Power asymmetry in classroom discourse

A study of turn-taking systems in teacher-student interaction

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Master's dissertation 15 credits
English | Spring semester 2019
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Abstract
This study aims to explore power asymmetry in the organisation of teacher-student interaction by looking at turn-taking systems and the restriction of participants. This is achieved by combining the frameworks institutional discourse, conversation analysis (CA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) and by looking at sequences of teacher-student interactions at seminars. The study encompasses analyses of classroom discourse at university level and uses data culled from the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English, MICASE. These data are analysed in relation to turn-taking systems and power asymmetry (i) to explore how teachers organise their classroom talk in terms of the allocation of turns, sanctions and control over the discourse and (ii) to determine to what extent teacher-student interactions show signs of power asymmetry.

The results show that the teachers control the classroom discourse in a number of ways. Firstly, the analysis shows that the participatory roles of “teacher” and “student” have different claims to power and that these roles are more or less restricted by the design of the turn-taking system in place. Secondly, the teachers are found to organise the discourse in turn-taking systems that have implicit rules. Thirdly, the teachers not only have greater participation rights, but also greater control over the students’ participation rights, as witnessed by the fact that the students get disciplined if they break the rules of the system.

Key words: Institutional discourse, classroom discourse, MICASE, turn-taking systems, power asymmetry.
1. Introduction

The exact nature of successful teaching is difficult to pinpoint and explain, and it is frequently the case that teaching approaches that work in one context may not necessarily work in another. However, although teachers’ positions vary in different cultural contexts, one thing that is certain is that teachers have largely moved from historically being viewed as unquestioned authoritative figures to being viewed as pedagogical professionals (Moore, 2014). A reason for this is that a large portion of teachers’ daily practices require a sensitivity to the institution in which they operate. Educational settings are what could be referred to as institutions that are open to the public, its sole function to serve the public and provide the education of citizens. Educational settings, like many institutional settings, exist within a greater system of institutions and other branches of societal functions which is commonly referred to as the educational system, i.e. schools and universities are institutions that are governed by other institutions, such as parliament, different branches of government, organisations and the like. Among the many players in the school system, teachers are inherently bound in their daily teaching and administrative practices by socio-political documents such as current school laws, values and curricula. These documents affect everything from designing lessons, choosing what content to use and what customizations need to be implemented to fit course goals and students’ needs, to grading and overall social effort in their student communication. Consequently, teachers are operating in two different institutional settings, their classrooms and their overarching educational setting of a larger institutional system, of which the present study focuses on the former by exploring power asymmetries in teacher-student interaction.

Studies within the field of institutional discourse have shown conflicting theories about what separates institutional talk from casual, or conversational, talk while at the same time providing different views on power asymmetry and access to discourse(s) within this framework. Some researchers such as Habermas (1984) and Levinson (1992) suggest that institutional discourse is a kind of strategic discourse in the sense that it is goal-oriented in its nature and in that it requires mutual comprehension between participants across discursive positions, which in turn are usually marked by power asymmetry. Others, such as Harris (1995) have contested this notion by declaring that all talk, institutional or otherwise, is marked by power asymmetry to some degree (cited in Thornborrow, 2002:2).

Furthermore, the institutional setting plays a role in what kind of talk is observable and how interlocutors are positioned in its discourse. While research on institutional
discourse has been conducted in a variety of settings such as in middle-school classrooms, court settings, at universities and in police interrogation settings, studies that have been conducted in educational settings have either assumed that there is an inherent power asymmetry between teachers and students (see for e.g., McHoul 1978), focused on power relations of lower levels of education (see for e.g., Manke 1997 who studies fifth grade classrooms), or instead focused on other aspects of classroom interaction such as turn design and teacher strategies (see for e.g., Lerner 1995). The present study looks specifically at power asymmetries in classroom discourse, focusing on teacher-student interaction and the organisation of discourse in turn-taking systems to make visible relations that may or may not reflect power asymmetry.

Unlike other settings that have been the focus of studies in institutional discourse, the teacher’s role as a figure of power in an institutional setting is not as clear as that of for example a police officer or a magistrate in court. The goals of teachers are ultimately pedagogically driven and consequently, the teacher role is not as clearly in a position of power as other people’s professional roles in other settings. This is mainly due to the fact that for teachers to achieve their goals, they need to take consideration to curricula and other aspects of the larger institutional framework, as well as rely on cooperation from their students.

It is perhaps not difficult to imagine what sort of talk may take place in a courtroom, a police interview or in a classroom, but these settings and their participants generally have different goals. Where a court hearing follows a protocol where deviations are heavily sanctioned, a seminar or lecture do not necessarily follow a set protocol in the strictest sense. However, this does not mean there is no power asymmetry between teachers and students. Since the setting affects how interlocutors are positioned in discourse and restricted by power relations, it would seem important to study this presumed power asymmetry between teachers and students by looking at how teacher-student communication may reflect a power asymmetry imbedded in the school institution and its discourse, as well as how teachers organize this discourse. The present study sets out to look at this by using a mixed approach of CA and CDA to look at teacher-student interaction in a university setting.

1.1 Aim and research questions
The aim of this study is two-fold: (i) to study signs of power asymmetry in the language between teachers and students by looking at teacher-student interaction in an educational
setting and (ii) to examine how the discourse is organised in terms of turn-taking systems and question-answer sequences. My research questions are:

1) How are the subjects of “teacher” and “student” positioned in turn-taking systems in an educational discourse?

2) In what way do these systems reflect power asymmetry?

2. Background

In this section, an overview of research within the field of institutional discourse will be presented in section 2.1, followed by an overview of research on educational settings in section 2.2. A closer look at turn-taking systems is then presented in the section 2.3, followed by a description of the present study’s perspective of power and power asymmetry in section 2.4.

2.1 Institutional discourse

Previous research on institutional talk has mainly focused on the following areas in a variety of settings: turn-taking systems and question-answer sequences (for e.g. see Drew & Heritage 1992, Ehrlich & Freed 2010, Harris 1995, Lerner 1995, McHoul 1978 and Garton 2012), the orderliness of institutional talk (Drew & Heritage 1992, Thornborrow 2002), power (Foucault, 1988, Thornborrow 2002, Fairclough 2013, Manke 1997, Harris 1995 and Haworth 2006) and politeness strategies (Levinson & Brown 1987, Manke 1997 and Mullany 2004). However, the present study will focus on power and power asymmetries.

An important issue in research within the field of institutional discourse has been to define what separates institutional talk from casual or conversational talk, a definition which many researchers have contributed to. However, what exactly separates institutional discourse, or institutional talk, from other modes of discourse is not readily defined. Levinson (1992) suggest that the difference in institutional talk as opposed to “ordinary” talk is evident in three particular ways: “firstly it is goal or task oriented; secondly it involves constraints on what counts as legitimate contributions to that goal or task; and thirdly, it produces particular kinds of inferences in the way speakers interpret, or orient to, utterances” (as cited in Thornborrow, 2002:2). In relation to these three attributes, Levinson has elaborated on the concept of what he refers to as activity types, which he states hold a central role in language use by:
one the one hand, they constrain what will count as an allowable contribution to each activity; and on the other hand, they help to determine how what one says will be “taken” – that is, what kind on inferences will be made from what is said


2.2 Educational settings as institutional spaces

So far, the present study has discussed studies of institutional discourse in a broad sense. The following section will discuss studies focused on educational settings. In McHoul’s (1978) study of classroom discourse and turn-taking organization he analyses instances of formal talk in order to distinguish how the emerging rules of the turn-taking system observed positions the different identity roles of “teacher” and “student” in terms of participation rights. McHoul’s study begins with the perspective that teachers have greater speaking rights than students and that they are in control, thus assuming an inherent power asymmetry. He found that the participation rights as well as the obligations between teacher and student identity roles differed greatly in the data analysed, and that the interactions analysed had a highly pre-allocated system of turn-taking consisting of mainly teacher-student-teacher-student interaction.

Similarly, Lerner’s (1995) study of classroom discourse and turn-taking design studies how teachers structure their talk and how it affects students learning outcomes and opportunities for participation. Lerner concludes that the way teachers organize activities and talk has an impact on student participation in classroom interaction.

The impact of classroom organisation on student participation was also found in a study of classroom discourse by Manke (1997), where she studies power relations in fifth grade classrooms and finds that teachers have control over “time and space”-aspects of classroom discourse, meaning that teachers control the physical arrangement of furniture as well as the activities taking place in this space. However, as Manke points out this does not occur without resistance from students and she argues that the students in her data had several strategies for gaining control and exercising influence over the discourse (Manke, 1997:63-74). Manke further studies teachers use of politeness strategies and “indirect discourse”, which she states have previously been viewed as strategies teachers use to exercise their authority over students. However, Manke concludes that these strategies are not primarily used for exercising authority but rather to keep the classroom in order and to avoid conflicts with students (Manke, 1997:75-91).
Similarly, Garton (2012) studies instances when students take the initiative of turn-taking in teacher-fronted discourse. Garton finds that students use turn-taking mechanisms to their advantage by for example creating their own learning opportunities in what is otherwise described as a highly controlled form of classroom discourse. Garton argues that students are not as restricted by the turn-taking system in place as assumed, and that students can “take control of the organisational sequences in classroom talk […] to direct the interaction in a way that better suits their learning needs” (Garton, 2012:42).

In another study of classroom discourse, Thornborrow (2002) studies the organisation and orderliness of talk in classroom discussions and finds that, similarly to both Manke and Garton, that while teachers are in a role that is “institutionally inscribed as powerful” and have control over the discourse, students can resist this and challenge the teacher’s position by exercising “unco-operative strategies” (Thornborrow, 2002:131).

2.3 Turn-taking systems

Studies of turn-taking systems, in educational settings or otherwise, have focused on the organisation of institutional discourse and found that not only does institutional discourse differ from “ordinary” talk, it also imposes restrictions on speaker mobility. The view of turn-taking systems in this study is modelled after Heritage (1998), who states that previous research on distinctive turn-taking systems, which has focused mainly on court procedures, news interviews and classrooms, suggest that these systems are characterised by two main criteria:

a) there are a large number of potential participants in the interaction, whose contributions must be ‘rationed’ in some kind of formal way, and/or
b) when the talk is designed for an ‘overhearing’ audience

In an educational setting, both of these characteristics are present in the sense that there are several participants present during a seminar or a lecture whose actions may be “rationed” by the underlying rules of the discourse and the activity (for example, by adhering to the unwritten rule of not interrupting someone who is addressing a larger group of people). At the same time the talk is meant for an “overhearing audience” in situations when the teacher is addressing one or several students and the rest of the class is expected to listen and learn from what is said.
Furthermore, Heritage notes that previous researchers on the subject of institutional discourse such as Schegloff (1991), one of the early contributors to CA, has argued that for interaction to be considered institutional, the speakers’ actions must show relevant signs of institutional properties, meaning that the organisation of activities and talk must be oriented towards activities of institutional character (Heritage, 1998:4). Heritage further comments on this notion by stating that research on turn-taking systems in institutional discourse has met Schegloff’s demand on relevancy by showing how the interactions within these systems are organized differently than “ordinary” conversation, and that the interactions are doing this both “recurrently and pervasively” (Heritage, 1998:6).

Moreover, Heritage proposes that in order for a turn-taking system to be considered distinctive we must observe instances of what he calls “departures” from its normal procedure where sanctions are allocated, such as when someone speaks out of turn in a court room and is met with the sanction of being ruled “out of order” (Heritage, 1998:7). In an educational setting, actions that could be met with sanctions could for example be speaking outright or interrupting, taking turns when not allocated, not answering a direct question or going off-topic in a discussion. In the present study, Heritage’s notion of turn-taking systems is incorporated in the analysis in section 4.

2.4 Power and power asymmetry

Before proceeding to examine power and power asymmetry, it is necessary to discuss the present study’s perspective on power. Since the present study focuses on power asymmetry in teacher-student interaction, this section will therefore provide an overview of the stance to power that is taken here. Power is a difficult concept to define and scholars across disciplines have various opinions on what constitutes power in language, and furthermore how power is to be analysed in terms of discourse positions and access to power (for further discussion see Foucault 1988, Thornborrow 2002, Fairclough 2013, Mayr 2008, Van Dijik 2008, Drew & Heritage 1992 and Haworth 2006).

The present study has the perspective that power and power relations are produced in discourse derived from CDA and uses Thornborrow’s understanding of power in language:

[…] the approach I adopt to power […] is to see it as contextually sensitive phenomenon, as a set of resources and actions which are available to speakers and which can be used more or less successfully depending on who the speakers are and
what kind of speech situation they are in. From this perspective, power is accomplished in discourse both at a structural level, through the turn and type of space speakers are given or can get access to, and, on an interactional level, through what they can effectively accomplish in that space.

(Thornborrow, 2002:8).

Furthermore, this study also implements Fairclough’s notion of power asymmetry, his position can be summed up in his own words that: “[...] power in discourse is to do with powerful participants controlling and constraining the contributions of non-powerful participants” (Fairclough, 2013:39). Fairclough divides the type of constraint put on less powerful participants into the following three types:

• contents, on what is said or done;
• relations, the social relations people enter into in discourse;
• subjects, or the 'subject positions' people can occupy” (Fairclough, 2013:39).

In the context of the present study, this means that the contents, relations and subject positions created by the turn-taking system observed in an educational setting will be analysed in terms of how they impose restrictions on the participants, i.e. the students, in relation to power asymmetry.

3. Methodology
In this section, an overview of the collection of data are presented in section 3.1, followed by a description of the methods used in section 3.2 and lastly, the analysis itself in section 4.

3.1 Data
In the present study, the data used are culled from the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE), a corpus consisting of a large collection of transcribed audio-recorded data, 152 transcripts and 1,848,364 words in total, collected at the Michigan University in the United States. The corpus data were collected during the period of 1997-2001 and covers several speech activities such as seminars, lectures, meetings and dissertations, and recorded speakers include staff, faculty and students. The corpus is searchable by keywords and variables such as gender, native/non-native speakers, speech event types, age, academic division, interactivity rating, academic role, participant level and first language (Simpson, Briggs, Ovens & Swales, 2002).
Since the present study specifically looks at the organisation of turn-taking systems and evidence of power asymmetry in teacher-student interaction, the data are culled from the speech event type of seminars. Data from a total of 7 seminars were available in the corpus from which this study focuses on 2, as explained in more detail below. The seminars that were chosen for analysis, English composition and politics of higher education, were labelled as highly interactive and mostly interactive respectively. The seminars that were not chosen for analysis in this study were 4 different seminars on the graduate level (philosophy, Buddhist studies, public policy and French cinema) plus a first-year seminar in philosophy.

There were two reasons behind the decision of which seminars to analyse: firstly, by looking at the variables of interactional level and the number of participants and secondly, by looking at the content and activity types of the seminars. Both seminars chosen for analysis were rich in teacher-student interaction and consisted of larger groups of students (11 and 20, respectively) that engaged in full class discussions whereas the other seminars either consisted of very small groups as in the case of 3 of the seminars (ranging between 2 students to 8 students). Furthermore, the remainder of the seminars consisted of content that was not suitable for analysis such as the public policy seminar where the students were giving presentations, or in the case of the first-year seminar in philosophy where there is nearly no teacher-student interaction because the class is split into smaller discussion groups which is what was recorded. The selection of where to begin and end the excerpts in the analysis were based on the seminars’ topic and activity type structure. The data used from both seminars are cut to include a whole sequence of an activity type, see more details on this in section 4.

3.2 CDA and CA

In order to find evidence of power asymmetry, the first step was to conduct an exploratory corpus study where examples of power asymmetry derived from previous studies by Heritage (1998), Thornborrow (2002), Drew & Heritage (1992) and Fairclough (2013) was applied to data culled from the MICASE corpus as described in section 3.1. To the excerpts used in the analysis, a mixed approach of CDA and CA is applied.

The present study is modelled of analyses on language and power relations by Fairclough (2013) as well as a study on turn-taking systems in institutional talk by Heritage (1998). Heritage focuses on what constitutes a distinctive turn-taking system by looking at question-answer sequences, pre-allocation of turns and possible sanctions in news interviews to exemplify what characterises distinctive turn-taking systems. While Heritage used
Conversation Analysis (CA) in his study, the present study uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with elements of CA for the reasons explained below.

Traditionally there has been a clear opposition between CA and CDA research with different approaches to data analysis. While CA has been criticised for not accounting for external context, often looking at phenomena in isolation, for being selective of data and lacking critical elements, CDA has been criticised for the opposite: placing too great an emphasis on explanations derived from analysing external context and thus being too critical, bordering on generalising (see further discussion in Drew & Heritage 1992 and Thornborrow 2002). However, both methods have advantages and disadvantages and do not necessarily stand in opposition to one another. In contrast to much of the discussion one may argue that they complement each other well.

Both Thornborrow (2002) and Haworth (2006) have presented arguments for the usefulness of combining the two approaches. Haworth by incorporating a combination of the approaches in her analysis of police interrogation discourse, and Thornborrow by presenting studies by Hutchby (1996b) and Silverman (1997) as basis for her argument of the possibilities of such a combination, to which she states that the strong opposition within CA to analyse power and asymmetry is experiencing a shift (Thornborrow, 2002:22-23).

Therefore, in this study both approaches are applied but for different purposes. A CA approach is applied in the close analysis of sequences of naturally occurring speech in classrooms as well as in the analysis of a distinctive turn-taking system, while the CDA approach is applied to the analysis and discussion of power asymmetry.

This analysis is partly modelled after Heritage’s analysis of turn-taking systems in news interviews described above, which is then applied in a classroom setting in order to see if a distinctive turn-taking system is present. Heritage (1998) states that “[…] CA embodies a theory which argues that sequences of actions are a central aspect of the social context of an action, that the meaning of an action is heavily shaped by the sequence of previous actions from which it emerges, and that social context itself is a dynamically created thing that is expressed in and through the sequential organization of interaction” (Heritage, 1998:3). The analysis and the discussion of power asymmetry is modelled after Fairclough’s three types of constraints described above in section 2.4, which adopts a sensitivity for external context.
4. Results

The following excerpts are taken from two seminars which are on two different subjects with two different teachers. In the exploratory corpus analysis, a total of six different activity types was observed in the entirety of the seminars: introduction, instruction, discussion, feedback, casual conversation and closing, although not all are accounted for in the excerpts. The color-coding system used in the transcripts is the original from the MICASE corpus, where blue represents overlapping speech and bracketed orange represents shorter inserts by speakers.

The first seminar, on English composition, has one teacher (male) and 11 students participating and the explicit focus of the seminar is on the composition of written assignments. In the excerpt below the students are given feedback on common errors, grammatical or stylistic, that the teacher has found in assignments that they have previously handed in. In the transcribed data, it becomes apparent that the students participating are not attending the same program and they are taking several different subjects at the university, albeit all within the humanities.

In the sequence below, the teacher begins by introducing the topic of the seminar and explaining a common error while naming two students who have committed the error in question. Only one of the students named are present and she states that she thought that she had improved.

S1 is the teacher, S4 the student and SS the whole class:

1. **S1**: uh i'll probably repeat this later when more people show up, um, but write this down, for your sake, while it's still fresh, on my mind. uh comma splices, what are those? do you know? well you don't l- have to know what they're called i guess but, it's a run-on sentence. right? two sentences joined by a comma. uh they should be, separated into two separate sentences or you should do some sort of punctuation fix, um semicolon dash maybe even a colon, okay? Leslie you are a, big-time violator of the comma splice rule, and so is Erica (who's not here.)
2. **S4**: i thought i did better this time.
3. **S1**: <LAUGH> i still caught some, right? you you got rid of the uh, the incomplete sentences, <SS: LAUGH> but you're still having trouble, <LAUGH> at the other end.
4. **S4**: thank you very much Simon for announcing my uh, problem (in) class.
5. **S1**: yeah i can read you, some examples
6. **S4**: no that's alright, i'll read (xx) <LAUGH>

In this example, the activity type can be considered to be instructional. In this opening sequence, the teacher addresses the whole class with information about comma splices, or run-on sentences, a common error in writing in general. While doing so, the teacher uses tag-questions (Do you know? Right? Okay?) as well as naming two students by name. Why he
chooses to call out these students in front of the whole class is unclear, but it is interpreted by the student as an allocated turn and is further met with the somewhat defensive statement “I thought I did better this time” in line 2. However, the response of the teacher, who initiates his turn with laughter while also having the whole class laugh, and the further banter-like exchange between the student (S4) and the teacher in this sequence indicates that this is considered normal conduct in this particular classroom context. Furthermore, the level of participation and the fact that the student initiates turns on her own in lines 4 and 6 is indicative of somewhat equal speaking rights and is not indicative of power asymmetry. On the subject of his use of tag-questions, it is mainly in the form of emphasis and consensus seeking, meaning that he wants to see if the students are following him and if they understand.

There are two possible interpretations of this exchange: firstly, it could be argued that the teacher, being in a position of power, deems it appropriate to ridicule those with less power by calling out a single student by name; and secondly, it could be argued that the teacher starts out being in a position of power in the beginning of the exchange but eventually invites the students to participate and build rapport, thereby relinquishing some of his power. There are three main arguments supporting the latter interpretation, which seems to be the most likely one: firstly, the teacher responds by laughing at S4’s remark and engaging the whole class in laughter, secondly through jokes and playful banter with S4, and thirdly by his use of tag-questions as an example of him showing inclusion and a sensitivity to his position.

Conversely, in another sequence from the same seminar, the teacher has selected a paper written by a student and has asked the others to read paragraphs and discuss the composition. S4 in this excerpt is the same student as in the first excerpt. In this excerpt, the class has moved on from the activity type of instruction to the activity types of discussion and feedback, where they are discussing S7’s literary analysis paper.

7. **S1**: […] um on a first glance, the novel appears to critic-criticize Christian beliefs... but after a closer look the novel really doesn't at all criticize the beliefs taught in the Bible Bible is capitalized. the novel is a satire on the people, who use the Bible as justifica- is a satire on the people is just, a longish way of saying satirizes. okay? na- novel satirizes the people who use the Bible, to justify their oppressive behavior. okay? use the w- use the verb when you have the word_ verb you don't have to make verbs out of is and nouns. alright? uh, okay. next one. Leslie why don't you do the next paragraph.

8. **S4**: okay. according to Hammer Handmaid delivers, a clear message opposing Christian fundamentalism. American Christian fundamentalists, are, fanatical and dishonest and therefore highly dangerous. they seek to erode the liberties which all Americans and especially American women cherish. this satire is valid in the sense that all of the dogmas
and morals of Christianity are panoptic and therefore dangerous, but invalid in any accurate account of what fundamental Christianity is.

10. S4: it's, to the point. it's clear.

<SS: LAUGH>

11. S1: <LAUGH> are you just being nice to Chris? or do you really feel that way? or are you just hedging your bets? Or
12. S4: um, is that, last sentence, the w- the satire is that a um, run-on sentence sort of? [S1: hm? ] the last sen- well the last sentence of the paragraph this satire is valid, could that be like maybe broken up?
13. S1: how?
14. S4: um, this satire is valid in the sense that um, maybe he can explain more about, um, why it's valid, like what the dogmas and morals are. you know like
15. S1: well the at least the ones that he calls panoptic [S4: right. ] and da- and dangerous.
16. S4: and then he could talk about m- how they're invalid.
17. S1: yeah. Chris do you really mean that all morals of all Christian morals are panoptic and dangerous?
18. S7: no.

<SS: LAUGH>

In this exchange, the teacher is allocating turns to S4 again, who then reads a paragraph from the paper written by student S7. After S4 has finished reading, the teacher allocates another turn to S4 to ask her about her thoughts on its composition. In the exchange, it is clear that the teacher has found an error in the paragraph and is prompting S4 to find it herself, as seen in the exchange in lines 9 through 11.

The fact that S4’s declarative “it’s, to the point. It’s clear.” in line 10 is met with laughter from the whole class is indicative of the force of the teacher’s previous turn in line 9, something which is further strengthened by his next turn in line 11. In this exchange the teacher is calling attention to the fact that he does not agree with her by questioning her answer and furthermore that he wants her to answer his original question with solid reasoning by following up with “[…]or do you really feel that way? or are you just hedging your bets? Or”. The teachers turn could also be viewed as ridiculing S4 by laughing, questioning her answer and implying that she is possibly “hedging her bets”. At this point, the students and the teachers talking overlap, as shown in blue, causing the teacher to stop talking altogether and letting S4 finish her turn. Following her turn, he asks her to further explain her answer by asking the question “How?” which S4 interprets yet again as signalling the need for a more detailed answer. It is evident that even if the turns are distributed quite equally, the teacher is controlling the topic of discussion and controlling, or directing, the exchange by clearly
showing the class what is considered to be an acceptable answer, thus remaining in a position of power.

In the following exchanges in the lines 6 through 9 the teacher continues to guide S4 towards the point he wants to make, as seen in the very end of the exchange when he addresses the writer S7 himself in line 11. During this sequence, the teacher is giving feedback to S4’s answers, as seen in lines 6, 9 and 11, while the teacher is guiding her towards his goal which is to discuss how the writers paragraph might be improved. It is concluded with an exchange between the teacher and the writer in lines 11 and 12, where the teacher’s criticism of the paragraph is finally made clear.

Even though this excerpt includes mainly the same participants there are more signs of power asymmetry in this excerpt than in the previous one, namely by the clear controlling or directing nature of the teacher’s role. The teacher decides what is considered a plausible answer or not, as seen in the lines 9 through 17, and he has a clear goal with the interaction as a whole which is to call attention to S7’s unclear argument which he tries to achieve through student S4. Furthermore, he puts pressure on student S4 to produce answers that fulfils with this goal. In this sequence, it is evident that the teacher is putting restrictions on student S4 in terms of what she can say or do. By relating this to Fairclough’s three constraints, the teacher is shown exercising constraints on what kinds of utterances S4 can produce by exercising power through their social relation and subject positions of “teacher” and student”. This is achieved by the teacher by effectively controlling the discourse and his assessments of what counts as plausible answers or not. Similarly to McHoul’s (1978) study, the teacher and the students are shown to have different speaking rights. The parts of the seminar which is not included in the analysis follow the same type of pattern as the two excerpts, although the activity types vary slightly. During the entirety of the seminar, the teacher is the one who allocate turns, choses the activity type and topics as well as the one who choses what is deemed an acceptable answer or not, thus drawing on an existing power asymmetry.

The second seminar, on Politics of higher education, has one teacher (female) and 20 students participating. In the excerpt below, the class is participating in the activity types of what I will refer to as discussion and feedback. S1 is the teacher and S2 through S13 are students. In the excerpt below the teacher is giving feedback on an assignment that the students have previously handed in, first by addressing the whole class on how they chose to handle the assignment and then by asking a single student to explain how he solved his assignment by allocating a turn to S12:
1. **S1:** okay um, well, to understand the limitations, and to become more, critical in your own thinking about, uh conclusions that people draw simply from numbers without understanding, necessarily underlying processes. so, some of you, uh, went that extra mile and brought in, other information, beyond the budget, or the c- or the uh uh course guide, to try to, nail things down a little more. some of you, uh limited yourself well some of you looked at the budget but looked at it in multiple ways, kind of, testing out your ideas. uh, and some of you, uh just looked at the budget, and some of you hardly looked at the budget at all. **<LAUGH>** so there wa- kind of a range. um, but all of you had really interesting ideas i thought and so let us uh why don't we start with you? and why don't you talk a little about what, your focus was?

2. **S12:** see i think i did mine on the wrong article i did i ch- i confused my twenty-first and twenty-eighth reading and did mine on Duderstadt's article

3. **S1:** you were the person who wrote about last week i knew [S12: yeah ] there was another person well c'mon tell us what you [S12: okay ] did for last week. i knew [S12: alright <LAUGH>] i had two, you were making me, wonder.

4. **S12:** no <LAUGH> alright in uh, Dr Duderstadt's, Duder- i can't pronounce [S1: Duderstadt ] Duderstadt [S1: yup ] uh article he focused on a change from, um, the need to change, uh the social construct between the university and uh, and the community in general, and so, things that he kind of, let's see, if i remembered, my extra copy, uh... right about, the need to cha- uh establish a new social construct between, the university and community, i talked about the three_ there're, i think five themes that he concentrated on that would be like significant in the future, discussion of higher education and the three of them i discussed were diversity, uh interactive and collaborative uh, uh, methodology or pedog- pedagogy, and then uh, becoming more (a learning center.) in regards to diversity, he ma- he made a good argument for diversity and why it's important to the university, uh but i kinda added more emphasis to the point that, it's more than just a race and ethnic, kind of diversity it's more of, preparing people preparing students (the best for) uh, positions of leadership once we graduate from the University of Michigan because it's not going to be unusual for us to, work for G-M or Ford uh i don't know Chrysler Daimler Chrysler or something like that not in Dearborn Detroit but in uh say, Asia or South America.

5. **S1:** i think if i could interrupt you for a second [S12: uhh ] i think that's a really important point. and you know diversity as a word has kind of become a uh, symbolic, it carries a lotta symbolism. and for some people it has come to mean only race **and. [S12: right ]** ethnicity, or sometimes gender. uh, but... but for others it means something really quite different. and i- it not only includes different cultures but, um different economic experiences, uh rural and urban and so forth and so on. and i think, it's important you know when certainly when we get to the um, discussion of affirmative action but, but just in your everyday life that you you be, careful, about both when you use the word but also what people mean when they use that word because they're they're often, meaning one thing but then talking as though they mean something else. i i so i think it's very, uh that's a very significant point yup?

6. **S12:** and even within the context of race and ethnicity i mentioned the uh, the affirmative action lawsuits against the admission policies of L-S-and-A and then the law school, and how the ramifications would not only be felt by Michigan but also by uh other campuses within the Big Ten, and but in particular i think it was the ninth circuit, district where we're part of all i think all of the Big Ten schools are a part of, and how, whatever decision_ let's say it was a it was a negative decision against, uh the the, the uh the university how it may alter it may, uh, make, universities less likely to pursue, admission policies that have target ethnic minorities or racial minorities or even those who are underrepresented or, disadvantaged. so um,

7. **S1:** however it comes out it [S12: however it comes out ] it's gonna have impact it's gonna have big impact [S12: right ] across the country, you know?

8. **S12:** and the uh, the important thing to remember about is that uh, i think it was what's the name of it? uh, Commission on Institutional Cooperation a lot of the Big Ten schools i
think all of the Big Ten schools are part of this commission. And the important thing to remember about that is that, uh, they graduate between fifteen and twenty percent of all minority PhD graduates. And so if the decision goes against the University of Michigan, it's likely that you could see a decrease in that percentage maybe to, five to ten percent like that I don't know.

9. S1: now why, actually it it's called C-I-C, and it includes all the Big Ten plus Chicago, and we get together, you know to talk about this event. why would a suit, directed at undergraduate admissions, and the law school, have an impact on, PhD production? which is, the number, that um, has been cited here. [S13: cuz you have to be ] it's Ron.

10. S13: oops sorry
11. S1: Ron right?
13. S1: what do you think?
14. S13: don't you need to you have to do undergrad before you do PhD. [S1: yeah, so ] so if there's less people going to undergraduate school then there's less people available to go, get a PhD.
15. S1: absolutely there's a, uh you know that's right, fewer people and what what else might happen? why are these things like _ you didn't actually link it [S12: right ] specifically in your paper but, they're they are linked, yeah.
16. S2: there'll be uh a skew in, in the type of information that is produced and in the type of research perhaps that is uh, that they partake in.
17. S1: why would that be?

In this sequence, there are several examples of power asymmetry, teacher goals and the pre-allocation of turns. Firstly, the addressed student, S12, seem to have misunderstood the assignment and is explaining his line of thought for his assignment in line 4 when the teacher interrupts him in order to stress the importance of a point he was making. The teachers turn is ended with allocating a turn to the student S12 again, giving him the chance to answer and build on her statement.

Even though S12 has misunderstood the assignment, the teacher shows flexibility by letting him explain his assignment regardless. Subsequently, a few turns are equally distributed between the two, with the student initiating a turn for the teacher by being unsure in the end of his turn in line 6. However, it becomes clear that despite the fact that it is a seminar, the teacher is treating this as a one-on-one discussion between her and S12, which becomes evident when S13 tries to take a turn by the end of line 9. When the student is sanctioned for his attempt at taking a turn by the teacher’s utterance “it’s Ron”, the student answers with an attempted repair sequence where S13 tries to apologise and the teacher tries to give the turn back to S12, ultimately talking over each other in lines 9 and 10.

However, despite the sanction and the repair sequence prior, student S13 takes a turn despite the fact that the teacher’s question “what do you think?” in line 13 is directed towards S12. Why he does this is unclear, but since no sanctions follow from the teacher it
might be because S12 did not take the turn as intended, and instead settled on giving his turn to S13. S12 however continues to show his participation by giving inserts throughout the rest of the exchange. Even though the topic of discussion is not necessarily going in the direction of what the teacher intended, she further shows flexibility by accepting a turn taken by another student, S2, by asking a follow-up question on S2’s statement in line 16 and 17. Since the teacher exercises control over the discourse throughout the entirety of the excerpt, these examples of flexibility is most likely due to the fact that the behaviour of the students corresponds with her teaching goals and the initiated activity type.

Consequently, the discussion that gets initiated by the teacher’s question in line 9 that is mainly directed at student S12 ends up engaging a total of 5 students as shown in the following exchanges below where students take turns by themselves. However, it is clear by the teacher’s responses throughout the whole conversation that she is controlling, or directing, the topics by commenting on the students answers and by the fact that she is the one who decides what counts as a viable answer, as seen in the exchange in lines 18 through 23, and again in 29 through 36. Furthermore, she also makes the students stay on the subject at hand, shutting down any possible side tracks as seen in her interruptions of students in lines 18, 21, 23 and 36:

9. **S2**: well if you, if there's a decrease in minorities for instance, in the undergraduate and then therefore there's a decrease in minorities then in the PhD program, there's less, research just by the the the trends, that have been taken. uh more people tend to do research that is pertinent to themselves, and so there will be less [S1: how do you know that?] how do i know

10. **S1**: by the way i think it's true. but, what, why, that's something_ that is what we would call, an empirical question. you know you could go out and find out, you could you could go out and find out what people study and it is_ a- and the reason i ask you this by the way is that it's, this is an assumption that people make that can be deeply offensive to peop- to, the people [S2: mhm] uh who are referred to. let me tell you why. i mean, if you always assume, that African Americans who come into political science want to study black politics, that wouldn't be a, a good assumption. that's not really [S2: mhm] what they're in_ but, what you said tend to, [S2: mhm] and i think it's true but you know what i've never seen any empirical evidence on it.

11. **S2**: oh well i took a class, uh last semester, um, African American intellectual thought and the majority of the class was based on, um, i guess, well, i guess the majority of the class was, was focused on whether or not, uh African Americans in higher ed should focus their, self but um, [S1: but not whether they do] whether they do, yeah, but (they're the)

12. **S1**: yeah, you gotta be careful [S2: mhm] i mean when you go to women's studies [S2: right] it's true you mostly see women. and when you read the, uh writings about women's studies, most, most of it, just on a casual basis you know just from looking is by women. uh, but, uh so probably, this means that, women tend to do, tend but d- it certainly doesn't tend to do more of the women's studies work then, men do. but it doesn't mean that most women do women's studies work, [S2: right.] in fact most women don't, right? and it's the same, thing for any ethnic groups. you have to be really careful about, the conclusions that
you draw. [S2: mhm ] um, but your point is that if you had fewer, minorities underrepresented minorities in the PhD ranks, you might have less, research going on, about minorities and that may be true. it's certainly, a reasonable question to ask. but, where we started is why would you have fewer minority PhD students just because we have a suit, about undergraduates?

13. S2: well maybe not w-
14. S1: i mean [S12: (maybe) ] we had one answer over here which was, you have fewer graduates, of the undergraduate school.
15. S12: they determine (xx) (concerning) interest.
16. S1: yeah
17. S7: um, maybe because they would consider it a more hostile environment?
18. S2: right
19. S1: right maybe, so maybe they wouldn't come to a place that lost a suit on that issue. what else? yeah?
20. S12: it may th-it may even deter a student from even d-like, pursuing a undergraduate degree in whatever it is that you that you want to study (what points at you,) uh decide to enroll in a PhD program. so, let's say you want to do a PhD in political science well, if you don't, i don't know, if there's a lawsuit against not so much a lawsuit but, it may deter you from actually pursuing the undergrad degree in, in that political science before you can get to the PhD level so
21. S1: right this is the same point you got fewer undergraduates so you got fewer people who are prepared to go into the PhD program.
22. S13: possibly um law schools would be, more apprehensive about taking the affirmative action route that they usually do in undergrad and actually start, refusing more minorities.
23. S1: law school yes we've got a suit against the law school if they lose they're gonna have to change the way they do, business. but what about, PhD programs in L-S-and-A or, graduate PhD programs in engineering or, business or
24. S13: well i mean they would be more apprehensive about taking, i mean, the repercussions of taking somebody, over another person, and in fear of being, reprimanded or having a lawsuit against them.
25. S1: it will chill out, basically what [S13: yeah ] they say it will have a chilling effect on the other, graduate programs. [S13: yeah ] it's already had a chilling effect on the structure, of the, uh graduate fellowships that are given out by Rackham. whi-because, everyone now is worried, and positioning themselves to the extent they can so that they're not, uh open to suit. so it's already had some impact and if we lose the suit, it will have impact not just on, uh, the undergraduate and law school but on, a much broader and i think that that's an important point... okay?
26. S12: okay uh, the next one i i kinda, <LAUGH> discussed <S5: LAUGH> was that uh
27. S1: oh i think we'll stop [S12: okay ] (xx) right there. we we we've given you, enough uh, <S12: LAUGH> of the business here. okay. now i think we've talked about the two that were about last week. um, so, let's move on to the budget.
28. S4: that would be, um, myself, i guess, to start. um, as far as the budget assignment goes before i say anything else i will say that this was like the most confusing thing i have ever done i believe. <LAUGH>um, i looked at a bunch of numbers drew some conclusions and then i posed some questions. that i’d, like us to discuss to get your input. um, when i was scrolling through the budget reading it the number that stuck out to me most was under office of the president. in which there was a nice, one million dollar plus sum, that said that it's used for maintenance of the president's house.
29. S1: well it's not just his house but, yeah.
30. S4: well the plant (position)
31. SU-f: he has his own (chef)
32. S1: right
It is clear that the teacher wants to steer the topic back to the seminar’s main focus, which is the discussion of their assignments as shown in line 26 and that the students immediately respond to her change of topic in line 27. During the turn sequence above the activity type could be described as discussion, and since a total of 5 students chose to participate without being allocated any turns by the teacher while not being met with sanctions either (with the exception of the first turn taken by S13), it would seem that this is considered normal conduct in this seminar environment and for the activity type initiated. Examples of departures from normal conduct in this excerpt could be considered in line 11-13 when S13 tries to take a turn, when S12 does not take his allocated turn in line 13, that the students glide off-topic in several places and when S12 tries to initiate a new topic in line 35 which is met with sanctions in line 36.

With regard to Fairclough’s three constraints, the teacher in this excerpt is restricting the contributions of the students by controlling the conversation, shutting down what she deems as irrelevant arguments and by steering the conversation back to the seminars main focus which is to discuss their assignments. The constraints are mainly exercised by drawing on the relations and subject positions of “teacher” and “student”, although it is not entirely successful as seen in the interruptions by S13 in lines 9 through 14. Similarly to Manke (1997), Thornborrow (2002) and Garton (2012), the students in these excerpts are able to challenge the teacher’s interactional goals by trying to change the topic or taking turns without allocation, subsequently gaining greater participation rights. Although in contrast to Manke (1997), the teacher in this excerpt is clearly controlling the conversation and it seems that she is deliberately letting the students engage in a discussion, further showing her pedagogical goal. This difference in attitude between the teacher in this excerpt and in the results of Manke’s study may simply be the results of the age difference of the students as well as the educational level.

Furthermore, in contrast to the teacher of the first seminar this teacher shows more signs of flexibility by giving more space to the students thought processes, indicating somewhat equal speaking rights but also different pedagogical goals. Although this might be because of the difference in topics of the two seminars and consequently the speech activities, where a composition seminar constitutes more “right or wrong”-answers by teachers than a more discussion-based topic such as politics of higher education, there are fewer signs of constraints in the second seminar than in the first one even if there are still constraints present. Furthermore, the teacher is exercising power over her students since she is the only one who allocate turns, choses the activity type and topics as well as the one who choses what
is deemed an acceptable answer or not. The parts of the seminar which is not included in the analysis follow the same type of pattern as the excerpt, where the class is going through students’ assignments by their assigned topics, although the activity types varies slightly, with the same type of teacher control.

5. Discussion

As seen in the analysis of the excerpts from two different seminars with two different teachers, the teachers follow a system of similar conduct and furthermore organises the activities in the two seminars in similar ways. With regard to Heritage’s two main characteristics of distinctive turn taking systems, it is clear that the observed seminars have a large number of participants present (11 and 20, respectively) whose contributions are “rationed” by the teacher. Furthermore, the conversations taking place are “designed for an overhearing audience” as seen in instances where the teacher of the second seminar is addressing a single student and the rest of the class is actively listening (Heritage, 1998:6).

During the first seminar, the allocation of turns and the introduction of new activities and topics are both controlled solely by the teacher, which shows that the teacher is in a greater position of power than his students, who do not have the right to initiate new topics or activities. The conversations are governed by the controlling nature of the teacher’s role in the sense that he is the one who chooses speakers, topics and what is considered a correct answer or not. In this exchange, a departure from normal conduct could be considered in lines 3 through 5 when student S4 does not give clear reasoning for her statement.

The teacher of the second seminar also controls the discussion by commenting on the students answers as well as being the sole person to initiate any new topics for discussion. In addition, it is mainly the teacher who interrupts, and further introduces and changes topics, sanctioning students who speak out of turn or attempt to initiate new topics and who, to a degree, allocates turns to the students by either addressing them directly, asking follow-up questions, giving feedback to statements or changing the topic entirely. However, the teacher seems open to relinquish some power as seen in her flexibility and willingness to let student S12 continue even though he had misunderstood the assignment, and furthermore in how she allows other students to contribute to the discussion later on. Similarly to the findings of Garton (2012), Thornborrow (2002) and Manke (1997), the students of the second seminar are somewhat able to take turns and contribute to the
discourse, although they are not able to do this freely. Subsequently, the second seminar contains more student participation and fewer signs of power asymmetry than the first seminar.

Moreover, it is also evident from these excerpts that the subject positions of “teacher” and “student” in both seminars have different speaking rights, obligations and are more or less restricted by the design of the turn-taking system. Similar to McHoul (1978), the teacher is shown not only to have greater speaking rights but also control over the students speaking rights, restricting them if they break the rules of the system. It is also clear from the analysis that the subject positions of “teacher” and “students” have different obligations in the organisation of talk and that the students are restricted in various ways, whereas the teacher is not. The positions could therefore be argued to be unequal and showing signs of a power asymmetry (Fairclough, 2013:39).

Furthermore, with regard to Lerner (1995) the analysis of the two seminars shows that both the topics and the way the teachers organize the discourse has an impact on student participation. The first seminar, on English composition, is both more teacher centred and more instructional than the second seminar, resulting in more signs of power asymmetry. Conversely, the second seminar, on politics of higher education, is less teacher centred and more discussion-based, ultimately resulting in more student participation and fewer signs of power asymmetry.

To conclude, both teachers control or direct the discussions taking place in both classrooms and both teachers allocate turns and expect their students to act accordingly by answering questions and explaining their reasoning. Furthermore, the teachers’ control of the discourse as shown in the excerpts also holds bearing in the seminars as a whole. As seen in the analysis of both seminars, the teachers are the only ones who initiate new topics and in the examples when students deviate from the structure in the second seminar, the students are met with sanctions. The organisation of the turn-taking system can therefore be considered both distinctive in its organisation and restricting since it is entirely controlled by the teachers’ goals. Although the second seminar shows greater participation rights for students, this seems to be a result of the seminar’s topic and not because of a lack of power asymmetry. The teacher of the second seminar still controls the discourse and constrains her students, but it seems that the subject matter at hand requires more flexibility from the teacher in order for her to reach her pedagogical goals. Therefore, it is evident that the restricting effects of the system, the power displayed by the teachers in their control over the discourse and the sanctions initiated when students
deviated from the system, as exemplified in the excerpts, are evidence of a power asymmetry.

6. Conclusion
The present study set out to study signs of power asymmetry in the organisation of teacher-student interaction by analysing turn-taking systems and constraints in classroom discourse. Studies of educational settings such as McHoul (1978) have either had the outset of a pre-existing power asymmetry due to the nature of the subject positions in classroom discourse, studied younger students such as Manke (1997), or chosen to focus on other aspects of teacher-student interaction such as Lerner (1995). The results of the present study show that power relations are produced in discourse and that factors such as topics, speech activities and subject matter may have an impact on the level of power asymmetry that is present. Furthermore, through a close analysis of turn-taking systems and the organisation of talk done by teachers, the present study has also shown that power asymmetries in teacher-student interaction exist in how the teachers in the analysed data control the discourse, albeit to different extents and to different ends, and not in the discourse itself as an inherent power asymmetry.

Moreover, the analysis shows that teachers control discourse and the organisation of talk to achieve their goals, thus offering further support to the claims of Habermas (1984) and Levinson (1992) that institutional talk is goal-oriented (cited in Thornborrow, 2002:2). It is further shown that as a means to attaining their goals, the teachers put constraints on their students’ participation rights and restrict what is considered acceptable contributions to the discourse. However, the teaching goals expressed in the analysis are shown to be pedagogically driven and do not have the function of exercising power for the sake of exercising power. Furthermore, since there is no possible way to account for the social relations between the teachers and students in the context of the seminars used for the analysis, there may be instances in the excerpts where we cannot know for certain the exact nature of the exchanges.

The present study analysed data recorded at seminars at the university of Michigan from the MICASE corpus with a mixed approach of CA and CDA. While the corpus is created from linguistic data collected in an American University context and even though the educational level (and, thus, the content) is different from other levels of education, the role of a teacher at a university and at other levels of education is similar despite these
differences. Furthermore, since the present study is conducted within the same type of institutional setting, the specific linguistic properties highlighted in the analysis are therefore feasibly transferable to other educational settings such as upper secondary school and university level settings in Sweden. Comparative studies of power asymmetry in teacher-student interaction and cultural differences in educational settings may therefore be of interest for further research.

In relation to the results of the present study and their connection to teaching implications, further research may include more extensive analyses of power relations in educational settings by looking at different levels of education to determine if analyses in other educational settings show similar results such as the present study in terms of organisation of talk and power asymmetry. Further research may also include an explicit connection to teaching implications and how the organisation of educational institutions affects teaching presuppositions and teacher roles. The present study is nevertheless of interest to the institutional role of teachers, a role that is, in many regards, unique. For one, teachers often express individual pedagogical goals in their daily teaching practices such as building rapport with their students and developing an understanding of their students’ positions to increase learning. These goals often differ from the overarching institutions goals of education, which mainly focuses on producing a stable future workforce and citizen education, and as such, the roles of teachers in educational settings is a topic that deserves further exploration.

7. References


