SELF-PRESENTATION AND ADAPTATION IN INSTITUTIONAL DISCOURSE: AN ANALYSIS OF GERMAN AND FRENCH INTRODUCTORY ROUNDS OF UNIVERSITY SEMINARS

Claudia Scharioth

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter is concerned with one aspect of institutional discourse in Germany and France. It deals with self-presentation and speech accommodation, concentrating specifically on how participants in university seminars introduce themselves to the other participants in the class. The study investigates the individual students’ communicative behaviours in this specific institutional setting, focusing on the way how students adopt utterance structure and choice of words from previous speakers. The chapter is structured as follows: Sections 2 and 3 provide information on the theoretical and interdisciplinary perspective of the study and present the empirical data. The two main hypotheses underlying the analysis are introduced and investigated in Section 4. The main results of the analysis and their bearing on the phenomenon of self-presentation are discussed in Section 5. Section 6 draws a brief and general conclusion.

1 These introductions are a very common practice in seminars at German and French universities. They take place in the first session of the seminar. The idea is for the participants to get acquainted with each other (see Section 3).
2. Theoretical Background

This study represents an interdisciplinary perspective on language use. It is only with an interdisciplinary approach that we are able to trace the multiple layers of the communicative behaviours in the specific setting investigated here. The methodology used in the analysis draws on Conversation Analysis (e.g. Adamzik, 2001; Depermann, 2001; Henne & Rehbock, 2001; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) in order to classify self-presentation patterns. The influence of institutions on the participants’ speech and action patterns is well described in and explained by studies in the field of Linguistics (e.g. Becker-Mrotzek, 1990; Bendel, 2007; Ehlich & Rehbein, 1983; Koerfer & Zeck, 1983; Wodak, 1987). The analysis of adaptation has emerged within different traditions and disciplines in Sociology and Psychology: from the tradition of Interpretative Sociology, from the Symbolic Interactionist perspective and from the discipline of Ethnomethodology. In this paper I adopt the sociopsychological model of Speech-Accommodation Theory (SAT) by Giles, which is “devised to explain some of the motivations underlying certain shifts in people’s speech styles during social encounters” (Giles & Beebe, 1984, p. 7). I agree with Giles, Coupland, and Coupland (1991) that this theory can be considered as the “predominant theory at the interface between language, communication, and social psychology” (p. 2).

SAT starts from the basic assumption that every speaker has a speech repertoire from which he or she makes a choice, and thus in his or her own turn at talk converges with or diverges from others:

Convergence has been defined as a linguistic strategy whereby individuals adapt to each other’s speech by means of a wide range of linguistic features. (Giles & Beebe, 1984, p. 234)

One effect of the convergence of speech patterns is that it allows the sender to be perceived as more similar to the receiver than would have been the case had he not accommodated his style of speaking in this manner. (Giles & Powesland 1975/1997, p. 234)

Divergence refers to the way in which speakers accentuate vocal differences between themselves and others. (Giles, Mulac, Bradoc, & Johnson, 1987, p. 14)

The individual creates from himself the patterns of his linguistic behaviour (…) so as to be unlike those from whom he wishes to be distinguished. (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985, p. 181)

Obviously, these two concepts – convergence and divergence – are in conflict and it needs to be analysed in which situations speakers choose to either accommodate their speech pattern to those around them or distinguish themselves from the other speakers. In the present empirical study I analysed accommodation and convergence in students’ communicative behaviours in the institutional setting of university seminars.