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Linguistic Power Moves: A Corpus-Based Study of Authority in Classroom Discourse

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Abstract
Classroom authority is not a given thing, we actually create it during a conversation. In this paper, the researchers consider daily discussions in the classroom between the teachers and the students to see how we are using language to assert or demand power. Applying discourse analysis and sociolinguistic data, the attention is drawn to the fact that modality, politeness, turn-taking, and speech acts can be mixed in case people negotiate their power. This builds upon previous research in the field of classroom discourse by showing that power is negotiated in an ever present way through talk rather than being imposed upon people by higher authorities. By speaking up, changing the voice or providing more details, we adjust the power dynamics in favour of a more cooperative classroom environment. Awareness of these patterns will enable the teachers to intervene more strategically in order to create a productive learning environment. Sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, power relations, student engagement, and the social, cultural and institutional norms that are involved in forming authority are all contextual and co-constitutive and impactful in this process.

Keywords: *Classroom authority, modality, teacher-student interaction, politeness*

Introduction

Language performs crucial social work: it not only constructs hierarchies but also gives shape to identities and regulates the norms that govern institutional life (Fairclough, 2014). Within educational settings, classroom discourse serves as an especially rich and dynamic space where the goals of learning, the expectations of social

roles, and the realities of power intersect in subtle ways. Teachers may enter the classroom with a certain degree of institutional authority, yet this authority becomes meaningful only when it is expressed, interpreted, and responded to within interactional exchanges (Holmes, 2000; Foucault, 1977). Everyday directives such as *Take out your notebooks* or *Let's think about this together* do more than instruct students—they simultaneously perform relational, organizational, and disciplinary functions. In this way, language becomes the central medium through which pedagogical purpose and interpersonal management merge.

Following Swales' (1990) CARS model, this study identifies and addresses a research gap that concerns the delicate, moment-by-moment processes through which authority is constituted in Pakistani higher education classrooms. While institutional discourse is widely recognised for its ability to reproduce power structures (Fairclough, 1989), the classroom provides a micro-setting where these structures are enacted through the movements, choices, and responses of everyday interaction. Early work by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) presented the structural shape of classroom communication through patterns such as the Initiation–Response–Feedback cycle. However, scholars (Candela, 1999; Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Walsh, 2011) have shown that authority is far from fixed; it is negotiated, and often co-constructed by both teacher and student during the conversation.

In the context of Pakistani classrooms—which are inherently multicultural, multilingual, and shaped by deeply rooted social expectations—the negotiation of authority becomes even more context-sensitive. Cultural understandings of respect, hierarchy, and politeness influence how participants adapt to one another and shape their actions in talk. Theories of politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987), identity positioning (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), and cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2001) all suggest that power is never merely a fixed attribute but is embedded within broader societal values. These values inform how teachers "claim" authority and how students "receive" or "reshape" that authority.

Due to these complexities, this study focuses on the linguistic strategies that both teachers and students employ to construct, challenge, or alleviate authority in the classroom. To capture these interactional distinctions, the research draws on conversation analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, and corpus linguistics, each offering a different but complementary viewpoint. Conversation analysis helps reveal how authority emerges in sequential patterns of talk; interactional sociolinguistics contextualizes these patterns within cultural expectations; and corpus linguistics provides evidence of recurring linguistic structures that indirectly imply power. Together, these approaches allow for a deeper, more grounded understanding of how authority operates in real classrooms—not as an abstract concept, but as a lived and continuously negotiated process.

Aims and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to explore how language performs social work in Pakistani higher education classrooms by shaping identities, organizing institutional life, and expressing authority through everyday interaction (Fairclough, 2014; Holmes, 2000; Foucault, 1977).

1. to address the research gap identified through Swales' (1990) CARS model by examining the subtle, moment-to-moment ways authority is negotiated in classroom discourse

2. to investigate how cultural expectations—such as respect, hierarchy, and politeness inform teacher's and student's orientations to power and identity (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Hofstede, 2001)
3. to analyze how authority is constructed in interaction during conversation analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, and corpus linguistics, noting both structural patterns (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) and their flexible, negotiated nature (Candela, 1999; Nassaji & Wells, 2000; Walsh, 2011)
4. to identify the linguistic strategies through which participants build, soften, or challenge authority, and to show how these strategies reflect broader institutional and social values

Research Questions

1. In what ways is authority linguistically constructed and negotiated between teachers and students during classroom interaction?
2. Which linguistic features (e.g., pronouns, modality, directives, question types) most frequently index institutional authority?
3. How do student responses contribute to reinforcing, resisting, or redistributing power in classrooms?
4. How do cultural norms and politeness strategies shape the interactional negotiation of authority?
5. What recurring lexical, collocational, or concordance patterns related to authority emerge in the classroom corpus (AntConc analysis)?

Literature Review

I have discovered that a few scholars attempted to describe the process of how power is formed and negotiated during classroom talk. This original work consisted entirely of structural analysis in effect of observing how conversation runs and once more, the time honoured Initiation Response Feedback (IRF) pattern of Sinclair and Coulthard (1975). .

That IRF model essentially made teachers the incharge of the discussion and making decisions about the things to be covered as well as who should go next. It was structured and was predictable but somehow portrayed students as being passive. That was to mean we would be able to see a one-way power structure, namely, teacher says, student does; that is how class was expected to work.

However, during several decades this entire stagnant image began to fall apart. Candela (1999) indicated that students did not sit at their places waiting all the time but rather they laughed off, pushed back, negotiated, or remained silent in a manner they actually do not agree with the teacher. It was revealed that this type of the interaction was much more important and useful than the rigid hierarchy.

A shift to the interactional perspective presents that power can be distributed dynamically on-line as opposed to off-line. Similar statement is made by (Nassaji & Wells 2000) who held that the participation of the students in the class can be facilitated or prevented by teachers- starting with planning sessions up to the real classroom discourse. When we are allowed to talk, the hierarchy is shattered because the teachers have to take a back seat. Therefore, when a teacher states such thing as "Can we take a moment to think about that?" It is already providing room to engage. The theory of politeness then provides us with a fine prism through which this all is seen. The model by Brown and Levinson demonstrates how individuals maintain a state of face in receiving

positive politeness (demonstrating solidarity) or negative politeness (respecting autonomy). An example of this is when a teacher speaks to the students and says, it is time to see how we can figure this out or solve this together, which is an indication that he or she is willing to share the information rather than dominate.

Holmes (2000) pushed this further. According to him, power and affability may coexist. The most effective teachers balance the two - they remain boss-like yet they are able to establish rapport as well. Fairclough (1989, 2014) is rather critical of the classroom discourse, believing that power fills classes through the knowledge of everyday language practice. When the teacher tells us to do some good or instructs that what is not right we are affirming the institutional power which passes us off as objects. However, Fairclough adds that power is not bad. In the sense that critical discourse analysts observe that it may be the key to helping one learn. Conversation analysis (CA) and interactional sociolinguistics is another large-scale influence which sets down to micro-level language properties. Such scholars as Seedhouse (2004) and Walsh (2011) examine the ways of how questioning, repair and turn-takings are used by teachers to raise their authority or to cooperate with students and make them participate.

Seedhouse and Walsh demonstrate that the control of a teacher may consist in posing of a question. Co-construction is encouraged by referential questions like “What do you think about this?” In this regard, power is reviewed through our patterns of talk and is a matter of context.

There is also the element of gender and culture. The studies by Sunderland (2001) and Li (2013) have also established the idea that female teachers are more likely to aim at more comprehensive, facilitative talk, and male teachers are more vulnerable to directive talk. The cultural variations are not an exception: in East Asian classrooms, indirectness and signs of respect indicate power whereas in the Western schools, the conversational power remains with direct questions and making statements. These results highlight the fact that power is not a universal concept, but rather a culturally constructed product.

Another angle is the identity formation of individuals. Identity of teachers and students is recognized via language. It’s always interactive and dynamic (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Once a teacher makes a joke or tells a personal story, he or she is placing him/herself in the more human position, perhaps in a less authoritative position but establishing trust somehow.

The decline of authoritative to communicative teaching practices is a demonstrable trend in most contemporary classrooms and conforms to the broader shift to the participatory communication. Yet, there are still gaps. Much of the literature has been on teacher talk or student response but has never given much attention on how authority is actually constructed together. It barely addresses the multimodal aspects such as tone, gestures, or classroom interactions which interact with speech.

In the future, authority should be considered a multimodal discursive occurrence, which regards linguistic, social, and contextual fragments that integrate together. In brief, the literature indicates that the teacher-student power relation is not unilateral or fixed but exists in the covert language-use, such as lexical lexis or interrogatives or even politeness, and it indicates underlying social difference. When we begin to think of authority as a communicative action and not a hierarchy we understand more deeply and naturally how knowledge and leadership are achieved in the daily talk in the classroom.

Methodology

The study followed the approach of Conversation Analysis (Sacks et al. , 1974) and Interactional Sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982). It was both a qualitative and a quantitative research so that we could carry out a close examination of the changing chats in a classroom and how individuals assert their status.

Participants and Environment

The field study was conducted in a state university in Pakistan, Punjab. We got a pair of social-science professors (a man and a woman both with over seven years of service) and their undergrads (N=52). The fact that we picked two teachers and two students allowed us to compare two sides of the authority playing out. Taking into account the interactive nature of their classes, they suited well.

Data Collection

We video recorded the natural classroom interactions with audio-visual equipment. In the course of one entire semester we had filmed 16 sessions that made approximately 24 hours of footage. We narrowed our discussion down to areas where authority manifests itself the most such as lectures or whole class discussions, rounds of questions, etc.

Overview of Classroom Interaction Data Collected

Data Type	**Description**	**Quantity**	**Duration**
Video-recordeds	Natural classroom talk	16 sessions	24 hours
Core excerpts	Key authority moments	42 extracts	8.5 hours
Observation notes	Gestures, tone, movement	16 documents	—
Transcripts	Full Jeffersonian transcripts	24 transcripts	180 pages

Data Analysis

All the speech characteristics (pauses, overlaps, emphasis, intonation, etc.) were preserved by rewriting in full, following a modified version of Jefferson (2004) style. The analysis was done in three steps:

1. Open coding - watching clips and reading transcripts and repeating them to identify patterns associated with authority moves (such as directive speech acts, turn allocation, markers of epistomatic stance).
2. Conversation Analysis - a tiny note of every turn to determine how power is accepted, opposed or reconstructed turn-by-turn (Seedhouse, 2004).
3. Interactional Sociolinguistic Analysis - the analysis of categories such as pronouns, modality addresses as a form of interaction with others as a method of forming a relationship, and analyzing those around words as a context (Walsh, 2011).

This division provided us with a good combination of the rigorous data and profound interpretation.

Linguistic Features Analyzed

Category	**Sub-features**	**Purpose**
Pronouns	I, we, you	Solidarity vs. authority
Modality	must, can, could	Strength of directives
Directives	imperatives	Control indexing
Turn-taking	Pauses, overlaps	Interactional point
Politeness	barriers, please	Face management
Prosody	stress, rise/fall	Authoritative tone

Corpus-Assisted Analysis Using AntConc

AntConc 3.5.9w was used to supplement the qualitative findings. This approach follows corpus-based methodologies in Pakistani linguistics (Anwar, 2023; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

1. Concordance Findings

Imperatives such as **open**, **listen**, **write**, and **focus** consistently appeared in teacher turns, confirming classic teacher authority markers (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975).

2. Collocation Results

Inclusive pronouns collocated strongly with collaborative verbs (*let's think*, *let's see*), supporting Holmes (2000) and Nassaji and Wells (2000).

3. Keyword Analysis

Keywords such as **think**, **understand**, **share**, and **need** reflect facilitative yet evaluative discourse.

Findings and Conversation

The analysis suggests that authority is an interactive exercise, which is flexible and depends on certain language moves. Two main themes came up.

Pronominal Decisions and Claiming Authority: Simplifying and Making the Claim.

The statistics indicated that instructors strike the balance between retreating and pressing forward. It circulates the knowledge authority and brusque the commands, developing a common identity (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Morton, 2012).

On the other hand, logical modality lays more concrete claims. Though, even with simple imperative occurrence, 'You need to understand this concept to pass the exam', can switch to a statement of a goal need (Fairclough, 2014). It is simple to ask, 'Could you please share your findings with me?' and this would be a nice way of asking him to command.

Cognitive Stance

Epistemic stance develops the authority between the teacher and students. (Heritage, 2012). Teachers tend to conduct status tests (Does everybody follow the instructions?), as a demonstration that they are the primary knowers.

This dominance is not often questioned by the students but when it occurs, it is affected. 'Best said sir, but as I read in another study, it was different'. The teacher responded, "It is a great point; we should discuss comparison of the two interpretations. When the teacher recognized the student, she again dictated the power

as an instructor of critical conversation, and presented that the intellectual flexibility can actually strengthen authority (Nassaji & Wells, 2000).

Taking Turns and Sharing Interactional points.

A major location of authority is turn-taking. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) argue that the normal Initiation-Response -Feedback sequence is functional, and changes teach us something. Teachers do not ask the definition of something (What is the definition?) but instead proposes (What do you think about this idea?). This allow students to co-create the conversation and instantly distribute epistemic power (Walsh, 2011).

When the teacher asks the person, when he/she addresses directly to a person (What is your opinion about this matter, Ali?) this portrays a strong control. Open invitations such as (Any thoughts regarding?) allow students to drive student turns hence creates a friendlier atmosphere (Candela, 1999).

Conclusion

The paper reveals that power in the classroom is dynamic, unfixed and produced by both teacher and student and is continually redefined through minor language actions by both the instructor and learners. The discussion of such strategies of pronouns, modality, epistemic stance, and turn taking shows that authority is justified by interaction and knowledge management. The reflexes of students assist in validating or reconstructing power, whereas the responses of teachers make them directive, authoritative and facilitative.

The pedagogical ramifications are obvious. Teachers will be able to make wiser linguistic decisions in case they understand how language determines social reality. Authority may be promoted by using commands and inclusive pronouns, as well as maintaining the direction. Teachers can assist learning and critical thinking by seeing their contribution of students as an authoritative negotiation.

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