

SOCIOLINGVISTIKA/ SOCIOLINGUISTICS

Teaching Italian in Australia to Second Generation Italian-Australian Students

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Abstract. Heterogeneity of class composition in schools, regarding cultural background and often language, is increasingly the norm in western countries. This paper explores some of the effects of cultural diversity on students' participation in school activities, examining a transcript taken from the videorecording of an Italian lesson in a high school in Sydney, Australia. The lesson is taught by a teacher whose mother tongue is English, while the pupils come mostly from families of Italian origin.

The video data will be analysed through a detailed discourse analysis within an ethnomethodological framework. I will point out how the students' knowledge of Italian, in fact, hinders the smooth running of the lesson. Teacher's authority is based on her/his superior knowledge, on which the control of the class depends. The presence in school of students of different cultural backgrounds in this case creates visible incongruities and questions the meaning of the learning processes.

Introduction

According to ethnomethodological research (see Baker, 1997 for a review), school knowledge is defined through teacher-student interaction during ordinary educational activities (Atkinson & Delamont, 1976; Baker & Freebody, 1989; Baker & Perrot, 1988; Griffin & Mehan, 1979; Edwards, 1981; Heap, 1985; 1990; Macbeath, 1994; MacHoul & Watson, 1984; Paoletti & Fele, forthcoming 2001). The student-teacher power relationship is constructed precisely in relation to the transmission of school knowledge. As reported by Edwards (1981: 303):

"In 'typical' classrooms, the point of persistent reference is the authority of the teacher as expert, which provides a more or less continuous interpretative context. A basic presupposition of teacher knowledge and pupil ignorance is a main resource from which both teacher and pupils accomplish mutually comprehensible talk. Where the teacher authority has been partly relinquished or eroded, then the resulting interplay of alternative frames of reference and relevance will be evident in the discourse."

All educational practices are based directly or indirectly on the use of informal knowledge of the students and on their competence in managing complex interactional practices. (Baker and Freebody, 1989; Furlong, 1976; Hammersley, 1977), but in classroom students are constructed as "incompetent". Baker and Freebody (1989, 271) notice: "The formal lesson is conducted as a demonstration that students do not know until taught". There are studies who have highlighted how frequently "pretending not to know" is part of ordinary educational activities (Atkinson, 1975; Atkinson and Delamont, 1976; Baker and Perrott, 1988) The students by definition "do not know" (Hammersley, 1977: 83). They receive knowledge from the teacher, who knows. If this situation is reversed the teacher's power is threatened.

This paper explores some of the effects of cultural diversity on students' participation in learning foreign

languages, examining a transcript taken from the videorecording of an Italian lesson in a high school in Sydney, Australia (Paoletti, 1990 b). The lesson is taught by a teacher whose mother tongue is English, while the pupils come mostly from families of Italian origin. Heterogeneity of class composition in schools, regarding cultural background and often language, is increasingly the norm in western countries (Paoletti, 1984; 2000). This situation, apparently peculiar, is becoming a common occurrence.

The study

The transcript is taken from a large corpus of data collected in Australian schools for a project studying classroom interactions (Paoletti, 1990a; 1990b). The video data will be analysed through a detailed discourse analysis within an ethnomethodological framework. The study highlights the problem of the usability of students' knowledge in their participation in classroom activities. In particular I will point out how the students' knowledge of Italian, in fact, hinders the smooth running of the lesson.

I will now turn to analyse a fragment of video transcript that shows how the knowledge of Italian of a student, Steven, produced problems during the lesson. The lesson videoed was carried out over two periods, one hour and a half in all. A dialogue in Italian was read aloud by some students selected by the teacher and its meaning was interpreted by the class as a whole group. Then the students formed small friendship groups, who were asked to create a dialogue and read it to the whole class at the end. Now we are at the beginning of the lesson, the teacher and the students are involved in interpreting the text:

1. ((One student is reading aloud a text in Italian. The teacher asks a question addressing the class))
2. Tacher: good, so what's happened so far, what does Sandra want to do?

3. ((Steven raising his hand starts to answer and the teacher turns towards him and allows him to continue his answer))
4. Steven: she wants to organise a party for her birthday, she telephones her friend named Chiara
5. Teacher: good, OK
6. Teacher: what is some of the meaning there, let's see, what can we check for what has happened?
7. ((The teacher re-reads aloud the paragraph))
8. Teacher: *pronto sono Sandra come va bene grazie che c'è di nuovo* that means which means what is there that's new
9. ((Steven, looking bored as the teacher finishes speaking, starts answering))
10. Steven: What ((Steven interrupts himself listening to the teacher)) what's the news
11. Teacher: Now what does Sandra want to do? She's asking Chiara something. Well Chiara, what's she asking Chiara?
12. ((after the first question Steven starts answering, looking at the text without raising his hand; then he waits for the teacher to finish asking the second question, and starts answering again.))
13. Steven: will you come over my place this afternoon?=
14. Teacher: =one at a time put your hands up
15. ((the teacher stops Steven from answering and points towards a student at the back who answers.))
16. Teacher: can you come? Nnooo,=
17. Steven: =My place=
18. Teacher: =she says - *oggi pomeriggio a casa mia*, to my house, all right, she wants to know if she can come to her house, Ruth, what does she want to organise?
19. Ruth: a party
20. Teacher: good, for her?
21. Stud. f¹⁰: birthday
22. Ruth: birthday
23. Teacher: good, Steven what does Chiara say? Can Chiara come?
24. ((Steven had been looking around, and after the teacher's question, he starts looking at the text, but Emma answers straight away))
25. Emma: no she can't come, she has to go to the dentist
26. Teacher: good and what does Sandra ask her?
27. Steven: do you wanna go to the party?
28. (Emma): if she can come later
29. Teacher: if she can come later
30. Steven: wrong, she's saying can you come later? To the dentist.
31. Emma: no she's saying can you come later?
32. Franca: and she prefers to come tomorrow morning
33. Teacher: actually you are right Steven - can you go there later?
34. ((Steven looks up at the teacher and then starts arguing jokingly with Emma who sits next to him))
35. Steven. (to Emma) (...) that means can't you go later?

(Video year 10)

That Steven has a good grasp of what is going on in the lesson, and shows some knowledge of the Italian language, is evident from this video episode, but that his participation in the lesson is far from ideal is equally evident: Steven does not wait for the teacher's permission to take the next turn at talk, is inattentive when the teacher directly questions him, but, above all, Steven's bored and restless,

and his disrespectful attitude irritates the teacher. I now analyse the passage in detail.

The teacher asks the question, *what's happened so far, what does Sandra want to do?* Steven starts answering immediately, and does not wait for teacher's permission, who anyway let him speak, ((*Steven raising his hand starts to answer and the teacher turns towards him and allows him to continue his answer*)). Classroom rules do not always apply (Erickson, 1982; Mehan, 1979a, 104), as in this case the teacher ignores the violation and allows Steven's self-selection, but later on she will sanction a similar type of behaviour. Steven's interpretation of the Italian text is correct as it is clear from the teacher's positive evaluation, *good OK*, that concludes the three part format: question-answer-evaluation, closing the sequence (Mehan, 1979a).

Later on (part of the transcript is omitted) the teacher asks a new question to the class about the interpretation of the text, *what is some of the meaning there, let's see, what can we check for what has happened?* The teacher reads aloud the Italian text to be interpreted, then she offers the English translation of the second part of the sentence that she has just read, through a literal translation, probably aiming to facilitate the understanding of each word, *that means which means what is there that's new*. Steven starts answering just after the teacher's question, but stops to let her finish, then he offers his version, *what's the news*, which is a better translation compared to that of the teacher's. Is Steven competing with his teacher? It seems the case, as confirmed by his annoyed and bored expression.

The teacher does not pay attention to Steven's reply and ask a new question to the class:

Now what does Sandra want to do? She's asking Chiara something. Will Chiara, what's she asking Chiara?

After the first question, Steven starts answering, but stops and lets the teacher finish her turn and then he promptly talks again. This time Steven does not even raise his hand, but he answers while looking down at the text book, *will you come over my place this afternoon?*=. In this way, he takes the next turn, without even giving the impression of asking for it, in contrast to the previous time, when at least he raised his hand. This time the teacher does not let it pass, recalling the rule "a speaker at a time" and ignoring Steven's reply, she re-establishes her right to control the turn at talk in the class, *=one at a time put your hands up*, and she calls another student. There is no answer, therefore the teacher repeats part of the translation, *can you come?* *No*= Steven cleverly manages to insert his turn in between the two parts of the teacher's turn, *=My place*=. Steven shows himself to be a skilled conversationalist, in fact, he is able to insert successfully his turn in between the micro pause within a turn, and to have a good understanding of the Italian text. At the same time, though, he shows a disrespect for the conversational order that the teacher is trying to establish in the class, in fact, he again self-selects and does not wait for the teacher's permission to start talking.

¹⁰ Stud.f means that a female student is speaking

In the following question, the teacher calls a specific student, *Ruth what does she want to organise?* The student's answer, *a party*, is followed by the teacher's positive evaluation, *good*, and a new question that is formulated through an incomplete sentence (Lerner, 1995), *for her?* A different student answers self-selecting saying, *birthday*, Ruth repeats, *birthday*, and the teacher evaluates the answer positively *good*.

Now the teacher asks a question to Steven, *Steven what does Chiara say? Can Chiara come?* Steven is not paying attention, he has been looking around, is the teacher trying to paying him off, catching him out? Using a question to keep the students attention is a well-known educational strategy (Mehan, 1974; Paoletti, 1990b). All students are responsible to follow during reading lessons (Heap, 1990). If the teacher had the intention of embarrassing Steven she was successful, in fact, Steven has no time to answer, since he needs to look at the textbook and another student answers in the meantime, *no she can't come, she has to go to the dentist*. The teacher accepts the answer and ask a new question without naming any student, *good and what does Sandra ask her?* Steven and another student answer, the teacher ignores Steven's answer and positively evaluates the other student, repeating, *if she can come later*. At this point, Steven openly challenges the answer that was ratified by the teacher *wrong, she's saying can you come later? To the dentist*. Here Steven not only offers a different version, but explicitly signals that the teacher's translation is wrong. A squabble between the two students follows, when the teacher talks she has to admit the correctness of Steven's interpretation, *actually you are right Steven - can you go there later?*

This conversation appears as a battle, a struggle for power between the teacher and Steven. Steven tries to annoy the teacher without openly breaking the rules, the teacher tries stopping his intrusions and embarrassing him when he is not paying attention. Steven has the last word this time and wins the match. Steven does not wait for the teacher's permission to take the next turn to talk (lines 4,10, and 13), is inattentive when the teacher directly questions him (line 22), but he has understood the content of the reading perfectly and in two cases intervenes to correct the teacher (lines 10 and 31). "*What's the news*" is an improved expression of the teachers' translation, *what is there that's new*. The second case is even more obvious and acknowledged by the teacher, *actually you are right Steven - can you go later*. The passage shows how Steven is a competent student in Italian and at the same time "a pain in the neck" in terms of school culture.

Constant challenge to the teacher's authority, resistance and lack of collaboration are evident in this passage. In an interview, the teacher expressed very clearly the form of resistance that she daily had to confront in that class.

Teacher: they're sort of passively disruptive too? They're not, it's very rare that they're really rude they're sort of, because I have classes sometimes where they're really rude, and that's it, they get really rough treatment and I send them down to the principal or something like that hh! but they're more subtly, disruptive so that their behaviour's never really, adequately it's not really sufficient enough =

...
Teacher: they don't do that swearing thing, but they're more disruptive like see, you know, one's disrupting the other they're not listening, at the back, or they all call out or something like that that's not, that's not normally considered to be serious enough to to, um, to send them to someone else because, there's a hierarchy in the school the further up you go, I'm just a classroom teacher, the further up the hierarchy you go to the principal the more stricter is considered the discipline, but, um, none of their behaviour really, warrants that, because it's not that severe, but it's continuous, it never stops.

(interview with the teacher 2)

The teacher does not have to deal with serious disciplinary problems, but experiences a constant struggle to obtain anything from the class: an attitude that, in the long run, appears more stressing and difficult to manage, than to more serious disciplinary problems, and students' knowledge of Italian appears to be a problem for the running of the lesson. Steven's knowledge cannot be used in the classroom as a resource it is instead a constant means of undermining the teacher's power. The teacher's authority is based on her superior knowledge, on which the control of the class depends (Henry, 1984: 38). Classroom relationships are constructed on the "ignorance" of the students and the knowledge of the teacher (Heap, 1985: 15).

Conclusion

In this paper I show how formal school knowledge is the basis on which teacher authority rests. Such knowledge constitutes the demarcation of the power relationship between students and teacher. In the analysis I pointed out how one student's knowledge of the Italian language constitutes both a motive and an instrument for the student to undermine the teacher's authority. In the classroom context, the students' knowledge becomes a motivation for uncooperative behaviour, and disruption of the lesson. Knowledge superiority of the teacher and teacher authority appears to be closely related. This issue has a special relevance for language teaching in a society that is becoming increasingly multicultural.

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Antrosios kartos italų kilmės moksleivių italų kalbos mokymas Australijoje

Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjama antrosios kartos italų kilmės moksleivių italų kalbos mokymosi specifika. Vakarų šalyse kultūrinė besimokančiųjų, pasirinkusių užsienio kalbos kursą, įvairovė yra įprastas dalykas. Šiame straipsnyje analizuojama kaip kultūrinių identitetų įvairovė įtakoja kalbų mokymosi procesą. Taikant etnometodologijos principus, straipsnyje analizuojamas italų kalbos pamokos vaizdo įrašas. Pamoką veda anglų kilmės italų kalbos mokytoja, o daugumą klasėje sudaro italų kilmės moksleiviai. Tyrimo metodas – diskurso analizė. Tyrimo rezultatai rodo, kad moksleivių italų kalbos žinios trukdo mokytojui sklandžiai vesti pamoką. Mokytojos autoritetas ir turimų žinių kokybė yra glaudžiai susiję dalykai. Nuo to priklauso mokytojos ir mokinių tarpusavio santykiai, bei mokytojos gebėjimas valdyti klasę. Taigi besimokančiųjų daugiakultūrinė kilmė tampa aktualia problema, kuri gali įtakoti studijų procesą.

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APPENDIX. Transcript notations

. or,	Stop or pause in the rhythm of the conversation
?	Rising intonation
!	Excited tone
()	Word(s) spoken, but not audible
(dog)	Word(s) whose hearing is doubtful
((laugh))	Transcriber description
[Overlapping utterances at this point
=	No gaps in the flow of conversation
(0.4)	Pause timed in seconds
.....	elongation

