

The complex dynamics of faculty-student relations in dialogic academic speech events: the research group meeting

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Abstract

Adopting a «dilemmatic» view (Tracy, 1997) of mixed-status dialogic academic speech events, this paper examines if and how status differences affect the discourse unfolding at university research group meetings. Although certain discursive features (such as the control over the agenda or bald on-record directives) seem to be the prerogative of higher-ranking participants (and therefore, in keeping with the tenets of Critical Discourse Analysis, insinuate a reflection of power in discourse), speakers of a lower academic status (i.e. students) apparently perform all kinds of evaluation (including criticism and questioning) as readily as (and often against) their institutional superiors, suggesting that the statuses of «novice» and «expert» (Jacoby & Gonzales, 1991) are continually being negotiated in and through the interaction. However, a cross-rank comparison of the distribution and effectiveness of potentially powerful interactional positions and discursive resources (Thornborrow, 2002) reveals that an unqualified dynamic model of power (Foucault, 1991) is somewhat idealistic and that, with an unproportionately high frequency, students find themselves in potentially vulnerable interactional positions in which their intellectual identity is on the line and has to be defended.

Key words: dialogic academic speech events, power and discourse, discursive resources, interactional positions

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Introduction

For students at US-American universities enrolling in a postgraduate program, the competent participation in predominantly interactional speech events such as seminars, colloquia, research group meetings or advising sessions is important for academic success. Foreign students having coursed their undergraduate studies in their home countries could be left at some disadvantage in these events since the progressive «processes of disciplinary socialization» (Swales & Malczewski, 2001: 146) students have to undergo to achieve the academic literacies (Paltridge, 2002) that are necessary for success in a university environment may not only be specific to the discipline but also to culture. These students therefore may need preparation in order to be able to perform adequately as interactants in dialogic events.

One potential stumbling block could be the comparatively informal and sometimes even humorous tone employed by many members of the American academic community (see Swales and Malczewski, 2001: 147), a tone that could easily mislead one into assuming –at least as far as interactional discourse is concerned– a lack of authority structures between the participants of an academic conversation. Mauranen, however, points out that «[p]ower asymmetries between participants are not made explicit in everyday university discourses –yet they seep into the language» (2001: 165). Thus, while encouraging our EAP students to stand their ground in interactional speech events, making valuable contributions –thereby potentially projecting their identity as «intellectually able» (Tracy, 1997: 24)– we may also have to caution them against an overuse of assertive strategies, an overuse which might mark them as outsiders of the discourse community (Scollon and Scollon, 1995: 69) and also possibly represent a face-threatening act (Brown and Levinson, 1987) to some of the «gatekeepers in the degree system» (Mauranen, 2001: 175), i.e. to people who will be in a position to determine the students' future academic success or failure.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze if and how the relative speaker status of participants in dialogic academic speech events influences the discourse and which «interactional positions» and «discursive resources» (Thornborrow, 2002: 1) can be engaged by students in order to make successful contributions to academic conversations, striking a necessary balance between the assertive

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Conflicting views on the relation between power and discourse

As is well known, there are discrepant stances on how to approach the question of whether or not differences in speaker status (and the power relations presumably resulting from them) are in some way reflected in discourse. Two schools of thought –that of Critical Discourse Analysis and that of Conversation Analysis– hold particularly irreconcilable views on the issue: practitioners of the former claim that power differentials will inevitably leave their trace on language since «discourse [is] a place where relations of power are actually exercised and enacted» (Fairclough, 1989: 43) while exponents of the latter reject such an a priori concentration on any particular category, such as speaker status, for the analysis of a speech event unless that category can be shown to belong, at a given moment, to «the overly displayed concerns of the participants themselves, the terms in which they relate to one another, the relevancies to which they show themselves to be oriented» (Schegloff, 1997: 174).

Both positions are reflected in the literature on interactional academic speech events. The first, which we could call a static model, is represented by Conefrey in an article on a life sciences laboratory meeting, in which she maintains that «actual patterns of talk break down according to status» (1997: 328). She demonstrates that the group members of a higher rank (for reasons of institutional status, seniority, or gender) enjoy a prerogative over others with respect to certain discursive features, such as directives, topic control, speaking on behalf of the group, disagreement, on-record put-downs, the evaluation of other speakers, and the sheer quantity of talk (328-29). These features could represent status-related discursive privileges which, in Conefrey's words, «instantiate [...] power differences» (328).

At the other end of the spectrum, more in tune with the inductive inclinations of conversation analysts, we find what we might call a dynamic model. This model bears strong similarities to Foucault's concept of a «microphysics of power» (1991: 174), which considers power not as something stable and in permanent possession of particular individuals, but rather as something to be «exercised» by all participants in an event. An example of the dynamic model is Jacoby and Gonzales's article on the statuses of «expert» and «novice» in a physics research group meeting, in which they observe that these statuses are not permanently attached to institutional categories but are decided on a local scale. Thus, the authors conclude that «social identities are co-constructed, maintained, and modified» (1991: 174) during and through the interaction. In a similar vein, Swales sees the relationship between faculty and students as a matter of negotiation (2004: 189). However, Swales and Burke also decidedly qualify the possibility of leveling status differences in academic speech events, adding adverbials such as «at least momentarily» or «however transiently» (2003: 12), thereby implying doubts as to whether, all efforts at promoting an egalitarian discourse notwithstanding power differentials may not after all carry the day in the long run.

A third position provides a middle ground between the two opposed poles of the static and the dynamic models, namely, Tracy's postulation of a «dilemmatic logic» (1997: 5) pervading interactional academic speech events that involve speakers of different statuses (in Tracy's specific case the colloquium). On the one hand, so one of Tracy's many arguments, the underlying belief for such events is that all participants are equally free to contribute ideas that should be evaluated «on their own merit» (p. 84), which potentially offers every contributor the same opportunity of a powerful projection of an intellectual identity. But on the other hand such equality is not perceived by the students themselves, whose continual awareness of the «fate control» (p. 99) that at a future moment may be exercised over them by present faculty cannot fail to influence the students' participation, thus precluding a fully democratic communicative situation.

A similar position is espoused by Thornborrow in her research into the relations of power and language in institutional –including educational– contexts. She argues in favor of a local realization of status and power within a specific speech event, but nevertheless cautions that, due to «pre-inscribed and conventional participant roles» (2002: 4), the institutional context usually does endow some

higher-ranking interlocutors with certain functions that make some «discursive identities» and «discursive actions» or «resources» more easily available to them than to participants of a lower institutional status. This does not mean that these identities, actions, and resources are forever unattainable by the latter, nor that some discursive actions or resources are «inherently more or less powerful than others» (2002: 33). It only means that when a lower-ranking interlocutor's conventional participant role is in conflict with a desired discursive identity, this may have an effect on the additional effort the speaker has to make in order to perform the discursive action and/or on the way this action is received by others.

Against the background of these three positions –the static, the dynamic, and the dilemmatic conceptions of power in interactional discourse– the following sections will analyze the research group meetings of the MICASE corpus in order to ascertain if, as the first model maintains, the higher-ranking group members enjoy any discursive privileges, if, as the dynamic model claims, status is a local affair, in principle equally achievable by all participants, or if, confirming the dilemmatic view, the institutional role influences in any way the participants' discursive identities and actions and the impact they may have on the ensuing discourse.

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Analytical data of the present research

Research group meetings (MTG), also called lab meetings, are regularly occurring academic events during which a group of people associated with the university, usually formed around a full professor and jointly investigating a particular phenomenon, present and discuss their findings and decide which future steps to take (Swales, 2004: 172-175). The four research group meetings in the MICASE corpus have dissimilar participation structures, belong to various disciplines and follow widely differing agendas. One of them –MTG485SG142– pertains to the field of physics, lasts 41 minutes and is attended by one senior faculty member and seven graduate students, who produce a total of 8,394 words. The major part of this meeting is taken up by a whole-group discussion about problems with equipment and about how to spend the budget. During the remainder two students present the results of their research. Another meeting –MTG400MX008– is

concerned with immunology, involves one senior and two junior professors, two graduate students, and a technician, uttering 8,504 words during 60 minutes. After the senior professor's brief report on and evaluation of another researcher's findings, one of the graduate students presents unexpected data and the group tries to find explanations for the results. In the final minutes, one of the junior faculty members summarizes further research. The participant structure of the meeting on Artificial Intelligence (MTG270SG049) is similar to that of the physics group: six students and one senior faculty member. The agenda of this 94-minute long event of 16,760 words, however, is different and, in fact, to some extent unusual, as the professor himself points out in his frame-setting introductory turn: *this isn't a, um, a straight group meeting either this is uh, uh to be a practice event for uh, for Rob's defense* (emphasis added). It should be added, though, that the use of a research group meeting as a «practice event» for other, more public or more consequential speech occasions (in this case the defense of a dissertation proposal) is not at all infrequent, as the physics group analyzed by Jacoby and Gonzales shows, whose meetings regularly included «dress rehearsals» (Swales, 2004: 176) for conference presentations. In the Artificial Intelligence meeting, the rehearsal proper is frequently interrupted by comment and discussion sequences in which the remaining participants suggest improvements, request clarification or call attention to flaws. Finally, the meeting on natural resources –MTG425JG004– is indeed somewhat exceptional in this subcorpus because it is exclusively attended by graduate students who work on revising the draft of the proposal for a feasibility study that forms part of their Master's group thesis project (Axelson, 1999). It lasts 83 minutes and amounts to 9,130 words. Since no professor participates in this discussion and questions of status difference and relations of power therefore do not apply, this last meeting was analyzed separately from the others. Interestingly enough, two absent professors –their advisors– are repeatedly mentioned by the students. These professors, whose opinions, evaluations, and instructions are quoted or otherwise referred to in 63 out of a total of 456 turns (i.e. in 13.8% of the conversation), manifest a strong virtual presence in the students' consideration that belies the advisors' physical absence.¹

¹ For more details on the contents and an analysis of the macro-features of these meetings, see Swales (2004: 175-89). For more information on the natural resources group see Axelson (1999).

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Discursive privileges

Before we turn to questions of a more quantitative nature, let us first take a look at the following example, an abbreviated but otherwise unedited passage from the physics meeting (crossed-out words signal overlaps):

(1)

S1: [. . .] so then the question is, what are the capabilities of the new thing? so for example, how far out in the I-R can it go? how far out in the U-V can it go?

S3: uh the, what i told 'em we wanted, um is it's gonna be three-fifty to ten-fifty nanometers, all at once.

S1: three-fifty? is that enough for you? [. . .] he'd like ~~three-twenty-three~~

S4: ~~w- we want~~ three-twe- three-twenty [. . .]

[. . .]

S3: you can't, he said you can go below three fifty, but it's gonna have to be a different grating than this one [. . .]

S1: ~~uh-mm~~ if it's only the grating, then i'm not worried at all because we can always replace the grating. [. . .] if it's the C-C-D, then we should wa- get one that really is that has broader [SU-M: *sure*] ~~spectral~~ coverage so find out what the spectral coverage of the C-C-D is.

S3: i i, i might have to talk to somebody else. i asked him [. . .] what's the low end from? and he said well in this case he said it's from the grating [. . .] so, he said if you wanna go below you'd have to get a different grating.

S1: right [. . .] but if you also have to get a different C-C-D then, [. . .] then you should just have bought that C-C-D to begin with.

When I present my Spanish EAP students with this sequence and ask them to determine the speakers' academic statuses and justify their answers, they invariably identify S1 as the professor. The passages almost always adduced as clues are: *then i'm not worried at all, we should wa- get one, find out and then you should just have bought that*

C-C-D to begin with. Also somewhat frequently my students point to the fact that S1 is the one to ask questions while the others have to give answers.² This latter issue will be dealt with in more detail in the next section.

Interestingly, the four items my students most consistently consider to imply a superior speaker status are instances of some of the features Conefrey has claimed to be the prerogative of a high-ranking group member: in the first two cases, the professor is deciding on behalf of the whole group what should be a cause of concern, respectively what course of action should be taken. The third item represents a bald on-record directive, and the fourth instance an unhedged example of a reprimand or, as Conefrey calls it, an on-record put-down (1997: 328), openly reproaching S3 a possible blunder without making any effort to respect the latter's face wants (Brown and Levinson, 1987) by mitigating the criticism.

It is hard to imagine the same conversation with inverted roles, i.e. with a student performing the above-mentioned discursive actions and a professor in the position of S3. Intuitively, thus, example (1) appears to corroborate the static view of the relation of status and discourse in dialogic academic speech events. However, these findings about one particular passage need to be contrasted by quantitative data.

A close-reading of the meetings, checking them for the occurrences of the discursive actions Conefrey considers to be prerogatives of high-ranking speakers – i.e. the share of the floor, on-record orders, the control over the agenda, speaking for the group, discrepancy, reprimands, and the assessment of other speakers – yields mixed results: the only of these acts exclusively performed by professors is the bald on-record put-down, which, however, is itself utterly rare in the subcorpus, occurring a mere six times (see the example above). Nevertheless, in the three mixed-status meetings some of the other resources are employed predominantly by higher-ranking speakers and only very infrequently by students. Thus, the professors utter twenty on-record directives, such as the one contained in example (1), whereas students only issue two on-record orders, both of which are directed at other students. Moreover, one of the latter – *just go through all those bullets and make sure they have the right*

2 I am aware that I should have quantified these observations, but since I usually have my students work on tasks such as this in groups, it is impossible to ascertain the real frequency of answers.

labels – is pronounced in the context of a comment sequence of the artificial intelligence defense rehearsal and, rather than representing a true directive, functions as a suggestion for improvement.

Similarly, the professors dominate the progress of the meetings considerably, exercising topic control 22 times, an activity to which they often refer metadiscursively, as in the following example: *so, i wanted to find out, uh about um other stuff to buy because there's something i wanted to bring up, and that is [...]*. The students, in contrast, influence the agenda (or at least try to do so) a mere six times, sometimes simply by starting to talk. On two occasions they are dependent on a moderately long pause for taking control over the agenda, and in another case, at the end of the physics meeting, the student's agenda clashes with the professor's – with the result that the former's efforts to continue the discussion of a topic eventually lose out against the latter's determination to close the meeting. Three of the instances of a student's exercising control over the agenda occur during the immunology meeting, all of them in the context of the student's presentation of her data. Within that episode she can mark the transition from a more interactive passage back to her presentation by employing, very much like the professor quoted above, typical signposts such as *okay, i'm gonna go on to the next line or now the other thing i should bring up, is [...]*. Thus, a student seems more likely to be able to influence the agenda (at least locally, within one and the same episode) if her/his participant role gives her/him a central position.

With respect to speaking «on behalf of the group» (Conefrey, 1997: 328), the data in the MICASE research group meetings is contradictory. The distribution seems to depend on what kinds of statements are made in the group's name. Evaluations of how the group should proceed – as exemplified by *we should wa- get one* of example (1) above – are rather equally distributed, with 19 occurrences for the students and 14 for the professors. On the other hand, the evaluation of whether or not something should be the cause for the group's concern (as in *no no that we're not worried about. that's all set*) seems to be firmly in the hand of the professors, for whom nine instances can be established, with no comparable examples for the students.

As a preliminary conclusion, Conefrey's assertion that status differences have an impact on the discourse evolving at interactional academic speech events can be confirmed, but the exact resources she considers to be the prerogative of higher-ranking speakers have to be qualified. Thus, the professors' discursive privileges seem to

be on-record directives, the control over the agenda, the evaluation of the group's concerns, and, though uttered much less frequently, on-record put-downs.

Turning to the natural resources group, from which professors are physically absent and which therefore, as Swales points out, «has no hierarchical leader» (2004: 178), we can observe that two different students issue on-record directives (Geoff three times and Julio once) and that two students make an explicit effort at controlling the agenda (both Geoff and Martin twice) –although the numbers indicate that both of these resources are made use of very infrequently (and in one of the instances of intended agenda control actually fail since the other students ignore it completely). This infrequent use of discursive actions associated with speakers of authority may be a symptom of the problems the group had with efficiently managing their meetings in general, creating a sense of frustration with «the lack of leadership» (Axelson, 1999).

I think it is revealing that, while these four students hardly employ what I have established as discursive privileges of higher-ranking group members, the two absent professors' explicit instructions to the group on how to proceed are quoted 15 times, an example being *he wanted the [...] findings of the first, in the beginning of the paragraph*. Furthermore, the students quote their advisors three times as evaluating something as worrisome, as in *one of their concerns [...] was differentiating between the objectives, [...] the methods and the tasks*. It is, of course, impossible to reconstruct the advisors' original utterances so that we cannot ascertain how exactly their instructions and evaluations were transmitted. But it does seem that, despite their physical absence, these two professors wield an important influence not only on the group's concerns and decisions but also on their very discourse, thus manifesting a further –however indirect– way of how power reflects itself in language.

With respect to the remaining features that Conefrey mentions –disagreement, the evaluation of other speakers, and the quantity of talk– the research group meetings do not confirm any of them to represent a discursive privilege of higher-ranking speakers. Students happily (and quite straightforwardly at times) express their disagreement with both students and professors, they are equally quick to evaluate their peers, and the professors do not always take more turns or occupy the floor longer than some of the students although this feature should be looked at more closely.

As Swales has already remarked (2004: 182), it makes sense that the student presenter in the artificial intelligence meeting, taking center stage most of the time, should be the speaker with by far the highest number of turns (p. 161), which, in addition, are on the average considerably longer than those of the others, some of them consisting of more than 400 words. Altogether (backchannels and mere acknowledgements and confirmations excluded), this student produces 66.5% of all the words uttered in the meeting. A similar though not as drastic an advantage can be observed for the student presenting her data in the immunology meeting, who takes 145 turns, pronouncing 44.3% of the spoken text.

In both events, the main speaker is followed by the group director. In the artificial intelligence meeting the director's 113 turns contain 18.6% of the talk. This number of turns is reasonably higher than that of the next student (79 turns), who pronounces only 10.3% of the words, definitely turning the group director into the second most dominant speaker, quantity-wise. The distance separating the director from the remaining members of the immunology group is even more pronounced: his 2,610 words (32% of the text) are almost four times the amount of words uttered by the third most frequent speaker, another faculty member, whose 80 turns comprise 708 words (8.7%).

The numbers change significantly if we turn to the physics meeting, whose nature is mostly that of an «open forum» (Swales, 2004: 179) with no predetermined principal speaker, ideally offering the floor to every member in equal measure. However, not only is the professor's number of turns (108) higher than any of the other members' (the most frequently talking student takes 70 turns), the professor also pronounces 44.5% of all the words, more than twice as much as the aforementioned student (21.1%). Contrary to the open-forum ideal, thus, the professor effectively occupies the floor almost half the time, leaving little more than half of the floor for the six student members to share.

The findings about the relation of speaker status and quantity of talk are contradictory. On the one hand, Conefrey's inclusion of floor occupancy in the group of high-ranking speakers' prerogatives needs to be qualified since the artificial intelligence and immunology meetings suggest that it is the role played by a participant rather than her/his rank that determines her/his share of the talk. Nevertheless, the physics meeting insinuates that, all other things being equal,

it still seems to be the speaker of authority who will dominate the floor, suggesting that status may entail the right to the floor but that discursive role may temporarily invalidate this right.

Comparing these observations with the students-only natural resources meeting, like the one on physics evincing an open-forum character, the findings are somewhat surprising. Dividing this meeting into two parts because one of the participants leaves after a quarter of the conversation, in both parts it is Geoff, a US-American, who not only takes most of the turns (64 in part one, 128 in part two) but who also occupies the floor 49.3% of the time in the first and a striking 59.5% in the second part. In the first part, it is Julio, a Guatemalan, who is the second most frequent speaker with 52 turns and 26.6% of the words, while Martin, another US-American, takes third place (31 turns/19.6% of the words) in the first part and, after Julio leaves, moves to second position for the second part with 117 turns and only 35.4% of the floor. In both parts, thus, the second most frequent speaker occupies the floor only little more than half the time Geoff does. The least frequent speaker in both parts is Hiro, from Japan, who takes 11 turns in the first and 31 in the second part, producing merely 5.8% respectively 5.1% of the words uttered at the meeting, which might be due to his more limited grasp of English.

In spite of the potentially democratic nature of this status-free meeting one person dominates the talk. It is probably not wholly coincidental that this person should also be one of the two representatives of the dominant culture. It seems to be revealing that Geoff also performs five out of the group's eight instances of powerful discursive actions mentioned above. Interestingly enough, he refers to the absent advisers more than anyone else (26 out of 46 instances) and quotes them on instructions to the group twice as often as the rest of the students taken together (10 out of 15 times), affecting the group as if he were the prolonged arm of the academe's power.

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Free negotiation or dilemma?

A stocktaking of the discursive resources employed and the interactional positions assumed by students and professors on the one hand reveals that, with the exception of the discursive privileges for professors established above, the students can perform the same

discursive actions and acquire the same kinds of discursive identities as the professors. As to the former, the students appear to suggest actions and improvements, make all sorts of recommendations, evaluations and assertions, reach conclusions, point out flaws, and correct, criticize, qualify and question other speakers (including the professors) just as freely as their academic superiors, while these concede, recognize errors, back down on statements, self-correct, and accept others' corrections just as their students do, all of this suggesting that student-faculty interaction is indeed a matter of unimpeded negotiation, seemingly corroborating the dynamic model.

Still, in order to determine if and how institutionally unequal power structures affect interactional discourse, we have to examine how these discursive resources are distributed among speakers of different statuses, how these discursive actions are in the process of the interaction, and whether one of the groups tends to take some interactional positions rather than others or more frequently than the other group. With respect to the speech act of disagreeing, the students of the three mixed-rank meetings perform it 113 times, 72 times being at odds with a fellow student and 41 times with a faculty member, while the professors raise objections only 81 times. The data thus reveals that students in fact express their disagreement more frequently than the professors, once again pointing to the dynamic model. However, when you compare the success of the objections raised by each speaker group, it turns out that disagreements expressed by the professor are contested 16 times (19.8%) whereas those uttered by students are disputed 44 times—representing 38.9% of all instances. A student disagreeing with another speaker apparently faces a significantly higher probability of being contested than a professor while the disagreements expressed by faculty go through without problem 80.2% of the times.

This observation of an unequal success of discursive actions performed by students and those carried out by professors can be extended to the three mixed-status meetings in general, providing proof for the dilemmatic model. Of the professors' total of 449 turns only 49 are contested (eight of these by other faculty members), which means that 89.9% of all the professors' turns are successful. No such luck for the students, of whose 617 turns 153 meet with some kind of objection, which means that one out of four (24.8%) of the students' turns are contested in one way or another, affecting most harshly the speech acts of recommending (50%), disagreeing (38.9%), defending one's position (32.9%) and asserting (32.1%).

Against the background of this disadvantage, the «nonhierarchical nature» Swales claims for the artificial intelligence meeting (2004: 183), adducing, amongst other features, the fact that, for the most part of the meeting, the students interrupt the presentation much more frequently with comments, suggestions and requests for clarification than the professor might have to be qualified. In fact, out of the 27 suggestions of improvement the students in the audience pronounce 14 (i.e. 51.9%) are disputed, while merely three of the professor's 31 suggestions (9.7%) meet with objection. Similarly, though less drastically, 33 of the students' 68 expressions of disagreement (48.5%) are disputed while this happens to the professor for only 16.7% of his on-record objections. Observe the following example:

(2)

- S4: ~~do you need~~ to explain the, uh competitiveness assumption?
are you making a competitiveness assumption?
S3: it's kinda, well it's implicit in this, [...] the only assumption is
here is that they're optimizing with respect to prices only.
S4: the current prices ~~so~~
S3: ~~right~~ wi-with respect to some set of prices. [...] I'm uh sidestep-
ping the issue, of how you would get a competitive equilibrium
right now
S1: right [...] but what makes it a competitive equilibrium is that
everything is relative to given prices, and that's, stated, [...]
you know there.
S3: ~~right~~. [...] so, here's an example of a competitive equilibrium
[...]

Student S4 raises doubts about a potential deficiency in S3's presentation (simultaneously implying a suggestion of improvement), doubts that S3 first tries to contest and then, cutting short S4's efforts at substantiating his objection, attempts to dodge and which he is only prepared to address after the intervention of S1, the professor. Like this one, the meeting contains many other instances in which it is the professor's involvement that brings a sequence of objections, disagreements, contestations and counter-contestations to an end, settling the dispute in favor of one of the positions. As a consequence, in at least 10 discussion sequences, the professor moves into the in-

teractional position of arbitrator, undoubtedly a position of power.

With respect to discursive positions, Thornborrow underlines that «the role of the questioner» can potentially be «a more powerful interactional position than the role of answerer» (2002: 60) since it automatically projects the discursive identity of answerer onto the interlocutor the question is addressed to, an identity which entails an implicit obligation to provide the answer unless one wishes to breach the rules of interaction. Contrary to experience in primary and secondary education, where the question turn is one of the indicators of the teacher's «role of director of the talk» (Thornborrow, 2002: 111), questions in our research group meetings are equally available to professors and students: the former ask 98 times and the latter 91, a fact that appears to imply an egalitarian distribution of power with respect to turn types. However, this changes drastically if we look at the numbers for the discursive identity of answerer, which is projected only 38 times onto the professors but a total of 129 onto individual students (the remaining questions are addressed to the group or to the technician). Thus, while students and professors have an equal share of the potentially powerful identity as questioner, the students are moved into the less powerful position of answerer more than three times as often as the faculty. Furthermore, we must remember that, as Thornborrow emphasizes, no turn type or discursive resource is in and of itself more powerful than another (33), a disclaimer whose applicability to questions can be easily verified when one compares a query about the circumstances of an accident with a request for instructions: the former would impose on the answerer the obligation to explain, exercising power over her/him, whereas the latter in fact raises the answerer to a position of authority over the questioner. In order to determine whether the position of answerer is indeed a subordinate one with respect to the presumable power of the questioner, one must identify what kind of answer the question requires. And this definitely leaves the students in a much less powerful situation than the professors, who mainly have to answer requests for confirmation, clarification, advice or instructions, often addressed to them in their status as experts. In their identities as answerers, the students, in contrast, are frequently under considerable pressure to justify or defend previous statements, account for their results, their interpretation thereof, or the methods employed in their research, provide reasons for particular choices or perform similar discursive acts of self-defense. Some exchanges create the sensation

of representing a downright interrogation, as we can observe in the following excerpt from the immunology meeting:

(3)

S5: you're running these on agarous jells right?

S4: yeah

S5: [. . .] what's the size of the um, the transgene, so between, eighty-four nineteen or thirty-seven ninety-six in, the I-region?

S4: um it's like, forty or fifty base pairs max. you can't tell it when you're running on agarous and blot it, you can't tell the difference. Um

S2: why is eighty-four nineteen, picking up pro- correctly spliced?

S4: because that primer was made through the splice site.

S2: so, if it's spliced it would be negative?

S4: so if it's spliced says it's positive.

S2: isn't the splice acceptor on the on the beginning of C-H-three?

S4: yes and [. . .] this primer spans that. no [. . .] the splicing goes like this.

Student S4 is bombarded with questions by technician S5 and group director S2, urging her to provide details about and explain her data; twice she has to rectify the professor's mistaken assumptions. Although at times the role of the interrogator can be played by a student (or here by a technician), we rarely find a professor in the position of the interrogated. At moments such as the one in example (3) the student's self is on the line and she/he has to be quite alert and even assertive to maintain her/his projected identity as valuable researcher intact.

It is surely no coincidence that the types of answers required from the students in their position as answerers also represent discursive actions that are frequently performed by the students even if they have not been asked a question. In fact, resources related to presenting, describing, explaining or interpreting data, methods, theoretical underpinnings, or the use of equipment comprise the biggest group of discursive actions performed by the students in the mixed-rank meetings, representing 161 of their 617 turns (26.1%). Similarly,

all types of reactions to criticism –that is justifications, self-defenses and others– account for 73 of the turns (11.8%). This means that for 37.9% of their talk the students are called upon to actively stand their ground and demonstrate and defend their academic qualities.

A final comparison with the natural resources group shows that the distribution of discursive identities is strikingly different. On the one hand, in both parts it is Geoff who asks most questions (exactly half of them), bespeaking his more dominant character. On the other hand, with the exception of Hiro all other speakers are projected as answerers with more or less the same frequency. Revealingly enough, however, questions addressed to the whole group, amounting to 46.2%, are much more frequent than the questions asked to any individual student. Thus, frequently the answer is not forced on anyone in particular and the questions open the floor to all of them alike. Moreover, most of the questions directly addressed to a particular student elicit his opinion or the endorsement of a suggestion. Hardly ever is a student forced by a question to project an identity of a researcher displaying her/his knowledge of complex concepts.

In this meeting, there are 37 contested turns, which is a comparatively low number. Accordingly, the discursive resources of justification or defense against criticism, which were so frequent in the mixed-status meetings, are only employed 10 times. Whose turns meet with objection, however, is revealing because, while the percentage of disputed turns revolves around 10% for Hiro, Julio, and Martin alike, only 4.2% of Geoff's contributions are called into question, once more manifesting the power he seems to have within the group. At any rate, the percentages for all the participants are very low if compared to the students in the mixed-rank meetings, making some 90% of all turns successful for all group members and thereby creating a truly democratic feel.

6

Conclusions

A stocktaking of discursive resources employed by participants at research group meetings suggests that, on the whole, on-record directives, topic control, bald on-record reprimands and the evaluation of group concerns can be established as the discursive privileges of the high-ranking group members, giving them considerable power over

the discourse. A consequence of this finding for teaching would be to encourage students to either refrain from using these resources (so as not to perform acts that could be face-threatening to professors) or find alternative ways of achieving the same communicative purposes, by transforming, for instance, a directive into a suggestion, recommendation or an evaluation of desirability, all of which are discursive actions that, as the data shows, are available to the students.

Furthermore, we should prepare our students to take an active part in academic speech events, calling their attention to the fact that their discursive role at an American university will not be limited to that of the listener nor to asking for clarification, as might be the case in some other, predominantly lecture-style university cultures. Students at an American university are very frequently moved into the discursive position of answerer, a position in which they will have to be able to account *ad hoc* for all aspects of their data, ranging from methods of data collection, to analysis and interpretation, to questions related to the theoretical framework. To do this adequately, students may need to be trained in the speech acts of presenting, describing and explaining.

Finally, students should be made aware of the fact that in academic speech events one's intellectual identity will predominantly depend on what one manages to project in one's contributions. This identity can be shown to be somewhat at risk in interactional events since an important number of students' turns are contested by other speakers. The contestations a student receives both from professors and fellow students may not be particularly face-threatening in their formulation but the student needs to be prepared to react to them adequately in order to establish her/his face to begin with, which is often done by American students whose speech evinces a considerable number of justification or defense turns. Even though much of this paper has tried to demonstrate that status does have its reflection in discourse, the fact that the option of reacting to criticism is open to a student at all also indicates the essentially democratic nature of such debates. The feasibility of this option itself might, however, not be self-evident to students from other cultures. In my own experience as an instructor in Spain I have observed that a Spanish university student may very well voice an opinion or even qualify or raise doubts about a professor's proposition. But as soon as you as a professor contest that contribution, that student will usually speak no more and you will never find out whether your contesta-

tion has convinced her/him or not. One task of the EAP instructor teaching in Spain might, therefore, be to point out to the students the discursive disadvantages and pressures that the institutional power structures will inevitably impose on them as well as teach them the interactional positions and possibilities available to them to assert their intellectual self against these obstacles.

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The gender of power relations in academic speech: a cross-disciplinary approach

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the presence of female speakers in the articulation of different interactions that take place in several spoken academic discourses extracted from the Michigan corpus. More specifically, I will analyze whether the use of hedging strategies such as *I mean* and *you know* reinforces the binary opposition of gender stereotypes which relegates women and their language choice to a powerless and subordinate position or, rather, it can indeed be defined as a terrain of cultural and linguistic contestation with which to negotiate gender formation. Such a statement, which is based on the Foucaultian notion of power as both productive and repressive, shall bring to the fore in my analysis how in the construction of gender identity, the role of language is paradoxical: on the one hand, identities and language are social constituents that produce certain stable meanings, and on the other hand, they may exceed and transgress the initial rhetorical context they seek to effect. It is with this double-edged Foucaultian theoretical background, which has also been adopted by several feminist linguists, that my research shall attempt to diagnose the way(s) gender identity is evoked through the above-mentioned hedges in different academic disciplines.

Key words: gender identity, power, hedging, speech acts, academic speech.