Power Relations in Teacher-Students Discourse in Trilingual classes

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Abstract: This study is an attempt to explore patterns of social power relations in teacher-student discourse. The basic theoretical framework of the present study lies in the critical discourse of Fair clough (1989, 2001). In this research, data were collected based on observations in a language institute (Sokhan Institute, Sanandaj, Iran) where learners from different age groups, mostly teenagers take part to learn English. Although English is the main language for learners to be able to speak English, as the target of these classes is Persian, as the second (Formal) language, and Kurdish, as their mother tongue are used inevitably. For some outsiders Persian is also the first language. The four constraint devices of Fair clough (1989, 2001) including interruptions, explicitness, controlling and formulation were found in this Iranian teacher-student discourse, but also eight more were taken out and reported some of which like Swearing (Oath) and Generalizing tu/vous patterns to other persons seemed culture-bound (Using swears to justify oneself, and tu/vous pattern which in Persian are generalized to I/We and S (he)/They patterns. In sum, the outcome of analyzing the texts, ended up with 12 power relation patterns or restriction techniques. The crucial significance of this research is the intensive focus on unequal social-power-relation patterns which are felt unpacked and unnoticed in other such works. There is expectation for this research to open ways to linguists of other cultures and languages to find trace of the highlighted social power patterns in their own culture and discourse and for both academic people and laymen to get aware of the processes happening in their relations and discourse.

Key words: power relations, powerful, powerless, discourse, teacher-student, school

1. Introduction

Work on social power relations has a young history of not more than two decades (for instance Manke, 1997 and Murray 2003), but this is no reason for inaction by Iranian sociolinguists. Unfortunately, studies on social power on the whole, and social power in curriculum in particular are very colorless and marginal, so the need for highlighting social power specially that of teacher-student is felt strongly. The Western Emiritus Professor Norman Fairclough has done splendid research on power relations which is needed to be expanded and continued in other cultures and contexts. This research is an attempt to find or rejectsocial power techniques of Fairclough (2001) in teacher-student and family discourse in an Iranian context.

There are two main questions which I will try to answer: Do Fairclough's techniques of social power (Fairclough 1989, 2001) exist in an Iranian discourse? Are there any more techniques (patterns) of social power in addition to those of Fairclough in an Iranian discourse?

Whom do we consider more powerful? A man or a woman? The older or the younger of either sex? Does "age" dominate "sex" or the other way around? What function do social roles play? In an Eastern context, elders are respected more (Deborah E.

Bowen, 2005 and Kyu-taik Sung, 2004). Linguistically speaking, they areconsidered more powerful. And let's measure the degree of power by which we choose to greet first or last. A young manager is not expected to greet his or her employeefirst, for instance a genitor (even elderly). Now let's just suppose this elderly genitor were the manager's father! A son or daughter is expected to greet his/ her parent first.

In a dialogue between a teacher and his students, we shall see that even to start a question, students have to take permission (extract 4-1-4*): (eʤazeaqa... eibnædarebenvisim, bædhæmunobexunim…?* (Persian, meaning: Excuse me, sir….. Might we write it, and then read that…..?)

The classes I observed were good arena of power emergence. I will show that powerless participants practice their powerlessness through different techniques which might be categorized in two groups: verbal and nonverbal. Verbaltechniques include*addressing* (using titles like Sir, and Mr.), *using special structures* (imperatives and commands), *tu/vous pronouns* (using first person singular form of pronouns), *tone of speaking, (*the powerful speaking ridiculously, while the powerless speaking formally), *justification* (the powerless using swears to justify his / her saying), g*reeting first or second* (the powerful

expect the less powerful to greet first), whereas the powerless stand up before the powerful, *programming* (teacher's deciding what to do and whom to do it), c*ontrolling* (monitoring verbally and nonverbally), *formality and politeness (u*sing formal expressions).

Nonverbal techniques include *body language (*e.g: moving freely in the classroom), *interruption* (up-down relation interruption: the powerful interrupting the powerless), *length of utterances* (a powerful participant has got the right to use short answers in response to a long question.).

A class as a social institution can be the most appropriate place to get trace of power relations. One may claim there are some democratic classes in which the trace of power has faded away. I would say just as any social institution has a level of power relations, these classes are not exceptions, but the degree of power varies.

I have in many cases encountered terms "less powerful" and "more powerful "(e.g: Fairclough 1989, 2001; Winograd, 2001) which conveys the idea that even the dominated have somehow more or less power. At the same time as Fairclough argues even the dominant to some extent overlapped by the situation and the way they plan to control others.

But teachers are known typically as powerful, whereas their students are considered as defenseless and powerless members of the institution.

I am in agreement with Fairclough, but I claim some factors which are the cause and/or effect of power relations as:

Using imperatives, Direct and/or Indirect corrections, Interruptions, Threatening (imposing power), Powerful participants' relaxation versus powerless participants' embarrassment, Address terms (eg. first names vs. family names with some titles as Mr.), Singular pronouns versus plural pronouns (eg. **to** vs. ʃomɑ, **mæn** vs. **mɑ̠u:** vs. **Iʃu:n**or **Iʃɑn**), Using Oath by less powerful participants (eg. *be xod*ɑ*=* By God*),* Using polite expressions by less powerful participants (eg. *beb**æxʃi:n*=Excuse me), Using shorter utterances by more powerful participants.

2. Material and Methods

My observation included thirty sessions of home and school out of which I found the following reports most interesting and message-bearing.

Setting1: (Sokhan Language Center, Sanandaj): Mr. Ahmadi (the teacher) calls one of my subjects, Kamran, to the board and wants him to present his lecture including the summary of a pre-allocated short story.

(Notice: T for "Teacher" and K for "Kamran")

1. T: Right, someone else*, (long silence while investigating his eyes among students finally getting down onto Kamran)* Kamran?... you…you ready?

(Stands up lazily, moves his chair to let Kamran take benefit of teacher's desk).

2. K: (Stands up hesitantly and anxiously) Can I…… eh…(*points his chin toward a paper in his hand which seems to be his notes on the story, he wants to take permission to take his notes with him).*

3. T: No problem, conditioned you have not copied down the whole story *(swinging his index finger to warn him.).*

4. S: (Hesitates and freezes a short moment) **bæ..le**?! (*Persian, meaning "Pardon"?) (Other students burst into laughter.) (A witty classmate shouts "***deI bro godʒæ, eʒeqenæ***" (Local language Kurdish, meaning "Go you fool, he said NO PROBLEM").*

5. T: All right, start now. (*T has hands in pockets, shoulders up, leans toward the wall) .*

6. S: This story is about a George. *Mother's George does not T: You mean <u>George's mother.</u>*

7. S: Yes, George's mother does not have a telephone….

8. T: (Bends down to a student near him, grasps his book) **bede bebinæm** *(Persian, meaning: Give it to me).*

9. S: George cannot find a job in his village; he goes (*loud sneezing by another student).*

10. T: (to the sneezer) Sneezing or shooting*? (Class bursts into laughter and the teacher loses the control of the class for some minutes…).*

COMMENTS: One might clearly find out power features in the aforementioned discourse. Firstly the posture the teacher holds proves a striking unequal relation (*standing up lazily, hands in pockets, shoulders up, leaning toward the wall*), secondly it's the teacher as a powerful participant who believes he has got the right to interrupt the non-powerful participant whenever he likes (or believes is necessary, as in 6), thirdly it's the teacher who applies conditions as in 3 (*conditioned that…*) and warns (using the gesture of threatening with his finger), fourthly the powerful participant strengthens his powerful position using imperative utterances, as in 5(*Start now*).

Fairclough's terminology: We may as well rule Norman Fairclough's four devices with which the more powerful puts constraints in the contributions of the less powerful participant: (Language and power, Fair Clough, 2001) I elicited the following, though:

1. Interruptions: The teacher doesn't consider turn taking rules, as in 6.

2. Enforcing explicitness: The less powerful participant uses the strategy of ambiguity, shifting into Persian as in 4, (**bæ..le**?!) while the powerful participant responds by ignoring him, as in 5 (*All right, start now).*

3. Controlling topic: The powerful side decides what to do as in 1(*Right, some one else*).

4. Formulation: Again it's the teacher as the floor holder who rewords what has been said as in 6 (*You mean George's mother*).

Setting 2: *(Sokhan Language Center, Sanandaj):* Mr. Abdi, the teacher asks one of my subjects, Kawan, to practice a conversation which is in their book with a classmate, Shahram, both around 13.

3. Results
T) for "Teacher", K for "Kawan", and S for"Shahram")

(1) T: Very well.. now… two of you practice this conversation together *(searches through his list on the desk in front of him.)* Verywell Shahram and Kawan (Shifts into Persian to make sure they get the order.) **Shahram, to Scott mi:ʃi væ to Lisa ro…***(Students burst into laughter) (The Persian sentence above means: Sharam, you'll play Scot's role and Kawan that of Lisa.)*

T: SHHHHHHH, be quiet *(scorns, stands up to gain control of the class, daggers at a witty student who is still giggling)* **sɑɑɑke**t!!! (*Persianmeaning Beee quiet!!!)*

(2) K: (Shows he wants to stand up) Can I…… eh…(*points his chin toward his book)*

(3) T: Don't stand up, **hæmu:n dʒu:rke neʃæsti:n** *(Persian meaning: Sit down where you are.)*….Close your books.

(4) S: (Hesitates for a moment, then opens his book and closes it when the teacher moves towards him.) **ɑqɑjɑdemu: n mire** *[Persian meaning Sir, we (I) forget].***ɑqɑ**.. Hello Lisa, how are you today?

(some students laugh again).

(5) Ahmad (a witty classmate): **Kawan, to kæni:ʃki** *(Local language Kurdish, meaning, "Kawan, you are a girl.")*

(6) T: SSSSSSSSSSSSS *(Knocks on the desk loudly and gets angry, goes straight to the witty boy)* **ætkæmædæro** Ahmad *[Local language, Kurdish, meaning " I'll exit you, Ahmad……. (long silence)]*

T: Go on.

(7) S: I.. I don't feel well.

(8) K: What's the matter?

(9) S: I have a headache.

T: (Corrects Kawan's intonation) **What's** the matter? *(Kawan nods.)*

(10) S: I have a headache.

(11) T: (Corrects Sharam's pronunciation) /hedek/

(12) S: I have a headache.

(13) K: Get better soon.

(14) S: Thank you.

(15) T:...( ) Very well. Now…

Interpretation:

If one asks you in advance whether a classroom discourse is a relation of inculcation or an equal one, it will be easy enough to choose the first one. The factors involved to lead you to such an answer may be:

1. A teacher even if not as a lecturer but as a guide, usually controls a classand is known as acenter and the students are dominated, for they need somebody to lead them, therefore they are powerless and their teacher is powerful.

2. The teacher's knowledge and experience overlaps the students and it is her/him who is to transfer that knowledge and experience to his group (students).

3. The relation between a teacher and students is known and accepted as a top-down one both conventionally and logically.

Now let's find clues in the reported extract above:

1. Controlling (Programming): The powerful participant decides what to do as in 1 and 15 (Now..).

2. Orders: The teacher uses direct imperatives as in 1 and 3 (Practice, Be quiet, Don't stand up, Close..).

3. Correction: Whenever he feels necessary, he corrects students as in 9 and11. (This has been termed "Formulation" by Fairclough (Fairclough 2001).

4. Interrupting: The teacher interrupts whenever feels needed with no attention toturn-taking rules, as in 9.

5. Threatening: Whenever he feels his territory and status in danger, he doesn't avoid threatening the student (s), let it be by gestures or by direct words, as in 1 and 6.

6. Freedom: While no single student considers it as his right to stand up or speak, or let's dare presume eat or answer his mobile phone, the teacher moves around conveniently, as in 1.

7. Tu/vous Pronouns: Whether call it power, solidarity or politeness, in Persian context using plural forms of subject and object pronouns, possessive pronouns and adjective sand also reflexive pronouns and even suffixes which are parts of different tenses of verbs (called **ʃenɑse**) is preferred in formal situations by the powerless participant whether in first, second or third persons, as in 4, while the teacher uses the singular form, as in 1 and 6.

8. Addressing: The teacher calls the students by first names, as in **1**above, while they address him by the title **ɑqɑ** (Sir), as in 4.

Trace of Power through Using Plural Forms in Persian Language

Discourse types and orders of discourse vary across cultures. (Fairclough 2001, p. 40) Using plural forms of first and even third person pronouns and also plural forms of possessive pronouns and adjectives as well as plural forms of reflexive pronouns is preferred

to singular forms in unequal encounters among Persian (Farsi) speakers which are an attempt to save the formality of situations and leads to politeness. In this regard Fair clough (2001, Language and Power, p. 55) believes, "Formal situations are characterized by an exceptional situation to and marking of position, status, and 'face'; power and social distance are overt, and consequently there is a tendency towards *politeness*." In such cases as that of a teacher and student, employer and clerk, lord and servant where there is a difference of power, and hierarchy of social status. A conversation such as the following is not unexpected to have been observed.

(T for "Teacher" and S for "Student")

(1) S₁: bærpɑ(Persian, meaning: Stand up.)

(2) T: Sit down, please. (a long silence of about ten seconds during which the teacher handles his things on the desk and clears his throat) How are youtoday?

(3) Sₛ: Fine, thank you.

(4) T: (long silence, teacher's mysterious stare and then he shifts into Persian.)
Bebini:nbætʃehɑ, nomrehatu:nhi:tʃxu:bnæbu:d, to "Siavash",… engar æslannæxundɛbu:di:. (meaning: Look kids, your exam marks weren't good at all; you, Siaavash,… it seemed as if you hadn't studied at all.)

(5) S₂: **ki:aqɑ?..Maaqɑ?!... bɛxodaxeilixundɛbu: di: maqɑ! æz babamu:nbeporsi: naqɑ..** [meaning: Who Sir?... **Us** (me) Sir?... By God (honestly) **we** (I) had studied a lot, Sir! Ask **our** (my) daddy, Sir.. ( )].

(6)   T: **babatbitʃarɛæzkojdʒabedunɛxundi:janæ!?** [How in the world should your daddy know if you've studied or nott!? (shoulders up smiles and otherstudents follow him).

(7)   S₂: (blushed)   **mi:dunænaqɑ, xodeʃu:nbahamu:nkarkærdænaqɑ!!**

(8) T: **pæs..?!**
[meaning: **They** (he) **know** (knows), Sir, **They themselves** (he himself worked with **us** (me),Sir!! (teacher interrupts: Then..?!)]

(9) S₂: **aqaedʒaaze, zæbaneʃu:nqævijɛaqɑ.** [Excuse me Sir, **their** (his) English is very good, Sir.]

(10) T: **male to hæmqævijɛ**…. (sits down at his desk) **ælbætɛzæbunɛ todæ'hænɛt** [yours is very good too,…. (sits down at his desk) but your tongue.]

Comments

The powerless participant uses the plural forms of:

1. Object pronouns (as in 5 and 8) [Referred to in Persian as "zamir-e- paivaste-ie- mafʃolee" (Khaanlari, Parviz, 2001, Persian Language Grammar)].

2. Possessive adjectives (as in 5 and 9) [Referred to in Persian as "motamam-e-esm" (noun complement) (Khaanlari, 2001, Persian Language Grammar)].

3. Subject pronouns (as in 1 and 8) [Referred to in Persian as "zamaier-e-shakhsi" (person pronouns) (Khaanlari, Parviz, 2001, Persian Language Grammar)].

4. Reflexive Pronouns (as in 8) [Referred to in Persian as "zamir-e-moshtarek", common pronoun) cause they are common in all 6 inflections.]

5. Shenaase (Persian part of speech meaning "Signifier Suffix", which doesn't exist in English and which signifies number and persons matching verbs) as in 5 and 7 in using **"i:n", "u:n",** and **"ɑn"**.

The powerless participant who is a student, tries to save the "formality" of the situation, and this way consider "politeness", specially one might notice, he is under pressure of the other side of the conversation (not to forget he was blamed for his bad performance in the exam). Having reviewed the discourse from the beginning, we would confess that the atmosphere ruling the whole context is unequal: The students stand up before their teacher and sit down when he permits them; the teacher calls students by their first names as in 4, whereas they call him **aqɑ** (Sir) as in 5; and even the teacher pulls the student's legs as in 10. But what is interesting here, is the parts of speech the student uses in his grammar. As quoted by Fair clough, "The plural and singular forms of pronoun *YOU*, the so-called *T* and *V* pronoun forms exist in many languages – French, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian among the European languages – but not modern standard English…*tu*is used to address people one is close to in some way (friends, relations, co-workers, etc.) and *vou*is used when there is social distance." (Fairclough, 2001, Language and Power, p. 59) Persian language could be listed among those languages as well. In addition, power has a trace not only in using **to/ʃoma**(*vous/tu*) but also in applying **mæn/ma** (*I/we*), and **u:/i:** ʃɑn [s (he)/they]. To refer to third person plural, there are two forms in Persian: **ɑnhɑ** and **i:ʃan**. The former is not used to refer to singular even as respect and politeness, but the later which was mostly used in old Persian is now applied to refer to third person singular by subordinates as in the following extract:

(Ahmad, one of the writer's students, is introducing the writer to his wife, Negar.)

Ahmad: **Negar, i:ʃun ostad Pahlevani hæstæn kɛ hæmi ʃɛradʒɛ' behɛʃun…** *[Negar, they are (this is) Ostaad Pahlevani about whom…] Negaar:***sælam, haleʃoma?** *(Hello, how are you?)*

Instructor: **mæmnu:n,** ʃ**omatʃetori:n?** *[(Fine,) thanks, and you?]*

Norman Fairclough's Arguments on Power and Discourse

Fairclough makes a relationship between social structures and discourse which, in its turn, leads to social continuity or social change: "… the relationship between discourse and social structures is dialectical in this way that discourse assumes such importance in terms of power relationships and power struggle; control over orders of discourse by…power holders is one factor in the maintenance of their power." (Fairclough, 2001, p31)

Fairclough discusses power in two major aspects: power in discourse and power behind discourse. He discusses "power in discourse" as power concerned with discourse where relations of power are actually practiced and enacted. Fairclough's"power behind discourse" is regarded as how orders of discourse, as dimensions of the social orders of social institutions or societies are themselves constituted by relations of power. Fair clough also discusses power in face-to-face spoken discourse, power in cross-cultural discourse where participants belong to different ethnic groups, and the hidden power of the discourse of the mass media. Fair clough discusses that power, whether it be 'in' or 'behind' discourse, is never definitively held by any one person or social grouping; because power can be won and exercised only in and through social struggles in which it may also be lost.

The constructs aforementioned can support us in exploring the impact of the power and relationship in schools and comparing them with home situation. Through the identification andanalysis of discourse, and the identification of teacher and student behaviors that attempt to control virtual classroom time and space, define course knowledge, or share, use, contest or reject authority, we can make these dynamics visible and consider how they affect teaching and learning process.

4. Discussions

In sum, the four constraint devices of Fair clough (1989, 2001) including interruptions, explicitness, controlling and formulation were found in this Iranian teacher-student discourse, but also eight more were taken out and reported some of which like Swearing (Oath) and Generalizing tu/vous patterns to other persons seemed culture-bound (Using swears to justify oneself, and tu/vous pattern which in Persian are generalized to I/We and S (he)/They patterns. There is expectation for this research to facilitate for both academic people and laymen to get aware of the processes happening in their relations and discourse and to open way to linguists of other cultures and languages to explore and find trace of the highlighted social power patterns in their own regions and cultures.

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