

# Conversing about conversation in the classroom how to increase pragmatic awareness in language usage

Peter Klotz\* and Marlene Rall\*\*

## Palabras clave

- poder,
- grupo multiétnico,
- jóvenes,
- didáctica de la pragmática.

## RESUMEN

*En una situación de comunicación, la interacción nunca está completamente equilibrada ni tampoco es asimétrica. Sin embargo, las relaciones de poder están presentes en toda interacción verbal, tanto en las conversaciones formales como en las informales entre varios jóvenes de distintos origen. El objetivo de este trabajo es mostrar cómo una enseñanza adecuada de la pragmática en el salón de clase, permitirá a los jóvenes no sólo adquirir una consciencia del fenómeno, sino también desarrollar estrategias para revertir la asimetría que se da en la interacción.*

## Introduction

This group of papers is dedicated to two purposes: they are dedicated to *descriptive linguistics* looking into the formal and informal communication inside and outside the classroom observing both teachers and students in their pragmatic roles and interaction. The participants have agreed to discuss this wide field of "conversation" in its broadest sense on the sensitive topic of *power*. Power determines interaction, especially in the classroom.

\* Munich, Germany.

\*\* Mexico.

Therefore we can link this first descriptive purpose with *educational linguistics*. The interaction in the classroom may not only be seen under according to the principle that the teaching process should run as smooth as possible, but this interaction can also be a vivid field of creating and discussing not only language, but pragmatic awareness and multi-ethnic relations.

This purpose of the panel is a truly *didactic* one, focusing goals of education and learnedness and of social tact. While the first purpose—describing conversation inside and outside the classroom— may be taken as an important part of general pragmatics.

### Some theory

I would like to start with two perhaps provocative statements

(1) Interaction, communication, and even conversation are never completely power balanced, and never really symmetrical. I personally doubt whether one should even wish that they were, or whether one should try to educate kids and students to worship symmetrical communication. Asymmetrical communication brings a subject, a topic forward. But accepting the that there is no symmetrical interaction asks for pragmatic awareness and technics as a part of a communicative competence (Habermas) that might deal with the unbalanced power in conversation and may become part of the *game* (in the sense of Wittgenstein) of gaining and losing power. The goal is a moral or even ethic consciousness of conversational power and interaction.

(2) My second statement is linked with my natural data, i.e. with conversation outside the classroom: Originally I wanted to set out a counterweight to the formal situation of classroom conversation, and therefore I worked on some informal communication of youths. But this brings me to the statement that there is far more formal communication in so-called informal communication situations than this classic dichotomy makes one expect; on the contrary: informal communication is full of elements of formal communication, and this means that the formal power distribution in conversations influences the so called "free" communication *powerfully*.

My first statement questions the most influential maxims of Grice on their basis: if asymmetrical communication is found everywhere, Grice's principle of cooperation and its maxims of quantity, quality, relations and manner work actually *in favour of* the powerful partner; therefore one can conclude that the cooperative principle stabilizes the asymmetrical interaction.

I agree with Sandra Harris idea (1995) that in Grice's conversational world there is a lacking of the social and political dimension. But by the same token one has to admit that the social deixis is mostly clear only in formal situations, whereas it may be unclear, concealed or hidden in informal situations. Furthermore, to change a deictic social situation is quite a challenge requiring a clear power and some rhetoric competence.

Even though I am in favour of the ideal of a "power free" discourse as formulated by the Frankfurt School, especially by Jürgen Habermas in 1968, and even though I value his validity claims of Rationality, Rightness, and Appropriacy, one has to face the fact of power-asymmetry in interaction. And it is Habermas who visualizes clearly that language is not only a means of understanding and consensus but also the potential instrument of power and inequality. I propose a non-idealistic conclusion. In Habermas' distinction an *action* is *communicative* when it is—though egocentric— understanding oriented; and an action is *strategic*, when it is success oriented. However, in ordinary life, this distinction cannot be made so clearly, and communicative and strategic action mingle, in institutional discourse (compare S. Harris) as well as in "free" communication.

If this is so, I repeat the conclusion which I made in my first statement: the facts of language use and of power in interaction do not lead to the educational ideal of power balanced, symmetrical communication, but they clearly ask for a *pragmatic awareness*. And: if it is a goal to let the complementarity of communication (Watzlawick) not be one sided, but finally approximately balanced, only pragmatic and linguistic competence—and the awareness about them!— can challenge the one-sidedness of power in communication, or at least become the tool to describe the actual situation of verbal and institutional interaction. As I know that the road to this competence is long, I plead for truly *pragmatic lessons* in school. These might include observations in literary dramas and the like, but first of all they should monitor the everyday conversation and interaction of youths so that young people do realize that these lessons treat their own affairs.

### An example

Therefore let me shortly draw your attention to one example of interaction among youths in an informal situation. This example could also be the basis of a pragmatic school lesson. The young people discuss whether they should install new loudspeakers in their disco at their young folk's home. Mehmet (=M) is the strong person in the

group, Tolger (=T) is his follower, and he wants to become "DJ", the most wanted position in the group.

### Shall we buy new (loud speaker) boxes

Mehmet: born in Turkey, he lives in Germany since he is 4 mechanic;

Tolger: from Turkish-German parents, mechanic

Gürbiz: born in Turkey, bilingual

Anna: father German, mother from Guatemala, bilingual German-Spanish,

Rondl: German-American, 20, electrician

Assi: Turkish-German

- 1 M: and then we talked about two guys who want two new boxes; and who just don't do anything about it, not even finding out what they cost and so on ... it's not that I look at anyone in particular. O.k., no more.
- T: What's about?
- 5 G: Who is he:  
T: Wait, wait. Now let me say something  
G: Who has the saying here?  
T: Just wait, and shut up. It's me talking
- M: Don't you fool me. O.k.! I am the boss. I can manage, I manage every thing. I am not the fool here who is doing everything for you; and then you make the DJ (disk jockey)
- 10 T: Fuck it  
G: Nobody is calling you fool
- 1 M: (Of) course, they do
- 15 T: It has been talked out. What was it?  
M: What about?  
T: First the money saved; piling it up; and then let's go ahead  
M: O.k.; and then?
- 20 Assi: But shouldn't we know what we really want. You know, people want new CDs; got me.  
G: Now, you just listen
- 2 T: Noooo  
Assi: Come on, live up to standards  
T: O.k.
- 25 G: I stick to it  
A: You know what I mean  
T: Hey. No dollar, no looking. Half a year, and they have better boxes, cheaper ones.

- Assi: A question, o.k.  
T: Go ahead
- 30 Assi: You want (to) buy something [and]  
T: Yea  
3 Assi: don't know what to buy  
T: No, 'course I know  
G: Do we have the money
- 35 T: Sure, I know what to buy  
Anna: 400 bucks  
G: 400 bucks!  
T: besides they 've got good boxes in the specials  
G: or at the swap market
- 40 Assi: Stop. O.k. You want to save  
T: Yea, 'course I save  
Assi: let's say ...
- 4 T: 800 bucks  
Assi: Another 800 bucks or what
- 45 T: Yea, just about  
Assi: O.k. that's enough, you think. We are at 400 now, and another 400.  
That's really enough  
G: Hey man. 800 bucks for boxes, real' good ones  
Assi: Well, F. thinks you come
- 50 G: [cheap boxes]  
Assi: F. told me they go from 500 to 3000  
G: Well; o.k.
- T: Now listen, now listen what "Rondl electrician" says  
Rondl: 2000
- 55 T: Good boxes 2000 boxes  
G: O.k., and not just for 400 bucks
- 5 Assi: O.k., That's it. Find out what we want and what it costs  
T: Yea,  
Assi: Look, we should ...
- 60 T: Why me? Just wait, baby. Why me?  
Assi: I thought it was your idea  
Mehmet: They want no boxes  
Assi: I don't care. Boxes are all right for me.  
T: Next please!

**Now let me pick out 5 interesting sequences shortly:**

1 The first one goes from line 9 to 17. Tolger is calming down the anger of Mehmet, and he has some power under the shelter of Mehmet, compare especially line 17: "First the money saved — piling it up— and then let's go ahead"

In the following three sequences (2 - 3 - 4) it is the energetic young girl Assi who is winning power. Let's see how she is doing so:

In 2 she begins with a basic question (line 19) and is not accepting a plane "no" by pointing to general standards of conversation— or should I say to "Gricean" principles of cooperation ?!

In 3 she drives Tolger to a defense position; Tolger is accepting doubts and fights for his position with a weak argument mentioning the specials (line 38).

Sequence 4 shows the cooperation of Assi, but she is setting limits as far as the buying of loudspeakers is concerned for to get through with her plea for new CDs later. She prepares this by enlarging her power by an especially exact question —line 44: Actually she is putting Tolger down because of his unclear statements.

But at this point Tolger obviously realizes that he is really losing, and therefore he uses what one can call a rhetorical trick: in sequence 5 he brings a competent partner into the game, and he wins against Assi, but at the same time he loses against Mehmet. Finally it is Assi who is cooperative helping Tolger, however in a weak manner (line 59) —but Tolger cannot accept.

Of course I could talk about observations along my "poor" translation as far as the German original is concerned (it was much rougher) but it enables me to point out the following:

- (1) Even though the original plan to buy new loudspeakers for the disco in the young folk's home is questioned, and other plans seem possible, the boss —here it is Mehmet— keeps his power at the end.
- (2) It is the young girl Assi who gains some power in the conversation because of her clear questions and because of her speaking of consequences. She would be a good example of fulfilling Grice's maxims; and this is true for Tolger, too, who is gaining some power in the beginning, and losing it against Assi. Finally he regains some power by bringing his competent friend Rondle into the conversation, and Assi can just withdraw "in honour".
- (3) Even though this was a non-institutional conversation, there was plenty of formalism in it:
  - Statements of power and consciousness of the social deixis "I am the boss"!

- Questions and answers, here in the mode of Socrates maieutic principle forcing the interlocuter to follow the topic brought up by the questioner
- Transferring the topic to a —so nominated— competent person, used like a "witness of the crown"
- Allowing a somehow pseudo-democratic process even though it does not lead to a democratic decision.

I hinder myself from analyzing this conversation more exactly with all this implications. At any rate it seems to me already proven that there is more formalism in non-institutional conversation than one might expect. Or, said in other, positive words: The study of institutional interaction and communication brings considerable insight into what is called and taken for "open conversation".

**The goal**

However, I have made this sketch especially for one reason: I plead for pragmatic knowledge and awareness in school, and I am looking for people who are willing to develop concepts and methods to reach a pragmatic competence which is aware of itself. We need pragmatic lessons in school.

Usually this awareness is quite fuzzy, if it exists at all. Therefore I suggest to describe levels of awareness which can be reached step by step. A first step would lead to a half consciousness which should enable a person to respond on pragmatics when there is some uneasiness or even trouble in the communicative interaction. The next level should include some basic pragmatic knowledge working like a tool in everyday conversation. The final step goes up to a cognitive pragmatic and linguistic level.

Pedagogically I claim that there is a double chance for acquiring pragmatic awareness: first by reflecting these rituals and their deviations and disturbances on the grounds of verbal and non-verbal behavior; second by changing and modifying these rituals.

In contrast to the institutional classroom conversations, there is for example, this data based non-institutional conversation of multi-ethnic young people. Using their young folk's language they determine their social deixis: they fight for power in conversation, give up, try again, follow a common goal, and the observer finds out not only their rituals, but also holds "material" which s/he can use to bring forward pragmatic awareness among students by introducing this type of material into classroom. In other words: one should converse about conver-

sation in school continuously in order to develop a metapragmatic routine.

Putting up these pedagogic —or in my German words: *didactic*—goals means not only to plead for pragmatic awareness and competence, but also for some ethic consciousness because power plays always an important role in conversation.

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