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Keywords
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Defending Face: Elementary Structures, University Students, and Bad Mark Narratives

Kimberly Ferns

ABSTRACT

Similarities and differences in bad mark narratives (stories told to justify bad marks) are examined in light of data collected from the discourses of elementary and university students. Following a structural analysis, issues involving presentation of face and the acquisition of cultural discourse structures are considered.

In Euro-Canadian culture it is important, even necessary, to publicly present ourselves as competent and qualified individuals (Goffman 1984:110). At work, at school and at play we want to display our abilities in a positive light and show the world our best side. We want to be seen as in control, competent and able minded. This is referred to as presentation of self. Often our self image is tied to the opinions others have of us, rather than knowledge of our own self worth. When coping with various aspects of life proves difficult, we refrain from presenting that fact in a public forum unless it can be manipulated and made to work to our advantage. So, we express what our expectations are of ourselves, even if we get sidetracked and do not always live up to them. Scollon and Scollon describe presentation of self as an opportunity to present ourselves in a "particular light, to put in certain details and leave out others so that others will take our view of things" (Scollon and Scollon 1981:13). This paper looks at similarities and differences in the discourses of elementary and university students defending their face in light of getting a low mark. The structure of narratives, themes and presentation of self are compared for the two age groups.

Like the illness stories described by Price (1987), bad mark narratives have a specific structure which sets them apart from other narratives and makes them distinct speech acts. Both elementary and university students use similar structures in their stories (see appendix), which indicates that an important part of language acquisition and competence is acquiring cultural discourse structures. Learning the appropriate structural ordering of different genres is as important for communicative competence in a culture as learning the appropriate ordering of nouns and verbs in a sentence. The ordering itself conveys information. It appears that children absorb these discourse structures without any formal training, in much the same way as they acquire the phonology and morphology of a language.

THE STRUCTURE OF BAD MARK NARRATIVES

Orientation: Time and Place

Bad mark stories are introduced by situating the event in time and space, what Price refers to as orientation (Price 1987:315). University students start their discourse orientation by referring to the year, then continue by describing the specific course and assignment. Elementary students state the subject but typically omit any time referents other than a generic "one day."

Chronology

After orientation comes the chronology of study events. It is here that presentation of self surfaces. In order to appear competent and in control, university students describe how hard they worked or how they chose not to study. Students present themselves as hard working and industrious. To be anything less would be to question the seriousness of their studies. It is important at this stage for the student to affirm that they did their best. Even the student who admits her poor mark as a result of not studying, has higher expectations for herself and plans to apply herself more. At a minimum, students need to hedge their bets. This brings to mind the age-old claim of students that they only chose the topic the day before and stayed up all night to complete it. If they do well, they are seen as brilliant. If they do poorly, it is understandable. They did not have enough time to work on the project because they had other deadlines to meet. It is understood that we expect to do our best even when we get sidetracked by procrastination, poor planning and life's circumstances.

Presentation of face does not seem critical at the elementary school age. Only one of three elementary students elaborated her story in this section using similar themes as the university students. It is an exaggerated version of how the student studied "ten times" on one test and then not at all on another because she knew the information.

Cause: The Explanation for the Poor Mark

Causation, or the explanation of the poor mark, comes next. This is where students defend their face. The most typical causations employed by university students are the toughness, almost pettiness, of teaching assistant marking, and professors who are either not specific enough in giving out topic or too obscure in
test questions. Often it appears as if it is the professor who has missed the main point of the course. One of the students did not blame anyone other than herself for not studying. At the elementary level, two of the three students simply explained that their poor mark was a result of not studying. The third chalked it up to getting confused and being too shy to ask for clarification on an oral test. Children aged ten and younger are not aware that other people or events can be blamed for bad marks, although they do assign blame in other circumstances.

**Coda**

All university bad mark stories ended with a coda to formally signify the conclusion of the story: “So now I have to...”, “And as a result...”, “So I did”, “and we all go through the test.” Only one of the elementary students ended with a coda.

**THEMES**

There were three themes repeated in the university narratives, only one of which was present in elementary narratives.

**“Working Hard”**

The first theme deals with the responsibility of the student to work hard and get good grades. It is when the student fails to meet these expectations, that their face must be defended. Since the student had done his/her best, something or someone else is naturally to blame. It is this theme that is present in a simplified form in the elementary narratives.

**Unfairness of Evaluation**

The second theme deals with the unfairness and subjectivity of formal evaluation and testing procedures. It is commonly felt among students that marking procedures are subjective and erratic, and that an exam has yet to be developed that will deal with the main point of the course rather than obscure and insignificant details.

**Power Relationships**

The final theme deals with power relationships in the educational system. Students are in less powerful positions, are expected to display their knowledge through papers and exams and rely on professors to grant them extensions, give or re-evaluate marks. Professors and teaching assistants are more powerful than students, observe student’s work and are in a position to grant them favours. Using Scollon and Scollon’s model of dominance, display and dependence (Scollon and Scollon 1981:16), it is students who hold the positions of subordinate, exhibitionism and petitioning, while professors have positions of superordinate, spectatorship and caregiving.

**CONCLUSION**

When comparing bad mark narratives it is evident that sometime between the decade when formal testing begins in grade four and university, students elaborate on their narrative structures. The chronology segment is expanded to allow for the presentation of self and the causation segment concentrates on assigning blame elsewhere to defend face. Themes of unfair testing procedures and power relationships have not developed at the elementary level, while responsibility has.
APPENDIX

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEVEL SPEAKERS

Speaker 1, Elementary

ORIENTATION: My worst mark was in Geography. I got 64.

CHRONOLOGY: I studied ten times before the day came. And then when the day came... I... did the test.

CAUSE: But then, us, three or four or five words didn't look right. So I erased them all out.

CODA: So I ended up getting thirty out of fifty.

Speaker 2, Elementary

ORIENTATION: I had a french test

CHRONOLOGY: ... and... I studied ten times before the day came. And then when the day came... I... did the test. But then, us, three or four or five words didn't look right. So I erased them all out.

CAUSE: ... And then the ...my french teacher went on to the next word. So I didn't know about the six words I had to do.

CODA: So I ended up getting thirty out of fifty.

ORIENTATION: I had another french test...um...one day and then...

CHRONOLOGY: I didn't study at all, but I thought I knew all the words. So I really didn't have to study. But then one day ... when the day came... I didn't know any words.

CAUSE: And because I was so shy I couldn't raise my hand to tell her that I ...that I missed some words.

CODA: Just a second... this doesn't sound right mom....

ORIENTATION: One day I got this test from my french teacher

CHRONOLOGY: and I looked at it and I thought I knew all the words.. sort of. So I didn't study. So when the day came I ...I didn't know what the teacher was talking about because it didn't sound like the words I studied.

CAUSE: But I was too shy to raise my hand.

CODA: So I got twenty six out of fifty. Which is a really, really, really, really, really bad mark.

Speaker 3, Elementary

ORIENTATION: My worst was in weather. It was a test about weather.

CAUSE:

CHRONOLOGY: I didn't study so I did bad.

CODA:
The worst mark this year was in physical anthropology. It was a mid term and I didn't think I was going to do so bad.

Mind you, I didn't really study so I can't blame anyone but myself. I haven't told my mom yet...actually I'm not going to tell my mother because if she finds out, I'm up some creek. And, uh, actually I was really disappointed in myself and my mark. I thought at least I'd get ....65....uh...but I didn't,

so I have to work really, really hard now. I have to make up that mark. That's it.

I uh, the worst, or not the worst, I just got back an essay ... this was two weeks back. And I thought

I did really well on it... and uh... like I really worked hard on it. It was for this course in First nations.

And when I got it back, the T.A. had marked it, which was the first thing I didn't like. And uh she totally cut the thing up to hell. Every time I used a certain word like: Indian, which is used all the time in the videos and stuff like that...ah...she had a problem with that. And I didn't use it in a negative way. It just seemed that the prof had used it constantly throughout the lecture that she had a problem with.

And as a result I didn't get the kind of mark that I wanted and that just kind of made me mad because I really worked hard on this essay.

The worst mark I ever had, I guess was my first year here and it was the worst mark ever. And it was, as you know, those multiple choice tests that he loves to give us .... every two weeks. And it was the one on the OED, the Oxford English Dictionary. And I failed it, I got 5 out of 12. But as you know he let us all rewrite it so I got a B. I think I got 9 out of 12, or something. I did better anyways.

But I studied and studied for that thing, you know.

And I knew all the higher levels and stuff. I knew etymology and stuff that I thought was more important. And we had all the trivial usage of some obscure part of the dictionary.

Anyway we studied the dictionary and we all got through that test.
REFERENCES

