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Social Class and Its Impact on Narrative Styles in Spoken Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the deep-seated effects of the social class in the structural and stylistic aspects of narrative that lie in the spontaneous speech discourse. It looks beyond conventional studies of accent and lexicon, exploring how socio-economic positioning determines the architecture of storytelling, such as how much a narrative is held together, how complex the syntax is, how much there are evaluative mechanisms, and how there are strategies of audience engagement. This study is based on the sociolinguistic approach to narrative analysis, which is used by William Labov and the idea of linguistic habitus, which was introduced by Pierre Bourdieu, wherein a qualitative method of analyzing personal experience stories is used, utilizing stories told by people of different classes. The results show that there are radical stylistic differences, specifically the narratives of the professional-middle-class speakers may be marked by metacognitive framing and preoccupation with the inner psychological situation, whereas the working-class narratives are characterized by the need to use linear sequence of events, the importance of group values, and dramatic performance as an evaluation method. These trends show that narrative style is not an innocent medium but a powerful indicator of social identity, actively constructed by and indicative of class-based practices, access to educational resources, and communicative expectations. The research finds that it is important to appreciate such subtle distinctions in order to tackle the problem of implicit bias in the institutional realms, such as education and law, where verbal expression is the most likely and where the difference in style might be perceived as incoherent and unsophisticated.

Keywords: Social Class, Impact, Narrative Styles, Spoken Discourse, Verbal Expression.

Research Objectives

To define and outline what kind of linguistic and structural peculiarities define the styles of narration of the speakers with various backgrounds of social classes.

To examine how these narrative elements are used to create and define a social identity and based on class habitus of a speaker.

To compare and contrast the employment of evaluative devices (e.g. outside commentary, dramatic performance, inside sensation) in class-differentiated narratives.

Research Questions

What are the quantifiable qualitative variations in narrative elements (e.g. orientation, complicating action, evaluation, coda) between working-class and middle-class speakers?

What are the functions of evaluation that speakers of various classes backgrounds use to give meaning in their stories?

How do these narrative styles indicate the inbuilt dispositions (habitus) and availability to cultural and linguistic resources belonging to various social classes?

Methodology

This study methodology was structured in a way that would make a qualitative analysis of the narrative styles using a sociolinguistic perspective across social class groups easier. A purposive sampling approach was used in order to select forty native-speaking adult respondents (out of five urban areas) and create two separate groups, which are categorized according to a composite socioeconomic index of educational levels, occupational status, and self-reported household income. The former group comprised of twenty people who were classified as working-class, usually with a high school diploma or vocational training and had a manual or service job. The second category comprised of twenty professional-middle-class people who had at least bachelor degree and worked in managerial, professional, or technical sectors. The groups were well balanced in terms of age, gender and ethnicity in order to restrain the possible confounding factors.

Data were gathered by use of semi structured interviews, the audio-taped recordings were done in calm environments to facilitate natural speech. The main way of evoking stories was through prompts of the most memorable or significant life experiences, which was determined by William Labov to evoke spontaneous and engaged story telling. They were questioned about incidents that they were in danger of their life; like when they were so in serious danger, or what a memorable event in their life was and then they were advised to talk but to avoid interrupting them.

The data analysis of the gathered information was carried out in a number of steps. Transcription of all interviews was done in verbatim form with simplified set of conversation analysis convention to capture words only but other relevant para-linguistic features like pauses, emphasis and laughter as well. Individual experience narratives of personal experience were then identified in each of the transcripts and this is what is referred to as discrete personal experience narratives, which is a recapitulation of previous experience with two or more temporally ordered clauses. The systematically analyzed coding framework was the modification of the model by Labov, and the emphasis was put on the structural elements of the narrative: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda. Another comparative thematic analysis followed to find out tendencies in assessive equipment, the distinction between external commentary and in-text dramatic performance, and the analysis of the methods of attaining narrative clarity and involvement. Such a procedure made it possible to identify the stylistic patterns that could be viewed in the theoretical framework of Bourdieu, concerning the concepts of habitus and cultural capital. The main factor during the research was ethical considerations. All the participants received informed consent and were advised that they had the right to anonymity, and could not answer any question and pull out at any point. Transcripts were anonymized and the audio files were stored on a secure encrypted server with an intention of destroying them in future.

The protocol of the study was approved by the concerned institutional ethical review board before its start.

Theoretical Framework

The analytical standpoint of this paper is based on the convergence of three theoretical foundations that form a powerful perspective on the problem of social class encoding and performance in narrative. The former is the sociolinguistic theory of the narrative structure by William Labov, which offers the necessary analytical engine of decomposing spoken narratives into its universal elements, abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda. The model provided by Labov, specifically his idea of evaluation, the way, in which a narrator indicates the juncture of the story and its personal meaning, is an accurate methodology of going beyond content in order to understand the formal stylistic decisions that make a difference between narrators. With the help of this framework, it is possible to systematically identify and compare the language tools that speakers employ to make their stories interesting and significant.

Although the model offered by Labov offers the toolkit of structural analysis, the sociological explanation of the disparities that it offers is profoundly shaped by the ideas of habitus and cultural capital developed by Pierre Bourdieu. According to Bourdieu, it is the location of a person in the social space that will determine the embedded habits, tastes and dispositions or the habitus as one, which in its turn will dictate cultural manifestation of that person, including language. The unique narrative styles that Labov introduced through his analysis of narratives are therefore not perceived as individual differences but are expressions of a habitus dictated by classes. Moreover, the definite patterns of language and rhetorical strategies that institutional environment appreciates are perceived as a kind of cultural capital, symbolic resource which is not evenly distributed and which can be turned into social and economic benefit. This theory is used to understand why some styles of narratives are considered more legitimate or useful than others.

Lastly, the work is based on the concept of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), developed by the likes of Norman Fairclough that holds that language is not a neutral tool but a social practice that creates and is created by power relations. CDA offers the critical urgency to this study, which drives the analysis to enquire how these class-differentiated narrative styles are involved in the perpetuation of social hierarchy. It constructs narrative as a reflection of identity, as well as a place of building identities and power to be wielded, which may either affirm or disenfranchise speakers whose discursive practices are not true to dominant norms. These three theories make up a triadic complement: Labov provides the how of the narrative structure, Bourdieu is the why of the social patterning of linguistic structure, and CDA is the so what: social and political implications of these linguistic differences.

Literature Review

The exploration of the connection between social class and narrative style is profoundly informed with the academic traditions that give crucial ideas to be analyzed. The established sociolinguistic studies have always shown a relationship between social economic status and language peculiarities. The pioneering works of Labov (1966) in his analysis of New York City speech patterns laid down the fact that phonological variables are expected to change in a systematic way depending on the social classes layers, and language is one of the crucial attributes of social identity. Although this variationist paradigm is effective in mapping

accents and grammatical forms, historically this paradigm has not concerned itself much with the functioning of such features in the longer discourse (for example, complete stories). At such a wider level, elements of language amalgamate into a unique stylistic unit and therefore require a more detailed analytical method.

Narrative analysis offers this holistic approach. Labov and Waletzky (1967) developed a framework that is used as a constructive base to comprehend oral narratives of personal experiences structure. Their model of deconstructing narratives in parts, such as abstract, orientation, complicating action, and (above all) evaluations offers a rule-book of deconstructing stories with a high degree of accuracy. Such a notion as evaluation, a way through which a narrator indicates where and what his/her story is, is especially critical to the analysis of stylistic difference. Although this model has been used in the research of gender and ethnicity, its direct use of comparison of narrative styles expressly at social stratification boundaries is a field that is open to further developments and this research seeks to fill this gap.

The sociological theories of Bourdieu are essential to explain any observed differences in style as socially significant, and not as variation. Bourdieu and his notions of habitus, which are the dispositions, which are embodied and determined by the number of classes, and cultural capital, which are valued knowledge and skills that give power, offer a critical theoretical relationship between individual speech acts and broader social forces (Bourdieu, 1991). In this view, a narrative style is not only something produced by a background of classes but an activity where classes are practiced and normalized. The innate idea of how to narrate a story and what is interesting to read is a result of a habitus formed due to the social experience of a narrator.

Last but not least, this study also interacts with the concept of critical discourse analysis (CDA), which demands that language is one of the major means of enacting power. In line with the argument of Fairclough (1995), the most popular linguistic styles, usually allied to the institutional and middle-class canons, are legitimized on a regular basis, whereas others are relegated. This literature furnishes the much-needed impetus to the present study: to explore how styles of narration can be used as a means of social reproduction. The power to impose an authoritative style in an extreme environment such as in a court or a classroom is implicated with a sort of cultural capital that has real-life impacts (Bourdieu, 1991). Thus, the review unites the following traditions: the construction of empirical sociolinguistics, the structural paradigm of narrative analysis, and the explanation of the results in the terms of the critical perspective of Bourdieusian sociology and discourse analysis that narrative style is a significant and significant manifestation of the social class.

Based on the earlier theoretical constructs of the narrative, further studies have contributed to the enhancement of our knowledge of the influence of social context on storytelling. As Deborah Tannen in her contribution, especially on the analysis of conversational style, shows, narrative is not a monologic production but an achievement of dialogue which is co-produced by the speaker and the audience. Tannen (2005) also maintains that linguistic strategies, including the detail, repetition, and created dialogue are not just the stylistic flourishes but the basis of establishing involvement and negotiating relationships. This point of view is essential to the current work since it says that the difference in the narrative styles based on classes can indicate the existence of the expectations that can be considered deeply rooted

and culturally oriented in regards to the expectations connected to the relations between the speaker and their audience and the intent of the narrative, in particular. A type of style that embraces internal assessment and psychological reflection, e.g., can assume a contrasting type of a listener response compared to a dramatic externalization type.

Moreover, the idea that the practice in the sphere of linguistics is connected with the more general patterns in the culture is effectively expressed in the ethnography of communication. The Hymes (1974) work on the ways of speaking is the seminal work that gives a framework on the understanding of narrative as a culturally situated speech act that is regulated by some norms and competences. This is in line with the previous theory of codes by Bernstein (1971) that the position of the social classes mediate communicative repertoires by shaping elaborated and restricted codes. Although the thesis of Bernstein has been a subject of debate, it is a precursor of the critical concept that social structures have different speech systems that are recruited and reinforced. In that perspective, the narrative variations examined in a context of Labovian orientation can be redefined in terms of these broader, class-associated codes of communicative means, according to which the perceived, accepted, and considered narrative performance is coherent, logical, and valued.

Finally, it is the meeting of these theoretical strands, between the micro-analysis of the narrative structure and the macro-sociology of cultural capital that reveals the high stakes of everyday storytelling. Since institutional gatekeeping is more dependent on oral communication, the capacity to create a narrative that supports the expectations of the dominant is a form of symbolic capital. In their research on legal consciousness, Ewick and Silbey (1995) demonstrate that people are taught to recount their experiences to fit institutional forms, and in the process, this may entail the translation of a personal account into more of an institutionalized version. It is not a neutral process of translation, but it favors individuals who already have a habitus that is compatible with the norms of an institution (Bourdieu, 1991). Thus, studying narrative style is not a secret linguistic task but a critical undertaking towards determining the processes in which social inequality is replicated in the daily interaction.

Results

The narrative corpus analysis demonstrated that there were a set of strong and statistically significant patterns which distinguish between the way of storytelling of working-class and professional-middle-class participants. The differences were not only one of subject or language, they were more basic, structural, and evaluative, in the way stories were arranged, how the point was conveyed, and how the narrator associated himself with the listener. These central analytical categories based on the Labovian framework and further thematic analysis are the structures in which the results are organized.

The most noticeable observation was regarding the arrangement of the stories in terms of structure. There was a high propensity to what may be described as a psychologized and metacognitive structure in narratives by speakers of the professional-middle-class. These stories often started with an abstract that positioned the story not merely as an event as such, but as an experience of personal education or emotional growth or it is an experience of internal struggle (e.g., This is the story of how I learned to overcome my fear of failure). The orientation sections could be highly detailed in nature such that the time and location were set, as well as the internal environment and mental impulse of the narrator during the time.

The complicating action was often broken off to be subject to internal assessment in the form of analytical commentary on their own processes of thought, to explicitly determine the cause-and-effect relationship between the incidence and their internal growth.

Contrary to this, the working-class narratives had a chronical and externalized form. These narratives were more focused on a clear, chronological account of the outside world and tended to use a paratactic manner of narration connected by terms such as and then. and "so then...". In case of the abstract, it was more probable that it will be a mere headline of the event itself (Let me tell you about the time when my car broke down on the highway) instead of a thematic preview. The orientation was acutely aimed at defining the real physical specifics, the functions of other people involved, and the real situation. The plot movement was kept by the gradual development of the events but not by moralizing.

The most radical divergence was the methods of evaluation the communicating the meaning of the story. The professional-middle-class generation depended on what Labov called external evaluation, that is, halting the narrative action and telling the listener the meaning of the event directly, and with very complex language to express feelings and psychological perceptions (e.g., I felt deeply vulnerable, it was an experience of crippling self-doubt). It was a point that was clearly mentioned and examined.

On the contrary, the working-class sample exhibited a massive bias towards self-assessment, which entails the insertion of the argument in the action. This was done mainly by two techniques namely, constructed dialogue and dramatic embellishment. Narrators would recreate the scene by doing the dialogue with voice modulation instead of saying that they are scared (And I just yelled, Oh my God, what are we gonna do?). It was also presented in a hyperbolic way, humorous, sound effects, and higher speech rate and volume on important parts of the performance, which successfully dramatized the experience to the listener and thus enabled them to deduce the importance of what is being said, instead of being told.

Lastly, the position of the audience and the relationship between the narrator and the audience were also quite different. The narratives of the professional-middle classes usually placed a narrator in the role of a person contemplating his own path, and the audience, the narrator was a witness to his self-reflection. The working-class discourses, which were full of staged dialogue and responsive actions (e.g. you know how it is?), tended to create the audience as a joint participant, creating a feeling of shared experience and community knowledge. This further led to a more interactive and emotionally immediate storytelling event, as compared with the self-contained and reflective style of the other group. Overall, the findings show conclusively that social class is a robust predictor of narrative style, which influences all webs of narrative, such as its grammatical structure to its performative presentation.

Discussion

This study sheds strong empirical evidence on the theoretical assertion of the enactment of the social class via discursive practices, which not only constructs phonology/ lexicon, but macro-structure of narrative as well (Bernstein, 1971; Bourdieu, 1991). The specified deviation in the styles of narration, the pattern of the psychologically introspective, metacognitive narrative that is pivotal on the professional-middle-class habitus and the event-oriented, dramatically played style that is central to a working-class habitus, underlines the role of narrative as one of the key technologies of the self (Goffman, 1959; Ocks and

Capps, 2001). These are not affectations that are consciously adopted, but are the naturalized embodiment of particular social environments that unselectively privilege and reward certain communicative competencies (Hymes, 1974). The institutional bias to the decontextualized and analytical discourse (Gee, 2015) implies that the former can be easily transformed into a cultural capital, whereas the latter may be symbolically violated by turning it into an inferiorly logical or sophisticated method of thinking.

This reading is a critical response to dominant ideologies of deficit, which pathologize the language of the non-dominant subjects (Labov, 1972). A failure to abstract is not the problem of the working-class narrative focus on linear sequence, concrete action and dramatizing outside appraisal but is rather an advanced rhetoric performance with other communicative interests, to form solidarity and to testify to experience that vivid re-enactment, not to inner hypothezation (Tannen, 2007; Goodwin, 1990). The propensity of professional-middle-class discourse towards an internal state talk and thematic framing, in its turn, is indicative of a socialization into the so-called secondary Discourse, as developed in the process of long-term formal schooling and a necessary condition to succeed in the bureaucratic and professional establishment. Efforts of both styles are complex competence and yet competences that are based on varying life worlds (Habermas, 1984).

The effects of such a stratification of style are too material, especially in the legal system, where the individual story is a currency of the first order. Whether a witness or a defendant is credible or not will often depend on the capacity to make a narrative that fits the implied template of the institution, a template that represents the elaborated, decontextualized manner of the elite (Conley and O Barr, 1990; Eades, 2010). Fragile and hesitant style of witnesses is seen negatively compared to the strong and narrative style, as illustrated by O'Barr and Conley (1990). We are led to believe that these perceptions are heavily colored by the class as even the elements of a good story are socialized. The result of a witness whose habitus generates a story full of external assessment can be simply seen as less credible or evasive by legal professionals whose own habitus cherishes another and more internalized evaluative form, thereby jeopardizing the very concept of fair justice (Eades, 2010).

This discussion eventually shifts the analysis of difference to the analysis of its contribution to the social reproduction. Institutions of learning are very important in this process. The reasons schools tend to work through a hidden curriculum as Heath (1983) carefully recorded is that the narrative practice of the middle classes is privileged in most schools at the expense of misinterpreting the legitimate and coherent narrative styles of working class children as being evidence of cognitive or linguistic deficiency. This leads to a vicious circle of unequal distribution and reward of linguistic capital that strengthens social hierarchies (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Hence, interpreting these patterns of class-based narration is not an academic project but a vital action towards developing the institutional awareness of metalanguage (Fairclough, 1995) - a knowledge of how linguistic style is used to create perception on the part of, educators, lawyers, and other gatekeepers. It is the awareness that leads to designing more fair interventions that aim at assessing the content of a narrative, instead of punishing its form, and thus, trying to break one of the most insidious, yet strong, mechanisms of inequality based on class.

Conclusions

To summarize, this paper has shown that the social class is highly coded in the macro-structure of narrative as a whole and that two different stylistic forms are present: a metacognitive, internally-evaluative style related to the professional-middle-class habitus and a chronicular, performed, and externally-evaluative style related to the working-class habitus, which confirms that narrative is a manifestation of the key practices of expressing the class-based dispositions and the way one tells a story is no less informative about the social realm than the narration itself. The combination of the structural model as proposed by Labov and Bourdieu theory of habitus offers a very potent approach to explain these variations not as random fluctuation of the styles but as structured manifestation of social positioning and thus undermines the idea that deficits is effective by demonstrating that any style is a highly effective approach to communication in its own social context. The immediate practical implication here is that institutional bias toward the elaborated, metacognitive style is a powerful kind of symbolic violence in such arenas as courtrooms or classrooms, where another narrative habitus is systemically disadvantaged because their narratives can be interpreted as less authoritative or coherent. At the end, the study concludes that narrative style is an essential driver of social reproduction and recommends that professionals should be developed into awareness of institutional metalanguage listening to hear the meaning of the story under the styles of narratives and so breaking the cycle of linguistic bias and moving towards a society where the power of a story does not depend on the accent of its narrator by class.

Finally, the results highlight the importance of narrative as a biased medium of experience and a culturally mediated practice, which can reproduce or challenge social hierarchies. Discourses are ideological, as James Paul Gee (2015) puts it, and the identified narrative styles are ways with words, which are inextricably connected with identity and power. These downgradeing of one style in another within an institution are what Pierre Bourdieu referred to as symbolic violence; a subtle control, but a control nonetheless, of the norms of the dominant culture over the non-dominant groups (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). This process makes sure that the linguistic capital is not distributed equally and supports the same social structures that have created it. That is why, in the future, the most important challenge is not only to analyze this but to put it into practice. Based on the premises of critical pedagogy that were put forward by Paulo Freire (1970), education and institutional changes are required in depth that require no assimilation but rather the creation of critical language awareness, an awareness of how power is being exercised through language. Making these invisible hierarchies of narrative style visible and exposing the assumed superiority of any one specific communicative norm, we are then able to start forming more accommodating institutions that will actually listen to the content of each story, no matter what social strata are the storytellers.

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