

SOCIOLOGICAL VARIABLES AND INTERACTIONAL STRATEGIES: CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN INSTRUCTORS AND STUDENTS AT A CATALAN UNIVERSITY*

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1. *Introducció*

This article is the result of the observation and analysis of a series of conversations between instructors and students at a Catalan university during office hours. The purpose of the research was to discover the extent to which what people say and how they say it can be explained in terms of the context in which communication is taking place.

The main reasons for choosing this specific type of interactions were, in the first place, my familiarity with that specific social environment. This kind of research allows us to constantly assess the linguistic data with features of context which are not always explicit. In the second place, as Fairclough (1985, 1989) says, by concentrating on the everyday life of social institutions, where social structure is stronger, we can integrate particular social actions within the larger framework of social structure. This type of analysis is, therefore, an attempt to bridge the gap between micro-sociolinguistics and macro-sociolinguistics, whereby observation of specific verbal phenomena can be used to describe and explain particular social features.

2. *A pragmatic approach to language*

The term pragmatics has its etymological origin in the Greek word *pragma*, which means *acting, action, activity*. A pragmatic approach to language will concentrate, therefore, on language as communication, as a means of acting upon the world. It attempts to discover the principles regulating speakers' intentions as well as hearers' understandings. While syntax connects words to other words, and semantics words to referents, pragmatics connects words to their speakers and the context in which they are uttered: what speakers hope to achieve by talking, the relation between the form they choose and the effect they want it to have.

The necessary question at this point is, what do we mean by *context*?. Firstly, by *context* we mean the *time and space* in which communication takes place.

* This article is a written version of a lecture given by the author at the Catalonian Studies Program of the University of California Berkeley, 28th October 1992.

Secondly, *context* refers to the *linguistic environment* of a certain expression. Finally, it may also refer to the *identities, beliefs, intentions, states and knowledge* of the participants and the rest of the members of the speech community in which the communicative event takes place (see Goodwin and Duranti (1992), for a complete revision of the different ways in which the concept has been used).

This article will concentrate on an aspect of the third meaning: the fact that entering a conversation involves, besides transferring information, starting, continuing or breaking up a relationship with a member of a social group who behaves according to certain social/ethical principles and who wants to live a life as happily as possible.

We will be looking at three main sociological variables that have a decisive influence on the way people interact: Distance, Power and Imposition. For each of these variables I will suggest what I think are *strategic moves* taken by the speakers. These moves are intended to clarify the social relationship between the speakers, and they involve selecting certain prosodic, lexical and grammatical items. The three variables that have been adopted for the analysis of the data were first applied in a systematic way by Brown and Levinson (1978), who attempted to rationalize the principles for constructing polite speech.

3. *Distance*

Distance is defined as

"a symmetrical social dimension of similarity/difference within which S [speaker] and H [hearer] stand" (Brown and Levinson 1978: 81-82).

The perception of Distance between two people is usually based on the frequency with which they interact and also on the content/purpose of their interactions. Distance may also be the product of the speaker's ascribed or acquired social attributes such as age, sex, occupation, etc. Thus, it could be (and very often is!) the case that a woman would feel her relationship with an unacquainted woman as being closer than with an unacquainted man.

The relevance of the Distance variable in the use of language can be seen in the fact that we all talk about different styles or registers, which depend mainly on the perception of shared experience between speaker and hearer. Thus, for example, in order to describe the different styles in English, Joos (1961) mentions the following: intimate, casual, consultative, formal and frozen.

Depending on the speakers' intentions, they may choose between increasing, diminishing or maintaining the variable Distance that they perceive between themselves and the hearer. In the verbal interactions analyzed, Distance is a variable that speakers are always perceived to be attempting to diminish. The strategic moves deployed can be defined in the following way: (i) appealing to the individual, (ii) breaking formality, (iii) sympathizing, (iv) denying social distance, and (v) prompting interactivity.

3.1. *Appealing to the individual*

One of the ways in which the speaker appeals to the hearer as an individual is by introducing a topic which is not directly related to the goal of the encounter. In doing this the speaker is suggesting to the addressee that he/she is willing to deal with him/her as an *equal* individual rather than as a representative of an institutional role, thereby acknowledging what they have in common rather than what differentiates them. In example (1) we have a situation in which the Instructor and the Student, after agreeing to close the encounter (notice the exchange of *molt bé*) become involved in a personal topic (i.e. the Student's flu). The Student takes advantage of the Instructor's leave-taking expression *bones festes* to try to get closer to him by introducing a topic which may eventually affect the Instructor, independently of his/her social status.

- (1)
- I |No:. Suposo que després de mirar tot això i >
 S |Em preocuparé de >
 >I començar a fer el treball, te'n sortiran. Mm?
 >S l'altre llibre. - Clar
 S Sí. Sí. Suposo que sí. - - Molt bé.
 I Molt bé. *Doncs bones festes, bon any.*
 S Igualment. A mi no m'han començat molt bé però bueno.
 I I perquè no t'han començat bé?
 S Amb (h) una (h) grip'
 I Ah bé. No. Això passa. Dona. (861-871)

3.2. *Breaking formality*

The introduction of expressions that are typical of a more informal register can be considered as another strategic move to reduce the Distance between the participants in a conversation. Examples of this are vocatives like *home*, *dona*, humorous remarks like *llevat que t'enviis per correu a tu mateixa* or a leave-taking expression like *venga*.

Example (2) is the continuation of (1) in the transcription. We can see here the use of the vocative *dona* and the irony present in the refusal of the Instructor to accept of the seriousness of the Student's flu.

- (2)
- S Amb (h)una (h) grip'
 I Ah bé. *No això passa. Dona*
 S |Desastroses.
 I Això és un refredat d'estar per casa. No. (870-873)

3.3. *Sympathizing*

This strategy has been proposed by Leech (1983: 131-33) as one of the maxims of the Politeness Principle. He defines it as Sympathy Maxim and it contains the following statements:

- (a) Minimize antipathy between *self* and *other*
 (b) Maximize sympathy between *self* and *other*

It consists mainly in showing concern about the addressee's feelings. This may take the form of positive feedback or expressions of solidarity towards the addressee.

In example (3) the Instructor expresses his positive feelings towards the conversation. Extract (4) belongs to a conversation in which the Instructor has informed the Student about the work involved in the course for students like her, who cannot attend classes regularly.

(3)

(I) Sí, home. Doncs és bo que - que tinguem: -
un primer contacte. (1530-1)

(4)

I Clar. Si fos la Universitat a Distància això,
doncs tindries més possibilitats més
facilitats de: de consulta telefònica

S !Oh clar. - Per supost. (794-797)

3.4. Denying the presence of Distance

One way of reducing the Distance between two people can be to create the impression of a shared background or communion between the speaker and the hearer. In order to achieve this the speaker needs to minimize disagreement and maximize agreement with the addressee. This strategic move corresponds to another maxim of Leech's Politeness Principle which is defined as Agreement Maxim (Leech 1983: 131-33). This expression of agreement should not be mistaken for the provision of backchannel like *mhm* and *hm*. It involves more explicit responses which go from the monosyllabic tokens *sí*, *clar*, *ja* to fully articulate responses like *estic totalment d'acord amb tu*. Another way of showing agreement is by anticipating what the other person is about to say.

Extract (5) contains three turns by the Student in which she expresses agreement with the Instructor on a lateral topic.

(5)

I Sí. Sí, sí. És el problema que tenim en
aquesta casa. Que hi ha molts bidells
molt personal de de serveis, però en >

S *Ja*
>I canvi ens falta personal docent.

S Sí, sí.

I I així van les coses.

S Com a tot arreu. Hm. - Mm l'extensió del
treball? (732-738)

The Instructor can also deny the existence of Distance by suggesting that he/she and the Student belong to the same group. This is done by using the first person plural when commenting on an action for which only the Student is responsible. In extract (6) we can see the two sides of the Instructor's role: on the one hand he identifies himself with the Student (e.g. *hauríem de fer la representació*) but, on the other hand, he presents himself as the authority who allows things to happen (e.g. [ells] *em poden donar un cassette*).

- (6)
I Això al juny. - - - I després, eh: - - Bé.
Hauríem de fer la representació. -
(xxx) Ho hauríem de fer en (plan) per
la prova final. - Tot i que *em poden*
donar un cassette amb: l'assaig amb
guió preparat. No? (495-498)

3.5. *Prompting interactivity*

One last way of reducing the perception of Distance in a conversation where one of the participants has all the power and relevant information and the other is there mainly to listen is to make the conversation more interactive. This strategy involves the insertion of short clues indicating that the construction of the discourse is a cooperative enterprise. The most representative particles with this specific function take the form of brief questions demanding backchannel. They usually appear after completed statements and their briefness is justified by the fact that they are intended to create the impression that the contribution of the hearer is essential for the development of the conversation. However, it is clear in our data that the Instructor does not expect a real interruption of his turn but rather a simple provision of verbal or visual backchannel. The instances observed in the data are the following: *eh?*, *no?*, *mm?*, *hm?* *mhm?*. In example (7) the Instructor is explaining the purpose of making a series of group reviews as part of a group project. Two aspects of the interaction are worth pointing out: (i) the synchrony between the actions of demanding and supplying backchannel after the first turn, which demonstrates the structural need of this type of move in conversation; and (ii) the number of interactivity tokens included in such a short stretch of conversation, which shows the interest of the Instructor in making his contribution as interactive as possible.

- (7)
(I) Es simplement una qüestió de comoditat
vostra.
S Ja.
I ¿Eh? No és que no puguem fer la recensió >
S lmhm
>I d'un altre. Naturalment que s'hi pot fer. No?
Però és que les recensions, en principi
les hauríem de fer igualment pel treball
de grup. Eh? (172-179)

4. *Power*

Brown and Levinson (1978: 82) say that somebody has Power over another when he/she can impose his/her own plans and self-evaluation (face) at the expense of the other person's plans and self-evaluation.

One of the implicit goals of the participants in an encounter of the type analyzed is to determine the Power relationship between them and abide by it. In this case, there is clearly one speaker, the Instructor, who has all the Power, both because of

his/her rank in the institution and because of his/her intellectual expertise. This does not mean, however, that their interaction must be entirely asymmetrical. Aspects of conversation such as topic control, turn-taking and the use of politeness, among others, can be manipulated by both the powerful and the powerless speaker to increase, diminish or maintain their interactive Power. The strategic moves adopted by the Student in our conversation have the function of acknowledging authority and those adopted by the Instructor serve him/her to assume authority.

4.1. *Acknowledging authority*

Because of the superior Power of the Instructor one of the things that the Student must make sure of is that what he/she intends to do has the Instructor's consent. However, the Instructor is not an arbitrary authority, his/her Power is also based on intellectual expertise. This explains the fact that besides requesting authorization, the Student also seeks advice from the Instructor. The result of this is that most of the questions that appear in the conversation are asked by the Student. Examples can be seen in extracts (8) and (9).

(8)

- I Mm <196> a baix a la biblioteca el podràs trobar.
 S D'acord. -- *I llavors, jo si faig aquest treball no he de fer la representació?* (441-443)

(9)

- S Venim per parlar amb vostè.
 I Hola.
 S El tema d'ensenyament i aprenentatge'
 I Sí'
 S *A quins autors en podem anar per fer:?* (1004-1008)

There is another indication of the difference in Power made explicit by the Student. This is the use of the formal pronoun *vostè* instead of the informal *tu*, when addressing the Instructor. Interestingly enough, none of the students whose conversations were tape-recorded used the *title + name* formula to address the Instructor, which would be another way of acknowledging his/her Power. In example (10) we can see how the Instructor addresses the Student with the *tu* pronoun and the Student addresses the Instructor by means of the *vostè* pronoun.

(10)

- S Venim per parlar amb *vostè*.
 I Hola
 S El tema d'ensenyament i aprenentatge'
 I Sí'
 S *A quins autors en podem anar per fer:*
 I Autors
 S Autors
 I Amb això
 S *l(xxx) llibres.*
 I Els *heu* de buscar *vostaltres*. La bibliografia és una part del treball. És la primera part del treball. (1004-1014)

4.2. *Assuming authority*

If Instructors are to fulfill the expectations that the university has placed on them, they must be able to assume authority. Since it is the responsibility of Instructors to organize the educational relationship between themselves and the Student, their speech should contain utterances with directive expressions, requesting some kind of action from the Student.

In example (11) the Instructor advises the Student on how to prepare a course project. Notice the imperative *vés*, the verb of obligation *hauràs de* and the indicative form *vas comentant* with an imperative meaning.

(11)

- I *Vés de tant en tant a l'Alcover Moll, també. -
Sobretot per preparar el: text. Convé ->*
- S *lMhm hm*
- >I *que quan trïis el text pel comentari filològic
eh: sigui del que es presti a comentar. Eh: és
a dir que - que no sigui molt senzill. El primer
pas a fer és el trasllat al català actual, perquè >*
- S *l Ja.*
- >I *serà un fragment català medieval. El primer
pas a fer és el trasllat al català actual. -
l després - línia a línia vas comentant - els
fenòmens que es presenten. - Perquè en
aquells moments tu estaràs davant - d'un text -
text - d'un català a mig evolucionar. el català
dels segles (depèn però) - de l'època que el
tries, no? Segles tretze, catorze o quinze'.
Hauràs de procurar trobar l'ètim al llatí
vulgar (604-619)*

5. *Imposition*

The last sociological variable is Imposition, which is defined as the degree to which one's efforts towards an achievement interfere with somebody else's wants of self-determination and approval by the others (Brown and Levinson 1978: 82). The degree of Imposition is measured by taking into account two kinds of expenditure: (i) services (including time) and (ii) goods (including non-material goods like information). Imposition is also measured in connection with the situation. Thus an action like borrowing money may involve little Imposition when addressing an intimate friend but it becomes more imposing when addressing an unacquainted person.

As in the case of the other two variables, language offers to its users the possibility of increasing or diminishing the perception of Imposition when someone requests an action from another person.

5.1. *Mitigating imposition in directions*

In the type of conversations studied, when the Instructor directs the Student to undertake a certain course of action he/she runs the risk of sounding as if he/she wanted to impose his/her wishes. In order to avoid this risk, the speaker can resort to a series of *non-asserive* expressions:

- (i) Conditional instead of simple present (especially with verbs of obligation and permission like *haver de*, *poder* and *voler*).
- (ii) The expression *vull dir* preceding an impositive action (one possible interpretation would be to suggest that 'wanting to say something is not the same as actually saying it').
- (iii) Verbal periphrases like *mirar de*, *convenir que*, *procurar que* and parenthetical expressions like *a ser possible* or *tenir manera*.

Extract (12) exemplifies the second strategy. The Students are explaining to the Instructor the problems they have in finding specific information in the library.

(12)

- S1 (...) i ens va dir que bueno que busquessim
però no: / vam trobar llibres però que
no / la informació es molt / no t'ho fica
en concret (diem doncs) =
I Oh no, és que en concret, *vull dir*, ho heu >
S1 | [smile] No, ja, però
S2 | Ja.
>I d'anar a buscar vosaltres, eh? Això és una part del
treball, eh? buscar bibliografia (...) (923-930)

Example (13) includes the first and the third possibilities. The Instructor requests the Student to give him her academic identification card. We can see three different types of non-imposing expressions: the first one avoids imposition by using the hypothetical mood (*hauries de*); in the second case the modal verb is substituted by a verbal periphrasis intended to show an understanding that the Student is not unwilling to collect her identification card but is unable to (*tens manera*); the third strategy diminishes the impression of imposition by implying that the addressee is free to decide on the most appropriate action to obtain an academic identification card (*o així*).

(13)

- I ¡Mhm. Em vas portar la: la fitxa ja?
S No. No la tinc encara. No.
I No.
I Doncs l'*hauries de* de, no sé. Secretaria
deu estar tancat ara.
S Mm.
I I no pots, *no tens manera* que algu et
reculli un imprès de fitxa *o així*? (245-253)

Example (14) is probably one of the best examples of the strategy consisting of giving options to the addressee in undertaking a course of action. In this case, the instructor successively supplies different options to the Student: (i) *demà*, (ii) *quan*

tinguis temps, (iii) demà passat, (iv) aquesta setmana, and (v) al més aviat que puguis.

(14)

I Aleshores, el que et podré mirar de fer - - és, a veure. - - Et podries arribar a l'IEI demà al matí *o o quan tinguis temps, demà passat, o aquesta setmana, al més aviat (que puguis)* i prendre nota del material informàtic que ja tenen a la guia de l'IEI. Perquè jo encara no sé exactament què hi ha. (1292-1297)

In order to understand how strong the need to diminish Imposition may be, depending on the social relationship between speaker and hearer, let us look at a brief exchange between two Instructors, example (15), in which they try to agree on such a simple matter as a time and place to meet.

(15)

I2 Hola.
 I1 Hola. - *Si vols m'esperes al teu despatx i vinc, vinc d'aquí a una estona. - Cinc minuts o deu.*
 I2 Vale doncs.
 I1 *!Què et sembla?*
 I2 Saps on és? (Si vols vinc) jo.
 I1 *!Sí*
 I2 *O com vulguis.* (563-570)

5.2. *Mitigating Imposition in directions*

The second strategy connected with the Imposition variable involves a clear acknowledgement of the action as an imposing one. In example (16), Imposition is acknowledged by the Student through the expression of gratefulness to the Instructor for having attended her.

(16)

I *!Té molt mèrit això té molt mèrit (xxx)*
 S *!Venga.Gràcies.*
 Eh? Bones festes. (881-883)

In extract (17) the Instructor clarifies what might be seen by the Student as an imposing action: to force a group of students to do a series of book reviews on the same topic.

(17)

S1 Las recensiones, se puede coger por ejemplo, ¿no? Podría tocarnos el primer tema este. ¿No? Pues ¿podría hacerse una recensión de cualquier otro tema? O tiene que ser necesariamente del del (.....)
 I Eh: jo *recomano que sigui del mateix centre d'interès. Per: una qüestió*

- vostra. No? per*
 [18 lines below in the transcription]
 I |Eh? *No és que no que no pugueu fer la*
 recensió d'un altre. Naturalment >
 S |Mhm.
 >I *que es pot fer. No? (152-177)*

6. *Final remarks*

I would like to conclude with a question that is very often asked to linguists in general, especially discourse analysts: "and now that you have torn this text apart, now that you have shown all the little tricks speakers resort to in order to get their way, now what?" My answer is threefold.

In the first place, this type of analysis can help us a bit more understand that area of Catalan society we are immersed in. It can help us to better understand why the educational process is sometimes not as successful as we would like it to be and, mainly, it can provide us with an empirical basis to talk about people and institutions, what they are like and the way they should be.

In the second place, this type of linguistic description shows that in learning how to use a language it is extremely important to realize that there is a lot more to learn than simply the linguistic code. Communication is not only a process of transfer of information but also a constant definition and redefinition of social roles. It is, therefore, extremely important to teach how to use a language bearing in mind the different contexts of use.

Finally, it is important to say that when we engage in this type of research we do not intend to come up with a list of prescriptions about what people should do 'in order to succeed in life'. Rather, our goal is to show that in an articulate society like ours language is, as Robin Lakoff (1990: 13) says, "a change-creating force and therefore to be feared and used, if at all, with great care, not unlike fire".

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TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

In order to facilitate the reading the transcribed extracts follow orthographical conventions. Other conventions used are:

- Pause.
- (xxx) Segment of speech not understood by transcriber.
- > The turn continues without a pause.

- = Contiguous turns by different speakers and without a noticeable pause.
- [] Paralinguistic and contextual information.
- | Beginning of overlapping speech.
- ' Terminal rising pitch, although not associated with a question.
- (h) Utterance delivered while laughing.
- / Interruption of tone unit.

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RESUM

Variables sociològiques i estratègies interactives: converses entre professors i estudiants en una universitat catalana

L'autor d'aquest article analitza 5 converses entre professors i alumnes d'una universitat catalana en hores d'atenció a l'alumne. La finalitat de l'estudi és la de descriure la relació entre les variables sociològiques Distància, Poder i Imposició proposades per Brown i Levinson (1978) i els tipus d'estratègies interactives que professors i alumnes adopten a l'hora de construir el seu discurs.

SUMMARY

The author of this article analyzes 5 conversations between instructors and students at a Catalan university during office hours. The aim of the study is to describe the relationship between the sociological variables of Distance, Power and Imposition proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978) and the types of strategies deployed by the instructors and students in constructing their discourse.