Investigating casual conversation: A systemic functional linguistic and social network model of analysing social reality

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Investigating casual encounters: A systemic functional linguistic and social network model of analysis

> Language and society – or, as we prefer to think of it, language and social man – is a unified conception, and needs to be understood and investigated as a whole. Neither of these exists without the other: there can be no social man without language, and no language without social man. (Halliday, 1989:12)

Abstract

This research is concerned with the study of language and the social order. Working within the systemic functional theory of language, and utilising the concept of a social network to model the social order, the primary aim is to put on display the relationship between the linguistic system and social order, between language and culture. Systemic functional grammar (Halliday, 1995; Halliday and Hasasn, 1985/9; Halliday and Matthiesen, 1997; Eggins and Slade 1997), with its emphasis on language as a social semiotic, is used to analyse the language used by a group of four women engaged in casual conversation in a small Australian island community. Here the analysis reveals how the women negotiate their social reality when speaking to each other. It shows how their social relations are shaped within a text (Hasan, 1996), and explores the notion that, despite the seemingly trivial, unconscious nature of casual interactions, power and solidarity are continually being negotiated by the participants (Halliday, 1994; Eggins and Slade, 1997). More specifically, this research examines the notion that through lexico-grammatical and semantic selections participants are able to negotiate dominant positions in interaction. Social Network analysis has been used to examine the relationship between the individual and the group. It offers a quantifiable analytical tool for describing the character of an individual's everyday social relationships (Milroy, 1987). A social network analysis is used in the present study to map the social relationships in the tight-knit network, or speech fellowship, of these women (creating a map of the context of situation in SFL terminology). Change in the social relationships and language choices is modeled by revisiting the participants 15 months later in a contextually similar environment and re-analysing the network and linguistic options. Systemic functional linguistics is then used to highlight the interdependency of language and social order. Through systematic accounts of language and the context in which it is embedded this reciprocal nature is displayed and language and social order can be seen, not as two distinct entities, but rather as one phenomena seen from two different perspectives (Halliday, 1978; Mathiessen, 1993).

DECLARATION

I certify that this work is the result of my own research and that the work has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university of institution

Signed: .....P.J.McAndrew...

Date: .....1..Dec..2001.....

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