Arridence and novility: Explicitness as a function of social inequality

Brianna Avenia-Tapper *

New York University, 239 Greene St., New York, NY 10003, United States

A B S T R A C T

Explicitness, or the degree to which a text or utterance retains its original meaning across space and time, differs by the amount of capital possessed by the speaker/writer (Bernstein, 1962, 1971; Hawkins, 1969; Hemphill, 1989; Lawton, 1963). Differences in explicitness are hypothesized to be a factor that contributes to academic achievement gaps between higher and lower income students, and thus demand investigation (Bernstein, 1971; Scarcella, 2003; Schleppegrell, 2004; Snow & Uccelli, 2009). Code theory, created by Basil Bernstein, posits that differences in explicitness are caused by different 'codes' that arise from different relationships to our material base. Code theory has been criticized for its lack of attention to agency (Harker & May, 1993), its middle class bias (Jones, 2013), and the paucity of empirical evidence for the social factors hypothesized to create the contrasting codes (Hemphill, 1989). In this article, I present an alternative explanation for this phenomenon that addresses each of these concerns. I argue that under Grice's (1989) maxim of quantity, the linguistic choices associated with explicitness depend on assumptions about the knowledge of one's interlocutor: assuming more knowledge on the part of one's interlocutor (what I call an 'novle' habitus) reduces the need for explicitness, while assuming less knowledge on the part of one's interlocutor (what I call an 'arrident' habitus) creates a greater need for explicitness. I further argue that habituation to different patterns of assumption about interlocutor knowledge is a function of the degree to which an individual has been socialized to enact obedience. In connection with previous sociological research that links positioning within a stratified social system to differences in attitudes toward obedience, this argument suggests that differences in explicitness are a symptom and component of unequal distribution of capital. This explanation has implications for both closing capital-related achievement gaps and illuminating potentially negative, yet rarely discussed, effects of bias toward practices of dominance in our educational system.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

The *explicitness* of a given text or utterance is the degree to which the text or utterance retains meaning across multiple physical and temporal contexts (Bernstein, 1971). This abstract quality of text or utterance can be operationalized as the ratio of deictic terms to total words. Deictic terms are words such as 'it', 'here' and 'this', "which can be interpreted only with reference to the speaker's position in space or time" (Schleppegrell, 2004, p. 8). More explicit language use, involving fewer deictic terms relative to the total number of words, is helpful for accomplishing many communicative tasks common in school (Scarcella, 2003; Schleppegrell, 2004; Snow & Uccelli, 2009), and using language more explicitly is hypothesized

* Tel.: +1 917 561 5576.
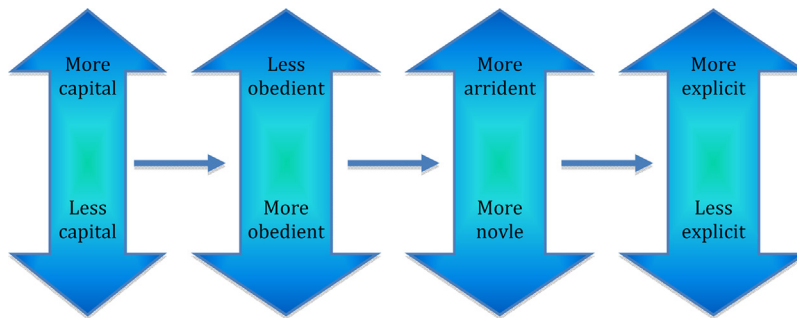E-mail address: Bat269@nyu.edu

Fig. 1. Relationship between social hierarchy, obedience, assumptions about interlocutor knowledge, and explicitness.

to facilitate academic achievement (Bernstein, 1971; Scarcella, 2003; Schleppegrell, 1998, 2004; Snow & Uccelli, 2009). However, when the communicative context is held constant, students' use of deictic terms varies by the amount of capital, or power, possessed by the students' parents. Studies conducted in the 20th century reported that students from families in which parents had relatively more education produced comparatively more explicit text and utterance, on average, than children of parents with relatively less education, on average (Hawkins, 1969; Hemphill, 1989).

In the mid-20th century, Basil Bernstein (1962) pioneered exploration of this link between capital and explicitness, and developed 'code theory' to explain the relationship. Code theory attributes documented capital-related differences in explicitness to differences in agents' relationship to our material base. Bernstein argued that "working class" families, with less education and lower incomes, worked more closely with our material base (raw goods), than did "middle class" families, and thus that less explicit language was more useful for "working class" speakers and writers. Code theory has been criticized for its ambiguous definition of explicitness (Jones, 2013), its deficit perspective (Grainger, 2013; Jones, 2013; Labov, 1972; Rosen, 1974), its assumption that individuals follow rules (Bisseret, 1979; Dittmar, 1976; Harker & May, 1993), its lack of empirical support (Hemphill, 1989; Jones, 2013), and its dependence on an outdated understanding of class structure. In this paper, I present an alternative explanation for the relationship between capital and explicitness that avoids each of these issues.

I argue that when the communicative context is held constant, differences in explicitness are *symptoms and components* of unequal distribution of power/capital within society, regardless of differences in agents' relationship to our material base. I first argue that under Grice's (1989) maxim of quantity, use of the linguistic resources associated with explicitness depends on habits of assumption about interlocutor knowledge. I name different habits of assumption 'arridence', meaning the habit of assuming *less* knowledge on the part of one's interlocutor, and 'novility', meaning the habit of assuming *more* knowledge on the part of one's interlocutor. I next argue that the assumptions about interlocutor knowledge to which we become habituated depend on the degree to which we are socialized to enact obedience. Specifically, a more arrident predisposition is antithetical to obedience, while a more novle predisposition is conducive to obedience. We are more likely to obey a directive if we believe the person issuing the directive to be knowledgeable about the situation at hand. We are less likely to obey a directive if we believe we possess more relevant information than the person issuing the directive. Finally, I argue that the degree to which we are socialized to enact obedience is a component of our habitual reification of social inequality. Fig. 1 illustrates the proposed relationship between social inequality, obedience, assumptions about interlocutor knowledge, and explicitness.

Theoretical framework

Functional perspective on grammar

Like Bernstein, I take a functional perspective on language and assume that grammatical choices are made in order to construct different types of meanings (Halliday, 1977; Hasan, 2005). This theoretical framework differs from the perspective that differences in language use between communities are evidence of differently valued codes in use for making the same meaning (Bourdieu & Thompson, 1991). Instead, a functional theory of grammar implies that significant between-group difference in the use of a particular grammatical form suggests a significant between-group difference in the importance of the meaning making potential of that grammatical form. In this way, a functional theory of grammar understands grammatical forms to work similarly to lexical items. We assume that different lexical items have different probabilities of use in different contexts because we assume that lexical items have meaning. For example, if the word 'leaf' is used often in one science class but not in another, you might hypothesize that one class is probably studying plants and one class is probably not studying plants. Similarly, under a functional theory of grammar, greater use of deictic terms in one community versus another suggests that one community has a greater need for the meanings constructed with deictic terms.