

# Interactional Functions of Self-Identification in Initial Interactions

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**Abstract:** One of the most basic interpersonal events is meeting someone for the first time. Research has shown that the interactive practices of getting acquainted in initial interactions play a crucial role in the construction of interpersonal relationships. This study focuses on how conversational openings particular self-identification sequences are constructed in dyadic and multi-party interactions between previously unacquainted interlocutors. Analyzing representative examples of initial interaction conversations under the framework of rapport management model, this study aims to discover the functions of self-identification in initial interactions. Findings indicate that self-identification is essential in initial interactions, and it mainly fulfills three kinds of functions: maintaining interlocutors' face, striving for interlocutors' sociality right, and contributing to interlocutors' interactional goals. It is noted that the self-identification sequences are generally multi-functional and at least play two kinds of roles at the same time, and the inevitable role is contributing to the interactional goals. In addition, lack of self-identification at the early stage of conversational openings will be perceived as problematic and will be remedied in the subsequent conversation. The fact that interlocutors initiate or re-initiate self-introductions, whether prompted or unprompted, is evidence of the essential role of self-identification sequences in initial interactions in the process of interpersonal relationship construction.

**Keywords:** Initial Interactions, Self-Identification, Rapport Management

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## 1. Introduction

Research on in-person and internet-mediated initial interactions focuses on cases of getting acquainted and has witnessed a growing interest in the field of interactional pragmatics over the past decades. Studies on initial interactions and discourse practices involved show how unfamiliar participants establish and negotiate interpersonal relationships and how they practice social norms in conversation. This study analyzes discursive practices of getting acquainted scenarios, particularly the self-identification sequences in initial interactions, exploring how conversations begin in interactions between previously unfamiliar interlocutors. By examining initial interactions in unfamiliar contexts, the authors aim to demonstrate the important role of self-identification sequences in previously unfamiliar binary and multi-party initial interactions.

## 2. Previous Studies on Initial Interactions

Initial interactions refers to “interactions between people who have not previously met in which they orient to getting to know each other as opposed to a passing encounter in which one engages in some form of small talk to pass the time [1]”. Research on the openings of initial interactions include “greetings and introductions, primarily in everyday, non-intimate settings [2]”. Pillet-Shore argues that “interactions do not simply begin. Rather, participants actively and collaboratively open their conversational encounters through an opening phase of activity [3]”. In the context of initial interactions, participants have the additional burden of knowing not only what to talk about, but also who will speak first. In fact, “the initial interaction goes systematically through a recurrent set of practices in which participants greet and introduce themselves, and then

regularly moves into some kind of post-introducing anchor sequence [4]”.

Introducing/self-identification sequences “through which participants explicitly identify self and/or other [5]”, are often referred to as self-presentation sequences. In fact, sequences that introduce the interlocutor’s self-identity play an essential role in conversational openings. In the self-presentation sequences, participants provide the other party with personal information related to their individual characteristics (biography) or social categories. “These types of self-disclosure can be prompted (using presentation-eliciting questions) and unprompted (volunteered via self-initiation) [6]”. A detailed analysis of how participants “made introductions” revealed that in multiparty interactions, “introductions initiated by a mediator (a known-in-common person) are preferred over self-initiations among previously unfamiliar parties [7]”. However, “in interactions without a mediator, it appears that other social norms are prioritized, i.e., interlocutors do not explicitly ask for identifying information (e.g., “What is your name?”), but rather would provide self-identification, which would implicitly invite the other party to reciprocate [7]”. Similarly, reciprocity is also generally expected in self-disclosures, which contributes to the interpersonal aspects of social encounters, “including such discursive features as positive assessments and attention to the interactant’s face needs [6]”. Lack of reciprocity can signal “disaffiliation between participants [8]” and “overly frequent requests for self-disclosure in the context of the initial interaction from the same party might be perceived as moral transgressions and thus be considered accountable and discursively sanctioned by the interactants [9]”.

As mentioned above, although many aspects of getting acquainted interactions have received considerable attention (e.g. self-disclosure), the role of self-identification in initial interactions during first encounters needs further studying. Therefore, this study will probe into the specific functions of self-identification sequences in initial interactions under the framework of Rapport Management Model.

### 3. Theoretical Framework: Rapport Management Model

Spencer-Oatey puts forward the concept of “rapport management” which is related to politeness and “draws specific attention to the concept of face [10]”. She uses rapport management instead of face management because the term “face” seems to emphasize concerns for self, and rapport management suggests more of a balance between self and other. Moreover, rapport management investigates the way that language is used to establish, maintain and/or threaten social relationships and involves the management of sociality rights as well as of face.

Rapport Management Model (RMM) includes three aspects: “face, sociality rights and obligations, and interactional goals [11]”, as shown in Figure 1. Face is the positive social value claimed by the speaker, closely related to personal identity or

self-concept. Speakers always expect others to give them positive evaluations, otherwise the face of them would be threatened. Management of sociality rights and obligations mainly involves management of social expectations, including the management of equity right and association right. The equity right refers to the fact that interlocutors should be treated fairly, and the association right refers to the right of interlocutors to engage in social involvement as a way to maintain interpersonal relationships. Interactional goals refers to the specific tasks or interactive purposes of people in mutual communication. Usually, interlocutors communicate with a certain purpose, including conveying information or building up relationship. The RMM establishes a framework for analyzing self-identification in this study.

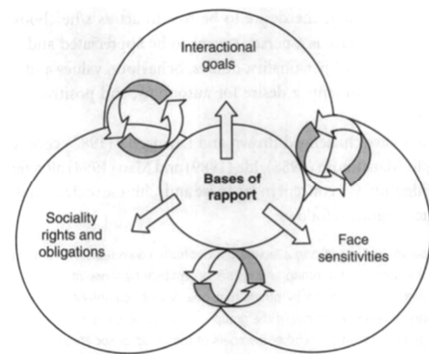


Figure 1. The bases of rapport (Spencer-Oatey, 2008: 14).

### 4. Three Functions of Self-Identification in Initial Interactions

Based on the rapport management model, we analyze the relevant initial conversations and discuss the functions of self-identification sequences in initial interactions. It is found that self-identification mainly fulfill three kinds of functions: maintaining the face of interlocutors, striving for the sociality rights of interlocutors, and contributing to the interactional goals.

#### 4.1. Maintaining the Face

“In order to get acquainted, interlocutors tend to orient to more face-saving interactional practices, thus avoiding assessments or topics that could be offensive [12]”. Similarly, in initial interactions, the interlocutors would avoid potentially offensive words in order to maintain the faces. Consider the following examples:

(1)那: 这样真没劲, 大家怎么都不说话? 这样吧, 我先自我介绍一下, 咱们大家互相认识一下。我是中港台著名歌手那英。

(众人鼓掌)

高: 我是中港台著名词曲作家高晓松。(鼓掌)

郑: 我是郑钧。

高: 你的歌写得真好。

郑: 你也写得好。

何: 我是何勇。

[Na: Well, it is really boring, why is everyone not talking?

Let's begin a talk, first I'll introduce myself, and we all get to know each other. I am the famous Chinese singer Na Ying.

(The crowd applauded)

Gao: I'm Gao Xiaosong, a famous songwriter in China. (Applause)

Zheng: I'm Zheng Jun.

Gao: Oh, you really write good songs.

Zheng: You also write good songs.

He: I'm He Yong.]

Example (1) is a conversation between guests on an award ceremony where they sit around a table for dinner after winning the award, and the atmosphere is a bit awkward because they have never met each other before and just sit quietly. In this multi-party initial interaction, Na Ying, the initiator of the conversation, stands up and introduces herself and suggests that everyone get to know each other. All of them are celebrities who are well-known in China, but have never met each other. Na Ying, the most well-known singer, just introduces herself first to break ice. Definitely, her behavior successfully maintains the faces of all parties and avoids potential offense.

In a group activity where everyone is meeting for the first time and not familiar with each other, self-introduction is the most direct and appropriate way to break the deadlock. It can be noticed that even though Na Ying does not explicitly request self-introduction of others, everyone realizes the implied meaning and they introduce themselves one by one, which in fact complies with the value of reciprocity and maintains their faces. Such a conversational opening serves as a good illustration of how in this situational context prompted self-identification exercises the function of maintaining the faces of interlocutors in multi-party initial interactions.

The role of self-identification sequence in maintaining face can occur not only in face-to-face communication but also in online social conversations. In Example (2) students A and B belong to the same Wechat group and have to complete a task together, so both of them have the interactional goal of building up relationship. However, they have never met each other, and A made a note of his name in the group chat, while B did not.

(2) A: 你好, 我是 21 级英语笔译专业的 Lily.

(以上为打招呼的验证消息)

B: 你好呀!

A: 哈喽

(3 分钟后)

A: 我是 Lily, 姐妹你叫什么名字?

B: 你好你好, 我是 Nancy, 语言学方向的。

B: 我去群里改一下备注。

A: 好的。

[A: Hello, I'm Lily, a graduate student majoring in English translation.

(The above is the verification message for adding friends)

B: Hello!

A: Hello!

(3 minutes later)

A: I'm Lily, what's your name, sweetie?

B: Hello hello, I'm Nancy, major in linguistics.

B: I'll go change my note in the group chat.

A: Okay.]

A takes the initiative to add B as a chat-friend, and voluntarily initiates self-identification in the verification message. B, on the other hand, after accepting A's friend request, just says "hello" to greet A, but not introduces who she is. B's behaviour is rights-threatening and goal-threatening, so A does not get the reciprocity in return. Therefore, after waiting for three minutes, A decides to re-initiate the self-identification sequence ("I'm Lily"). Here, after offering the unprompted self-identification again, A directly requests B's name, and she addresses B as "sweetie". A's self-identification serves as a mitigating device, saving their mutual faces in this situation. The three-minute delay indicates that A is trying to avoid offensive statement and expecting B to initiate a self-identification sequence. The re-launched self-identification sequence unfolds in B's answer as she greets once again and introduces her name and her research direction, which shifts back to the prior topic in the verification message, complementing the information and maintaining A's equity right in communication. In the next sentence, B offers to change her note in the group chat, indicating that she realizes why A does not know her name and explains why she does not introduce herself earlier-- she thought her name was shown in the group chat. She wants to make up for the negative impact on the face and sociality rights of A. This online conversation indicates the importance of self-identification sequence in the initial interaction, lack of which is perceived as problematic and must be remedied in the following conversation.

#### 4.2. Striving for the Sociality Rights

The equity right means that "participants in communication should be treated fairly: not being unduly imposed upon, not being unfairly ordered about, or not being taken advantage of or exploited [11]". The equity right includes: a) *cost-benefit*: which should be kept roughly in balance through the principle of reciprocity; b) *autonomy-imposition*: one interlocutor should not be controlled and driven by the other. The association right refers to the right of communicators to have an appropriate amount of conversational interaction and social chit-chat with others. It is also related to two aspects: a) *interactional involvement-detachment*: the extent to which interlocutors associate with people, or dissociate ourselves from them; b) *affective involvement-detachment*: the extent to which interlocutors share concerns, feelings and interests.

The following example is from the first episode in a popular reality TV show: *Sisters Riding the Winds and Breaking the Waves*. The participants of the program are female celebrities over 30 years old. The singer Na Ying is more well-known, while Li Feier and Zhang Xinyu are two actresses who are not so famous as Na Ying. In this episode, most singers and actresses meet each other for the first time.

(3) (远远看到)

李：那姐！  
 张：（挥手）  
 （互相走近，没有说话）  
 那：我们是，都来选择口红吗？  
 张：对，是的，就是要选一个口红，然后涂在嘴上，然后印一个唇印，签一个名。  
 那：（看了两人两秒）你俩谁啊？  
 李：对不起（鞠躬），我是李菲儿。  
 张：我是张馨予。（指向李）李菲儿。你好。（与那英握手）  
 李：我一直在说（想见到你），我可以拥抱一下？  
 那：可以可以。（两人拥抱）  
 那：还有点懵圈。（笑。与张拥抱）  
 [(seen from afar)  
 Li: Ms. Na!  
 Zhang: (waving her hand)  
 (approaching each other, no one speaking)  
 Na: Are we, are we all here to choose a lipstick?  
 Zhang: Yes, yes, you have to choose a lipstick and color your lip, then put a lip print on the card and sign your name.  
 Na: (looking at the two for two seconds) Who are you?  
 Li: Sorry (bows), I'm Li Feier.  
 Zhang: I'm Zhang Xinyu. (points to Li) Li Feier. Hello. (shaking hands with Na Ying)  
 Li: I've been excepting (to see you). Can we hug?  
 Na: Sure. (hug)  
 Na: I'm a little confused. (laughs. Hugging with Zhang)]

Since Na Ying is relatively well-known and easily recognized, Li and Zhang immediately greet Na, who does not know either of them and does not speak. Her silence can be thought of a face-threatening behavior. Apparently, she has no idea how to address the two ladies, so she asks about what everyone is doing. Zhang replies immediately, but Na still fails to know them, which is problematic. Then she requests their self-identifications, seeming to be some sort of transgression that is related to “the value of reciprocity, which is essential not only in the initial stages of getting acquainted but also in self-disclosure sequences [13]”. It can be seen that Na appears a little embarrassed at this point because she hesitates for two seconds, turns around, and scratches her head. Finally, Li and Zhang realize that Na does not know them, and they immediately introduce themselves and break the deadlock. Na explains why she asks the question bluntly, trying to make up for the negative impact on the faces of the other two.

This interaction highlights the importance of self-identification in conversational openings -- mainly to strive for social rights. In this conversation, all parties have equal social status, but Na's questions are strongly driving and directing, thus violating the equity right of Li and Zhang in terms of autonomy-imposition. On the other hand, Li and Zhang greet Na as soon as they meet and address her directly without self-introduction, which is a violation of the equity right in terms of cost-benefit. The responses of the interlocutors reflect their intention of striving for the equity right and the autonomy of behavior. So Li and Zhang formally introduce themselves. What is crucial here is that the absence

of the self-identification in Li and Zhang's greetings is problematic. In a word, each party has a interactional goal of building a relationship. On the one hand, Na Ying's direct request is face-threatening or even rights-threatening, her speech act strategy is a bit blunt and even offensive. On the other, Li and Zhang's not initiating self-identification is also right-threatening, violating the principle of reciprocity. It can be seen that the re-lunched self-identification sequences successfully maintain the equity right of them and manage rapport among them.

#### 4.3. Contributing to the Interactional Goals

Interlocutors often (although not always) have specific goals when they interact with others. These can be relational as well as transactional (i.e. task-focused) in nature. “These ‘wants’ can significantly affect their perceptions of rapport because any failure to achieve them can cause frustration and annoyance [14]”.

(4) JAKE: Hi! My name is Jake. We haven't met before, have we?

DEBBIE: No, we haven't! My name is Debbie.

JAKE: Nice to meet you, Debbie!

DEBBIE: Nice to meet you, too, Jake.

JAKE: Are you a new student?

DEBBIE: Yes, I am. What about you?

JAKE: Yeah, me too!

In this conversation, college freshmen Jake and Debbie meet for the first time on campus. Jake, the initiator of the conversation, opens the conversation by introducing himself. Debbie reciprocates by both replying to his question and introducing herself. Both interlocutors have the interactional goal of making friends, which means a rapport-enhancement orientation. So here, the self-identification sequences contribute to the mutual interactional goal. They exchange information equally, preserving each other's sociality rights, especially the equity right. In addition, self-identification sequences both are offered voluntarily, which means no face-threatening behavior appears either.

The following conversation takes place between Todd and Steven, who meet for the first time at a forum and sit together.

(5) Todd: Hello!

Steven: Hello, there!

Todd: How are you doing today?

Steven: Pretty good.

Todd: What's your name?

Steven: My name is Steven. And I come from the North of England.

Todd: Oh, really!

Steven: Yeah. What's your name?

Todd: I'm Todd, and I come from Ireland.

Steven: Nice to meet you, Todd.

Todd: Nice to meet you, Steven.

Contrary to what was observed in Example (4), after a short greeting, neither Todd nor Steven initiates self-identification, so Todd immediately requests Steven to identify himself. However, it is not treated by Steven as a

dispreferred action. Steven not only answers Todd's question, but also takes the initiative to say where he comes from, which indicates his wish of building up relationship. Here, the two interlocutors are equal and the equity right is maintained. Though it is an other-request self-introduction, no one perceives it as problematic or face-threatening, thus establishing rapport between interlocutors, contributing to interactional goals in initial interactions.

## 5. Conclusion

"Usually, speakers in communication have certain interpersonal purposes and choices [15]". For example, to enhance or maintain the social relationship between two parties, as in the case of mitigators to achieve "interpersonal harmony", or to disrupt the interpersonal relationship, as in the case of conflicting discourse to produce "interpersonal disharmony". In addition, communicative interaction can be interpersonal or intergroup, which affects the speaker's choice of communicative style and conversation sequences. To be specific, the words or behavior chosen by the communicator are based on the interactional goals, because maintenance of face and sociality rights are essential to promote the interactional goal. Thus, it can be concluded that self-identification serves to maintain face, strive for social rights, and contribute to the interactional goals.

This study reveals that the self-identification sequences are multi-functional and at least play two kinds of roles at the same time, and the inevitable role is contributing to the interactional goals. In Example (1) and Example (2), self-identification sequences play the role of maintaining face and the role of contributing to the interactional goal -- building up relationship. In Example (3), in addition to the function of striving for sociality rights, the re-lunched self-identification also contribute to establishing relationship -- interactional goal. Self-identification sequences in Example (4) and (5) successfully preserve face and social rights, and therefore contribute to achieving interactional goals.

Based on the Rapport Management Model, this study has explored how conversational openings and particularly self-identification sequences are interactionally accomplished in dyadic and multi-party interactions among previously unacquainted parties. The analysis focus on five conversational openings in the getting acquainted instances at various scenarios. It is concluded that the absence of self-identification in the early stage of conversational openings is often perceived as a transgression and problematic. The fact that participants initiate or re-initiate introducing sequences, whether prompted or unprompted,

demonstrates the essential role of self-identification sequences in initial interactions in the process of interpersonal relationship construction.

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