NOW YOU'RE GETTING REAL! Perspectives of a "Group Processes" Course[1]

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The study of how small groups function is important for all involved in educational endeavours. This study looks at 'Group Processes', a university course, from a sociolinguistic perspective. The focus is on what was said (the structure and the function), how it was said (e.g., accent, force, validity), who said it to whom, and what the context was, both in terms of the speakers' respective statuses and roles inside and outside the group, and in terms of time, place, and the myriad of other factors involved in the interaction (e.g. attitude to the interlocutor's style of language production). The prominent issues of group processes such as authority, power, leadership and decision-making are addressed in terms of how they are reflected in the speech behaviour of the participants. A study of the verbal interactions of a group may lead to hypotheses being formulated with regard to (i) patterns of behaviour and societal elements which are reflected in the linguistic behaviour, or (ii) factors of linguistic behaviour which have a bearing on society.

The present study investigates, through participant observation and subsequent interviews, a particular small group, its language and relationships of the language to the processes. The group had come together in an educational setting specifically to learn about the process. It could be said that the group studied was representative of a microcosm of present day Western society in that pluralistic features abounded on various levels. There were also culturally unifying factors: the participants had arrived at the same place and time, sharing a common aim (based in the cultural/social value of education). But they had set out from very different ethnic, ideological and social starting points. Both the unity and the pluralism were reflected in the language, and the language of the group and its individual members played a crucial part in the process of the group.

'Group processes' is a popular university course for arts, humanities, and business-studies students. It is a 'core' course for students of psycho-educational processes (PEP) and is considered a useful 'elective' for students of education and related fields. The format of the course is somewhat unconventional, being based on the 'T Group' (Training Group or Sensitivity Training) methodology. Students spend periods of time together (in groups ranging in number from ten to sixteen people) in one room. One or two 'facilitators' or 'leaders' are with the group all or most of the time. One 'semester' course may consist of a virtually continuous session lasting for four days (8-9 hours per day), or periodic, regular meetings (once or twice a week) of 2 - 3 hours per session. Some courses are structured with regard to content; some are completely unstructured. An account of such a course, published in the university handbook, is given below.

.....Class members will participate in an ongoing group.

......attention to the examination of the processes of small group phenomena such as decision-making, norms, structure, authority, and membership. Set up to increase a student's understanding of the various factors which affect the life of a group as it changes during the semester.

(Temple University Handbook, 1986, p. 31)

The group chosen for the ethnographic study was one such course, following the periodic time pattern, meeting one afternoon each week for twelve weeks. The observations were made by a participant in the group who functioned as a member of the group at all times. Saville-Troike (1982) points out that participation "in group activities over a period of time is often necessary for much important information to emerge, and for necessary trusting relationships to develop" (p. 121). Since observation (of oneself and of others) is an integral part of the course, the observer was able to fulfil her role as member while concommitantly making note of ethnographic data. These data were validated according to accepted conventions (Hymes, 1980), by subsequent interviews and by conversations with participants and facilitator. Meanings and intuitions about language

used were verified (or nullified) through discussion with participants and written data (journals) were examined in consultation with the writers involved. Thus, through these various strategies, the issue of "observer's paradox" (Labov, 1971) was avoided as far as was humanly possible.

The following account relates to Hymes' suggested components (1974, pp. 54-65) for due attention: setting, situation, events (including an account of one full session), the speech community and its members. Modes of interaction are described, as are significant features of 'group processes' courses, and suggestions are made regarding foci of further study in this area. Issues such as interethnic relationships and gender-power imbalance were significant but will not be addressed in this instance.

The Setting and the Participants

The group consisted of eighteen members. Every member had enrolled for the course through the usual administrative channels. There were four undergradute students and thirteen graduate students. Two participants were facilitators: one a trainee and the other the trainer. Thus, while it is true to say that people participated for various reasons, e.g. to complete a first/second degree, to fulfil a requirement in the Psycho-educational Processes Department, as an adjunct to education or business courses, as a course in a sabbatical year, as employment (the facilitator), all considered the course a learning situation. Every student required a grade at the end of the course, which meant that role-status was established immediately with regard to the facilitator (the 'donor' of the grades) and the other participants (the recipients of the grades).

Of the eighteen members, sixteen were native born Americans. Three of these were first generation Americans, two of whom spoke Italian as their first language. Eight members were born in Philadelphia. The age range was from 23 years to 46 years with the mean at 36 years. There were eight women and ten men. Two women were high school teachers (originally from lower middle class backgrounds, as described by Labov in his research on hypercorrection and language attitudes (1970)); two men were 'in advertising', one of whom was a radio broadcaster; two people were personnel trainers in

the business world; four were psychotherapists and the remainder were in commerce, industry, homemaking or were students. One of the two foreign students was a visiting scholar from China.

Although there were only two foreigners in the group, there were still enough representatives of various ethnic groups to warrant citing the group as representative of the pluralistic society (and Philadelphia in particular) in which we live.   There were a number of first generation Americans whose parents came from Italy, Rumania, Ireland, Greece and Poland.   One member was Puerto Rican, one from North Carolina and two from the Mid West.

The group met every Tuesday, from 1 p.m. until 4 p.m., in a lecture room in the School of Education building on the main campus of a university in an urban area. The room was on the seventh floor and was usually reached by elevator.   In the carpeted room were some circular tables, hard-backed chairs, two chalkboards and sundry notices and posters (on teacher education) on one wall.   On entering the room, one noticed a curtained window stretching the full length of one wall. This was, in fact, a viewing window for use in the adjoining room. This facility was not utilised during the group's collective experience. There were no windows to shed natural light or to give fresh air to the occupants.   Air-conditioning/heating operated constantly. The group was closeted in this room for three hours per week save for a ten-fifteen minute recess at approximately 2:30 p.m.   This 'break' was not mandatory according to the university ruling but was agreed upon by the group during the first session. (This 'norm' was one of the few agreed upon explicitly throughout the course and was frequently referred to!). The weather, which changed from icy winds and snow to rainstorms to warm spring days, influenced the attendance of the participants and the mood of the group.

Modes of Communication

The essential mode of communication was speech but certain events required or involved the written word. Other forms of communication such as paralinguistic and non-

verbal gestures were evident and often significant. The first session was representative of all the sessions with respect to modes of interaction as well as other features. (On only one occasion did the group operate in a different format which influenced the behaviour and verbal interaction. For twenty minutes during the fifth session the group split into dyads in two concentric circles)[2]. A full account of that first session follows (including observations on relevant features, topics and situations relating to other sessions).

Session One

Prior to the arrival of the facilitator, people sat in small groups (twos or threes). One group was discussing expectations of the course, another was discussing the relative merits of travelling to the area by train or by private car. Two people sat on their own. One person remarked to another (a female in one of the trios) that she had assumed that she was the facilitator. The 'assumed facilitator' denied this and became embarrassed. (It later became evident that this person's language, appearance and general demeanour gave her an air of authority which she put to use when she perceived that the status roles were appropiate).

On his arrival, the facilitator asked everyone to gather into a circle with the chairs that were around the room. He immediately announced the requirements of the course (see below) and handed out small white cards which were to be filled in by each member with name, telephone number and any relevant information the member felt that the facilitator would want to know (e.g., if the member had previously attended such a course). While the group was writing, the facilitator wrote his name and the requirements of the course on the board:

Requirements

1. Attendance
2. Keep a journal - about feelings and reactions, not necessarily events.
3. Journal to be handed in one week prior to the end of the course. Journal will be returned.
4. An account of one (for undergraduates) or two (for post-graduates) theories of group participation and how they relate to the member's own experience and perceptions of the group.
5. The goal of the course is to become a group.

He then collected the cards, informed the group that he had an assistant whom he introduced, and then told the group that they should appoint a spokesperson to represent them in the PEP department. The spokesperson's task was to collect and transmit information to and from the department. A male member who had been speaking to a number of people before the beginning of the session was appointed by a female who said

1   Let Z do it. He'll be good.

Others echoed this and 'Z' agreed. The circle of people then sat in silence. The silence continued for twenty-five minutes. It did not, however, have a consistent quality but shifted in terms of communication. (Silences - i.e. periods of no spoken communication - occurred in every session. Some were short (ten seconds), others extended to five minutes and more. As silences grew more intense, members shifted in their seats, looked towards other participants and then averted their gazes, usually to the floor or to an item of clothing or the personal journal. On some occasions, the silence was an expression of empathy or sympathy; the quality of the silence was different. People were relaxed, their eyes looked towards the subject of their sympathy and then to fellow members.

If a further silence ensued, the members were relaxed, did not fix their gazes resolutely on particular objects and appeared to be in a mood of introspection. This was often reflected in the content of the subsequent spoken interaction.) At the end of the silence, one person spoke, suggesting that each member introduce himself. With this agreed upon by utterances such as

2   OK
That sounds like a good idea

the group began to acquaint themselves with each other one by one in the order of the formed circle. Each person offered personal information which he/she felt was important for the group to know. Everyone gave his/her name; some gave home location, occupation, family or marital status while others talked about aspirations for the future or political views. Just how much each person was prepared to divulge (or share) was an important issue in subsequent sessions and continued to be so until the end.

Discussion began about the needs of individual members and their expectations of the course. People spoke across the circle, directing their messages to individuals by means of eye contact and to the whole group by movement of the eyes and by hand gestures/gesticulations. Members responded to utterances similarly by passing their messages to other appointed recipients by means of eye contact or nomination. In some cases a member would 'shoot' a message into the centre of the group. While it seemed apparent that speech was directed at an individual or the group as a whole this was not always the case. The message was not always intended for the recipient who 'picked it up'. (As the sessions proceeded, members became more direct with their utterances and more perceptive regarding intended recipients of utterances). A member who was dissatisfied with the lack of direction from the facilitator and a lack of resolution on the part of certain members remarked to her interlocutor (whom she knew to have a similar opinion):

3   It seems that we're in the wrong course.

By means of eye contact, many members signalled comprehension of the message and its meaning.

When a recipient 'picked up' a topic (introduced by another member), it was either directed back to the sender or to the group as a whole. If the latter was the case, some other member 'picked up' the topic - or it was ignored, in which case silence ensued or another topic was initiated.

No member was interrupted when speaking although frequent confirmation signals (grunts, nods of the head, single word utterances) were given. Members signalled their desire to take a turn speaking by paralinguistic expressions such as exclamations, drawing-in of breath and questioning noises based on single phonemes (e.g. schwa) with rising intonation.

Active listening was evident. Members turned to each speaker with all or part of the body (depending on their position in the circle in relation to the speaker); they leaned forward when deeply interested in what was being said; they turned away or looked downward to display disagreement, disgust or, perhaps, embarrassment.

The mood of the group altered through the session, becoming warmer and more congenial. People were, as one member said,

4   beginning to connect.

A period of 'story-telling' began. Individuals related anecdotes from their life histories. Sustained listening gave way to collective gratification gestures: a number of people speaking at once, murmuring agreement with phrases such as

**5   Thank you for sharing that
      Wow**

      Absolutely.

After a narrative, people became introspective. A number offered short, pithy reflections or commiserations on the stories heard. Utterances such as

**6   You make me feel so inadequate
      We never know what's going to hit us, do we?**

were representative of the 'act'. At this point, the members appeared to be least aware of their status positions (as they had described themselves) and roles as responsible adults in an industrial society where expression of feelings is regarded as weakness.

After the ten minute recess, which was characterised by the 'rite' of moving out of the room into the hall (to visit the bathroom and/or to buy refreshments) where people would engage in casual conversation in small groups (two - four people), the group returned to

the room and sat in silence. A sequence of phases followed, echoing the first half: light-hearted topic switching (in an attempt to find some commonality of interest, serious proposition-making followed by little positive response, intense discussion on a topic of deep interest to a small number of members and a lightening of mood characterized by the speech becoming less personal in content, less analytical, more referential, with quicker change of topics and more frequent change of speaker.

The session ended (at precisely 4 p.m.) when one of the members uttered:

7   **The big hand has reached the twelve. I must go pick up my kids.**
People dispersed quietly, leaving their chairs in position. Dyads formed as people left the room and walked to the elevator.

The communication patterns, which were set in the first session, were maintained throughout the course. Speaking, which was the dominant element, was executed by individual members in turn. Rarely was a speaker interrupted. The turns were sometimes punctuated by periods of silence. Topics were nominated by individuals, then developed or ignored. Not all members shared an equal portion of speaking time; some may only have spoken once or twice per session. However, the amount of attention paid to speakers by the members did not necessarily correlate with the amount of speaking. This may reflect the power (or lack thereof) exerted by certain individuals or perceived by others, in terms of social strategies; or it may reflect a function of people's verbal skill. Another aspect of this issue is the witholding of information or remaining silent (which may or may not be non-communicative). It has been posited that silence is an efficacious means of exerting power.

Notable Features

1. The Journal. One item of written communication which plays a significant role in the life of the group is the journal, which can function as communicator between member and facilitator (who reads it at the end of the course), the member and him/herself or as a receptacle for thoughts and feelings of which members are not prepared to share with

others. Some members of this group chose to write notes for their journals during the sessions while others occasionally jotted down a word or a sentence, putting their notebooks down after each writing event . In the silences that occurred (at the openings of almost all sessions and variously during sessions) some members resorted to reviewing their notes or writing other notes (or doodling). During one session, the assistant facilitator remarked:

8   **The journal is the life and the heart of the group.**

The facilitator later explained the remark as meaning that by writing down their thoughts rather than communicating them with others, the members were "holding back" and "obstructing the process" but that "a lot came out on paper."

2. <u>Presentation of self</u> (a term used in T-Group analysis as well as in interaction analysis) has a number of forms and serves a number of functions. The obvious, overt form is the introduction (verbal) of oneself to another. In the group this proceeded throughout the sessions inasmuch as each member revealed a little more of him/herself on each occasion that s/he spoke. These revelations were made through:

(i) content of the message, e.g.,

9   **Look, with five kids, I didn't have time to study.**

(ii) form of the utterance in terms of dialect, style and tone or attitude to the addressee, and (iii) moment in time or juxtaposition with other utterances where the item occurred. This too indicated attitude, awareness of appropriacy of comment and concurrence (or not) with other members.

Members presented themselves by other means, too. Their outward physical appearance e.g. bodily features ,dress and degree of attention to dress, were significant. Social attitudes and subsequent social behaviour are affected by perceptions of individuals' appearance and verbal behaviours. The context in which one presents oneself has much bearing on the manner in which one is received, perceived and responded to. This seems to be a dynamic process and in the context of a learning situation such as a T-group is a

particularly dynamic and vital element. Cazden (1980) has pointed to the notion of "situation" as being an indispensable feature of sociolinguistic analysis, with special reference to communicative competence and the need to investigate what surrounds a speech act and its responses. Perceptions of a speaker and the subsequent reponses are saliently investigable in T-group analysis, since in certain phases (see below) exchanges are relatively context free and expressions are authentically uttered (i.e. with a minimum amount of influence regarding status and role awareness). Indeed, the components of the speech that remain - those that are inextricably extant - may perhaps characterize the true ideolectal vernacular (see Labov, 1971).

3. Phases.

In any extended social interaction (i.e. not a passing greeting or, e.g. a supermarket transaction) there are various *phases*. These could be labelled "speech events" or "speech acts" depending on the length and/or comprehensive nature of the content. In the unstructured T-group setting there are inevitably areas of intensity and areas of light relief, periods of introspection and periods of intellectualisation.

In T group analysis the term for the light-hearted period is *flight*. When a person relates his/her heartfelt feelings or some deep emotional problem, or perhaps divulges some personal information which s/he feels should be received in confidence, the 'act/event' is termed *disclosure*; for purposes of this paper this I will use the term *intimacy introspection*. Another phase is similarly intense and intimate; a mood of quietude often overcomes the group when a member narrates or relates some event or experience. I will call this period *narration*.

Flight, narration, and *intimacy introspection* phases may be characterised by different language patterns. These may be a reflection of one of the following features: (i) mood of the group; (ii) social constraints of the different topics; (iii) the dynamics of interaction (e.g. turn-taking); (iv) the members' interpretations of the messages received, influenced by their perceptions of the sender and context which, with their expectations and perceptions of self, in turn, influence the subsequent discourse.