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Discursively Performing Membership: Assertions Of Normativity

ERDG 715: Discourse Analysis, Fall 2009

“Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?” Amos 3:3, New International Bible

Abstract

This paper develops a model to chart what happens in discourse when an interlocutor raises an *assertion of normativity*, i.e., what is considered common knowledge for belief and action that is morally compelling. The model is termed *the discursive trajectory of an assertion of normativity*. The work of Michael Silverstein (2007), Erving Goffman (1967), and Brown & Levinson (1987) is drawn upon in the development of a framework to show that groups or interlocutors do *membership work* by aligning themselves according to norms which are made explicit in talk. Norms are explicated in *theories of normativity* that unfold discursively. As norms are explicated and negotiated, group *membership in good standing* is defined. This model has practical implications for educational discourse analysis, and it can serve as a basis for analyzing intercultural communication.

1. Introduction

A disagreement is essentially a problem in which one person sees the world one way, and another person sees the world in a different way, insofar as each person holds a coherent belief system. In a grand sense, all knowledge and opinion hangs on some (at least temporarily) fixed and systematic notion of the way the world is. Such notions are assumptions of what the total state of affairs in the world is. Let us call these notions informal *theories* (Gee, 2005). Discursive moves, then, adhere to the outlines of these theories, and may be divided into two kinds: moves proceeding with tacit assumptions of what the state of affairs is, and moves that question, challenge, or seek to define or redefine what the state of affairs is.

This study attempts to plot the trajectory of discourse in which questions of norms are raised. “Trajectory” refers to the pattern in which one discursive move follows another. The discursive move of an assertion of normativity (that is, a statement or question that assumes a normative state of affairs), it is argued, is followed by¹ a move of agreement (tacit or expressed) or disagreement in the form of deliberation or contention that may lead to division among participants in the discourse. Knowledge and opinion hang on assumed theories, and so, this paper argues, does group cohesion.

To develop a model of the discursive trajectory of an assertion of normativity, Michael Silverstein's (2007) concept of "performing membership" in which interlocutors situate themselves relationally to denotational text is drawn upon. Silverstein's ideas are adapted to situations in which normative behaviors and beliefs form the denotational text, from which participants form (co-construct) *theories of normativity*, similar to Silverstein's "onomonic knowledge". Erving Goffman's (1967) "face-work" and Brown & Levinson's (1978/1987) politeness theory are sourced to formulate a concept of *membership work* in

which participants align themselves to norms to maintain *membership in good standing*, i.e., to refine norms through deliberation to create new understandings of what constitutes membership.

Several examples are provided using excerpts from two transcripts of face-to-face interaction and one transcript of anonymous Internet discourse. Finally, implications this model may have for civil and educational discourse are discussed.

2. Background: Discursively performing membership

[M]embership in every social group is always and everywhere a more or less subtle function of continuously performing that membership -- indexically locating oneself in social categories, in effect -- for others whose task it is to recognize this interactional work and to situate themselves relationally in respect of it. (Silverstein, 2007, p. 41- 43)

To illustrate the performance of membership, Michael Silverstein analyzes a conversation between two graduate students who have just met. In the "denotational text" (the verbal content of their talk) these students raise the subject of college attendance, which they have in common. Between them, they co-construct a scheme on the subject of college that is discursively fleshed out with details through question and answer exchanges. In the process of building this conceptual scheme ("-onomic knowledge" in Silverstein's terminology) the participants position themselves within the framework of universities and geographical locations they have constructed:²

- 1 A: An' you went to undergraduate here or
 2 B: In Chicago at, uh, Loyola
 3 A: Oh oh oh oh oh, I'm an old Jesuit boy myself, unfortunately
 4 B: Oh are ya? where'd you go to?
 5 A: At Georgetown, down in Washington
 (adapted from Silverstein, 2007, p. 42)

Each becomes aligned with a particular undergraduate institution and locale. As it happens, they are aligned not only within Jesuit institutions (as if to have something in common) but the scheme they construct also shows them to be differentially aligned, one having a more prestigious standing, the other less. The differential alignment is not made explicit, but is palpable in the undercurrent of insider knowledge, especially that Georgetown is a more prestigious university than Loyola (a prestige that speaker A politely, yet perhaps falsely, disavows with the tag "unfortunately"). Silverstein notes:

One's *group membership*, and even one's *status within a group*, emerges in interaction as one signals control over group-specific -onomic knowledge, the kind of knowledge, to be sure, that one has access to as a function of participation in discursive interaction (2007, p. 41, italics added).

Silverstein's analysis of discourse helps us to see how participants present themselves and perform membership in relation to the knowledge they co-construct.

2.1. Norms and common knowledge

If, instead of conceptual knowledge on subjects such as college affiliation, Silverstein's students raised questions of right conduct or normative behavior, what effect would that have on group membership and status within the group? Even more fundamental than the tendency to (politely) one-up one another according to group-specific knowledge is the tendency for people to align themselves according to norms of good and competent behavior. Norms of goodness range from the prohibition of murder to saying "please" and "thank you"; norms of competence rest on a core of common knowledge, such as, for example, how to flip a switch, that the earth goes around the sun, and that some dogs bite.

Norms have been called "the cement of society", "decentralized spontaneous mechanisms for coordination and cooperation" upon which society coheres (Elster, 1989, p. 250). Norms are formed of common knowledge which is largely implicit or out of awareness. Nonetheless, common knowledge is "expected of anyone who 'knows the language'" (Silverstein, 2007, p. 41); it is knowledge of what to expect in a given situation. With these common knowledge expectations, interlocutors achieve an intersubjective coherence (this compares to "recipient-designed mutual knowledge", Schegloff, 1988, p. 444; frames of expectation, Tannen, 1993; common ground, Clark, 1996; Discourse models of appropriateness, Gee, 2005).

Norms are not only followed implicitly, but are frequently negotiated in conversation. Examples readily come to mind: for instance, while the driver parks the car, the passenger asks, "Do you think we're close enough to the curb?" Or one neighbor says to another, "Your lawn is getting a little wild, don't you think", to which the reply comes, "I'm going for a lush look". The underlying assumptions are that all competent members of the group "drivers" know cars shouldn't be too far from the curb, and all competent members of the group "neighbors" know lawns should be mowed, but there is a range of normativity in which drivers and neighbors may choose to operate. The acceptable range is commonly debated (e.g., that within the acceptable range, there is a "lush-looking lawn"), and serious disagreements may arise over what exceeds the range of acceptability. In aligning themselves vis-à-vis normative behavior, it is possible for participants to align themselves inside or outside the present group or to form opposing opinion camps.

Norms form a class of behavior-regulating social rules, and as such, a norm enters conversation in a peculiar discursive move identifiable as an "assertion of normativity", as just illustrated. Norms have at least three features that distinguish them from other topics of talk. The first is that they are assumed to be binding or compelling, as if to say, "this is normal behavior for normal people" (whatever normal happens to be in a specific situation). The second feature is that a norm, albeit punishable by formal law, is independent of legal and social institutions. Third, a norm has *punishment-supported stability*, which is to say:

Norms are rules which specify behaviors that are required or forbidden independently of any legal or social institution or authority, though of course some norms are also enforced by laws or other social institutions... Violations of norms result in a variety of punitive attitudes -- including anger, condemnation, and blame -- directed at rule violators; the presence of these punitive attitudes in

members of the community contributes to a norm's long-term stability (Kelly & Stich, 2007, pp. 349-350).

Thus norm violation involves a measure of sanction ranging from silent "tolerance" (as in the case of a passenger refraining from commenting on the driver's ability to park) to outright punishment (as in the case of a driver who is fined by the traffic court for parking illegally).

While disagreements over norms don't necessarily threaten group membership, some normative stances may put a participant squarely outside the group. For example, on the level of law, convicted criminals are put outside free society; on the moral level, offenders may be put out of church membership; even flouters of folkways may be shunned by their peers, like the neighbor who neglects lawn maintenance. Performing membership, then, is not only a matter of "indexically locating oneself in social categories" co-constructed in talk, but is also a matter of maintaining membership in good standing by staying in alignment with group norms, whatever they may happen to be.

2.2. "Theories" of normativity

A conversation, then, takes place along (loose) structures of assumed knowledge herein termed "theories". We hold in our minds more or less fleshed-out theories (Gee, 2005, p. 96); in conversation we discursively "compare" these theories and learn from one another as we position ourselves vis-à-vis one another's knowledge. Group norms are usually followed implicitly, but when participants choose to make norms explicit, they unfold discursively and take on a "textual formedness" (Silverstein, 2007, p. 47) according to which participants can show themselves to be members in good standing. Consider the following sample of elementary school classroom conversation in which children deliberate over the appropriateness of using the word *beer* in their writing:

- 1 Mark: Some kinds of beer are good for you.
 2 Robbie: It's alcohol . It's non-alcohol.
 3 Mark: You know, like root beer, it's not alcohol.
 4 Teacher: Well, that wasn't said
 [...]
 5 Will: I don't like the wor -- when he uses beer in the story. It's sort of a slang word, especially if it's a kid's story that you'll be reading to a class. I mean, grown-ups, like, if you were reading a grown-up book, you'd probably find some stuff like that in it, but not in a kid's story.
 6 Mark: I know, if he changed it to root beer, it'd be SAFE.
 (Adapted from Buzzelli & Johnston, 2001, p. 878; see Appendix A for the full transcript)

In this interaction, Mark, Robbie, and Will co-construct a "theory of beer" in which:

beer has two varieties

- (1) okay for children: non-alcohol
 root beer as an example
 "safe"

- (2) not okay for children: alcohol
 a "slang word"
 for grown-ups

According to this theory, the children may align themselves with regard to the use of the word *beer*, that is, to stay on the "safe" side of the word. Yet in spite of their conceptual work, the teacher points out the crucial distinction that the word in question was not *root beer*, but was *beer*. Thus the teacher prevails in clarifying the norm for the group (even though the children had already disavowed themselves of the alcoholic variety of beer).

2.3. Face-work and membership work

To Silverstein's claim that all interaction involves the work of alignment with conceptual knowledge, let us add Erving Goffman's (1967) claim that all interaction involves a degree of "face-work" -- a striving to maintain positive social value for the self and, in a cooperative gesture, for others, too. In short, people don't want to be put outside the group they want to belong to. According to Goffman, members of a group are entitled to an expectation that they are members in good standing at the same time as they are obligated to enact the socially-approved attributes of their position or role:

During interaction the individual is expected to possess certain attributes, capacities, and information which, taken together, fit together into a self that is at once coherently unified and appropriate for the occasion... The elements of a social encounter, then, consist of effectively projected claims to an acceptable self and the confirmation of like claims on the part of the others. The contributions of all are oriented to these and built up on the basis of them. (p. 105-106).

Following Goffman, let us assume that in social interaction we are entitled by default to an expectation that we will be accepted and positively regarded *as long as we adhere to norms of appropriateness* -- for example, norms of morality, competence, dress, gesture, and hygiene. An individual maintains (performs) membership in good standing by aligning himself or herself to these norms. I will call this "membership work".

Extending Goffman's ideas, Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory suggests that face-work is in some aspects universal, and that people (relative to the situation and their status and role) are entitled to an expectation of self-affirmation and autonomy (respectively, "positive" and "negative" politeness), also called "face wants". Politeness, then, is the work of paying respect to these expectations or, on the other side of the same coin, it is the work of trying not to threaten each other's self-affirmation and autonomy. Politeness is, in short, a kind of "social lubrication".

In doing membership work, the main face threats to avoid are indications that "the speaker does not care about the addressee's feelings, wants, etc." (Brown & Levinson, 1978/1987, p. 66) such as:

expressions of disapproval, criticism, contempt or ridicule... contradictions, challenges ([that is, the speaker] indicates that he thinks [the addressee] is wrong or misguided or unreasonable about some issue...) ... raising of dangerously emotional or divisive topics, e.g. politics, race, religion... (pp. 66-67)

Note that these threats are matters of normativity. Such indications or acts of disapproval and contradiction threaten to call membership in good standing into question, as they may be taken as challenges to one's competence -- that is, one's ability to trade on common knowledge -- or one's correctness, such as being politically "right" when the group is "left", or being Christian when the group is Muslim.

2.4. Stakes in group membership

Politeness theory posits that face threat levels depend on the size of an imposition (a big favor requires more politeness, a small favor less), social distance (more intimacy or solidarity present, less politeness required), and the power gap between interlocutors. The necessity of membership work, and how much social lubrication it requires, depends on these factors as well, but also on the goals of the group: Are they together for a specific purpose? Do they intend to stay together long? Will they meet again? Evidence from city driving and Internet comment boards suggests that people are less compelled to be polite when interacting anonymously: their personal interests may be given free play because they are virtually immune to being cast out of the "group" (i.e., a set of people who interact regularly, as commuters and Internet commenters do).

Following is an example of a group that frequently interacts but which seems not to be constrained by politeness to avoid bald expressions of disapproval, confrontation, and criticism in their discussions of what constitutes competence and correctness. The excerpt is taken from the comment section of the online version of the Glens Falls Post Star in which commenters discuss a report of a racial incident classified as a felony "hate crime" according to New York State law (the comment text is copied verbatim with ellipsis [...] indicating editorial omission):

- 1 *streetztheblock wrote on Jul 1, 2009 12:52 PM:*
as i mentioned before,hispanics and blacks are not welcomed in warren county,we dont get no kind of respect, its so sad how this county displays racism..even the young kids are becomming racist..why? who is at fault? the parents, thats what my opinion is.racism is here folks, and its here to stay.
- 2 *wentsoft wrote on Jul 1, 2009 2:05 PM:*
Oh boy here we go again. Streetz you should probably change you tuff name because you cry all the time. ... Be a man and grow up stop acting like a kid that needs to be comforted by his mother.
- 3 *gugny wrote on Jul 1, 2009 3:03 PM:*
Hey Streetz, knock it off. ... Enough of the woe is me crap, please. Oh, one more thing ... Hudson Falls is in Washington County. ...
- 4 *Anthony Cerro wrote on Jul 1, 2009 3:52 PM:*
"Streetz, Hudson Falls is in WASHINGTON county, not Warren ..."

That these commenters are a frequently-interacting group is evidenced by their comments on numerous other articles over a period of at least a year (the time in which I have been

following the comments). They appear to constitute a group of citizens in and around Glens Falls and Warren County. The initial assertion of normativity in this example, by *streetztheblock*, is that the people of Warren County are racists. In the ensuing membership work, participants discursively co-construct a definition of membership in good standing where matters of race are concerned. Their collective "theory of race relations in Warren County", as it is fleshed out here, essentially states that, although a racial incident has been reported, and while that may indicate the presence of racists to a greater or lesser degree, people should not "cry racism" (this is unmanly and self-pitying), and the allegations of racism must not be extended beyond the locale in which they have been reported. Members align themselves with various points in this theory.

2.5. The centripetal tendency of groups

The online commenters, unlike the elementary school children, were not constrained by face-to-face pressures to "keep them in line" when they privately typed in their comments, and thus they gave full vent to their opinions. But does this mean they were speaking independently as agents of reason on a quest for objective truth? In some sense they did come together in the Aristotelian process of deliberation, each bringing his or her "share of goodness and moral prudence" to add to a truer definition of the way things are or should be (Aristotle, 1972, p. 123). Yet to the contrary, evidence suggests the commenters had already formed cyberspace opinion camps in which the fun of it all is in joining with likeminded others -- and taking sides with great relish.

Sociological research has shown that groups exhibit a concurrence-seeking tendency. Groupthink, the "mode of thinking that people engage in... when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action" (Janis, 1982, p. 9) has been shown to be a strong tendency for groups of all kinds (Baron, et al, 1996; Street, 1997). This centripetal tendency, in mild form, feeds conflict avoidance, as evidenced in face-work/membership work discussed above; in stronger concentration, it feeds extremism, as

having one's (pro/con) position corroborated by others is a powerful means of increasing one's confidence in the validity of a particular pro/con stance. There is ample research verifying the assumption that perceived consensus elevates confidence" (Baron, et al., 1996, p. 538).

It may be inferred from human tendencies to seek a consensus that membership work, whether groups are face to face or anonymous, is driven not only by an aversion to conflict, but also by a desire to belong, to commune with like-minded others, and to have one's beliefs supported. When one is able to join a group of one's own choosing (as in the online example), free play can be given to matters one cares strongly about. In other kinds of groups -- ad hoc groups, institutional groups, work groups -- one must rein in certain beliefs and opinions and "go along to get along". This mode of interaction, I believe, makes up the bulk of ordinary, everyday discourse.

3. Analysis: The discursive trajectory of assertions of normativity

So far a picture of discourse has developed as an activity in which people basically go along to get along according to the constraints of face-work, and in which people align

themselves to knowledge and norms in membership work. All of this is analogous to a sort of complex card game in which the general rules of play are implicitly understood, but in which specific rules often come into question. Players have to deliberate over what the rules should be at certain turns when certain cards are put into play -- that is, what cards should follow what cards in order to keep everyone in the game. In the example of elementary school children discussing the word *beer*, we may say that the "beer card" was played, and after some deliberation a rule was established: cards of disapproval should follow the beer card, or better yet, the beer card shouldn't be played at all. In the Internet comment board example, the "racism card" was played, followed by a similar round of disapproval. These "cards" are assertions of normativity.

3.1 The zero position, an assertion of normativity, and agreement

In short, an assertion of normativity is an utterance or expression (a discursive move) raising a proposition of right conduct or belief which is by definition binding on all competent, prudent, moral persons. Because norms are relative to groups, situations, and roles, there are often questions as to what constitutes competence, prudence, and moral correctness as participants perform their membership. To elaborate, an assertion of normativity is:

- *an utterance or action...*

made explicit or implied pragmatically or nonverbally; a question of normativity, e.g., "How should I do X?", followed by a reply, "Do it this way", constitute two assertions

- *asserting right conduct or belief or violating right conduct or belief...*

i.e., an assertion may take the form of "It is right for everyone to do X", or "People like us prefer/think/believe X", which may be realized in criticism or praise (a value judgment); or it may take the form of an innocent mention of a taboo topic such as beer in an elementary school classroom -- the mention of which raises the question of normativity

- *assumed by the participant who raises it to be binding on everyone in a participant's reckoning of common knowledge and value, especially those in the immediate group --* i.e., whatever codes happen to be shared among the group regardless of the larger society's particular laws, mores, or folkways

- *and the adherence to which defines group membership in good standing --* i.e., what it means to be "one of us", "a true friend", "a good boy", "an upstanding citizen", "a loyal member of a band of thieves", and so on.

Continuing with the "discourse is like a complex card game" analogy, I noted that general rules of play are implicitly understood. The discursive status quo, or basic play of the game, is the flow of talk in which assertions of normativity, if they are raised, are generally agreed with or simply passed over in silence without discussion. People tend to want to be agreeable and be agreed with, as noted above, especially if their participation is mandatory or accidental (being in "polite company"), or if they have an emotional or instrumental stake in the group (e.g., close friends, a family). Therefore, in proposing a model of the discursive trajectory of assertions of normativity, I posit a "status quo" pattern defined as an uncontroversial flow of talk in which the status quo of assumed knowledge and belief is maintained and unchallenged.

To distinguish between talk intended to question the status quo and talk that unfolds in an unchallenged or undeliberated way, I posit a "zero position" in which no assertions of normativity are raised. The term is relevant only in the context of my model, and in no way implies that ordinary, uncontroversial talk is in any way simple or uncomplicated! The zero position could perhaps contain controversial elements, but it lacks what I have specifically termed assertions of normativity.

My model of the discursive trajectory of an assertion of normativity, then, may be visualized as something like an electrocardiograph hooked up to a patient whose heart is beating normally:

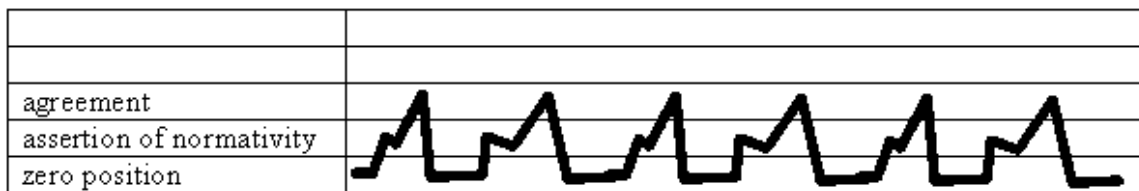


Figure 1. The status quo pattern in the discursive trajectory of ordinary, uncontroversial talk

3.2 Deliberation and division

Beyond the unremarkable pulse of conversation in which questions of normativity are not challenged, there are two levels of controversy. The basic controversy where questions of normativity are concerned, as already noted, is whether a norm is binding on everyone, and whether by disagreeing with the norm one can remain a member in good standing -- a "good boy", "devout Catholic", "real conservative" or whatever.

3.2.1 The deliberation level

The first level I call "deliberation" after Aristotle's process of deliberation in which varied viewpoints are brought together to hash out a "golden mean" between opposing extremes. The contention at this level is: "What exactly is the norm here?" and "How much leeway does one have in interpreting and acting on this norm?" To answer these questions, a "theory" is needed, as discussed above. To illustrate, let us recall the *beer* example. First, it is necessary to recap the discussion in fuller detail:

- 1 Teacher: All right, Robbie. Go ahead.
 2 Robbie: [In Robbie's writing] ... Joey said, 'Hey guy, up in the front, where's the beer?' ...

 3 Chris: ... Are y'all gonna get caught drinking that beer?
 4 Robbie: He is. Well, actually, he's going to get arrested ... When we go to jail. When HE goes to jail.

 5 Teacher: Uh, before Robbie leaves I want to discuss some little something that -- I'm wondering if, what you thought about. Just -- when he used the word beer in the story, uh, I'm wondering, how do y'all feel about that?

- 6 Mark: Some kinds of beer are good for you.
 7 Robbie: It's alcohol. It's non-alcohol.
 8 Mark: You know, like root beer, it's not alcohol.
 9 Teacher: Well, that wasn't said.
 (Adapted from Buzzelli & Johnston, 2001, p. 878)

The following chart plots line numbers from the above transcript as discursive moves in my model:

deliberation	5 6 7 8 9
agreement	4
assertion of normativity	2 3
zero position	1

Figure 2. The discursive trajectory of a normative assertion: deliberation.

Robbie (in discursive move 2) raised an image of minors using alcohol; Chris (move 3) recognized it as a punishable offense, to which Robbie readily agreed (4). The teacher (5) problematized the matter of bringing the word *beer* into the classroom. From there, deliberation ensues over what the precise norm in play is.

3.2.2 The division level

The second level of controversy involves a higher pitch of emotion and stronger sense of sanction. It is deliberation raised to the level of a moral struggle. If, for example, Robbie had said in reply to Chris' question ("Are ya'll gonna get caught..."), "Get caught for what? There's nothing wrong with Joey and me drinking beer", Robbie would immediately jeopardize his standing as "good boy" according to institutional norms. If Robbie persisted in his celebration of underage drinking, the teacher may have been forced to bring sanctions against him. Robbie's alternatives in this hypothetical case are (as, I assert, anyone's options in analogous cases would be):

A. discursively persist

- 1 insist that it is acceptable for him to do this, even if others disagree
- 2 insist that everyone should likewise do what he does

B. discursively desist

- 1 change his views to align with the group
- 2 simply drop the matter (whether he changes his views or not)

If Robbie persists, the strongest sanction available to the teacher is to remove Robbie from the class. A weaker sanction would be to alienate Robbie from the other children and stigmatize him as less than "a good boy", i.e., no longer a member in good standing. In any case, this level of controversy leads to division.

In the comment board example, the discursive trajectory jumps straight to the division level, rather like an electrocardiograph registering an increase in amplitude in a patient's heartbeat. Using numbers from the transcript already presented, I plot the trajectory as follows:

division	2	3	4
deliberation			
agreement			
assertion of normativity	1	(1)	(1)
zero position			

Figure 3. The discursive trajectory of a normative assertion: division.

Online asynchronous discussions complicate matters a bit for my model because it is sometimes unclear if one comment is in response to another comment or to the news item. I therefore selected the comments with direct reference to the original commenter's username. In this case, *streetztheblock* is immediately pegged as a crybaby (move 2), a whiner (move 3), and an incompetent (move 4), and therefore not a member in good standing. Unless *streetztheblock* repents of these "sins", he/she shall be removed from the fellowship of the online opinion camp. The comment "Warren County, love it or leave it" would not be out of place here.

4. A Final Example: "People like us don't watch shows like that."

In this section, I will put the tools I have described to work on a final example of natural discourse: I will note the zero position, assertions of normativity, a theory of normativity, and membership work in discursive moves of agreement and deliberation (there is no serious conflict or division in this example).

In the following simplified transcript excerpt from a six-minute conversation (the entire transcript with technical notation is provided in Appendix B), a group of five friends (American, white, middle class; three males, two females) in their mid-twenties are gathered in an apartment for the purpose of enjoying each other's company. The conversation is more or less at zero position until the topic of a then-popular (1986) television show "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" is raised. Len makes an assertion of normativity by suggesting that the rich people portrayed on that show are basically snobs who don't deserve to be rich. That is, the "theory" is that there are "good rich" and "bad rich" (or "Hollywood rich"), as the unfolding *theory of rich people* constructed by the group will show:

- 1 Len y'know what gets me ... is they're so Hollywood and they're so rich they don't know anything about the rest of the world and they're like, they like have contempt for like, (in mock snob voice)"tsk oh and I saw this, y'know I saw this person in a, a rusty car" or sumpin' like that, they don't understand at all y'know they're like, (sniff noise) "I can't wear the same pair'a shoes every day"
- 2 Joe Hollywood
- 3 Cyl how can you, how can't you think that way when all you see around you are mansions an'
- 4 Len glitz
- 5 Joe sure
- 6 Jen yeah

... (three second pause; then the group proceeds to make fun of the television show, in what constitutes the status quo -- meaning no new norms are introduced, for approximately seven seconds)

....

- 7 Len they had this thing on late at night, it's not Lifestyles of the Rich an'
 8 Cyl no it's (snaps fingers) I know it
 9 Len it's Runaway or Getaway
 10 Cyl Run Away with the Stars
 11 Len yeah Run Away with the Stars
 12 Jen ah yeah yeah
 13 Cyl is that a nightmare
 14 Len it's it's jist, wull what I like about watchin' that is like you turn the sound
 down an' y'get t'see all these places y'never see y'know, like Hong Kong
 15 Cyl yeah but who cares/ they're the places you would never wanna go
 16 Jen: uh huh.
 17 Len: but then you get to see like some, some Dallas star walking through a
 Hong Kong y'know like (in mock TV show narrator's voice) "She's the
 sexy secretary on Dallas, and she was fascinated by the mystery of Hong
 Kong"
 18 Cyl it's so horrible.
 19 Joe tsk!
 20 Cyl: I mean I don' understand, let's not watch this.
 21 Len: yeah.
 22 Joe: yeah.

... (Group continues status quo for about ten seconds making fun of the shows and criticizing the rich and famous)

- 23 Cyl an' they show these people like they're really great and he has three
 mansions, an' an' they think it's really great that it took his wife and him
 a year each to rebuild all the mansions to their former beauty, now it's the
 most gaudy, they all look like Graceland (laugh)!
- 24 Jen: yeah.
 (See lines 1 - 47 in Appendix B)

At this point in the talk, the group has constructed a theory of rich people as portrayed on television shows like "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous". It may be sketched thus far as follows:

A. The rich and famous, as portrayed on television shows are:

- 1 Phony ("Hollywood", "glitz")
- 2 Snobs (mock snob voice)
- 3 Out of touch with ordinary people ("they don't know anything about the rest of the world")
- 4 Undeserving of their privilege because they don't have cultured tastes ("gaudy", [going to] "places you would never wanna go")

5 Deserving of scorn
 "nightmare"
 "horrible"
 "who cares"

It is therefore normative to view the "Hollywood" rich and famous and television shows about them through this theoretical lens. Although Len initially raised the point, Cyl seems to be its staunchest advocate, applying the strongest language to the point -- "horrible", "let's not watch this", "I just get sick to my stomach" (see Appendix A, lines 32, 34, 58) -- as well as helping to flesh out the theory with her assertions. Furthermore, Cyl transforms the question of normativity to "People like us don't watch shows like these". Len does not seem completely on board with the theory of the rich as it is unfolding, perhaps because he wants to be justified in his desire to watch the shows. He therefore attempts a deliberative move (14), in which he tries to point out at least one thing that is not reprehensible about the television shows -- a tiny virtue that will justify his desires to partake of the "glitz". Note Len and Cyl's deliberation in moves 14 and 15, and Len's acquiescence in move 17 in the following chart of the discursive trajectory of the talk so far:

division				
deliberation	14,15			
agreement	2, 4,5,6		16,17 19	21,22
assertion of normativity	1, 3	13	18	20
zero position	7,8,9,10,11,12			23,24

Figure 4. The discursive trajectory of a friendly conversation, part 1.

As the conversation continues, Len attempts to refine the theory of the rich and famous (and the acceptability of watching them on TV) by introducing new assertions that get no uptake. Consider:

25 Len ... (trying to break into the stream of talk) y'know who's got a cool house
 ...
 26 Cyl (in a side conversation with Jen and Joe) he's useless, he does nothing, he's like a leech
 27 Jen (laughs)
 28 Len (trying to break in) I saw pictures of it in a magazine it's um, that, designer Laural Vigotti
 29 Cyl (to Jen and Joe) heh, he's, perfectly named
 30 Len (trying to break in) remember that place? he's got a castle
 31 Joe (to Cyl and Jen) it's like Dick Clark or Ed McMahon
 32 Cyl (to Jen and Joe) yeah they're like parasites on other people
 (See lines 60 - 68 in Appendix A)

In moves 25, 28, and 30 Len attempts to make a new assertion of normativity while Cyl and the others continue to heap scorn on TV shows involving the Hollywood rich. Len asserts that there are some houses in the context of the rich and famous that are "cool" (and as such, it is normal practice for group members to read magazines or watch TV shows about them). I plot it as follows:

division	
deliberation	
agreement	
assertion of normativity	25 28 30
zero position	26,27 29 31,32

Figure 5. The discursive trajectory of a friendly conversation, part 2.

In the flow of talk, each of Len's utterances is an assertion of normativity forming one attempt to get uptake from the group on the subject of a "cool" house of a rich person. The subject of cool houses doesn't fit in the group's theory as it has been fleshed out so far. Before the theory can be further refined, Len needs to find an example that is likely to get uptake from the group. He finds just such an example in the person of a rock star that the group likes: Bryan Ferry. Here is the final excerpt:

.... (The group has continued in a status quo pattern for just under one minute making fun of the shows and criticizing the rich and famous)

33 Len y'know who I saw on that show once

34 Jen who?

35 Len Lifestyles of th' Rich'n famous, they showed this island this, getaway island with with, and all there was was a big, place on it

36 Cyl Raquel Welch?

37 Len no, Brian Ferry

38 Cyl you're kidding.

39 Len it was really weird because I guess, see what happened is they were filming there, and I guess he was there with his wife on a vac' on a week's vacation an' it was funny 'cause it he, well he seemed very shy about it y'know

....

40 Len like it was like "an' his wife Lucy are here"

41 Cyl yeah.

42 Len y'know cos they were, they were showin' the place

43 Cyl I'm surprised they knew who he was

44 Len an' they were interviewin' the guy who built it y'know an' the guy who lives there, an' I guess it's like you c'n have maybe, ten couples there at a time it's like a gigantic

45 Len it's really cool it's jus' it's

46 Cyl mm

- 47 Len really, isolated island an' they show Bryan Ferry walkin' up the beach with shorts on an' an' a buncha fish, y'know
- 48 Cy: (laugh)
- 49 Jen (laugh)
- 50 Len heh, heh it was weird
- (See lines 70 - 88 in Appendix A)

Len extends the group's theory of the Hollywood rich portrayed on television by introducing an example of the appearance on one of the hitherto blameworthy shows of a rich, famous person that the group seems to like. In move 45, Len is finally able to assert that it is okay to partake of the shows because sometimes "cool" things are shown. The further fleshed-out theory is now, in addition to the explication above:

B. The rich and famous, as portrayed on television shows can also be:

- 1 Genuine ("[he happened to be there] with his wife on vacation", i.e., he wasn't merely making appearances)
- 2 Modest ("he seemed very shy about it")
- 3 In touch with ordinary people ("walkin' up the beach with shorts on an' a buncha fish")
- 4 Deserving of their privilege because they have cultured tastes ("it's really cool")

And therefore, the rich and famous are not entirely deserving of scorn, nor is watching shows about them outside the normative range of what "we" do. Note the symmetry of the second part of the theory with the first part: phony/genuine, snob/modest, out of touch/in touch, undeserving/deserving. Len amended the group's theory (which was the combined work of Len and Cyl) with examples to counter each point of the original. Thus, through membership work, Len succeeded in defining television shows about the rich and famous as not beyond the normative range of what group members in good standing may watch.

5. Conclusions, Implications, and Limitations

Of what value is charting the discursive trajectory of normative questions? Like most work in discourse analysis, the goal is not to create a new and better way of talking, but it is to uncover patterns underlying discourse and in so doing offer a broader awareness of what is taking place when people talk (Michaels, 1986). With the awareness, new discursive options are made available. Communication may be improved. The awareness that I presume to offer is simply that talk proceeds in a particular predictable way when assertions of normativity are raised: participants can "go along to get along", deliberate over the normativity or binding strength of the norm, or exchange strong words to defend entrenched positions. This has implications for civil and educational discourse.

The deliberation level is where the discursive action is: it is the level at which Socrates sustained his dialogues and for which he was persecuted for continually challenging the status quo. When assumptions are questioned and deliberation ensues, the implicit becomes explicit, boundaries are negotiated, and an Aristotelian golden mean may be pursued. The deliberation level is itself a mean between tacit assumptions and divisive

rancor; it is the deliberative space of "the forceless force of the better argument", as Jurgen Habermas has put it (1999, p. 940). The difference between the deliberation level and the division level is the difference between civil discourse and partisan polemics. Certainly there will be divisions, and that may be a good thing, but a goal to aim for, at least, in public forums (such as online comments, blogs, and discussions) could be more frequent and sustained deliberation.

In classrooms in which group discussion is used as a learning tool, students might well be made aware of the discursive trajectory and how the natural tendency is to simply go along to get along -- and that this might be something to be avoided. Teachers, moreover, can be made aware of the tendency to maintain a discursive status quo -- teacher initiation, student response, and teacher evaluation -- in a presumptive knowledge transmission model (Cazden, 1988).

One limitation in my model (among the many I can't see at the moment) is that there is some muddiness in the definition of an assertion of normativity. The explication in section 3.1 is an attempt to be thorough and capture the essence of what might simply be called a value judgment. More study of natural discourse is needed to see how the definition might be tightened and simplified. It may be, too, that further study could show the definition to be an ever-expanding product of a misrecognition.

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Appendix A

A third grade classroom discussion of a student's writing. From Buzzelli & Johnston, 2001, pp. 878-879.

- (1) T: All right, Robbie. Go ahead.
- (2) Robbie: OK. I'm gonna start a new story, because my other one, I had so many misspelled words, and, um, I ha -- , in my first chapter is at jammin gym, and I just started on it today, and, here I go! (*Begins reading*) Joey, come on. If we are going to jammin gym, we have got to go now. I have rented a limo to take us there. OK. Let's go. The limo is here. We are on our way. Joey said, 'Hey guy, up in the front, where's the beer?' Under the seat. Joey, move out of the way, AAAAHH! Joe's hanging out the window. And that's all I said. (*Class claps*) Response. (*Children put their hands up*) Jessica.

- (3) Jessica: How in the world did Joey get out, hanging out the window?
- (4) Robbie: Because I pushed, I knocked him out of the way and he hit the door, and he's hanging off the door, outside, and we're going a hundred miles per hour on the freeway. He's hanging by his pinkies and then we go up to a hundred and ten and he falls out the window. Chris?
- (5) Chris: Um, well, this is just a suggestion, all right, um, oh, I'm just supposed to ask one question... Are y'all gonna get caught drinking that beer?
- (6) Robbie: He is. Well, actually, he's going to get arrested because he falls out the window and he rolls a couple of feet and then goes up to the bank and he goes where all the money's hid, and then he breaks in, and then he goes to jail, and then that's when the real funny part's going to be. When we go to jail. When HE goes to jail. (*To group asking to see who is to share next or for a final question:*) Anybody? (*Students point and mumble among themselves*) Kate.
- (7) Kate: No.
- (8) T: Uh, before Robbie leaves I want to discuss some little something that -- I'm wondering if, what you thought about. Just -- when he used the word beer in the story, uh, I'm wondering, how do y'all feel about that?
- (9) Mark: Some kinds of beer are good for you.
- (10) Robbie: It's alcohol . It's non-alcohol.
- (11) Mark: You know, like root beer, it's not alcohol.
- (12) T: Well, that wasn't said.
- (13) Mark: He can...
- (14) T: That wasn't said, see.
- (15) Robbie: I can change it to that.
- (16) T: Well, I'm just thinking, you know like, uh. What would be acceptable as far as words that we use here at school, and uh, what are your thoughts on it?

Whispering among children: "It's OK," "I don't like it," "I don't think"; Will, standing near the teacher, says something.

- (17) T: Wait a minute, turn around and tell everybody.
- (18) Will: I don't like the wor -- when he uses beer in the story. It's sort of a slang word, especially if it's a kid's story that you'll be reading to a class. I mean, grown-ups, like, if you were reading a grown-up book, you'd probably find some stuff like that in it, but not in a kid's story.
- (19) Mark: I know, if he changed it to root beer, it'd be SAFE.
- (20) Chris: Safe?
- (21) Ann: I used to drink root beer.

Robbie makes an inaudible comment.

- (22) Clare: Well, what if it gets public? I mean, it'll give children the idea to do it.
- (23) Marie: I know and it'll influence them.

Most students look toward the teacher.

- (24) T: OK. Well, I don't ever really want to make a person change their words or their thoughts in a story, but just every once in a while something kind of comes up, maybe a word that maybe is, might offend somebody else in the room or might, like Clare said Clare, what was it you just said about...?

- (25) Clare: It might get published one day, and if you like... children... encourage them to do it.
- (26) T: In other words, it might influence somebody. And again, I don't ever want to make you change something, but I just wanted to hear your thoughts on it because there's certain subjects that, uh, might or might not be acceptable to children.
- .

NOTES

¹ (excepting non-response)

² Analysis here is not dependent on prosodic, technical features, so transcriptions are adapted for readability.