

APPROACHES TO ANALYSING WORKPLACE DISCOURSE

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Abstract

A range of approaches, originating within a variety of disciplines- sociology, anthropology and linguistics- have been used to study talk in institutional and workplace settings. The aim of this article is to touch on some of the key issues involved in collecting and analyzing workplace talk and to show how different approaches deal with these issues and what they can reveal about the data. Firstly, we will emphasize the role of context by examining different views and treatments of contexts and how these are linked to methodology, taking into account the fact that the different approaches to analyzing workplace discourse vary considerably in terms of how they define and deal with contexts. Next different natural occurring talks will be analyzed at the discourse level.

Keywords: institutional talk, discourse analysis, context, inferential framework, communicative goal.

1. Introduction

Workplace talk occurs in a wide range of settings from talk between co-workers, to interactions in service encounters, to international business communication. In this article, we will try to give an overview of what is distinctive about workplace discourse and why it warrants special investigation.

When language is used for communication, the co-participants typically employ one or more skills simultaneously: listening, speaking, reading or writing. They often switch quickly from one role to another or they are engaged in a task that involves carrying out several skills simultaneously (e.g. listening and writing). The language produced interactively by such co-participants is discourse, that is, language in use. Thus, as Cook (1989) pointed out, discourse analysis is useful for drawing attention to the language skills, which put users' knowledge of phonological, grammatical and lexical resources into action whenever language users achieve successful communication.

Although today discourse analysis can be considered a well-defined discipline on its own, it is closely linked with a number of other disciplines and could, in fact, serve as an umbrella term for a variety of approaches. Ethnography of communication, from the sociological point of view is language analysis of communicative behavior and of its role within given social contexts. Within linguistics, discourse analysis has taken at least two paths: one is the extension of grammatical analysis to include functional

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objectives and the other is the study of institutionalized language use within specific cultural settings. (Bathia, 1993). The latter, which we will look into, is concerned with describing actual communication within institutionalized contexts.

1. Chapter I – Institutional talk

The term “institutional talk” is frequently used in the literature to interactions in all kinds of workplace setting. According to Drew and Heritage (1992) there are three dimensions of interaction which distinguish the institutional discourse:

1. *Goal orientation “an orientation by at least one of the participants to some core goal, task or identity,conventionally associated with the institution”.*
2. *“Special and particular constraints on what one or both of the participants will treat as allowable contribution to the business at hand”.*
3. *“Inferential frameworks and procedures that are particular to the specific institutional contexts”*

The first dimension is clearly rendered in institutional talks, by specifically signaling of the discourse goal from the very beginning. There is a number of features of workplace talk, for instance, the recurrence of particular types of discursive activity which can be associated with specific workplace practices, such as instruction-giving, decision making, briefing. Meetings at work may also have an overall structural organization consisting of a number of phases, each of which plays a particular role in terms of goal of the meeting.

e.g. “Uhm..... I just wanted to tell you about mytalk to John”.

Constraints on what can be said or done can be manifested in a number of different ways: turn-taking systems, reduction of the range of interactional practices compared to ordinary conversations. The institutional context and the constraints it imposes is reflected in the lexical choice, most obviously when technical or professional jargon is used. Recent corpus-based research on spoken Business English (McCarthy and Handford, 2004) confirms that such institutional discourse is indeed different from casual conversation in terms of the relative frequencies of many lexico-grammatical items.

We will mainly focus on the third dimension, which is reflected in institutional talks, especially in turn design and adjacency pair structure, that is the action a turn is designed to perform and the way in which it is responded to (Heritage, 1997).

In conversation, in addition to managing new and old information in a coherent way, the interlocutors also have to take stock of and constantly monitor each other to control the turn-taking system of the target language in question since this is another feature of discourse in oral interaction. The conversational turn-taking design includes conventions governing, according to Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, (1974) matters such as: how conversations open and close, who speaks when and for how long, who can interrupt (and how this is done), how topics get changed, how much time can elapse between turns or between speakers, whether or not speakers can overlap, and whether or not can complete or repair each other’s utterances. Here, there are often important cultural differences in the way discourse communities do turn-taking. A lack of understanding of these differences can cause problems in cross cultural communication.

As I mentioned earlier, one important source of organization in the turn-taking system is adjacency pair, where the first speaker says something that conventionally requires of the interlocutor a response that is often partly predictable (sets up the expectation or the so called “conditional relevance”).

Conversation analysis has laid considerable emphasis upon the “sequential implicativeness” of conversation- the claim that any utterance will constrain what can follow it. A question produced by a speaker sequentially implicates an answer from another.

Here is a common example:

1. "Hello, how are you?"
2. "I'm fine, thank you."

In any given speech community, including institutional one, such adjacency pairs can have a highly conventionalized and formulaic phrases associated with them. Needless to say, mastering these conventions and phrases will greatly contribute to oral fluency and communicative competence.

However, in institutional talk, we can encounter more often the so-called power asymmetries in discourse (Button and Lee, 1987). In discourse analysis classification, this would be called critical discourse analysis. Its primary interest is to deconstruct and expose social inequality, legitimized through language use. Critical analysts believe that discourse tends to become normative with repeated use and, thus, neutral, but, in actual fact, especially in institutional talk, discourse is never neutral, it must be analyzed in terms of the political ideology, social history and power structure that it embodies and expresses explicitly or indirectly. In professional and workplace interactions, participants, therefore, take on particular institutional roles which are often asymmetrical (doctor-patient, teacher-student, employer-employee) in terms of knowledge and expertise or in terms of hierarchy. Speakers may make relevant their institutional identities through the discourse identities they take up.

Here is an example of a conversation in the marketing office, where an adjacency pair is produced by the CEO, John, and the marketing specialist, David:

John: "Haven't seen much in the way of campaign the last half of the week"

David: "...eh...Well, a lot of media, the surveys were very hard to do....stuff is...jammed"

David responds defensively to John's initiating comment, that the campaign has been poor, and attempts to explain the situation in terms of problems that have arisen. It is because of the institutional context and the role the speakers play within it (David is the head of the marketing department and he is expected to run the promotion campaign properly) so, it is inferred, implicated, that John's comment is heard as a kind of accusation against which tries to defend himself. Actually, John's comment has consequences well beyond the sequence and influences the rest of the conversation, in which David gives details of the problems with the campaign.

2. Chapter II – The role of context

Another important aspect that should be taken into account when dealing with institutional talk is that it is difficult for an outsider to understand what people are talking about. The topics and the procedures discussed, as well as the vocabulary, are specific to the work of the organisation and totally unfamiliar to the outsider as they lack the relevant background or context to make sense of the discourse. Thus, the importance of the context.

The term context in discourse analysis refers to all the factors and elements that are nonlinguistic and nontextual but which affect spoken and written communicative interaction. Halliday (1991) describes context as „the events that are going on around when people speak (and write)”. Context entails the situation within which the communicative interaction takes place. Discourse analysis of context entails a linguistic and cognitive choice made relevant to the interaction at hand.

For our specific purposes, two types of context are particularly important: 1) the situational context, that is, the purpose, the participants and the physical and temporal setting where communication takes place (pragmatics) and 2) the discourse context (the co-text), the stream of prior or subsequent language in which a language segment or exchange occurs (discourse). For example, if someone encounters a friend and says „Hello”, the person expects some sort of oral response. Or, if one hears

an utterance such as „Who else was there?“ one looks to prior discourse about the people present at some event in order to interpret the utterance.

Conversational analysis, which is one of the dominant methods used in analysing workplace talk, takes a quite different approach of the context. Schegloff (1992) proposes a talk-intrinsic definition of context, where talk is seen as creating its own context. Context is defined as dynamically created and expressed in and through interaction and only by examining the details of the talk it is possible to see which aspects of the socio-cultural context are oriented to by the participants. (Silverman, 1999). Basically, the idea is that it can not be simply assumed that all features of the institutional context will be relevant to an interaction within the institutional setting, but that evidence must be found in the talk itself. A very obvious case in which the institutional context does not seem to be oriented to by the discourse participants is the case of small talk at work; especially if the talk is about topics outside the workplace as in the following example:

Anne: „I’m going to a tent camp next weekend.“

Joe: Really? How nice!“

Anne: Yes, so , if the bear doesn’t eat me, I’ll be back.....the Monday after that.

Joe:“ Hahaha.....be careful, though!“

This is a typical example of small talk, where the conversation addresses topics outside work (activities at the weekend). The only indication that this conversation takes place at work is the reference to Monday.

On the other hand, it has been argued that by limiting the analysis only to verbal interactions, one may be missing essential background information that is relevant to the interpretation of any given stretch of institutional discourse.

Take the following dialogue between two colleagues, Dave and Mike, who work at the marketing department of a company:

Dave:“ And she said something about the December surveys, I don’t remember what it was.... did she say anything about the content?

Mike: „December surveys....uhm....

Dave: You know the four page thing? Have you not seen the draft? It has been on your desk for two days!!! It’s the same we did in October.“

Mike: „, I have not seen them, yet. But I can deal with them right now.

Dave: „Yeah....but maybe first I’ll find out whether she really wants the same thing.I’ll talk to her first.“

Obviously, it is difficult to make sense of this extract without some knowledge of the immediate context, the specific jobs Dave and Mike are discussing, the nature of the company and the respective roles of the speakers within it. Knowing that the conversation takes place at the marketing department, we can assume that the speakers talk about some surveys that should be carried out in December, but it is also essential to know who is responsible for what in relation to this job. Dave is, in fact, the company’s marketing specialist, who makes up the content of those surveys with the view of launching a new product, and Mike is the office administrator, whose job is to organize the whole campaign, and the *she*, referred to a couple of times, is the woman they deal with from the customer’s firm.

It is a typical characteristic of workplace discourse that documents in the physical environment are often the object of discussion, and therefore an integral part of the interaction. Finally, the nature of the relationship between the speakers also has an impact on how we interpret the discourse: Mike and Dave are on the same level within the company, that they have a friendly relationship, and, so, Dave's remark on Mike's delay in analysing the surveys is not perceived by Mike as hostile or threatening.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, we may say that even if a conversation analysis seems to be, in many respects, the best approach of looking into interaction in institutional environment, it is sometimes, quite difficult to make sense of the meaning of such interaction without the help of informants and without any knowledge of institutional structures and workplace practices. In other words, all the cohesive devices and the coherence organisation elements work within the wider co-text and need to be properly identified by anyone trying to interpret the meaning of the institutional text.

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