

Last week, the “Social Minds: Coordination, Communication, and Cultural Transmission” project was having a five-day workshop at the Burn, a manor in the Scottish Highlands. Elizabeth Warren (a PhD student working with Josep Call at St Andrews) presented her work on ostension in chimpanzees, with videos.



Bangolo insisting (here by shaking ropes) that Swela let him touch her baby

We saw several examples of one chimp attracting the attention of another, for instance by hitting the ground or by gently establishing eye contact, and doing so in order to make or to reinforce a request, say, for grooming. We discussed whether such behaviour was indeed ostensive, at least in the broad sense of being intended to attract the attention of an addressee and to indicate that whatever attention was being attracted to was relevant enough to be worthy of this attention. Seemed quite plausible but our evidence is not strong enough yet.

In many cases, these potentially ostensive behaviours were indeed attention catching but not in a heavy-handed way. In other cases, however, ostension in chimps (and in humans) can be insistent or even obtrusive. One video showed a young adult male, Bangolo, who really, really wanted to touch the infant that Swela held in her arms, but would she let him? Bangolo not only attracted the attention of Swela and made his request manifest but also became quite insistent and more and more agitated about it. Elizabeth asked us: was Bangolo’s behaviour an example of ostension? Prima facie, it was. Bangolo’s behaviour forced Swela to pay attention and rendered his request to be allowed to touch the infant quite pressing.

In human communication, insistence can be a clear form of ostension, reinforcing the message, whatever it is. In verbal communication in particular, insistence is a common pragmatic device. It can even be achieved by means of an explicit performative, for instance, quite simply, with a parenthetical “I insist,” as in this quote from a recent opinion in the *WaPo*:

“I might also urge you to kondo your prose of what I call the Wan Intensifiers and Throat Clearers® — the “very”s and “quite”s and “rather”s and “actually”s in which many (most?) of us bury our writing like so many packing peanuts. Because once you’ve stripped those away, **I insist**, you’ll find yourself looking at sentences that are bolder in their sparseness.” (Benjamin Dreyer—author of *An Utterly Correct Guide to Clarity and Style*—February 8, 2019, *Washington Post*). (emphasis added)

(I wonder whether the last sentence would not itself have been bolder without the parenthetical “I insist.” But let’s return to ostension.)

Verbal insistence can, more commonly, be achieved by tone of voice, repetition, hyperboles, and so on. Possibly the most famous case of such ostensive insistence is that of the ancient Roman senator, Cato the Elder, who ended all his speeches in the Senate, whatever the issue being discussed, with “delenda est Carthago,” (Carthage must be destroyed) or words to that effect. His being in favour of destroying once and for all the city that had waged several wars against Rome was well-known to his audience and so were his arguments. So why would he insist in this manner? To highlight the seriousness and the relevance of his admonition.

What is not just communicated but communicated with insistence is presented as particularly relevant: statements as definitely true and important, requests and advice as priorities. Is insistence in communication intended to secure the audience’s acceptance of a statement or compliance with a request through persuasion, the speaker’s stronger commitment to the message providing an added reason to attend to it and trust it? This is generally so, yes, but not always.

There is another way in which insistence can succeed, at least in the case of a request (or a refusal). Repetitive insistence can become so obnoxious and the annoyance it causes so great that complying becomes desirable as a means to put an end to the insistence itself. A form of blackmail, so to speak: you satisfy my request, or I will keep pestering you. In such a case, however, compliance is achieved not by making the message more relevant and by convincing the audience of its legitimacy but by imposing a social cost on the addressee. Insistence turns into harassment.

To give another famous historical example, here is an extract from [Anita Hill’s testimony](#) at the 1991 Senate confirmation hearing of Clarence Thomas (whom President George H. Bush had nominated for a seat on the U.S. Supreme Court):

“After approximately three months of working together, he asked me to go out with him socially. I declined and explained to him that I thought that it would only jeopardize what, at the time, I considered to be a very good working relationship. ... I was very uncomfortable with the idea and told him so. I thought that by saying “no” and explaining my reasons, my employer would abandon his social suggestions. However, to my regret, in the following few weeks he continued to ask me out on several occasions. He pressed me to justify my reasons for saying “no” to him. ... My working relationship became even more strained when Judge Thomas began to use work situations to discuss sex. ... His conversations were very vivid. ... Because I was extremely uncomfortable talking about sex with him at all and particularly in such a graphic way, I told him that I

did not want to talk about those subjects. I would also try to change the subject to education matters or to nonsexual personal matters such as his background or beliefs. My efforts to change the subject were rarely successful.”

Thomas’s insistence had turned into a strong form of verbal harassment. Many of his remarks were quite irrelevant to Hill and, we may assume, deliberately so:

“One of the oddest episodes I remember was an occasion in which Thomas was drinking a Coke in his office. He got up from the table at which we were working, went over to his desk to get the Coke, looked at the can, and said, “Who has put pubic hair on my Coke?””

The relevance of such a remark lay not in what he said but in his demonstration that he had the inclination and power to inflict such remarks on her. The Anita Hill case played a major role in the growing cultural and legal recognition that, in some cases, sexual harassment in particular, verbal insistence is not a matter of freedom of speech but one of violation of rights.

There are clear cases of insistence used as an ostensive device to reinforce one’s message: Cato could not hope that the Roman senators would yield and go to war against Carthage just to put an end to his annoying repetition; they had to be genuinely convinced that it would be the right thing for Rome. There are clear cases of harassment: Thomas was conveying that the only way Hill could put an end to his unwanted entreaties was to yield to them.

All the same, there is a continuum of cases between insistence as merely a form of ostension, and insistence as pure harassment. In different social situations or cultural contexts, the same communicative act might be seen as ordinary conversation or as harassment. Does this mean that the distinction is arbitrary, a matter of cultural convention, not of fact? What I tried to suggest here is that there are not just conventional or legal grounds for such a distinction but also substantial grounds: insistence doesn’t produce its effects in the same way in the two cases.

In its basic ostensive use, insistence serves to enhance a message. In its harassment use, insistence is the message (or at least a crucial component of the message). Verbal harassment is ostensive. It advertises its own relevance. What is relevant, however, is not the content of what is said (which can even be blatantly irrelevant); it is the threat of more harassment.

So, if there is a continuum of cases between mere insistence and harassment, it is not because they are weaker or stronger versions of one and the same type of action, but because the two types of actions may co-occur in the same behaviour. There is an element of harassment—of blackmail, if you prefer—not in all, of course, but in many cases of ostensive insistence. What varies across cultures and historical times is the threshold at which harassment is detected and found unacceptable.

Chimpanzees don’t have conventional or legal concerns. Even so, the question arises as to whether Bangolo’s behaviour was aimed at getting Swela to let him touch her infant by persuading her of his sincere and harmless desire to do so—ostensive insistence—, or at getting what he wanted by pestering Swela until she would yield—harassment. Note that these two kinds of very similar but functionally different behaviours may be part of chimpanzees’ behavioural repertoire without them ever deciding strategically to adopt the one, the other, or some mix of the two. Humans too, infants and very young children in particular, may insist in order to persuade or insist as a way to coerce moved by their emotions and not by a representation of the way their behaviour may help achieve their goal. More generally, humans and other primates may engage in ostensive behaviour,

insistence, or harassment without having any clear understanding of the manner in which their action may succeed.