

POWER OF LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION

Meisa Fitri Nasution

Dosen Tetap Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Ekonomi Labuhan Batu

meisa.fitri@gmail.com

1. Introduction

When we speak or write, we “tailor” what we say to *fit* the particular situation in which we are communicating and, at the same time, how we speak or write *creates* that very situation. We fit our language to a situation or context that our language, in turn, helped to create in the first place’ (Gee, 1999: 11). Furthermore, it seems that we always build and rebuild reality not just by dint of the language we employ but through language as *discourse*, i.e., language used in tandem with non-linguistic cues and symbol systems, tools, actions, interactions, technologies, and particular ways of thinking, feeling, or believing (ibid.). In looking at how power is exercised through language, the capability to refer to real examples that is found, and explained texts. But have a theoretical approach that will enable to interpret language data is presented with in an exam. Among other things, one should look at pragmatics and speech act theory, lexis and semantics (forms and meanings), forms that include or exclude (insiders or outsiders), structures (at phrase, clause and discourse level), forms of address, phatic tokens, as well as structural features of speech, which may be used to exercise or establish power. And in some contexts, one will need to be able to show how rhetorical devices are used to influence an audience

According to Gee (1999: 12), when we speak or write, we build six ‘areas of “reality”’: the meaning and value of aspects of the material world; activities; identities and relationships; politics; connections; and semiotics (an in-depth analysis of these areas is not within the purview of the present study). Here, one of the aims is to show that language is social practice and not a phenomenon that functions in a vacuum; it is not an ‘autonomous construct’ (Fairclough, 1989: vi) but action, both shaping and shaped by ‘the structures and forces of [the] social institutions within which we live and function’. Moreover, it will be concerned with the construction of discourse within the classroom, where the seemingly salient participant, that is, the teacher, may negotiate meaning while still remaining the main *purveyor* of knowledge and wielder of latent power. Thus, drawing upon several teacher-students sequences, with a view to shedding light on the role of discourse in establishing the teacher’s authority over the students, as well as the power relationships attending the construction of knowledge in the classroom. It is hoped that the present study will ‘help correct [the] widespread underestimation of the significance of language in the

production, maintenance, and change of social relations of power' (Fairclough, 1989: 1), and draw the attention to how language contributes to people's domination.

2. Discourse as social practice

It is not uncommon for linguists and laymen alike to talk about the relationship *between* language and society, as if these two were separate entities that may occasionally come into contact. Yet, argument that language and society are inextricably related: 'linguistic phenomena *are* social phenomena of a special sort, and social phenomena *are* (in part) linguistic phenomena' (Fairclough, 1989: 23). On the one hand, linguistic phenomena are social, in that, whenever engages in some talk, doing so in ways that are socially determined and can be said to have certain social effects. In the case of speech acts, for example, utterances such as *I bet you six pence it'll rain tomorrow* or *I apologise* perform acts that go far beyond the meaning of the words comprising them. In fact, their force 'is *situated* in specific social and cultural practices, and is continually transformed in those practices' (Gee, 1999: 63). In other words, what has been dubbed as "discourse" is language which is 'customized in, to, and for context, used always against a rich store of cultural knowledge (cultural models) that are themselves "activated" in, for, and by contexts'. A rather telling example of how a cultural model operates is the case of "bedrooms." When thinking about bedrooms, actually "trigger" any pertinent situated meanings and cultural models regarding houses, families, relationships, and so forth. The bottom line is that meaning, even literal meaning, is not abstract but 'wedded to *local*, "*on-site*," *social*, and *cultural practices*'.

What can be gleaned from all this is that social phenomena are also linguistic, in the sense that the language activity transpiring in social contexts does not merely reflect social practices, but is a part of those practices. According to Fairclough (1989: 23), there is no symmetrical relationship between language and society; 'the whole is society, and language is one strand of the social'. At this juncture, it is of consequence to introduce another term, that of *subjectpositions*, used in Fairclough, which better illustrates how discourse determines and is determined by social structures. Consider the example below and try to clarify what a subject position is. What follows is part of an interview in a police station (found in Fairclough, 1989: 18). The witness to a robbery (W) is being asked what happened, while the policeman (P) is writing down the relevant information.

4. P: Did you get a look at the one in the car?
5. W: I saw his face, yeah.
6. P: What sort of age was he?

7. W: About 45. He was wearing a...
8. P: And how tall?
9. W: Six foot one.
10. P: Six foot one. Hair?
11. W: Dark and curly. Is this going to take long? I've got to collect the kids from school.
12. P: Not much longer, no. What about his clothes?
13. W: He was a bit scruffy-looking, blue trousers, black...
14. P: Jeans?
15. W: Yeah.

The relationship between the policeman and the witness is undoubtedly an unequal one, the way the interview develops being under the interviewer's control, who does nothing to mitigate the demands he makes in the form of questions. For example, in turn (1) the interviewer might have used a mitigated form such as *Did you by any chance have a look at the person in the car*. Furthermore, in (5) and (7) the policeman reduces questions to words or phrases—*how tall* and *hair*, respectively. As Fairclough (1999: 18) insightfully remarks, 'the sensitive nature of the situation does not override the norms of form-filling'. We should also notice the way in which the policeman exercises control over W's contributions: P interrupts W in (5) and (11), while in (9) P fails to acknowledge W's problem, asking another question instead.

How much leeway are we left with in asserting that all these features touched upon above are arbitrary? In some respects, they are but, on reflection, they are contingent upon social conditions—more specifically, upon the relationship between the "police" and members of "the public." Thus, the social structure of the social institution called "the police" involves, *inter alia*, a set of 'social roles' (or subject positions), as well as a set of approved purposes for discourse. To hark back to our example, the policeman and the witness *occupy* different subject positions, that is, they are assigned different social roles. It is by virtue of the subject positions they occupy that they are constrained to act and talk in certain ways. In this light, in the interview above, mitigated expressions and acknowledgement of the interviewee's needs are not generally expected, nor is lack of them experienced as a problem for someone versed in the conventions for such interviews.

Being a police officer or being a police witness is a matter of occupying the subject positions set up in discourses such as the discourse of (information-gathering in) interviews...And it is only in so far as people do routinely occupy these positions that the conventional personae of police officer and

witness are reproduced as a part of the social structure of policing as an institution (Fairclough, 1989: 41).

3. Discourse and power

In keeping with the discussion above, we will try to add an important proviso: power is inherent in “face-to-face” as well as cross-cultural discourse where interactants come from different ethnic groupings or communities. Moreover, power is a kind of commodity, so to speak, which ‘can be won and exercised only in and through social struggles in which it may also be lost’ (Fairclough, 1989: 43). It is this “negotiable” character of power and discourse that we will focus upon, thus laying the theoretical foundations on which an evaluation of educational discourse is to be based later on.

3.1. Power in discourse

Fairclough (1989) makes the distinction between power “in” and “behind” discourse but we will only be concerned with the former. Let us begin our discussion of power in discourse by adducing an example of “face-to-face” discourse—what Fairclough (1989: 44) calls an *unequal encounter*. The following is an extract from a visit to a premature baby unit by a doctor (D) and a group of medical students (S). A spaced dot is used to indicate a short pause, a dash a longer pause, brackets overlap, and parentheses talk not distinguishable enough to transcribe (conventions adhered to throughout this study).

1. D: and let’s gather round . the first of the infants—now what I want you to do is to make a basic . neo-natal examination just as Dr Mathews has to do as soon as a baby arrives in the ward . all right so you are actually going to get your hands on the infant . and look at the key points and demonstrate them to the group as you’re doing it will you do that for me please . off you go
- (2) S: well first of all I’m going to [()
- (3) D: [first . before you do that is do you wash your hands isn’t it I . cos you’ve just been examining another baby (long silence) are you still in a position to start examining yet ()
5. S: just going to remove this .
6. D: very good . it’s putting it back that’s the problem isn’t it eh—
7. S: come back Mum—
8. D: that’s right. OK now just get a little more room by shifting baby . er up the

. thing a bit more that's very good . well now . off you go and describe what's going on

9. S: well here's a young baby boy . who we've decided is . thirty . thirty seven weeks old now . was born . two weeks ago . un is fairly active . his er eyes are

open . he's got hair on . his head [. his eyes are [open

(9) D: [yes [yes you've told me that

(10) S: um he's crying or [making

(11) D: [yeah we we've heard that now what other examination are you going to make I mean—

1. S: erm we'll see if he'll respond to

2. D: now look . did we not look at a baby with a head problem yesterday .

3. S: right

4. D: and might you not make one examination of the head almost at square one . before you begin .

(16)S: feel for the ()

(17)D: now what [. the next most important thing .

(18)S: [er gross mo—gross motor [function

6. D:[well now you come down to the mouth don't we.

7. S: yes

8. D: now what about the mouth

What is most striking is that the doctor constantly interrupts the student in turns (3), (9), (11), (13), and (19), not simply because he is talkative, as many people sometimes are. He interrupts because he wants to control the student's contributions so as to ensure that only the relevant information is given. Let us see in what other ways the doctor's "authority" is manifested. First of all, in turns (1) and (7), he explicitly announces when the student should talk and examine and when to stop (see *off you go* and *just get a little more room*). Secondly, the doctor gives instructions as to how things should be done (see turn (3)). Thirdly, he comments upon, and evaluates, the student's contributions (*very good* in (5) and *that's right* in (7)). On the face of it, these seem to be positive features, yet there is more to it than meets the eye: the discourse employed by the doctor is interspersed with various 'techniques of control which would be regarded as presumptuous or arrogant if they were addressed to an equal or someone more powerful' (Fairclough, 1989: 45). Finally, the student is in a way "put on the spot" in (13), (15), (17), and (19), whereby the doctor tries to lead him through the stages he has not mastered.

Such examples lend credence to our contention that power in discourse embroils, as it were, two groups of people, powerful and non-powerful participants, in a struggle, discursal and social, where the former control and constrain the contributions of the latter (Fairclough, 1989: 46). On a general note, according to Fairclough, there are three types of such constraints: constraints on *contents*—what participants say or do; *relations*—what social

relations participants enter into, as this is manifested in discourse; and *subjects*—what subject positions participants can occupy. It is noteworthy that, as often as not, this kind of “manipulation,” which has far-reaching social implications, is rarely explicit; the doctor is far from directly controlling the student. ‘Rather, the constraints derive from the conventions of the discourse type which is being drawn upon’ (Fairclough, 1989: 47). Nevertheless, the doctor is, in some respects, in control, inasmuch as the onus is on him ‘to determine which discourse type(s) may be legitimately drawn upon’.

3.1.1. Power in cross-cultural interactions

What we have dilated upon are some of the techniques used by certain socially ‘powerful participants’ to control certain ‘non-powerful’ participants in unequal encounters. We have seen that students or members of “the public” (see also the first example on pages 2-3) can only operate within the constraints on what is considered ‘legitimate discourse’. But what happens when non-powerful participants come from cultural and linguistic backgrounds which are at odds with those of the so-called powerful people? In job interviews, for instance, a dominant cultural group determines whether certain people are eligible for a particular job. In Britain, it is preponderantly white middle-class people who decide on the status of members of various ethnic or cultural minorities as candidates. Discourse types vary across cultures but in such encounters it is very likely that the dominant group and its concomitant powerful discourse type will reign supreme. Let us have a look at the following extract from a job interview for a post in a library with a member of an American cultural minority (CM) (found in Fairclough, 1989: 48).

Interviewer: What about the library interests you most?

CM: What about the library in terms of the books? or the whole building?

Interviewer: Any point that you’d like to...

CM: Oh, the children’s books, because I have a child, and the children...you know there’s so many you know books for them to read you know, and little things that would interest them would interest me too.

Obviously, CM has not interpreted the interviewer’s question in the way she, as an interviewee, is expected to. She has not provided any information on her professional background and how she is going to cope with the “job exigencies” her post will entail. Yet, ‘there is no inherent reason why people should not show how their work interests relate to their family and other interests in response to a question of this sort’ (Fairclough, 1989: 48). It is regrettable, though, that interviewees are assumed to be conversant with the “dominant way” of conducting interviews. The possibility of miscommunication on the grounds of differences in discursive conventions is rarely, if ever, considered. The interviewee who does not “comport herself” in the “dominant way” is denigrated for lack of the ‘requisite knowledge or experience’, or uncooperativeness. As a

result, many people are denied jobs and other ‘social goods’ by virtue of belonging to different cultures.

3.2. Language and ideology

What we hope has become clear by now is that discourse (or Gee’s “Discourse” with a capital *D*) is ‘always language *plus* “other stuff”’, to quote Gee (1999: 17). To take further this view of discourse, we should explore what sort of relationships obtain between language and ideology. More specifically, an attempt will be made to prove that conventions permeating discourse carry, or even embody, ideological assumptions which are tantamount to ‘common sense’, as Fairclough (1989: 77) asserts, and which accentuate and sustain power relations. What needs to be made explicit from the outset is that ideology is a property of ‘the dialectic of structures and events’ (Fairclough, 1995: 71), in that ‘structures’ point to ‘events’, that is, discursal practice, ‘to be constrained by social conventions, norms, histories’.

The sociologist Harold Garfinkel (1967, cited in Fairclough, 1989: 77) writes of ‘the familiar common sense world of everyday life’, a world which is premised upon, and actually tinkers with, assumptions and expectations that are implicit, taken as gospel, and seldom formulated or impugned. Against this background, it would be nothing short of ludicrous to assert that discourse is immune to the social contexts that, on the one hand, feed into and impregnate it and, on the other, are shaped and determined by it. In order to come to an understanding of how ideology invests elements drawn upon in producing and interpreting a text; how these elements are assembled in orders of discourse; and how the latter are ‘rearticulated in discursal events’

(Fairclough, 1995: 74), we should consider the following passage from *True Story*, Summer Special, 1986 (cited in Fairclough, 1989: 79).

Driving rain almost obscured the wooded hills as I made my way along the winding roads towards the village where I had my craft shop.

As I drove over the bridge and towards the shop I was excited about Geoff’s arrival that evening. I hadn’t seen him since I’d left Hampshire for Scotland three months before.

Geoff had been annoyed. ‘I can see there’s no use my trying to change your mind, Carrie. Go ahead, move to Scotland and open your shop’.

‘We can be married next year’, I pleaded. ‘I have to take this chance of running my own business, Geoff’.

‘Just when I think you’re going to settle down, you get this hare-brained idea’. I sighed as I remembered our conversation...

There are two “messages” about Carrie: on the one hand, she is independent (with her own business), and on the other, her behaviour is in

keeping with that of the traditional woman (who pleads with her husband, sighs, and is considered hare-brained). There are mainly two *frames* that assist the reader of the text in arriving at these messages: women are entitled to a career and women depend on men to make decisions because they lack discipline and are prone to emotion. The textual elements such as *where I had my craft shop, I was excited about Geoff's arrival, I pleaded, hare-brained idea, I sighed*, even the title of the story, *His kind of loving*, 'act as cues for a particular frame, and the frame provides a place for each textualized detail within a coherent whole, so that the apparently diverse...elements are given coherence, in the process of interpretation, by the frame' (Fairclough, 1989: 80). It should be noted that texts have an interpretative character, in so far as it is incumbent on the producer or reader to draw upon her knowledge of the world in constructing the text and providing cues on which the interpreter of the text will base her own interpretation, according to the assumptions and expectations she entertains. Implicit assumptions, such as those cloaked in the seemingly "benign" words and phrases we saw above, or other features and "jingles" characteristic of the discourse of politics or advertising, 'chain together successive parts of texts by supplying "missing links" between explicit propositions, which the hearer / reader either supplies automatically, or works out through a process of *inferencing*'.

It is our contention that ideology is most effective when 'least visible' (ibid.: 85). And invisibility is achieved when ideologies and norms are brought to bear on discourse not as explicitly stated, foregrounded, markers, but as the background assumptions 'which on the one hand lead the text producer to *textualize* the world in a particular way, and on the other hand lead the interpreter to interpret the text in a particular way' (my italics). Ideology, though, ceases to exist when one becomes aware that what is implicitly stated as 'common sense' is actually conducive to power inequalities and discrimination at one's own expense. Furthermore, what can vitiate ideology and put paid to the process of its *naturalisation*, i.e., that of becoming a *status quo*, is an awareness that there is no inherent reason why women should be presented along the

lines we discussed above, or job interviews be conducted the way they are, and that '*the common-sense way of doing things is an effect of power, an ideological effect*'.

This 'common-sense way of doing things' lies at the heart of structural change and the establishment of hegemony—a power that insidiously cuts across economy, politics, and ideology, and constructs alliances by 'integrating rather than simply dominating subordinate classes, through concessions or through ideological means, to win their consent' (Fairclough, 1995: 76). To this end, the so-called 'democratization of discourse' comes into play, which involves the reduction of explicit markers of power asymmetry between powerful and non-powerful social classes—teachers and pupils, employers and employees, parents and children, and so on. Yet, as Fairclough observes, this tendency, i.e., the

democratisation of discourse, ‘appears to be generally interpretable not as the elimination of power asymmetry but its transformation into covert forms’. For example, teachers, as we shall see, may exercise control over students through indirect requests and the way they respond (physically and verbally) to their contributions, rather than through direct orders and constraints on when and how to speak. In other words, their language is a cross between democracy and hegemony, ‘[a] contradictory [mixture] of discourses of equality and power’.

4. Language and power in education

Language and power in education is an issue which many scholars have been concerned with—Heidegger, Foucault, Bourdieu, Fairclough, and others—and which will constitute the background against which the construction of educational discourse may be examined. Our age is characterised by the exercise of power through consent rather than coercion, wherein the role of language has been enhanced, only to be used as a vehicle for the production and reproduction of social order. ‘[I]t is mainly in discourse that consent is achieved, ideologies are transmitted, and practices, meanings, values and identities are taught and learnt’ (Fairclough, 1995: 219). Furthermore, living in an age of radical change, instability, and social “fermentation,” we witness the constant shaping and reshaping of cultural practices and forms of power—developments that indisputably affect and change language. Educational practices form a domain of discursive practices, which in turn are disseminated as of a particular cultural, social, and pedagogic value. At any rate, ‘to be subjected to education has meant to become disciplined according to a regimen of remembering and forgetting, of assuming identities normalized through discursive practices, and of a history of unpredictable diversions’ (Fendler, 1998, cited in Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998: 9). These discursive practices Foucault (1971, cited in Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998:

1. calls ‘procedures of exclusion’, which he divides into three categories: ‘prohibited words’, i.e., constraints on what and how to speak; ‘the division of madness’—the dividing line between reason and folly; and ‘will to truth’—the desire to learn. In this light, we can argue that the discourse of education ‘exercises its own control’ (Foucault, 1971, cited in Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998:

4.1. Discourse, social control, and the construction of knowledge within the classroom

Despite the fact that the role of education has always been held in high regard, the experience of schooling amounts to what Philip Corrigan (1991, cited in

Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998: 231) refers to as the ‘tightening of bodies’ when students are expected to raise their hands to speak, ask permission to perform a certain act, or rely on the teacher for their success or failure—a bipolar view which afflicts society at large. It is flagrantly obvious that education is a domain where ‘compliance and uniformity of thought, behaviour, and action’ are *sine quanon* elements (Coren, 1997: 29). Knowledge is by no means the sole concern of education; through discourse, students and teachers actually *enact* and, in so doing, reproduce social roles in which power is inherent. Inasmuch as knowledge is ‘a joint possession’ (Mercer, 1995: 1), it can be shared and negotiated by the participants in the educational process. As Coren (1997: 52) notes, ‘[o]ur identity, or sense of self, cannot exist in a vacuum, so our enjoyment of knowledge may depend on the nature and quality of the relationships which we allow ourselves, or are allowed, to establish’. Nevertheless, even though knowledge is the product of a collective endeavour, in which the role of teachers and students is equally important, it ends up being a “social good” dispensed by the teacher only to those who decide or are able to abide by discursal, or other, conventions. As we shall see, ‘teachers use talk to control the behaviour of children’ (Mercer, 1995: 2), which means that teachers exercise social control over pupils by dint of discourse. In Foucaultian terms, pedagogical interaction is riddled with various ‘techniques of power’ (Foucault, 1983, cited in Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998: 234-245), which we will examine by drawing upon several teacher-student(s) sequences.

4.2. Techniques of power in pedagogical interaction

In this section, we will pay particular attention to segments of data, with a view to examining the ways in which the teacher exercises control over the students through the discourse he constructs. It goes without saying, of course, that educational discourse, being a conventionalised means of negotiating and coping with knowledge and each of the subjects taught within the classroom, confers social power and authority on the teacher, while ascribing to pupils minor or, at best, secondary importance. It seems that, unbeknown to students, what is transpiring within the classroom, mainly through teacher (and student) talk, *aids and abets*, as it were, in pupils’ subordination and is conducive to the reproduction of cultural models and norms that view teachers as the legitimate purveyors of knowledge and students as members of the “*benighted* mob.” Let us now consider some instances of teacher-student talk, thus tracing the forms that “discourse as social control” takes within the context of the classroom.

Sequence 1

1. Teacher: Now . We’re going to er follow up the work we were doing last week on Present Simple. Can anyone remind us: when is Simple Present used? Maria?

2. Maria: We use it when um when . when we say what we do every day.
3. Teacher: (*pensive, then smiles*) Yeh. We use Present Simple for habitual actions, right. Any examples? I think we went through some in the book last week.
4. George: *The sun shines?* or *I never do my homework* (*laughs*)
5. Teacher: That's right George. This time you *did* your homework didn't you? Ok now I'm going to . I'm going [to
- (6) George:[no not again! I don't like () on the blackboard
6. Teacher: You read my mind, George. You're going to be the one to . to um write some sentences on the blackboard . and . and the rest of you are going to write them down, ok? Today we're going to to er learn how to form questions and negatives in the Present Simple.
7. Katia: Why do we learn all this?
8. Teacher: (*laughs*) Ah because if we didn't . learn all this . you wouldn't be able to er ask such questions, Katia (*turns her back, looking at the blackboard. George is now standing next to the teacher facing his classmates*)
9. George: Can I write . the same examples?
10. Teacher: Yes. Remember, short sentences . try to keep them simple and er and legible (*smiles*). Costa, I have no spare pen to give you. (*goes next to him*)
Ok
George . let's see some examples. Stop talking and help George (*George writes down the examples he came up with earlier*)
- (12) Katia: *She comes home twice a week*
- (13) Teacher: Is it "comes" or "goes"?
- (14) Katia: No no . She comes she er my cousin Eleana . She comes she visits me twice a week. She lives in Zografou . very near
- (15) Teacher: (*goes to the blackboard, her back turned*) OK Here are two more sentences for you George. "She comes home twice a week" and er what's the other one? ["She
- (16) Katia: ["She lives in Zografou"
- (17) Teacher: Thank you Katia . (*to a student muttering at the back*) Jimmy, I can always tell your voice you know . That's great George . Now it's it's time to . to form some questions using these examples. Jimmy? Can you please help us?
- (18) Jimmy: Hmm *Do the sun shine?*
- (19) Teacher: You take the auxiliary "do" yes . Is "the sun" singular or plural?
- (20) Jimmy: Singular
- (21) Teacher: Right. So you should say "does" instead of "do" . and [then
- (22) Jimmy: [*Does the sun shine?*

(23) Teacher: Great! Maria, it's your turn...

In this sequence, we see that the teacher is first of all attempting to establish some continuity between last week's work and the task she wishes the students to engage in (turn (1)). Prior to engaging the students in the task, she checks their understanding of the concept "Present Simple" by *eliciting* from them what she thinks are the main features they should bear in mind, and providing feedback (turns (3), (5), (21), (23)). Furthermore, in doing so, she uses the contributions of those who have studied and remember what it is they should do to remind the rest of the class who may not. It is

noteworthy that the teacher refrains from providing the answers herself, for in this way she can both check the students' knowledge and help present this knowledge as something owned by the pupils as well as herself. After all, learners should get involved with new knowledge if they want to consolidate their own understanding. And this is achieved through trying to use this knowledge on their own. 'The process of creating knowledge in classrooms is one in which, for it to be successful, themes must emerge and continue, explanations must be offered, accepted and revisited, and understanding must be consolidated' (Mercer, 1995: 68). As Mercer (*ibid.*: 18) notes, such sequences are '*conversational routine[s]*, which can only happen if everyone who participates knows the rules for "doing lessons," the conventional ways for talking like a teacher or a pupil' (my italics). In some respects, this sequence, as part of a lesson, is a kind of 'temporary detachment' (*ibid.*) from the real world at large, for it is patently obvious that, in order to learn the Present Simple, no evaluative comments (as in turns (3), (5), (21), (23)) would be required, save to attest to, and reproduce, the different social roles that teacher and students occupy.

Moreover, there are some features that, not only evidence the teacher's control over the students, but also *enact* this very control. For example, in turns (11) and (17) (*Costa, I have no spare pen to give you, Stop talking and help George, Jimmy, I can always tell your voice you know*) she implicitly (in the case of the first and third examples) passes judgement on the students' behaviour (Costas' being absentminded and Jimmy's not paying attention), while (in the second example) placing constraints on what the students should do. Cloaked with the mantle of *hints*, her exercise of control is direct and blatant, nonetheless. These are instances of what Foucault (1983, cited in Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998:

235) referring to the 'techniques of power' pervasive in the classroom calls *surveillance*. Of course, the fact that the teacher avails herself of some students' contributions in her attempt to construct her lesson, while paying little attention to the rest, is itself an *exclusionary* technique.

236)

Teachers in schools and other educational institutions use language with a variety of aims and goals. As was intimated earlier on, one of these aims is to guide their students' learning activity along directions stipulated by a curriculum, and to construct, *inter alia*, a version of educational knowledge, i.e., a metalanguage, which is deemed important for the negotiation of each of the subjects taught. Apparently, a great many teachers are more interested in laying down the 'ground rules' for classroom talk (Mercer, 1995) than in helping students develop techniques of grappling with, say, maths, history, or chemistry. Rather, we should say that this knowledge of maths or chemistry is inseparable from the discourse types it is negotiated in and constructed by. Let us take a look at the following extract from an Algebra lesson.

Sequence 2

- (1) Teacher: Dimitra, how many parts are left?
- (2) Dimitra: Eight I think
- (3) Teacher: Answer my question. How many parts are left?
- (4) Nikos: There are eight parts left.
- (5) Teacher: Yes, Nikos. Sit down Dimitra. You have tried.
- (6) Nikos: We are left with eight parts.
- (7) Teacher: We are left with eight parts. Great. We are left with eight parts.

This teacher-student exchange is known as an IRF because it consists of an *Initiation* by the teacher ("How many parts are left?"); a *Response* by the student ("Eight I think"); and *Feedback* by the teacher on the student's response ("Answer my question"). Here the teacher is asking the same question not only to evaluate the student's understanding of maths but also to *enforce* the 'ground rules' attending classroom talk ("Answer my question"). As David Wood (1986, cited in Mercer, 1995: 28) argues, teachers' questions require factual answers, which may inhibit students' intellectual activity and confuse them about what it is they should do—provide the 'correct answers' (as in the student's response: "Eight I think"), or come up with the appropriate 'formulaic reply' (see Gumperz, 1982: 133) (as in "There are eight parts left")? We should also note that students' confusion quickly fades into disillusionment through teacher's choice of constructions and what Bruner (1990: 49) calls 'deontic modal[s]' ("Answer my question" in turn (3), "Sit down" and "You have tried" in turn (5)). As Fairclough (1989: 126) notes, 'in the case of the imperative, the speaker / writer is in the position of asking something of the addressee...while the addressee is (ideally!) a compliant actor'. Conversely, were the teacher to use mitigated expressions such as "Could you please answer my question?", "Please sit down," "You can do better," in tandem with facial expressions indicating approval and understanding on his part, the social constraints of classroom teaching and its *requisite* discourse would be less acute. It is unfortunate that pupils...are expected to follow, unquestioningly, conversational 'ground rules' which may seem to them quite arbitrary because they are imposed

and never explained or justified...Trapped within the constraints of traditional teacher-pupil exchanges, learners may be spending too much time playing ‘guess what’s in the teacher’s mind’ and trying simply to ‘pass’ as good pupils, when they could be analysing and solving more educationally valuable kinds of problem (Mercer, 1995: 45, 46).

And the situation is exacerbated when it comes to teaching students who come from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds and thus follow significantly different discourses, or other, conventions. ‘There is evidence that children from some social [and ethnic] backgrounds find public interrogations by teachers initially more strange or uncomfortable than do other children’ (ibid.). This discussion, though, is outside the remit of this paper.

At any rate, one important characteristic of educational or ‘educated’ discourse (Mercer, 1995: 82) is that students ‘must make their ideas *accountable* to specified bodies of knowledge [part of which is the teacher] and do so by following “ground rules” which are different from those of most casual, everyday conversations...’ (ibid.). Nothing in the schoolroom is haphazard. Let us now content ourselves with yet another sequence, discussing some of the most common ‘techniques of power’ inherent in teacher talk.

Sequence 3

- (1) Teacher: So what is the main point of the poem? Is it literally about a man “playing with the snow”?
- (2) Alex: I’ve no idea
- (3) Teacher: I haven’t asked *you* Alex. Petro?
- (4) Petros: I think it’s . it’s about er about a man playing with the snow but . but he’s not actually playing with the snow . he’s talking about what he
[
wants
- (5) Teacher: [his desires .
Right. It’s a kind of . of *amorous* play isn’t it?
- (6) Natasha: “Amorous”?
- (7) Teacher: Yes. “Amorous play” means er it’s like . what people who are in love usually do. Let me explain . the poem is not about “playing with the snow” but er it makes um *oblique* allusions to the man’s desires and . and his er his . love for the woman
- (8) Natasha: Ah I see. I’ve read a similar one . er it was about a kid . Huck I think . who um who ran away from home because he got battered [and
- (9) Teacher: [no no That’s

- Huckleberry Finn Natasha it's a novel . not a poem (10) Natasha: I got confused (*smiles*)
- (11) Teacher: Now tell me . why do you think the poet has chosen to conceal all this? I mean . why is it that he doesn't . explicitly er explicitly state that he loves her?
- (12) Alex: loves who?
- (13) Teacher: the woman . Why does he eschew explicitness?
- (14) Natasha: Because he was . afraid maybe. He may have thought . someone will accuse him or [er
- (15) Teacher: [Great! That's right. That's exactly what "snow" and "winter" refer to . the fear of rejection . "snow" and ["winter"
- (16) Petros: [mean others' contempt and er their I mean others may accuse him of being . greedy
- (17) Teacher: You mean "lascivious" er "promiscuous" perhaps
- (18) Petros: Yeh.
- (19) Teacher: Right. Well the "winter" stands for a society that is er priggish and . (*looks at Alex, who is toying with his pen*) What does the "winter" stand for, Alex?
- (20) Alex: (*smiles*) What if I don't answer?
- (21) Teacher: (*half-jokingly*) Is that a threat? Answer my question.
- (22) Alex: I don't know I mean
- (23) OK Now what have we been discussing so far? What's the main point of the poem?
- (24) Natasha: It's about love and . and er how destructive it can be
- (25) Destructive in what respects?
- (26) Natasha: I mean er it's destructive because er people at that time . were very conservative and . cold like "winter" [and
- (27) Teacher: [You're right. People thought feelings were . were inferior to reason and . they denigrated those who "fall in love" . you see? To love someone is seen as "falling" . as if someone is falling into a trap [or
- (28) Petros: [That 's terrific!
- I've never thought it that way!
- (29) Teacher: So as we said earlier . the poem...

As is glaringly obvious, the more powerful participant, the teacher, puts constraints on the contributions of the less powerful participants, the students. Let us see the various devices or techniques used for doing this. In turn (1) the teacher is eliciting information from the students (*direct elicitation*) by means of asking a question ("What is the main point of the poem?"). Note that the teacher always elicits knowledge he already possesses, with the aim of gauging the students' understanding. We could say that this technique is very popular with

teachers who are partial to a “progressive,” “learner-centred” mode of teaching. He avoids the mere provision of factual information, giving learners the opportunity to take an active part in learning. In doing so, he can be said to ‘empower’ students (Fairclough, 1989: 235), “ceding” to them part of his power. Furthermore, we see that the turn-taking system within the classroom differs considerably from the formula for casual conversation. It is usually at the teacher’s bidding, as it were, that a student starts talking; pupils cannot self-select. ‘[T]eachers, conversely, always self-select because pupils cannot select teachers’ (ibid.: 135). And,

whereas students are limited to giving relevant answers to the teacher’s questions, the latter can do many things, such as provide information, give instructions, or make comments.

Apart from this, the teacher interrupts the students in order to *formulate*, that is, to reword, the student’s answer in ways commensurate with the subject register (“desires” rather than “what he wants” in (5)); to *reject* the student’s response (“no no” in (9)); to *elaborate*, i.e., to expand and explain a ‘cryptic statement’ made by a student (turns (5), (15), (19), (27)) (Mercer, 1995: 33); or to make *evaluative* comments (“Great! That’s right” in (15) and “You’re right” in (27)).

The teacher often enforces explicitness as a legitimate way of tackling knowledge and information. For example, in turn (20) the student responds to the teacher’s question in an ambiguous way, which induces the teacher to ask, “Is that a threat?”, thus forcing him to reword his response. It seems that discourse endows teachers with such power that they can almost always force students into a sort of ‘non-powerful’ relationship to them. As Fairclough (1989: 136) argues, ‘[s]ilence is another weapon for the less powerful participant, particularly as a way of being noncommittal about what more powerful participants say; but the latter may again be able to force participants out of silence and into a response by asking *do you understand?* or *do you agree?* or *What do you think?...*’.

The teacher can also control the topic of the discussion (as in sequence 3). What is at issue here is “the main point of the poem” (turn (1)); the students cannot go off on a tangent, talking about poems in general or novels they have read (as in turn (8)). Rather, it is incumbent on the teacher to ‘specify the nature...of [the] interaction...and to disallow contributions which are not (in [his] view) relevant thereto’ (ibid.).

5. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we should reiterate the point that has permeated this study—language does not exist in a vacuum and, as a result, determines and is determined by the very society and institutions within which it plays a significant

role. It is by virtue of this interdependence of language and society that we have attempted to show that language and power go hand in hand. We have seen that “discourse,” which is language used in tandem with a wealth of cultural institutions and knowledge, may, and usually does, reproduce cultural models and social roles that help establish power and ideology, thus contributing to the domination of some people by the socially potent. What is remarkable is that the socially potent have yet another feature in their favour: discourse. The ideological investment of discourse is acutely felt within the classroom, as our observations have shown. As social institutions, schools are not immune to forces engendering and establishing power. Of course, they have many goals—to instil values, to help students acquire skills, and so forth; yet, one of the most important goals of education is the acquisition and development of possible ways of using language. It is this very language that renders the teacher the wielder of power and knowledge, and forces the students to pay obeisance. As Fairclough (1989: 239) succinctly puts it, [i]t is the perspective of language as socially constituted and constituting that is all too often missing, leading to legitimized and naturalized orders of discourse being presented as legitimate and natural...Such ways of representing language inhibit children from coming to conceptualize it as an object of critical awareness—that is, they prevent a genuinely educational orientation to language.

REFERENCES

- Bruner, J. 1990. *Acts of Meaning*. USA: Harvard College.
- Coren, A. 1997. *A Psychodynamic Approach to Education*. London: Sheldon Press.
- Fairclough, N. 1989. *Language and Power*. London: Longman.
- Fairclough, N. 1995. *Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Longman.
- Foucault, M. 1980. *Power / Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings*
by Michel Foucault 1872-1977. New York: Pantheon.
- Foucault, M. 1983. The subject and power. In H. L. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow

(Eds.), *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics* (2nd ed., pp. 208-226). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Gee, J. P. 1999. *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis. Theory and Method*. London: Routledge.
- Gumperz, J. J. 1982. *Discourse strategies*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Mercer, N. 1995. *The Guided Construction of Knowledge. Talk amongstteachers and learners*. Great Britain: Cromwell Press.
- Popkewitz, T. S. & Brennan, M. 1998. Restructuring of Social and Political Theory in Education: Foucault and a Social Epistemology of School Practices, In Popkewitz & Brennan (Eds.). 1998. *Foucault's*