Conversational Involvement in Interaction: A Literature Review

Cicely Anne Rude[1]
Teachers College, Columbia University

ABSTRACT

Conversational involvement is a fundamental aspect of human communication, influencing how participants engage, connect, and collaborate in interaction. The purpose of this paper is to synthesize existing research on conversational involvement across contexts and disciplines, unpacking its complexity and contextual nature. Drawing from diverse fields such as linguistics, sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, and education, the review examines various practices, including lexical, grammatical, paralinguistic, embodied, pragmatic, and discursive behaviors that contribute to involvement. The key insights reveal that conversational involvement is both an internal psychological state and an observable interactional achievement, understood as a co-constructed process in which participants mutually enact and interpret engagement within culturally, stylistically, and situationally situated contexts. Importantly, involvement is shaped by shared knowledge, conversational style, and sociocultural norms, which vary across groups and settings. This review identifies gaps in research on conversational involvement, particularly in three areas: (1) cross-cultural communication, (2) studies of diverse populations, and (3) educational contexts. Future research might examine these gaps using a methodology such as conversation analysis, which is particularly effective for capturing the moment-by-moment and context-sensitive nature of conversational involvement in interaction. By integrating findings from across disciplines, this review underscores the significance of understanding conversational involvement's multifaceted nature and its role in fostering connection, inclusion, and rapport. Ultimately, these insights offer directions for future research and practical applications in multilingual education.

Keywords: conversational involvement, cross-cultural communication, classroom interaction, multilingual education, learner engagement

INTRODUCTION

Humans are inherently social beings. Aristotle famously referred to humans as social animals, a notion that remains widely accepted over two millennia later. Despite individual differences and

[1] Cicely Anne Rude is a doctoral student in Applied Linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her research draws on conversation analysis to examine discursive practices and learner engagement in second language classrooms, with the aim of informing language teacher education. Correspondence should be sent to Cicely Anne Rude, E-mail: car2289@tc.columbia.edu.

varying levels of social anxiety, humans generally thrive in the presence of others, forming connections and cooperating within groups. Sociality is foundational to our sense of belonging and interaction, rooted in a shared primal desire for inclusion and involvement.

Involvement, central to social interaction, refers broadly to the degree to which individuals are engaged, invested, or active participants in an interaction. It is a complex concept studied across disciplines using varied research methods (Altmann, Oertel, & Campbell, 2012; Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Calleja, 2011; Cappella, 1983; Chafe, 1982; Coker & Burgoon, 1987; Gumperz, 1982; Nguyen & Fussell, 2016; Tannen, 1989/2007). Work in communication, human–AI interaction, cognitive science, educational games, literacy, anthropology of education, developmental psychology, and game studies has examined not only how involvement is defined and measured, but also how it functions to facilitate engagement, coordination, and meaning-making in interaction. Methods include conversation analysis, discourse analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, and quantitative approaches.

Following Hymes's (1972) notion of communicative competence as the ability to use language appropriately within social contexts, scholars have recognized conversational involvement as a key interactional resource that supports competent communication. Involvement contributes to communicative competence by enabling participants to manage engagement, responsiveness, and mutual understanding in interaction. It can be understood both as an internal state and as an observable phenomenon that shapes the quality of interaction and influences perceptions of conversation partners (Cegala, 1978; Villaume & Cegala, 1988; Davies, 2003). High levels of involvement have been associated with satisfying social interactions, while its absence is associated with misalignment or disengagement (Altmann et al., 2012; Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Nguyen & Fussell, 2016).

The purpose of this paper is to synthesize the diverse body of research on conversational involvement with regard to how the concept has been defined and studied across disciplines. This review focuses on how conversational involvement is conceptualized as both an internal psychological state and an observable interactional achievement, and on how contextual factors such as culture and setting shape its manifestation. By integrating findings from across disciplines, the review aims to develop a more unified framework for understanding involvement as a multifaceted, co-constructed process. In doing so, it identifies theoretical and methodological gaps, particularly in cross-cultural and educational contexts, and outlines directions for future inquiry relevant to multilingual education.

For this review, I focus specifically on scholarship that explicitly uses the term conversational involvement in an empirical, operationalized sense. By this, I mean studies that provide a definition of conversational involvement and situate it within a clearly articulated analytic approach, rather than using the term informally or in a non-analytic way. To identify relevant work, I conducted a search for "conversational involvement" across major databases commonly used in applied and educational linguistics, including Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), and Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts (LLBA), EMCAWIKI, Google Scholar, and Web of Science. I also searched multidisciplinary databases such as Academic Search Complete and JSTOR. I then read the results and excluded sources that did not use the term in a clearly defined analytical way. The resulting body of literature includes the set of studies that empirically investigate conversational involvement.

DEFINING INVOLVEMENT

Defining conversational involvement has proven challenging, as scholars from diverse disciplines approach the concept from different theoretical and methodological perspectives. As a result, scholars have not reached a single, agreed-upon definition. Generally, involvement is treated as either an internal psychological or emotional state, or as observable behaviors displayed during interaction. In the following section, I will discuss these two different groups of definitions.

Involvement as an Unobservable, Psychological State

Some scholars have characterized involvement as an internal and, therefore, unobservable state. I will examine these definitions first, focusing on how they frame conversational involvement as either emotional engagement or cognitive focus. In doing so, I aim to begin to unpack the different ways involvement has been understood in the literature.

Emotional Engagement

Emotional engagement refers to the connection individuals experience during an interaction and is considered an important component of conversational involvement. Chafe (1982), as a linguist, provides a foundational definition of involvement as a state of strong emotional engagement that participants feel about the conversation and each other. Chafe contrasts involvement in spoken discourse with detachment in written communication and his work seems to imply an important question: When a conversationalist experiences a state of involvement, with whom or what are they involved? To address this question, Chafe (1985) suggests three loci of involvement. First, a speaker may be primarily focused on their own concerns. Second, they may focus on the needs of their interlocutors. Third, involvement can shift to the discourse itself. Coker and Burgoon (1987), communication scholars, also define conversational involvement as the extent to which participants feel "enmeshed in the topic, interpersonal relationship, and situation" (p. 463).

Adding to the definitions of involvement as emotional engagement, the concept of affective involvement offers a more specialized lens through which to consider the role of emotional engagement in involvement in interactive settings such as gameplay environments or the virtual or physical spaces in which players interact with a game and other players. Calleja (2011), a game studies scholar, defines affective involvement as "an internal state of emotional engagement derived from interaction with other agents in a game environment" (p. 112). In a study of educational role-play game (RPG) play, Corbitt (2024), an educational researcher, examines how emotional engagement emerges when players' real-world identities interact with in-game characters. In computer-supported educational settings, Oertel et al. (2020) define conversational involvement as emotional engagement between humans and AI agents. Taken together, these studies suggest that while emotional engagement is central to conversational involvement, it is not synonymous with it. Involvement also encompasses cognitive focus, observable behaviors, and context-dependent interactional processes.

Cognitive Focus

While multiple scholars have defined involvement as a state of emotional engagement, or how it feels to be involved, in the studies reviewed here only two provide definitions of involvement as a state of cognitive focus, or mental effort and attention. Regardless of the small number, these definitions are important because they underscore the role of attention and mental

resources in involvement. First, in a study of how participants feel about their levels of involvement while multitasking, Nguyen and Fussell (2016) define conversational involvement as the cognitive focus of attention and other mental resources on a specific communication task. Second, in a study of computer-mediated communication (CMC) among university students in Sweden, involvement is defined as the degree to which people perceive they are cognitively focused on an interaction as well as affectively and behaviorally engaged with the topic and other participants (Burgoon et al., 2000). Goffman (1967) similarly conceptualized involvement in interaction as attentional focus, emphasizing the cognitive dimension of paying attention, as well as a moral dimension, or the social obligation to remain engaged and responsive to co-participants. Together, these definitions illustrate that while emotional engagement often takes center stage in discussions of involvement as a psychological state, cognitive focus is an important dimension that underscores the importance of mental attention and resource allocation in creating involvement.

In sum, the definitions of involvement as a psychological state, whether emotional or cognitive, describe internal processes that shape how individuals experience involvement. However, while these definitions provide valuable insights into how involvement can be experienced by individuals, they leave open the question of how involvement manifests in observable actions. A shift in focus from internal experience to external behavior invites a closer look at how involvement unfolds in interaction.

Involvement as Observable Action

Rather than thinking about involvement as a psychological state, some scholars define it in terms of outward expressions in interaction. From this perspective, involvement becomes observable through behaviors that participants can observe, interpret, and respond to. In keeping with the scope of this review, this section focuses only on studies that explicitly define conversational involvement, examining how it has been conceptualized as displays of emotional states, expressions of affiliation, and coordinated interactions.

Display of Emotional State

Scholars have offered a range of nuanced definitions of involvement that emphasize how emotional engagement is displayed through behavior. Lakoff (1990) defines involvement as a display of "emotional connection, interest, and concern" (p. 49), a definition that reflects her broader focus on the pragmatics of emotion and the ways speakers use linguistic choices to index interpersonal stances. Tannen (1989/2007) goes further by describing conversational involvement as the use of linguistic and paralinguistic strategies to convey a sense of connection, engagement, and emotional resonance between participants, consistent with her discourse-analytic work on conversational style and the interactional achievement of rapport. Importantly, Tannen (1989/2007) conceptualizes involvement as both an internal, emotional connection that participants experience and an observable phenomenon that can be recognized by others, describing involvement as an internal, emotional connection that binds individuals to others, as well as to activities, ideas, and memories and adding that involvement is not an inherent state but is achievable and observable in interaction.

Through investigating how conversationalists navigate emotional displays, Tannen (1989/2007) identifies four components of conversational involvement: emotional connection, engagement, understanding, and rapport. Emotional connection emerges when participants feel

understood and validated, fostering closeness and increasing openness to new ideas and influence (Leaper, 1991). Engagement reflects the level of attention and investment participants display during interaction. Understanding, facilitated by involvement cues such as backchanneling and other communicative signals, represents shared comprehension between participants (Gumperz, 1982). Finally, rapport serves as a culmination of conversational involvement, marked by mutual responsiveness and ease in interaction. Together, these components align with Tannen's (1989/2007) broader definition of conversational involvement as observable displays of emotion.

Expression of Affiliation

Rather than viewing conversational involvement simply as coordination, some scholars define it in terms of affiliation, displayed through behaviors or metamessages that signal closeness between participants. Affiliation, in this context, refers to the degree of connection, closeness, or mutual orientation participants display toward one another in interaction. Cappella (1983) defines involvement as the use of behaviors that display closeness by "approaching" rather than "avoiding" a conversation partner (p. 119). Similarly, Leaper (1991), in developmental psychology research, defines involvement as the extent to which a message is "affiliative," by which Leaper means it brings the speaker closer to a listener, versus the extent that it creates "distance," separating the speaker from the recipient (p. 801). Both of these definitions emphasize the relational aspect of conversational involvement, where affiliation is signaled through actions or messages that display connection rather than separation.

Coordinated Interaction

Another approach to defining involvement as an observable action focuses on coordinated interaction. Gumperz (1982) defines conversational involvement as observable evidence of participation and coordinated interaction. Coordinated action relies on a shared understanding of what specific behaviors signify, or the process known as conversational inference. Conversational inference involves interpreting contextualization cues, or culturally embedded signals, within the broader sociocultural context in which an interaction is situated. When participants share similar sociocultural backgrounds, these cues are more likely to be interpreted consistently, thus paving the way for coordination.

Building on Gumperz's discussion of coordinated interaction, Norrick (1994) offers a more specific definition that further emphasizes the importance of shared interpretive conventions. Norrick (1994) defines conversational involvement as "the coherent give and take of talk in interaction" (p. 409). From Norrick's perspective, coherence depends on shared indexicality, or mutual ability to recognize and interpret contextual cues in the same way. Without this shared interpretive framework, the flow of conversation and the participants' sense of involvement can break down. The works of Gumperz and Norrick frame conversational involvement as observable, coordinated interaction, while also highlighting the challenge of achieving this coordination among diverse participants.

In sum, scholars conceptualize involvement in different ways. Some emphasize internal states, such as emotional engagement or cognitive focus, while others emphasize external behaviors, such as displays of emotion, expressions of affiliation, and coordinated interaction. Some perspectives, however, recognize that internal and external dimensions are intertwined (e.g., Tannen, 1989/2007): internal states often manifest in observable behaviors, which in turn can reinforce psychological involvement. Table 1 summarizes definitions of conversational

involvement across the literature, delineating internal (psychological) and external (behavioral) conceptualizations, and showing the interplay between internal and external dimensions.

TABLE 1
Conceptualizations of Conversational Involvement

Type	Focus	Representative Studies	Notes
Internal / Psychological State	Emotional engagement	Chafe (1982, 1985); Coker & Burgoon (1987); Calleja (2011); Corbitt (2024); Oertel et al. (2020)	Feeling "enmeshed" in topic, interlocutor, or activity; may contribute to sense of belonging
	Cognitive focus	Goffman (1967); Nguyen & Fussell (2016); Burgoon et al. (2000)	Attentional focus on interaction; mental effort
External / Observable Action	Display of emotional state	Lakoff (1990); Tannen (1989/2007)	Verbal and nonverbal behavior; may reflect underlying internal states
	Expression of affiliation	Cappella (1983); Leaper (1991)	Behaviors or metamessages signaling closeness; may both reflect and shape internal involvement.
	Coordinated interaction	Gumperz (1982); Norrick (1994)	Participation and interactional coherence; may both influence and be influenced by psychological states

Considering these perspectives together, involvement can be understood as a multifaceted construct reflecting a dynamic interplay between psychological states and interactional behaviors. While the following review emphasizes observable actions that conversationalists use to create involvement, it does so with the understanding that these actions both reflect and influence participants' underlying psychological states.

CONVERSATIONAL INVOLVEMENT PRACTICES

In this section, I review the practices that have been associated with conversational involvement. In keeping with the scope outlined earlier, this section reviews only studies that explicitly examine conversational involvement as an empirical construct, rather than the broader bodies of work on related phenomena such as affiliation, alignment, or humor in conversation analysis. Following Tannen (1989/2007), involvement strategies are the specific interactional choices that conversationalists use to create, display, and negotiate interpersonal connections. Other scholars discuss indicators of conversational involvement as observable behaviors that may

signal involvement. I therefore use the term *practices* to reflect how researchers have described conversational involvement.

Of course, conversational involvement practices cannot be presumed to represent a speaker's true feelings or intentions. Furthermore, the presence of a strategy or indicator does not automatically denote involvement. Many scholars have therefore identified strategies and indicators of involvement used and treated as successful by conversationalists in various contexts. The following practices have been identified in studies examining how they have been used in conversation, how recipients respond, or the degree of involvement the conversationalists report having experienced in the interaction. To arrive at these findings, scholars have asked how conversationalists experience involvement, how they display it, and how they co-create it. The practices I will discuss fall into three categories: lexical and grammatical, paralinguistic and embodied, and pragmatic and discursive.

Lexical and Grammatical Practices

Throughout the literature, conversational involvement is reflected in the use of lexical and grammatical practices across a variety of languages. Such practices include the use of specific pronouns, intensifiers, and affect keys, as well as case-marking patterns and lexical choices that signal cooperation, emphasis, or personal significance. To begin with, Chafe (1982) associates involvement with oral communication and identifies emphasizers such as "And he got really furious" (p. 47) or hedges such as "And he started sort of circling" (p. 48) as indicators of involvement, as does Cegala (1989). Inclusion of these lexical items can create involvement by opening the door for responses that evaluate or opine on what has been said.

In an examination of linguistic features of talk, Cegala (1989) finds that participants who report feeling highly involved use more first-person and relational pronouns to display affect and link to prior talk than those less involved. Similarly, in their study of affect keys, or intensifiers and specifiers of affect, Ochs and Schieffelin (1989) find that case marking, specifically dative case, can be used in Spanish and Italian to intensify involvement by displaying affect. For example, in Spanish, "mi hijo no me come nada" or "my son won't eat anything for me," and in Italian, "non mi mangia niente" or "he doesn't eat anything for me." The implicature of "for me" is that the action described is of personal importance. This use of pronouns and case marking can show involvement by personalizing the talk, which can be accomplished through displaying connections between the speaker and the story, and between the current and prior talk.

In addition to personalizing talk with pronouns and case marking, conversationalists can also use definite articles and cooperative expressions to create conversational involvement by displaying a sense of shared understanding and cooperation between participants. For example, Nguyen and Fussell (2014) report that highly involved speakers use more definite articles as well as more words signaling assent and willingness to cooperate such as "accept, right, indeed, true, etc." (p. 477). In Japanese, words signaling assent and willingness to cooperate such as "そうですね" ("sou desu ne" or "that's right, isn't it") have also been associated with increased conversational involvement (Tokuhisa & Terashima, 2006). By leveraging words and phrases such as these to signal agreement and cooperation, conversationalists can display engagement and shared understanding, thus building mutual involvement. Lexical and grammatical resources are well-established practices for signaling affect and understanding. However, beyond words, conversationalists also use paralinguistic and embodied practices for creating involvement.

Paralinguistic and Embodied Practices

Having examined lexical and grammatical resources, I now turn to paralinguistic and embodied practices that offer additional means of creating involvement. Expressive paralinguistics go beyond words to display attitudes, emotions, and involvement levels (Tannen, 1981). I will begin this section with an examination of prosody, followed by a discussion of nonverbal and embodied cues.

Prosody

Prosody features prominently in both Cappella's (1981) and Gumperz's (1982) studies of involvement. For Cappella (1981), prosodic indicators are one of what he terms "expressive behaviors" (p. 101). For Gumperz (1982), prosody is a key aspect of the contextualization cues that can signal conversational involvement. Prosody can help listeners interpret a speaker's meaning and engagement. By adjusting prosodic features, speakers may convey involvement or detachment, emphasize certain points, indicate agreement or disagreement, and manage turn-taking. While prosodic choices can create involvement, emphasize certain points, or influence turn-taking, prosodic cues vary across cultural and linguistic contexts, and the same pattern may be interpreted differently depending on the listener's expectations.

Prosody has been identified as a core aspect of an "emphatic" conversational style, particularly in the telling of stories. Tone of voice, or the emotional or attitudinal quality with which something is said, can contribute to involvement by adding more information than words alone (Cappella, 1983). Prosody also plays a role in generating "peaks of involvement" within the telling of a story as "sudden shifts from an unmarked normal style to a marked emphatic style" (Selting, 1994, p. 404). Selting's (1994) "emphatic style" may be used to highlight a particular activity or emotive expression. It creates interpretive frames of "emphasis" or "emphatic involvement" (p. 383). Goodwin and Goodwin (2000) subsequently add their own analysis of an emphatic speech style comparable to Selting's (1994) peaks of involvement. Their data documents "Wow!" with marked emphasis as an example of one such "emphatic unit" (p. 17). Additionally, pitch and speed are style elements for signaling emphatic involvement in the contexts of social and institutional language power and politics (Lakoff, 1990). Furthermore, the use of emphasis as a stylistic involvement practice can display heightened excitement about the interaction itself, signaling high involvement and conveying a metamessage of rapport (Tannen, 1989/2007).

While prosody may create involvement, research across contexts suggests that prosodic synchrony in particular plays a central role in signaling mutual involvement. For example, fast pacing and rapid turn-taking are collaborative practices that can signal a high-involvement communication style, with conversationalists often matching each other's speech rate (Cappella, 1981; Tannen, 1981). The role of coordination is further supported by Coker and Burgoon (1987), who find that speech with fewer silences and latencies is a strong indicator of heightened involvement. Yang (2014) links prosodic synchrony to shared affective states, fostering shared involvement and emotional alignment.

Nonverbal Cues and Embodiment

Nonverbal and embodied practices such as proximity, orientation, gaze, gesture, facial expressions, and shared laughter can also shape conversational involvement. Physical proximity and orientation can contribute to involvement when displaying engagement and attentiveness.

Specifically, conversationalists have used physical closeness with forward-leaning postures to this effect (Cappella, 1981; Cappella, 1983), as have conversationalists who face each other (Altmann et al., 2012).

Gaze has also been recognized across contexts as a means of creating involvement through signaling engagement, attentiveness, shared understanding, and interpersonal connections (Cappella, 1981; Cappella, 1983; Gumperz, 1982; Tannen, 1985; Tannen, 1989/2007; Altmann et al., 2012). Shared gaze in particular (Goodwin, 1981) may be used to display "involvement in the talk of the moment" (p. 85). For instance, an "appropriate state of mutual gaze" may be achieved when a speaker "requests" and "obtains" the listener's gaze either by initiating a gaze or by use of pauses or restarts at the beginning of a turn (Goodwin, 1981, p. 86). In other words, either a gaze or a pause or restart can act as a request for a gaze in return and the achievement of a shared gaze can display mutual involvement. While instances of mutual gaze are valuable for signaling and creating involvement, they tend to be brief, often less than one second in length (Goodwin, 1981, p. 84). When listeners withdraw their gaze mid-turn, they can still display engagement through alternative signals of hearership, such as nodding or vocalizations like "mmhm" (Goodwin, 1981, p. 88). Even brief instances of shared gaze can serve as a strategy for creating involvement.

While gaze plays an important role in signaling attention and mutual engagement, talk is also often accompanied by gestures, which further emphasize spoken content and provide visual cues that signal understanding and engagement (Altmann et al., 2012; Cappella, 1983; Goodwin, 1981; Tannen, 1985; Tannen, 1989/2007). For example, pointing gestures can direct attention to a specific topic, such as when a teacher uses a finger to point to an image on a screen during a lesson, anchoring the verbal explanation to a visual focus (Cappella, 1981; Cappella, 1983; Altmann et al., 2012). Rhythmic hand movements, such as those mimicking the pacing of speech, can convey emphasis or intensity, as seen when speakers move their hands rhythmically during debates to underline important points (Goodwin, 1981; Tannen, 1985).

Facial expressions can also shape involvement in interaction by mirroring emotional states, such as a furrowed brow indicating confusion or a head nod with raised eyebrows signaling active listening and agreement. They can frame talk as either serious or playful, for instance, exaggerated wide-eyed expressions paired with a smile can indicate a lighthearted comment. Smiles and shared laughter, in particular, can foster a sense of solidarity and mutual understanding, such as in moments where co-workers share a joke during a meeting, deepening interpersonal connection (Gumperz, 1982; Burgoon & Le Poire, 1999; Altmann et al., 2012).

Pragmatic and Discursive Practices

Finally, there are many pragmatic and discursive practices that speakers use to create conversational involvement. I have organized these practices into two groups based on how they have been described and analyzed in the research. The first group focuses on ways speakers design their talk to invite or make relevant listener participation, while the second focuses on ways participants display involvement once interaction is underway. These categories are not intended as fixed or mutually exclusive, as the same practice may function differently depending on context. Rather, they are intended to serve as a conceptual framework of how participants have been observed to use these practices to create conversational involvement in interaction.

Inviting Participation in Interaction: Shall we dance?

Some conversational practices create involvement by projecting participation, structuring talk so that recipients are invited, or required, to actively contribute to meaning-making. These practices make listener involvement relevant in advance, positioning understanding as a collaborative achievement rather than an individual one. One way speakers may invite co-construction is by leaving talk open or incomplete. For example, hesitations leave utterances unresolved and can signal that the speaker may welcome listener input (Goodwin, 1981). Similarly, restarts provide opportunities for collaboration by reopening talk for reformulation and uptake (Goodwin, 1981). Syntactically incomplete utterances invite listeners to anticipate or complete what is being said (Goodwin, 1981). Ellipsis, which omits information while relying on shared context, likewise draws listeners into the interpretive process (Villaume & Cegala, 1988).

Other practices can explicitly create expectations for listener responses. Call-and-response patterns, such as a speaker prompting gathered members of a church congregation with, “Let the church say Amen!” (Erickson, 1984, p. 87), project a next turn that requires collective participation, creating involvement through structured completion (Erickson, 1984; Rosenberg, 1975). Self-produced rhetorical question–answer sequences can simulate participation by momentarily adopting the listener’s presumed perspective and incorporating that imagined response into the unfolding talk. As Frank (1989) shows, in examples such as, “You may be thinking… Am I eligible for one of these loans? Then the answer is YES…” (p. 236), the speaker guides attention while displaying awareness of recipients’ presumed concerns.

Speakers may also invite participation by shaping talk in ways that draw listeners into the “vividness” of events and experiences. Constructed dialogue, for example, in which speakers recreate past or imagined speech, shifts talk from summary to reenactment, inviting listeners to experience the described events as if they were unfolding in real time (Tannen, 1989/2007). Similarly, the use of imagery and detailed description invites listeners to follow scenes closely, making abstract or distant events more concrete and accessible (Tannen, 1989/2007). Dramatic storytelling and performative reenactment further invite involvement by transforming narration into performance, prompting listeners to imaginatively follow the scene alongside the speaker (Tannen, 1985). Sharing personal experiences and subjective reactions likewise invites empathic engagement by foregrounding lived experience and positioning listeners as responsive participants rather than detached recipients of information (Tannen, 1985).

Involvement may also be created through the activation of common ground and related forms of shared knowledge. The use of familiar narrative tropes and recognizable story structures invites listeners to anticipate how talk will unfold, drawing on shared cultural knowledge to co-construct meaning (Tannen, 1989/2007). Strategic indirectness likewise requires listeners to infer meaning rather than simply receive it, positioning understanding as a collaborative process grounded in shared contextual knowledge (Tannen, 1989/2007). Repetition of linguistic forms, whether phonological, lexical, syntactic, or discourse-level, creates rhythm and patterned expectations that listeners can recognize and align with, as in the well-known example from John F. Kennedy, “Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country” (Tannen, 1989/2007, p. 36). Intertextual repetition and reference to prior discourse similarly activate shared discourse histories, inviting recognition and reinforcing coherence (Tannen, 1989/2007; Chi, 2012). More specialized forms of intertextual reference, such as allusions to shared esoteric or group-specific texts, presuppose common knowledge and invite listeners to display recognition and group membership (Becker, 1994; Sierra, 2016). Through these practices, speakers can design talk in ways that open up interactional space, inviting listeners to step into the dance of co-construction.

Displaying Involvement in Interaction: Yes, let's dance!

Other practices create involvement not by projecting participation, but by displaying it. These practices signal attentiveness, alignment, emotional engagement, or shared stance in real time, encouraging continued interaction and reinforcing social connection. One foundational category of such practices involves signals of recipiency. Backchanneling, including minimal verbal responses such as "mmhm," "right," or "yeah," displays cooperation and encourages speakers to continue (Gumperz, 1982). Embodied forms of backchanneling, such as nods and other gestures, similarly signal recipiency (Gumperz, 1982). Overlap, in which participants speak simultaneously or interject, can likewise display enthusiasm and engagement in some cultural contexts (Lakoff, 1990; Tannen, 1984/2005, 1989/2007). Frequent and rapid topic shifts, along with increased talk volume and pace, may also signal active participation and emotional involvement (Tannen, 1981).

Other practices display involvement through foregrounding some sort of "sharedness." Code-switching, for example, indexes shared social or cultural background (Gumperz, 1982). Playful wordplay, including puns, irony, and collaborative language play, enacts shared interpretive effort (Norrick, 1994). Jocular verbal abuse, when recognized as non-serious, alludes to a shared playful frame, and so do humorous narratives and anecdotes (Norrick, 1994). These practices function as recognizable signs that participants have accepted the invitation to interact, actively sustaining involvement by displaying alignment with and investment in the unfolding talk.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Throughout the last fifty years or so, scholars have sought to define conversational involvement for a variety of purposes, offering many definitions. Some see involvement as an unobservable psychological state of emotional engagement or cognitive focus, treating it as an internal experience. Chafe (1985) breaks this down into three types: self, interpersonal, and topical involvement, providing a framework for how conversationalists experience involvement with their thoughts, with others, and with subjects discussed. In contrast, other scholars regard involvement as an interactional achievement, focusing on observable behaviors. They demonstrate how participants display affect, coordinate interactions, and signal affiliation. Tannen (1989/2007) explains how understanding, engagement, emotional connection, and rapport appear through linguistic and nonverbal practices, while Gumperz (1982) stresses shared sociocultural cues as crucial for creating involvement.

Researchers across fields and contexts have identified many practices that can create conversational involvement and indicate its presence, classified as lexical and grammatical, paralinguistic and embodied, and pragmatic and discursive. Lexical and grammatical practices emphasize cooperation, emotional connection, and personal relevance (Chafe, 1982; Cegala, 1989; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1989), helping speakers link to prior talk, signal affect, agreement, and foster shared understanding (Nguyen & Fussell, 2014; Tokuhisa & Terashima, 2006). Paralinguistic and embodied cues convey emotional engagement (Cappella, 1981; Gumperz, 1982; Selting, 1994) or signal attentiveness, shared understanding, and alignment (Altmann et al., 2012; Goodwin, 1981). Pragmatic and discursive practices can further contribute to conversational involvement by inviting listener participation through mechanisms such as open or incomplete talk, activation of common ground, and performative storytelling (Goodwin, 1981; Tannen, 1989/2007), and by

displaying involvement through signals of recipiency, social alignment, and shared identity (Gumperz, 1982; Norrick, 1994; Tannen, 1981, 1985).

Taking a holistic view of the available definitions and practices, I suggest that conversational involvement can be understood as having three key features. First, it has a dual nature, encompassing both internal psychological states and observable behaviors, which can facilitate and enhance each other. The internal, subjective experience of feeling involved in an interaction is intertwined with observable behaviors. These behaviors can both signal involvement and contribute to its creation. Importantly, while displays of affect do not always reflect internal experiences, both observable and unobservable aspects are essential to creating conversational involvement.

Second, conversational involvement is a collaborative achievement, arising from the coherent give-and-take of talk in interaction (Gumperz, 1982; Norrick, 1994). It is neither the sole responsibility nor experience of the speaker but is co-constructed by all participants. Practices such as repetition, shared humor, and storytelling are responsive to and shaped by interaction and can foster a mutual sense of engagement and emotional connection. These practices illustrate the reflexive interplay between individual actions and group dynamics in developing shared understanding and rapport. As participants negotiate meaning and build connections, conversational involvement becomes the co-creation of all involved. As such, it is the result of ongoing, interactive processes that rely on the contributions of all participants, in which each participant's contributions both shape and are shaped by the others.

Third, conversational involvement is context dependent, meaning that practices for creating it and indicators that it has or has not been created cannot be assumed to be universal. It is created within contexts that are culturally, stylistically, and situationally situated. Involvement practices depend on shared sociocultural norms, the physical and social setting, and conversationalists' ability to interpret cues within a common indexical framework. These cues vary across cultures and situations, with different meanings attached depending on context (Gumperz, 1982), so that conversational involvement may manifest differently depending on cultural background, social roles, and interactional goals.

Additionally, subcultural factors such as style also shape how participants and observers perceive involvement (Tannen, 1985; Tannen, 1984/2005). Different conversational styles can lead to varying perceptions of involvement. For instance, Tannen (1984/2005) explores how elements such as intonation, pacing, and overlap in conversation contribute to a speaker's style and how these features are interpreted differently across cultural and social groups, while Selting (1994) points out that emphatic involvement cues are entirely context dependent. Variations in conversational style can lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations of involvement, as what signals engagement to one group may be seen as a rude interruption or disengagement by another (Tannen, 1985).

Considered together, the perspectives above suggest that conversational involvement is a co-constructed, context-sensitive process in which participants mutually enact and interpret engagement, shared understanding, and social connection. It arises from the interplay of internal experience and external expression, sustained through linguistic, paralinguistic, and embodied cues. The meaning and effectiveness of these cues depend on sociocultural norms, conversational style, situational factors, and participants' social roles. Far from a fixed state, conversational involvement is an interactive accomplishment through which participants create and maintain connection, coherence, and rapport.

While much work has been done to define conversational involvement and tease out the discursive practices used to create it and indicators of it having been created, there are several gaps in the research. First, most research has linked involvement to behaviors that are predominantly

Eurocentric and normative regarding race, culture, neurodiversity, and psychological diversity. As a result, behaviors that signal involvement in other cultural or social contexts may be overlooked, misinterpreted, or even penalized, despite learners participating and engaging. This raises the need to examine conversational involvement within a wider range of sociocultural and cognitive contexts to avoid privileging dominant standards and to better understand how involvement is enacted across diverse populations.

Much of the research linking involvement to Eurocentric and normative behaviors has been conducted in linguistically and culturally homogeneous groups, where these norms are assumed to define involvement rather than being explicitly examined (Gumperz, 1982). Such assumptions can obscure potential failures of understanding in cross-cultural communication, where participants' interpretive conventions may differ. As Gumperz (1982) explains, "Almost all conversational data derive from verbal interaction in socially and linguistically homogeneous groups. There is a tendency to take for granted that conversational involvement exists, that interlocutors are cooperating, and that interpretive conventions are shared" (p. 4). In cross-cultural interactions, where shared indexicality cannot be presumed, the threads of conversational involvement become more fragile and attempts to create involvement are more likely to result in miscommunication. The field has yet to examine how involvement might be studied in a way that situates it within diverse contexts in which cross-cultural conversational involvement is created.

Research on conversational involvement is limited in educational contexts, yet it is especially relevant for second language instruction and teacher education, where diverse conversational styles and cultural backgrounds coexist. Creating safe and inclusive learning environments is essential for effective education (Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999). Involvement provides a lens for understanding how teachers and learners co-construct classroom culture, navigate differences in style and indexicality, and foster participation and collaboration. Unlike other important concepts such as motivation or engagement, conversational involvement specifically addresses the interactive, relational processes through which learners and instructors actively create and maintain communicative connection. Examining classroom interaction through this lens can shed light on how safe and inclusive learning environments are established, how misunderstandings are negotiated, and how involvement shapes learning outcomes.

Finally, while some research has examined conversational involvement using conversation analysis (CA), the field could benefit from additional CA studies that focus explicitly on how this construct is enacted in interaction. Scholars who have applied CA to the study of conversational involvement include Corbitt (2024), Goodwin (1981), Norrick (1994), Ochs and Schieffelin (1989), and Sierra (2016). CA may be an ideal method for further enhancing our understanding of conversational involvement because it examines how involvement is shaped in the moment-to-moment organization of talk. Unlike self-report or content-based approaches, CA allows researchers to identify interactional practices that participants themselves treat as indicators of involvement. Moreover, CA situates these behaviors within their naturally occurring contexts, enabling analysis of how practices for displaying and interpreting involvement vary across diverse groups and settings.

Future research could use CA to explore how involvement is established and maintained among diverse participants in second language and teacher education. These settings unite individuals with varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds, creating unique challenges and opportunities. A key question is: How can involvement be experienced, shown, and co-constructed in cross-cultural and cross-stylistic communication? Answering this may reveal practices that can promote meaningful engagement, offering valuable guidance for educators and learners.

At its core, conversational involvement reflects a basic human need for connection and inclusion, fulfilling the universal desire to belong and be understood. Its dual nature, internal and

observable, underscores its role in forging meaningful connections. Through shared laughter, storytelling, or subtle conversational cues, involvement helps conversationalists navigate relationships. This review has several limitations. By focusing only on work that explicitly employs the term conversational involvement in a defined analytical sense, it excludes research on related constructs and may overlook insights from adjacent areas such as stance, alignment, or affiliation. It is also shaped by how scholars label and frame their constructs. The gaps identified here show the need for research expanding understanding of involvement in diverse, multilingual, and educational contexts. Doing so can help educators foster inclusion and belonging in an increasingly interconnected, culturally diverse world.

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