Discursive variation and discursive power in an institutional setting: A mixed-methods analysis
Michael Shepherd, University of Southern California

Sociolinguistic research in the tradition of Labov (1966, et seq.) has tended to focus on phonological and morphosyntactic variation, with discursive variation receiving relatively little attention (though see, e.g., Hasan 2004). Nevertheless, just as the incorporation of qualitative methods, such as ethnography (e.g., Eckert 1989, et seq.), has advanced sociolinguistics, the incorporation of quantitative variationist methods into the (traditionally qualitative) study of language-in-interaction can enhance discourse analysis. This is particularly evident in studies of institutional discourse, such as Conley and O’Barr’s (1990) research in small claims courts, which found (qualitatively) that most litigants use one of two discursive strategies in presenting their cases and (quantitatively) that users of the more successful strategy were, overwhelmingly, educated men, a finding that the authors explained as reflecting differential opportunities to acquire “powerful” discourses.

This paper explores discursive variation in another institutional setting—the classroom—examining synchronic and diachronic variation in the discursive strategies teachers use in initiating interactions with individual students. Teachers use two main strategies: “individual nominations”—selecting a student to respond without his/her having volunteered—and “invitations to bid”—soliciting students who are willing to respond to raise hands, then nominating one of the volunteers (Mehan 1979). This paper first examines the relative prevalence of these discursive strategies in detailed transcripts of 4.5 hours of third-grade lessons (students ages 8-9), video-recorded in several classrooms in 2008, and compares that with equivalent data from the 1970s (Mehan et al. 1976, Griffin & Humphrey 1978). This reveals a dramatic shift: In the 1970s, individual nominations constituted over 70% of teacher-initiated interactions (Mehan et al. 1976, Griffin & Humphrey 1978), whereas in today’s classrooms, individual nominations constitute less than 10%, and invitations to reply over 70%. Analysis of the adjacency-pair structure (Levinson 1983) and discursive functions of each strategy suggests a motivation for this shift. Individual nominations consist of a single adjacency pair: a combined cue/nomination first pair part followed by a student response. Functionally, these allow teachers to select any student to respond, which can help ensure equitable participation (Griffin & Humphrey 1978), though nominating students who have not volunteered risks eliciting dispreferred (incorrect/inappropriate) responses (McHoul 1978). The now predominant invitation to bid functions to reduce this risk by adding a volunteer-solicitation presequence, which, like other presequences (e.g., pre-invitations), helps avoid dispreferred responses (Liddicoat 2011). However, a regression analysis indicates that this shift to invitations to bid comes at the expense of equity, making how often a student volunteers (which averages from 2 times per lesson for some students to up to 18 times for others) the overwhelming determiner of how many opportunities he/she gets to contribute verbally, \( \beta = .84, t(28) = 8.16, p < .001 \).

Thus, blending quantitative variationist methods with traditional qualitative discourse analysis reveals how teachers’ shifting to predominantly invitations to bid puts less-outgoing students at a disadvantage, giving them fewer opportunities to practice not only advancing their ideas but accessing and using discursive power (cf. Conley & O’Barr 1990).

Keywords: discursive variation; discursive power; institutional discourse; critical discourse analysis; mixed methods