Groups at work: Pragmatics and group interaction

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The two papers in this forum take a fresh look at current issues in pragmatics. Looking at how students position themselves in written discourse, Todd Squires discusses reflective narratives. Donna Fujimoto looks at the micropractices of small group discussions. In both papers, the writers argue that the activity of subjects in both L1 and L2 reveal subtle attempts to use language as a tool for positioning the self.

　本フォーラムの2つの論文は語用論の今日的な問題について新しい観点で検証した。Todd Squiresは、学生のライティングの中で学生が自分自身をどのように位置づけているかを考察し、学生のナラティブについて論議した。また、Donna　Fujimotoは小グループによるディスカッション時の学生の言動を細微な点まで観察した。両論文において、著者らは母語および第二言語を使用する際に学生は言語を自らの立場を位置づける手段として使用する傾向がみられると論じている。

Sociocultural Theory (SCT), Conversational Analysis (CA), and the field of pragmatics are not obvious bedfellows. However, where they do overlap and intersect is an interesting nexus of dialogic interaction, cultural construction of meaning, and linguistic positioning. In the two papers that comprised this forum, the authors look at the pragmatics of discourse and how speakers represent themselves to their interlocutors from rather different perspectives. Taken separately, each paper is an

interesting discussion of issues that concern pragmatics today: the use of language as a psychological as well as a social tool; how different languages allow speakers to create and label a self; how we become more fully linguistic in dialogue with others. Taken together, they offer a sense of where pragmatics is moving in the future: no longer preoccupied with speech acts, pragmatics as a field— enriched with the cognitive, social, and analytic tools of SCT and CA—is opening up to cross-disciplinary perspectives.

Todd Squires uses Japanese L1 reflective narratives written by learners of English to illustrate the subtlety and complexity of how the *self* (the writer/learner) is presented when the ostensible *other* is the writer herself, and at the same time is the teacher/reader. Drawing upon both SCT and Lacanian psychology, Squires explores the pragmatic implications and instantiations of self-directed discourse that is neither fully discursive nor fully self-directed.

Donna Fujimoto uses a close CA analytic approach to illuminate the micropractices of English learners in small group discussions. Initially seeing just general patterns of student behavior in group discussions, she found, through careful observation, that the students were in fact engaged in rather intricate strategic practices. They were speaking and interacting in ways that escaped the teacher's casual gaze, and needed a researcher's patient attention to detail for their true participation to be gauged.

Students' narratives of classroom activities
Genre and style in the construction of the subject
Telling stories is a particularly human activity. We use stories to make sense of the events in our lives and to express ourselves to others. Indeed, it has even been argued that narrative structures consciousness (Bruner, 1986). In this paper I wish to explore students' narratives of classroom activities in order to uncover how students construct subjectivities through narratives. In doing so, I will argue that classrooms are sites where subject positions are sustained and contested within educational institutions. First, I will briefly clarify my approach to subjectivity, ideology and narrative. Then, I will explore one pragmatic issue— politeness—that emerged when I was reading students' narratives.

The subject, ideology and narrative
Sociocultural Theory is part of a larger philosophical shift witnessed across multiple disciplines which holds that the distinction between consciousness and the social environment is untenable. At the core of this is the notion that subjects (rather than individuals) are socially constructed through discursive practices.

Our desire to be a unified individual (ahistorical) drives us to narrate precisely because it is through narrative that we attempt to structure our lives and give them a coherent and meaningful unity (Lacan, 1977). Behind narrative we find ideology. The main function of ideology is to create subjects, and because ideology takes formation of subjects as its main work, ideology informs our construction of reality. Ideology is vitally important in that it defines not only how we position ourselves and others as subjects in the world, but also it structures the way that we think about ourselves and attach meaning to our experience (Althusser, 1971, p.

164). The ways in which we narrate our stories to others, therefore, can serve to maintain the power of certain groups and the institutions that legitimate them. Narrative enables us to speak, but it always undermines our efforts at pinning down an unchanging self. Genres are, after all, "agents of ideological closure--they limit the meaning-potential of a given text" (O'Sullivan et al., 1994, p. 128).

The subject in narratives of classroom activities

Narrative practices in any culture are supported by ideological systems. Subject positions, story grammars, characterization, and the language itself are all embedded in this legitimizing idea system. In this section, I would like to explore how subject positions develop in narrative. After an introduction to the context and how the narratives were elicited, I will look closely at how authors use narrating styles to draw subject positions.

Background

The narratives for this research were written by a class of 22 second-year students (19 male, three female) in an information science and engineering college at a large private university in western Japan. The middle five weeks of this listening and speaking class were devoted to discussions on a broad range of topics. In Week 4 the topic was whether the minus point system (a demerit system) of the English language program was good or not. In the week before this discussion, students were randomly assigned to a side of the argument and asked to prepare some notes on their opinion with reasons.

When students arrived for class, the teacher instructed them to sit in their usual seats and prepare silently for ten minutes. After the ten minutes were over, students were put into pairs randomly with playing cards. They were to use the ideas from their speeches to have a short discussion role play with their partners. When the first pair practice was over, students made new pairs and practiced again. Finally, two pairs joined together and each pair performed for the other pair who completed a peer evaluation.

At the end of the class, students were asked to write a narrative (the teacher used the words *monogatari* and *naratiibu* in the instructions) in which they retold what happened during the class. At the beginning of the next class, students submitted their narratives.

Narrative style

The narratives written by the students all exhibited a three-part structure common to narrative. (My framework relies primarily upon works such as Bal, 1985 and Genette, 1980.) The *introduction* gave the setting for the narrative and in some cases this was prefaced with a brief summary. In addition, the introduction often included the narrator's explanation of his or her psychological state before the recounted events. The main part of the narrative, the episode, followed. This was divided into two main parts: the practice session (*rensyuu* 練習) in which the narrator had to overcome some obstacle, and the main performance (*homban* 本番). Following the episode, there was a short coda in which the narrator explained how he or she changed because of the discussion activity or reflected upon the event in a personally meaningful way.

As I read through the students' narratives, one feature stood out. While the narratives were structurally similar, there was a clear distinction between authors who chose a plain *da*-style of narration versus those who used the formal *desu/masu*-style. (I will use the term *author* to refer to the student as writer, *student* to the position within the institutional structure, and *narrator* to the textual role. Likewise, I will use *reader*, *teacher* and *narratee* for the teacher, respectively.) My initial conclusion was simply that some students were being more polite toward the teacher. After reading the narratives in more detail, however, my initial conclusion had to be revised.

In Japanese discourse, the author must make a choice between using the *da*-style or *desu* / *masu*-style. At the level of communication, the *desu* / *masu* – *da* alternation is, of course, a matter of politeness. (Communication level refers to the act of narrating as communication involving an author and a reader.) Brown and Levinson (1978) consider politeness as a pragmatic strategy whereby the speaker attempts to maintain face; and according to this theory, the *desu* / *masu* - *da* style choice is part of the Japanese politeness system. A typical use of the *desu* / *masu*-style is to encode relative status differences between the interlocutors and also to maintain distance between interlocutors who are not socially close.

However, when we look more closely at narrative, we find that a face-saving strategy interpretation does not fully explain the data. If it did, then we would have to conclude that the majority of the students were misreading the relationship between the teacher and student. The key for understanding the author's choice of style was to be found in a closer examination of how politeness is employed by authors in narrative genres.

Maynard (1991) argues that politeness should be considered as a discourse modality. The *da*-style encodes a perspective that is internal to the narrative. The writer is giving the reader a more direct access to the events in the story by vividly presenting these events as the speaker experienced them. The *desu* / *masu*-style, on the other hand, heightens the narrator's role as a mediator of the information to a narratee with whom he / she has a specific social relationship.

In homodiegetic narratives (one in which the narrator is a character in the story) the use of the *desu/masu* forms can be seen as an authorial move to create an explicit level of communication between the author and the reader, in that the *da*-style constructs a reader that is extradiegetic, and the *desu* / *masu*-style conversely draws the reader closer to the world of the narrative. Thus, by using the *desu* / *masu*-style, authors create narratives that encode a specific relationship between the narrator and the addressee. This suggests that issues of status, authority and formality should be considered in any interpretation of the narrative.

I would further argue that the *desu* / *masu*-style by constructing an overtly present reader embeds the narrative deeply within institutionally demarcated social structures with ideologically established subject positions directly into the practice of reading. By this I mean that the *da*-style constructs a greater distance between the events of the narrative and the social relations between the reader and writer. Whereas, the *desu* / *masu* style clearly establishes a relationship between reader and writer—the author not only

creates a narrator subject but the projected narratee. In doing so, the reader is guided into a subject position in which his or her interpretational freedom is limited. The *desu* / *masu*-style as both a discourse modality and a politeness marker impels the reader into a certain ideologically circumscribed interpretative framework.

To see how subject positions are constructed and how this guides the reader's interpretation, let us look at one narrative in particular. Due to the limitations of space, I have only reproduced here the introduction and coda of the narrative.

Kota's Narrative

	Original	English Gloss
1 5	今日はディスカッションをする日でした。最初に新しいグループを分けることになりました。私達は仲の良い友達と一緒になれるようにこの日は離れて座っていましたが、カードの配り方が思っていたのは違い、あまり意味がありませんでした。	Today was the day we did discussions. At first [the teacher] divided [us] into new groups. I hoped to be put into a group with close friends, but on that day I sat apart from them; the way the cards were distributed was different than what I had thought, there wasn't much meaning in it.
	（省略）	(deleted)
10	今回の授業はほとんどディスカッションだけで終わりましたが、いつものようにただ授業を聞いているだけより、自分で何かできる今回の授業のほうがとても楽しく、そして有意義に過ごすことができたように感じます。	Although class ended this week having only done discussion, rather than just listening to the lesson as usual, this week's class was a lot of fun—I had to [think about] what I could do myself—and I felt as if I could spend the time really meaningfully.

Kota begins his narrative, as many other students did, by introducing the setting as a "day in which we did discussions." Having attuned the reader to the classroom setting, Kota's next move is to recount how the students were divided into groups. We note that even though the teacher is never once mentioned in the entire narrative, he is being constructed as the assumed reader and as a character in the story. What kind of narratee is constructed by the narrator? The second sentence of the orientation gives us a clue. As the narrator tells us, the students were divided into groups. The verb *wakeru* 分ける is not passive, however its subject referent is absent at the surface. The strategy of deletion is frequently found in languages such as Japanese which rely heavily on context. Absence shifts the interpretational burden upon the reader to replace the missing items in order to construct meaning. In doing so here, Kota is reminding the reader that the narratee as teacher is always there in the background controlling the actions of students in the classroom.

How is this power depicted? In the next line, Kota tells us that this division of the class into groups broke up his initial group of close friends. The *we* suddenly becomes an *I* through the act of the teacher. As the episode unfolds, the narrator tells us how this *I* struggles to overcome his lack of preparation for the discussion. After practicing with his first partner (*aite* 相手) he is able to achieve success by performing smoothly during the real performance.

In the coda, the narrator reflects upon how he overcame the initial situation and was able to perform relatively smoothly and confidently. Again, speaking to the narratee, the narrator comments that the class has forced him to do

something that he as a student would not have normally done: think about what he could do for himself. Thus, the author as student is making a comment to the reader as teacher

Kota is performing a subjectivity that is slightly shaken by the requirements of the activity, and by calling out to the reader in a *desu / masu*-style, this draws the reader into a specific reader position. By pulling an assumed reader directly into the web of the narrative through metalepsis (violation of narrative levels), Kota tries to work out how he can continue to maintain a unified self (student position) in the face of an activity that threatens to undermine it. At the same time, he is reconstructing a self that is consistent with authorized subject positions.

Conclusion

Use of qualitative data in foreign language education research allows us to bring in a number of analytic tools that have too long been overlooked in mainstream SLA theory. In this paper I have argued that narrative data must be analyzed as narrative, and in doing so it will allow us to undercover a much richer understanding of the foreign language learning process. Specifically, I have shown how writers' stylistic choices must be read according to how they actively construct reader positions which force ideological closure on the reader's interpretation of the narrative. Writer's choice of the formal desu / masu style clearly establishes a social relationship between reader and writer—the author not only creates a narrator subject but the projected narratee. In doing so, the reader is guided into a subject position in which his / her interpretational freedom is limited. The *desu* / *masu*-style as both a discourse modality and a politeness marker impel the reader into a certain ideologically circumscribed interpretative framework.

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Conversation Analysis: Micropractices of students in multi-party talk

Many language teachers put their students in small groups as a regular part of their class. The teacher becomes a facilitator and shifts the focus from themselves to their students. In the small groups the emphasis is on students communicating in the target language trying to get their meanings across through a discussion or working on a task. In this way more students can get practice in using the language than in whole class lessons.

Groups in the classroom

For teacher education, there has been much published on group learning and group dynamics (Cole, 1970; Dörnyei, 1997; Ur, 1994). Also there has been a considerable amount of attention paid to cooperative language learning (Cohen, 1994; Gunderson & Johnson, 1980; Jacobs & Hall, 2002; Oxford, 1997) and to task-based language learning (Ellis, 1997; Nunan, 2004). The increasing interest in Sociocultural Theory has given rise to many publications which show the importance of learners participating in activities with other people—activities that require their cognitive faculty and their communicative ability (Lantolf, 2000; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Wertsch, 1991, 1998).

SLA researchers have investigated the type of talk generated in the small group, categorizing some speech as *input* and *modified input* (Doughty & Pica, 1986: Gass & Varonis, 1985; Pica, 1994; Long & Porter, 1985). These researchers suggested that interaction in small groups leads to increased input and output, thereby facilitating target language development. However, this assumes that that learning is purely a cognitive activity and focus is on what an individual student hears or produces. As far as the activity of the overall discussion itself, there has been very little attention by researchers and teacher educators alike.

One teacher's changing view of groups

Perhaps group discussions get little attention precisely because they are so commonplace. Teacher researchers assume that students know how to discuss already. When observing university students in Japan, it seems that not all students are able to participate well in discussions. To better understand student behavior, the writer has been videotaping classroom discussions for over ten years. She has used the videotapes in classrooms to help raise student awareness about effective participation in groups, and she has used the videotapes to do her own research. Her perspective on students in small groups has changed significantly over time. Perhaps the best way to depict these changes is through the use of metaphors.

When she first started observing students in group discussions, she was on the ground just using normal eyesight. When observing she could get an idea of what was going on. She could see roughly who was speaking more than others, if students were on task, and if they seemed to be interested or not. Not being satisfied with this, she climbed up to a higher vantage point, as if from a hill looking down, and from there she could see more of what was happening. This time she could see patterns. She learned that every group seemed to have: 1) *a key person*, a person who speaks most often in the group, initiates the

talk, asks questions and acts like a group leader and 2) *supporters*, people who do not speak as much, but support the key person by responding to questions and comments. A few groups even had 3) *a silent supporter*, a person who also supports, but does not speak (Fujimoto, 2004). Students, with just a little help from the teacher, came up with these terms, and they used them when talking about their performance in the discussions. These classroom-friendly terms seemed to motivate them prompting them to strive to change their roles to more active ones.

From the metaphorical hill, the researcher used binoculars. She transcribed some of the videotaped discussions, and by using discourse analysis she saw more patterns. She discovered that students sometimes used collaborated turns to help each other; they had a strong repertoire of ways to show agreement and disagreement and to make topic shifts; and they demonstrated an ability to create an atmosphere of solidarity in their groups (Fujimoto, 2005). This was still not enough, so it was as if the researcher tried using a low-flying helicopter to descend to a position, as close as possible yet without being a member of the group. This time the research tool was Conversation Analysis (CA).

Using Conversation Analysis to investigate group interaction

Conversation Analysis (CA) as developed by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (see 1978) is a highly disciplined way of investigating the intricate details of interaction. The name Conversation Analysis is somewhat misleading because it sounds as if it refers simply to the investigation of conversations. Although CA researchers are indeed interested in everyday conversation, they also study a very broad range of talk, e.g., talk in institutional settings. Thus, within the research literature in order to distinguish it from the lay term, CA is often referred to as *talk-in-interaction* (Schegloff, 1989).

Conversation Analysis is strongly data driven. In other words, analysis depends very much on the talk itself and not upon the researcher's hypotheses. Conjectures or interpretations about the motivations of speakers or how the context may have influenced the utterances are not allowed in CA, so one can often hear CA analysts say, "the data must speak for itself." According to CA analysts, interaction is highly structured, and thus the goal of CA research is to uncover that underlying structure. Great attention is paid to the sequential order of talk (including nonverbal behavior). As Wood and Kroger (2000) put it, "The great achievement of CA is that the investigation of seemingly narrow organizational features of interaction (e.g., turn taking) has yielded information about a very large number of practices…" (p. 21).

In the study of the videotaped discussions, many interesting practices of participants in group discussions have been revealed by using CA. Some of these will be explained in the next section. Before proceeding, a few CA terms should be defined. In CA a turn within the interaction is made up of *turn construction units* or TCUs. One turn can be made up of one or multiple TCUs. There is a tendency to equate TCUs with linguistic terms, such as clauses, phrases or words. However, in CA, care is taken not to use grammatical terminology, but to look at the finer details of the utterances. A turn takes place at a Transition Relevance

Place or a TRP. These are located at the end of a TCU, a place where there is a possibility that a transition of speakers can take place.

The focus of the analysis

Excerpts of the transcription of an eight-minute discussion will be used. (See Appendix A.) There were five members in the group, A, B, C, D and E sitting from left to right, respectively, in a semi circle facing the camera. The topic, international marriage, had been given to them a week before. One area that is critical for successful participation in student discussions is how members first enter the discussion. For novice speakers in particular, it is a formidable task. They are faced with many challenges. 1) They should be able to recognize a TRP in order to take their turn. 2) They must be able to time their entry into the flow of the talk. 3) They should begin to speak *before* or *after* others take a turn. 4) They must select the appropriate wording to express what they want to say. 5) They must try to make themselves understood by others. 6) Finally, they must make their utterance relevant to the previous talk. In this discussion A, B and E entered the discussion within the first 20 seconds; C entered at line 30, but D did not speak until line 53. We will look closely at D's entry into the discussion.

Initial entry into the discussion

Conversation Analysis examines more than just verbal behavior. In D's case before line 51 he had been engaged, although minimally.

Line 4	nod and smile
Line 10	nod
Line 15	repetition of a word (that E said)
Line 19	nod
Line 22	nod

Novice speakers who are preparing to make an initial entry into multi-party talk often exhibit preparatory behaviors, such as, incipient facial expression (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1986), gaze shift, lip movement, preparatory hand/arm gestures, body movement, coughs, inbreaths, and so forth. (Schegloff, 1989). While C displayed incipient lip movement and gaze shift before her entry, D did not display any of these until immediately before line 51.

44		(3.0)
45	A:	but then i- if we can (1.6) uh:: love the kun- (0.2) the foreigner
46		(0.2) foreigner ↓
47		(2.0)
48	C:	°nnn° (gaze up)
49		(1.0)
50	B:	ah: (nod, then questioning face) [bu:t]
51	D:	[sense] of value (0.4)
52	B:	(lean forward, gaze at D)
53	D:	sense of value sense of value (0.2) is difficult [(1.0)]
54	A:	[nod]
55	B:	[°yeh ok° (nod)]
56	D:	between [(0.8)] uh A and A and A and B like that
57	B:	[mhm]

After a noticeably long pause of 3 seconds, A spoke. When A was talking (line 45), D gazed directly at him and nodded. However, A's statement was not well-formed, and it was quite unclear. This makes it likely that D's nod was not one of comprehension and agreement, but simply one of acknowledgement. The fact that A's statement was unclear may also have been why no one responded, opening up a very long 2-second gap. After A showed he was finished with the falling intonation of "foreigner ↓," D shifted his gaze downward, not to any of the co-participants. This retraction of gaze from the current speaker or potential speaker to some point away from the other participants is often an indication of a "word search" (Carroll, 2005, Goodwin & Goodwin, 1986). Thus, D may have been preparing to speak. He then smiled briefly and his lips began to move, looking as if he were practicing his next line. When he finally spoke, it was in overlap with B (line 50).

The phrase "sense of value" was repeated three times. This stands out, and a teacher or casual observer would most likely assume that this is a sign of a low-level speaker having production difficulty. This repetition is what has been referred to in the CA literature as a recycled turn beginning, a restart (Carroll, 2005) or self-repetition (Toshima, 2005). Both Carroll (2005) and Toshima (2005) dispel the idea that these are false starts, production errors or disfluencies. Empirical research, in fact, shows that repetitions are used by both fluent and novice speakers strategically, and closer examination here shows that this was also the case with this novice speaker.

When D and B overlapped, B stopped immediately and gave D her full attention, gazing directly at him. After the first "sense of value" B leaned forward towards D as if she had not heard or understood him. This may well have prompted D to repeat the phrase. After the second "sense of value" B continued her gaze but did not nod or smile as she had done when interacting with the others previously. The lack of a visual display of acknowledgement may have prompted D to say "sense of value" for yet a third time. After D said "is difficult," he received positive acknowledgement from both A and B. Thus, far from being redundant, the three repetitions of "sense of value" each displayed a logical response to the other participants from D's point of view.

Conclusion

This strict adherence to the perspective of the participants themselves is one of the strong points of Conversation Analysis. It is not necessary to consult the participant after the recording because the logic and reasoning for their behavior are all there within the transcript itself. It is up to the CA analyst to uncover them. The recycled turn beginnings by participant C were also completely logical from her point of view, but unfortunately, space does not allow further explanation here. Suffice it to say that close examination of novice speakers of English in multi-party talk can reveal a wealth of interesting micropractices. What is salient is the fact that many of these micropractices are the same or quite similar to what fluent speakers routinely use in their interactions.

For the teacher/researcher who is interested in getting an up-close and accurate reading of students in group discussions, the approach of Conversation Analysis is invaluable. As in this study, the strong lens of CA has shown how truly capable students are. Where previously C and

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D had been evaluated as weak ineffectual speakers, this analysis provided clear evidence that this was not completely true. It is always good when teachers and researchers see what students actually do.

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