

The Power of Language and the Language of Power: The Blue-Eyes, Brown-Eyes Workshop

By Tanne Stephens

Oppression takes many forms, but language may be one of the most pervasive and allusive tools people use to exert their power. I was struck by this fact the day I was introduced to Jane Elliott and her famous Blue-eyes/Brown-eyes exercise in a psychology course. As an educator in the US, Elliott strove to teach her third-grade students about racism, and in 1968, she conducted an exercise in her classroom to do just that. Separating students by eye color, she created a situation where they could experience firsthand the consequences of separation and oppression – a lesson Elliott became widely known for in the United States and globally.

Elliott went on to become a renowned diversity educator, and she repeated her Blue-eyes/Brown-eyes exercise many times with adult participants. In one of the filmed exercises, participants, who are all volunteers, line up behind a table, sign their names on a list, and are categorized based on eye color. What seems like an innocuous workshop quickly turns into a nightmare for some, as Elliott immediately begins creating and orchestrating an oppressive system.

Brown-eyed participants are treated to coffee and breakfast; blue-eyed participants are given a collar to wear and ushered into a room with no chairs, no food, and no water to wait for the workshop to begin. When it is time to start, Elliott assumes the role of workshop leader and begins with a lesson on “listening skills,” all the while giving the brown-eyed participants preferential treatment and the blue-eyed participants verbal instances of indirect, subtle discrimination, i.e., microaggressions. First coined by Dr. Chester Pierce in 1970, a microaggression is defined in the Oxford dictionary as “an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority.” The precariousness of microaggressions makes them particularly difficult to confront – especially when they are carried out unconsciously. Regardless of intention, microaggressions have an impact. Elliott uses them in abundance and while some try to laugh off the discomfort of the situation, others burst into tears.



Elliott does not inflict any physical violence to generate the emotionally intense responses from blue-eyed participants – she simply talks. So, what exactly is happening in this seemingly simple verbal interaction to bring an adult stranger to tears within minutes? More specifically, how does Elliott use conversation and discourse to exert power and authority, and model oppressive microaggressions in the workshop? Turning to linguistics gives an interesting perspective on how power works and is wielded through the symbolic tool of language. To take a closer look at how Elliott uses language and power, I analyzed certain sections from *The Angry Eye*, a documentary about one of Elliott’s workshops conducted with young adult students at Bard College in 2001.

Discourse and conversation analysis has been influenced by many disciplines, including linguistics, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and anthropology. My analysis examines the dialogue Elliott uses in her workshop. I will explain three theoretical levels of analysis and provide examples from Elliott’s speech in *The Angry Eye*. My aim is to use these examples to not only illustrate how the theory looks in real life, but also to demonstrate how we all can and do use language in oppressive ways toward others.

Speech Act Theory

Central to a Speech Act Theory approach to analyzing discourse is the concept of illocutionary force, i.e. what the speaker is intending to accomplish with their utterance (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1976). Speech acts can be classified into five categories according to the speaker’s intention: declarations, representatives, commissives, directives, and expressives (Searle, 1976). Intention can additionally be garnered from how a speaker adheres to or violates Grice’s (1975) four maxims of conversation. According to Grice, verbal communication is governed by four implicitly understood maxims that enable mutual understanding and encompass the cooperative principle of interaction:

quantity

speakers should give the right amount of information, not too little or too much.

quality

speakers should give accurate and sincere portrayals of reality.

relation

speakers should say something that is relevant and related to what was said before.

manner

speakers should be speaking in an organized way with little ambiguity or obscurity.

Using speech acts to flout or violate these maxims happens often, but a meaning can typically be deduced from the violation. These maxims directly relate to issues of politeness and “face” as further explained by Brown and Levinson (1987). According to them, every person has two socio-psychological faces – a negative face and a positive face. The negative face describes our need to be autonomous and have the freedom of our own actions, and the positive face describes our need to be desired, accepted, and wanted by others (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967). Speech acts that threaten either of these two faces are called face threatening acts (FTA) and are compensated for in cooperative situations by redressing face needs with politeness strategies. When an FTA is committed and no redress occurs, it can be interpreted as uncooperative and even antagonistic.

Jane Elliott’s Speech Acts

One of the first observations I made in watching *The Angry Eye* is Elliott’s frequent use of the imperative directive as a speech act when speaking to the blue-eyed participants. These acts are directly explicit (e.g. “Sit here”; “Get up”; “Read the next sign”), with an obvious illocutionary force stated. Using these speech acts, Elliott can be observed flouting the maxims of quantity and manner. For example, when the blue-eyed participants enter the room, one of the participants poses the question “Should we sit anywhere?” (Mukuka 10:19). Elliott’s response to the question is another question, which violates the cooperative maxim of manner, since a question is meant to be answered. Elliott then follows up with an imperative directive: “Get in the blue-eyed section.” (Mukuka 10:41). This flouts the maxim of quantity since she has answered a yes or no question with much more speech than required. Since maxim violations are not done without meaning, it seems that Elliott is using the violations to establish authority starting with this first interaction.

Once the lesson begins, Elliott asks if the blue-eyed participants have paper and pencils with them in a

tone suggesting that they should. That they needed paper and pencils was not communicated, which was a violation of the quantity maxim (not saying enough) – thus putting the onus on the blue-eyed participants to implicitly understand what Elliott is not explicitly stating. In repeatedly violating maxims without any face redress, Elliott makes it nearly impossible for the blue-eyed participants to position themselves in a cooperative relation toward her. Furthermore, Elliott’s directives threaten the blue-eyed students’ negative faces, and she uses no politeness to redress the threat. She also threatens the positive face of the blue-eyed participants by making them sit physically separate from the brown-eyed participants and by categorizing them verbally as “bluey” (Mukuka 10:52). Elliott uses imperative directives to commit FTAs and to violate maxims causing emotional responses from the blue-eyed participants.

Discourse Structure

While speech acts are vital for conversation analysis, the larger structures and patterns found within discourse can particularly illuminate how meaning and power relations take shape in verbal interaction. Two of these structures are adjacency pairs and recipient design. Adjacency pairs are expected utterance pairings. For example, a question is expected to result in an answer, hence the question/answer pairing. Others include complaint/denial, compliment/rejection, request/grant, and offer/acceptance, etc. (Sacks et al. 717). Recipient design refers to the dynamic process by which speakers adapt to the expected response on the part of the interlocutor. The underlying idea is that interaction is an interpretive process, meaning what one *expects* as a response impacts how one *decides* to respond.

In other words, as Taylor and Cameron explain, “my behavior is designed in light of what I expect your reaction to it will be: i.e., you will react to it as conforming to the relevant rule or as in violation of it, thereby leading you to draw certain conclusions as to why I violated the rule” (1987, 103). Every culture and society has certain structural expectations or scripts that are used in verbal interactions. Whether you follow the expected structure or not, the words you say and how you choose to say them carry a particular meaning to the person you are talking to.

Jane Elliott’s Discourse Structure

When examining longer pieces of dialogue in the workshop, structural patterns become more obvious. Elliott uses adjacency pairs often including numerous question/answer pairings. For example:

Question

Elliott: You came to a learning experience, right?

Answer

Blue-eyed participant: Yes.

Question

Elliott: D’ya ever go to a learning experience before?

Answer

Blue-eyed participant: Yes.

Question

Elliott: D’ya ever take notes?

Answer

Blue-eyed participant: Yes.

Question

Elliott: What did you use?

Answer

Blue-eyed participant: I used paper and pencil.

(Mukuka, 16:57)

This question/answer run of adjacency pairs occurs numerous times throughout the workshop. The first part of the act has a preferred and a dispreferred response which creates a preference structure. Dispreferred responses are more unusual and may be interpreted as meaningful or rude (Eggins and Slade 1997, 28). In using adjacency pairs, Elliott can control the preference structure; participants must give a preferred or dispreferred response, situating themselves either in line with Elliott or in opposition to her. In one instance, a participant does not follow the adjacency preferred response:

Yes/No Question

Elliott: You have paper and pencil with you?

Yes/No Answer

Blue-eyed participant 1: No.

Yes/No Question

Elliott: [making eye contact with another participant]

Do you?

Declarative

Blue-eyed participant 2: Over in my bag // I do.

(Mukuka, 16:39)

In this instance there is a violation of the quantity maxim because Elliott did not tell the participants that they needed paper and pencil. Elliott then initiates an adjacency pairing with a yes-or-no question where the preferred response is a yes. Given the context of the setting (a learning environment), and the lack of positive feedback to the no response of Blue-eyed participant 1, it is made clear that the answer should be yes; however, the participant must answer no, giving a potentially negatively meaningful response. To avoid this unsatisfactory response and the disagreeable way it may frame her, Blue-eyed participant 2 answers differently with “Over in my bag // I do” – an answer closer to yes than no. This strategy seems to be used by the student to subvert the preferred/dispreferred structure Elliott has set up. However, in subsequent dialogue, Elliott regains control by asserting a string of structural strategies that ultimately results in Blue-eyed participant 2 admitting to being at fault for her behavior.

The Context of Elliott’s Workshop

As it is for many oppressive systems, Elliott’s speech alone is not entirely responsible for the success of the oppression. The environmental context is key to subliminally supporting the microaggressions used. For the workshop, Elliott intentionally creates a social culture and context using both her speech and visual cues in the room, including signs that read: “Only brown eyes need apply”, “Blue eyes shouldn’t hold political office”, “Why can’t a blue eye be more like a brown”, “I’m not prejudiced. Some of my best friends are blue eyed” (Mukuka 12:30).

These signs are symbols used to define the social context and hierarchy of the environment. An additional symbol used is the collar Elliott places around the necks of the blue-eyed participants, providing a visual cue to the social and cultural arrangement of power. Lastly, because the workshop is held in a classroom-like setting, participants are already prepared to be in a situation where Elliott, as the teacher, has more power and authority. The context Elliott creates and her language choices are used to bolster ideas, contexts and messages that best fit her agenda. Table 2 shows how Elliott’s language choices – especially pronoun usage – reinforce new layers of meaning reflected in the symbolism of the environment.

Table 2: Pronoun Comparison
(Pascal Mukuka, 2015)

Elliott’s statements made to blue-eyed participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sit here. • Go in that room • Move your leg. • Get there. • Next. Stand up and read the next sign. • Get it right this time.
Elliott’s statements made to brown-eyed participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are going to accuse them of not being as smart as we are. • We are going to give them no respect. • In order to get them into their adult ego state, we are going to try to teach them the listening skills. • We are going to call these males “boy” to keep them in their child ego state, or bluey or fool.

Elliott neglects pronouns when speaking to blue-eyed participants and uses we when speaking to brown-eyed participants. This grammatical choice denotes in-group and out-group membership as allocated by Elliott’s position of authority. Each visual cue along with each utterance within the discourse structures are tools used to perform and sustain the social hierarchy of the workshop and to wield power.

Power of Language – Language of Power

After briefly considering various perspectives on analyzing conversation and discourse, there seem to be some main strategies Elliott uses to express and maintain power in the workshop. She commits FTAs toward the blue-eyed participants; she violates maxims, making it difficult for the blue-eyed participants to follow the cooperative principle; she poses imperative directives and question/answer adjacency pairs which allow her to predict and funnel preferred responses; and she uses visual cues, grammar, and discourse to connect to her larger contextual ideation of the workshop’s social context and interpersonal power dynamics.

Committing FTAs is common in daily interactions and is not necessarily an act of intimidation, except when not redressed. Politeness strategies can make a request non-intimidating: “Sorry to bother you, could you, if you have a moment, help me find a book?” Phrases and features are added in this example to create a non-intimidating FTA. A directive lacking any politeness features, on the other hand, is the most threatening FTA (Cutting 2002, 46): “Help me find a book.” When face is not redressed in a request, the addressee has the option of doing as they are told (feeling controlled) or being interpreted as uncooperative. In using direct FTAs toward the blue-eyed participants, Elliott ignores all their face needs, likely resulting in intimidation. This intimidation strategy becomes more pronounced when coupled with the intentional flouting of Grice’s maxims, creating interactions where participants are forced into an uncooperative role.

Repeatedly using adjacency pairs could be seen as a highly offensive tactic in conversation. Remaining the initiator in such pairings allows a person to better control the flow and direction of discourse, which seems to be a strategy Elliott uses during the workshop. At certain points, Elliott answers a participant’s question with a question, successfully reversing the attempt of a participant to initiate and gain some control. Additionally, Elliott seems to use many question/answer adjacency pairs, often of a yes/no structure, which again limits participants’ ability to expound or expand easily in a more casual way. The preferred responses remain limited and so are the social options within the staged hierarchy.

Conclusion

I, for one, believe that if you give people a thorough understanding of what confronts them and the basic causes that produce it, they’ll create their own program, and when the people create a program, you get action.

-Excerpt from Malcolm X’s speech at Queen’s Court Audubon Ballroom, December 20, 1964

On first viewing, Elliott’s workshops can seem perplexing in how she brings an adult to tears within minutes simply using words. Using theories of conversation and discourse analysis, one can begin to identify that the only perplexing thing is the use of the word ‘simply’. Strategies for wielding power and oppressing others operate on several levels – from speech acts to broader sociocultural cues and

underpinnings. Through the analysis of each level, the workings of oppression, microaggressions, and racism become more apparent. More investigation is needed to begin to unveil how different types of perceived power influence verbal interactions and potentially how verbal interactions could in some ways even subvert and influence broader systems of power. Although power may not stem entirely from speech acts, daily performative functions certainly perpetuate and strengthen ideas and prejudices already existing in the public realm.

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