Communication and Argumentation in the Public Sphere **ISSN 1843 - 7893**
(2007) Year I Issue 3
Galati University Press
Editors: Anca Gâță & Adela Drăgan
Proceedings of the Conference *Public Space* vs *Private Space*, THIRD VOLUME
April 12th-14th, 2007 – "Dunărea de Jos" University, Galați Romania
pp. 416-421

Anca CEHAN

Public and Private in Classroom Discourse

"Al. I. Cuza" University of Iasi, ROMANIA
acehan@uaic.ro

1. Pedagogic discourse as manifestation of public responsibility

Education is a social, negotiated activity, analysable in terms of purposive, goal-driven activities, in which teachers and students structure and organise the teaching-learning process. One remarkable feature of these processes is the pedagogic discourse, which unfolds through operations taking place at two levels: it combines a discourse of competences or skills of various kinds with one of social order. In other words, it combines an instructional register/set of language choices with a regulative one. The terms *instructional* and *regulative* are adopted from Bernstein's discussion of pedagogic discourse. Bernstein calls the discourse transmitting specialised competences and their relation to each other *instructional* discourse, and the discourse creating specialised order, relation and behaviour *regulative* discourse (Bernstein, 1990: 183). The regulative register is thus instrumental in bringing the classroom activities into being, and in determining the directions, sequencing, pacing and evaluation of the process. On the other hand, the instructional discourse realises the content or the specialist experiential information that constitutes the substance of the teaching-learning activity.

Bernstein posits that pedagogic discourse is instrumental in building and shaping consciousness and schools are agencies of 'symbolic control'. This explains the importance of analysing and explaining how the pedagogic discourse works, how access to forms of knowledge is made available, how such forms are distributed and how they function to shape consciousness. A pedagogic discourse operates by taking forms of knowledge from elsewhere and 'relocating' these for the purposes of the initiation of the students. Thus the 'relocation' of knowledge is the main goal of pedagogic discourse, which is defined as:

> …a principle for appropriating other discourses and bringing them into a special relation with each other for the purposes of their selective transmission and acquisition (Bernstein, 2000: 183 – 4)

The pedagogic activity, by its very nature imposes language choices that are meant to create and cultivate certain behaviours in the participants, while other choices have to do with the content of instructional field which is at issue. Adapting Bernstein's terms, we can say that the pedagogic discourse in general is realized not only *through*, but primarily *in* the regulative register, as this has to do with the overall pedagogic directions taken, their goals, pacing, sequencing, and evaluating. The instructional register has to do with the 'content' and the specialised competences or skills at issue. We may thus say that the regulative register projects the second order, instructional register.

The process of appropriating the instructional register by the regulative one is at the heart of the functioning of the pedagogic discourse, and at the heart of the pedagogic relationship. The first of the dimensions involved in the operation of the

BDD-A25328 © 2007 Galați University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:54:16 UTC)

regulative register has to do with overt advice and directions concerning desirable behaviours in the classroom. Once the teacher assumes an understanding of acceptable behaviours in the students and the latter show such behaviours, less and less of the instructional register is appropriated by the regulative register. The learning of the 'good' behaviours is instrumental to establishing the classroom climate that makes possible the developing of reasoning and thinking encoded within the instructional register.

Though in general, the regulations associated with the dislocation, relocation and transmission of the instructional knowledge may be of a different order from the regulations regarding 'good' behaviour in the classroom, in a sense, the two are merely manifestations of the same process at work: that of shaping the students as they learn methods and manners of functioning in the classroom. These are also valued for their relevance for the students' participation in the wider world beyond school.

2. Realisations of the regulative and instructional registers in the foreign language classroom

The very close identification of the instructional register with the articulation of acceptable behaviours as a feature of the regulative register is marked in the teacher's discourse throughout the class, while the principles required for acceptable behaviour are evident in the various responses and replies that the students produce. For instance, in a foreign language class, the teacher may ask the students to use the dictionary *frequently*, or to copy *accurately* from the board, or s/he may advise the students *that they really need to improve their writing*. Such advice may display instances of modality or instances of negative polarity such as:

1. P: do we *have to* print it out
   T: I would say you *need* to print it + ***never*** submit it handwritten + you *must always* print a project + ***never*** write

The interplay of the two registers can be seen as different in the case of the foreign language classrooms from that of the other subject lessons. We may say that the foreign language classroom discourse has a very special characteristic as the instructional register (the foreign language) very often provides the language choices for the regulative register; the regulative register speaks *through* and *in* the instructional register. Switch to L_1 in the foreign language class may signal not only the teacher's exercise of her/his authoritarian powers over the class, reinforced through the use of the mother tongue, but also a reversed balance of the two registers to the detriment of the instructional one:

2. P: [reading] *the princess*
   T: *pune-ţi limba între dinţi*
   P: *the hand*
   T: *şi de ce rîzi + fii serioasă*
   P: *of the princess…* [goes on reading]

The two registers have different linguistic realisations in the overall construction of the pedagogic discourse. This may have implications on the manner in which pedagogic knowledge and relationships are constructed, and on the way we judge the success of the teaching of the foreign language.

BDD-A25328 © 2007 Galaţi University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:54:16 UTC)

3. Linguistic evidence for the operation of the two registers

The operation of the two registers can be followed in the linguistic expression of the metafunctions of classroom discourse, as defined in Halliday's systemic functional model. The model posits that any language use serves simultaneously (a) to construct some aspect of experience, (b) to negotiate relationship and (c) to organise the language itself into successful messages. These functions are pervasive in any natural language and extend across all language uses. Any language will serve these three broad metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual.

3.1. The ideational metafunction (experiential or logical)

Process types and participant roles can describe the experiential content found in classroom discourse. In the foreign language classroom discourse, the model of the teacher as authority is perhaps explainable to a greater extent than in the case of other subjects where more means of accessing class-external information sources are available.

Examples of language in which the process types belong to the regulative register include such instance of teacher talk as:

3. right, okay we are going to start | the next exercise | in a moment
Process: material | Goal | Circ: Time

or such remarks made by students in pair work as:

4. we've got to follow the written instructions

The instructional register is frequently expressed in parts of transitivity other than the process itself as in sentences like:

5. you'll be colouring the snake in green

In this latter case, the material process (*colouring*) and its participant role of Actor (*you*) realise an aspect of the students' behaviour – an aspect of the regulative register, while the Goal role (*snake*) is realized as an aspect of the instructional register, as in this case the students practice the colours and vocabulary items connected with animals.

In all pedagogic activity, some language choices may reflect the private behaviours of the participants in the activity, while others reflect the public 'content' or instructional field of information that is at issue.

3.2. The interpersonal metafunction

The interpersonal metafunction is realised in the mood choices made by the speaker in taking up particular speech roles vis-à-vis the listener (Halliday 1994: 69) and in the use of the first person pronouns. These suggest how the speaker is involved in taking up particular speech roles in relation to the listener:

– *teachers typically offer information:*

6. well today we've got another story about Cinderella + called "A Modern Cinderella"

– *students may demand information:*

7. what's the English for "broască"

– *both may offer a service,*

8. do you want this pen

– *or they can demand a service:*

9. give me that pen please

BDD-A25328 © 2007 Galați University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:54:16 UTC)

Since the teacher – student relationship is asymmetric, with the teacher representing the public sphere/the institution, it is mainly the teacher who exercises particular power in offering information, in eliciting information and in directing the nature of activity. This is marked in the operation of the regulative register. The uses of modality and person offer other indicators of interpersonal relationships. Thus, the teacher often uses high modality to indicate the importance of a course of action to be pursued:

10. so, you've got to find a solution in your groups

At other times s/he may use low or median modality to make the directions to behaviour more oblique:

11. now you may work with a partner + so you'll probably sit next to somebody you have not worked with today

The person system is also significant in classroom discourse. The teacher classically uses the first person plural to suggest solidarity with the students in some activity to be undertaken:

12. well today we've got another story about Cinderella + called "A Modern Cinderella"

The use of the first person singular, on the other hand, may suggest what the teacher's expectations are, as in:

13. I want you to listen attentively to the story on the tape

The teacher may also use the second person when overtly directing the students' behaviour:

14. You really need something to write with.

The basic speech functions are augmented by various types of responses available (e.g., rejection or acceptance of an offer, acknowledgement of a statement, refusal to comply with a command, etc.). Teachers and students take up various roles vis-à-vis each other across a classroom session, and the identification of their speech roles becomes an important measure of their relative roles and responsibilities.

3.3. The textual metafunction

Patterns of theme distribution in classroom discourse can be also revealing, for three choices contribute to discourse development: who controls theme, to what end, and at what points in the lesson. These tell a lot about the overall organisation of the discourse and about the responsibilities assumed by the participants. Thematic patterns tend to be distributed differently across different stages of a lesson, reflecting, but also enabling various shifts that occur with respect to the operation of the 'regulative' and 'instructional' registers.

Thematic progression is often expressed in teacher talk, particularly at the beginning of the lesson, as in the following transcript, where the topical themes are give in italics and the textual themes are in bold italics:

15. ***Well*** *now* that we are ready
I want you to listen attentively to the story on the tape.
You remember we spoke about Cinderella last week
And then we told our own success stories
Well *today* we've got another story about Cinderella, called "A Modern Cinderella"
And *I* want you to listen to it…

We can also come across instances of marked topical themes which occur when a circumstance is put in theme position (16) or of a marked topical theme being created by placing a dependent clause first, thus giving it thematic status (17):

BDD-A25328 © 2007 Galați University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:54:16 UTC)

16. Today we're going to start a new unit.

17. Before you start, let's make sure you know what to do.

Topical themes are often found in association with textual themes and interpersonal themes. Where all three appear, it is the textual theme that comes first, followed by the interpersonal, and then the topical theme as in (18):

18. *We'll see how that works (*topical theme)
as we go through (a textual and a topical theme)
so you're following the given model… (a textual, an interpersonal and a topical theme, respectively)

If we turn to a dialogue involving a group of students working together, one finds the theme choices are of a different order:

19. A: You need help?
B: I can't find it.

Both textually and interpersonally such a passage of text is quite different from the passage of teacher monologue. The students indicate that they are directing the course the discourse takes, which is in this case very intimately linked to the activity they are performing. This explains the extensive use of exophoric references to matters out of the text and in the context. Also, thematic patterns tend to be distributed rather differently across the different stages of a lesson, reflecting, but also enabling, the various shifts that occur in the operation of the regulative and instructional processes.

4. Developing the expression of personal experience

The developing of the ability to talk about personal experience is an important one. Any activity that develops this ability has both educative value and permits development of shared classroom work. Such an activity can draw students into joint participation in talking about and reconstructing various episodes. Shared experience can be used to model and practice talking about it, while using the shared episode and talk provides a basis for new areas of activity and knowledge. Free expression also brings an alignment of regulative and instructional registers. In other words, through free expression activities, the balance of regulative register and the instructional register is again redefined; as a result, the students get enough guidance about *what* to speak or write about (genre and instructional field).

The regulative and instructional registers are brought together again in teacher talk when this asks the students to *read* or *think about,* or even *pretend* to have lived or to be living a certain experience with respect to the instructional field.

20. now that we finished reading the story + let's think that something similar has happened to you + or pretend that something similar has happened to you

Here the regulative register appropriates or speaks through the instructional register. Without such appropriation, students are left with insufficient direction and advice about the task.

BDD-A25328 © 2007 Galați University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:54:16 UTC)

Final Remarks

Successful classroom discourse seems to be a discourse in which the regulative register and the instructional registers function in such a way that a form of 'regulation' occurs. Such regulation, working through the authority which is invested in the regulative register and in the institutional agent – the teacher, operates to position the students to address questions and/or reason in particular ways or to adopt certain values and/or habits of working.

References

BERNSTEIN, B. 1990. *Class, Codes and Control*, Vol. 4; *The Structuring of Pedagogic Discourse*, London and New York: Routledge.

BERNSTEIN, B. 1996. *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control, and Identity: Theory, Research, Critique (Critical Perspectives on Literacy and Education*, series editor: A. Luke). London and Bristol, PA: Taylor & Francis.

BERNSTEIN, B. 2000. *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control, and Identity: Theory, Research, Critique,* rev. edn. London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

BLOOR, T. and M. BLOOR. 1995. *The Functional Analysis of English: A Hallidayan Approach*. London and New York: Arnold.

EGGINS, S. 1994. *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics*. London: Pinter.

HALLIDAY, M. A. K. 1976. in *Halliday: System and Function in Language. Selected Papers.* G. R. Kress (ed.) London: Arnold.

HALLIDAY, M.A.K. 1979 'Models of meaning and modes of expression: types of grammatical structure, and their determination by different semantic functions' in *Function and Context in Language, Selected Papers*. D.J. Allerton, Edward Carney and David Holcroft (eds.) London: Oxford University Press.

HALLIDAY, M.A.K. 1985. *Spoken and Written Language*. Geelong, Victoria: Deakin University Press.

HALLIDAY, M. A. K. 1994 (2nd ed.), *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Arnold.

HASAN, R. and J.R. MARTIN, 1989. *Language Development: Learning Language, Learning Culture. Meaning and Choice in Language: Studies for Michael Halliday*. Advances in Discourse Process Series, Editor: R.O. Freedle, NJ: Ablex.

BDD-A25328 © 2007 Galați University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:54:16 UTC)