

Accusatory Discourse

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Accusations are assertions that another has done something wrong. They occur in a variety of forms such as direct statements, questions, or nonverbal cues (e.g., an accusing stare, the honking of a car horn). As assertions, accusations construct social reality and assess actions as violations of the social and moral order. Accusations implicate agency by blaming or holding the accused as responsible for the wrongdoing. Accusatory discourse occurs in ordinary conversations and institutional discourse, and as such, there are different rules that govern how accusations unfold.

Accusatory discourse functions to construct social reality and maintain social order. These features may be summarized in terms of the implications of accusations for discursively constructing action, agency, and morality. Accusations construct action in labeling something that has been done. They construct agency in identifying a party responsible for that action. And they construct morality in evaluating the action and by extension, the responsible party. It is through this latter feature that accusations demonstrate their social control feature in that accusations are deployed when something is seen as nonroutine or unusual. In addition, through the enforcing of normative expectations, accusations are interrelated with power.

Accusatory discourse is utilized in circumstances in which there is a perceived wrong. Accusations label and assess actions and by extension, label and assess or blame agents. They function to construct and maintain a social order. Accusations may be issued in a variety of contexts that range from the informal and interpersonal to the formal and institutional. Accusatory discourse is governed by conversational rules, but when they occur in an institutional setting, the institutional context may take precedent in shaping accusations.

Accusations serve a variety of speech act functions such as reproaching, blaming, confronting, challenging, or questioning. They may be direct or indirect, verbal or nonverbal. An accusation may contain the term “accuse” (“You are accused of stealing that car”), or they may assert (“You stole that car”) or be posed as a question (“Did you steal that car?”). Accusatory discourse may imply a wrongdoing, as with the situation of posing questions, and they may even be presented visually as with the case of political cartoons.

The metacommunicative label for an accusation can also be context specific. For example, in a court, the formal accusation is known as the indictment. Police may use a “soft accusation interview” format. In an organizational setting, whistleblowing is a form of accusation that is issued specifically from an organizational insider.

As part of ordinary conversational sequencing, accusations are the first part of a two-part conversational adjacency pair in which after the accusation is issued, the accused

party may deny, justify or excuse, counteraccuse, accept the charge, or apologize (Atkinson & Drew, 1979). For example:

(1) Bilmes (1988, p. 167)

01 RUTH: :... because you keep saying we need more and I'm not certain
 what more is. || You're saying more is
02 ARTHUR: I-I didn't say that, I you know I raised it as a question.

In this excerpt, Ruth accuses Arthur of claiming that more of something is needed and that he is being ambiguous. Also implied in the accusation is that he is being overly persistent (“you *keep* saying”), however, his persistence is inappropriate given the ambiguity over what “more” is. Arthur’s response is a denial that is accomplished by meta-communicatively reframing his action as “rais[ing] a question” rather than making an assertion.

Typically in conversational sequencing, there is a preference for agreement. However, agreement to an accusation puts the accused into a dilemma as agreement to the charge of the accusation is admitting that one has done something wrong and therefore has violated the social order. For accusations the preferred response is denial or minimization of self-blame (Atkinson & Drew, 1979). Also, a response is preferred as failure to respond may be construed as accepting the charges of the accusation.

In addition to the dilemma that those accused of wrongdoing face, those who accuse have a dilemma in that in everyday life, there is a preference against directly accusing another (Komter, 1994). While accusations may threaten the identity of the one being accused, accusers must also attend to identity issues. This area has more specifically been addressed in research related to questions and questioning. In posing an accusation, one must present him/herself in a credible manner. The responsibility on the part of those who accuse is illustrated through famous, historical cases of false accusation such as the Massachusetts’s Salem Witch Trials, the Spanish Inquisition, and the McCarthy “Red Scare” era of the 1950s. Indeed, the term “McCarthyism” is now used to describe situations of unfair, excessive accusations, and ironically, labeling another’s communication as “McCarthyism” is itself an accusation.

Broadening out from conversational adjacency pairs, accusatory discourse has been studied as part of larger episodes or sequences of interaction such as account episodes and conflict episodes (Schönbach, 2010). In these episodes, an accusation of wrongdoing may be issued, the accused may respond, that response is assessed, and if it is accepted, the accused is reintegrated into the community or if it is rejected, the accused receives a negative sanction. While a great deal of research has been conducted on account and conflict episodes this research has tended to focus on responses or accounts rather than on the forms of accusation. In addition, the more commonly used term in account episodes to point out a breach is “reproach” rather than accusation.

Accusations are a prominent aspect of institutional discourse particularly in legal and criminal justice settings such as the courtroom, interrogations, police interviews, and dispute mediations (Atkinson & Drew, 1979). Within the courtroom setting, there are different guidelines regarding how accusatory discourse occurs as compared to what

occurs in ordinary conversation (Komter, 1994). In addition, specific guidelines for courtroom discourse will vary depending on the type of case and country. As a general format in courts based on a common-law system, someone other than the offending person, such as a courtroom prosecutor, may issue the accusation by addressing a judge and/or jury. The accused is not given the opportunity to immediately reply to the accusation and may not even respond at all if the accused does not take the witness stand to be questioned—he or she may just rely on a representing lawyer to defend against the accusation. In addition, the accusation is already known to those present, except perhaps to members of the public in attendance. For example, from Komter's (1994) study within the Dutch court: "Mr van Putten is charged with having committed violent theft on the 11th of March 1990 in Koog aan de Zaan municipality of Zaanstad, he has then among other things taken a bag of dope and some other items . . ." (p. 168). In this excerpt, the public prosecutor states the accusation or indictment, using a Dutch court format of hyperaccusation by issuing multiple charges.

Accusations have also been studied in dispute resolution or mediation settings and police interviews. In mediation settings, the presence of the third party mediator as well as the specific rules guiding mediation influence how accusations and denials are presented. Police interviews or interrogations also have expectations that differ from the previously described settings for accusations. With police interrogations, the preferred response is agreement to the charge. In the legal setting, accusations are especially consequential given that accusations are interrelated with laws. If one is formally accused and found guilty, the resulting punishment may be a fine or incarceration.

In the area of political discourse, accusations have been studied directly in relation to interactions with politicians (Ryan, 1988). One theoretical lens that has been applied in this area is a rhetorical one that examines accusations in the context of *apologia*. As with accounts research, rhetorical approaches have also tended to focus on responses to accusations rather than accusations. This may be due to the nature of political accusatory discourse as dispersed, coming from groups and parties rather than being issued as a single, formal attack. Blending the political and legal, accusatory discourse may also be prominent in governmental hearings. The case of J. Robert Oppenheimer, former Manhattan project head, is a situation in which formally during a government hearing, as opposed to a criminal trial, Oppenheimer was accused of being a communist and possible Soviet spy. Related to political discourse but not necessarily associated with formal governmental institutions, critical discourse analytic scholars have analyzed accusations about racism and discursive social psychologists have studied accusations of violent conduct.

Within the arena of organizational discourse, accusations may be issued against a corporation as a whole. When an accusation of wrongdoing comes from an insider of the organization, this is known as "whistleblowing," a very serious activity with legal and financial consequences for the organization and personal, psychological, social, and financial risks for the whistleblower. The act of whistleblowing is rife with tension as the whistleblower is faced with the dilemma of whether to stay loyal to the company or to expose a wrongdoing for the public good. The societal significance of whistleblowing is highlighted by *Time* magazine's featuring of three whistleblowers as "Persons of the Year" in 2002 for calling attention to scandals within WorldCom, the FBI, and Enron.

When an organization is publicly accused of wrongdoing, the organization, or representatives of the organization, provides an account to address the accusation. This response may be handled within the legal and media domains. This latter area falls within the realm of public relations; how organizations respond to accusations have been studied through research on image restoration. This area has a great deal of overlap with political communication research on accusatory discourse by applying a rhetorical lens in examining *organizational apologia* and crisis response. Studies in this area have examined situations where corporations make a mistake and how they then respond as in Exxon's response during the Alaska oil spill or Union Carbide's response during the Bhopal gas leak. However, as with accounts research, with some exceptions, the focus in this area has been on responses rather than on accusations.

As accusatory discourse is closely tied with conflict situations, it has been examined in a wide range of contexts. Three notable areas are in children's talk, political discourse, and crisis situations. Within children's discourse, accusations have been examined in terms of how children construct arguments and gossip. As described earlier, there is a strong preference against uttering a direct accusation in everyday conversation; however, there are differences in how adults issue accusations compared with children. For example, Goodwin (1990) identified a gossip structure of "he-said, she-said" and storytelling among young black urban children for issuing an accusation. For example, from Goodwin's (1990) research: "Annette: And Arthur said that *you* said that *I* was showin' off just because I had that *bl:ouse* on" (p. 195). This example shows how the accusation sequence unfolds through a number of communication acts. There is the supposed initial act of wrongdoing where the accused, Benita, criticizes Annette in the presence of Arthur who then conveys this criticism to Annette who then confronts Benita. Goodwin's research illustrates the complex nature of accusations in that in everyday discourse, accusations can unfold through multiple communication sequences and converge with other communication acts such as gossiping and storytelling. In addition to highlighting that adults and children do accusatory talk in different ways, research on children highlights the relevance of gender, class, and race in the formulation of accusations and their responses.

Accusatory discourse has also been studied in the context of crises, either as a crisis is occurring or in retrospect, after the crisis is over. These crises may occur in a governance context, and accusatory discourse then may be guided by multiple frames including expectations for public meetings and organizational expectations. In this area, action-implicative discourse analysis and actor-network theory have been two of the key perspectives that have been applied. Accusations may also be issued after natural disasters when governmental responses are inadequate as illustrated in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In crisis situations, accusatory discourse may address problem definition and the identification of a causal agent.

Accusatory discourse is construed as *discourse* rather than as a single speech act. Hence, a great deal of the research in this area has addressed the interplay between context and the forms of accusations. Future research in accusatory discourse will most likely focus on the gestalt between the micropractices of accusing and the broader social meanings and problems that accusatory discourse points to and the implications of accusatory discourse in reconstructing social actions. Research on crises best

exemplifies this future direction where accusatory discourse is not being treated as merely reflecting on an already preexisting social and moral order, but rather, crises also serve to highlight and disrupt what has been taken for granted in the social and moral order. In this respect, accusatory discourse has the potential to not just maintain social reality, but to transform it.

SEE ALSO: Account-Giving and -Soliciting; Agreement and Disagreement; Argument Discourse; Conversational Preference; Evaluative Language; Interaction Dilemmas; Language in the Law; Political Interviews; Questions and Questioning

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