

Enacting Power and Authority in Interaction

Alena Vasilyeva

The research is based on the constitutive view of communication that treats interaction as a process of meaning creation and construction of social entities such as personal relationships and organizations (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). The study uses the method of discourse analysis that focuses on the language use in context. It examines how power and authority are interactionally achieved in the course of talk between a county clerk and clients over gay marriage and their dynamics. In this respect the study follows research on establishing interactional power and authority in institutional context, for example, radio talk (Hutchby, 1996), therapy sessions (Bartesaghi, 2009), dispute mediation (e.g., Tracy & Spradlin, 1994).

The study includes a turn-by-turn analysis of the participants' moves with a special focus on dialogue episodes where the participants make an attempt to enact power/authority by 1) performing actions to control interaction; 2) referring to the figures of authority either to justify or support one's actions, or 3) challenging the other party's actions and referring to one's rights.

The preliminary analysis shows the power/authority dynamics at three levels: competition for interactional power; competition for institutional power (agent versus client); and a clash between a legal order and a moral order. All these levels are interwoven.

First of all, at the mere interactional level, the participants exercise control over who can participate in interaction. For example, in line 107 David questions the right of Beige to take the floor and asks other people in the room to be silent. In this episode,

David, White, and Kim are ratified participants, while others are bystanders. Ratified participants have the right to include or exclude others in or from their participation framework.

Next, I will look at the techniques the participants use to control interaction. For example, at the beginning of the interaction, David questions Kim in a similar way the radio host challenges callers by employing a second position, which is a stronger position, according to Hutchby (1996).

Next step is to address the institutional dimension of talk. For example, Kim invokes her positioning power by mentioning her business (“I’ve asked you all to leave, you are interrupting my business “ in line 41), and her territory (“[j]ust push back away from the counter “). The legitimacy of this power is challenged. For example, David, in his turn, introduces the rights of a client, referring to the fact that he is a tax payer, thus counterbalancing Kim’s moves.

Finally, there is a clash between legal and moral orders, which is performed by other forms of agency and authorship: God vs Court. While Kim appeals to the authority of God to justify her refusing to register marriage, David and others appeal to the decision of Court as a legitimate authority. It is noteworthy that Kim’s claim is challenged from different angles. First of all, her expert authority is called into question, then the existence of this authority is denied, and finally the relevance of this authority in this matter is challenged.

References

Bartesaghi, M. (2009). How the therapist does authority: Six strategies for substituting client accounts in the session. *Communication & Medicine*, 6, 15-25.

Hutchby, I. (1996). *Confrontation talk: Arguments, asymmetries, and power on talk radio*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Littlejohn, S. L., & Foss, K. A. (2009). *Encyclopedia of communication theory Vol. 1*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.

Tracy, K., & Spradlin, A. (1994). "Talking like a mediator": Conversational moves of experienced divorce mediators. In J. P. Folger & T. S. Jones (Eds.), *New directions in mediation: Communication research and perspectives* (pp. 110-132). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.