

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT POWER AND LANGUAGE?

Theorists

Norman Fairclough argues that many exchanges are “unequal encounters” and that social power is encoded and made to appear normal. He distinguishes between power WITHIN the discourse (the powerful participants’ use of language) and power BEHIND the discourse (the social role of the speakers).

Shan Wearing identifies three areas in which power is established: the political (in politics and the law), the social (in work situations) and the personal (within families and friendship groups). She also suggests that authority is revealed through two means: instrumental power (using language to assert authority) and influential power (using language to persuade).

Penelope Brown and **Steven Levinson** draw on Goffman’s concept of face to explore Face Threatening Acts (FTAs), where speakers challenge the self-image of the addressee. They argue that FTAs play a crucial role in negotiating power in spoken exchanges.

John Sinclair and **Malcolm Coulthard** explore power in classroom discourse, noting the common use of an Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) structure to exchanges. This IRF pattern helps the teacher to maintain authority and control the exchange.



Speech situations involving power

In many contexts, the difference in status and role establishes power relations which are reflected in the discourse. The ways in which power can be asserted, and sometimes resisted, can be seen in a variety of speech situations such as:

- interviewer/interviewee (e.g. a job interview or a television interview with a politician)
- manager/worker (e.g. a disciplinary hearing)
- doctor/patient (e.g. a consultation with a GP)
- teacher/student (e.g. a classroom exchange)
- police/suspect (e.g. an interview in a police station)
- lawyer/witness (e.g. a cross examination).

Asserting power in personal exchanges

Particular strategies for asserting power in exchanges might include some of the following features:

- Face threatening acts
- Interruptions and uncooperative overlapping
- Accusatory use of second person pronouns
- Control of topic management
- Deontic epistemic verbs and imperatives
- Refusal to yield the floor

Sample analysis

Political interview

Eddie Mair: What does that say about you Boris Johnson? You’re a nasty piece of work, aren’t you?

Boris Johnson: Well, you know, Eddie, I think I think all three things I would dispute.

The interviewer Mair asserts his authority by using the noun phrase “a nasty piece of work” to threaten Johnson’s face. The challenging tag question “aren’t you?” also seeks to diminish Johnson’s status by implying that his moral failings are self-evident. In contrast, Johnson’s discourse lacks authority: his use of the filler “you know”, the repetition of the comment clause “I think” and the modal verb “would” indicates his uncertainty. This imbalance in power is also reflected in the use of proper nouns where Mair mimics a teacher’s discourse by using the full name while Johnson seeks a more equal relationship with the vocative “Eddie”.

Persuasive techniques in speeches

- Parallelism
- Repetition
- Tripling or power of three
- Rhetorical interrogatives
- Synthetic personalisation
- Hypophora