Show that you know – Explanations, interactional identities and epistemic stance-taking in family talk and peer talk

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Previous research has pointed to students' diverging access to academic discourse practices outside school while lacking empirical insights into how such differences in communities' communicative repertoires are interactionally brought about. Focusing explanatory discourse, the present study addresses this issue by analyzing the local sequential negotiation of interactional identities and epistemic stance-taking in preadolescents' family talk and peer talk. Drawing on microanalysis informed by conversation analysis and discourse analysis, it examines how interactants establish local relevance for explanations to occur or not occur and demonstrates that the interactional identity of an explainer as well as knowledgeable stances may be readily adopted as well as rejected. Findings demonstrate that for some children, explanatory discourse in talk with intimates is linked to the interactive disclosure of not-knowing, irrelevance and inability to explicate knowledge for others. The findings indicate that being able to provide explanations in classroom talk might also be a question of identificatory compatibility with regard to students' out-of-school interactional experiences and identities.

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1. Introduction

As outlined in the introduction to this special issue, school confronts students with the challenge of actively participating in academic discourse practices, i.e. in communicative practices which serve institutional purposes of showing, transferring, negotiating, and constructing knowledge. In classroom interaction, students have to display that they *know* something – mostly in response to teachers' questions. They have to verbally explicate what they know about the meaning of specific words, about facts, circumstances and causal relations in different domains. The capability to participate in such interactional exchanges also involves the task of "representing the self" (Snow & Uccelli, 2009, p. 122) as a member of a knowledge-constructing community. As Schleppegrell (2001) points out, students are expected to adopt an authoritative stance that casts them as assertive authors who presents themselves as "knowledgeable expert[s] providing objective information" (Schleppegrell, 2001, pp. 444–445). This aspect is referred to as the "socio-symbolic function" of academic language in the introduction of this special issue (Heller & Morek, in this issue). Thus, issues of identity construction come into play

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and may lead to resistance when 'talking academically' is concerned (Benwell & Stokoe, 2002; Kirkham, 2011; Michaels, O'Connor, Williams Hall, & Resnick, 2013; Preece, 2009, 2015; Rampton, 2006; Wortham, 2006). These issues are assumed to hold particularly for students whose discourse practices outside school – with peers and family members – are in marked contrast to those of schooling (Michaels et al., 2013, p. 37; Preece, 2009, p. 50; Snow & Uccelli, 2009, p. 113). We know – from extensive research into students' language socialization in their communities – that children's access to academic discourse practices outside school differs sharply (Heath, 1983; Michaels, 1981; Morek, 2014; Quasthoff & Heller, 2014). According to practice based approaches, communities of practice (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992) – such as families or groups of friends – are constituted by the repertoires of communicative genres they draw on (Günthner, 2009; Heller, 2014; Orlikowski & Yates, 1994) to solve the communicative tasks they habitually set up for themselves. Previous work has demonstrated that discourse activities pertinent to schooling, such as explaining, problematizing and debating topics that transgress the here-and-now, are an essential part of some families' repertoires of communicative practices but not of others' (Heller, 2012; Lareau, 2003; Morek, 2012). Little is known, however, as to the actual interactive procedures that help to practically bring about such differences in the genre repertoires (Günthner, 2009) of different groups. Previous research on the challenges of academic discourse has suggested that different communities might associate different values with discourse practices geared to the display and transfer of knowledge. Snow and Uccelli (2009, p. 128) assume that some communities would "value the accumulation and display of knowledge for its own sake" even in informal interactions among intimates. Michaels et al. (2013, p. 10) point out that some communities would consider 'accountable talk' as "overly didactic or even impolite or arrogant" (Michaels et al., 2013, p. 10). Yet it has not been answered in previous research *how* exactly communicative practices of knowledge transfer come to be interactively accomplished as corresponding (or not corresponding) to the values and identities of particular discourse communities. The present study thus aims at examining how participants locally construe providing knowledge and adopting knowledgeable stances as (ir)relevant and (in)appropriate tasks of their everyday talk. This question is addressed by means of fine-grained sequential analyses of family talk and peer talk of German preadolescents. In doing so, the study focuses on explanatory discourse – as explaining represents a prime genre of discourse practices at school (Morek, 2012). Drawing on sequential analyses informed by conversation analysis and discourse analysis, and directing attention to details of epistemic stance-taking in conversation, the study thus allows for what Bolden (2009, p. 141) called "a front-seat view of how interactional agendas are made visible, discerned, and negotiated on a moment-by-moment basis". By including not only family talk but also talk among children, the study acknowledges recent insights into peer talk's important role in children's socialization (Goodwin, 2006; Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2012) and their development of discourse skills (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2004; Cekaite, Blum-Kulka, Grøver, & Teubal, 2014; Zadunaisky Ehrlich & Blum-Kulka, 2010).—-

The aim of the study is twofold: First, it aims at micro-analytically reconstructing interactive procedures by which members of individual discourse communities locally point out to each other that explicating knowledge for one another represents a communicatively relevant discourse practice at a certain point within a particular situated activity – or a less relevant one. How exactly do families and cliques of children make 'explaining something to someone' their local conversational problem? How do they abstain from doing so and instead, navigate out of explanatory talk? Secondly, the study aims at examining how the potential of explanations to position oneself as a knowledgeable person within a local conversational context is used or left unexploited.

The following section (Section 2) first gives a brief overview of what interactive structures are characteristic of explanatory discourse and outlines how the interactional identities of explainers and explanation-addressees are negotiated among participants (2.1). Secondly, it introduces the concept of epistemic stance-taking (Heritage, 2012a, 2012b; Mondada, 2013) and points out its analytic relevance for describing the discourse practice of explaining (2.2). Section 3 presents the data and sketches the analytic account chosen to analyze explanatory sequences. Section 4 first focuses on family talk and demonstrates how interactional identities of explainers are readily adopted or rejected and how local relevance for an explanation to occur is (re)established or downgraded. It then turns to peer talk and shows how explanations are locally initiated and collaboratively ratified or playfully navigated out of. The study's consequences for students' learning of academic discourse practices are discussed in the final section (Section 5).

2. Providing explanations in informal talk

From a pragmatic perspective, explanations in mundane conversation can be regarded as interactive sequences in which participants provide "a response to a problematic state of affairs" (Blum-Kulka, Hamo, & Habib, 2010, p. 441) that has been made relevant by the participants in the ongoing talk. Explanations provide answers to the *why*, *how*, or *what* of concepts, conditions, actions or events (e.g., Aukrust, 2004; Barbieri, Colavita, & Scheuer, 1990; Beals, 1993; Blum-Kulka et al., 2010; Morek, 2012), i.e. they provide verbal explications of meanings, features, logical or functional relations. Therefore, they are usually linguistically complex in the sense that they involve the construction of coherently structured units above the sentence level (Hohenstein, 2006; Morek, 2012). If successful, explanations result in comprehension and knowledge gains on the part of the addressee.

Interactionist studies have empirically reconstructed the specific communicative tasks participants have to sequentially and jointly deal with when co-constructing explanatory "discourse units" (Wald, 1978) within talk-in-interaction. Notwithstanding the actual type and topic of an explanation, the following five interactional jobs have been identified