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ORAL DISCOURSE AND EDUCATION

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CONVERSATIONAL PATTERNS ACROSS GENDER, CLASS,  
AND ETHNICITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR CLASSROOM  
DISCOURSE

Tannen (1984) introduces the term "conversational style" to refer to the unique collection of communicative habits that individuals develop – all the ways they say what they mean – influenced by regional and cultural background, ethnicity, class, age, and gender, as well as numerous other influences such as sexual orientation, profession, and personality. According to Tannen, when individuals' systems for signaling meaning and framing interaction are relatively similar, meaning is likely to be understood more or less as intended. When they are relatively different, speakers' meaning, interactional intentions, and abilities may be misjudged.

In schools that draw their student bodies from multiple speech communities, classroom interaction is susceptible to breakdowns in communication including misunderstandings and misjudgments attributable to conversational style differences; such breakdowns can profoundly affect the school's accomplishment of its mission. This review summarises research into the nature of stylistic differences that are associated with gender, social class, and ethnicity, and their impact on classroom discourse – and on students' educational experiences.

EARLY RESEARCH

Investigation of conversational style patterns across class, gender and ethnicity has its roots in the study of classroom language within the ethnography of communication, ethnomethodology, and sociolinguistics. Early research identified cultural differences in communicative styles between teachers and their students as a major factor in low achievement, since teachers tend to evaluate students' participation based on their own sociolinguistic expectations. Cazden's history of research from 1966 to 1986 on 'actual classroom talk' (1986, p. 433) notes that the focus on communicative style grew out of a new awareness that speech behavior is sensitive to context and that the classroom context is not wholly of the participants' making.

Other early research, mainly from psychology, sociology, communications, and education, explored differences in gender-related communicative styles as a factor in girls' lower performance, focusing on girls' and boys' differential interaction with the teacher in whole-class formats.

Overviews of work during the 1970s and 1980s identify the pattern that has been investigated by subsequent work: Boys tend to talk more in the classroom across the educational spectrum (Coates, 1993; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Swann, 1992; Treichler & Kramarae, 1983).

### MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Major work on ethnic and social class differences in conversational style includes Philips' (1983) ethnography of children's school and community behavior (based on research conducted in the early 1970s) on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation. Philips demonstrated that patterns of students' participation that were negatively evaluated in school were positively valued in the community. Native American students participated in official classroom interaction less than their teachers expected them to, responding less often and less fully to teachers' questions, seldom initiating or interrupting to get the floor. Such patterns were illuminated by norms in the community, where children who asserted themselves were viewed as pretentious and bold, and where children were expected to participate in collective rather than solo performances. Significantly, Philips showed that the discontinuity between community and school norms could result in Indian children behaving more rambunctiously than their Anglo peers – not as a reflection of behavior tolerated in the Indian community but because the level of physical activity accepted by the White teachers was so much greater than that accepted by Indians that the Indian children mistakenly concluded, in effect, that there were no holds barred in the White classroom.

Other cultural groups show a disinclination to take the floor in mainstream classes. Malcolm (1979, 1982) reports that indigenous (Aboriginal Australian) students may decline to reply to a teacher's elicitation, or may do so belatedly or in concert with another speaker. Pacific Island students at a New Zealand girls school withdraw from academic interaction that would spotlight the individual, a culturally inappropriate role for them (Jones, 1987). Corson (1993) points out the role of teachers in maintaining interactional conditions that cast culturally based conversational style as a problem.

Heath (1983) not only compared community and school norms of interaction but also shed light on the interaction of race and class. Based on long-term ethnographic work in two rural working-class communities, one Black and one White, Heath found that the children from the working-class communities did not learn the social interactional rules for school literacy events that are more similar to the community interactional patterns of the mainstream middle class townspeople, both Black and White. For example, children from the Black working class community had difficulty when teachers called for 'a strict recounting of facts based on a lesson' because

'The request for a story which simply recounts facts accurately has no parallel in their community' (Heath, 1983, p. 296). Children from the working class White community were able to do this, but were not able to fulfill teachers' requests to "make up" a story or to put themselves "in the shoes of a character" in a story from their reading book, because in their community such 'fanciful, creative, and imaginative accounts . . . would bring punishment or a charge of lying' (p. 296).

At the Kamehameha Early Education Project in Hawaii, anthropological insights on such conflicting school/community norms contributed to design of a culturally appropriate literacy program for non-middle class Native Hawaiian children who were having trouble learning to read (Au & Jordan, 1981). Reading lessons incorporated aspects of a Hawaiian speech event, "talk story", characterized by co-narration among multiple speakers (Watson-Gegeo & Boggs, 1977), and teachers learned to participate as interested adults and co-narrators rather than as dispensers of turns at talk. The researchers emphasize that the reading program includes other elements as well, but the successful incorporation of children's culturally-based cognitive and interactive abilities into school literacy tasks has provided an important exemplar for research-based intervention.

The micro-ethnographic work of Frederick Erickson and his students, begun in the 1970s, also contributed to understanding the processes and consequences of mismatched interactive styles between home and school, particularly with regard to rhythmic synchrony, turntaking, and listener behavior. Focusing on the co-occurrence of stylistic elements and participant identity, Erickson and his students devised methods for tracking elements of 'participation structures' such as turn-taking patterns and rights to the conversational floor (Erickson & Shultz, 1981). Comparing participation structures in structurally similar events – meal time in Italian American children's homes and classroom lessons – Florio and Shultz (1979) found that an Italian-American child would be chastised at school for talking "out of turn" when he participated in a way that was accepted and expected at home.

Current research continues to reflect many of the concerns that are the focus of this classic work: attention to literacy events, the fine-grained analysis of structurally complex interaction, and investigation of the educational consequences of culturally-associated style differences. Many subsequent and current studies reflect the direct or indirect influence of the theoretical framework of contextualization cues developed by Gumperz (1982) and the focus on literacy practices in home and school developed by Cook-Gumperz (1986).

One such research program has evolved from Michaels' (1981) study of "sharing time" in a racially integrated first grade classroom. Michaels identified two culturally-based narrative styles used by students when called upon to address the class: a topic-centered style, preferred by the

White teacher and generally followed by White students, mentioned a narrow topic and produced related details sequentially. In contrast, a topic-associating, episodic style, often used by Black students, established a general topic and then took up other topics suggested by it. The styles differ both in possible topics for a narrative and in how topics are developed. Children whose narrative style differed from that of the teacher were penalized for telling stories that seemed pointless.

Subsequent research on teachers' responses to children's use of these two narrative styles involved playing recordings of episodic and topic-centered stories told in standard English for students at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. As anticipated, Whites preferred the topic-centered stories: They found the episodic stories hard to follow and attributed them to low-achieving students with language problems or even family or emotional problems (Cazden, 1988). Black graduate students appreciated the topic-centered stories, but also praised the use of detail and description in the episodic stories.

Related work by Gee (1989) identifies contrasting narrative devices in a story told to peers by an 11-year-old working class Black girl and one told by a White middle class girl of the same age to an adult. The Black girl conveyed meaning by patterns of rhythm, sound play, repetition, syntactic and semantic parallelism, and changes in tempo, pitch and loudness; the White girl relied primarily on content strategies, such as topic/comment and background/foreground.

Another important contribution to understanding the influence of ethnicity on narrative style is Scollon and Scollon (1984), showing how the discourse structure of Athabaskan narratives and the negotiated nature of Athabaskan conceptions of story meaning contrast with the essayist tradition preferred at school – to the detriment of Athabaskan children in Anglo-influenced classrooms.

Collins (1988) shows that teachers' instructional practices can be influenced by students' community-influenced verbal style. In examining elementary school reading groups, Collins observed that children who used discourse styles and dialect features associated with Black English Vernacular (BEV) when reading aloud frequently received instruction that centered on decoding – sound-word drill – whereas children who read aloud in standard English received instruction that centered on comprehension: Correction of their errors focused on the meaning of the passage they were reading.

In considering the connection between community-influenced style and school success, Corson (1993) argues that the poor school achievement of children from working class, low-income, or minority social group backgrounds is due not entirely to discontinuities between the home and the school, but also to the family's orientation to the dominant style. Some non-mainstream parents work to replicate a school-like interactional setting

at home. This echoes McDermott and Gospodinoff's (1981) contention that stylistic contrasts 'are secondary to the political relations between members of the different groups both in the classroom and in the larger community' (p. 212), and that such political relations explain why stylistic differences are not ameliorated over time. Gee (1990) argues too that the differences in style must be seen as ideological – aspects of the broad Discourses that sort students for school success or failure. These issues are relevant for gender-related conversational styles as well.

Early work on gender and language led researchers to investigate the nature of classroom talk in which girls tend to participate less than boys. Based on two decades of observing and analyzing classroom interaction, Sadker and Sadker (1994) identified some of the strategies used by boys, girls, and teachers that result in boys speaking more in the classroom: Boys tend to call out more often, volunteer to speak more often, and disrupt more than girls. Teachers collude in making boys' voices heard by responding to boys' comments regardless of content, waiting longer for them to answer, fixing their gaze on the boys' section of the classroom when formulating questions, and by giving boys more helpful feedback (for example, by asking boys more difficult questions and more follow-up questions, while girls are often rewarded for contributions with a compliment).

A number of researchers argue that the discrepancy in how often girls and boys participate results, in part, from educational practices that institutionalize styles more typically used by boys and men (Corson, 1993; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Tannen, 1991; Treichler & Kramarae, 1983). Maltz and Borker (1982), summarizing research by numerous others, explain that girls and boys learn to use different strategies in same-sex peer groups. Girls' groups tend to have an egalitarian ethos, so girls learn to use strategies that maintain an appearance of equality. Boys' groups tend to be organized hierarchically, so boys learn to use strategies that raise their status such as attempting to seize center stage by exhibiting skill, displaying knowledge, and challenging and resisting challenges.

Tannen (1991) outlines ways in which college classrooms are more congenial to young men's language experiences than to young women's: First, classroom discussions entail putting oneself forward in front of a large group of people and being judged based on verbal display. Second, students may have different ethics of participation. Many men who speak freely in class assume that it is their job to think of contributions and to try to get the floor to express them, whereas many women monitor their participation not only to get the floor but also to avoid getting it too often, so as not to appear aggressive or overbearing. Those who speak freely may assume that less talkative students have nothing to say, and those who rein themselves in may assume that the talkative students are taking more than their share of class time. Third, our educational system is based on the assumption that learning occurs best in a public debate format

by which individuals express ideas in the most absolute form possible, followed by argument and challenge. Ong (1981) demonstrates that this ritual opposition is more reflective of male culture, experience, and training than of female (see reviews by V. Edwards; A.D. Edwards; and Heller in this volume, and by Freeman; Baugh; and Norton in Volume 8).

#### WORK IN PROGRESS

Most of the work on conversational style and classroom discourse has shown that styles influenced by ethnicity, class, and gender can result in a conflict of norms that contributes to some students' marginalization and failure. But several studies in classrooms where the social identities of teachers and students are more similar have found participants following shared norms that contrast with general patterns of school talk. Foster (1995) examined an African American professor's strategic use of grammatical forms and interactional strategies associated with African American English (AAE). While the professor generally used standard English in accomplishing classroom control, her discourse about the curriculum was peppered with AAE forms, repetition, variations in pitch and tempo, and call and response that invites student participation.

Adger's (1998) study of talk in elementary classrooms where students and teacher are Black focuses on dialect choice as conversational style. Students shift away from African American Vernacular English forms, their usual dialect for instructional talk, toward standard English when literacy tasks invite them to take up the authoritative footing usually reserved for teachers. The popular view that only standard English is appropriate for classroom talk is disputed by these empirical studies that connect dialect and activity types.

Investigation of classroom talk has begun to focus on student/student interaction among language minority students in group work where students construct their own learning and establish a shared, school-centered community (Gutierrez, 1995). Lerner (1995) finds that such groups provide the interactional resources for young bilingual students to develop the literate discourse style that schools value. He observed young students using the incomplete question format with rising intonation typical of teacher talk to guide their group work. Investigating ways in which bilingual third graders framed group activity, Duran and Szymanski (1995) found that without the teacher's presence, students carried out language and literacy development activities such as producing extended academic talk, correcting pronunciation, and collaboratively producing text.

Recent research on gender-related styles has also begun to focus on peer interactions in small groups in order to determine whether girls and boys participate more equally in that format. A number of studies identify

parameters that may influence the nature and quantity of participation. Group composition may influence a student's talk because, as Tannen observes, 'Conversational styles are not absolute; everyone's style changes in response to the context and others' styles so that the same person who can be "oppressed" into silence in one context can become the talkative "oppressor" in another' (1991, p. B3).

Reay (1991) considers how girls' and boys' talk in small groups is affected by gender composition. In a house-building activity, an all-girls group organized collaboratively, made decisions by consensus, framed ideas as suggestions and as proposals for joint action, appealed to 'fairness', and gave each other positive feedback. In contrast, a mixed-sex group was organized hierarchically. The boys in the group used explicit commands and marginalized one of the girls.

Holden's (1993) study of 30 small groups in a primary school suggests that both curriculum area and proportion of girls to boys affect the nature of talk and its distribution. In language tasks, girls talked more than boys, unless there were more boys than girls in the group. In the latter situation, talk was distributed the least unequally, though boys still talked more than girls. In addition, this configuration increased boys' use of abstract language to reason, hypothesize and sometimes come to a conclusion, but it substantially decreased girls' use of this type of talk. Conversely, in mathematics/technology tasks, talk was distributed the least unequally when there were more girls than boys.

Sommers and Lawrence's (1992) study of eight mixed-sex peer response groups in college-level writing classes suggests once again the significance of participant structure. The authors found that girls and boys participated equally in 'teacher-directed' groups in which the teacher instructed students to take the floor in turn. This contrasted with 'student-directed' groups which were allowed (or required) to devise their own participant structures – with the result that men spoke more often and took more turns, while women tended to acquiesce more and initiate less. In both types of groups, women and men tended to contribute in different ways: Women tended to mitigate their suggestions, phrasing them as questions or possibilities, or as what they thought or felt. Men tended to make suggestions as definitive statements.

Further evidence that small group structure may in some instances benefit boys and disadvantage girls is provided by Cheshire and Jenkins (1991) who analyze the interactions of three mixed-sex groups taking the oral General Certificate of Secondary Education English exam. They found that girls tended to use supportive strategies: backchanneling, overlapping, asking questions, and building on others' topics. However, some of the judges attributed these behaviors to the entire group, incorrectly extending them to the boys. In addition, some judges assessed supportive talk in gender-stereotypical ways, penalizing girls for not playing a sus-

taining role, but rewarding boys who made relatively limited attempts to support others.

### PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES

Unfortunately, research on the educational consequences of conversational style differences has had limited impact on the problem of differential school performance. The classic studies are read in teacher education courses, and many of the researchers who contribute to the study of conversational style across gender, class, and ethnicity also work closely with teachers. Yet traditional instructional methods rooted in conversational norms characteristic of the dominant group continue to predominate. Assumptions that privilege those norms and cast others as incorrect and irrelevant to adult success continue to be broadly accepted. Some teachers resist the idea of differentiating among students. As Tannen explains,

Ignoring such issues as gender and ethnicity becomes a source of pride: 'I treat everyone the same.' But treating people the same is not equal treatment if they are not the same.

The classroom is a different environment for those who feel comfortable putting themselves forward in a group than it is for those who find the prospect of doing so chastening, or even terrifying. . . . Telling them to feel free to jump in will not make them feel free; one's sense of timing, of one's rights and obligations in a classroom, are automatic, learned over years of interaction (1991, p. B3).

Researchers and educators are challenged not only to find ways to bring this body of research to bear on schools but also to influence more generally social attitudes toward ways of speaking. (See Volume 6 on "Knowledge About Language" and the many reviews that address the need for greater language awareness among teachers.)

### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

School, classroom, and community-based research on patterns of conversational style has the potential to help schools accommodate the increasingly diverse population of students. Researcher/practitioner teams need to examine local school processes and outcomes and respond to their findings in ways that benefit students. Erickson (1997) and Heath (1994) provide models for how teachers can engage students in investigating language and style in their own communities and incorporating this learning into school practices.

An assumption underlying much of the work on gender-related conversational styles is that increased talk in the classroom is beneficial. Research is needed to determine whether increased talk is in fact beneficial to all

students or whether for some students observation and listening are more important. Placing value on equal individual participation in itself reflects culturally-mediated norms.

Potential questions for inquiry include how schools can balance the need to respect students' linguistic, conversational and interactional styles with the possible need for students to learn the styles that are valued in school and in the world of work they are expected to enter. With respect to gender, for example, numerous studies support the finding that boys' interaction tends to be more competitive, girls' more egalitarian, at least on the surface. The style used by many boys and men is more closely aligned with educational practices and values than the style used by many girls and women. But what are the implications of these patterns? Should girls be taught to be more competitive? Should boys be taught to be less so? Should schools attempt to accommodate both styles? Rich and DeVitis (1992) identify competitiveness in – to name only a few areas – testing, grading, promotion, class ranking, scholastic awards, and students' striving against others for teachers' limited attention and favorable treatment. Educators must determine how best to accommodate or attempt to modify student behavior within a system that actively values competition and individual achievement. Moreover, at the same time that children's individual futures are being shaped by their school experience, educators must consider what values children are acquiring and how these values will shape the society of which the children will become members.

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