

A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Power Relationships in Institutional Talks

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Abstract—As a special form of conversation, the institutional talk has been described as characteristically asymmetrical in contrast to the ordinary conversational interaction between participants of equal status. On the basis of Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA analytical model, the present study concentrates on the complex and invisible power relationships between the participants by probing into the grammatical features and the interactional conventions in institutional talks. Findings show that there are unequal power relationships between the participants in the talks. This study concludes by discussing the implications of the findings and proposing the suggestions for future research.

Keywords—institutional talk; power relationship; critical discourse analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

Conversation is playing an increasingly important role in human's daily communication and it "is all-pervasive and is by far the commonest use of language" [1]. Conversation analysis (hereafter CA), which originated from sociology in 1960s, has developed into an independent field of study through the joint efforts of Harvey Sacks as well as Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson. At the very beginning, CA focuses on the study of social interaction in ordinary conversations, but gradually it has been applied to the study of various forms of institutional talks, ranging from courtroom interaction [2] [3], news interviews [4], business meetings [5], doctor-patient communications [6] [7] to workplace interaction [8]. Therefore, institutional talks may occur in such physical settings as hospitals, courtrooms, companies or schools, but they are not restricted to these contexts. Actually, the institutionality of an interaction is determined by participants' institutional or professional identities instead of its setting. The institutional talk has been described as "characteristically asymmetrical" [9] in contrast to the ordinary conversational interaction between participants of equal status. Although the distinction between these two forms of talk (either institutional or non-institutional) may be oversimplified, the nature of institutionality can serve as a basis for the present study, which will critically analyse the power relationships between the participants in three institutional talks.

II. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Drawing from linguistic and social theories, critical discourse analysis (here after CDA), which emerged from critical linguistics developed by Fowler *et al.* [10], is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse that views language as a form of "social practice" [11] and considers the context of language use to be significant. Founded on the idea that there is unequal access to linguistic and social resources which are controlled institutionally, CDA aims to examine ideologies and power relations involved in the discourse with its ultimate goal to change or stop the social or political problem of inequality.

The CDA approach to discourse analysis is best illustrated by Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis: "**Description** is the stage which is concerned with formal properties of the text. **Interpretation** is concerned with the relationship between text and interaction-with seeing the text as the product of a process of production, and as a resource in the process of interpretation. **Explanation** is concerned with the relationship between interaction and social context-with the social determination of the processes of production and interpretation, and their social effects." [12]

This model emphasizes "the relationship between texts, interactions, and contexts" [12]. At the stage of description, Fairclough lists ten questions concerning vocabulary, grammar and textual structures and distinguishes three kinds of value (experiential, relational, and expressive) that formal features may have. The analysis at the stage of interpretation focuses on the cognitive processes of participants while it is relationships between transitory social events at the stage of explanation.

Based on Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA analytical model, the following analysis will concentrate on the complex and invisible power relationships between the participants by looking at the grammatical features (i.e. Question 6) and the interactional conventions (i.e. Question 9). Since there are a variety of grammatical features of texts, this study will focus on the modes of sentence (i.e. what modes are used, declarative, grammatical question, imperative?). In terms of the interactional conventions, turn-taking systems will be investigated (i.e. are there ways in which one participant controls the turns of others?).

III. ANALYZING THE POWER RELATIONSHIPS IN INSTITUTIONAL TALKS

As mentioned in Section 2, this part will focus on the power relationships in three examples of institutional talks by analyzing the modes of sentences and turn-taking systems on the basis of Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA analytical model.

A. *Analysis of Text One*

Text One Daily Operational Meeting in Hong Kong Hotel

Participants: GM: General Manager (Chair)
PR: Public Relations Manager CR: Controller
FO: Front Office Manager CE: Chief Engineer
CC: Chief Concierge PM: Personnel Manager
RM: Resident Manager

1 GM: good morning everyone (.) okay not too much to cover this morning (.) but er a

2 couple of urgent guest-related things (.) the er the gentleman who was taken ill

3 last night any news on his condition from the hospital

4 FO: er he he was stable quite stable last night when we phoned to check on him but

5 I'll be phoning again after this meeting to er see if er he's still er stable

6 GM: okay good (.) I need to be kept informed make sure that you keep me up to date

7 on this one

8 FO: of course sure sure but I think he'll be fine by the sound of things

9 CC: it seemed very serious at the time but you know er er once he got to the er

10 Princess Margaret he started to look better (.) a lot better

11 GM: who went with him then

12 CC: just me er just me from the hotel

13 GM: right thanks (.) okay then there's the missing purse in 1568

14 CC: oh that's taken care of that's er it was found in the er laundry basket by the

15 cleaners and contents all accounted for

16 GM: good (.) that hadn't got back to me yet but that was this morning was it

17 CC: yes about half an hour ago

18 GM: right (.) okay what are the numbers looking like for the coming month

19 RM: er up on this time last year but down on last month er but that was unusually

20 good because of that convention and those other things you know

21 GM: yes right (.) right the extension to the bar er the bar of the roof terrace is that

22 still scheduled for next week

23 CE: no the week after next er but er we might have to postpone again if the weather is bad

24 GM: yes but let's plan for it happening (.) have you spoken to them about the noise

25 and dust problems er we we don't want a repeat of last time

26 CE: they know I've told them so they know to be er to be more careful

27 GM: good (.) okay and those website updates

28 PR: all done um except for the one I mentioned yesterday er that one will be done

29 today

30 GM: that's good (.) right the discount for the holiday special is fixed now [or

31 CR: [fixed fixed

32 GM: right has Cecelia got that to update the website

33 CR: not yet but I can let her have it now that it's agreed

34 GM: good (.) okay the last thing is the staff development programme er is that er

35 when is that starting

36 PM: started last Monday but er most staff won't begin their training until this coming

37 Monday er because er because of arranging for the consultants to use the one of

38 the er conference meeting rooms

39 GM: right (.) okay that's it then (.) thanks everyone

Text one is about a daily operational meeting in Hong Kong hotel, where a dialogue between GM and other participants indicates their unequal power relations. This text can be further divided into several patterns on the basis of the participants' turn takings, such as GM-FO talk (lines 1-8), GM-CC talk (lines 9-18), GM-RM talk (lines 18-21), GM-CE talk (lines 21-27), GM-PR talk (lines 27-30), GM-CR talk (lines 30-34) and GM-PM talk (lines 34-39). Specifically, GM first opens the conversation by asking a question (line 3 *any news on his condition from the hospital*). Among the listeners, FO answers the question immediately as soon as he realizes that he takes charge of this, which suggests that the speaker (GM) exerts his control over the next turn in the way of leaving the listener (FO) to self-select. Other talks except GM-CC talk have similar turn-taking

systems as the GM-FO talk. In the GM-CC talk, CC first expresses his opinion on lines 9-10, which caught the GM's attention and then GM asks him a question on line 11 (*who went with him then*). Next, GM starts another topic on line 13 pointing to CC. Another interesting thing is that GM gives feedback about the listener's responses (e.g. line 6 *okay good*, line 13 *right thanks*, line 16 *good*, etc.) and then starts a new topic, which indicates GM has the power to comment and control the topic. Besides, the opening and closing are initiated by the dominant speaker (GM).

When it comes to the modes of sentence, declaratives, grammatical questions and imperatives are all employed by the chair GM in this text. Grammatical questions are most frequently used to indicate that the speaker is asking for information and the addressee must provide information (e.g. line 3 *any news on his condition from the hospital*, line 11 *who went with him then*, etc.). Declaratives are used to give information but here indicate the speaker's requirements (e.g. line 6 *I need to be kept informed*, line 24 *let's plan for it happening*, etc.). Imperatives are used to indicate the speaker's demand for action (e.g. lines 6-7 *make sure that you keep me up to date on this one*). The asymmetrical power relations between the participants are clearly presented in the analysis.

B. Analysis of Text Two

Text Two Hong Kong TV Panel Discussion

A: TV Host B: guest C: guest

1 (pause for commercial break)

2 A: welcome back we're discussing the chief executive's policy address er now SK

3 about the Pearl River Delta er Hong Kong is supposed to be integrated into the

4 Pearl River Delta er so the the two are partners but in this partnership who's the

5 senior partner who's the junior partner

6 B: well I think we better not touch upon this question what we are talking about is

7 that er we are talking about mutual benefits

8 A: mhmm

9 B: so we'd better op- [cooperate

10 A: [alright but is it possible to avoid this question

11 B: yes

12 A: whenever anything concrete comes up er isn't it true that someone takes the lead

13 B: well I I I must say that we may not necessarily be able to avoid on individual

14 issues but at least on a grand strategic dimension we're talking about equal

15 partnership

16 A: mhmm

17 B: otherwise we won't be able to work together at all (laugh)

18 A: er okay er Richard what do you think

19 C: well I think essentially you know from an economic point of view it's mutually

20 benefit er exchanges er so there's no no the issue of who's lead or who's junior it's

21 really doesn't arise however it is entirely possible that in sit- there might be some

22 situations where the interests and way of looking [at deve- development [er may

23 A: [right right [mm

24 C: not be [in common because of er largely because of varying time horizons of

25 A: [mm

26 different government officials rather than the public or the people the residents er

27 that that is where basically the negotiation and give and take is essential [and and

28 A: [mm

29 er one must keep an eye on the primary objective which is to enhance the

30 prosperity of the region er rather than er who is number one or who isn't number

31 one

32 A: so there there you are saying that there're cer- certain projects where Hong Kong

33 can take the lead and others where the the mainland can

34 C: yes [er absolutely

35 A: [well what what can you give an example

36 C: well if if you were to construct a bridge then there're issues of first of all the

37 mutual concerns of both whether is environment financing and where are the er

38 lead points how is customs handled and everybody should have an input but but

39 but er Hong Kong's advantage might be financing and in in this case in the in the

40 bridge project the crucial issue is is engineering then may Hong Kong need not

41 take a lead [but the issue is primarily [financing then Hong Kong can take the lead

42 A: [mm [yeah

43 A: right er SK what do you think if we were to build the bridge should Hong Kong

44 take the lead

45 B: well the problem is that a bridge is built ninety ninety-five percent more on

46 Guangdong territory territorial waters

47 A: right

.....

Text two is about a Hong Kong TV panel discussion between three participants, TV host and two guests. In the opening turn of the discussion, the TV host presents the background and then exerts the control over the next turn in the form of constraining the next speaker by addressing his name (e.g. line 2 *SK*, more examples can be found on line 18 *Richard what do you think*, line 43 *SK what do you think*, etc.). That's to say, two guests don't have the right to self-select and they can speak only when they are asked to. As for the topic of the discussion, it's determined by the TV host, which suggests that he has more power. Besides, two guests are both interrupted by the host during their talk (e.g. line 10 *alright but is it possible to avoid this question*, line 23 *right/mm*, etc.). As a matter of fact, there are two different reasons of the interruption: on the one hand, the host wants to show solidarity with the guest by using the markers (*right, mm, yeah, uhuh*, etc.) to suggest that "I am listening"; on the other hand, he wants to control the guests' contribution and forces them to make their meaning clear and unambiguous by asking line-10 question (*is it possible to avoid this question*). And the host repeats the same or similar questions in different turns (e.g. lines 4-5 *who's the senior partner who's the junior partner*, line 33 *take the lead*, line 44 *take the lead*), which indicates his control over the topic and tries to lead the guests to his focus. When it comes to opening and closing, it's the host who opens and closes the discussion.

In this text, the host asks many grammatical questions (e.g. lines 4-5 *who's the senior partner who's the junior partner*, line 10 *is it possible to avoid this question*, line 35 *can you give an example*, etc.), which requests the addressee to provide the information. Declaratives are mainly used by the guests to give the information that the host requests. It can be found that guest B provides more information (more turns) than guest C, which seems to indicate that guest B may be more authoritative and hence more powerful than guest C. No imperatives can be found in this discussion.

C. Analysis of Text Three

Text Three Job Interview (Extract) in Local Government Department in UK

Interviewers: S & K Interviewee: C

1 S: well have you got a copy of the job description with you

2 C: I have had a copy of it [haven't got it with me

3 S: [do you want to have another look do you want to

4 [have a look at one now

5 C: [thank you very much

6 S: erm what I wanted to do was just sort of (.) go through it and if there were

7 if you had any questions

8 C: yes

9 S: about the job description (.) if you want me to elaborate on anything (.)

10 erm I think we can you know sort of go through that now

11 C: mhm

12 S: erm (.) you will be responsible to the (.) Admin officer

13 C: yeah

14 S: and (.) there'll be it's just a small group er within that particular

15 office erm your duties mainly would be sort of collecting stamping in

16 [distributing

17 C: [yes when you say a small group excuse me interrupting you

18 S: mhm

19 C: how many are you talking about

20 S: about half a dozen (.) well what about the pay in this particular job is that

21 satisfactory do you think

22 C: er yes I think so er I was going to ask (.) if I was appointed where would

23 you put me on the scale

24 S: well I think we haven't fully discussed this but clearly we'd take into

25 account the fact that you've worked for two years doing virtually the same

26 job

27 C: yes

28 S: we'd also have to consider the er other people in the office and how much

29 we're paying them [so that you don't in fact create a situation where you

30 C: [yes

31 might be out of line [with other people

32 C: [mm

33 K: but as a broad sort of statement I would agree probably you know say

34 three increments

35 C: yes

36 K: good

37 S: I mean if we decide to appoint you we we would simply write to you and

38 and tell you and offer you a salary

39 C: yes

40 S: if you felt strongly that that wasn't appropriate then we'd expect you to

41 come back to us

42 C: mm

43 S: so perhaps we've covered that now

44 C: yes

45 S: good

46 K: right (.) okay do you any questions for us

47 C: I don't think so

48 K: fine

Text three is about a job interview in the local government department in UK with three participants, Interviewers S & K and Interviewee C. In the opening turn, Interviewer S initiates the conversation by directly asking the interviewee a question (line 1 *have you got a copy of the job description with you*), which indicates his control over the next turn in the form of selecting or constraining the next speaker in that Interviewee C is the only addressee in this situation. Interruption happens many times by both the interviewer and interviewee. On line 3 (*do you want to have another look*), the interviewer interrupts in order to control the interviewee's contributions, but the interviewee has no choice but to accept (line 5 *thank you very much*). On line 17 (*yes when you say a small group excuse me interrupting you*), the interviewee interrupts the interviewer in order to clarify something, but he apologises immediately when he realises his inappropriate interruption. There are some other interruptions by the interviewee (e.g. line 30 *yes*, etc.) which indicates he wants to show his understanding of what the interviewer is talking about. Moreover, the interviewers talk the most and have most turns, controlling the topic development, whereas the interviewee has less and short turns (e.g. line 8 *yes*, line 11 *mhm*, line 13 *yeah*, etc.), simply following the interviewer's topics. The interview ends up with another interviewer's turn (line 48 *fine*).

In this job interview, most grammatical questions are asked directly by the interviewers (e.g. line 1 *have you got a copy of the job description with you*, line 3 *do you want to have another look*) and few are initiated by the interviewee (e.g. line 19 *how many are you talking about*) to ask for clarification in a very polite way. Declaratives are frequently used in this text by the interviewers to show their request for information and demand an action of the interviewee through employing such sentence patterns as emphatic construction and conditionals (e.g. line 6 *what I wanted to do was...*, line 9

if you want me to...). And there is no imperative employed in this text.

IV. CONCLUSION

Drawing on Fairclough's CDA analytical model, the present study has critically analyzed the modes of sentences and turn-taking systems in the data and concludes that there are unequal power relationships between the participants in institutional talks. In light of the above-analyzed three texts, major findings are summarized as follows.

Firstly, all three texts can be classified as institutional talks, for the institutional interaction involves "an orientation by at least one of the participants to some core goal, task or identity (or set of them) conventionally associated with the institution in question" [9]. General Manager in text one, TV host in text two and interviewers in text three are all representatives of certain institutions (hotel, TV station, and local government department), and these identities contribute to their dominant roles in these talks.

Secondly, the dominant speakers in institutional talks all attempt to exert their control over the next turn in the forms of selecting or constraining the next speaker or simply leaving the listener to self-select [13], which indicates that turn-taking rights are not equal in the communication between unequal participants. In other words, the turn-taking systems in the institutional interaction are quite different from that in casual conversation.

Finally, different modes of sentences can help illustrate unequal power relationships between participants in that "systematic asymmetries in the distribution of modes between participants are important in terms of participant relations" [11]. Specifically, declaratives, imperatives and grammatical questions perform different functions of positioning the participants by presenting their different values (asking for information, demanding an action, and the like) in different contexts.

To sum up, CDA is an effective approach to disclose the relationship between language and power in the institutional talk, but the analysis here is by no means the end. As is mentioned above, the present study just focuses on the modes of sentences and turn-taking systems. Therefore, future studies could be devoted to other aspects, such as inference, presupposition, speech acts, to further investigate the power relationships between participants in institutional talks.

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