

Language and Behaviour

John Polias

This article describes the early work of a Year 6/7 classroom teacher, Giuseppe Mammone, at Seaton Park Primary School in Adelaide, South Australia, in supporting students to understand what happens in their exchanges with peers, family and other adults. Its title could have been: “Developing the range of contexts in which students can make conscious choices in language”. The explicit teaching of language and context began as a way of addressing the issue of abusive behaviour by children in his class. Although he was reacting to an immediate situation in his classroom, similar issues regarding the role of language in accessing discourses of learning and power have been explored by a range of researchers researchers and theorists, such as Basil Bernstein.

The teacher was interested in supporting the students in their being able to choose appropriately from the language system in as many different contexts as possible. The work undertaken was not intended to be about imposing the values of one group on another but about the students developing control of the linguistic tools needed to make their own meanings, so that their meanings were more transparent but also in a variety of contexts. Later, as the students began to understand more clearly the connection between text and context, and how meanings are realised, they could also see that they had the resources to make their meanings more opaque if they wanted to. In this situation, the language user has some degree of control of the outcome rather than necessarily being the servant of others’ meanings and this meant that they were able to start negotiating within their peer groups, their school communities, their families and the wider community.

The context

Prior to this work in the classroom, the typical way for a teacher to deal with disruptive students was to follow the school’s three-tiered method: Tier 1 is classroom-based (pointing out inappropriateness of behaviour within the class plan – What did you do? and What are you going to do about it?); Tier 2 is school-based class exclusion (eg a time-out locale); and Tier 3 is school exclusion (ie suspension).

At Tier 1, the teacher counselled the students after they’d been reprimanded. This involved talking about the situation and exploring the meanings and intentions made by the students but meaning wasn’t clearly related to the language choices made by the students. In this counselling, the students and teacher felt frustrated that they weren’t progressing to a satisfactory position and the typical behaviour patterns were simply re-occurring.

The disruptive students, who were consistently finding themselves ‘excluded’ by their peers and adults, felt they knew what they meant and thought their meanings were transparent to the listener. However, the listeners’ reactions made them think that the listeners were purposely misconstruing them. Hence, they felt they were being victimised and their reaction to that was to resort to being abusive, physically and verbally. A typical situation would be:

- Student 1: “Give me the pencil.” (meaning: I need a pencil and I think this kid could lend me one because he has a few)
- Student 2: “No.” (meaning: I’m not giving you a pencil if you ask like that)
- Student 1: “Give me the pencil, jerk-off.” (meaning: It’s so unfair; he’s got so many pencils and he lent one to that other kid. What is it with this guy! He hates me, so I hate him.)
- Student 2: “Piss off.” (meaning: He thinks he can order people around and hassle them but I’m not accepting that)
- Student 1: *abuses Student 2 physically and/or verbally*

Student 1 doesn’t realise that Student 2 is reacting to his language and not to the exchange of a pencil. Student 2 can’t clarify that and, in any event, Student 1 cannot see anything wrong with his language choice.

The counselling indicated that the intention of Student 2 wasn't to hurt Student 1 but to get him to stop harassing (the command *Give me the pencil* was seen as harassment by the student and the vocative *jerk-off* simply exacerbated the situation). In general, the intentions weren't to hurt, yet there was a lot of hurting.

Language

To undertake an analysis of the students' meanings, these interpersonal meanings, the teacher needed a model of language that is concerned with the linguistic resources chosen to make meaning in context. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) allows for a structured and systematised way of discussing context and the degree of appropriateness of the available linguistic choices in that context. It doesn't say what is or is not appropriate, but it does provide a systematised exploration.

At the time, the teacher was undertaking a professional development course in classroom applications of SFL, the pre-cursor to *How Language Works*, and realised when interpersonal meanings were discussed that it was possible to address the issue of behaviour from a linguistic perspective instead of solely from a psychological one.

The implications of looking at language for the teacher and students

Using SFL, the students and teacher are able to discuss the meanings intended and discuss the appropriateness of the language choices made. Explicitly teaching the lexico-grammar (words and the arrangement of those words) and understandings of the context gives the students and teacher a shared metalanguage. It also makes them aware of a greater range of language resources from which to make conscious choices in a range of contexts.

Importantly, by reflecting on language in a technical way, the students can 'separate' themselves from their language. In this way, individual students are not the targets of the discussion. This is important if the language of the students is not to be set up for criticism and ridicule. At the same time, they are supported in understanding the choices they are making.

What actions did the teacher take?

The teacher had talked about language informally in the counselling sessions but began to discuss it formally in the classroom. There, he introduced the issue of inappropriate behaviour to the class, discussed it in general and then said that they were going to look at the language involved. They had ownership of both the problem and the resolution of the problem and the teacher's role was as a support so that the problem could be reduced.

The SFL model

In the SFL model, language is seen as located in a context. The context is organised as two parts: the Context of Culture and the Context of Situation, the latter being a specific situation in the cultural context. The Context of Situation itself is organised according to three variables in the context: the Field (the 'what' of the context), the Tenor (the 'who' of the context) and the Mode (the 'how' of the context). The model makes a clear link between these three situational variables and the language system. Field is realised (expressed) through the experiential meanings in the language, Tenor is realised through the interpersonal meanings in the language, and Mode is realised through the textual meanings in the language.

The focus of the work undertaken by this teacher was the interpersonal meanings and these interpersonal meanings are realised through certain linguistic elements. These include attitudinal lexis, modality and mood. Attitudinal lexis deals with those words that express some kind of attitude or affect and when it came to disruptive behaviour, they usually included swear words. Modality is concerned with the speaker's angle on the world and can be realised through elements like modal finites (might, could, must), modal adjuncts (perhaps, possibly, always), modal processes (suggests, indicates, appears), mental processes (I think, I believe) and modal nouns (chance, risk, possibility). Mood is concerned with the speech functions of statements, questions, offers, and commands and the mood type we use to express

those.

Attitudinal lexis was the first thing to be explored by the class but here I would like to look in more detail at mood choice.

CONGRUENT MOOD CHOICES

Congruent grammatical choices are intended to be very clear and transparent by the speaker; in other words, there is a one-to-one relationship between the meaning intended and the grammar chosen. However, as we see in the table below with metaphorical examples, language users ‘play’ with the grammatical choices for various reasons, such as: humour, power, and sarcasm. For students and English-language learners, especially, this aspect of language use is fraught with problems.

Meaning	Speech function	Grammar (Mood type)	Example
Giving information	statement	declarative mood	I feel sick.
Seeking information	question	interrogative mood	Are you sick?
Giving goods and services	offer	modulated interrogative	Can I take you to the doctor?
Seeking goods and services	command	imperative mood	Go to the doctor.

METAPHORICAL (INCONGRUENT) MOOD CHOICES

The meaning here is instructing (or commanding) someone to go to see a doctor. The most transparent, direct way of expressing that is to use the imperative mood. As we see here in the table, the most opaque, least direct way of expressing that is to use another choice, the so-called grammatical metaphor.

Speech function	Grammar (Mood type)	Example
command	imperative mood (congruent)	Go to the doctor.
	declarative mood (metaphorical)	You don't look well at all.
	interrogative mood (metaphorical)	Are you only going to take those tablets?
	modulated interrogative (metaphorical)	Shall I ring the clinic to check?

What became clear to the teacher and his class was that quite a number of the students, including all those getting into trouble regularly, were not able to understand or use the metaphorical forms of commands confidently. Although there are metaphorical forms for all of the speech functions, it was commands that caused the major problems. The students were typically making commands using the congruent grammatical choice, the imperative. What they couldn't see was that this was not always appropriate.

Initially, the teacher attempted to discuss these issues of language and context, and degrees of appropriateness, by focusing on the tenor variables of the roles they have taken on, their relationship to the listener(s), their status, the amount of contact they have, and their attitude to each other and the events happening, without teaching the lexico-grammar. However, he soon realized it was necessary to teach the lexico-grammar for the students to understand independently the choices being made by others and the choices available to them.

Crucially, the process of getting the students to learn the grammar was to get them to be researchers of language. For a lot of the students, the language they used had always been a focus in their lives, typically that they shouldn't use that kind of language. By turning them into researchers of language in an objective sense, the spotlight shifted from their own use to generalized uses. So, initially, four contexts were chosen: another classroom, the school yard, the supermarket (and then later in other public places), and home. The students would go to these sites and write down on their clipboards examples of language used for expressing commands, who said them, to whom were they said, how they were expressed and whether

the command was successful. The students would return to the classroom and compile and discuss patterns in these examples.

Outcomes for the students

For some of the students, this exploration of interpersonal resources has had positive effects on their home relationships. Many of the students had previously been in an ongoing state of conflict with parents. Now, students were discussing their work in this area with their parents – some were even teaching it to their parents – and their relationships were not marked by continual misunderstandings. Issues to do with power and language and the choices made by both parents and children were better understood and since they didn't have to separate themselves physically like before, they could get to the next stage of talking about things in general.

Here are a few examples of the outcomes for students:

Reception-Year 1 students out in yard – instead of using *Fuck off*, they now use *Go away because I don't ...* or *Leave me alone* or they use modality. They are now able to reflect to some degree on how they and others realise commands in different ways in different contexts. Of course, if their attempts at using metaphorical commands don't work, they revert to *Fuck off*.

In a discussion with one Year 6 girl who was abusive both at school and at home, the teacher discovered that what she really desired was to talk like Dawson, an actor on a TV show called "Dawson's Creek". On investigating the kind of language used in the show, it was clear to the teacher that the choices were overwhelmingly metaphorical. In the girl's home, the communication with her mother hadn't been successful — the girl thought her mum was being hurtful when using congruent commands, and her mother was frustrated and angry because her daughter wasn't following orders, which she felt she was forced to be blunt about. The work on language and behaviour has had a very positive influence on the girl's relationships with her mother, peers and teachers.

"It's helped me by keeping my old friends and new friends. It's made me realise people's feelings and it makes me realise what I'm saying and keep calm."

One Year 6 boy, who had been receiving extra language support since his first years in school, has developed his metalinguistic skills to the point where he is respected by the other students for his knowledge. This is an interesting phenomenon requiring further research because it is typical that students who are highly skilled in an 'academic' subject are often put down by somebody in the class for their knowledge. However, with their study of the English language, it seems that respect is the response in this classroom. One possible explanation for this is that the school subjects are considered to be too technical by the students who are not successful in them and so a student who excels in a subject is showing off their knowledge of the technicality. But language is so naturalised and the students in the class think, rightly or wrongly, that their use and existing knowledge of the English language is not technical that, when they do start to technicalise it, they are impressed.

Future school action

Many initiatives followed this ground-breaking work. Some examples are that exploring the role of language in communication was incorporated as part of the whole school curriculum, in all year levels. Research into school talk, peer talk, shop talk, and class talk, for example, became part of the curriculum, and a scope and sequence was mapped out so these understandings would be developed in a supportive way. Also developed was a practical, eight-hour professional development package for teachers to share and explore the classroom activities used.