

1-1-1984

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Recommended Citation

Melnick, Jane F. (1984) "The Politics of Writing Conferences: Describing Authority Through Speech Act Theory," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2, Article 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1089>

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The Politics of Writing Conferences: Describing Authority Through Speech Act Theory

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A writing conference is one of the few places in most universities where a student talks at length with a teacher. It is one of the very few places where student texts, whether written or oral, can be handled on a one-to-one basis. Writing conferences are perhaps the only place where students can hope to get some kind of live response for written work before confronting evaluation. It is no wonder that the basic situation is politically charged. Conferencers offer intellectual dialogue, a rare offering to students; students seek this dialogue, yet nothing in the university culture has encouraged them to know what it is, much less that they deserve it. Furthermore, conferencers' goals can be misperceived in the university. This charged situation adds to the urgency that exists already when two people discuss writing, especially when one is the writer, and the other a writing "authority."

These outside political pressures exacerbate the confusion between two basic, competing imperatives that makes the writing conference political in the first place. The first imperative—a moral as well as pedagogical one—leads some teachers to want to give maximum space to student texts. The second, contrary impetus, leads us to try to tell students something they could not have told themselves, useful strategies to help them feel less isolated in the face of the myriad problems of writing.¹ These two mandates happen in many teaching situations, but in an unusually pure form in the writing conference. The interplay of the two continues to be both basic, yet mysterious. We resist thinking about this interaction between the teacher's exercise of

authority and the student's claiming of it. Or else we perhaps assume that the real questions might best be "left" to people in the social sciences.

With strong, yet inchoate notions about the charged situation of authority in the conference, I decided to research the actual operation of the competing needs of students and teachers through my own taped conferences. As I worked my way into close readings of the transcripts, I began organizing the material in terms of speech act theory.² I chose three conferences—one I judged unsuccessful, two I judged successful—that gave me the clearest basis for evolving my thinking. Complex as it is, the speech act perspective offered me a system for describing the actual ebb and flow of authority within conferences. I wanted to know not only what the words of both participants were saying, but also what they were doing. Speech act theory, I began to realize, might help me tell when and how I took control of the conference, or how I turned it over to the student.

The sociolinguistic concept of "membershopping" offered the possibility of considering more closely than I ever had before how I might try to include a student in a social sense in an intellectual inquiry.³ Membershopping refers to the process by which speakers share varying degrees of intellectual and social belonging in a conversation. I found that simply by trying to consider where and in what ways it *might* have taken place, I was able to refine my approach in including—and creating—"membershopping" around writing, and intellectual questions, with students.

In a conference with Dmitri, a freshman who was a recent immigrant from Russia, also a biology major whom I had never previously met, the two of us "membershopped" conversationally in a variety of ways. We also negotiated in a complex way, I realized in studying the transcripts, about the basic agenda of the conference. When I finished the conference, I felt convinced that it had not been very good. Yet studying it in terms of speech acts, I came to judge the conference as more or less successful, whether or not it in fact "helped" him, which seems very difficult to measure.

In the beginning of the conference, we "membershopped" around Dmitri's language user history, as well as the fact that we both lived in Brooklyn. As soon as I learned that he had been in the country only one and a half years, and in college only about two weeks, I had guessed that he felt considerable "non-membershopping" about his general situation. Had his American high school been "around here?" I asked,

thinking about both literal and figurative distances he had travelled. He told me it was in Brooklyn. I then told him I lived in Brooklyn and he eagerly asked me what area I lived in. I told him and we established it was a different area from his, but not far away. We had found a literal basis for a degree of membership; also we had limited that basis. In this short conversation, we set up possible patterns for our upcoming discussion. I had demystified my authority to the extent of clarifying that I was a real person who lived in a particular place. Certainly this is one thing that teachers accomplish when we have similar informal exchanges; speech act theory, however, allowed me to note the process more deliberately.

I asked him near the beginning of the conference how long he had spoken English. He answered that he had studied it in Russia, and used it actively since being in the United States. Wielding undeniable authority, I said I thought he spoke English well for someone who had been in the country for a short time. I recall having a conscious impulse that I was trying to remove him as much as possible from any fears he might have that he needed to work “only” on grammar and usage, at the expense of meaning and ideas. In looking back at the moment of asserting such authority to Dmitri, I became fully conscious of my instinct to make such assertions both brief, yet decisive. Avoiding evaluation altogether seems like evasion to me; using it accurately to set someone at ease can obviously help a student open up.

At our Writing Center, after we have probed the assignment and, perhaps, the general writing context and process, we almost invariably assert the authority of our system by inviting the student to read. As Dmitri began reading his draft, my first impression with the parts sounded very alive, while others sounded guidebookish. He began with the following paragraph:

The afternoon sun strikes Washington Square Arch and the red brick mansions along the square. Small shops and intimate restaurants lie in wait along the quaint streets in the western Village. Hordes of shoppers surge in and out of the bazaar-like discount shops along Fourteenth Street.

These well-known images focus attention on Greenwich Village’s most interesting quality, different from all the other parts of the city.

However, he never named this quality, but simply narrowed his focus—following the advice of his peer group and teacher—to a subject of literally smaller scope than the one he had started with. He moved from describing the Village to describing Waverly Place, one of its major thoroughfares. First he gave historical facts, then described examples of architectural diversity. There was no generalizing or shaping, no ex-

pllicit naming of the theme of diversity. I sensed he stood at a confused crossroads of genres, a situation I encounter with many students. His confusion, between exposition and fiction, had apparently led him to think that because he had described detail he could not, nor did not need, to analyze it.

As he came to the end of his draft he said he had writer's block about writing the conclusion. This is where the complications arose about agenda setting. Agenda setting, of course, is a primal moment in negotiation, a moment when questions of authority can come out in the open. I said I thought he had trouble writing the conclusion because he had not really been certain what the piece was about. My agenda—which I did not state more fully than that—was that I thought he should think about the piece as a whole. His was that he wanted help writing a conclusion. This kind of disagreement occurs often and is among the most delicate in conferences.

With Dmitri, I stalled for a time, even while seeking shared formulation, formulation being another speech act concept, referring to the process by which two people come to agree on what they are talking about.⁴ First I told him I thought there was some nice description and detail and that it made me think he had read novels. His eyes lit up and he soon told me he had read lots of novels. “But reading *War and Peace* was quite a drag. They made us read it in school.” I felt a stronger degree of trust coalesce between us as he said that.

In response, I chose to be honest back, and admit that I loved Tolstoy, but that I was not sure I would have wanted to be forced to read it in high school. I later remembered realizing almost as soon as I said this that I had cut off his thinking with a response about myself. Such symmetrical talk had helped us start or membershiping, but right then, I realized it had curtailed the possibilities of our both building on what he had said.⁵ Remembering that you can't win more than half the time—though feeling more befuddled over such moments than I have since I began analyzing transcripts—I pressed on, remembering there was an agenda hanging in the air. I made my big move to state what I thought it should be: “Anyway, with your piece, there's all this detail. . . but I don't get a clear feeling about a center, you know, like the core of an apple. . . a sense that all this is trying to say a particular thing.” He began to argue, tentatively, that he felt his piece was centered around the idea that Waverley Place was a great example of diversity. Thinking he had a case for this, but feeling anxious that it may have been my “fault” that I had failed to see his intended main point, I

yielded for awhile to his proposed agenda. I asked him what he wanted to do with the conclusion. He said that he wanted to say that “Waverley Place is like a mirror of the changes that have happened over the period of time that Greenwich Village. . .” But he did not finish the thought even though I paused. Soon he was asking me questions. Had I noticed how he had described a federal house and “right next to it tall columns?” Yes, I had noticed that, I said, but I had not known how it was supposed to connect with the historical facts in the previous paragraph. Was the problem that it did not flow, he asked. Not exactly, I said. There was a kind of flow. I said I could imagine going in the same order but “just getting something clear at the beginning and something clear every time you shift gears.” “Like more ideas?” he asked. “Yes!” I said, enthusiastically.

Our talk in this moment, I remembered as I relived it, felt as if our minds were truly interweaving around the complex questions of both the different agendas and writing itself. He had opened himself up to my agenda, even as I had opened up to his. Authority over the content and direction of the conversation was in both our hands. He wanted to know what I had not understood. We had both acted out our wariness of taking too much control, control that would curtail the depth of our potential exploration. I immediately felt ready to launch into some of my speeches about Main Points, speeches that I try to particularize to each student. He indicated both understanding, and readiness to hear them. At one point, I said, “The reality is often that readers don’t work as hard as we would like them to and you have to kind of—”

“Yes,” he said, with emphasis, before I finished.

“You know what I mean?” I asked.

“Choose what it’s about and tell them,” he replied.

After this, I began asking questions to draw out spontaneous texts, in effect, asking for material that might lead to revision. Most of the many questions I ask in conferences are either doing this, or are historical, seeking information about a writer’s language-using history, or context, or writing process. I asked him what might be the most important thing to say about Waverley Place to a friend in Russia, also for some further esthetic reactions. Was the diversity of village architecture “pleasing or was it chaos?” He laughed and said, “pleasing chaos.” He also said that one thing about the Village was that “it makes you never stop wondering.”

I asserted that both these ideas offered possibilities for controlling ideas that were more interesting than plain old diversity, or diversity

undefined. Just as his time was up, I asked him if his piece lacked an obvious center of gravity because “you were so afraid of being boring you didn’t want to come right out with it?” He laughed with apparent surprise and said, “Yes.”

As soon as the conference was over I felt uneasy about it, mostly because I had had to grope to find an agenda. Yet in sorting out the speech acts I became convinced that not only was there nothing wrong with this, but that it had been an effective way of leading him to a place where he had to focus on what I had experienced in his paper. The confusion I had felt really had come from his paper. I felt a little slow at not having been totally clear his point was diversity and showed this feeling. At this point he began trying to draw out of me what it actually was like to experience his paper.

I cannot be totally sure of the spirit in which he took in what I said, nor would I ever plan ahead to reproduce the exact same dynamic. What analyzing it does for me, however, is to let me know the name more quickly now of certain speech patterns and acts that come up often. I often now find myself thinking, “I am stalling the agenda on purpose now because I am confused, but this is all right” or “I think it is time for us to formulate the agenda explicitly.” And I find myself knowing when I am hoping to membership with a student around the awesome problems of writing itself, around such questions of whether to “write a conclusion” or reconsider central concepts and definitions. Knowing with more certainty when our word patterns are creating these possibilities, I am more able to let them happen all the more freely. While every conversation makes unique choice, follows unique routes through the maze of possibilities, every one follows some familiar patterns, as well, also some familiar awkward lapses of momentum. Speech act awareness has not taught me precise steps or formulae, but it certainly has offered me the possibility of knowing more quickly what general steps—and awkwardnesses—might be happening in the midst of the flow. Since few conversations can move throughout with the grace of a smooth and intricate dance, it helps when at least one of the people is aware of the general steps being taken.

In fact, rather than resembling a dance, conferences can be much more like a dialogue between two fish who have just discovered they are swimming against the same rapids of an overwhelming river, especially given the relative brevity of the conference itself, and also the atmosphere of the larger university. Both swimmers have unique histories and destinations, and there isn’t much time for niceties. If the swimmer

who knows some of the routes can recognize familiar patterns and somehow insist on cutting through to the most real, often basic questions, useful exchange may occur. Yet both parties must take risks; the teacher can use her authority to create a truly questioning atmosphere, hoping the learner will risk exposing his real questions, the real contours of his confusion about where to go next.

Two other transcripts will show speech act awareness being used to chart the functioning of authority in a different kind of successful conference, and in one I judged to be a failure. The first case follows a basic writer through a series of conferences, even though I only taped one. The student is an older woman, Joan, who had a stroke several years ago. In the first session, Joan's opening request had been for "a few pointers" about writing. After some discussion about her writing class, historical information about the stroke and Joan's past in general arose naturally. She was now studying management, she told me, and hoped to operate a small business out of her home. Prior to the stroke, she had been a nurse for many years prior. She was in a wheel chair, had enunciation problems, but ample use of her right hand—and, as time went on, her cognitive and expressive faculties.

The paper for her second session was about management. I believe the assignment was simply to write a "persuasive essay." All she had written was a "thesis statement," following the orders of her teacher. The thesis statement, which she insisted had to be the first sentence of the essay, read as follows:

One of the qualities of good management is motivation. Getting people motivated, and being able to do this, a manager must herself be motivated, creative, as well as innovative.

Joan's essay had come to a grinding halt at this point. It was already filled with arrows, erasures, and crossed out words.

She had written no specific demonstrations of what being "motivated, creative, as well as innovative" in management really meant. I asked her where she had learned what she knew about management. She talked—in intimidated tones—about her business classes. After a lot of getting nowhere, I finally asked her what kind of management she had experienced as a nurse. We began filling in pictures of the two head nurses she had worked under whom she considered to be the best. Gradually Joan appeared transported into a whole different world of recollection, clearly surprised and pleased at the possibility that people she had actually worked with for years could "belong" in a college paper. I could feel us both working to membership Joan into her own text: certainly a common effort of writing

teachers. We had also moved into joint agenda setting. At one point I asked, “You want to keep going into this stuff? Does it seem like the kind of material you want?”

“Yes it does,” she replied, emphatically.

By the next week, she had filled out her description of the two head nurses with much more detail. A week later, she handed in a draft with a new thesis statement and the following title: “Management: A Humanistic View.” The introductory paragraph said that managers had to be organized, never arrogant, and in close touch with the actual work in the trenches. Then the essay simply described the two model headnurses in real detail, how one helped Joan with her homework and was interested in who she was as a person, how the other used to comb her hair and kid around with all the nurses. There was no conclusion at all. The essay got a B–, she said, showing me the grade proudly. She explained that it represented a considerable forward leap in terms of grades.

What helped me most about applying speech act concepts to this conference was to realize how my use of authority actually functioned. In Joan’s case, the final content evolved out of a meshing of her spontaneous revisions (those that came out as we talked), with the authority from me which told her that such texts were not only “all right,” but “good.” I did not, however, simply say that “telling it like it is from your own life in your own words” would automatically make the writing “good.” I said it had to make sense to another and be clear. The language came from her, and from me came encouragement and a kind of permission in that I said I thought the specific details were “good.” Once I had, in effect, given her permission to use her own mind to figure out writing problems, Joan seemed to enter a whole new world: a world where she realized she had authority over her own meaning.

With my last tape, we can see how confused authority relations can lead to stalemate in a conference.

Frederika, tall, pale, dressed with drama and fastidiousness, came literally sideways into the conference room. Pen in hand, she held an open notebook, and was asking something about zygotes. She wanted to know what I thought about writing about zygotes, also whether a nail was an appropriate image for writing about something very small. I said that a nail connoted sharpness, as well as smallness, to me. She then said that she had the basic direction but she “wanted to write more. I didn’t want to leave it so that I’m using the Bible and not using

myself. It's just that most of what I have to say is already said." I replied, "But no one's ever said what you can say." She continued to write more, as I began sensing what I know better now to recognize as an authority conflict coming on.

A belief I have about authority is that many, though not all, of the problems about it come when it is exerted covertly, or through hidden agendas and manipulation. The confused rhetoric of equality in our society means that we often deny the inevitability of authority altogether, allowing covert forms of it to flourish. In fact, authority is often unavoidable, but can also be carefully defined, limited, divided, and shared. It is one of the emotional bonds of all societies, as Richard Sennett has argued. "Disobedient dependence" is the name he gives for one form of authority relations that are denied. In looking at Frederika's language as speech acts, I think she had a strong case of "disobedient dependence" in relation to the authority of college writing constraints. She derived identity in the actual process of disobedience.

After she had told me that she felt at odds with her writing class, I asked her to read her essay aloud. Bracing herself, she read the following:

The Morality of
Abortion—A Biblical View

"All the days ordained for me are written in your book before you came to be." (Psalm 139, v. 16) Before each one of us came into being, God knew us. In fact, Paul wrote to the Christians at Ephesus, "For he chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in sight. In love, he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ." If this and the above passage are true, then it can also be said that God knew each person ever to come into being before the beginning of the world. Each head is counted. Although Paul wrote to believers, all of them started out not believing. But God knew them just as He knows today who will come to Him.

Then came more of Psalm 139, four more verses, which took up at least as much space as the above passage. Her text continued:

The Bible may have been written over thousands of years ago but what it said is applied to life today. A two-celled zygote, a six year old girl, a 14 year old junior executive, and an old man on a respirator have one thing in common. They each started out as one single cell, one very human cell.

Soon after she finished reading her unfinished draft, I asked her what she planned to have next. She said she had found a passage from the Bible, “just a little bit under ten verses long,” that she thought would be good. I was having difficulty sorting out my reactions, and, once again, was stalling for time. I found a compelling quality to the writing, yet I also found the argument from predestination very difficult. Yet I did not want to say this, since it ventured too close to the area of belief. At the same time, I knew it would be good to talk—very carefully—in terms of belief and audience. And I found a certain fascination, along with repugnance, that someone had actually pulled together an anti-abortion argument from predestination. And I felt sympathy for her obvious isolation in a relatively elite, New York school. In short, I had several conflicting reactions and no clear inspiration for an agenda or a strategy, except certainly to talk about audience.

I told her the good things I thought, that it sounded nice. To me this was true. Also a clear point of view was emerging, I said. The real problem of the writing had to do with the fact that her writing was at odds with her given milieu, I began saying, yet did not try to adapt to that milieu, to “talk directly,” as I put it, to the people in her audience. I tried to say this plainly as time went on. She did not seem to want to hear it. How do you set up an agenda to tell someone their writing will not mesh with an audience? I’m sure it could be managed better than I managed it, but I don’t find it all that simple a problem to solve. According to many of the rules of “good” writing, that I continue to see generally applied in our writing program, her writing was of some quality. It was consistent, had fluency of style, and certainly a controlling idea. There was mainly the problem of audience. After I told her what I thought was good, we spent the rest of the conference going back and forth between an uneasy discussion about audience, to a confused discussion about whether college conventions in the 1980s made it possible for over half your text to be from the Bible. At one point, I said, “If I heard the Bible going on too long, I would suddenly think I was in Church.”

“The thing is,” she replied, “for me . . . there is no differentiation between being in and out of church.”

I then speculated aloud to her on how various audiences might receive the piece. I mentioned abortion activists, northeast American college students, non-Christians. She continued to become aggressively pious with each different tack I tried. If I speculated on how non-believers would respond, she would come back with what it was those

non-believers did not understand. It was a case of symmetrical, but unmeshing, assertiveness, to describe the pattern in speech act terms. We were not really exchanging anything or exploring anything. First I would assert something about writing and audience; she would assert something about what non-believers did not understand. At one point she explained, “You see I’m taking God’s point of view . . . or . . . or I’m trying to show that abortion is just one of the ways we have turned away from His religion . . .”

She complicated the pattern, furthermore, by frequently interrupting my assertions with the statement, “So you want me to . . .,” then giving a perfunctory summary of my suggestion. This is the classic display of disobedient dependence that students throw at writing teachers, whether they teach with old style authoritarianism or newer efforts to demystify the teacher’s authority to the student’s advantage. I would repeat that I wanted her to write what she wanted or needed to write but to do it in relation to her actual audience. She would then repeat, in a resigned tone, “Then you want me to . . .” and again summarize my suggestion, for instance, to interweave brief biblical quotes rather than quoting ten verses at a time. Her tone suggested she considered herself a prisoner in an alien environment, also that only complete agreement with not only her beliefs, but her rhetorical approach to them would free her from this feeling.

While there was some healthy confrontation in our session, I continue to judge it unsuccessful. There was far less exploration of either ideas or questions of form or content than might have taken place. With tighter application of speech act concepts, I might have been able to break the authority binds we fell into. I would have realized the need, for one thing, of sorting out my conflicting responses more quickly—even though I still think it desirable to wait with some writers, as long as you can keep learning about them, before making one or two strong, clear suggestions. I would, above all, have pointed out the dynamic that was taking place: that we were simply matching assertions, and not exploring anything. I would have asked her what she thought we should have done about that. As it was, the dynamic simply kept repeating itself.

The situation of the conference has obvious limits, both because of time pressure, and the lack of expectation by students for what it can offer. And yet, in our center, we continue to see surprise, gratitude, and even, sometimes, substantive improvement. Most of us seem to feel that to make this possible, we must limit our role, and maximize the

student's authority. But this does not mean abandoning our authority, or critical tools. Quite the contrary, it means learning how to use them all the more deftly and quickly. Speech act theory has helped me to tighten my conferencing enough that I am curious to see if it could also help others.

One thing that can become dramatically clear the more you think about speech acts is that teachers cannot physically control a student's language. The only way would be to adopt a totalitarian approach: to stand over students with a loaded gun, then force them to parrot what we write or say—a kind of Patty Hearst approach to teaching writing. I think some of the confusion within the profession comes from some people's failure to realize fully the futility of the Patty Hearst approach. Cognitive theory and research remind us that teachers cannot pull full scale meaning and style out of a student's head, and speech act theory can dramatize this inability. Remembering this can lead us to sharpen our conception of the initial opposing mandates of the conference: to focus on the needs of both student and teacher to claim and clarify authority. It can point, also, to the possibilities that can grow from a teacher's taking the authority to clarify decisively that the student must take a certain basic control over his or her meaning.

What I have ended up thinking is that the student and teacher's authority are not complementary. Both can be enhanced at the same time, and both can also block the others' sense of autonomy of thought—as happened between Frederika and me. Student's and teacher's authority are not mutually exclusive; it is not as simple as that. By using our authority decisively, we are not necessarily taking control away from students; if we can clarify both in our actions and our words that our authority is clear but limited, students can experience the reality that they must and can take on basic authority—and responsibility—for their writing.

NOTES

¹This research was done at The Writing Center at New York University, directed by Lil Brannon, where many of us discuss the complexity of such imperatives. The inquiry was conducted for a course taught by Prof. Brannon.

²See e.g., John Searle, *Speech Acts* (London: Cambridge UP, 1969), Malcolm Coulthard, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis* (London: Longman, 1977). I had encountered an interdisciplinary speech act bibliography in a course taught by Paula Johnson at NYU.

³See again Coulthard; also, Michael Gregory and Susanne Carroll, *Language and Situation*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978)

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⁴See J. C. Heritage and D. R. Watson, "Formulations as Conversational Objects," in *Everyday Language: Studies in Ethnomethodology*, ed. George Psathas, (New York: Irvington, 1979)

⁵All talk is either "symmetrical"—i.e. people mirror each others speech acts—or complementary, according to Paul Watzlawick, in *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson (New York: Norton, 1967), p. 70