

Signaling Learner Stance through Multimodal Resources

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Stance refers to a display of a socially recognized epistemic or affective attitude toward a referent or proposition (Ochs, 1993). Although this display of attitude can be performed linguistically, paralinguistically, and non-verbally (Du Bois, 2007), it has primarily been explored in terms of *linguistic* strategies (use of reference terms, constructed dialogue, repetition, etc.) that can contribute to the process of socialization and the expression and construction of sociocultural identities and relationships. Gordon (2004), for instance, showed how members of one family socialized each other and constructed a shared identity as Democrats by using referring terms, repetition, narratives, constructed dialogue, and laughter to express positive and negative stances toward presidential candidates in the 2000 U.S. elections. Damari (2010) demonstrated how, during an interview, a married couple used constructed dialogue, constructed stance, verb tense, and adverbials to express their own and each other's stances and thus construct divergent identities related to their cultural differences. And in her analysis of interviews with members of a Jewish community in Philadelphia, Schiffirin (1984) found that, by expressing divergent stances or disagreements, her participants actually signaled closeness and solidarity.

Considering the significance stance can have in the process of socialization and identity construction and expression, in this paper I would like to explore stance in an *educational* setting. Specifically, I am interested in how a learner's stance toward instructional tasks might be uncovered analytically and how it might shape learner participation and engagement. I conduct a close, turn-by-turn analysis of the data, drawing from the techniques of conversation analysis. The data come from an hour-long video recording of a third-grade sheltered instruction English Language Arts (ELA) class at a public school in the United States. The participants are the teacher, Fred, and his four ESL students—Anthony, Melissa, Alonso, and Brendon (all pseudonyms). During the recorded session, each student needed to write three dialogues between him/herself and three different people in his/her life on the topic of the student's chosen future profession. I show that a learner's stance toward a class task is signaled multimodally—not just through linguistic but also through paralinguistic and embodied cues—and propose that overall low participation can also signal an implicit negative stance toward a task or a disengagement from it.

The analysis will focus on two interactions which occur between the teacher and one of his students near the beginning of the recorded lesson. In the first extract, the teacher and student appear to be *aligned* in their orientation to the class task, i.e., they seem to exhibit converging stances toward the task both verbally and nonverbally. The second extract, however, reveals an underlying *disalignment* between the teacher and student, i.e., their diverging stances toward the pedagogic task at hand, as evidenced in their verbal and embodied conduct.

Seeming Alignment

During a previous lesson, the focal student, Anthony, expressed his interest in being a soccer player and, therefore, chose to write his dialogues on this particular topic. At the start of the recorded class session, Anthony is writing a dialogue between himself and his father, asking his father to teach him how to “beat an 18-year-old” in soccer. At this point in the lesson, the

students are all working on their dialogues individually, and Fred, the teacher, is going around and assisting everyone with their writing. At the start of Extract 1, Fred has approached Anthony to check his work. Arrows (→) are used to mark the focal turns in the transcript.

(1) read this for me

- 1 Fred: °>let me see what you wrote, can° you read
2 this for me<?
3 (1.0)
4 Fred: ((reads Anthony's work))- would you te:ach,
5 Anthony: ((reads))- m:y brother, (.) and my brother,
6 can (beat/win) a 18-year-old.
7 Fred: and that's who though.=is that you?
8 Anthony: mhm?
9 Fred: °↑okay,° so let's put me up top,
10 Anthony: ((writes))

Image (1) aligned physical orientation (Extract 1, line 10)



- 11 Fred: beautiful. what does your dad ↑say.
12 Anthony: → m:: (.) <my dad say> (4.0)
13 Fred: how does he res↑pond to that. you asked
14 him a ↑question.=right,
15 Anthony: mhm?
16 Fred: so what does he have to say. what's the first
17 thing he has to say.=yes or no.=right,
18 Anthony: → ((holds pencil over paper))- (3.8)
19 Fred: so did he teach him?
20 → (0.4)
21 Anthony: → yeah?
22 Fred: ↑okay,
23 Anthony: ((writes))
24 Fred: good. (.) good job. ((walks away toward
25 other students))

In this segment, Anthony's stance toward the task at hand is not overtly marked as either particularly positive or negative. Throughout the segment, Anthony and Fred are aligned in their treatment of the task, as can be seen in their collaborative completion of and physical orientation to it (Image 1)¹. When we explore this sequence more thoroughly at the linguistic and paralinguistic level, though, we notice that Anthony is not very animated in his work on the task,

¹ Images have been blurred to protect the participants' identities.

and he needs quite a bit of assistance from Fred in order to complete it. For instance, Fred's directive for Anthony to read his work (lines 1-2) is initially met with a gap (line 3), and it is only after Fred offers a designedly incomplete utterance (Koshik, 2002) that Anthony slowly provides a response marked with elongation and a "listing" intonation, which allows Anthony to make frequent micro pauses as he reads. Fred then goes on to offer increasingly more assistance to Anthony in completing his task: He begins with a wh- question (line 11), allowing Anthony the space to construct his own elaborate response; after no response from Anthony, Fred poses a tag question, eliciting only part of the target response (lines 16-17); finally, once his previous two attempts at assistance prove insufficient, Fred poses a yes or no question (line 19), now targeting only a minimal response from Anthony. Therefore, even though Anthony aligns with Fred as he complies with his directives by reading his work (lines 5-6) and adding the words Fred asks him to add (lines 10 and 23), Anthony's turns in this sequence are either delayed (lines 12, 20-21), minimal (lines 15 and 21), incomplete (line 12), or absent (line 18).

Overall, Anthony's work on the task at this point occurs within a classic institutional, extended IRE sequence (Mehan, 1979), in which the teacher initiates questions/directives, the student offers (minimal) responses, and the teacher finally evaluates the student's performance and closes down the sequence (line 24-25). The sequence, thus, flows smoothly on the surface, with Anthony and Fred demonstrating alignment in their orientation to the task at hand; however, this task does not engender animated verbal participation on Anthony's part and constrains his ability to complete his own dialogue independently. Immediately after the end of Extract 1, it becomes clear that Anthony, in fact, no longer has a positive stance toward the task, as will be shown next.

Evident Disalignment

Extract 2 begins right after Fred closes down the previous sequence (Extract 1, lines 24-25). At the very beginning of this segment, Anthony interrupts his work and initiates what initially seems to be troubles telling (Jefferson, 1988) (Extract 2, line 7) and gradually grows into a negotiation over the task topic.

(2) my brain hurts

- | | | |
|----|----------|---|
| 1 | Anthony: | → ((<i>stops writing, looks up and squints</i>)) m::: |
| 2 | | ((<i>looks to the side and then in front</i>)) |
| 3 | Melissa: | ((<i>looks up from her paper, gazes straight,</i> |
| 4 | | <i>looks back down at paper and writes</i>)) |
| 5 | Fred: | ((<i>picks up wrappers from students' lunch</i>)) |
| 6 | Anthony: | ((<i>puts hand on forehead, looks at Fred</i>)) |
| 7 | | >what's <u>wr</u> [ong with me:.] |
| 8 | Fred: | [°(who) are you looking (at) |
| 9 | | there.]° (.) what's wrong with <u>what</u> ? |
| 10 | Anthony: | ((<i>holds hand on forehead</i>))- I feel like |
| 11 | | changing. |
| 12 | Fred: | feel like changing <u>what</u> . |
| 13 | Anthony: | ↑my <u>mi</u> :nd. |
| 14 | Fred: | about <u>what</u> . |
| 15 | Anthony: | abou- ab- about being a <u>soccer</u> player. |
| 16 | Fred: | ↑right no::w, |

- 17 Anthony: (ast-)
18 Fred: the most important thing >even if maybe
19 you wanna change your mind about< what
20 ↑you want to be, for example when I give
21 you my example anthony? I'm gonna give
22 you an example of what I wanted to be when
23 I was a kid? when I was young? .h but that
24 changed for me ↑also. ↑so it's okay. right
25 now we're just practicing with our writing
26 and what the people in our lives: <say to
27 us.>
28 Melissa: [()]
29 Anthony: → [()] changing my mind.
30 Fred: .hh
31 Anthony: cuz- cuz my brain hurts.- ((*touches forehead*
32 *with fingers*))
33 Fred: can you- (.) ((*squints*)) ↑you're o- you're-
34 you're one sentence away from finishing it.
35 your brain will be fine.
36 [(*taps on Anthony's work*)]
37 Anthony: → [no it wasn't.] no it's not.

Image (2) pencil down (Extract 2, line 37)



- 38 Fred: yeah.
39 Anthony: → i- cu- I feel like (.) being something.=else.
40 Fred: >what do you wanna< be.
41 Anthony: I ↑think police.
42 Fred: {((*opens eyes wide*))- police?} ((*tilts head*))
43 .hhh I don't think we have time right no:w,
44 to change this one? bu:t, maybe if I work
45 with you: (.) maybe I can work with you a
46 little bit tomorrow and we can change it.=for
47 no:w, can you [just] finish this
48 conversation?
49 Alonso: [(*sneezes*)]
50 Anthony: [alright.]- ((*shrugs*))
51 Fred: [can you] do me a favor? thank you sir.
52 ((*turns to Brendon*))

Image (3) brief physical engagement with the task (Extract 2, line 52)



Image (4) subsequent physical disengagement (10 seconds after Image (3) and onward)



Anthony's attitude toward his task is displayed much more explicitly in this segment. His embodied disengagement from his task (line 1, Image 2 and Image 3), verbal (lines 7, 31, and 37) and embodied displays of trouble related to his task topic (lines 1,6, and 10), and repeated indirect requests to change this topic (lines 10-15, 29, and 39) all signal a negative stance, which now engenders a disalignment between him and Fred, as evidenced in Fred's repeated, though mitigated and indirect, rejections of Anthony's requests to change his topic (lines 18-27, 33-35, 38, and 42-48).

This disalignment is maintained throughout the segment and dialogically indexed (Du Bois, 2007) through Fred's and Anthony's verbal and embodied responses to each other's stances. For instance, when Fred rejects Anthony's request in lines 18-27, Anthony does not simply back down. He resists the rejection by repeating his request and accounting for it (lines 29 and 31), and by dismissing Fred's attempts to reassure him and to close down his request sequence (lines 33-35 and line 38). Furthermore, as Fred implicitly rejects Anthony's request for the second time by reassuring him that his *brain will be fine* (line 35), he taps Anthony's paper repeatedly, nonverbally expressing his divergent stance and the directive for Anthony to "get back on task." In response, Anthony underscores his verbal dismissal of Fred's reassurance in line 37 *no it wasn't. no it's not.* with an embodied rejection of the task: He puts his hand down, palm over the paper, and for a split second puts his pencil down as well (Image 2), thus embodying a rejection of the actual paper and an implicit rejection of Fred's nonverbal directive as well. Anthony's implicit negative stance toward the task is finally embodied once more, after he verbally concedes to Fred's request to work on his current topic (line 50): Anthony briefly holds the edge of his paper and stares straight ahead (Image 3) before letting the paper go completely and gazing around the classroom (Image 4). It is as though, after he has conceded, Anthony *tries* to interact with the paper and get back to his task by picking it up, but this physical interaction fails to evolve into actual writing as Anthony only holds the edge of the paper for a moment before putting it down entirely.

When we examine Anthony's verbal participation in this segment, we can clearly see that it is now much more animated than in Extract 1. First of all, Anthony is the one *initiating* the sequence (line 7), not Fred. What's more, although Anthony's turns are still short (lines 10-11, 13, and 15), they are non-minimal, unlike his turns in Extract 1, and they work together to perform a complex action of expressing an indirect request. In fact, it is quite possible that these turns are delivered incrementally, in collaboration with Fred, precisely due to the sensitive nature of Anthony's request (Schegloff, 2007). Overall, Anthony's participation in this segment is much

more energetic than in the previous one. There are no delayed or incomplete responses signaling hesitancy in the form of elongation or try-marking, which we witnessed in Extract 1. On the contrary, in Extract 2 Anthony displays persistence, higher volume, faster speech, longer utterances, and a more certain and determined tone as he disaligns from Fred in his treatment of the task.

This paper has examined one learner's stance toward an instructional task as it is expressed multimodally—through linguistic, paralinguistic, and embodied cues. Even though Anthony initially had a positive stance toward his task topic, seeing how he personally chose it, here we see that his stance has shifted, as evidenced in his disengagement from the task and pursuit of a different topic. This shift in stance does not appear to be indexed at the beginning of the analyzed class session. Namely, as Anthony and Fred work on the task together they seem to be aligned in their orientation to it. However, Anthony's rather low participation and an inability to work independently at this point in the lesson could in fact already imply a weakening of a positive stance toward the task if not an already established negative stance. This emergent shift in stance, however, only becomes clear retroactively, as Anthony indexes his negative stance toward the task more explicitly.

Drawing from techniques of conversation analysis in examining stance can help us uncover the subtle changes in its verbal and embodied expression. A turn-by-turn analysis of the data in this paper has revealed an array of subtle cues such as shifts in length and timing of turns, pace and volume, gestures, posture, and gaze, all of which can signal not simply a lack of focus but a change in a student's stance toward a task and potentially also his ability to engage with that task. By being sensitive and responsive to these subtle changes in verbal and embodied displays of learners' attitudes toward class tasks, teachers could help promote learners' positive stances toward tasks, thus also possibly increasing their engagement. Further research in this area could help uncover illuminating information about how stance is exhibited in the classroom and how it might interact with participation, task completion, and even learning.

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