1. Interpersonality as a fuzzy paradox

Few concepts in Discourse Studies are so versatile and intricate and have been so frequently contested as interpersonality. This construct not only offers diverse perspectives and research topics depending on the linguistic schools and theoretical frameworks it is viewed from, or the instrumental tools employed in its analysis, but also across successive social spheres. It is moulded by national cultures, registers, disciplines, genres, and private intentions, as well as by the media and the communicative situation – the nature and size of audiences, for example – through which all of them are transmitted. Clearly, the notion is versatile due to the dynamism inherent in every social group, and particularly within specialized communities, where established conventions may change and new genres emerge and make use of the latest technologies to produce and disseminate knowledge. What is not so evident, however, is the boundary between the two basic elements assumed to integrate the interpersonality construct: stance and engagement (Hyland 2005). They hold a circular relationship (Sancho Guinda/Hyland 2012), fuzzy and full of overlaps, since engaging with interlocutors (or opting for not doing so) inevitably entails adopting a stance on them, and taking and disclosing such posture intentionally is per se an act of engagement.

In this sense, general scholarly labels such as evaluation (Hunston/Thompson 2000), stance as a conjunction of ideational, interpersonal, and stylistic stands (Biber/Finegan 1989, Biber 2006, Jaffe 2009, Gray/Biber 2012), positioning (Harré/van Langenhove 1999), point of view (Simpson 1993), footing (Goffman 1981) and appraisal (Martin 2000, Martin/White 2005) aptly reflect this circularity. The
fuzziness intrinsic to interpersonality becomes even more patent when another superordinate term, *voice*, is invoked, often as a synonym. Do they in actual fact refer to the same phenomenon? The answer is yes and no. Both subsume stance and engagement (that is, the different kinds of stance), are qualified as dialogic, and imply a certain degree of subjectivity, but voice seems to incorporate an expressionist nuance of stylistic distinctiveness, of ‘authorial imprint’, either individual or collective – if there is really such a dichotomy, as Prior (2001) doubts, because society always mediates individual choices. Voice and interpersonality are *subjective* because they depend on the addressee’s impression (Tardy 2012) to be identified, and may be metaphorically or literally *dialogic*. Recent investigations (e.g. Gil Salom/Soler Monreal 2014) have drawn on this aspect, which some might take as tautological given that dialogism (Bakhtin 1981) is connatural to language in interaction. In light of all this, interpersonality should be certainly understood as *fuzzy*, but also as *paradoxical* and *gradable*: it embraces two categories (i.e. stance and engagement) that in reality fuse in one (stance/evaluation/positioning or any other of the aforementioned ‘general labels’) and evolves along a multiple continuum of uniqueness (determined by a relative stability of its features within communities, despite its permanent dynamism), explicit dialogism, and subjectivity. Therefore, some texts are more interactive – more ‘dialogic’– and easily recognizable, in stylistic terms, than others.

To complicate matters further, this interpersonal fuzziness may arise from several sources: the *openness* of the construct, its *motivation*, its *multifunctionality*, and its *multidimensionality*. The inventory of interpersonal devices is by no means closed, and researchers speak of ‘potential features’ (e.g. Hiltunen 2010, in relation to ‘existential there’ as readability resource and stage labeller in academic research articles). Among them, discourse areas such as rhetorical manipulation, interdiscursivity conceived as shared knowledge, the selection, prominence and ordering of contents, punctuation and layout/format, rhythm in speech and written prose (set by syntax, cadence, euphony and prosody and impinging on memorability), shifts in attribution, genre bending and manipulation for communal purposes, or choices regarding the medium and channel
of dissemination, still constitute untapped sites of study for the applied linguist interested in pinning down the idea of interpersonality and refining its taxonomies.

Interpersonality may show accidentally, as a ‘give-off’ (Goffman 1959) betraying the speaker or the writer, but may also be intentional and seek alignment with the community of practice by complying with its conventions, or show deference towards its outsiders. These actions are not mutually exclusive and form the conceptual tandem *proximity/positioning* (Hyland 2010), which turns interpersonality into a ‘two-way street’. A case in point is the use of multifunctional metadiscourse in specialised texts: items such as evidentials (e.g. citations) simultaneously provide background information for those who need it, telling them where to obtain it, disclaim the knowledge being transmitted in accordance with the honesty and modesty code of academia or the profession, and show competence (i.e. scholarly authority), which creates a gap between the expert sender and his/her lay addressees.

Similarly, attitudinal boosters of the type *clearly, obviously, certainly, truly*, etc., draw a line between the knowledgeable insider and the uninformed listener/reader, yet signposting what is taken for granted among experts within their community – shared notions, perceptions and deductions considered elementary and that gauge the knowledge of non-members and cue them about the expertise they should acquire to join in. More vehement interactional items of this type, such as *needless to say or it goes without saying* embody this category of (superfluous?) tacitness-breakers that inform readers of the interlocutors’ perceived relationship from either side. Of course, the interpersonal relationship or tenor between participants is partly shaped by the writer/speaker-reader/listener role, which includes the degree of interlocutor-considerateness (i.e. more or less reader/listener-responsibility, pointed to by Purves 1988 or Hyland 2004) and the higher and lower foregrounding/backgrounding of the content or the person behind it in the national and disciplinary cultures. Another central issue is what ‘community membership’ actually means, because inside the specialist group coexist multiple communicative purposes and there are asymmetrical power
relationships as well, and not everyone may wish to become an insider or think it is beneficial.

When communicative multifunctionality transcends sentence-level and affects the social repercussion of the whole text, we may be witnessing ‘genre manipulation’ (Hyland 2004) or ‘discursive appropriation’ (Bhatia 2004). Genres fulfil broad and narrow purposes and implement them through interpersonal devices, which span a cline whose poles are the informational and persuasive goals. The promotional component, every day more pervasive, is ‘colonizing’ (Bhatia 2004) texts that were strictly informational in the past. For example, at the time Vázquez and Giner (2009) held that judgments were seldom promotional, the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board was just beginning to divulge online its highly reader-oriented case appeal decisions (see Sancho Guinda, this volume), which in addition brand the institution as transparent and democratic, following the Freedom of Information Act’s guidelines, so representative of the all-American spirit. This promotional matter may go unnoticed to genre users, as not all instances of social purposes are expressed overtly and prototypically, resembling one another and making up genre families and colonies (Bhatia 2004). Its detection depends instead on the user’s ability to read between the lines.

Interpersonality is not determined by the social purpose of the genre, but the two interact (again fuzzily and circularly) on several planes: topical, rhetorical, sentential, phrasal, lexical, phonological, phonetic, proxemic, and kinesic within the text (Bhatia’s 2012 ‘text-internal factors’), which generate – and are in turn generated by – communal expectations concerning aims, audiences and situational contexts, assumptions of shared knowledge, the strategic management of gatekeeping, and intertextuality (‘text-external factors’, Bhatia 2012). Internal and external factors thus enmesh multidimensionally and bidirectionally (from the individual to society and vice versa) to convey different sorts of meaning. On the one hand, there is ideational opinion or stance, aimed to inform but in legal settings also normally expressed to persuade or influence. On the other, we must consider solidarity with the interlocutor in the form of deference/engagement, aimed to facilitate comprehension by making the text intelligible to outsiders. Between both, as an intersection, there are attitudinal