

## **The discourse of post-graduate seminars**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Video-recordings of a range of post-graduate seminars in the Arts Faculty at a South African University were made and analyzed, in order to define the current nature of this particular form of educational practice in South African tertiary institutions. Recent demographic changes in formerly white universities are having a significant effect on the nature of interaction in formal discussion groups. Despite a common perception that at tertiary level tutors and students are equally entitled to speak and all contributions equally valued, this paper reveals that post-graduate seminars are sites of competition for the floor and that there are significant imbalances in participation by different groups in this competitive speaking environment; it is further argued that these imbalances reflect different (culture- and gender-specific) assumptions about what constitutes appropriate participation and also, to some degree, previous learned discourse patterns associated with schooling experience.

### **Discourse in the domain of education**

The identities of teachers and students and the relationships between them are at the heart of the educational system and depend on the durability of the discourse patterns used. Each brings to the classroom his/her own past experiences and expectations for certain conventionalised behaviour of teacher and learner, in accordance with historical precedents.

Traditional views of school education see the teacher as provider of new information, the model of correct performance and selective reinforcer of student efforts by evaluating utterances as relevant or good. The teacher gets power from expertise, competence and external legitimation, based in authority and is normally dominant. It is widely accepted that the rules of turn-taking in classrooms are under teacher control, with differential participation rights, open-endedness and permutability being controlled to make for a minimisation of gap and overlap (McHoul 1978). Teachers alone have the right to interrupt and to continue indefinitely without fear of any interruption (reports show over 80% talk from teachers) or to select the next student

speaker; if a student speaks, the next turn will revert to the teacher again. Non-nominated next speakers are rare and simultaneous multi-party talk is avoided, despite the view that such domination of the classroom may be excessive and counterproductive, preventing rather than facilitating discussion and knowledge sharing.

In tertiary institutions, however, ideally there is a gradual transition to joint responsibility and full participation rights, and university students have to learn new conventions, in which they supposedly have equal rights with the tutor to the floor and where their contribution is valuable and their voice is important. Honours seminars at Rhodes University are one of the primary sources of knowledge acquisition, from the point of view of student participants; courses are based on reading programmes, there are no lectures, and seminars typically aim to ensure clarity and understanding of topics through tutor-guided discussion. While knowledge generation is an important aspect of such seminars, the tutor is regarded as the main authoritative source of knowledge, with students providing input on the basis of their preparation.

In any event, during tutorials the opportunity to speak is of crucial importance to both tutor (who uses this opportunity to teach and assess understanding) and student (who needs to display knowledge and impress the tutor, as well as obtaining clarification and expressing views). Because access to the floor is highly desirable and because active discussion aids learning, one expects to find some challenges to the traditional unilateral and unidirectional authority of the teacher at tertiary levels, where students are in a sort of bargaining position and the management of turns is a vitally important negotiated process. As Allwright puts it (1990:166) "learners are not wholly under the control of the teacher, they have some freedom concerning the nature and extent of their participation in class."

Current research in this field (Beattie 1983, Bashiruddin et al. 1990, Reynolds, 1990, Allwright, 1980) reports on the situation in Britain and America, but their results are not generalisable to the South African situation, owing to the huge differences in educational training preceding tertiary levels. Rhodes University, where this study was conducted, has been open to all races since the late 70's, and in recent years there has been a significant increase in the

number of other-than-white students (40% in 1994); many of these students are products of the apartheid education system, in which huge numbers of children and generally ill-trained teachers have resulted in an authoritarian, rote-learning approach in which pupils typically have little or no opportunity to speak. Such students have an enormous adjustment to make in adapting to the new discourse conventions of erstwhile white Universities, and even after three years in the system, at post-graduate level, many of these students have not made adjustments to this new learning environment. As Corson (1993:5) states, it is the commonalities in language orientation that make communication possible, but such commonalities are roughly in inverse proportion to the social distance between people. He cites Bordieu's (1984) term 'habitus' in discussing the core dispositions, tendencies and attitudes underlying a person's behaviour, and makes the point that dominant members' habitus permeates educational systems, thereby limiting the opportunities of the non-dominant (1993:9). In this way education can routinely repress, dominate and disempower language users whose practices differ from the norms that it establishes.

The assumption that interlocutors are cooperating and sharing **the same** interpretive conventions (or habitus) is seldom justified, and in tutorials we are not dealing with such homogeneity. Evidence of significant gender differences is readily available, and Preisler (1986) and Graddol (1989) give full reviews of this field of research; evidence of significant cross-cultural differences in the Eastern Cape (South Africa) comes from research on the conversational discourse in English among Xhosa-speaking students by Peires (1992:10) who reports that speakers took significantly longer between turns than is normal for native English speakers. Frequent silences of up to 6 seconds between turns were observed, with no fillers and no evidence of any discomfort. Respondents in her research reported viewing English speakers as very rushed in their conversations.

In similar vein, Gough (1994:3) has this to say: "when tutoring once on inter-cultural miscommunication through differences in time between turns, one of my students indicated to me, politely, that this was precisely the problem they were experiencing - I was not giving them time enough to respond to questions."

Although participants in seminars at Rhodes University all use English, they do not share the same 'habitus' or necessarily all speak the same mother tongue. Significant background sub-cultural differences, constructed over the years by exposure to repeated models of certain discourse domains are bound to lead to unequal opportunities for interaction in this formal educational context, where one particular mode of discourse is favoured. Research strongly suggests that all students are not equally free to determine the nature and extent of their participation in class, and that gender and ethnicity are both very important factors in determining predisposition to engage in formal discourse (Smith 1987:22, Corson 1993:6).

This study aimed firstly, to determine the nature of typical discourse patterns in post-graduate seminars in an historically white university, and secondly to ascertain the extent to which all students (male and female, white and other than white) enjoy equal participation in these seminars.

### **THE MAIN STUDY**

The selection of a population sample which is typical, relevant and representative proved to be problematic, but few analysts can escape making use of planned stratification in order to reduce data to manageable proportions. Large samples tend not to be as necessary for linguistic surveys as for other surveys (Sankoff 1980), apparently because linguistic behaviour is more homogeneous than many other types of behaviour studied by surveys, and large samples bring increasing data-handling problems with diminishing returns. "It is crucial, however, that the sample be well chosen, and representative of all social subsections about which one wishes to generalise." (Sankoff 1980:52) (See also Milroy 1987:23)

Because the study aimed to reveal the "typical" patterns of interaction in small-group post-graduate seminars, only seminars which aimed to discuss questions relating to pre-set readings were suitable. Groups of 9 to 11 participants (tutor included) were selected which had representation from both genders and included white and other-than-white students<sup>1</sup>. In order that age could be eliminated as a possible variable, only groups in which students were between

20 and 30 years were selected. These criteria were essential if viable generalisations were to be made, and considerably reduced the pool of potential classes which might have been videotaped.

Obtaining the informed permission to record seminars from department heads, tutors and students was essential in order to allay fears that personal teaching styles or sexist practices were under scrutiny. Only 3 of the 20-odd department heads who were approached (in both science and humanities) refused permission for any video-recording.

The ethical question of just how much a researcher can inform potential participants about the nature of the research is an important one: too much detail raises awareness and interferes with the naturalness of the data. "Informed consent" (Punch 1986) was obtained in that the informants' right to knowledge about the nature of the research, and not to be exploited and manipulated was respected. But too detailed a description of exact aims was avoided, in order to obviate the observer's paradox as much as possible.

Nine groups were eventually recorded from the Arts Faculty, and of these, six (covering 6.2 hours) were fully transcribed and analyzed in terms of the model described below. Reasons for the three exclusions ranged from poor class turn-outs on the day to disruptive influences in the class which rendered the interaction atypical: one student, for example, was angered at being taped, and although the group as a whole agreed to (indeed, insisted on) being taped, her behaviour probably deeply influenced the "normal" interaction patterns on that day. There are methodological problems entailed in selecting data to suit one's needs, and the question of what is "normal" or "typical" is ever-present, but care was taken to remain objective and to select in accordance with criteria established at the outset.

A further controversial point needs elaboration: discussions in the various seminars naturally ranged across different topics, as the content varied according to the discipline concerned. While many researchers have moved away from studies that focus on structure only, in their attempt to develop more sensitive descriptions, and because topics may affect the nature of participation and the structure of instructional discourse, this study focused on the structure rather than content; the six seminars which were finally selected for closer analysis were all in departments

in the Arts Faculty: two in Psychology and Journalism, and one each in Sociology and Politics; readings in each case were based in their respective disciplines, but the teaching method was the same in every case: the tutor led a discussion of pre-set questions pertaining to the readings. All students had had the same opportunity to acquaint themselves in advance with the reading material and questions.

While an analysis of content can offer particular insights into the nature of discussion, one has to weigh up the relative merits of its inclusion in analysis: in exchange for the quality and detail obtained from in-depth analysis of content, one must sacrifice breadth and range of data, and therefore any hopes of generalizability. The primary aim of this study was to ascertain trends in participation by different groups in post-graduate seminars generally, an aim which could not be achieved by close analysis of the content of only one seminar.

### **Methodology**

The video camera, in full view of participants, was switched on a few minutes before the students arrived at their usual seminar venues. It ran silently, with no additional lighting and no camera operator. While it is admitted that the camera's presence will have had some effect, especially initially, on normal patterns of interaction, the broader trends of typical interaction are still likely to emerge, and all groups experienced exactly the same recording process, so this factor was controlled in that sense. The first five minutes of seminars were excluded from analysis in order to avoid any initial heightened reaction, but in all cases participants quickly forgot about the camera as they became involved in the matters under discussion.

### **Transcription, analysis and coding of the data**

The primary focus of this investigation was to establish floor- holding and floor-winning patterns among participants. Analysis of content of discussions was therefore sacrificed (while it is acknowledged that it holds considerable relevance in more detailed studies); only beginnings and ends of turns were closely analyzed, as well as any occasion where there was simultaneous speech or some evidence of competition for a turn. In addition, the duration of each turn, being highly relevant to overall control of the floor, was measured.

Because genuine interaction was the focus of the research, pre-written answers were not regarded as legitimate data. On the few occasions when a particular student had been given a particular question to prepare in advance of the seminar, and had written down an answer which was (typically) read verbatim from his or her notes, such turns were excluded from analysis, because this study focused on spontaneous interaction patterns.

After video-recording and transcription, all turns had to be categorised and analyzed in terms of their level of assertiveness. Each turn was regarded as a record in the data, and was coded in terms of the seminar group and speaker's gender and ethnicity. Tutors were tagged separately as tutors.

All turns were then coded in terms of whether speakers were chosen from some external source (nomination, gaze or some formal constraint) or whether they voluntarily selected themselves. If self-selection occurred, turns were characterised as either valid (in terms of the turn-taking rules of Sacks et al. 1974: 702-704) or non-valid. Valid turns, taken from an open floor, were turns occurring either after a brief pause at a transition relevance point (TRP) or those resulting from general questions, open to all.

For example, all the turns illustrated in Text 1 are valid: external selection occurs when the Tutor calls on Student A by name (line 1), and asks him a question (line 5) which requires a response (and can thus be regarded as a formal constraint). In contrast, all of the tutor turns are self-selections by the tutor, mostly by virtue of the privilege afforded by that role. The question thrown open to the white males (line 11) results in two (almost simultaneous) self-selections from B and C as a response. (In the illustrative transcripts which follow, square brackets indicate the start and end of simultaneous speech by more than one party, : represents a one-second pause and ????? represents indistinct speech).

Text 1:

1Tutor: Paul, you are almost a victim of all this.

Student A: Um, I was - I've actually got a very interesting article (talks for 63 seconds)  
it's going to create a lot of frustration.

Tutor: How does it make you feel? Do you feel frustrated? Or do you intellectualise  
this?

Student A: Not at the moment ::: you can get frustrated.

Tutor: Do you feel this whole backlash thing is a very real phenomenon?

Student A: Yes very much so especially in this country.

10Tutor: What do other white males think?

Student B: I don't know no

Student C: I think it's much harder for a woman to leave varsity and find a job ....

Simultaneity of speech, such as we see occurring in lines 12 and 13 in Text 1 does not necessarily constitute an interruption in itself; in the above case two speakers (legitimately) took up an open floor simultaneously, and a brief unintentional overlap resulted. B did not challenge C, but simply stopped speaking. Non- valid turns, or occasions where speakers try to speak when someone else already has the floor, are also not necessarily challenging: in some cases a speaker can "chime in" over the voice of another speaker simply to indicate active listening or heightened involvement rather than to effect a change in speaker. Such turns, while technically categorised as non-valid in terms of Sacks et al. (1974), had to be distinguished from deliberately violative interruptions. Non-valid turns were therefore classed into three types:

1. **Supportive minimal responses**, which, despite chiming in over a current speaker, were aimed to support and encourage rather than to intrude; e.g. the tutor's two utterances in Text 2 below:

Text 2

Student A: I was actually very happy with the distinction that you made between theory  
and practice

Tutor: sort of cleared it up a bit

Student A: Yes, because it was very :: um ::: in my mind I had a  
very definite sort of :: I mean :: I had a sort of definition of it and  
there was both positive and negative in - ah - this sort of  
definition that I had

Tutor: uhuh

Student A: you know I couldn't quite decide  
whether it was a good thing or a bad thing...

2. **Unintentional overlaps**, in which the speaker assumed a TRP had arrived, but on realising that the current speaker has not finished, immediately stops speaking; e.g. in Text 3 the student thinks the tutor's turn is over, starts to speak, but immediately stops when s/he realises it was not



a TRP:

Text 3

Tutor: ... and they still haven't solved it,

Student D: America's tried to -

Tutor: mainly because the way it's progressed. But let's not  
get into that.

3. **Deliberate interruptions**, intentionally violative of current speakers rights, aiming to steal the floor from them (more than 2 syllables away from a TRP) (West et al. 1977:523); e.g. Student B in the exchange below tries three successive times to interrupt and take the floor from Student A, who speaks on very insistently, despite extended overlaps:

Text 4

1Student A: I think that once you're in a selection programme - it's no use saying that  
once they select you ??? you've got to

Student B: obviously it's

Student A: do it the whole time. You've got to identify the people

5Student B: it's not just -

Student A: that you've selected who weren't good enough ??? On that basis alone, Okay.  
And then you've got to go on to

Student B: The thing is ???? developed

Student A: advancement and training and development. You cant just say we'll select  
you then after that

11Student B: No no I just ???

Student C: You get them out for training.

In such cases where challenge or competition arose, degrees of assertiveness were assigned in each case: a brief overlap of 3 to 5 syllables was coded as a simple "challenge", while overlaps of more than 5 syllables were coded as "persistent", indicative of strong resistance and determination not to give in on both sides. Text 4 above gives examples of a persistent overlap between Students A and B (lines 8 and 9), and Text 5 below shows similar competition between A and B, with occasional attempts by the tutor and C to get a word in edgeways:

Text 5:

1Student A:... that's when they're going to say

Student B: but that's fine that's when you're you're getting right back to the  
window dressing

Student A: ja ja exactly so someone has to do it

5Student B: ???? legislation says you have to do something  
then you say fine okay we'll do it but

Student A: It's not that simply -  
 Student C: ??????????  
 Student B: that doesn't mean you put 20% of your people in your organisation, they do  
 nothing, they have no real power and you just continue with it  
 Tutor: One of the arguments is that ....

In all instances of overt "contests" for the floor, the final success (winning the floor) or failure of the struggle was noted. In Text 3 above, for instance, B was coded three times as unsuccessful in the bid to speak, while C, who also interrupts violatively, was coded as successful. In Text 5, B's interruptions (line 2 and 9) were successful, (and conversely A was unsuccessful in retaining the floor); A's and C's interruptions of B in line 8 were unsuccessful.

Data was also tagged for instances of politeness (such as overt apologies), laughter, rapid (instantaneous) turn-taking and prolonged silences before turns.

It should be clear that categorising presupposes and involves a lot of decision making as to the criteria to be used and in terms of what to ignore and what to select (Tannen 1984:34); it is a highly subjective process, dependent on overall aims. The model selected for analysis was drawn up carefully in order to provide precision and replicability, and tagging of utterances was consistently made by the analyst in terms of that model. While it is admitted that retrospective confirmation from interactants of their own intentions, while extraordinarily time-consuming, would always be ideal in research of this nature, access to replay video facilities enabled careful scrutiny of the nature of every instance of floor- changing.

## RESULTS

**Table 1: Distribution**

Group	W	O	N	r in group	Sex of tutor
1423110	F				
2522110	M				
323229	M				
4260210	M				
5425011	M				
6515011	M				
<b>Total</b>	22	16	17	66	1

(*W* = white; *O* = other than white; *M* = male; *F* = female)

Overall there were 38 male participants (5 tutors and 33 students) and 23 females (1 tutor, 22 students). As far as the racial distribution was concerned, there were 39 white (W) students (6 tutors, 33 students) and 22 students who were other than white (OTW). Tutors were all under 40 years of age with the exception of one, who was under 50. This distribution, with females and other than whites in the minority, can be regarded as fairly typical of the demographic distribution at historically white universities at present.

### **Length of Turns**

On average (including tutors) there were 369 turns per tutorial, each of which was an hour long. Despite the skewed distribution of participants in terms of gender and race it is nevertheless interesting that 62% of all turns were male turns, with a mean time of 12.3 seconds per turn, occupying 76% of the time overall. Females averaged 6.5 seconds. (T-test: T 5.86, DF 2202, P: 0.000.) When tutors were excluded from computations, male students average turn length was 9.4 seconds compared with 5.8 for female students.

In terms of race, whites occupied 84% of the conversational floor overall, with an average turn-time of 7.61. It is particularly interesting to note that, although OTW speakers (all students, as tutors were white) had only 59 turns in the 6 seminars overall, the mean length of OTW turns was 14.01 seconds. (DF: 1; F Val: 10.55; P: 0.0012). This suggests a considerable difference between racial groups regarding the nature of turns.

The proportionate length (in seconds) of turns for the tutor and the students in each group is given in Table 2. *Place Figures 1 & 2 about here*

**Table 2: Length of Turns**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Tutor only</b>	<b>Students only</b>
<b>Length</b>	<b>% of turns</b>	<b>% of time</b>
<b>Length</b>	<b>% of turns</b>	<b>% of time</b>
19.530	43.477	86.95
224.335	25.879	46.41
314.130	25.584	86.98
424.721	64.518	47.70
56.342	13.917	15.76
622.429	34.611	97.01
<b>Total</b>	<b>30.646</b>	<b>56.94</b>

While tutors took just under a third of all turns, their turns were considerably longer than student turns (on average just under a half of all available time), leaving precious little time for the students. Figures 1 and 2 give a more detailed picture of results.

### Turn Types

Table 3 gives the overall distribution of all turn types in the data, and Figure 3 depicts the proportions of each type of turn for students and tutors respectively.

**Table 3: Overall distribution of turn-types**

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<b>Tutor</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>External</b>	<i>Name/Gaze</i>	09090
<i>Formal</i>	161102263	
<b>Self-start</b>	<i>Valid</i>	3457781123
<i>Non-valid</i>	<i>Min Resp</i>	69121190
<i>Mistaken</i>	24109133	
<i>Deliberate</i>	70323393	
<b>Totals</b>	66915232192	

Minimal responses can be regarded as a sign of cooperation and supportiveness. There were 330 altogether (15.6% of all turns), some taken as legitimate turns and some overlapping current speakers, but the vast majority of these were from the tutor, as one would expect in a situation where the tutor is supposed to encourage discussion and student involvement: 35.7% of minimal responses came from an open floor and 36.3% of overlapping minimal responses were from the tutor. This converts to a per-person rate of 19.8 per tutor and 1.1 per student. There is a similar imbalance in other signs of considerateness or concern for others: on average tutors laughed 3.2 times per seminar compared with 0.2 times per student, and tutors indicated politeness in some way 1.3 times per seminar, compared with 0.1 times per student. Such low frequency rates overall for laughter and politeness are to be expected in this formal environment, but the imbalances suggest a high level of competition among the students. Table 4 below reveals important differences in participation levels, especially between whites and other-than-whites:

**Table 4: Minimal Responses and Laughter**

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<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>OTW</b>
<b>Min Response</b>	17116429243		

**Laughter**39225110

Table 5 gives the breakdown per group of external and self-selections: of the 2192 analyzed turns 16% were external selections and 84% were voluntary self-selections, further indication of an environment requiring considerable assertiveness, where interactants have to take their chances and not wait to be given them.

**Table 5: Percentages of External Selections and Self Selections**

<b>Group</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>External selections</b>	17.6	13.65	718.328	810.515	9		
<b>Self selections</b>	82.486	486.494	381.771	289.584	1		

There was an average of 12.8 pauses longer than 2 seconds between turns, moments when nobody took an available turn. This is a further indication of high levels of competition for turns.

An analysis of all external selections revealed that an average of 74.5% came from formal constraints such as minimal pairs or reversions of the floor, leaving only 25% as turns in which students were explicitly selected to speak, either by name or by direct gaze, by the tutor - a very small amount. Waiting for the tutor to pick you might mean a very low chance of speaking at all! Formal turn types are usually consequential on previous turns, so not speaking in the first place will mean no possibility of a formal reversion. Analysis revealed that of all the formal turns, an average of 61.2% were taken up by tutors (because turns revert to tutors after students have spoken) In real terms this meant that of the 351 externally selected turns in all seminars, only 102 were for students. The only way round this problem for the student is to self-select.

Table 6 shows results of analysis of External Selections in terms of gender and race; it is clear that other-than-whites (OTW) are at a particular disadvantage in taking turns when not explicitly invited by name or gaze. (Pearson Chi-square test for gender were not significant, but for race they were as follows: Val: 6927; DF: 2; P: 0.000.)

**Table 6: External Selection Types by Gender and Race**

<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>OTW</b>
<b>Name</b>	37161934		
<b>Gaze</b>	2982215		
<b>Formal</b>	1956822835		

A close analysis of self-selections showed that 61% were valid (non-violative) and 39% were non-valid. Overall of the valid self selections, 31% were tutor turns, and of the non-valid self-selections, 22.4% were. This means that when one compares tutors with students, more of the non-valid turns were taken by students than the valid turns - reasonable if one remembers that the students have little alternative if all other legal avenues are closed; tutors do not need to break the rules, because the rules already favour them. Table 7 shows the results of an analysis of the frequency of self-selections in terms of gender and race:

**Table 7: Self Selection types by Gender and Race**

	Male	Female	White	OTW
Valid	7104	1292	4197	
Non-valid	4003	1663	878	

*Pearson Chi-square for gender: Val 6.680; DF 2, P: 0.0354\**  
*Pearson Chi-square for race: Val 1.677; DF 2, P: 0.4324*

An overall analysis of all types of verbal behaviour which may be regarded as assertive, to a greater or lesser degree (including rapid responses, challenges, deliberately violative interruptions and cases of aggressive persistence in speaking simultaneously) revealed that 47.4% of tutor turns were assertive, compared with the far higher figure of 60.9% for students. This means that nearly two-thirds of student turns had to be actively "fought for", indicative of very high levels of competition among the students. It is hardly surprising to note that 80% of tutor assertive turns were successful, compared with 53.4% of student assertive turns, despite their higher attempt rate.

Instances of winning the floor after 'aggressive' contests for the floor were particularly telling: of the 52 occasions overall, 30 were won by males, and 22 by females; in terms of race, 46 were white wins and only 6 were one by other-than-whites.

What is interesting is that a fair number of strong challenges from students were directed not at fellow students but at the tutor: closer analysis of deliberate violations revealed that 27% of all

student interruptions were directed against the tutor. Of the 40 persistent overlaps by students, 11 were directed against the tutor, indicative of considerable resistance to his/her authority.

The overall aim of this analysis was to show just how competitive this speaking environment is and how the tacit rules of discourse, which favour the tutor, also favour particular sub-groups of students. What has also been revealed is that those students who are more accustomed to the norms of discourse, (such as the males) actively seek to exploit the system to the full; the statistical evidence supports this assertion, and Texts 6 and 7 below also serve to illustrate this; (in both cases the student is a white male making persistent attempts to challenge the tutor for the floor, which the tutor strongly resists:

Text 6:

1Tutor: As such I think that all the foot soldiers do it

Student 3:                   you need to understand

Tutor: and nobody else does

Student 3:                   the position of authority so that - I mean at least you can understand it from the top of the pile ?????

6Tutor:   clarity of values, philosophy, vision, ja. I think quite a nice way to look at this dilemma ...

Text 7:

1Tutor: ... have 80% of your workforce - of of your engineers are

Student 6:                   but that's problematic because if you're looking at people coming out of varsity that's going to reflect going to reflect inequality of society so

5Tutor:   No no okay I just took that as an example, basically that's that's just the qualification

Student 6: 90% of women coming out of secretarial college of a secretarial course will be more than a third of those women becoming secretaries. And at that rate ????????????????

10Tutor:   No but that's their choice. I mean no one important -

Student 6:                   It's their choice though but - but - I I wouldn't call it a choice ..

Although statistical analyses in terms of ethnicity and gender were not reliable, owing to the lack of proportional representation among the groups, it is worth noting that males took 62.4% of all turns compared with females, and took up 76% of all the time; whites took 84% of all turns compared with members of other groups, occupying 83% of the time. Levels of assertiveness among other-than-whites were low throughout - for example, only 11% of all insistent

interruptions came from them.

## **DISCUSSION**

In interpreting the findings of this analysis, we need first to summarise what appear to be the tacit rules of discourse in seminars. While multiple recording sessions or the repeated presence of the camera in the venue would undeniably enhance the reliability of the results, it is hoped that the broader trends of interaction are still likely to have revealed themselves during the full hour of recording that took place.

Results indicate domination of seminars by tutors in every instance. Not only did they enjoy a disproportionate number of turns (111 turns per tutor versus 7.7 per student) and use up 47% of the overall speaking time, but the nature of these turns was indicative of a high degree of assertiveness: they enjoyed 61% of all formally legitimate external turns, by virtue of their role as tutors, and 30% of all legitimate open floors. Despite already enjoying this advantage, they were responsible for 22% of all violative interruptions, with an average per tutor rate of 11.7 compared with 1.6 for students. In addition tutors achieved high measures of overall assertiveness (47.4% of their turns were assertive in some way, and 80% of these were successful in winning the floor).

There were some signs of effort by the tutors to engage other participants in discussion: 36% of all minimal responses were from the tutor (giving a rate of 19.8 per tutor and 1.1 per student) and tutors laughed and overtly showed politeness significantly more often than students did. However, frequencies were very low indeed overall, indicative of relatively little concern for social niceties and negligible when compared with overall behaviour.

While the tutor domination which is revealed is hardly surprising, it is clear that some students have more success in their efforts to participate in the exchange than others. A close examination of the nature of the discourse confirms the view that a high degree of assertiveness is essential for successful seminar interaction: the low frequency of pauses longer than 2 seconds and high rates of rapid, indeed instantaneous, responses (11.1% of all turns) suggest high levels of competition to speak. External selections were relatively rare (16%) and students were only



awarded 25% of these: those who wait to be invited to speak might never speak! The pressure is on the student to self-select. However, waiting for a valid moment when one could self-select without violating a current speaker's rights also offered students relatively little opportunity to speak: tutors commandeered a third of the 61% of the opportunities for valid self-selection, which meant that for the students there was considerable pressure to interrupt if they wanted to make their voices heard. And counteracting their efforts we must note that tutors, despite the fact that they are favored by the rules, had by far the highest scores for violative interruptions and assertive behaviour.

Of particular importance is the fact that 47.4% of all tutor turns were assertive (in itself notably high), but as many as 60.9% of all student turns were - the implication is that nearly two-thirds of student turns had to be actively "fought for" - in some cases in direct opposition to the tutor, indicative of very high levels of competition among the students. Student attempts at assertiveness were successful only 53% of the time, despite their higher rate of attempt. But of these, very few came from members of minority groups (either females or other than whites).

According to Corson (1993:1) "Institutions of education often allocate power to favoured norms of discourse and thereby create discrimination and injustice for many." Language fashions, reflects and reinforces structures of domination with no apparent agents at work but it is people who have the power to use language in various ways and who give discourse its forms. While not all uses of power are necessarily harmful, we need methods for establishing when the exercise of power through language is benevolent and when it is harmful.

The implicit consensual acceptance of invisible cultural dominance rather than through visible political power is a form of hegemony. This non-coercive force is said to penetrate consciousness itself so that the dominated become accomplices in their own domination (Gramsci 1948 cited in Corson 1993:6). "In their language usages, the non-dominant adhere to the linguistic norms created by the dominant groups, while not recognising that they are being voluntarily coerced" (Corson 1993:6). This means that the non-dominant often condemn themselves to silence in public settings for fear of offending norms which they themselves

sanction. This appears to be the case in the data.

### CONCLUSIONS

In seminars minority and majority groups meet in order to communicate and learn and on such occasions the opportunity to speak is highly desirable and of crucial importance to both tutor and student. Because traditional rules of discourse are not totally inter-subjective, but are rather a matter of convention and experience, on an ideological level such discursive practices are most effective and most powerful when they are naturalised and achieve the status of "common sense", taken for granted. These ways of talking actually serve as powerful indicators of social view and group values and are "insidious metaphors for particular ideologies" (Smith 1987:24).

The shift to a participatory form and power sharing in the post-graduate classroom clearly centers on two fundamental aspects: the question of letting go (by the tutor) and of taking on responsibility (by the learners). This study reveals that, on average, tutors are over-dominant and have not learned the art of participatory discourse; it also shows that students vary in their levels of participation in proportion to their familiarity with the discourse conventions operating in this context. It is clear that it is not language *per se* which is an instrument of power, but rather that power is exercised through the production, accumulation and functioning of the favoured discourse, thereby creating disadvantage for those whose practices differ from the established norm (females and other-than-whites).

It would appear that members of minority groups at University, who are accustomed to discourse norms which differ from those operating at post-graduate level, are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to seizing opportunities to speak. Unpractised in the art of interrupting and being assertive, yet accepting this as the norm in this context, such individuals do not challenge the *status quo* and in acquiescing (silently) to this norm, they reinforce it.

This analysis of the discourse of post-graduate seminars highlights the fact that the tacit rules, inherited as naturalised and unremarkable phenomena, which greatly favour the tutor, are being challenged primarily by students who belong to majority groups, well acquainted with the

conventions. These students use challenge as their primary means of trying to re-shape the imbalance in participation, but breaking the rules is only one means of achieving change. By reconfiguring and reconstructing events, by collective reflection and free, planned consensual action in pursuit of change among students and staff, better patterns of communication could be established. If students are encouraged to acquire some sort of critical language (and discourse) awareness and understanding, the more oppressive (and subtle) forms of power could be isolated and a more enlightened treatment of minorities could be achieved.

Educational institutions are not inevitably the agencies of dominant cultural groups, and have the potential for being places where cultural pluralism can flourish, by changing some of the unjust reproductive tendencies in society.

#### NOTES

1. At most white Universities males outnumber females and whites outnumber other-than-whites; a similar imbalance is likely within any seminar group, and could in fact be regarded as "representative" of typical groups.

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