

Talking business, taking charge: Communicative and interactional norms in the MBA classroom

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This project draws from interactional sociolinguistics to explore the linguistic construction of authority in the MBA classroom. We explore authority as constructed through the stance(s) an individual takes toward what they are saying, the local and nonlocal resources the individual brings into the interaction, and the status of the speaker as core or periphery. Data are drawn from 30 hours of participant observation of classroom interactions of first year MBA students at Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business, informed by analysis of course materials and interviews with teachers and students.

Linguistic analysis focuses on ways students employ discourse features including personal experience narratives, put-down humor, and heightening effects. The work also examines how students position themselves (van Langenhove and Harré 1999) vis-à-vis each other and the professor and the role of stancetaking (Jaffe 2009) towards the ideas presented. In (1), below, after the professor illustrates a point using a 1980s memo instructing employees not to make copies for personal use, three core students question the applicability and relevance of this evidence using narratives of personal business experience:

(1) "This seems extreme. We just would have made fun of this memo at my previous organization."

As revealed in this ethnography, personal narratives of previous experience serve as the resource most effectively used to build authority in the MBA classroom, valued more highly than group opinion, case studies, academic articles, or current events. Such experience is nonlocal for other interlocutors and thus cannot be contested by the teacher or other students, and also positions the speaker as principal (Goffman 1981), unlike other resources that provide more social distance. The institutional authority of the teacher in the classroom is circumvented through use of this feature, which further cements the status of core members, adding to their existing social capital built through previous interactions.

Although previous ethnographic research has focused on the classroom context, such research has typically investigated the extent to which students learn material given differences in lecture style and material, language proficiency, and/or sociocultural expectations (c.f. Philips 1983, Saville-Troike 2003). While these differences remain significant, less attention has been paid to interactional aspects of a classroom community including how hierarchies of core and peripheral members are formed (Moore 2004). The present investigation fills this gap by exploring how differing authorities are jointly constructed and negotiated in student-teacher and student-student interactions. Ultimately, we suggest that communicative competence in the MBA classroom (as preparation for the business world) requires not just retention of learned material but also an understanding of largely unarticulated communicative and interactional norms. As gradual socialization occurs and implicit boundaries form (that are consciously or unconsciously policed), unequal ability to access these linguistic resources can serve to further perpetuate hierarchies of authority. Our findings suggest applications for this research in the business educational context including ethnographically-informed teacher training practices and cross-cultural components in new student orientation and curriculum development.