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Talk that counts: Age, gender, and social class differences in discourse

By Ronald K. S. Macaulay

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Summary

In Chapter 1, “Discourse variation,” Macaulay introduces the aims of the study, which include the use of quantitative measurement to demonstrate the way people speak. More specifically, this volume investigates the correlation of discourse styles in Scotland with extra-linguistic variables such as social class, gender, and age.

In Chapter 2, “Methodology,” the author discusses his three hypotheses about analyzing discourse features in research. Macaulay also focuses on calculation of relative frequency rather than the number of tokens, since each individual produces a different amount of talk. Relative frequency is calculated in the number of tokens per 1,000 words.

In Chapter 3, “The sample,” the author presents the samples obtained. The samples are drawn from two corpora. One was composed of the researcher’s individual interviews with twelve adult speakers in Ayr in Scotland. The interviews were recorded without a specific time limit. The other was from Stuart-Smith’s study of the dyad interactions of thirty-three participants, including adolescents and adults. In the dyad interactions, each participant was asked to choose a familiar interlocutor who was of a similar age and the same social class and gender. Their interaction was recorded without the presence of the researcher for 30 minutes. The data was balanced in terms of age, social class, and gender. For his statistical analysis, the author employs the Mann-Whitney nonparametric test.

In Chapter 4, “Social class,” Macaulay considers some issues of classifying social class. As the author states, some researchers classify social class by asking participants to rate their social class by themselves. In contrast, other researchers use 10-point or 16-point socioeconomic class indices based on measures of participants’ occupation, education, and income. For the study presented in this book, the author uses occupation, education, and residence to classify each participant’s social class.

In Chapter 5, "Decoding Bernstein," the author presents some issues with Basil Bernstein's study (1958). Bernstein claims that there is a difference between working-class speech and middle-class speech. However, this classification of working-class and middle-class language has been criticized by a number of scholars, due to its lack of appropriate methodology for analyzing discourse variation. Despite the weaknesses of Bernstein's research, Macaulay feels that Bernstein's study is a helpful starting point for quantitative discourse analysis.

In Chapter 6, "Talk in action," the author discusses the quality of recorded speech in terms of naturalness and claims that recorded speech should satisfy the condition that "All speakers have the same opportunity to use certain discourse features in the recording sessions" for analysis (p. 46). The discourse features described in this chapter include the use of a minimal response, questions, imperatives, and the pragmatic particles *oh* and *well*. Based on these discourse features, Macaulay examines the correlation between discourse variables and gender, age, and social class in recorded speech.

In Chapter 7, "Some common discourse features," the author investigates the use of the discourse features *oh*, *well*, *you know*, *I mean*, and *like* in the Glasgow conversations and the Ayr interviews, relating the specific functions of discourse features to age, social class, gender, and the participant's relationship with the interlocutor. He also describes the functions of each discourse feature and suggests that the investigation of the usage of discourse features would be more important than overall frequency of use.

In Chapter 8, "Syntactic variation," Macaulay examines some syntactic variations such as coordinating clauses, the subordinate conjunction *because*, passive voice, and dislocated syntax in relation to social class, age, and gender. As shown in chapter 5, Bernstein claims that different social classes use different syntactic constructions. For example, he proposes that working-class speakers use short and simple grammatical structure, as well as unfinished sentences. However, Macaulay argues against Bernstein's claim and proposes that the most significant differences in syntactic features are revealed in age and gender, rather than social class differences.

In Chapter 9, "Modals and modality," the author examines Bernstein's claim that middle class speakers use modal auxiliaries more often than working-class speakers. The modal verbs investigated are *can/could*, *will/would*, *be going to*, *have got to*, *used to*, *shall*, and *want*. Macaulay's study shows that there is no significant difference in the use of modal auxiliaries among social classes and thus does not support Bernstein's claim.

In Chapter 10, "Adverbs and social class," the author continues to investigate Bernstein's claim that the middle-class uses "uncommon adverbs" more frequently than the working class. Macaulay assumes that uncommon adverbs are the adverbs derived from adjectives such as *carefully*. He compares the frequency of uncommon verbs within different social classes, gender groups, and ages in the Ayr interviews and Glasgow conversations. In addition, other adverbs, such as *very*, *quite*, and *just*, and some adjectives, such as *pure* and *dead* are compared in the chapter.

In Chapter 11, "Articles and pronouns," Macaulay presents the use of articles, pronouns, and relative pronouns in different social classes, age groups, and genders. The chapter shows some gender differences in use of pronouns. More specifically, women and girls use third person

pronouns (*he*, *she*) as well as the first person singular pronoun (*I*) more frequently than men. Based on these results, the author further examines what topics were chosen in same-gender interactions and associates the use of certain pronouns with the topics chosen.

In Chapter 12, "The use of dialogue in narratives," Macaulay analyzes the distribution of narrative as well as quotative verbs in narratives in Glasgow conversations. Quotative verbs include *say*, *go*, *be like*, *be like that*, *think*, and so on. The distribution of narratives and quotative verbs shows some differences in social class, gender, and age. In addition, the author discusses the innovation of middle-class girls in Glasgow producing *be like* as being influenced by the United States.

In Chapter 13, "Results of quantitative measures," the author summarizes the findings of each chapter. It was revealed that age is ranked first as a statistically significant variation. Following age, gender is ranked second and social class third.

In Chapter 14, "Discourse styles," Macaulay describes whether the discourse variations studied in each chapter can be associated with the differences in discourse style in terms of age, gender, and social class. Based on the findings in each chapter, the author provides some characteristics in discourse styles. First, the discourse style of adolescents includes less talk, compared to adults, frequent use of questions and imperatives, as well as frequent use of modal auxiliaries. Second, in terms of gender, females produce greater amounts of talk and narratives and more frequent use of pronouns, *because*, modal auxiliaries, *so*, and clichés, as compared to males. Finally, although the difference of social class is not a major factor affecting differences in discourse style, some differences still exist between middle and working class. Middle-class individuals use more passive constructions, adverbs, evaluative adjectives, hedges, and explicit comments. In contrast, members of the working class use more dislocated syntactic constructions, and less emotive language and hedges. However, since the similarities and differences do not occur in every context, Macaulay suggests that more studies need to be conducted to see if the results would be replicated.

In Chapter 15, "Discourse sociolinguistics," the author concludes the book with methodology and limitations of the study. In addition, he proposes the following five principles as guidelines for analyzing discourse features; 1) decide what to count at the beginning of your analysis, 2) provide the raw scores of word counts, 3) treat discourse features first as unitary phenomena rather than considering their subfunctions, 4) treat discourse features as units of form, and 5) don't treat discourse features as a closed class.

Comments

This volume provides a readable overview of discourse study. Most studies of sociolinguistics have been concerned with phonological/morphological variations. By contrast, this book provides an innovative way of considering discourse features in sociolinguistics. In addition, there are a few other ideas in the book that deserve special attention.

First, this volume examines some claims made by Bernstein. Bernstein's claim that there is a difference in discourse style between working and middle class has been criticized due to its lack

of scientific method, but little research has been conducted to verify Bernstein's claim. This volume provides empirical research in relation to Bernstein's claim. Most of Bernstein's claims have been contradicted by Macaulay although some have been supported. Therefore, this volume shows that social class is not a major factor that affects different discourse styles.

Moreover, the method is legitimate in that the author provides the frequency of each feature for every speaker by calculating the number of instances per 1,000 words rather than the number of tokens per feature type. The calculation excludes the hesitation marker such as *um* and *er* but includes minimal responses such as *mhm* and *uhuh*. However, as the author notes, treatment of contracted forms such as *I'm* and *couldn't* as a single word form could be a problem affecting the token frequency in interaction.

Last, Macaulay concludes that the findings of the study are locally determined and may not be generalized to other situations. Although the findings may be hard to generalize, they are still valuable in that they open up many possibilities for carrying out future research, considering the limitations of the present study. The book seems to be almost free of typographical errors, but there are some minor errors in headings and examples. For example, the subtitle 1.1.a.ii. says "Invariant forms, consistent in form but varying in meaning" on p. 17 but the subtitle does not match the content which says invariant forms are consistent in function but varying in meaning. In addition, the numbering of examples (4d-e) of the last sentence on p. 119 does not correspond to the examples shown on p. 120.