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Chapter 1

Remarks on Discourse and Power

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Following is a transcription, with only minor revisions of remarks that were made in the role of respondent to the papers delivered at the session, "Power Through Discourse." I begin these remarks with two general and unrelated observations about the papers gathered here, and then move to a discussion of the question suggested by them: What is power? Then I comment on three linguistic phenomena that are discussed in many of these papers: questions, topic, and interruptions. Based on these observations, I caution against too hasty correlations of discourse phenomena with underlying forces such as power, showing how the same phenomenon can be evidence of different, even opposite, motivations, depending on the context and roles of participants. I illustrate this with the linguistic concept of power and solidarity. Finally, I end with a caution about the power of our own expertise as analysts of interaction.

The papers collected here can be seen in descending order of focus on power: they discuss increasingly less concrete manifestations of power, but no less embodiment of power. Reordered in this way, the three papers based on the legal setting (those by Philips, Walker, and Shuy) discuss the most extreme and obvious form of power. The public negotiation situation considered by Agar is next. After that comes the McDermott and Tylbor study of school interaction, and finally Varenne's analysis of the subtle power distinctions in family talk. It is particularly enlightening to be able to compare discourse in these diverse settings, even as it is particularly hazardous, given the differences in so many aspects of the discourse studied and the theoretical and methodological approaches taken to them.

An important aspect of the papers concerned with the legal setting which was not their focus is, as Philips puts it, that some of the participants are in the know and some are not. This in itself gives those in the know a kind of power, at the same time that their power gives them access to knowledge. One aspect of their knowledge is their awareness that the talk created on the

spot in face-to-face interaction was really not the significant end product. Rather, the encounters yielded a permanent record which would look different in many ways from the oral event, and which might be more important in the long run.

This is an interesting and important factor. The nature of truth and reality that we expect in face-to-face conversation is different from what we expect in writing. As suggested by McDermott and Tylbor, we really don't expect —and even less ever get—an explicit kind of truth in conversation, as we expect in writing.

Consider, in this regard, the discourse produced by three of the participants in the legal setting. In Shuy's data, a government agent knew that the interaction in which he was participating was being taped. It is likely, then, that he was asking questions with an eye to what the video record would look like. In the case of the deposition (Walker), the lawyer was aware that the proceeding would yield a transcript, had seen innumerable such transcripts in the past, and had seen their effects on the outcomes of cases. The deposed witness had probably never experienced or seen any and would therefore draw upon her experience in interaction as a reference point in deciding how to talk. In the case of the change of plea proceeding (Philips), the judge is familiar with court transcripts and their status as legal documents; the defendant is not.

Such a distinction between those aware of the resultant written record and those focused only on the current interaction is common in interaction in institutional settings. Similarly, the professionals, in numerous contexts, are doing something they do all the time, whereas the others are doing something they do rarely.[1] Thus doctors, lawyers, and teachers, in examining rooms, courts, and classrooms (respectively, of course) are doing business-as-usual on their home turf, while their clients pass through the system, often confused and always ignorant of the intricacies of the system. This suggests a problem inherent in understanding power in discourse. As McDermott puts it, "the meaning is really in the situation," and most of what people understand in interaction can't be located in the words spoken. This explains, in part, Varenne's suggestion that when we look at a transcript, what we see is very different from what went on moment to moment.

When we look at a videotape or transcript, we see both more and less than what actually occurred. There is less there because much of what people understand in interaction is not derived from the words spoken. There is more there because of the inherent indeterminacy of speech which is lost when it is written down. Written discourse appears definite where the spoken

[1] This may obtain in many professions. In the movie *Klute,* a call girl (played by Jane Fonda) tells her therapist that when she meets a client, he is nervous but she is not. This, she says, is just fine, presumably because it puts her in control—an interesting perspective on the question of who has the power in such an interaction.

discourse was indefinite. This can be seen even in the uttering of words. When a word is uttered it doesn't have a perfect form. Maybe it was realized in reduced form like "n" in "ham'n'eggs" or not uttered at all like "do you" in "Wanna go?" But when written, "ham and eggs," the word "and" is fully realized, and, unless the intention is to mirror speech, "wanna go?" will become "Do you want to go?" in writing. Words as spoken are typically reduced, slurred, run together, or even purposely ambiguous.[2] Their meaning is mediated by how they are spoken. When written, words are discrete, definite, and committed.

WHAT IS POWER?

With this as a basis, I want to tackle the question, *What is power?* The papers collected here (like much current conversation) bristle with words like power, manipulation, and control. What are the relationships among these? Is manipulation the same as power, or is manipulation what you do when you don't have power? Is "control" the same in "control of topic" and "control of the trucking industry"? Is power in court the same power as power in a family relationship, or as the power of production?

I suggest that the notion of power or control is always metaphoric when applied to interaction and discourse. Is there any situation in which power is equal? It is misleading, I believe, to reify power as if there is one source of it and somebody has it and someone else doesn't. I suggest that there are many different kinds of power and influence that are interrelated and have varied manifestations. When people are taking different roles, it may not be the case that one has power and one doesn't, but that they have different kinds of power, and they are exercising it in different ways.

This is similar to a caution that Frake (1977) and others have sounded about application of frames theory. They warn against assuming that frames are static and can be identified, as if one could walk into a situation and say, "Show me your frames." Similarly, we cannot confront a situation and ask, "Okay. Where's the power?" Power may be there in different forms and in different ways—all constantly changing in dynamic response to the behavior of others.

To conclude this section, I refer to a line from Varenne's paper: "A power analysis of an interaction is not, strictly speaking, an analysis of interaction." This is important to remember. When we study an interaction and ask what is going on, we are necessarily applying interpretations from other

[2] An instance of intended ambiguity in writing is when schoolchildren, uncertain of how to spell a word, intentionally make a mess in place of the questionable letter(s) in hopes that the teacher will assume the student intended to correct a wrong form with a right one, or will simply discern the correct form in there somewhere and move on.

coherence systems (a term from Gregory Bateson that Varenne uses). This is necessarily so because without a lot of background knowledge, interaction is incomprehensible. But it must be borne in mind so that our interpretations can be monitored and checked as we go, rather than being accepted as concrete.

DISCOURSE DEVICES

I will now comment on two discourse devices that are discussed in these chapters and have been much discussed in linguistics: questions and topic.

Questions

There has been a great deal of research on the form and function of questions in interaction. Addressing a general issue first, I would observe that there are some contradictory findings about the power of questions in various papers here and elsewhere, suggesting that their function is complex. For example, Walker tells us, and cites others who tell us, that lawyers' and judges' rights to demand an answer to their questions is a manifestation of their power. This sounds right.

At the same time, however, William Hall (in a paper that was included in the panel which gave rise to this volume but is not included here) tells us that in white as compared to black families he studied, twice as many adult-generated questions got no response from children. Would we therefore want to say that white adults have less power than their black counterparts, because they do not demand a response to their questions?

In a study of talk in a pediatric medical setting, Tannen and Wallat (1983) found that the mother "asked questions" which did not have the form of questions. She stated a concern, and the doctor responded as if she had asked a question. Now in some sense it would seem that the mother must have a tremendous amount 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. It has been argued, for example, that an employer can get a butler or maid to open a window simply by stating, "It's hot in here," because of superior status or power. Yet we would not want to make that interpretation about the doctor/patient setting. On the contrary, the person in power in a medical setting is conventionally assumed to be the physician. If the physician responds to the mother's indirect questions, she does so by choice—and her exercise of choice is a reflection of her power. This choice, however, does not show up in the discourse; we find it in our real world knowledge about medical settings and possible responses to indirectness in discourse.

Ervin-Tripp (1978) wanted to find out at what age young children were able to understand indirect requests. She devised an experiment by which she showed child subjects a picture of children applying finger-paints to a wall, at the moment when their mother walked in. In one case, the mother is shown to say, "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 "Are you painting the wall?" is an indirect way to get them to stop. She found instead that it made no difference what the mother said. It was sufficient for her to appear for the children to understand that she was telling them to stop doing what they were doing—an activity that all children recognize as cause for adult disapproval.

While some have argued that those in power may use indirect requests (or, as in Ervin-Tripp's study, the most indirect request of all—silence), others have suggested that only a person in a position of power can make a direct request like "Shut the window." In other words, the meaning is in the context rather than the words spoken or not spoken.

In a study of indirectness in discourse among Greeks and Americans (Tannen 1981), I found (and similar observations have frequently been made for Japanese) that when Greeks say "yes" they may mean "no". This surpasses Shuy's point: Not only does "uhuh" not mean "yes," but "yes" doesn't necessarily mean "yes" either. For example, a Greek woman explained to me that when she wanted to do something she had to ask her husband (or, previously, her father) first. If he said, "Yes, you can go if you want," she understood that she shouldn't. If he said, "Yes, of course, you should go," then she understood that she could.

It would be tempting here to conclude that Greek women are so oppressed that they must obey even hinted preferences—"Your wish is my command." But bear in mind that the woman might actually not feel commanded. She may feel—and prefer to feel—that she is choosing to do what someone else wants because of her relationship to him. (For discussion of indirectness see Tannen 1981, 1986). So the situation is very complex in terms of whether or not the man in these situations is exercising more or less power by communicating indirectly. 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.

Topic

Topic is a phenomenon that has received much recent attention from linguists. The inclusion of data from family interaction is particularly enlightening here, because it is one of the more unfocused (to borrow a term from Scollon & Scollon, 1981) forms of discourse, in comparison to relatively

focused and comparatively less common forms of discourse studied in the other papers, and frequently studied by linguists.

It is suggested in this volume and elsewhere that the person who controls the topic is the person who controls the interaction. This is seen in Shuy's and Walker's as well as other legal data. But in most settings, a topic cannot become a topic simply because someone raised it; someone else must pick it up. There has to be, in McDermott's terms, collusion. In this regard, it is not sufficient to consider what is in the transcript or even in the interaction. We have to ask what else could have happened, in order to see that what did occur was a joint production.

In a study of a single dinner table conversation (Tannen, 1984), I tried to count how many topics each participant had raised. I found, however, that decisions about what constituted a topic and who raised it were highly interpretive. For example, an extended discussion centered on the question of whether adopted children more closely resemble their biological or adoptive parents. An obvious conclusion was that this topic—adoption—was raised by the participant, Peter, whose comment was the first that could be considered "on" this topic. He had commented that he had read an article about a study which found that the IQ's of adopted children more closely resembled those of their biological parents.

But how accurate would it be to say that Peter raised the topic of adoption? Discussion centered on the topic of adoption only because others picked it up and channeled it in this way. If no one had picked up this topic, we would not count it as one, and yet Peter's behavior would have been the same. Furthermore, the fact that discussion centered on adoption, rather than IQ's, is the doing of other participants. Later in the dinner table conversation, discussion turns to whether intelligence is inherited or nurtured, and whether or not, in consequence, educational funds should concentrate on gifted or disadvantaged children. At that point Peter returned to the article he had read, saying that's why he found it interesting. It is likely that the adoption aspect was not the topic he intended to raise, and it is not clear that he intended to "raise a topic" as compared to "making a comment." Thus a topic becomes a topic, as a statement may become a question, because of the way others respond to it.

Continuing to focus on someone else's topic may give them power, but it may also be seen to reflect the power of the attention-giver. Varenne observes that whereas initially the wife in his study does not pick up on her husband's introduction of the china closet topic, she gets back to it and then makes an exaggerated show of interest in it by asking a whole series of questions about it. The china closet is still in some sense the husband's topic, but whether or not it was realized as one, and how much or little attention was paid to it, was the doing of the wife.

We should not, therefore, be hasty to correlate surface features with underlying forces such as power. 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, seen very dramatically in Shuy's data in which, as he explains, those who were taping an interaction as part of a scam were watching it from another room and were able to see when the target was about to say something that they didn't want on the record. They could then interrupt the interaction and prevent it from being said. This ability to obstruct by interrupting grows out of their being in control—in power. Yet the people who use interruption in just this way, in Varenne's study, are the ones lacking in power. For them, interruption is a last resort bid for attention. Whenever the husband and wife begin a positive interaction with each other, the children interrupt them.

CONCLUSION: VERSATILITY OF LINGUISTIC DEVICES

I would like to end with some thoughts about the potential double meaning in any message. Perhaps the most relevant way of demonstrating this is the linguistic concept of power and solidarity, which are both served by the same linguistic means. For example, I may call you by your first name because we are friends—solidarity—or because I am superior to you in status —power. Ralph Fasold (cited and discussed in Tannen, 1986) gives an example of the misinterpretation of such a sign by an old woman who said she was really in tight with the nurses in her nursing home because they called her by her first name. Fasold suspected she was mistaking their lack of respect for her advanced years as a sign of solidarity.

This suggests a very crucial question about whether the perception of an exercise of power, of control, of domination, is always synonymous with the intent to exercise it. If a doctor or professor addresses a patient or student by first name in order to be friendly—solidarity—he or she may be taken to be patronizing. This particular ambiguity could be solved by asking whether the client or student addressed by first name is entitled to reciprocate. But even if the form of address is reciprocal, it is usually the doctor or professor who has the prerogative of "allowing" the patient or student to use this form of address, and this itself is a sign of power or status. Thus people in possession of socially defined power are constrained in how their words and actions are likely to be interpreted, quite apart from their intentions, just as much as are those out of power.

A second word of caution is suggested by the title of this volume: power through discourse. I have had occasion to write about language for popular

audiences and have found that publishers and agents are most interested in a book about how to achieve power through discourse. People want a how-to book in which experts help them exercise power over others.

It is clear that linguistic and interactive skill does give people power over others. But we have to think about how we as experts want to be of service to people in their pursuit of this goal. We would all agree, I think, that it would be good to help medical patients, witnesses, job applicants, and innocent targets of scams to get more control through talk. That is, we can help people protect themselves against those who have more power than they. But what if those who are planning a scam, or con artists, or advertisers, or any of a range of manipulaters, get hold of our writings and find ways to better accomplish their unseemly goals? I will end, therefore, on a note of caution, not only with respect to the manipulation of the concept of power in our theoretical paradigms and analytical frameworks, but also with respect to the uses our work may be put to, as we go beyond theory to application. In other words, we have to consider seriously our own power, when we move beyond the comfortable academic analysis of discourse to the real world exercise of power.

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