

DE LA SALLE UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

The ethnographic study has investigated the social control functions of the speech act of gossiping. In effect it answers the major problem: Does the speech act of gossiping function as a means of social control? The study also describes the speech components of the act: message form (Sub-problem 1), participants (Sub-problem 2), instrumentality (Sub-problem 3), key (Sub-problem 4), setting and scene (Sub-problems 5 & 9), message content (Sub-problem 6), norms of interaction (Sub-problems 9 & 10), norms of interpretation (Sub-problems 7 & 8), ends (Sub-problem 11)

Being a field study, the gossip situations in the Chawanda community (a pseudonym) were used as units of analysis. Data was gathered through participant observations in the gossip situations and through unstructured interviews of eighteen purposively chosen participants.

The results show that the gossip process proceeds in the following phases. The first phase of a gossip act is that a giver of gossip having heard a bit of gossip from the community-at-large, assesses this bit using the data he has been socialized with, i.e., his Chawanda upbringing. The gossip is also assessed as to the ties of affinity between the giver and the source of gossip, the giver and the receiver, the gossip participants and the gossip victim. Another consideration is the giver's motivations to spread the gossip to another. The last input in the giver's mind is the organic completion of the gossip. His personal musings, biases and perceptions are incorporated in the bit of gossip. The gossip is distorted.

In the second phase the distorted gossip is transmitted to a receiver. The receiver assesses the gossip using the aforementioned considerations. He also inquires on the gossip's credibility. The



participants exchange tentative information and again, these get incorporated in the gossip.

The twice-distorted gossip is transmitted by the receiver (who is now a giver) to another receiver in the third phase. The process repeats.

In answer to the major thesis statement, gossip controls behavior in three ways: 1) the community members refrain from performing deviant acts and conform to societal rules, 2) the community members adapt their behavior by overtly or in the presence of Chawanda behaving as conformists, 3) the community members refrain from gossiping for fear of being considered a gossip - a herald of harm - since not gossiping is considered as ideal behavior.

These findings imply that gossip as a means of social control reminds the individual that he needs to conform to the roles, expectations and values of his community. Conformity assures the individual of an extended and secure sense of self.

The study could be improved with statistical validations. Attitudes on gossip and how it can control behavior may be surveyed from a population sample. The study can also be of more use for the cross-cultural understanding of various communities if the community under study is identified.

