

Forms for talk and talk for forms: Oral and literate dimensions of language use in Employment Training interviews*

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Abstract

This paper uses observational data from occupational training counselling sessions to describe and analyse ways in which spoken and written modes of language use are related and combined. Some specific discourse-features are identified and discussed in relation to the institutional and interpersonal contexts of the sessions as bi-modal language events. Comparisons are made between the observed events and other similar bi-modal events (e.g., doctor-patient consultations, police interviews), as studied by other researchers. It is argued that the analysis of such events requires a revised conception of the cultural basis and social functions of talk and writing and, especially, of the relationship between these two modes of language use.

Keywords: interviews; language events; literacy events; literacy; orality; reformulation; traditions.

Introduction

This paper is about ways that talk and writing are used in a specific set of observed social encounters, interviews in which people are assessed and counselled for courses of occupational training. It emerges from a continuing programme of applied research into occupational counselling, of which some findings have been reported elsewhere (Longman, 1990; Mercer and Longman, 1992). Although we will offer here an analysis of language use in this specific set of events, we will also use this analysis to support a more general proposition: that, for anyone attempting to analyse the use and function of language in social encounters in modern western society, it may no longer be appropriate to describe observed language use in terms of separate 'literate' and 'oral' modes, especially if those modes are taken to be associated with separate oral and literate traditions of language use