of complaint, namely, ranting, the level of informativeness of what is vented helps more accurately distinguish between heavy-load and maintenance venting.

It is along these pragmatic and conversational features that venting may be more precisely described from a linguistic perspective. Although this description may certainly enrich our

understanding of why it may have the effects that Thorson and Baker (2019) ascribe to it, other issues still need considering. They are left aside for future work.

Contact details: mpadillacruz@us.es

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