

## **A Counter Perspective**

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It was with great interest that I read the Stubbe, Lane, Hilder, Vine, Vine, Marra, Holmes, and Weatherall (2003) article analyzing workplace interaction. It demonstrated the varied ways the same material could be dissected and the diverse conclusions that could be drawn from approaches of conversation analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, politeness theory, critical discourse analysis, and discursive psychology. However, I found myself disagreeing with the general analyses made by the writers in all five approaches. It seems that, in looking to properly use linguistic, paralinguistic, and discourse features in ways championed by each approach, the analysts tailored their discussions to fit with the general assumptions and foci inherent to each style, and in consequence, to ignore the big picture (or what I term the common sense view that we, as social beings, have of an interaction from our general social knowledge).

I first read the transcript of the workplace interaction before reading the various analyses of the conversation through the five approaches. In short, a female employee comes to a male supervisor to talk about a situation in which she feels she has been passed over for promotion in favor of a male colleague. My initial impressions were that the supervisor, Tom, was a sniveling, nervous man who knew that the subordinate, Claire, was in the stronger offensive position since she seemed able to attack him by criticizing the decision that had been made. Indeed, Claire's powerful stance as the complainant is substantiated by the article's disclosure that there was already an undercurrent of gender bias troubles within the company. Claire initially presented her point of view, disguising it within a request for Tom's help in the situation, and then Tom launched into a long, stuttering, repetitive string of excuses for why the decision was made, appearing to try to shift the blame for the decision away from himself. Tom displayed his nervousness and his knowledge that Claire had taken the offensive role through this flouting of the Gricean maxim of quantity. Claire didn't comply with him, and he kept talking (trying to talk his way out of it, perhaps), until he agreed to consider her in the future, apparently the end result she was seeking. I would argue that she engaged in a type of social game or sequence that people play or enact to reach their own goals (in this case, to manipulate Tom). It also seems clear that she was in control of the entire interaction as Tom weakly attempted to justify his actions or shift blame through his long and 'changing excuse' speech, but in the end, he finally acquiesced and said he would do things differently in the future.

In trying to conform to the general aspirations of their approach, the critical discourse analysis (CDA) analysts decided that Tom had the most powerful position and then seemingly tailored the rest of the analysis around that stance. I contend that Claire entered the scene with more power because she was, in fact, threatening Tom's power via the issue of gender discrimination. The CDA approach is described in the article as necessarily taking a political viewpoint on power relationships, but in this case it fails to look at the underlying power beneath the surface and only considers initially perceived or surface power roles. Although the desire to unearth social inequality in society is admirable, CDA may bias the analyst to look for a power dominance that may not exist in a particular interaction. This raises the broader question of whether detailed linguistic analyses of discourse are useful if they fail to see the relevant or

meaningful interpretation (at least with regard to the participants) in a certain discourse setting. If we can pick apart speech acts and face-threatening acts (FTAs) but can't see that these may only be surface elements that mask the underlying social meanings, then how can we say that the analyses are valid?

This general criticism can also be made of the politeness theory approach as outlined in the Stubbe et al. article. The politeness theory approach focuses more on singular utterances. The analysis mentions that the presentation of the complaint was an FTA on Claire's part, but this is not further analyzed in the larger context, such as looking at the power roles or the underlying meanings to this singular utterance. The politeness theory analysts look at Claire's introduction of the complaint and say she is using the strategies of minimizing imposition (by hedging) and giving deference (by acknowledging Tom is her supervisor and asking for his managerial help). At face value in examining these few phrases, this appears to be what her intentions are. However, it seems more than possible that this is a theatrical act. Claire appears to be subservient in order to manipulate Tom and accomplish her goal of assuring that she will have opportunities in the future. Politeness theory also suggests that Claire's use of more negative politeness strategies (being maximally polite) and Tom's use of more positive politeness strategies (showing that he can afford to be more casual) confirm the hierarchical relationship between them. I again assert that this is just a part of the social game both participants know, perhaps at the subconscious level, that they are playing. When studying speech acts separately from social world knowledge and the larger context of the conversation, we look at FTAs at face value, which may not be productive. We fail, in this method, to look at the big picture, in which individual acts of linguistic politeness are merely part of playing the social games we know we must in order to reach our goals.

An example of a specific event that I feel was misinterpreted is the phone interruption. During the conversation, which takes place in Tom's office, the phone rings and Tom asks if he can answer it, then apologizes, and subsequently Claire excuses him. CDA insists that Tom is displaying his power by interrupting Claire to answer the phone. They say that he is asking a rhetorical question when he asks if he can answer it. The CDA analysts further purport that by accepting the interruption Claire is put in a "one-down" (p. 368-369) social position and Claire "colludes" with his "marginalization" (p. 369) by explicitly accepting his apology. They further state that after the interruption, Claire is then forced to restate her request for advice, which reinforces her supplicant role because it again highlights the difference in status between the two. However, one possibility is that since Tom is clearly superior in rank and they are in his office, he could simply answer the phone, or tell Claire to wait, or state that he will answer the phone and then proceed to do so. He does not need to ask her permission to answer his own phone. The fact that he asks her is granting her a certain amount of respect, which is, in turn, power. Claire vocally gives him the go-ahead to answer, which could indicate that she is interpreting it as a sincere apology and request for permission. If she had perceived it as rhetorical, she may not have felt a need to answer. This may indicate that she is comfortable in accepting his respect and she feels, in fact, entitled to it. In addition, the CDA conclusion is that Claire has to again "lower" herself and put herself in a demeaning position by repeating her request. I contend that Claire was maintaining her power by putting the conversation "back on track" and drawing Tom back to her initial complaint.

How do the other approaches see the phone interruption event? The conversation analysis (CA) analysts look at the actions involved, saying that there was a request, an apology, and an acceptance, showing that a normative rule of interaction (that of not interrupting a spoken interaction once it is started) had been broken and the breaking of it was acknowledged. But they do not look for a deeper level of meaning in this event. Those in the interactional sociolinguistics (IS) camp look at the sequence of utterances around the phone interruption as Tom making a request to answer the phone, “acknowledging that the person present in his office should take precedence over the person ‘interrupting’ on the phone.” (p. 360). This also supports the idea that Tom is not asserting his power over Claire with the event, as the CDA analysts suggest.

Another point of the analyses that I wish to discuss is Tom’s long justification exercise. I agree with the CA camp that throughout Tom’s long sequence of turns, Claire’s brief responses and continuers, such as *yeah* and *mm* and *ok* look superficially to be accepting Tom’s justification, but in reality seem to be more neutral in nature, and not positive. They conclude that this withholding of acceptance propels Tom to continue trying to justify his actions, and again this seems reasonable. I further assert that in this way, Claire was controlling the conversation and in effect forcing Tom to continue until he said what she wanted to hear. The CA analysts also bring into discussion the way that Tom rephrased Claire’s remark, in which she asked what to do to be looked upon more “favorably” in the future. Tom changed it to a more neutral position (removing direct involvement from himself) by saying that it was not “a question of favorability” (p. 357), but rather of practicality. CA analysts depict Tom as being stronger here by “rejecting” Claire’s complaint and trying to distance himself from it. I propose that it simply demonstrates how worried he is about the repercussions of her threat to him based on possible gender bias. The IS analysts say that in his long turn, Tom is dominating the floor, maintaining that he does so throughout the interaction. They say this is consistent with studies showing that men dominate conversational turn taking in public settings, and thus are tailoring the analysis to coincide with other IS studies in the field. However, as mentioned earlier, it is plausible that Claire was actually propelling the interaction by uttering backchannels that were non-compliant and so forcing Tom to blather on.

In conclusion, although it was interesting to see the different ways various approaches tackle an interaction, it seems that many of these approaches focus on specific linguistic and paralinguistic features without considering their roles in the greater social context. An approach such as CDA that does take a more global view seems to be confined to its social inequality agenda. How can we get to these deeper meanings? Is there really a benefit to analyzing conversations in minute detail when the final results are not true descriptions of the reality of the interaction as experienced by the participants? It seems that there is still much room in the field of discourse analysis to develop a more inclusive and holistic approach to the study of social interaction.

## REFERENCE

Stubbe, M., Lane, C., Hilder, J., Vine, E., Vine, B., Marra, M., Holmes, J., & Weatherall, A. (2003). Multiple discourse analyses of a workplace interaction. *Discourse Studies*, 5, 351-388.

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