

A Discursive Linguistic Analysis Of Power Relations During School Assembly English Speech Events In Secondary Schools In Bungoma County, Kenya

Maleya Oscar: Mbori Bob and Omondi Tobias

*Department Of Language And Literature Education, Masinde Muliro University Of Science And Technology,
P.O. Box 190-50100, Kakamega, Kenya.
Corresponding Author: Maleya Oscar*

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to analyse English messages transmitted to learners (hearers) by teachers and prefects (speakers), during the school assembly sessions, with the view of establishing the power relations witnessed between the two groups during the interaction process in the secondary school set up. The guiding assumption is that there are many English messages transmitted during the school assembly and, therefore, the language in the messages transmitted has a great influence on the kind of relationship that exists between learners (hearers) and their teachers and prefects (speakers). The research drew data from school assembly speech events where twenty assemblies were observed and tape recorded from ten purposively sampled, secondary schools, from Bungoma County. The research used the Critical Discourse Analysis theory to establish the power relations in the messages transmitted and the results analyzed qualitatively with particular attention to the frequency with which words and sentences expressing domination occur. It was expected that the findings would be used to promote teacher-learner relations, which would be essential in promoting discipline in schools, thereby leading to better results in school.

Date of Submission: 14-08-2018

Date of acceptance: 31-08-2018

I. INTRODUCTION

The present article aims at exploring how power relations are represented in the English speech texts by the teachers and school students' council, who are at a higher level of the hierarchical structure within the school, during the school assembly sessions. The study specifically focuses on the relations between school assembly discourse and as showcased power in the school setting. More importantly, the study considers the various discursive strategies which are employed within the linguistic text, as teachers and students interact within the secondary school assembly context. These various discursive strategies are analyzed within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). According to van Dijk (1996), Critical Discourse Analysis describes and explains how power abuse is enacted, reproduced and legitimized by the text and the talk of dominant groups or social institutions. In the present study, the use of CDA was to show how meaning and power relations are produced through the medium of language in a speech event and how the teachers use language as a linguistic tool to exercise social power and control in the school set up where the learners are the listeners.

Statement of the problem

The paper investigates the messages transmitted during the secondary school assembly English speech events with the view of establishing power relations in the messages. That is why the study considers language, not only as a social practice but also as an instrument of power within the interaction.

The secondary school has been structured in a manner that gives the teacher the mandate of being fully in charge and in control of the learning process, with the learner playing a fairly passive role in the whole language use arrangement. As a result of the teacher being in charge and in control of the school set up, there have been disagreements between teachers and learners with regard to the way the latter are handled and communicated to. Consequently, the relationship between the two interactants, in the school speech event may be strained, leading to a high level of indiscipline in schools. Therefore, it is possible that the problem facing learners and teachers may be as a result of the language used in interactive discourses. It is also possible that the many upheavals witnessed in schools that have far reaching consequences to the learning process can be attributed to the interactive discourse and how

the speech events are structured in the school set up. Partly for this reason, the present study is grounded on practical measures which would define, enhance, and make concrete of the discourse strategies in selected speech events in the school environment.

Theoretical underpinnings of power relations in the school setting

The speech event in school may be studied using the Critical Discourse Analysis theory advanced by Norman Fairclough (1992) who identifies three central tenets of CDA. Firstly, Fairclough posits that discourse is shaped and constrained by the social structure. Secondly, it is noted that discourse is shaped and constrained by culture, so that what we say is shaped by our professional culture, socialization and member profile. Finally, Fairclough (1992) notes that discourse is shaped and constrained by discourse (the world and language we use) which helps shape our identities, relationships and systems of knowledge and beliefs.

Fairclough (1989) and Wodak and Meyer (2001) argue that Critical Discourse Analysis focuses on language use, and how the language is constructed by the social institutions that people belong to. The participants in the present study are the secondary school teachers and their learners. The school, therefore, acts as a social organization where participants use English language to interact in various ways. It then follows that if the dominant discourse reflects the ideology of the dominant class (teachers and students' council members), then the main task of CDA would be to analyze the verbal aspects of the dominant group as conducted in English. This would assist in establishing existing power relations and the effect of the power relations on the participants.

This theory is relevant to the present analysis because it supports the view that discourse and language can contribute to unbalanced power relations within a social institution. The unbalanced power relations could be manifested in prejudice, injustice and inequalities to the oppressed in a society. Therefore, teachers, together with the prefects, being in a more privileged position in the school hierarchy may use words to intimidate, misdirect, control, manipulate and oppress learners. There is thus need to analyze the messages transmitted in the school linguistic environment, and see whether power imbalance does exist in the language used by teachers, and come up with strategies to counter the imbalance.

Research Methodology

The present paper aims at establishing how power relations manifest in the English language messages transmitted in the secondary school assembly speech event in secondary schools in Bungoma County. The research was carried out in secondary schools in Bungoma County and targeted teachers and learners.

A qualitative research design was adopted in this study. A one month descriptive survey was done by collecting data from ten purposively sampled schools during morning and evening assemblies, with the view of observing and recording the speech events. The point of focus was on speeches made by teachers and prefects. This kind of descriptive design enabled the researcher to analyze and explain the content of messages in a more exhaustive manner.

II. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Manifestation of power relations through language use

In the secondary school system in Kenya, power relations are manifested in various ways, through the linguistic structures that have been put in place as guided by the Ministry of Education.

System of hierarchy as illustrated in the speech texts in the secondary school speech events

The research established that the Kenyan secondary school system was designed in a manner that is hierarchical. At the top most level is the principal then down to the learners. During the school assemblies, the learners were found to be at the lowest position in the hierarchical order, which is already a poor setting for any democratic space. Sifuna (2000) argues that many school administrators seem not to adapt to the new changes that are taking place globally especially with regard to embracing democracy in our schools. Instead, they have continually perpetrated autocracy in schools.

This research established that in the school assemblies, the speeches, too, were presented in the system of hierarchy, starting from the least powerful persons, who are the student leaders, to the most powerful in the school set up, the position held by school administrators, who are either the principals or their deputies. However, the addressees remained the students, though some of the information was directed at teachers. The most intriguing observation is that the addressees were to remain quiet, and would not be allowed to challenge what was being said by the speakers.

It was also observed that the language employed by the speakers, during the school assemblies, became more and more authoritative as the various speakers took to stage. That is, as one speaker ushered in another one, power dominance seemed to increase as we moved up the hierarchical structure. The student leaders seemed to play the role of whistle blowers, and then the rest of the speakers would emphasize on the same aspects, but with more assertive words. According to Pettigrew (1973), any form of communication or dialogue within institutions or organizations are forms of institutional interaction, and, therefore, also enact, demonstrate, indicate or legitimate a great amount of power relations. Therefore, participants in such interaction, may follow context dependent rules and norms of interaction, but may also negotiate different roles or positions, including those of status, hierarchy, or expertise. In the following excerpt, we shall analyze the language of all the speakers in a session.

Text

Prefect: ..First, you people are not obeying prefects. When a prefect tells You something, you must do....Ok..you just make noise and then I find you...I will deal with you on the spot. ..I am even urging the staff to give me the powers to deal with you and you will see. (Noise)

MOD: I think it is quite clear that some of us are disrespectful and you don't obey school rules and regulations. What the prefect has said is quite true I have had problems this week, chasing many of you to go to class when the bell has rung...And for all those who refused to attend to manual work, just remain on parade. Don't make a mistake of going to class. Thank you.(All quiet)

Deputy Principal

I want to start by saying that respect is very important. People who don't respect others don't go far in life....You are still young and you must learn to obey the people above you....If you continue disobeying prefects, Teachers and any other person in this school, we shall send you parking.

It could be concluded that the power in the words of each of the speakers, tend to be more powerful as we go high up the hierarchy. When the prefect talks about discipline, though he speaks with authority, the students rebuke him by making noise. However, when the teacher on duty and the deputy principal talk about the same issues, the students maintain silence. It, therefore, means that, the degree of power relations in language increase as we go high up the hierarchy.

Lerner (1987) argues that hierarchies are inherently coercive because they grant dominant groups the authority to impose their rules and ideology on those below them. Lerner's argument supports this study because the manner in which the speeches were designed and presented to the audience reflected a very high level of power dominance, with emphasis being on co-operation, and adherence to school rules and regulations. The learners were expected to remain quiet throughout the sessions, and indeed they were, however tough or unpleasant the speeches were.

Manifestation of power relations through use of pronominalization

It was found out that the prefects and the teachers used different types of pronouns in the discourse texts. Pronouns replace nouns in sentences and are used to avoid unnecessary repetitions of nouns, which make a text or speech boring. However, pronouns have been discovered to be showcasing power in speech. The following table presents an analysis of how different pronouns were used in the speeches by speakers.

Table 2: Type of Pronominalization

Pronoun	Frequency	Frequency in %
I	201	18.54
Me	20	1.78
Us	104	9.55
We	216	19.84
You	549	50.38
TOTAL	1090	100

Source ; Field Data

From the table 2 above, the study shows that some pronouns have been predominant in some of the speeches. Firstly, the pronoun "I" is used more than 200 times in the speeches. Hence, it was observed that learners were generally against the student leaders who seemed to has a personalized approach to their leadership.

I want all the class prefects to be closing the doors when the bell goes.(Noise) Ok ok... just make noise and then I find you, I will deal with you on the Spot.(More noise).

We could, therefore, argue that, the use of the pronoun “I” in the text above shows that the speaker was personalizing the position and he would use the powers bestowed in the position to administer a form of punishment known to him alone. The first sentence presents the speaker as an all powerful one, issuing a directive which he expects compliance by the audience. However, the negative reaction from most of the learners makes him to try to impose himself to the audience even more by introducing a threat in the second sentence. But he has taken it upon himself, to fight those who will not comply with his directive. .

According to Straker (2010), the use of the pronoun “I” especially which is always a capital letter is a sign of power and significance since it is made to stand out. He argues that, the pronoun is used to demonstrate commitment. In support of Straker and Weissman (2014) suggests that if a communicator, a writer, a presenter, a speaker, a sales person, or a significant other- uses “I” too often, the reader, the audience, the customer, or the mate thinks that it is about the speaker and therefore turns off.

Secondly, the pronoun “you” was the most frequently used in the secondary school speech events, taking 49% of the total percentage of pronouns used in the speeches. In this study, the pronoun “you” has been used mostly to point out the weaknesses in the learners and issuing directives, threats, commands, and so on. The acts mentioned in above are what Austin (1962) refers to as exercitives and he argues that they are successfully utilised by individuals or members of a group to showcase power at high magnitude. The pronoun “you” has also been used to separate the speakers from the entire group on parade. Therefore, the speakers use it very effectively in casting blame to the learners, pointing out weaknesses which the speakers do not want to identify with.

Another pronoun that has featured prominently in the speeches is “we”. It is used, generally, to bring individuals together. Therefore, both the speakers and the audience are united using this pronoun. The research found out that the pronoun “we” mostly portrays the speakers as those who want to identify with the learners only when they are doing good and run away from them when they do things that are perceived to be against the school rules and regulations. In addition, it is used to demonstrate the kind of unity which existed among teachers. This is because it is believed that most of the decisions made and the messages communicated by teachers on parade are not from individual teachers parse, but the decisions and opinions of all the teachers. Therefore, they speak one language. When people are united in any organization, they become stronger than when they work in isolation. It is possible that that language of solidarity is the one that makes the teachers to assert their authority and be able to gain control over large numbers of students they serve.

From this research, we can therefore deduce that the pronouns “I”, “you” and “we” have been used successfully to express power. This is observable in the speakers’ perceived cunning concave approach to the use of pronouns in their language. They start with a general approach as they zero in to the learners alone. They start by addressing issues as “we”, then “you”, cleverly exonerating themselves from any pressure or wrong doing.

Power relations as showcased through modality in the speech events

According to Simpson (1993:47), modality is a semantic concept that refers to the speaker’s attitude or opinion towards the truth of a proposition, as well as the situation or event described in the sentence and includes meanings such as ability, probability, necessity, permission, obligation, and volition. Because of the various expressive functions, van der Auwera and Plungian(1998), classified modality into: deontic, epistemic and participant internal/ external. Modality is realised through modal auxiliaries such as “must”, “can”, “may”, “could”, “will”, “would”, “should”, “shall” and “ought to”.“Have to” has also been used to express modality. Each of the modal auxiliaries above has been used in varying proportions, so as to achieve certain communicative functions.

In most of the school assembly sessions, the learners were seen to rudely interrupt the speakers, yet the messages passed across were similar. The difference could be in the manner of presentation, and the magnitude of the power, held by each speaker. The manner in which the speakers used modal auxiliaries in their speeches signifies their position of control in the hierarchical relations with the students. Despite the fact that the learners would at times contest authority, the way in which the modals were used, denoted a deliberate calculation to regulate and control students’ psychological dispositions and behavioural actions, during school assembly sessions.

Table 3: Modal Auxiliaries

Modal Auxiliary	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Can	69	21.04
Could	3	0.95
Have to	8	1.71
May	23	7.35
Must	51	16.29
Shall	24	7.63
Should	35.23	11.18
Will	82	26.20
Would	24.51	7.63
TOTAL	313	100

Source: Field Data

The speakers employed the following modal auxiliaries to impose an obligation to the learners and demanding for compliance from them: must, should, have to, and shall/will. The modal auxiliaries have been used in varying proportions in order to achieve certain communicative functions. It is also important to note that the modal auxiliaries listed above, take a very large combined percentage of the total number of the modal auxiliaries used in the speeches presented by the various speakers. This is an indication of the high level of force or power that is manifested in the speeches as presented by the various speakers.

According to Ravelli (2000), auxiliaries that express obligation are what he refer to as auxiliaries with high modality. “Must” falls into the category of high modality. Through “must”, power is manifested right from the prefects to the teachers; in the same school assembly session.

In summary, the modal auxiliaries, particularly the high modality auxiliaries, were used strategically to perpetuate power relations in the school system. The speakers, deliberately, incorporated them (modals) in their discourses, in order to force learners to perform certain activity, adhere to school rules and regulations, or behave in a specific manner, as determined or prescribed by the school leadership.

Analysis of speech acts in school assembly situation.

Austin (1962) believes that meaning is achieved by means of many factors, both linguistic and extra linguistic. More importantly is that an act of saying something is an act of doing something. Austin sees utterances as capable of showing relationships between different users and capable of performing different communicative functions. Here, utterances do not only communicate information, but also stand as verbal actions, since actions have taken place. On the other hand, Searle (1975), classifies speech acts into assertive, directives, commissives, expressives and declaratives.

Huddleston (1976) argues that, the illocutionary force of an utterance depends on a variety of contextual factors, such as beliefs, assumption, intentions of speakers and the relative social statuses, which will not always be expressed in the grammatical structure of the sentence uttered. To Huddleston, a speech act is interpreted well when articulated in a certain context. Therefore, the surrounding of the speaker will determine the ultimate meaning of the speech act.

Table 4: Types of Speech Acts

Type of Speech Act	Total no	Percentage (%)
Praising	81	7.18
Warnings	278	24.65
Threats	172	15.25
Commands	185	16.40
Requests	47	4.17
Asking	59	5.23
Suggestions	40	3.55
Thanking	20	1.77
Promising	32	2.84
Informing	214	18.97
Total	10128	100

Source: Field Data

From the table above, the speakers used commands, warnings and threats when passing on information (informing), to a greater extent, than the other speech acts. Firstly, it is possible that they are used to maintain the status quo so that the teachers' position is not undermined by the learners. For example, threats and warnings are meant to make the recipients of the message to conform to what they have been told.

Secondly, the threats, commands and warnings may be used to induce the fear factor in the learners. With this kind of illocutions being employed in speeches to such great magnitudes, the addressees are pushed into a state of helplessness because the teachers and the student leaders seem to be in direct control of the discourses and they expect nothing short of compliance. In support of this argument, van Dijk (1989) observed that, direct control of action is achieved through discourses that have direct pragmatic function (elocutionary force), such as commands, threats, laws, regulations, and instructions.

Thirdly, it is possible that the speakers use the speech acts in order to direct learners easily. One of the deductions we could make, going by the speech acts is that, learners are perceived to be very difficult persons to deal with in the school set up. Therefore, a certain amount of force has to be applied in order to manage them effectively. Hence, threats, warnings and commands become the most effective tools to do the work. Perhaps, the learners are to work more or less like robots. Their work is to take instructions and to obey commands from the seniors. Van Dijk (1989) argues that power may first be enacted at pragmatic level through limited access or by the control of speech acts, such as commands....or other institutional speech acts. In this case, the three speech acts put the speakers at a very high position of influence, leaving the subjects quite powerless and helpless.

Use of Imagery

Another way in which the school authority uses language in a manner that is against the expectation is when some abusive messages are used by the teachers when addressing the learners. The school being a place where positive values are to be imparted into the learners, it is expected that the speakers make correct lexical choice. However, the words chosen and used by some of the speakers during the school assembly context cause embarrassment to the learners, thereby killing their self esteem. For example;

Prefect

[I don't know why you like to be followed like sheep, especially when you are going for tea, or when you are going to take lunch]

Deputy principal

.....You girls, you should be ashamed of yourselves! If that is not prostitution, what else can we call it? Even dogs are better because they have no intellect. (Aaaah..Clicks...)

The examples above show how the people in authority use language without any restrictions. That is why they are able to say anything to learners. The only reaction from the learners is either laugh or jeer at the comment. The deputy principal uses abusive language against the learners by referring to learners as prostitutes.

It could, therefore, be argued that the teachers deliberately use derogatory words, to pin down learners who are perceived to be crossing the defined boundaries. In addition, we could also argue that the teachers have limitless freedom to use of language, in terms of choice of words and style of presentation, owing to their high level of education as compared to that of their learners.

In support of the argument above, Reddy (1979) observes that language functions like a conduit, transferring thoughts bodily from one person to another. He emphasizes that people while speaking, insert their thoughts and feelings in the words and the words contain the thoughts or feelings and convey them to others. Going by Reddy's argument, it can be noted that the messages passed to learners would elicit some feelings in the learners and in return, the learners would react either positively or negatively to some of the statements used by the speakers.

1.7 Conclusion

We could conclude that there is high level of power abuse and dominance in the secondary schools in not only Bungoma County, but also the rest of the secondary schools in the country. The domination is making the learning process, which is supposed to be enjoyable, a nightmare for many school going children.

The research has established that the unlimited freedom of speech and the high status enjoyed by the teachers, compounded with the privileges enjoyed by most student leaders are a root cause of the strained relationship with the rest of the learners. The learners' freedom of expression has been

curtailed and they cannot say a thing where teachers are. The learners therefore design their own ways of countering the domination especially when they believe that they are being oppressed by the system. The result is rudeness, violence, poor performance, school dropout, and many a times, strikes, leading to loss of property and worse still, loss of lives. This is, indeed, a negation of the initial aim of education.

There is, therefore, a dire need of enhancing teacher- learner relationship in secondary schools by establishing and putting in place proper mechanisms of enhancing rapport between teachers and learners, so as to make learning an enjoyable experience, since it is majorly through education, that careers are pursued, and great relationships are constructed.

Recommendations

The learner is a customer and should be given the best service. Hence, right words should be used to attract the customer. Like in many organisations, the customer care desk under a public relations officer should be introduced in schools to look into the welfare of the learners.

More guidance and counselling teachers should be trained and posted to all secondary schools, so as to enhance talk or rapport with the learners. Alongside training of teachers, guidance and counselling should be taught as a compulsory subject in all secondary schools.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Austin, J. L. (1962). *How To Do Things with Words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- [2]. Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and Power*. London: Longman Publishers.
- [3]. Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- [4]. Huddleston, R. D. (1976). *An Introduction to English Transformational Syntax*. London: Longman Publishers.
- [5]. Lerner, G. (1987). *The Creation of Patriarchy*. New York: Oxford.
- [6]. Pettigrew, A.M. (1973). *The Politics of Organizational Decision Making*. London: Tavistock.
- [7]. Ravelli, L.(2000). *Getting started with Functional Analysis of Texts*. London : Cassell.
- [8]. Reddy, M. J. (1979). *The Conduct Metaphor: A case of frame conflict in our language about Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [9]. Searle, J. (1975). *Indirect Speech Acts: Syntax and Semantics*. Vol. 3. Academic Press
- [10]. Sifuna, D. N. (2000). *Education for democracy and human rights in African schools: The Kenyan Experience*. *Africa Development*, Vol XXV, Nos 1&2, 2000.
- [11]. Simpson, P. (1993). *Language, Ideology and Point of View*. New York: Routledge.
- [12]. Straker, D.(2010). *Changing Minds in detail*. London: Syque Press.
- [13]. Van der Auwera, J. and Plangian, V. (1998). *Modality's Semantic Map*. *Linguistic Typology*.
- [14]. Van Dijk, T. A. (1989). *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach*. London: Sage Publishers.
- [15]. Van Dijk, T. A. (1996). *Discourse, Power and Access in C.R. Caldas-Coulthard and M. Coulthard (eds). Texts and Practices: Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis pp. 84-104*. London: Routledge.
- [16]. Wodak, R. and Meyer, M. (2001). *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Sage Publications.

Maleya Oscar A Discursive Linguistic Analysis Of Power Relations During School Assembly English Speech Events In Secondary Schools In Bungoma County, Kenya.” *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*. vol. 23 no. 08, 2018, pp. 32-38.