

LANGUAGE AS A POWER VECTOR IN BUILDING REALITY - APPROACHES TO THE ANALYSIS OF WORKPLACE DISCOURSE

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Abstract

This article aims at analysing the natural occurrence of institutional talk in workplace environments, focusing on its characteristics, such as goal orientation, specific constraints, institutional role, but also on the interpersonal dimension it always includes. Workplace talk occurs in a wide range of settings from talk between co-workers, to international business communication. We have focused on the unidirectional and decision-making discourse genre, providing illustrative examples of this frequently used genre in our attempt to show the way in which speakers signal and negotiate genre in the pursuit of transactional goals. Moreover, I have also examined the relational features of workplace discourse, as an ever present component of specific workplace

genres. My final aim has been to show that the existence of relational markers carry out important functions within the workplace discourse, proposing different examples for investigating the participants' both transactional and relational goals.

Keywords: institutional discourse, transactional goal, relational goal, relational markers, workplace interactions

1.1. Language as social interaction

Social psychologists have long had an interest in language, and, watching the current social psychological scene, have focused on the so called “social cognition” (Semin and Fiedler, 1992) Social cognition refers to the mental processing of information about the social world. The term “social” refers to the objects of cognition (that is, people) and the psychological mechanisms which enable the individual subjects to perceive themselves and other people in particular ways in particular circumstances. A more interesting and useful approach of the concept is given by Forgas (1981) concerns the way in which perception and description of the social world are done by people as members of particular cultures or groups and the way in which the social world is thought about or described in the course of social interaction. These different usages of the term “social cognition” have rather different implications for the study of discourse. Discourse analysis, which refers to the production and comprehension of language above the level of the sentence. That sense of discourse is rendered by cognitive processes like span of attention, ability to make inferences, conversational implicatures, the ability to be sensitive to textual coherence and cohesion. The sense of discourse seen as a cognitive work is linked with the social, cultural or political circumstances of its

production. Van Dijk enumerates a number of classic social psychological phenomena which seem to depend on discourse: “*After all, there are few fundamental socio-psychological notions that do not have obvious links with language use in communicative context, that is, with different forms of text or talk. Social perception, impression management, attitude change and persuasion, attribution, categorization, intergroup, relations, stereotypes, social representations and interaction are only some of the major areas of current social psychology in which discourse plays a part*”.(1990: 164)

Thus, interactional linguists and discourse analysts are quite clear in their beliefs that social interaction is the place of language use: what we know and understand about interaction complements our ability to use language. The central goal is the analysis of “language as it is used in everyday life by members of the social order, that vehicle of communication in which they argue with their wives, joke with their friends, and deceive their enemies” (Labov: 1972) Actually, each approach to discourse incorporates this insight into its specific methods and concepts. Speech act theory focuses upon the linguistic actions that we perform towards another person (initiating an interaction). The cooperative principle (on which we will focus later), so important in Gricean pragmatics is a principle applicable to human interactions, relying on the way people interpret one another’s meaning during the interaction with each other. To be more specific, each approach to discourse views language as social interaction in the sense that it is a process where one person has an effect on other. Ochs (1988: 15) stated that “*activity mediates linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge and that knowledge and activity impact one another*”. Moreover, we should add that the activity most pertinent to our understanding of discourse is interactive activity, which is directed to another person and has a potential for affecting that other person.

1.2. Language and power

In what follows, we would like to focus on language seen as, besides a social interaction, an important tool in the production, maintenance and change of social relations of power. It is an attempt to increase consciousness of how language contributes to the labelling, manipulation and domination of some people by others. We will address and approach the problem of how to relate speakers' goals and intention to surface discourse features, the linguistic way they signal and make inferences about communicative goals.

The framework that we have chosen is the institutional environment, focusing on analysing the interpersonal dimension of workplace talk associated with specific institutional roles (employer- employee, manager- subordinate, employee- employee type).

We will see that in different qualitative analyses of a variety of encounters, while institutional role and relative power are important factors, the roles and the identities taken up in the discourse are negotiated, and may or may not correspond to their institutional roles. Speakers, sometimes, invoke identities related to their relational goals which are less asymmetrical than their institutional roles. Relational side sequences, which involve a shift in footing and alignment, are evidence of such identity negotiation. Using a genre- based approach we will try to identify a further type of dominance in addition to institutional dominance or asymmetry: discursive dominance, illustrating the use of certain linguistic mechanisms to render it, on the one hand, and showing that there is a tendency for dominant speakers (due to their superior institutional role) to reduce discursive asymmetry through the use of politeness and solidarity strategies, on the other hand. The concept of "intersubjectivity" might be invoked, assuming that the discourse participants share a co-

conception of the world” (Overstreet and Yule, 1997). Thus, the efforts of the dominant speakers to reduce asymmetry can be seen as an attempt to achieve intersubjectivity. Discourse participants always have a clear goal in any interaction. Tracy and N. Coupland (1990) claim that the speakers usually have several goals, and at least two types of goal are evident: “the “transactional” goals and the “relational” goals. In workplace discourse, the speakers may be primarily concerned with getting things done , therefore, with transactional goals. However, taking a multiple goals approach to discourse means acknowledging that, in most types of discourse speakers orient to both transactional and relational goals, although one goal might be dominant.

Moreover, many linguists claim that the speakers’ relational goals are also important when describing workplace discourse. Manifestations of relational goals in institutional environment often involve the notion of “politeness” or “face-work”, concepts developed principally by Goffman (1972) and Brown and Levinson (1987). “Face” is an “individual positive social value (Goffman, 1972), that is, maintain in one’s own and other participants’ face in the course of an interaction, and avoid or correcting threats that arise. Brown and Levinson n (1987) distinguish between positive and negative politeness, both of them involving the attempt to keep unimpeded one’s face. Many instances of a relational orientation involve either positive or negative politeness, especially when dealing with a boss-employee transactional talk.

2. Transactional goal and interpersonal markers

In what follows, we shall provide instances of institutional directive discourse where the main transactional goals are task-completion delegated by the manager towards their employees, or decision-making discussions, providing an overview of a range of linguistic devices dealing with

interpersonal aspects of language use which are relevant for an examination of the speakers' relational goals. We shall investigate a series of interpersonal markers used in task delegation and decision-making discourses. The following types of interpersonal markers will be analyzed at the discourse level: modal verbs, hedges, intensifiers, vague language, evaluative language, idioms and metaphors. All these lexico- grammatical features could be described as having modal meanings, as they can all express speaker stance, but we will use the term "modality" especially for modal verbs (*could, must, should etc*), modal lexical verbs (*think, want, believe etc*), modal adjectives (*certain, necessary, compulsory etc*), modal adverbs (*maybe, definitely, probably*) and modal nouns (*possibility, opinion, view etc*). They all express the speaker's degree of commitment and a range of modal meanings: possibility, volition, necessity, ability etc. A. Koester (2006) investigated in detail the workplace talk, drawing up a corpus of naturally occurring office conversations recorded in a variety of workplaces . Modal items, he says, "were the most frequent of the lexico-grammatical markers investigated in the corpus".

Another way of expressing either commitment or detachment to an assertion is by using *hedges*. (words or constructions used to lessen the impact of an utterance due to different constraints) and intensifiers. Depending on the context the same adverbs like *sort of, just, really, a bit* can be used pragmatically either as hedges or intensifiers .

Example1: "*I don't know what to add. Let's just say it was nobody's fault.*"

Example2: "I don't know what to add. This is just too much!"

The adverb *just* functioned in the first example as a hedge, giving the discourse a mitigating tinge, whereas in the second example it is used as an intensifier, emphasizing the speaker's commitment to what they are saying.

Another interpersonal marker used in institutional talk is the so called “*vague language*” rendered by vague approximators like *around, about,* vague manners referring to entities (*stuff, thing*)and categories like *something, things like that*. Their role is to make the speaker’s discourse more or less specific, accurate. According to Chanell (1994), there are ten possible communicative functions of vague language , but A Koester reduces the to two big categories: 1. Those that are related to the information state of the participants and serve the transactional function of language and 2. Those related to the relational aspect of the interaction, including self-protection, politeness, power.

One of the major functions of interpersonal linguistic devices is evaluation. Within institutional discourse, evaluative language is mainly used by the management , referring to speakers’ judgments of goodness or desirability , also called appraisal.

Let us examine the following dialogue, part of a business meeting, where A is the manager of the company).

A: *“Hello, Michael! Thank you for coming. I’m sorry to say that the sales last month were sort of disappointing. Can you tell me why?”*

B: *Well, it has been a tough period, the orders have been very difficult getting out....I will show you some numbers.*

A: *Yeah, we’re thinking together on that..... just wanted to tell you about it. Some action should be taken, right?*

This is an instance of a decision-making conversation, covertly directive, an episodic structure consisting of a series of problem- solution patterns stressed put by different interpersonal markers.

Many decision- making conversations follow a problem-solution pattern. Hoey (1983) identifies a textual pattern with the following phases: situation→problem→response/solution→evaluation.

Examining the linguistic manifestation of this dialogue, we may argue that the linguistic system provides the resources for pursuing discourse goals. It deals, obviously, with a transactional goal, but the relational goals are also expressed.

At the opening phase of the encounter, the words *sorry* and *disappointing* provide a clear frame for the interaction, where the manager expresses his feelings, regarding the sales of the previous month. This is a statement based on a fact and he is entitled by his position in the company to analyze and evaluate the situation. However, in order to keep up the positive face, which is a “positive social value”, according to Goffman (1982) of his addressee, A uses a hedge, *sort of*, softening the message that is intended to be delivered to the addressee and, thus, avoiding face-threatening acts , facilitating the task for both parties and, consequently, conveying the message that what the addressee is being asked to understand is not so much an infringement on his freedom of action. Moving on, a query, under the form of a question, introduced by a modal verb follows. As we have mentioned earlier, the semantics of modality is very complex, and different types of meaning can be expressed through modality: possibility, obligation, necessity, volition, intention, prediction, inclination etc. Lyons (1977) broadly divided them into two categories: deontic modality, expressing necessity to perform acts and epistemic modality, expressing degrees of commitment to the truth of a proposition. In the dialogue above, the modal verb *can* functions as a epistemic modal, performing both transactional and relational goals. On the one hand, *can* introduces a query

that regards the feasibility of an action, most frequently used in transactional genres, but, on the other hand, has a relational orientation. The unequal relationship of the interlocutors (boss-employee), which is common in unidirectional genres, often results in greater threats to face. Therefore, this use of the modal *can* has a so called “politeness” function, which involves avoiding or mitigating threats to the face.

Further on, B justifies himself, admits, evaluates and explains the situation, appealing to the in order to express a high degree of commitment to the veracity or accuracy of things. It is both used to announce a future action and to show the commitment of the speaker, implying the idea of volition, determination and personal orientation.

B replies politely, maintaining the positive face of his interlocutor. When discourse participants can be seen to make efforts to preserve their own or others’ positive or negative face, they are clearly oriented to relational goals. It is exactly what A is doing with his reply, reinforcing the addressee’s self-esteem by invoking common ground. Other reasons might be building a positive relationship or creating a pleasant atmosphere or even a feeling of intimacy. Expressions of solidarity, as in the example above, go beyond politeness, and are indicative of an affective dimension of relational goals. Further on, he adds an instance of vague language, which contributes to negative politeness, which, according to Brown and Levinson (1978) has the function of minimizing the imposition caused by a face-threatening act. Thus, the speaker is attending to the relational aspect of the interaction, even in explicitly framing their task goals. It is also true that it also initiates a new phase of the conversation which constitutes an imposition on the addressee’s freedom of action: ” *Some action should be taken, right?* ”

Moving on, another another interpersonal marker that usually occurs in decision-making and discussing genre is the idiom or metaphor, whose first role to play is that of evaluation. As discussed earlier, decision-making always focusses on a problem which needs to be solved and usually follows a problem-solution pattern (Hoey, 1994): the problem phase (*a bit of pain, a real headache, rough day, goin' crazy, hangin' over our heads, being in the red* etc), the response/solution phase (*come up, cook up, sit down and talk, wrack our brains, figure out* etc) and the evaluating phase (*that was close, dead easy, makes sense, it never hurts, works for me, pay for the course* etc).

The fact that these idioms and metaphors are frequently used in different conversations to discuss solutions to different problems is an indication that they have become pragmatically specialized as signaling markers..

For instance, in the following example:

A: Can I have a word with you?

B: You can have a word but I am sure it will not do any good!, the idiom is quite a clear signal that the speaker ,even if, at first, he reluctantly agrees to have a word, evaluates this negatively as surely unlikely to lead to a solution.

So, idioms like *have a word, let's sit and talk*, act, at the discourse level, as signaling devices , because they draw the attention to themselves and thus foreground key elements and phases of the discourse; but they also function interpersonally . Talking about problems and their solution is a highly evaluative business, thus, the idioms used in problem-solution patterns also perform an evaluative function, being markers of subjective stance and are used by the participants in these genres to make evaluations and express judgments and opinions. But, as Powell (1992) explains and proves, idioms function more often as negative evaluation. Moon (1998) found that idioms were used for negative evaluations twice as frequently as for positive ones. She suggests this

is because idioms allow speakers to express themselves more indirectly than with literal expressions, and that they are, consequently, useful politeness and mitigating devices in performing negative evaluation.

Let's take this example, where two colleagues talk about their boss:

A: I heard that the CFO has resigned!

B: That's a blow! But he has been in the red for some time now!

A: Yeah, such is life!

The first idiom is used in the dialogue to evaluate the piece of breaking news. The speaker sustains his first remark using another idiom, explanatory on the one hand, but also mitigating the impact of the piece of news. By using this idiom instead of a literal expression, B is being polite in performing a negative evaluation. By his reply, A creates a bond of solidarity between the speakers.

3. Conclusions

We might argue that institutional talk blends almost always with relational talk. An overview of a range of linguistic approaches which deal with interpersonal aspects of language has been provided in our attempt to examine the participants' transactional and relational goals. We have identified a number of functions which interpersonal devices can perform, focusing on one stance in the institutional environment (manager- employee), among which the most interesting were the expression of commitment/detachment, judgments, opinions etc. A wide range of linguistic devices can play the role of "interpersonal markers", of which we have analyzed the modals, the hedges, vague language, intensifiers, evaluative language.

In the analysis of the interpersonal markers, we tried to show that they play an important role in workplace discourse, illustrating that in decision-making and discussing genres or unidirectional genres, linguistic devices like

deontic modals, vague language, hedges were most frequently used. Even if they primarily have a transactional goal, all these interpersonal markers also play an important role in terms of speakers' relational goals: being vague and using hedges allow speakers to mitigate or minimize the unequal discursive relationship in these genres. These devices perform, therefore, a face-saving politeness function and keeping up the Gricean cooperative principle.

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