

The Conversational Throne: Analyzing the Impact of Casual Language on Power Dynamics in The Late Late Show with James Corden's Carpool Karaoke

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate how the use of casual language affects power dynamics in conversations and how this relates to politeness strategies within a discourse analysis framework. The topic was chosen because informal communication practices are increasingly common in the era of digital media and contemporary entertainment, yet their impact on power structures in social interactions remains under-researched. Specifically, this study focuses on how participants use informal language to maintain, enhance, or negotiate dominant social positions in various public conversation contexts. A qualitative approach using Teun A. van Dijk's Discourse Analysis (DA) framework will be employed, with data collected from conversation transcripts of social media interactions. Specifically, two YouTube videos from The Late Late Show with James Corden's Carpool Karaoke will be examined: "Justin Bieber Carpool Karaoke" and "Justin Bieber Carpool Karaoke Vol. 2." Forms of politeness strategies, such as positive politeness, will be identified, and the power relations formed through the choice of casual language used by the two characters will be mapped. This study is based on the main question of how forms of casual language are used in verbal interactions involving comforting interlocutors and maintaining power. The results show that casual language does not necessarily reflect equality; rather, it can serve as a strategic tool to establish intimacy or maintain dominance depending on the user and context. Individuals with authority who use positive politeness tend to reinforce participative leadership, while casual language from subordinates can be a veiled rejection of hierarchical structures. These findings confirm that politeness strategies and casual language play an important role in shaping and shifting power relations in everyday communication, especially in entertainment and popular media.

Keywords: casual language, power dynamics, politeness strategies, discourse analysis, social interaction

Introduction

Language plays a much more complex role than merely serving as a means of communication. It is a social instrument that can shape, maintain, and destabilize power structures. In everyday interactions, a person's speech — including word choice and style — is never free from the influence of social context, ideology, and deeper communicative goals. Casual language is an interesting form of language use to analyze because, although it appears relaxed and informal, it can significantly impact the power dynamics between speakers. Although casual language is often associated with familiarity, equality, and non-hierarchical relations, it can also be used to disguise and strengthen dominant positions in conversation.

Casual language is generally understood as informal speech often used in familiar or non-formal social contexts. Holmes (2013) states that casual language plays an important role in building solidarity and strengthening social identity. Sennett (2012), on the other hand, emphasizes that even in formal institutions, dominant actors can use informal communication styles to create the impression of openness while maintaining control over the direction of the interaction. In other words, casual language can serve as a rhetorical tool to maintain power subtly. In this context, the theory of politeness strategies developed by Brown and Levinson (1987) becomes relevant. Politeness strategies, especially positive politeness, often manifest as humor, familiar greetings, and friendly approaches when conveying opinions—strategies that are common in casual language.

This research also adopts the Discourse Analysis (DA) approach of Teun A. van Dijk. Van Dijk (1993) views discourse as not only a linguistic structure but also an ideology-laden social representation. Van Dijk developed a three-layer model of discourse analysis—micro (text structure), meso (social cognition), and macro (social structure)—to demonstrate how power is reproduced through control over discourse. He argues that who speaks, how they speak, and the context in which they speak are part of a social control mechanism that is often overlooked.

Building on this framework, this research analyzes the interaction between James Corden and Justin Bieber in two episodes of The Late Late Show's "Carpool Karaoke" segment. These episodes were selected because they showcase verbal interactions within an entertainment context, where two prominent public figures predominantly use casual language. Combining van Dijk's DA perspective and Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness strategies, this study aims to understand how casual language is used in public conversations to create comfort for interlocutors while maintaining or strengthening power relations. Thus, the main question this study addresses is how casual language is used in verbal interactions involving interlocutors' comfort and power maintenance.

Methods

This research employs a qualitative approach based on the Discourse Analysis (DA) method developed by Teun A. van Dijk (1993). This approach aims to understand how casual language is strategically used to shape, maintain, or challenge power relations in verbal interactions and how politeness strategies play a role in this process.

1. Data Source

The main data for this study are taken from two Carpool Karaoke videos aired on The Late Late Show with James Corden:

- "Justin Bieber Carpool Karaoke"
(<https://youtu.be/Dx06c0ZEBMk?si=BNqMSmbo83J6e2-l>)
- "Justin Bieber Carpool Karaoke Vol. 2"
(<https://youtu.be/ztWFp63QPj4?si=vimBWgu6ZX6uZt3>)

Both episodes were chosen because they feature informal interactions between public figures of high social status in semi-structured situations that imply symbolic and discursive power relations. The interaction between host/discourse controller James Corden and guest star Justin Bieber shows complex power dynamics, with the use of casual language as a means of social negotiation.

2. Data Collection

The data for this study were obtained by transcribing verbal interactions between James Corden and Justin Bieber in two episodes of Carpool Karaoke that aired on The Late Late Show with James Corden YouTube channel. These videos were selected because they feature natural conversations in an entertaining format and depict casual interactions between two public figures with different social backgrounds and statuses. This situation provides an ideal context for observing how casual language relates to power dynamics and politeness strategies.

The first step in the data collection process was to select and download the two videos to be analyzed: "Justin Bieber Carpool Karaoke" and "Justin Bieber Carpool Karaoke Vol. 2." The entire conversation in both videos was then transcribed manually. This process involved transcribing not only the main speech but also pragmatic aspects, such as responses, turns of speech, pauses, and interruptions. It also involved transcribing paralinguistic elements, such as laughter, tone of voice, and meaningful nonverbal expressions, such as gestures or eye contact. These elements can strengthen the interpretation of meaning in the social context.

After transcribing the data, we analyzed it qualitatively through an initial categorization that aimed to identify three main focuses. We analyzed the casual language used by both characters, including slang, informal greetings such as "dude" or "bro," ellipses, omission of sentence parts, interjections, and other spontaneous expressions reflecting a casual speaking style. The discourse structure was examined to see how power relations manifested or were negotiated in interaction, whether through topic domination, control over speaking turns, or management of social impressions in public. Using this approach, the transcribed data serves as a source of linguistic information and a reflection of social practices containing ideological and relational meanings in the context of casual public communication.

3. Data Analysis Technique

In this study, data analysis was carried out by combining two main theoretical frameworks: the discourse analysis (DA) approach developed by Teun A. van Dijk and the theory of politeness strategies from Brown and Levinson (1987). The analysis focuses on revealing how casual language is used to form, negotiate, or perpetuate power relations in public discourse.

Van Dijk's DA approach provides a comprehensive analytical framework with three layers. First, at the text level (micro level), the analysis focuses on structural language aspects, such as diction, sentence structure, and casual word choice, which can reflect an informal style. At this level, language is understood as a textual construction that reflects certain communication goals related to the social position of the speakers and is not value-free.

Next, the analysis shifts to the social cognition (meso) level, examining how speakers and their audience understand the meaning of speech based on shared knowledge, social norms, and collective perceptions. In this context, the analysis of the relationship between James Corden and Justin Bieber is based on how they represent themselves as public figures and individuals in casual interactions. It also considers how the audience shapes the meaning by interpreting their symbols and speaking styles.

Finally, at the macro level of social context, the analysis includes the relationship between discourse and broader power structures. This includes the role of the media in shaping public perceptions of celebrities and how symbolic power is

reproduced through seemingly casual interactions. At this stage, language is seen not only as a form of interpersonal communication but also as an ideological instrument related to social dynamics, cultural dominance, and the legitimization of social roles within society as a whole.

Data Analysis

Transcripts of verbal interactions between James Corden and Justin Bieber in two episodes of Carpool Karaoke were analyzed. This analysis used the three-level model of Discourse Analysis by Teun A. van Dijk (1993), which includes text structure (micro level), social cognition structure (meso level), and broader social context (macro level). Additionally, politeness strategies based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory were applied to identify linguistic ways of maintaining social relations and negotiating power.

At the micro level (text structure), the analysis revealed an intensive use of casual language, including expressions such as "dude," "man," and spontaneous interjections such as "oh my God," "yeah," and "seriously." Both participants used this informal language, albeit with different frequencies and functions. As the host, James Corden often started the conversation informally to create a comfortable atmosphere, direct the conversation's flow, and signal control over the speaking turn. Conversely, Justin Bieber used casual language to respond in a relaxed manner while maintaining his image as a cooperative guest star. This demonstrates a positive politeness strategy, which attempts to show closeness and acceptance toward the interlocutor.

At the meso level of social cognition, it is evident that both characters have similar social knowledge about their public roles. Despite being the host, James Corden uses humor and casual greetings to blur the line between control and friendship. Bieber picks up on this and consciously responds in the same style. For instance, when Corden teased Bieber about his clothing choices or lifestyle, Bieber responded with laughter and lighthearted comments. This interaction reflects an awareness of each other's social status but softens it through a discourse that appears equal.

At the macro level (social structure and ideology), this interaction illustrates how media and public figures display power relations wrapped in intimacy. As a representative of mainstream media, James Corden has authority over the narrative built into the program. Though the language is informal, Corden controls the direction of the conversation and determines which topics are highlighted. In this case, power is expressed not through explicit domination but through subtle, persuasive conversation management. In contrast, Justin Bieber, a guest and young celebrity, uses a relaxed style to maintain his popularity and connection with the audience without directly challenging the host's authority.

The most prevalent politeness strategy in the data is positive politeness, indicating that both Corden and Bieber aim to create an impression of familiarity. However, this strategy reveals the management of social position and symbolic power. Even in seemingly casual and lighthearted discourse, power operates through language choices and interaction structures.

Result

The results of the analysis of two episodes of Carpool Karaoke with James Corden and Justin Bieber show a number of important findings related to the use of casual language and politeness strategies in power dynamics. The following is a

summary of the research results based on the three levels of DA analysis (van Dijk) and Brown & Levinson's theory:

1. Micro Level (Text Structure)

- There is extensive use of casual language, including:
 - Slang: "bro", "dude", "man".
 - Emotional interjections: "oh my God", 'seriously', "no way".
 - Ellipsis and incomplete sentences as markers of spontaneity.
- James Corden uses humor and casual greetings to:
 - Establish an informal atmosphere.
 - Conceal control over speaking turns and topic direction.
- Justin Bieber responds in a similar casual style, but is more reactive.

2. Meso Level (Social Cognition):

Both participants demonstrated an understanding of their respective social roles.

- James Corden: mediator, conversation controller, and media representative.
- Justin Bieber = guest, celebrity, and cooperative image bearer.

Dominant Politeness Strategies:

- Positive politeness: compliments, shared laughter, and an inclusive language style.
- James Corden maintained control even though the interaction appeared parallel.

3. Macro Level (Social Context and Ideology):

Interactions reflect symbolic power relations.

- James Corden: narrative authority as part of the media institution.
- Justin Bieber goes with the flow of the discourse without confrontation.

Casual language is used as a strategy to:

- Public image polishing strategy.
- A means of reducing the impression of hierarchy without removing it.

There is a reproduction of power through entertainment formats and public representations that seem "egalitarian."

4. Politeness Strategies Found

Examples and Functions of Politeness Strategies

Positive politeness: compliments, use of humor, and familiar greetings show familiarity.

Discussion

In Carpool Karaoke, casual language is not merely a stylistic choice; it constitutes a discursive strategy that subtly negotiates power. Through a combination of politeness and turn-taking strategies, participants collectively construct a discourse that appears egalitarian while concurrently preserving their established social and ideological positions. Employing the framework of Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (e.g., *Language and Power*, 1989; *Discourse and Social Change*, 1992), which examines how language use contributes to the reproduction or transformation of power relations and ideologies, this analysis of interactions between James Corden and Justin Bieber across two Carpool Karaoke episodes reveals the significant role of casual language in shaping, disguising, and negotiating power dynamics within media entertainment. Despite its superficial appearance as an

informal conversation, the resulting discourse structure unveils symbolic power meticulously orchestrated by the media—specifically, by James Corden as the host.

1. Casual Language as a Subtle Tool of Dominance

In the initial transcript at 00:10-00:15 of the first episode, James Corden begins with an informal opening:

James Corden (00.12): "Hi, guys. Oh my God, pleasure, guys. Anytime."
(Justin Bieber laughs and replies, "Oh my God.")

These remarks reflect positive politeness, which blurs the social distance between host and guest. By greeting them with an exaggerated expression of astonishment, Corden breaks the ice and implicitly positions himself as a "humble" person in front of the big stars. However, he still controls the flow of the conversation, demonstrating his position of power as the director of the discourse.

2. Politeness Strategies in Parallel Interaction

During the conversation, around seconds 02:30-02:40 Bieber used the politeness strategies several times to avoid potential confrontation. For example:

James Corden (02.32): "Why don't you drive? Why am I always driving you?"

Justin Bieber (02.25): "You're such a good driver. I don't want to ruin the experience."

This response is a form of mild sarcasm packaged as humor. Instead of rejecting Corden's request outright, Bieber used a complimentary reason. It's a form of off-record politeness that keeps social relationships positive without losing face.

3. Framed Power Discourse:

Within van Dijk's social cognition framework, both Corden and Bieber engage in reproducing internalized social representations. Although Corden has full control over the set, camera, topic, and editing, he comes across as a "simple yet funny" figure. Although Bieber is a major celebrity, he was in the position of a guest who conformed to the discourse agenda set by the media.

Corden asked many open-ended questions but also made subtle interruptions and changed the topic often. In one part:

Justin Bieber: "So I've been working on some new stuff-"

James Corden (interrupting): "That's great, but before we talk music... can we talk about your shoes?"

This demonstrates how control of the topic shifts without the audience realizing it, revealing an implicit yet dominant power relationship. Van Dijk calls this form of power "control over context," which is the ability to determine the structure of a conversation and how it is perceived without verbally dominating.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that casual language in entertainment media is not merely a neutral form of informal communication; rather, it is a strategic tool used to negotiate and maintain power relations. Using Teun A. van Dijk's discourse analysis (DA) approach and Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness strategies, this study analyzes the interaction between James Corden and Justin Bieber in two episodes of Carpool Karaoke. The analysis reveals how the two use informal language as a conscious mechanism of discourse management and social control.

The analysis reveals that, at the micro level (text structure), casual language, such as slang, emotional interjections, ellipses, and humor, is employed to create a relaxed atmosphere while concealing the existing power structure. At the meso level (social cognition), both characters are seen to understand their public roles and adjust their speech strategies to maintain a balanced relationship. However, Corden still subtly manages the direction of the conversation. At the macro level (social structure), this interaction reflects the symbolic dominance of the media, where the host, representing the media institution, retains power over narrative and social representation.

The positive politeness strategy seems to be the most dominant, suggesting that the sense of familiarity established during the conversation is actually a rhetorical strategy used to maintain the social hierarchy without seeming oppressive. Even when conversations seem equal and natural, power relations persist through turn management, choice of topics, and control over discourse structures.

Therefore, it can be concluded that casual language in the media is not merely informal expression; it is also an effective ideological instrument for framing and maintaining power in social relations. This finding confirms the importance of analyzing language practices in popular media to reveal the hidden power dynamics behind seemingly familiar, lighthearted communication styles.

Biography

Najwa Nur Fadila, who is familiarly called Najwa, is a 4th semester student of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Islam Kediri (UNISKA) Kediri. Najwa has a interest in communication, writing, and public speaking. She has experience as an MC and moderator in various campus activities and organizations, and has good leadership skills in managing teams effectively.

In developing her English competence, Najwa has attended intensive courses focusing on vocabulary, pronoun usage, speaking, and listening comprehension. She continues to develop her interest in writing and public speaking through academic and non-academic activities that support the improvement of communication skills in English.

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