

Discourse analysis of students and non-teaching staff conversations

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Abstract

This study investigated the structure and functions of some discourse strategies in students and non-teaching staff interactions in tertiary institutions in Anambra State. 15 non-teaching staff and 30 students were randomly selected for the study sample. The theory used for the study was conversation analysis theory developed by American Sociologist Harlod Garfinkel. The method of data collection was audio record through non-participant observation. The study found out that students interact freely with non-teaching staff in students and non-teaching staff interactions in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and Chukwuemka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus. The study discovered also that both students and non-teaching staff initiated and interrupted interactions in conversation in students and non-teaching staff interactions in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and Chukwuemka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus, unlike students' relationship with their teachers as found out in some reviewed studies in the research. The study recommended for similar study in other universities outside Anambra State.

Keywords: Language, discourse analysis, student-staff conversations, conversation analysis, non-teaching staff

Introduction

In every human community, language plays a crucial role; it helps to define any community. “It initiates us into the world of the community and allows us to participate by giving us the power to communicate” (Hatch, 1999:69). Almost all normal human beings can produce and make meaning out of a great number of words and sentences without much ado once they belong to the same speech community (Aitcheson, 2005 cited in Idiagbon, 2010:39). Hatch (1999:69) and Aitcheson (2005) opinion that the major essence of language is communication, and this defines the community one belongs to.

In classrooms, as in courtrooms and medical consultations, speaking turns tend to be distributed unevenly in accordance with the hierarchical power relationships that hold between participants. Teachers, like judges (and doctors), maintain full rights over the routines of turn-taking. Teachers may select themselves for a speaking turn at any point. A teacher’s self-selection of whom to speak to may interrupt a student who may be pausing to consider his/her answer, showing that turns of students are liable to sudden termination (Wood 2006:168).

Olateju (2004:4) asserts that language serves a lot of functions such as “transactional and interactional function”. The interactional function of language is often used to establish and maintain social relationships. In this context, participants in an exchange do not always transmit information, rather, “the essence of conversations sometimes is just to open up conversations of friendship or partnership...” (Olateju 2004:5). Brown and Yule (1998:3) also note that “conversational analysts are concerned with the use of language to negotiate role relationships, peer solidarity and the exchange of turns in a conversation”. Other linguists that share in this view include: Onadeko (1990) who

argues that “language is preferably studied as a “doing tool” in human society and in interpersonal interaction rather than for its own sake”, Gee (2014:31) who says that “we use language to make meaning in the broadest sense, we make meaning by using language to say things that, in actual context of use, amount, too, to doing things and being things”. As a matter of fact, this study is highly inspired by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) work on the English used by teachers and pupils in traditional English classroom, and has been used by many scholars within and outside Nigeria to investigate their structures in other discourses like: doctor/patient, police/accused, buyer/seller, employer/employee interview, lawyer/client among others, but none to the best of my knowledge has done any research on students and non-teaching staff interactions which this study embarked on.

In line with the above views, this study is therefore, part of the continuing investigation of language functions or the organization of units above the clause and sentence. In so doing, it is expected to focus on function of utterances and the structure of discourse in Student/non-teaching staff interactions in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus.

Theoretical framework

The study is based on the theoretical contribution of Discourse Analysis. Our analytical approach draws primarily on Conversational Analysis. This analytical approach grew out of ethnomethodology (the study of how social order is constructed in the socially organized conduct of the members of a society), and seeks to examine the competence that speakers rely on in participating in interaction. This approach of the

ethnomethodology to conversation was strongly influenced by American Sociologist Harold Garfunkel's concern to understand how social members themselves make sense of everyday life. Conversation analysis was developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s by Harvey Sacks and his close associates, Emmanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson at the University of California. "These scholars initiated studies of real-time sequential ordering of conversations, the rules, patterns and structures in the relations between actions participants engage in as they interact" (Ezeifeke 2018:100).

Conversation analysis deals solely with 'naturally occurring' speech and, while recognizing that there is no value-free observation, is careful not to impose pre-established structures and definitions on how speakers talk in interaction. In this way, conversation analysis aims to study how conversational behaviour relates to the creation of social roles, social relationships and a sense of social order (Woods, 2006: xiii-xiv)

Principally, conversational analyst discovers how participants understand and respond to one another in their turns at talk with central focus being on how sequences of interaction are generated. In other words, the objective of conversational analyst is to uncover the tacit reasoning procedures and sociolinguistic competence underlying the production and interpretation of talk in organized sequences of interaction. In relation to this, early work of Sinclair (1966) shows that utterances relate back and forward, place certain restrictions on the kind of utterances that can occur and also affect how preceding or succeeding utterances are interpreted. In the practice of education, there are restrictions on how students talk to teachers and non-teaching staff especially in advanced level of education. Students cannot talk rudely to both teachers and non-

teaching staff. There are restrictions on the type of utterance teachers or non-teaching or students can produce to avoid disrespect.

Literature review

Obviously, there have been several serious researches on the analysis of conversations in discourse. Notably among them are the works of Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) which used Birmingham model to study classroom discourse. Many scholars have not only used their model for various discourse situations, but have “expounded more descriptive schemas and approaches by which language can be captured while “at work” (Olateju et.al 2007) within the last few decades.

Odeunmi (2007) establishes one of Margret Berry’s (1987) findings on power relations in discourse of how utterances can predict statuses and roles. In his study on acts doctors and patients perform in medical encounters in Nigeria, Odeunmi establishes the fact that by virtue of their location in the social structure, doctors have an institutionally based, interactively accomplished position of authority; an authority that patients lack. Onadeko (2007), in his study on the right of the speaker in Nigerian Magistrate Court talk, establishes that in the Courtroom talk, there is always one who is in authority and who wants to exercise his power and authority, and another is an inferior participant. Anyadiegwu (2011) conforms to this when she says that the counsel initiates exchanges and controls discourse while the witness does not in her analysis on Counsel and Witness Discourse in Nnewi. Olateju (2004), just like Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) on Classroom Discourse, examines how teachers interact with their pupils in a second language situation, and establishes the fact that in classroom situation, a single

individual in person of the teacher is in control of the class. Because of the power relations that exist in the classroom, pupils cannot contribute as they like except the teacher gives them permission to do so. The teacher decides who speaks and the topic to speak about.

Generally, these studies have explored the asymmetrical structure of the encounter between the participants in discourse. The overall contention is that there is an unequal power relation between the interactants. However, none has concentrated on students and non-teaching staff discourse in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus. More so, this research adds to fast growing literature in discourse analysis. It helps in analyzing and understanding students and non-teaching staff discourse as an institutional genre. It helps to explore the extent to which students and non-teaching staff in tertiary Institution discourse represent socio-cultural reality in Nigeria and Anambra State in particular.

Research Questions

This study is concerned with finding answers to the following questions:

- i. Who manages the interaction in students and non-teaching staff conversations in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus?
- ii. What type of exchange structures take place in students and non-teaching staff interactions in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus?

Methodology

The population of this study covers all the students and non-teaching staff in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus which comprise of both male and female students, male and female non-teaching staff, senior and junior non-teaching staff, young and old non-teaching staff, new and old students, undergraduate and postgraduate students, among others. Six units were sampled. A total of 15 non-teaching staff and 30 students were randomly selected with simple random method for this study. 14 out of over 40 interactions recoded for the data were also selected. The data for the study is taken from students and non-teaching staff interactions in two universities in Anambra State. This choice has been made because university students are expected to use English language as the language of instruction and language of interaction at their levels in any part of Nigeria. Based on this, the language of the conversations were mainly English language and mixture of English and Igbo languages. Two methods were used in the collection of data, which were face-to-face observation and recorded voices. For the face-to-face observation, the researcher was present when the interactions were going on. Before the recordings, the participants especially the non-teaching staff were informed of the recording while the students were not informed, but some of them were uncomfortable with the presence of the researcher and were self-conscious in their speech. In analyzing the data, the researcher analyzed the interactions of the participants based on the discourse features discovered.

Results and discussion

Turn-Taking: Turn-taking observes when and how people take turns in conversation (Wu, 2013: 87). It is concerned with the way in which participants in interaction hold turns, pass turn, get in and get out of talk. The point at which people alter turns is called Transition Relevance Place (TPR) (Yule 2000:72). Turns could be simple or complex. For instance in our data, we have the following:

Simple turn

Exchange 1

Student: I want to get the library card	1
Staff: You want to do what?	2

Turn 1 and 2 in exchange 1 above are examples of simple turns as they are made up of a single move each.

Complex Turn

Exchange 2

Student: I want to get the library card	3
Staff: You want to do what?	4
Staff: You have to register first with hundred naira, then, we will give you card, you can now fill your data. After filling it, you will meet your HOD to sign and stamp it. You can then fix one of your passport. Anytime you want to enter the library, you will make sure you are with your library card.	5
Student: Please, is it the way?	6

Exchange 2 above could be regarded as a complex turn as it is made up of more than one move to each speaker.

Speaker change technique

Another aspect of Turn-taking that is relevant to this study is speaker change Technique. Osisianwo (2008:12) says that speaker change is when speaker A stops talking and gives room to speaker B to respond, [then] a speaker change has occurred.

Exchange 3

Staff: So what is your problem?	7
Student: I came for clearance	8

In the above Exchange 3, in turn 7, the staff selects the student in turn 8 by directing a move with an interrogative form. This is an example of current speaker selecting and indicating the next speaker.

Exchange 4

Student 1: Aunt, I want to know why it is taking so much time for the names to come out?	9
Staff: Which name?	10
Student 2: A bialam, I came earlier long	11

In exchange 4 above, student 2 self-selected herself in turn 11 when the staff question was directed to student in turn 9. Similar thing happened in exchange 5, turn 17 where the student self-selected herself.

Exchange 5

Staff: Is it the same year, the same session?	12
Student: Year	13
Staff: The same date, the same result?	14
Student: The same result	15
Staff: Jesus! The only person that will solve this problem is the lecturer. ..	16
Student 3: It is the same thing with my own	17
Staff: It is the lecturer, you people should go and meet. ..	18

Selecting the next Speaker is the process in discourse task that occurs when the current speaker decides on who speaks after him.

Exchange 6

Student 4: They are not working or ...	19
Staff: I don't know, I don't know, I only know, I can only tell you about my office, whether I have sent it or not so ...	20
Student 5: Sorry ma, biko odi possible na madu nwere ike i collect a copy of that transcript and photocopy?	21
Staff: No ooo!, it is not possible. I choo ya ga na your school ga nweta from them	22

In the above Exchange 6, in turn 19, student 4 did not finish her contribution before the staff interrupted in turn 19. Similarly, the staff did not finish her contribution before the student 5 interrupted in turn 23. This type of interruption changed speaker and topic, and can also be regarded as interruption without censure that is positively responded to, as observed by Onadeko (1999).

Repair mechanism

Another example of turn-taking that is worthy of note in this study is repair mechanism. Participants in interaction can make corrections through repair either on their own initiative (self-repair) or by the other participants (other-repair) such as we have in the following examples:

Exchange 7

Student: My mates are supposed to be in 300 level now. .. this November to continue based on our this thing, both our HOD and em em official, exam Officer in charge of the department...	23
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Exchange 8

Staff: They cannot bring out names like three or four names as others did. When their list comes out now, you will see it. They will bring out more names	24
Student: OK	25
Staff: So that once they start their first lecture, they start	26
Student: They have started	27

In Exchange 7, turn 23, there is repair mechanism where the student corrected himself when he said official, instead of exam Officer. And in Exchange 8, turn 26, the staff said start, while the student politely corrected him in turn 25.

Exchange 9

Staff: Are you through with the library	28
Student: (nods) to indicate yes	29

Exchange 10

Student: I want to get the library card	30
Staff: You know is hundred naira	31
Student: I said, if I want to get that of 100 level, I am in 200 level now, how much?	32
Staff: Then two hundred naira, hundred, hundred naira	33
Student: (gives the money to the staff)	34
Staff: Go and drop your bag outside	35
Student: (went and dropped his bag)	36
Staff: Collect your phone, collect your money and important things	37
Student: (Collected the things mentioned from his bag)	38

Exchange 9 and 10 are examples of Elicitation in Talk, which Osisionwu (2008) says is a reaction, a talk, a feedback, or a response, verbal or no verbal delivered usually from questioning an interlocutor. Onadeko (1999) also opines that “sometimes, the verbal response may be accompanied by kinesics, a nod, a raise of hand or a show of surprise”. The actions performed in turns 29, 34, 36, and 38 are non verbal responses to the directives in turns 28, 33, 35, and 37 respectively.

Adjacency pairs are exchange structures in pairs. They are reciprocal and complementary which often features as: Question/Answer, Greeting/Greeting, Challenge/Reaction, Offer/Response, Complaint/Apology, Complain/Justification (Osisianwo, 2008:13) The following are examples from our data;

Exchange 11

Student: Good morning ma, I want to check result	39
Staff: What result is that?	40

Exchange 12

Staff: Do you know her in person?	41
Student: Yes, I know her	42
Staff: Ok	43

Exchange 12, turn 43 can be regarded as a follow up move showing that the staff is not against the answer given in turn 42 by the student.

Exchange 13

Staff: So she didn't check anything in the Department and she directed you here to come and check result	44
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Student: Noooo! They didn't see it there	45
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Discussions

Research question one: Who manages interaction in Student and Non-teaching Staff Conversations in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu Universty, Igbariam Campus?

Unlike other researches reviewed in this study where there are unequal power relations between participants, this study found out that students relate freely with non-teaching staff. Both students and non-teaching staff initiate interactions as the case may be. Students enquire for one thing or the other concerning results, admission, library from non-teaching staff. Non-teaching staff on their own part ask questions for clarifications on students' need and make suggestions, give directions on how the problems can be tackled. Students interrupt conversations just like non-teaching Staff.

Research question two: What type of exchange structures take place in students and non-teaching staff conversations in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus?

Conversational concepts are the discourse strategies used in the conversations of students and non-teaching interactions such as Turn-Taking, Initiation of exchanges, Elicitations, Repair

Mechanism, Adjacency Pairs, Interruptions, Selection of the next Speaker among other.

Conclusion

In this study, the researcher has been able to analyze students and non-teaching staff interactions in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus. Their speech pattern is characterized with greetings, enquiry, complaints, clarification, directives, and follow-up, among others. Based on the findings of this study, we recommend for a similar study to be done in the universities in the North and Western parts of Nigeria as well as other countries of the world.

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