



Voices, grins and laughter in the lecture room

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the listening behaviors of students in a university lecture hall for cues of 'active listening' and/or cognitive/emotional engagement. Claims that the lecture format intrinsically lacks opportunities for learning since there is no (verbal) student response are examined on the basis of video data of a lecture on the first day of term in a large lecture theater seating 300+ students. We show evidence of the intricate coordination and synchronization of individual and multi-listener responses with emerging units of the lecture-in-progress and conclude that there is no research-based ground to support the aforementioned claim. Laughter, whisper voices, grins, and prosodic cues are part of the data that should be addressed to advance our understanding of complex participation modes in formal institutional settings.

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1. Introduction

This paper started out as an investigation of the notion that there is no evidence of active engagement or cognitive activity on the part of students during institutional events of the type 'straight lecture'. We address the issue on the basis of detailed analyses of video data recorded during an introductory lecture on the first day of term in a large university lecture theater seating approximately 300 students. In the course of our investigations the emphasis shifted to include linguistic phenomena and multimodal semiotic resources that are more generally relevant to the coordination and synchronization of interactional behaviors. Our investigation is in the nature of a case study in so far as it focuses on just the one lecture, but since this lecture is also part of a larger corpus we will occasionally claim more general relevance for phenomena that we have encountered (and described) elsewhere. Our general aim is to make some progress toward articulating what relevantly happens in the lecture room and what are appropriate ways to describe and interpret the discourse complexity commonly found there.

In task-oriented multiparty events such as university lectures there is a lot going on *simultaneously*. Questions with respect to the selection of data and their interpretation are therefore notoriously difficult to resolve. What needs to be done, we suggest, is that we scrutinize the lecture room interface for online signs of attention and cognitive engagement on the part of individual students and/or groups of students. Detailed observations of the coordination and synchronization of the interactional behaviors of participants might enable us to make valid inferences about the extent to which students are actively processing the lecturer's input (cf. Goodwin, 1984 for a similar recommendation with respect to the interactional behaviors of story listeners).

In this paper we zoom in on the gray area of backchannel communication: the synchronized verbal, nonverbal and paralinguistic behaviors of the students attending the lecture. We also follow prosodic and deictic cues in the lecturer's

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monolog that signal complex changes in footing (Goffman, 1979, 1981) on the part of the speaker. The many voices and instances of ‘double-voicing’ that are in evidence (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986) index modes of dialogic involvement that, we will argue, can mediate both emotional engagement and cognitive activity on the part of the listening students (cf. Wortham, 1994).

In more technical terms the phenomena we address involve structural features of discourse production and discourse processing (Polanyi & Scha, 1983) in formal task-oriented multiparty settings. The potential of discourse genres and speaker/hearer roles to be recursively embedded means, for instance, that lecturers may briefly shift to a conversational, narrative or theatrical stance inviting their audiences to change their footing accordingly – without breaking the dominant lecture frame.

This paper, like its twin in this issue of *Linguistics and Education* (Bannink & Van Dam, 2013), was motivated by our experiences as participant observers in actual lecture events that were part of the project reported on in section 3. We noticed discrepancies between what is claimed about the lecture as a pedagogical genre in mainstream educational research literature and our in situ observations. In line with the trend to re-explore traditional practices (Maley, 2004) we decided to undertake detailed investigations of the lecture room interface in order to reassess the constraints and affordances of the university lecture as a teaching/learning environment.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical orientation of our investigation is interdisciplinary. Departing from a socio-cultural, *situated* view of learning as mediated, discursively constructed in social situations and communities of practice (cf. Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1986) we draw on insights from conversation analysis, discourse analysis and pragmatics as well as the literature on genres, ethnography of speaking, speaker/hearer configurations and communicative practices (e.g. Duranti & Goodwin, 1992; Goffman, 1974, 1979, 1981; Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004; Hanks, 1996; Hymes, 1964, 1972; Kendon, 1967, 1992).

The lecture as a genre has a long history in the study of rhetoric, but our main concern in this paper is not with persuasive techniques or effective argumentation on the part of the speaker. We investigate claims about the lack of students’ attention and cognitive engagement during lectures. Therefore, our main focus will be on *listener* behaviors and what can be inferred from them and on the intricate *coordination* between speaker and listener behaviors. Since we monitor the processing of the lecturer’s input in multiple screened-off student domains, there are fruitful correspondences to be explored with story recipients and with the novel as a genre that also exploits *dialogic* modes of engagement (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986). Bakhtin’s distinction between ‘authoritative’ and ‘internally-persuasive’ discourses was picked up and further developed by educational researchers such as Kamberelis (2001), Matusov (2009) and Wortham (1994, 2001). It serves as a metaphor for ways in which students may internalize and appropriate the voices that are dialogically modeled for them on their way to becoming academic scholars and practitioners.

In order to account for hybrid discourse forms and emerging discourse complexity in the course of a lecture, *structural* features of institutional multiparty interactions need to be systematically addressed. This requires a discourse model that includes nonverbal, paralinguistic and prosodic features of talk as relevant data and is able to account for the fact that genres and discourse contexts can be mutually and recursively embedded, invalidated or stacked on a moment’s notice (Bannink & Van Dam, 2006; Polanyi, 1988; Polanyi & Scha, 1983; Van Dam, 2002). In the context of the present paper prosodic cues are especially important in signaling changes in footing (Goffman, 1979/1981) that cast the students in the role of actors/speakers in off-record or virtual discourse domains.

3. About the data

Over the past few years we have collected a corpus of video-taped lectures and seminars taught by experienced professors and lecturers at the University of Amsterdam. The work was done within the framework of the project *Competences in Context*.² The lectures cover a wide range of subjects: Physics, Mathematics, Law, Philosophy, Foreign Languages, Sociology, Psychology, History, Language and Culture. For some recordings we used simple camcorders; others were made with two professional cameras. One camera was focused on the lecturer; the other on (different sections of) the audience. The resulting tapes were brought together in split screen mode, so as to enable us to monitor the synchronization of interactional behaviors.

A note with respect to ethical dimensions of the recordings is in order. The students in the lectures were informed beforehand that the tapes would be used for research purposes and for the website that is being developed as a learning tool for new members of staff at our university (see also Bannink & Van Dam, 2013). They were invited to change seats and move outside the reach of the camera if they objected to being filmed or to the footage being used in academic publications.

We interviewed the professors before and/or after the lectures and whenever possible – in between lectures – also interviewed some of the students. These were open interviews. Apart from the opening question that enquired after any memorable or unexpected events, decisions about what was worth topicalizing were left very much in the hands of the interviewees.

² For more information about this project, see Bannink and Van Dam (2013), section 4.1. We thank the University of Amsterdam and in particular the ICTO board for providing the funds that enabled us to carry out this project.

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