

LANGUAGE AND POWER

by
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Conversation bristles with references to power and related concepts, like manipulation, dominance, and control. People see others (though far less often themselves) as having, or seeking to have and wield, these forces. Such forces, and impressions about people they believe have and use them, are largely worked out in talk. As a linguist who analyzes conversation, I am interested in how talk actually reflects (or enhances or depletes) power, and also how ways of talking are perceived as evidence of such effects, valid or not.

In this discussion, I examine two assumptions and one hypothesis. The assumptions are: 1) that power is concrete and resides in people or in their behaviors, including ways of talking, and 2) that the effect of domination or manipulation is necessarily evidence of the intention to dominate or manipulate. The hypothesis is that power resides in social roles and social interaction. In particular, I will focus on the linguistic phenomena of questions and interruptions. Finally, I will discuss the relationship between power, which tends to be seen in fairly negative terms, with the related motivation of solidarity, which tends to be seen in positive terms.

Margaret Mead pointed out cross-cultural differences in assumptions about how power and status are expressed in behavior. She observed that in American society, we tend to associate the observer stance with the one of higher status, the performer stance with the one of lower status. For example, in an American classroom, the teacher calls on children, who must perform for the teacher's evaluation. In other cultures, the children in a classroom would not think of speaking; their role is to sit and listen to the teacher's verbal performance. Classroom ethnographers have observed unfortunate consequences for Hispanic or American Indian children showing respect and deference by not talking, are misjudged by their teachers to be insolent or uncooperative.

Thus, in cross-cultural situations, one cannot trust one's impressions of others' intentions. Yet even within what seems to be the same culture, there are differences in ways of showing what one means. Some of my own research has focused on subcultural differences between members of what seems to be the same culture—differences between Americans of different ethnic backgrounds, from different regions of the country, or simply of different genders. Close examination of subcultural differences often results in the discovery that what seems at first like a predictable correspondence—people in the position of power talk this way—upon examination doesn't hold up.

One linguistic form that has received considerable attention is questions. This is natural, since

questions seem to require an answer, and constraining the actions of others is what power is all about. Suzanne Scollon, for example, has found that Alaskan Athabaskans avoid asking questions almost entirely. She hypothesizes that this is because they perceive questions to be too coercive—a violation of others' rights not to speak. But are questions necessarily coercive in themselves?

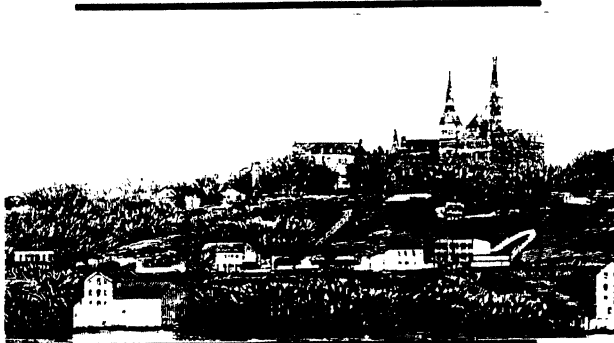
Many hypotheses about powerful/powerless ways of talking come from research on male/female differences in talk. Women, it is said, often use questions as indirect ways of indicating what they want, rather than stating what they want—for example, "Would you like some lunch?" instead of "I'm hungry and want some lunch." Asking questions here is a way of avoiding making a demand—a strategy of one out of power. But in other settings, it is the one in power who asks the questions—in a courtroom setting, for example, or in a police interrogation, or an interview.

Who uses questions depends on the form and purpose for which they are used. In an institution of higher learning, it is the students who ask questions and have a right to expect that they be answered, but this is predicated on the superior knowledge of the teacher. On the same principle, women often ask men for information by way of setting them up as the knowledgeable ones, and to initiate and prolong interaction.

A well known study by Pamela Fishman found that in ongoing conversation among couples at home, women's topics tended to die for lack of attention, whereas men's topics tended to become the focus of extended discussion as the women kept them alive by asking questions. In a study of the dialogue between the husband and wife in Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes From a Marriage*, Robin Lakoff and I found that both the husband and wife asked each other questions, but their questions had different forms and different functions. The wife tended to throw out a barrage of questions that seemed to beg for interaction but actually prevented it by being overwhelming ("Would you like an omelette or a sandwich and some beer? Or would you like a real meal? Shall I fry some eggs and bacon? Or heat up some soup?"), and fantasy-like rhetorical questions ("Why can't we be big and fat and good-tempered?"). The husband, however, asked taunting and sarcastic questions which prevented communication in a different way ("Do you know how long I've had this in mind? Can you guess? I don't mean about Paula, but about leaving you and the children. Can you guess?").

In a study of doctor-patient communication in a pediatric setting, Cynthia Wallat and I found, in an interaction in which the doctor examined a child in the mother's presence, that the mother elicited information without asking questions. She stated a concern, and the doctor answered as if a question had been asked. Now in some sense it would seem that the mother must have a tremendous lot of power in that setting because she got the doctor to answer her questions without even asking them. Such analyses have been made of indirect speech acts—for example, that a rich employer can get a butler or maid to open a window by simply stating, "It's hot in here." Yet we would not want to make that interpretation about the

doctor/patient setting. On the contrary, the person in power in this situation would seem obviously to be the physician, regardless of whether or not she answers the patient's (or mother's) questions. If she chooses to answer indirect questions, this is her choice—and her exercise of choice seems to reflect the power of her role. This choice, however, does not show up in the discourse—it resides in our real world knowledge about medical settings.



Susan Ervin-Tripp wanted to find out at what age young children were able to understand indirect requests. She devised an experiment in which she showed children a picture of some children applying finger-paints to the wall, just as an adult woman walks in. In one case, the child-subjects are told that the woman says, "Stop painting the wall." In another, she says, "Are you painting the wall?" In yet a third, she says nothing. Ervin-Tripp expected to find that very young children would not understand that the question, "Are you painting the wall?" is an indirect way to get them to stop. She found instead that it made no difference what—or whether—the mother spoke. It was sufficient for her to appear, for the child subjects to understand that the woman in the picture was telling them to stop doing what they were doing.

In a study of indirectness in discourse among Greeks and Americans, I found that very often when Greeks say "yes" they mean "no" (similar findings are reported by Patricia Clancy about Japanese). For example, a Greek woman explained to me that when she wanted to do something she first had to ask her husband (or, before marriage, her father). If he said, "Yes, if you want to, you can," she understood that she couldn't. If he said, "Yes, of course, you should do it," then she understood that she could.

It would be tempting here to conclude that this woman is so oppressed that she must obey even unspoken preferences—"Your wish is my command." But the woman might actually not feel commanded. She might genuinely feel that she is choosing, of her own free will, to do what someone else wants. So, the situation is very complex in terms of whether or not the man in these situations is exercising more or less power by choosing to communicate indirectly.

Anthropologists Herve Varenne and Ray McDermott of Columbia University's Teachers College suggests that power resides in social roles and social interaction, not in individuals and their independent behaviors. Accordingly, my fear is that often, in

interpretation, we begin with our real-world assumptions about who has power and who doesn't, and interpret the use of various linguistic devices in support of those assumptions. But, features used in one case by the powerful can be used in other cases by the powerless.

Another linguistic device that can be understood in this light is interruption. Again, research on male/female interaction is relevant. Candace West has found that men repeatedly interrupt women in conversation. She draws the conclusion that this shows that men dominate women. Yet Herve Varenne found, in studying the transcripts of talk in a family's living room, that those who use interruption are the ones lacking in power; interruption is a kind of last resort bid for attention. Whenever the husband and wife began a positive interaction with each other, the children interrupted them.

Moreover, in order for an interruption to take place, two parties have to act. One person has to start talking, and another has to stop. When the one who stops feels interrupted, it is often the case that the one who starts did not expect the other to stop. So it is the interrupted who is creating the interruption.

This became very clear in my own analysis of dinner table conversation among New Yorkers and Californians. The New Yorkers often spoke simultaneously. Chiming in did not make an interruption; it created a chorus of voices that the New Yorkers heard as evidence of a successful conversation. But when they tried to chime in with a non-New Yorker, the speaker stopped—and felt interrupted.

Another minor difference in conversational style had a major effect on interaction. The New Yorkers expected slightly shorter pauses between sentences and between speakers. So while a Californian was pausing within a turn, or was waiting for a pause to take a turn, a New Yorker got the feeling there was an uncomfortable silence, and kindly filled it in with more talk. Such generosity was perceived not as kindness at all, but as hogging the floor, not giving others a chance to speak—in short, as dominating. Yet the effect of domination did not reflect an intention to dominate. It was a structural effect of differing habits which was as confusing and disconcerting to the faster-paced talkers as to the slower-paced ones. Whereas the former were perceived as dominating, the later were perceived as withholding and unfriendly, not holding up their end of the conversation.

In addition to the potential confusion from differing conversational styles, there is a more general potential double meaning in linguistic messages. One way this is seen is in the motivations of power and solidarity. The same linguistic features can be used as a sign of power or of solidarity. For example, others may call you by your first name because you are friends—solidarity—or because they are superior to you in status—power. My colleague, Ralph Fasold, gives an example of the misunderstanding of such a sign when an old woman who lived in a nursing home boasted that she was really "in" with the nurses because they called her by her first name. Fasold suspected she was mistaking their lack of respect for her advanced years as a show of solidarity.