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Outline

Vásquez (2009) examines discourse between a student teacher and her supervisor in order to study face work in a workplace complaint narrative. The setting is a post-observation meeting in which the narrator, Michelle, attempts to complain to her supervisor, Rachel. In this asymmetrical power relationship, Michelle uses mitigation to save face and preserve the proper level of politeness that is expected in a subordinate-superior relationship. By the end of the discourse, Michelle has indirectly stated her complaint – she feels awkward about the introduction of another student teacher into her classroom – but has also admitted that “it’s fine” in an effort to avoid making an explicit complaint and lose face or cause a feeling of negative face in Rachel. Vásquez states that although Michelle’s complaint was not successfully addressed by her superior, Michelle did use appropriate linguistic techniques to maintain the politeness of the interaction.

Comments

Michelle’s attempt to complain to her supervisor about a situation in her classroom reminds me of a similar situation when I was teaching. I have twice had to share a class with another teacher, a special education specialist. The experience was strange because, in both instances, I did not share a planning period with my co-teacher, making planning joint lessons extremely difficult. Like Michelle, however, I was unable to successfully explain how I felt to my supervisors. When principals came to observe the classes, they made brief mentions in our post-observation conferences of how the other teacher and I did not seem to be working together as a team, but it was difficult for me to complain about the arrangement. The need to save face and remain polite while addressing a superior is an overpowering feeling.

Face work like that required by Michelle (and by myself) necessitates a delicate balance between the complainant's positive and negative face wants and the face wants of the supervisor/interlocutor – typically the person who is responsible for whether or not the complainant continues being employed. In Vásquez's (2009) study, Michelle probably had more leeway than I did as a traditional employee because she was a student as well as a teacher. Her supervisor, Rachel, could have interpreted Michelle's complaint as part of her learning experience instead of as a criticism of another employee or of Rachel's decision to place the second teacher in Michelle's class. Throughout the discourse sample, Michelle's speech reflects both positive politeness – attempts at informality and solidarity building – and negative politeness – attempts at deference and indirectness. As a complaint narrative, her preference was for negative politeness to show respect towards her supervisor since it was Rachel's decision to change the dynamic of Michelle's classroom.

Excerpts

1. “Although the supervisor's job may be to provide feedback to teachers during these [post-observation] meetings, there remains an underlying tension: supervisors must balance the competing demands of providing guidance and direction, while attending to teachers' positive and negative face wants (Vásquez, 2004)” (p. 263)
2. “The primary reason for what appears to be a highly contradictory stance in this particular narrative is a tension between the function of Michelle's narrative (which is to complain) and her awareness of, and responsiveness to, the politeness demands of the situation” (p. 274)

3. “[This] analysis has highlighted how the telling of a complaint narrative was shaped by interactional contingencies such as: 1) the need for face work (i.e., mitigation of an FTA); 2) participants’ roles and asymmetrical relationship; and 3) the situated responses of the listener/complaint recipient” (p. 274).

Questions

1. Was Michelle’s complaint successful? What are some features from her discourse with Rachel that support your belief?
2. What are some strategies people in asymmetrical power relationships, where they are the one with lower status, can successfully complain to their superiors without losing face?
3. As future ESL teachers, what are some ways you can instruct your students about saving face when making complaints based on what is pragmatic here in the United States?

References

- Vásquez, C. (2009). Examining the role of face in a workplace complaint narrative. *Narrative Inquiry, 19*(2), 259-279.
- Wardhaugh, R. (2006). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. Blackwell Publishers Ltd. Oxford University Press.