Catherine DeJager

Linguistics 370-B: Final Paper

Which section was the most interesting for you to work on and why?

Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis was the most interesting for me to work on. This is because before this class I hadn’t put a lot of thought into this section, so it was really interesting to analyze. I thought it was really interesting to see the pragmatics of turn taking, especially in regards to figuring out who would take responsibility for suggesting a new topic. In some cases a speaker would explicitly give up the floor, in other cases the speaker simply didn’t come up with a new topic, implicitly giving that responsibility to the other speaker. I also really liked observing the backchanneling and seeing how different speakers had different words/phrases for backchanneling based on their background. I enjoyed seeing the use of “like” as a discourse marker and defending my previous assumption that “like” is not a mere filler word but does in fact serve several useful functions. I found it interesting how there were a few different situations in which overlap could occur - a speaker thought the other speaker was done, or a speaker anticipated the end of the sentence and responded as if the full sentence had been said. It was also fun to think about and analyze body language, which I wouldn’t usually have thought of as part of linguistics, but it is certainly part of communication.

Describe any examples (from your speech data) of how language is being used creatively or playfully or changing in its typical usage? How do you think this will affect this word or phrase over time?

An example of creative language usage is “\*gets off soapbox\*”. As explained in the paper, this is an expansion of asterisk action, in which actions are described using asterisks in online informal writing, to speech. Since asterisks can’t be used in speech, the same effect is conveyed with a pause before and after the utterance and by changing pitch for the utterance, usually picking a pitch lower than the speaker’s usual pitch and holding that pitch for the whole utterance (similar to the way a speaker would indicate that something is in parentheses). That speaker is not the first speaker I have heard using asterisk action in speech; it seems to be a growing phenomenon. I wonder whether asterisk actions will replace actions in face-to-face conversation; e.g., “\*facepalm\*” instead of facepalming. I think this may happen for some actions, but probably not all actions.

How have you seen (or used yourself) language for purposes of solidarity (unity and belonging), separation (exclusion), or mediation (crossing established boundaries)? Give examples of each.

A good example of language used for purposes of solidarity is the LGBT community. I go to SAGA regularly and there are certain words and phrases there that emphasize people’s common identity and shared experience. Some are terms anyone could use but it’s LGBT people who are more likely to know and use them: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, heteronormativity, cisgender, etc. Then there are other uses of language that mark a person as part of the ingroup, for example, calling oneself “queer” or “gay”, using “that’s so gay” as a compliment, an excessive amount of puns about closets and “coming out”, talking about how a regular thing could be gayer. Also, it’s common to take a noun and add “gay” as an adjective because LGBT people are doing it. For example, pancakes with SAGA are “gay pancakes”, even though pancakes have no concept of sexuality. These and other uses of language help people in the LGBT community, a traditionally marginalized and oppressed community, express solidarity and connection to each other. An example of language used for separation is the language used is the language used for video games. Certain terms like “tank”, “glass cannon”, “DPS”, “kiting”, etc. can be used to quickly establish whether someone is familiar with those kinds of games (primarily RPG games that involve combat). A “tank” is a role designed for taking a lot of damage, a “glass cannon” can deal a lot of damage but can’t take much damage, “DPS” is short for “damage per second” and refers to a role that deals a lot of damage, and “kiting” is running around to keep the enemy at a distance where it can’t attack, maybe getting in a few attacks yourself. If someone hears and understands these terms, this jargon is a useful form of communication and also a way to express solidarity. But someone not familiar with these games won’t know the terms and thus will be excluded/left out. An example of language used for mediation is the work of a translator/interpreter. When I did the interim class Faith and Computer Education in the Dominican Republic, many of the people on the trip didn’t speak Spanish. Thankfully, some of us knew Spanish and also several of the people we worked with were able to translate for us. When we gave our workshops, the translator translated for us so that the teachers at the workshops could learn what we were teaching. I also did a fair bit of walking around in a lab-assistant type role, listening to teachers’ issues and communicating with them to solve problems. In many cases, I didn’t know the answer but was able to translate the question to a leader of the workshop who could then provide a solution that I could translate for the teachers.

What are we doing when we learn another language? What do we gain and what do we lose?

When we learn another language, we are expressing an interest in another culture, saying “this is valuable enough that I’m going to devote my time and energy to it”. We are forming a way to communicate and build relationships with speakers of this language. We are learning a new worldview. According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, language influences thought. So when we learn a new language, we learn a new way to think. We open ourselves up to other experiences (interacting with people, reading/watching things, travelling, jobs, etc.) that require the language. We also learn our own language(s) better, especially the differences and similarities with the target language. So we gain perspective and opportunities. Besides the time, energy, and other resources it takes to learn the language itself, there is something else we lose. We lose the simplicity of the worldview/experience we had before. A common problem third-culture kids (TCK) have is not being able to fully connect with people who haven’t travelled because those people can’t understand the TCK experience. A similar problem happens with learning a new language. With the knowledge of the additional language, a speaker may also lose the ability to communicate as creatively in their original language as it becomes more tempting to simply borrow from the learned language. However, knowledge of a new language could help the speaker speak better in their original language because the new language provides a new way to think about language.

Jhumpa Lahiri calls language a “mirror”. Do you agree with this analogy? Explain why or why not. What can we learn about ourselves when we pay careful attention to the language we use with others?

Yes, I agree with this analogy. The language we use shows who we are (or who we present ourselves to be). The language we use indicates what ingroups we are part of (through what slang and jargon we use). It indicates our politeness, level of certainty, etc. It shows how we perform gender. It shows our cultural background. We can also pay attention to how much linguistic adaptation we do: do we change our language to be better understood by our audience? Language also shows our values: for example, what do we emphasize by using more/stronger words? We can learn how we conform to and break accepted standards. These are just a few of the things we can learn about ourselves by examining our use of language.