

*Compliance Gaining*  
**From Strategy-Based  
 to Feature-Based  
 Analyses of  
 Compliance Gaining  
 Message  
 Classification and  
 Production**

---

by Daniel J. O'Keefe

Kellermann and Cole's article in this issue represents a very important step forward in the study of compliance gaining messages. To be sure, some (but not all) of the complaints Kellermann and Cole make about compliance gaining message classification systems are familiar ones. It has been argued for some time, for instance, that many compliance gaining taxonomies are atheoretical hodgepodes. But what Kellermann and Cole have done is to demonstrate, in a particularly massive, unmistakable, and compelling way, just how far-reaching are the problems with the usual ways of approaching the task of classifying compliance gaining messages. This is an impressive and important accomplishment. The depth of evidence and the carefulness of the analysis are such that even if one wanted to quarrel with this or that particular example (e.g., to object that they are mistaken about whether so-and-so's instance of a category is actually defective in the way

claimed), Kellermann and Cole's general points would surely be intact at the end of the day.

But for all that this represents important progress, I believe it is insufficiently revolutionary. Indeed, I believe that Kellermann and Cole are still in thrall to an old image of message production, an image that prevents them from seeing that their arguments actually compel a conclusion more radical than the one they draw. The appropriate conclusion, I believe, is that the concept of "strategy" has outlived its usefulness in the study of compliance gaining message production and should be abandoned. In what follows, I try to show that although their arguments recommend this conclusion, Kellermann and Cole do not fully embrace it—with unhappy attendant consequences. My larger aim in this commentary is to go some further way toward breaking the grip that the concept of "strategy" (and affiliated ideas) has on compliance gaining theory and research.

---

*The Case for a Feature-Based Approach*

The general import of Kellermann and Cole's arguments is that "future research should focus on specifying and explaining regularities in compliance gaining message behavior rather than on describing differences among strategies"; that is, "the focus of research must shift from describing possibly im-

portant differences in compliance gaining strategies, situations, and goals to explaining observed and theoretically important differences in compliance gaining behavior.”

Broadly put, the central rationale for this conclusion is found in the haphazardness of strategy taxonomies. Kellermann and Cole convincingly demonstrate that existing strategy taxonomies are conceptual hodgepodes, with the various strategies not clearly distinguished from one another. As they point out, in extant compliance gaining strategy taxonomies, “strategies are not differentiated from each other by a systematically varied set of features.” Hence, Kellermann and Cole suggest, the focus of attention should be the underlying dimensions of message variation (“observed and theoretically important differences in compliance gaining behavior”), since it is these that provide a sound basis for progress in understanding compliance gaining.

One way of expressing the central idea here is to say that what Kellermann and Cole’s arguments recommend is a *feature-based* rather than a *strategy-based* approach to the analysis of compliance gaining messages. In a feature-based approach, the focus of investigators’ attention is specifiable message features, rather than “strategies.” Any number of different characteristics (dimensions, features) of messages might be investigated. For instance, one might pursue research questions connected with the degree of listener-adaptedness of compliance

gaining efforts, or with the different power bases invoked in compliance gaining messages, or with whether the compliance gaining attempt is reward oriented or punishment oriented, or with the degree or sort of politeness exhibited by the message, and so on.

With a feature-based approach, the usefulness of “strategy” evaporates—and with it many of the problems associated with strategy-based approaches. We no longer need to worry about “getting the right list of strategies,” or “getting a comprehensive list of strategies,” or “getting a sufficiently general list of strategies,” or anything of the sort. All we have to do is (in the ordinary social-scientific way) consider whether we have a good index (measure) of the message feature of interest.

For example, suppose that one is interested in the “prosocialness” of compliance gaining efforts. One can see whether independent variable X influences the prosocialness of compliance gaining, even without some comprehensive taxonomy of compliance gaining strategies. For example, one can study a particular compliance gaining situations, in which only a limited range of “strategies” is relevant (as Kellermann and Cole point out) and so only a limited number of “strategies” are needed in one’s message coding system—because what will be important is the classification of compliance gaining efforts (whether conceived of as “strategies” or not) along the dimension of prosocialness.

If one adopts a feature-based rather than a strategy-based ap-

proach, one will be more likely to avoid precisely the sorts of difficulties that (Kellermann and Cole show) plague current message classification schemes. By virtue of beginning with a particular message feature of interest, an investigator will be more likely to consider carefully just how to define the categories in the message classification system, more likely to attend to potential problems of category overlap, more likely to avoid having an atheoretical collection of categories, more attentive to the fit between specific instances and abstract categories. As Kellermann and Cole emphasize, in most compliance gaining strategy taxonomies, the categories (“strategies”) are not distinguished by some clearly identified set of features; but if an investigator begins with some clear idea of the message feature of interest (politeness, power base invoked, listener adaptedness, etc.), then the investigator’s attention is naturally drawn to questions of precisely how to differentiate the message categories in some systematic ways that reflect (or embody) the contrasts of interest.

So with a feature-based approach, the concept of strategy becomes unnecessary, and correspondingly many problems affiliated with strategy-based classification systems vanish. Kellermann and Cole argue very persuasively, I think, that precisely what is needed now *is* a feature-based approach, one that emphasizes theoretically driven descriptions of compliance gaining messages, descriptions focused on underlying differentiating features.

---

### *The Failure to Embrace a Feature-Based Approach*

However, despite their own arguments, Kellermann and Cole do not fully embrace a feature-based approach to the analysis of compliance gaining messages. There are two indications of this. The first is their criticism of existing strategy taxonomies; the second is the sort of evidence they think is relevant to the assessment of examples of theoretical message categories.

#### *Criticism of Message*

##### *Taxonomies*

In general, Kellermann and Cole hold message classification schemes to good (defensible) standards. It is surely right that (for instance) categories in taxonomies need to be defined clearly. But sometimes Kellermann and Cole advance criticisms that are based on (what they elsewhere show are) inappropriate criteria. For example, one complaint made about existing taxonomies is that the taxonomies are not exhaustive (e.g., “Lack of exhaustiveness in these compliance gaining strategy taxonomies restricts the classification of compliance gaining messages”). What this implicitly recommends is that researchers ought to try to make their taxonomies exhaustive, capable of covering all cases whatever of compliance gaining. But Kellermann and Cole’s arguments seem to suggest that a comprehensive list is actually of little intrinsic value. (Certainly, for instance, Kellermann and Cole recognize that their own “exhaustive” list is not all that valuable; see note 21.)

If what we want is (as Kellermann and Cole’s arguments ap-

pear to recommend) a feature-based focus on underlying dimensions of variation, then we probably should expect that the classification system used for any given compliance gaining situation will *not* be comprehensive (in the sense of having categories that will encompass all compliance gaining situations) but instead will have categories that (1) assess the dimension of interest and (2) articulate with the particulars of the communication situation under investigation. If, for example, “threat” just is not a plausible possibility in the situation studied, then “threat” should not appear on the category list (should not appear as a category in the classification scheme)—but this is not a problem or weakness with that category list.

So from the point of view of a feature-based approach, it is entirely natural and unproblematic that a given classification scheme not be exhaustive (whereas with a strategy-based approach, an exhaustive taxonomy is expected). The point here is that on the one hand Kellermann and Cole’s arguments (in favor of a feature-based approach) suggest that comprehensiveness is not a good criterion for the assessment of message taxonomies, but Kellermann and Cole nevertheless use that criterion to assess current taxonomies. (A similar point might be made about their complaint that strategies are often defined in a domain-specific or situation-specific manner. From the point of view of a feature-based approach, this is not an in-

trinsic defect in a message classification system.)

*Judgments of Naive Raters*

Kellermann and Cole’s failure to fully embrace a feature-based approach is also betrayed by the sort of empirical evidence they adduce as relevant to the assessment of examples of theoretical message categories. To assess the representativeness of messages (instances, cases) as members of message categories, Kellermann and Cole provide evidence derived from naive raters’ judgments of the representativeness of cases as instances of categories.

But given their arguments about the desirability of feature-based analyses, it is difficult to see why naive raters should be employed in this way. If theoretically driven categories are what is really important, then the ability of theory-ignorant perceivers to rate examples for their representativeness of some theory-based category is quite beside the point. If I have an abstract theoretical classification system, and naive raters do not match cases to my categories (i.e., do not rate my instances as representative of my categories), this is no evidence whatsoever that my category system is defective or that my cases are not representative.

Consider, for example, a theoretically motivated contrast such as “active versus passive voice” in sentences. It might be that uninformed perceivers could not accurately classify cases into these categories (i.e., could not accurately judge whether a given sentence was in the active voice or the pas-

sive voice), but this would not be evidence against the soundness of that theoretical distinction. In fact, even to consider using naive perceivers as a source of evidence here would betray a deep misunderstanding of the relationship between this theoretically motivated distinction and the perceptual functioning of uninformed perceivers.

Or, as another example, ignorant undergraduates may not be able to classify cases correctly into Brown and Levinson's (1987) categories, but this is no evidence whatsoever against the representativeness of the cases. Suppose I give an examination in an interpersonal communication class, one portion of which lists example utterances and asks students which Brown and Levinson categories they exemplify. Kellermann and Cole's reasoning appears to be "if students get these questions wrong—that is, do not classify cases as Brown and Levinson do—then Brown and Levinson are mistaken about what categories their examples represent." I believe this reasoning is palpably off the mark. The students' inability to classify cases correctly may indicate a defect in my teaching or in the students' exam preparation, but not any defect in Brown and Levinson's theory.

To put the matter more generally: Theorists and researchers need not (and in fact should not) assume that their theoretical categories are (or should be) transparent to naive perceivers. Remember: Kellermann and Cole's

arguments suggest that our focus of attention should be theoretically driven analyses of message features—but if that is to be our focus of attention, then it is not necessarily relevant whether theoretical categories based on such features are somehow instantly accessible to uninformed perceivers.

The root of the problem here, I think, is Kellermann and Cole's implicit retention of strategy-based ideas about message production. The concept of strategy encourages certain misguided thinking about the validity of message descriptions; specifically, it encourages the mistaken idea that "valid" message categories/descriptions must match the categories/descriptions that are putatively in the heads of naive perceivers.

The mistake derives from a particular sort of strategy-based conception of message production, one based on the belief that message producers have message categories in their heads. Message production is seen as involving (inter alia) selecting a category, and then instantiating it in a message. On this view, researchers should aim to identify these categories, since these are the categories implicated in the message production process, the categories embedded in the message production machinery. Identifying these categories will involve creating an exhaustive and mutually exclusive set of message categories.

This picture is easily recognizable as the one underlying much compliance gaining production research; Seibold, Cantrill, and

Meyers (1985) called it the “strategic choice model.” The message categories are conceived of as “strategies,” and hence investigators have been trying to identify the correct list of message strategies, the correct strategy taxonomy. On this view, a taxonomy is “correct” or “valid” to the extent that it matches the categories in message producers’ heads. After all, the point of having these strategy taxonomies is to explain message production, and hence (from this point of view) it is crucial that one’s strategy taxonomy correspond with the strategy taxonomy in actors’ heads.

If one thinks along these lines, then using naive raters (in the way Kellermann and Cole do) will seem like a sensible procedure. The reasoning would run something as follows: “Naive raters have these strategy categories in their heads already, so they are in a good position to judge whether cases fall in these categories. Since we are trying to reproduce the actors’ categories, the actors’ judgments should be the final arbiter. In fact, *any* valid message categorization system *must* supply validating evidence of this sort.”

But if we adopt a feature-based approach and so focus instead on underlying message features as theoretically conceived, then this use of naive raters no longer is appealing (or even plausible). After all, an inability of naive undergraduates to recognize instances of active-voice and passive-voice sentences is not an indication that there is something wrong with this theoretical contrast. Once one

moves from a strategy-based approach to a feature-based approach, the judgments of naive perceivers no longer automatically carry special weight in deciding the appropriateness of cases as instances of theoretical categories.

I want to underscore this point, because Kellermann and Cole make large claims about their empirical procedure. They assert that a “superior” validation procedure “provides ratings” of just the sort they offer; they propose their guidelines as general ones for the assessment of message-category instances; they suggest that they provide “rigorous methods” for assessing validity; and so on. But Kellermann and Cole’s procedure and guidelines derive from a strategy-based image of what the relevant evidence is for the validity of a specific case’s being an instance of a general theoretical category. Once one fully abandons that latent strategy-based image, in favor of a feature-based approach, the necessity for such evidence—and the generality of Kellermann and Cole’s procedure and guidelines—vanishes.

#### *Summary*

So despite their own arguments, Kellermann and Cole have not fully embraced a feature-based approach. Some of their criticisms of existing message taxonomies and their use of naive raters (for assessing examples of theoretical message categories) are inconsistent with a feature-based approach. And hence I conclude that Kellermann and Cole are insufficiently revolutionary. Their arguments point unmistakably to a feature-

based approach, but they remain in the grip of a strategy-based conception of message production — a conception that leads to dubious views about what makes for good message category schemes (comprehensiveness, etc.) and to dubious procedures for establishing the fit of cases to theoretical categories (naive raters' judgments, etc.).

#### *Breaking the Grip of "Strategy"*

There are now a number of arguments on the table that suggest the inadequacies of strategy-based taxonomies and the strategy choice model of compliance gaining message production (for some discussion, see B. O'Keefe, 1990, pp. 99–102; D. O'Keefe, 1990, pp. 203–209; Seibold et al., 1985; not so easily obtained, but worth the effort, is Lambert, 1992). Kellermann and Cole make an impressive addition to these arguments — and yet still seem unable to break free from strategic-choice images.

So how might this grip of "strategy" be broken? In a spirit of provocation, I would suggest that theorists and researchers in this area simply avoid the word "strategy." The presumption, I believe, should be that if one's hypothesis or research question or claim uses (or worse, seems to require) the word "strategy," then it is malformed in some way.

In fact, Kellermann and Cole offer some pretty convincing arguments to support such a presumption. They are particularly lucid in pointing out that certain sorts of research questions (or hypotheses or claims) are malformed precisely because of a reliance on the con-

cept of "strategy use," a concept that is not a meaningful variable because there is no specified *feature* of strategy use. What this argument recommends is that research questions be phrased in terms of the message feature of interest, not "strategy" or "strategy use." Notice, thus, that "strategy" is entirely avoidable: instead of asking, "As consequences shift from short term to long term, does strategy use increase?" one can ask, "As consequences shift from short term to long term, does the politeness of compliance gaining messages increase?"

But (as I hope is obvious) my interest here is not simply the word "strategy," but the conceptual baggage that seems to accompany it. Strategy-based images appear to have a strong grip on thinking about compliance gaining message production, despite long-recognized difficulties. Kellermann and Cole's arguments, it seems to me, are another bullet in the heart of that conception of compliance gaining messages — and yet still it lives, still it influences even Kellermann and Cole's thinking. My recommendation that the word "strategy" be avoided is intended to offer a device whereby the conceptual grip of strategy-based images can be minimized. Notice, for instance, that if one thinks of one's message categories as simply message "categories," and not as "strategies," one may be less likely to suppose that the judgments of naive raters are required in order to "validate" the representativeness of examples.

But some may want to cling to

the idea of strategy, because they cannot conceive of explaining message production without it. Here, I want to invite consideration of how we might conceptualize message production rather differently from the way it is usually done.

Message production is almost always thought of as involving *choice among message types*. So, for instance, people can pursue compliance in different ways, which naturally suggests something like the strategic choice model. And thus there is a natural reluctance to let go of “strategy”—after all, message producers are apparently choosing among alternative general message categories (which one might naturally want to call “strategies”).

What I want to suggest is that one might consider thinking about the message production process in a way that does *not* involve such choice. Suppose, for example, that we think about message producers as simply saying what is on their minds. That is, suppose that message producers simply express their currently active thoughts (for some discussion of such a view, see Lambert, 1992; B. O’Keefe, 1990, 1992, in press). There is no choice of message type here, no selection of one message strategy (or message category or message type) over another; people just say what they think. (Now different people may think different things, and so say different things, leading to the observed variability across persons in message production—but for everyone the message production process is simply a matter of expressing current thoughts.)

From this point of view, the necessity for “strategy” and “choice” evaporates. Message producers do not choose among different strategies. Their messages may instantiate different message categories but not because any message producer *chooses* among those categories. A message producer simply expresses his or her current thoughts.

My point here is not to advocate this express-current-thoughts image of message production. It is just to show how one might conceive of message production in a different way, in a way that does not require the concepts of “strategy” and “choice.” Our current theorizing about message production is generally dominated—implicitly or explicitly—by images of strategic choice, but it need not be so.

---

### *Conclusion*

For some time now, evidence and argument has been accumulating that shows serious defects in strategy-based images of compliance gaining message classification and production. Kellermann and Cole’s article provides a particularly impressive indictment of this approach to compliance gaining classification and points the way to a positive alternative, a feature-based conception of the description and analysis of compliance gaining messages. However, Kellermann and Cole’s thinking on this score displays the strong hold that strategic-choice images have on theorizing in this domain, for even they are unable to embrace fully a feature-based approach to



message production. But a feature-based approach suggests that the concept of strategy is more trouble than it is worth—it is unnecessary; it invites malformed research questions; it encourages misguided thinking about the validity of message descriptions; it suggests inappropriate criteria for the assessment of message classification systems. It is time to take the decisive step of putting strategy-based analyses behind us, in favor of feature-based approaches.

---

Author

Daniel J. O'Keefe is an associate professor in the Department of Speech Communication, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, IL 61801.

---

References

- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lambert, B. L. (1992). A connectionist model of message design (Doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 53 (1993), 2161A. (University Microfilms no. DA9236510)
- O'Keefe, B. J. (1990). The logic of regulative communication: Understanding the rationality of message designs. In J. P. Dillard (Ed.), *Seeking compliance: The production of interpersonal influence messages* (pp. 87–104). Scottsdale, AZ: Gorsuch Scarisbrick.
- O'Keefe, B. J. (1992). Developing and testing rational models of message design. *Human Communication Research*, 18, 637–649.
- O'Keefe, B. J. (in press). Variation, adaptation, and functional explanation in the study of message design. In G. Philipsen & T. Albrecht (Eds.), *Developing theories of communication*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- O'Keefe, D. J. (1990). *Persuasion: Theory and research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Seibold, D. R. Cantrill, J. G., & Meyers, R. A. (1985). Communication and interpersonal influence. In M. L. Knapp & G. R. Miller (Eds.), *Handbook of interpersonal communication* (pp. 551–611). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

*Compliance Gaining*  
**Validity Assessments  
 of Compliance  
 Gaining Exemplars**

---

by Michael E. Roloff

Kellermann and Cole provide a comprehensive critique of the compliance gaining literature that should give pause to scholars. In a thorough and specific manner, they evaluate the validity of both conceptualizations and operationalizations of the compliance gaining strategies contained in various taxonomies. Based upon the evidence, they conclude that significant portions of the taxonomies do not cohere, that the strategy definitions contained within the typologies are often inadequately explicated, and that many exemplars employed to operationalize strategies have low representational validity. As a result, it is difficult to make sense of the findings reported in the literature and these grave problems in classification systems make problematic both literature reviews and meta-analyses. In essence, although the emperor is not entirely naked, there are significant gaps in apparel!