**Heather Edmunds Language Exploration Project LAI 537**

I chose to complete my research in a retail environment. In order to gain deeper access to the rich language practices, I determined that a location I have a personal connection to would best suit my research needs. I selected my family’s furniture store because rather than sitting in a chair and watching or recording the conversations on a surface level, I could also delve into the different relationships that go on beyond the showroom. I am still observing the language use instead of participating in it, but I can view it from more angles in this site.

\*\*For privacy reasons, I am choosing not to disclose the name of the business or the names of the employees and customers.

**The Setting**

The location of the store is in Sennett; a very small, rural town in Central New York. My parents started the store from the ground up and have continued to keep it locally owned and operated. The staff consists of the owner, Dave, who takes care of the paperwork, finances, and communications with vendors, but is also a versatile hand whenever he is needed on the sales floor or warehouse/delivery functions. There is also a salesman, Brian, a deliveryman, Jeff, and another young man, James, who specializes in sales, delivery, and acts as manager. Along with studying this crew’s interactions, I also witnessed the dialogue between customers, without being too intrusive, as well as the conversations between both groups of people.

**Research**

I conducted my research through observations and taking detailed field notes, plenty of photographs of the environment and written language, and recording some audio where applicable. I went into this study with the impression that I would be able to support my research with Gee’s theories of situated language. My focus was mainly on specialist varieties of language as well as the communication between the employees and how they participate in what Gee called affinity spaces. Gee (2004) described affinity spaces as a more suitable term than learning communities. He said,

If we start by talking about spaces rather than "communities," we can then go on and ask to what extent the people interacting within a space, or some subgroup of them, do or do not actually form a community. The answer will be different in different cases. Even if the people interacting within a space do not constitute a community in any real sense, they still may get a good deal from their interactions with others and share a good deal with them. Indeed, some people interacting within a space may see themselves as sharing a "community" with others in that space, while other people view their interactions in the space differently. In any case, creating spaces wherein diverse sorts of people can interact is a leitmotif of the modern world (p. 78-79).

I believed this location to be somewhat of an affinity space in and of itself because of the various individuals that all exist in the same context for language and who work together to accomplish similar goals, i.e. business transactions. As a result of this preconception, most of my research was situated in the belief that the employees act *together* in a single, content-specific, affinity space—one that takes place in the world of ‘new capitalism’; “Much work in the new capitalism involves teams and collaboration, based on the idea that in a fast-changing environment, where knowledge goes out of date rapidly and technological innovation is common, a team can behave more smartly than any individual in it by pooling and distributing knowledge” (Gee, p. 97). Now, going back to the phrase I used previously, “context for language”. I understand how that may be a bit vague, so let’s move on to the first area of my findings where I can explain.

**Specialist Language Varieties**

This is a term that Gee used to declare the differences between vernacular and other varieties. It consists of academic language—which is learned and practiced, and most commonly appreciated, in school. Then we have varieties of language that are specific to different contexts. Gee said, “There are many different varieties of English. Some of these are different dialects spoken in different regions of the country or by different sociocultural groups. Some of them are different varieties of language used by different occupations or for different specific purposes: for example, the language of bookies, lawyers, or video game players” (p. 16). The language used by different occupations is what I observed in my research.

I actually found that there were two distinct types of specialist language used in this environment. One is what some might call “furniture jargon”; terms and concepts used in the world of furniture manufacturing and retail. A basic example of this form would be describing an item as a sofa or loveseat, rather than a “couch”. People who are not rooted in this context of language would not care to distinguish one from the other; it is insignificant in their world of language. One instance where this was prominent was when a customer would come in looking for a mattress; here is one case.

*Brian: “Hello. Is there anything I can help you find today?”*

*Customer: “I’m looking for a bedroom set.”*

This type of exchange is common; it doesn’t require that the person outside of the context of language, here it is the customer, require any sort of additional vocabulary to communicate with the salesman.

*Brian: “Okay sure thing, I can help you out there. Now how many pieces are you looking for? Headboard, footboard, dresser, chest of drawers, maybe a nightstand? What are we looking at here?*

*Customer: “I definitely need a dresser and probably two nightstands. I’m good with the headboard/ footboard stuff. And what was the other thing? Chester drawers? What’s that?”*

I have to admit that this conversation made me laugh a little. I was unsure if that was simply a misinterpretation of what Brian said, or if the customer really had no knowledge of what he was talking about. However, after he pointed one out to her, she continued to call it a “dresser” for the remainder of the time she was in the store, up until her purchase. I would consider that a situation in which the specific language was not important to the customer. It doesn’t affect their ability to do business, so it didn’t much matter.

Nevertheless where the context-specific language does play a role, is in the second scenario—the one in which the employees communicate with each other. Considering these individuals do coexist in the same affinity space, in which furniture language plays a very important role, they are expected to share that knowledge when communicating. For example, later that day, when Dave informed James and Jeff that they needed to pick up a “split box spring” from the warehouse for a customer to pick up at four o’clock that afternoon, it mattered very much that the boys understood precisely what Dave was asking of them. This situation is very similar to how Gee referenced effective video game knowledge; Gee said, “When you can spell out such information in situation-specific terms in the game, then the relationships of this information to the other hundreds of pieces of information in the booklet become clear and meaningful. And, of course, it is these relationships that are what really count if you are to understand the game as a system and, thus, play it at all well” (p. 44). If the boys lacked the content-specific information, they would not succeed very well in their jobs and it took a lot of situated learning in this context for James and Jeff to acquire the appropriate language skills.

**Formality in Retail Environments**

There was a few times in my research where I witnessed a more formal approach to conversation. This quite often stemmed from the demeanor of customers when they drew nearer to the impending greeting of a salesman. I think everyone has witnessed or maybe experienced this scenario before: You walk into a store and see a “pushy” sales person waiting to ‘push’ their product on you. So what happens is we become standoffish to communicating with them. What results, is a short, unfriendly rapport between two individuals. In this case, the customer was distant from the salesman, and in return the salesman shied away from talking to the customer. Now, whether this is right or wrong is not particularly relevant to my findings. However, I thought this resonated with the idea that Gee suggests in which people take on a certain identity when participating in different social contexts and the outcomes produced are from the way we “play the game”. He says, “It is about learning the right moves in embodied interactions in the real world or virtual worlds, moves that get one recognized as "playing the game": that is, enacting the right sort of identity for a given situation (e.g. science class in middle school)” (p. 48). The customer took on the role of being an independent, knowledgeable consumer, and Brian therefore took on the role of being the antithesis of a “pushy” salesman. They both played the game because they have learned how to interact with others in this type of situation; they have gained the identities required from past experiences in this context. My conclusion after studying this type of interaction is that no one really benefits or learns anything.

**Perspective-taking**

I detected many circumstances of perspective-taking in this atmosphere; it occurred most commonly in writing, and between employees and the intended consumer. It was also the most obvious use of language that I could find when exploring my research location. It is not uncommon for businesses to foresee questions that consumers will have when shopping. And if sales associates are not readily available or if the customer does not want to seek one out, we would hope that we might find some sort of information to help us figure it out ourselves. Like where Gee says, you can “piece in missing bits of information, check on your understandings, solve a particular problem, or answer a particular question you have” (p. 44). This was the case for various signs and signals that I viewed and photographed around the furniture store. Most examples were what one would expect: A sales tag, product description, branding marks and logos, etc. All of these written cues count as language use and quite frankly, I’m noticing that they are more and more prevalent in retail locations. Not that retail businesses are the only places where written communication is becoming the norm…. Regardless, written communication can be a very effective medium for learning and I found quite often that it succeeded in informing customers of pertinent information. The written messages I studied from employees to customers, as well as from employees to each other, were no less important than the spoken interfaces.

**Conclusion**   
 There is indeed a science to communicating. And the abilities of perspective-taking, collaboration among individuals, and what Gee calls “playing the game” are the characteristics that determine successful exchanges of language in the retail world; “There are three types of design that reap large rewards in the new capitalism: the ability to design new identities, affinity spaces, and networks. These three types are all deeply interrelated (Gee 2000-1). In turn, people who are adept at taking on new identities, adept at using and interacting within affinity spaces, and are well connected in networks will flourish” (Gee, p. 97).

I went into my research inquiring, “How can everyday varieties of language, like the ones I’ll witness in the furniture store, support my theories of language learning in the classroom?” What I’ve come to find is that the communication skills that are needed in school are the same ones that we need outside of school: 1) We need to learn language in context; knowing what a word means does not contain much relevance to our lives unless we use it. 2) The sharing of ideas is essential to learning in any environment, especially language because that’s how we communicate ideas; if our students do not learn how to share their thoughts, try to understand different perspectives, and learn from each other, it is likely they will not be willing to learn from others in different contexts. 3) Academic language varieties are not everything; many people will survive in the “real world” without using correct grammar or following the rules of proper English. So as much, if not more, attention that you give to learning academic language to succeed in school, you should focus just as much on the language that goes on around you every day--that is where you should situate your learning.

Reference:

*Please visit my Glogster to view artifacts from my research.*

Gee, J.P. (2004). *Situated Language and Learning: A critique of traditional schooling*. Routledge. NY.