Discursive practices in family dinner talk and classroom discourse: A contextual comparison

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

The present study investigates the interplay of communication, socialization practices and educational opportunities by reconstructing the discursive practices of the same children in different contexts: family dinner talk and classroom interaction. From a rich corpus of naturally occurring interactions of eleven children before and after school enrollment, two cases are selected for presentation. The microanalytic reconstruction demonstrates how discursive practices are socio-culturally situated and differ in terms of communicative genres, topics and communicative demands, both between families and contexts. When the teacher does not make communicative investments to bridge divergences in teacher-student interactions, children lack the external resources necessary for utilizing discourse as a means of learning, both from a microgenetic and ontogenetic perspective.

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1. Introduction: discursive practices in family and classroom discourse

Lukas is very smart. (-) he will go far. ((...)) and apart from that he is extremely bright, clever, works independently (-) rarely asks for help, he is doing very well. (Teacher B)

lukas ist absolut PFIFFig dabei. (-) der wird seinen weg machen. ((...)) ansonsten ist der äußerst AUFgeweckt, CLEver, arbeitet SELBSTständig, (-) fragt selten, der ist gut DRAUF.

well there are children here who can actually follow along quite well. (xxx) and (-) have a sense of injustice; that is whereas some of them if such as Patrick take things at face value - they are able to scrutinize things. ((...)) he loses interest in things much too fast- umm; (.) - then he is disruptive- he says I'm am finished- I'm not in the mood anymore- he can't concentrate- then he whistles- he doesn't work properly does he, (-) but I don't have the feeling that he doesn't understand. (Teacher A)

also es gibt hier kinder die DURCHaus wirklich RICHtig gut MITdenken können. (xxx) und (-) haben auch so_n UNrechtsgefühl; also so:: wenn EInige hier wenn:: wie bei patrick der so an der OBerfläche bleibt- können DIE das noch so_n bisschen mehr hinterFRAgen noch so. ((...)) der hört VIEL zu schnell auf- ä:hm; (.) da LUST dran zu haben- dann STÖRT er- dann sagt er bin FERtig- hab keine LUST mehr- der kann sich schlecht konzenTRIERN- der PFEIFT dann- der arbeitet nicht Ordentlich_ne, (-) also ich hab NICHT das gefühl dass der das nicht verSTEHT.

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In these interview extracts two teachers comment on the performance of Lukas and Patrick, two boys just starting school. Both teachers perceive the two children's learning participation as a person-bound property, not as an outcome of their own interaction with the children. In both cases the perceptions are associated with ascriptions of willingness and competence. Whereas Lukas is seen as bright and clever, Patrick is considered erratic and unreliable. How do the teachers arrive at these assessments? The present article views such assessments as manifestations of an interactively established match or divergence between pupils' discursive practices and teachers' institutional expectations. Thus, the objective is to investigate how, in the course of the interactional histories of teacher–student dyads, interactional patterns and corresponding expectations with regard to communicative demands and competence solidify. Consequently, the intent is to explain (the lack of) school achievement in terms of being included or excluded as a legitimate member of the classroom discourse community. In order to investigate why some pupils do not succeed in fulfilling the communicative demands established by the teacher, the pupils' communicative experiences in their families are also reconstructed. This approach requires careful attention: variance in children's familial discursive practices is not used as an *explanans* for educational inequality in itself; instead, it is the *interactive constitution of a match or divergence* which is assumed to be crucial for classroom discourse participation and – in the long run – for school achievement.

Why are *discursive practices* relevant to classroom discourse? How can they provide an explanatory account of educational inequality? Discursive practices are a key competence at school because they enable children to utilize classroom discourse as a means of learning (Cazden, 2001; Michaels, O'Connor, & Resnick, 2008). Participation in classroom discourse not only requires abilities and knowledge with regard to institutional orders of turn-taking and turn design (e.g. McHoul, 1978) but also entails mastering globally organized discourse activities in production and comprehension. Classroom discourse is largely composed of explanations, instructions, descriptions and arguments – discourse activities which serve the purpose of handling topics transcending the immediate here and now and which are an important means of knowledge transmission and construction. Linguistically, these verbal activities require structural abilities (Nguyen, 2012) to organize speech at an above-sentence level (Hausendorf & Quasthoff, 1996).

In the present context, the term *discourse* in the expression 'discursive practices' refers to such global structures. Interlocutors do not exchange sentences; instead, their utterances create contexts above and beyond sentences (Quasthoff, 2011). With regard to their sequential structure, the aforementioned discourse activities can be conceptualized as *discourse units* (Houtkoop & Mazeland, 1985; Wald, 1978), i.e. as chunks of conversation which are clearly marked as different from the surrounding turn-by-turn talk. Their internal sequential realization follows a specific structural pattern for each type of discourse unit. Furthermore, discourse units establish special conditions for the turn-taking mechanism. Generally, the participant responsible for the performance of the discourse unit is assigned the role of "primary speaker" (ibid.) and holds the right to the floor until the closing of the discourse unit is interactively established.

The term *practice* refers to a praxeological – as opposed to a structuralist – understanding of discursive activities. Rather than being seen as a system, language, or, more precisely, "talk in interaction" (Schegloff, 2007) is viewed as a socially and culturally situated practice. From this perspective, discursive practices can be conceptualized as communicative genres, i.e. as procedural solutions for recurring communicative problems (Bergmann & Luckmann, 1995). Genres are used as an orientation framework and serve to organize, routinize and render (more or less) obligatory solutions to recurrent communicative problems. They are also crucial for the *constitution of contexts* of interaction. By realizing a genre in a particular way, interlocutors can frame the situation at hand as 'private' (e.g. by telling a story of personal experience) or as 'formal' (by providing an instruction). Thus, the realization of genres is an important means for constituting different contexts, such as family dinner talk and classroom discourse (Heller, 2011).

From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, genres are part of the "communicative budget of a society" (ibid.). As access to the latter is socially stratified, individuals and even groups possess different knowledge of communicative genres. For many years, research in sociolinguistics and ethnography has considered communities in terms of their communicative practices and resources as reflected in the terms 'speech communities' (Hymes, 1974), 'communities of practice' (Nguyen, 2012; Wenger, 1998) and 'discourse communities' (Young, 2008). Discourse communities share and value different repertoires of communicative genres. Conversely, repertoires of genres are constitutive of social milieus. On this basis, discursive practices can be understood as cultural practices (Günthner, 2009).

School enrollment is assumed to represent a point in time when the affinity or divergence between familial discursive practices and institutional demands is consequential for learning receptivity and general attitudes towards school. Pioneering studies on such (mis)matches have been conducted by Philips (1972), Gumperz (1981), Heath (1983) and Michaels and Cazden (1986). More recently, Lareau has compared communicative practices in family and school, taking taken up Bourdieu's line of thought. In her ethnography of twelve black and white working and middle class families, she describes internally coherent cultural repertoires of child rearing, which include a certain attitude towards language. According to her observations, argumentation and reasoning are primarily performed by middle-class families, whereas working-class families typically rely on directives and use language primarily as "a conduit for social life" (2003, 146). Teachers promote reasoning and thus favor discursive practices valued by middle-class families. In Bourdieu's terminology, these findings suggest that discursive practices are a constituent part of the linguistic habitus, as elaborated by Hanks (1996, 246):

> "Analyzed as modes of practice, they [genres, author's note] are among the best examples of habitus as a set of enduring dispositions to perceive the world and to act upon it in certain ways. Genres are neither rigid formal types that can be repeated indefinitely as tokens, nor are they formless, purely momentary conjectures. Rather, they embody just the kinds of schemes for practice that constitute the habitus. And like it, they are unequally distributed among agents in any social world. For access to certain genres involves power and legitimacy and serves as a form of sociocultural capital."

Such enduring dispositions to interpret and act upon the world are interactively acquired in socialization. In general, language socialization can be regarded as "the process whereby children and other novices are socialized through language, part of such socialization being a socialization to use language meaningfully. Language socializes not only through its symbolic content but also