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Balancing the Competing Interests in Seminar Discussion: Peer Referencing and Asserting Vulnerability

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As Jacoby and McNamara (1999) have convincingly demonstrated, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) assessment tools with primarily a linguistic focus can fail to locate the competence actually needed in real-world professional settings. In a similar vein, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) pedagogical activities rooted in an unsituated notion of academic English can also be inadequate or misleading. Through a sequential analysis of actual interactions, this study describes the real-world discourse activities performed by competent native and nonnative speakers to handle complex academic tasks. Using data from a graduate seminar, I detail two interactional resources ("peer referencing" and "asserting vulnerability") exercised by the seminar participants in the doing of disagreement and critique. I show that these resources are invoked to accomplish the double-duty of acknowledging another's viewpoint while performing a potentially disagreeing action, to make an otherwise independently advanced critique into a co-constructed one, or to back down from forcefully articulated positions. Finally, I hypothesize that the particular use of peer referencing and asserting vulnerability characterizes the members' transitional stage between undergraduate novicehood and doctoral level junior expertise.

The pedagogical emphasis of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has traditionally been placed upon academic writing (e.g., Leki, 1992; Raimes, 1999) and "academic lectures, formal speaking, or pronunciation" (Ferris, 1998, p. 291). Despite the difficulty nonnative speakers experience in class discussion (e.g., Jones, 1999), relatively less attention has been directed towards socializing this population into the discourse of multi-party interaction. Existing materials that purport to emphasize oral communication in the academy (e.g., Hartmann & Blass, 2000; Hemmert & O'Connell, 1998; Johns & Johns, 1977; Lynch & Anderson, 1992; Price, 1977; Steer, 1995) tend to prescribe lists of isolated linguistic expressions or functions which are believed to constitute "academic English." Generally lacking in this pedagogical orientation is an interactionally based understanding of the target discourse practices. As Jacoby and McNamara (1999) have convincingly shown, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) assessment tools with primarily a linguistic focus can fail to locate the competence actually needed in real-world professional settings. In a similar vein, pedagogical activities rooted in an unsituated view of academic English can also be inadequate or misleading. This study is intended as a preliminary endeavor aimed at informing the EAP pedagogical agenda by describing, through a sequential analysis of actual interactions, the real-world discourse activities performed by competent native and nonnative speakers to handle complex academic tasks.[1]

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In particular, I intend to examine the talk in a graduate seminar whose participants include both MA students and beginning level doctoral students who are still completing their course work. In the remainder of this paper, I use the term "graduate seminar" to refer to one with such mixed participants. Existing discourse analytic research on multi-party interaction that involves graduate student participation ranges from dissertation defense (Grimshaw, 1989), academic colloquium (Tracy, 1997; Tracy & Baratz, 1993; Tracy & Carjurzaa, 1993), to informal meetings among university physicists on a research team (Gonzales, 1996; Jacoby, 1998; Jacoby & Gonzales, 1991; Ochs & Jacoby, 1997) as well as graduate seminars (Brzosko-Baratt & Johnson-Saylor, 2001; Prior, 1998; Viechnicki, 1997; Waring, in press). The participants in the above events, with the exception of those in graduate seminars, are more likely to be graduate students at a fairly advanced stage of study. If graduate school experience can be construed as a continuum that indicates increasing scholarly maturity, it is perhaps fair to say that the research carried out so far has mostly illuminated the nature of talk at the advanced end of the continuum. Discussion in a seminar with a mixture of both MA and beginning level doctoral students would then contain the discourse practices that typically occur at the lower end of the continuum. In many ways, discussion in such a seminar is the common denominator of all other types of university talk in which graduate students participate. Unlike the other settings where graduate students' involvement is largely voluntary (e.g., colloquium), on a selective basis (e.g., research team), or a once- in-a-career occurrence (e.g., defense), a graduate seminar is the baseline experience of graduate school.

More importantly, a graduate seminar represents a crucial transitional stage between undergraduate novicehood and doctoral level junior expertise.[2] On the one hand, "collaborative discussion" has taken the place of "unidirectional informing" (Lakoff, 1990, p. 156). The students are no longer undergraduates entertained with information in a large lecture hall. For the graduate students, a considerable portion of the final grade often goes to class participation, where they routinely display their "fully-preparedness" through competent understandings of the readings. Learning is achieved at a higher level of independence, democracy, and collaboration, where interpretations of the reading materials are attempted, deliberated, clarified, contested, and fine-tuned. On the other hand, unlike other settings such as a doctoral seminar where the role of graduate students is more of independent, responsible, and contributing researchers, a reading seminar with mixed participants remains a guided learning event with clearly delineated goals articulated in a course syllabus. Unlike a doctoral seminar that primarily focuses on the participants' own original research being prepared for dissertation, conference presentation or publication, the central task in a graduate seminar involves the discussion of readings from books or journal articles. The professor selects the readings, steers the discussions, and evaluates the students' performance with a course grade.

As such, a graduate seminar is replete with complex interactional issues that reflect the members' transition from receptive undergraduates to thoughtful junior scholars. These issues tend to revolve around the doing of disagreement and critique. By proffering assessments through disagreeing or critiquing, one claims knowledge of that which is being assessed (Pomerantz, 1984). Graduate students in a reading seminar who are to both comprehend and critically respond to the works of published writers are, however, inevitably confronted with the somewhat paradoxical task of assessing that which they are still in the process of learning. Relatedly, their role as guided learners in a semi-structured speech exchange system where turns of talk are neither locally managed (like in an ordinary conversation) nor completely pre-allocated (e.g., traditional classroom) (Viechnicki, 1997, p. 105) makes it necessary for them to remain receptive, abiding participants on the one hand, and try to become more independent and thoughtful individuals on the other hand—through disagreeing or critiquing. To a certain extent, this paradox is perhaps also related to what Viechnicki (1997) calls "the inherent tension between" "self-aggrandizement and self-deprecation" (p. 111) that students face in a seminar. Similarly, Tracy (1997) points to the dilemma of looking "intellectually able without being seen as a show-off" among the discussants in the academic colloquia (p. 29). The purpose of this study is to examine two of the interactional devices deployed by the seminar participants to cope with the above dilemmas: peer referencing and asserting vulnerability. I will detail the composition, position, and action of these two devices, and discuss their properties in light of the unique context of a graduate seminar.

THE DATA SET

Data for this study consist of five weekly meetings of a nine member (professor included) graduate seminar titled "Trends in SLA: Second Language Reading and Literacy-Theory and Practice" at Teachers College, Columbia University in the fall of 1997. Each meeting lasted 1.5 hours long. Among the nine members, six were native speakers of English (Professor, Libby, Kelly, Ellen, Sam, and Jack[3]), and three spoke English as a second language (Ling from Taiwan, Kim from Korea, and Tamar from Israel). Libby, Ling, and Tamar were early doctoral students who were still doing their course work in the Applied Linguistics and TESOL programs, and the rest were MA students. Kelly was the only beginning level Master's student.

The seminar took place in a regular classroom. Before each session, the students moved the desks around to form a slightly rectangular table around which everyone could then sit and talk. In general, the professor opened the session with some overall comments regarding what was expected to be accomplished within the next 90 minutes. She also suggested the order of presentations and the approximate amount of time allotted to each presenter. Sometimes, the professor would begin a session with a guiding discussion question. For most sessions, two

assigned speakers presented two different articles that the entire group had read for a particular session. The speakers had been asked to summarize the articles and generate discussion questions. Discussion followed or interwove with the presentations. Each session ended with some concluding remarks by the professor.

The topic of discussion for each session was pre-determined in the course syllabus, varying from models of L2 reading theory, L1 versus L2 reading, L1 skill transfer, text-driven components of reading in L2, to knowledge-driven components of reading and L2 reading pedagogy. One of the sessions was also devoted to conducting an experiment in understanding the notion of "main ideas." According to the professor, the chosen readings were either seminal articles on key issues in the field or important materials related to the discussed topics. In short, the professor selected the readings which she believed the students ought to be familiar with in order to become knowledgeable about the field of second language literacy.

Five meetings were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed using conversation analysis (henceforth CA) (see Appendix for transcription notations). The first three meetings were also videotaped. (Further videotaping could not be arranged due to scheduling conflicts.) The video data were sometimes brought in to clarify the analysis, but were mostly used as backups for checking accuracy or identifying speakers. This research is based on the assumption that "one instance is sufficient to attract attention and analysis" because it is "an event whose features and structure can be examined to discover how it is organized"(Psathas, 1995, p. 50).

PEER REFERENCING

I use the term *peer referencing* to label a specific class of items found in the data (7 instances) where the expression "as/like you said" is placed either prefatory to or parenthetically inside the allegedly reported talk. This practice has been referred to in the communication literature as "naming," "referencing back" (Barnes & Todd, 1995) or "idea crediting" (Tracy, 1997). Peer referencing might also have something in common with "reported speech" (e.g., Holt, 1996; 2000; Li, 1986), "formulation" (Heritage, 1985; Heritage & Watson, 1979; Hutchby, 1996) or "reformulations" (Gonzales, 1996). Research on these phenomena has shown that reproducing what someone else has said before can accomplish a variety of actions beyond simple reproduction, such as conveying the current speaker's attitude towards the reported talk (e.g., Li, 1986; Gonzales, 1996; Holt, 1986; 2000; Myers, 1999). The actions performed by formulating or reformulating, for example, include demonstrating comprehension (Heritage & Watson, 1979), summarizing (Heritage, 1985), eliciting further talk (Heritage, 1985), indicating agreement (Heritage, 1985), or constructing a pre-move to disagreement (Gonzales, 1996; Hutchby, 1996).

Most notably, peer referencing is distinguished from formulations, reformulations, or reported speech by its design. Unlike formulations ("you don't think X") in Heritage (1985) and reformulations ("you're saying X") in Gonzales (1996) or "you say X" in Hutchby (1996), in peer referencing, the allegedly reported talk X is either prefaced or parenthetically marked by an adverbial clause such as "as you said" or "like you said." As an initial observation, a free standing "You say X" or "You're saying X" is primarily heard as an attribution which is often disaffiliative in its orientation (e.g., Gonzales, 1996; Hutchby, 1996). By contrast, the word "as" or "like" in "as/like you said, X" suggests a sense of similarity, convergence, or affiliation between the speaker and the reported talk. In what follows, I attempt to go beyond this initial observation by illustrating two particular actions performed by peer referencing in its sequential contexts—what I call *collaborative critique* and *inclusive disagreement.* In collaborative critique, one turns an otherwise indpendently advanced critique into a co-constructed one (6 instances). In inclusive disagreement, one acknowledges another's view while constructing a potentially disagreeing position (1 instance).

Collaborative Critique

In the seminar data, one use of peer referencing is to collaboratively construct a critique. In the following segment, Ellen begins her turn by alluding to the author's questionable choice of data. Her critiquing orientation is captured in negative assessments such as "He doesn't really deal with them separately" (line 5) or "there's no (.) data" (line 9). By noting that the author has lumped children and adults into a common category and applied evidence from native speaking children to second language learners, Ellen questions the internal validity of the study. And by pointing to the lack of data, she questions its external validity. The heart of her criticism, however, is couched in peer referencing (line 7):

[01] [1118.22]
1 Libby: Okay well my first question was the um what kind of assumptions does
2 Krashen make about learners. For example children versus adults and native
3 versus nonnative. Uhm °what do you think.°
4 (3.0)
5 Ellen: °He doesn't really (.) deal with them separately. He treats them° (.) as learners
6 and he uses the evidence of native (.) children (.) that're I mean,
7 —> as you said before supposed to apply to second language but
8 (2.0)
9 there's no (.) ( )data.
10 (0.6)
11 Kelly: And by combining them? One thing I- I was- con- confused about is, how does
12 a nonnative speaker use (.) free (.) reading. (.) from (.) the beginning (.) where
13 Kelly: they haven't acquired any vocabulary to use as ⌈( )
14 Tamar: ⌊You jst- quoted this article.

Indeed, earlier in the discussion, Libby voiced her objection to using data from native speaking children to draw conclusions for second language reading. Ellen acknowledges that in peer referencing. By saying "as you said before," she presents Libby as the co-author and co-principal (Goffman, 1981) of the critique, and thus reminds everyone that she did not initiate the criticism of a widely popular scholar in the field. At the same time, she also uses what Libby has said before as a piece of substantiation for her own assertion of understanding. She thus strengthens her current response by indicating that the critique is not isolated and idiosyncratic, but rather a shared sentiment.

The role of peer referencing in forging a co-constructed, thereby strengthened, critique is captured with even greater clarity in the following example. At the beginning of the session, Kelly (the presenter) briefly mentions that the third component of the reading model under discussion is not something the author has addressed at any length. Later on, Sam refers back to Kelly's comment on the "third component" and reformulates it as a critique. Below is what Kelly said first:

[02] [1014.1]
1 Kelly: And the third component °>which he doesn't use very much in the study except
2 in the conclusion<°would be:: .hhh the outside factor which doesn't have to
3 do with the schemata o:r the text. They are the (.) ∞you know∞ (.) purpose the
4 studen- why the student took reading the purpose of reading the motivation
5 factors an- (.) emotional factors, anything else that plays a role.

Later on, as shown in the segment below, Sam explicitly states that the author failed to address in detail the third component of reading: "affect." The expression "like you said before" is again placed between the contextualizing background "the third component, which is more of the (.) affective" and the specific point of critique:

[03] [1014.7]
1 Prof: [lines limited] Does one help sometimes? when the other one fails? Okay?
2 Which is it that's (.) that's (.) you know (.) most useful in (.) in helping (.)
3 comprehension. Okay? Because ultimately, in all of these they all had a test at
4 the end.
5 Kelly: Right. [Right.]
6 Prof: [Right?]
7 (0.4)
8 Sam: I had a (.) question (.) but uhm (.) he also- the third component, which is more
9 —> of the: (.) affective. and js- like you said before, he seems to completely (.)
10 uhm leave that out. And at the end, he says that uh (.) he's talking about that
11 .hhh (.) motivational factors may lead advanced level readers to utilize skills
12 which other lower-level readers have so he seems to be (.) maybe there's (.) three
13 parts interplaying (by and large here)but this article only seems to be focusing
14 (.) on the interplay between these two but then he >kind of throws it in with the

15 others and says< oh yeah! it's these two that we (.) ⌈kinda brought it up.⌉
16 Kelly: ⌊they could affect ⌋
17 everything.
18 Sam: Yeah! you know

Although earlier on Kelly mentioned the fact that the author did not deal with the third component "very much" except in the conclusion (lines 1-2 in [02]), "completely leave that out" (lines 9-10 in [03]) was certainly not her wording. She provided a descriptive account. She also de-emphasized that account by producing it parenthetically in decreased volume and increased speed (lines 1-2 in [02]). Sam, on the other hand, calls attention to the same fact in a tone that ostensibly suggests a critiquing stance. By using expressions such as "leaving out" (line 10) something and "only" (line 13) focusing on two of the three components, he clearly alludes to some type of failure on the author's part. In other words, Sam is the "principal" (Goffman, 1981) of, or the one whose position is represented in, the critique, not Kelly. Through peer referencing, he brings in a factual point mentioned by Kelly in passing, and remodels it in a fashion favorable to the critique he is attempting to construct.

Interestingly, Kelly does not seem to find the twist objectionable. She in fact proceeds to proffer a collaborative completion (line 16) of what Sam has begun. Considering the potential benefit of critiquing in indexing intellectual competence, Sam is arguably putting Kelly in an "indebted" position rather than acknowledging indebtedness himself. More importantly, however, the allusion that Kelly said this before also does Sam a favor by lending support to his argument under construction—one that Sam might not otherwise feel confident enough to advance single-handedly.

Compared to "as you were saying" which highlights the distance between the speaker and the proposition involved, "jst- like you said before" stresses that what is being proposed is not new or ungrounded. In light of the fact that Kelly's original remarks were not critical in their orientation, it is even more plausible that peer referencing is used strategically by Sam to strengthen his own critique by turning an otherwise independent argument into a co-constructed one.

Inclusive Disagreement

I have also found one instance in which peer referencing is used not for *collaborative critique*, but for *inclusive disagreement*—a practice of acknowledging another's view while constructing a potentially disagreeing position. The following segment is part of a larger discussion on a key finding in an assigned article. The article states that readers of limited linguistic proficiency can compensate for their language difficulties by using their background knowledge. Immediately prior to the segment was a sequence of talk initiated by Ellen who expressed concern about what seemed to be an overly tentative manner in which the author presented the aforementioned finding. The professor concluded that sequence by commending the author's cautiousness and suggesting that the readers have the

freedom to interpret the finding in any way they deem appropriate. And that is exactly what Tamar proceeds to do at the beginning of the segment. She attempts to interpret the finding in practical terms, entertaining the possibility that the author might endorse a teaching strategy which emphasizes pre-reading background introduction:

[04] [1014.10]
1 Tamar: So-) ((*adjusts her posture to look towards Kelly*)) (if you look at it in practical
2 terms? classroom? recommendation) Does that mean that when I have beginner's
3 class, uh:m like this, a:h strategy would be: to: discuss the reading ahead of
4 ti:me, and sa:y we:ll a:hm (.) give a few ke:y (.) not WORDS, but key notions
5 about the backgro:und, whatever, let's say I have a story about somebody >did a
6 magic pray for rain whatever it says (.) sometimes there's too much rain,
7 sometimes there's little rain, an' sometimes people think we can influence (.)
8 uh..heaven whatever a discussion of it< and then going to the text? would that
9 be a recommendation he would (.) uh:m if he hadn't been so cautious,
10 ⌈((laugh)) (w'd he)⌉
11 Kelly: ⌊I think that he- ⌋ (.) also almost like saying, if you expe:rience this (.)
12 brea:kdown, that (.) this is the stra:tegy (.) to u:se, an:d (.) °(what worked).°
13—> ((*looks towards the professor who responds with a nod of approval*)) Or
14 >maybe with students like you were saying °of a certain level of proficiency°
15 you can just use it as a< stra:tegy.
16 Libby: .hhh °I think it's- oh I'm sorry.°=
17 Kelly: =°Go ahead.°
18 Libby: I think he's not saying u:se it, and ignore the others. He's saying u:se it in
19 conjunction with the others. because there seems to be this- seasa:w, you know,
20 of (.) the teachers continue to teach the lingui- it's the linguistic (.) element, and
21 then the researchers >are saying don't do the top down do the top down.< so
22 some people give up on the linguistic stuff, focus on the top down, and nobody
23 knows how to read. so it has t- eveything has to be done (.)
24 ⌈eh. (.) together in a wa:y, ⌉=
25 Kelly: ⌊That's basically what he's saying.( )⌋

As Tamar begins speaking, it is clear from the video data that she has selected Kelly the presenter—the "knower" of the session, as the primary, if not the sole, recipient of her talk through her gaze (Goodwin, 1981). Immediately after the turn initial "so," she adjusts her posture to position herself so that she could face Kelly—the relative "knower" of the session. This body movement is unambiguously visible as Tamar has been sitting side by side with Kelly at the table facing the same direction. In addition, although Tamar's gaze travels around the table as her turn at talk unfolds, it repeatedly comes back to land on Kelly as her turn approaches the various focal points, such as "discuss the reading ahead of time" (line 3), "give a few key...notions" (line 4), and "a discussion of it" (line 8). Finally, Tamar ends her question "Would that be a recommendation..." (lines 8-9) by again looking directly at Kelly.

Tamar's multi-unit turn is initially set up by the "if-" clause which announces that she is about to discuss the author's findings with regard to "practical terms" or "classroom recommendation" (line 1). She begins with "Does that mean..." (line 2), asking whether discussing readings ahead of time would be a teaching strategy consistent with the author's stance. The possible completion point after the phrase "ahead of ti:me" towards the end of line 3 is the first turn transition opportunity passed up by Kelly (Sacks, Schegoff & Jefferson, 1974), after which Tamar continues with an expansion where she specifies what she meant by "discussing"—giving "key notions about the background" (lines 4-5). In other words, Tamar addresses the possibility that Kelly's withholding of response at the first possible completion point arises from her trouble understanding the question. As Tamar reaches a second possible completion point with the word "backgro:und" in line 5, Kelly again passes up her opportunity to speak, upon which Tamar utters "whatever" to create a new transition-relevance place. When that fails to incur any uptake from Kelly, Tamar proceeds with yet another expansion (lines 5-8) where she uses "a magic pray for rain" as an example of the type of text to which a pre-reading discussion might be applied. As shown, up to "and then going to the text?" in line 8, Tamar has been focusing on clarifying her initial question as if to remove the road blocks that might have hindered Kelly from responding.

Having seemingly exhausted her resources of clarifying by this time with Kelly continuing to remain silent, Tamar goes on to remind her of the original question "would that be a recommendation..." (lines 8-9). It can be argued that the three subsequent items following the restated question (i.e., "he would," the micropause, the filler "uh:m") in line 9 constitute "monitor spaces" (Davidson, 1984, p. 117) where Tamar can assess the nature of Kelly's implicated response based on what happens or does not happen there. It seems that within these monitor spaces, Tamar has reanalyzed Kelly's withholding of uptake from her having trouble understanding the question to having difficulty agreeing with the recommendation. The fact that Tamar reconsiders her interpretation that the lack of uptake from Kelly is not surprising since Tamar's successive attempts at clarifying did not seem to have made a difference in shaping Kelly's response. The revised understanding (that Kelly had difficulty agreeing with the recommendation) is made evident in the ensuing qualifying clause "if he hadn't been so cautious" (line 9), which addresses Kelly's possible concern that such a recommendation would not be consistent with the author's findings, especially when those findings have been stated with great caution. Thus, by saying "if he hadn't been so cautious," Tamar in a sense relaxes the standard for admitting the "recommendation" and makes it more easily acceptable, thereby exhibiting an active orientation towards inviting agreement from Kelly.

It is conceivable that Tamar's earlier expansions were not intended as clarifications, but simply produced to create new transition-relevance places for Kelly to proffer the preferred response "yes" already built into the "yes/no" question "Does that mean..." (line 2).[4] Tamar's question (in line 2) also invites agreement

in the sense that it is more an assessment than a question. Tamar does not simply say, "Would this have implication for classroom teaching?" Rather, she puts forward a candidate measure of application—an assessment whose preferred second assessment would be agreement (Pomerantz, 1984). In any case, regardless of whether the invitation for agreement was implied earlier on in Tamar's turn, it becomes clearly visible when she says "if he hadn't been so cautious."

What Kelly subsequently produces as she finally takes her turn is an elaborately designed two-part response suggesting that inducing schemata to compensate for linguistic limitations is first a reading strategy (lines 11-12), and then perhaps, as Tamar suggests, a teaching strategy used with students of a certain level of proficiency (lines 13-15). There are two points to be immediately noted about the first part of Kelly's response (lines 11-12). First, as she begins talking, the preferred/invited agreement is noticeably absent. Or, we could perhaps say it is further delayed or withheld (i.e., after the multiple transition-relevance places within Tamar's previous turn). From a sequential perspective, such absence or delay is disagreement-implicative (e.g., Pomerantz, 1984; Sacks, 1987). Second, complicating this disagreeing orientation is roughly a re-assertion of Kelly's own interpretation (lines 11-12) she presented earlier—a counter-interpretation of a sort. In other words, Kelly is not merely showing trouble granting Tamar's "recommendation" instant endorsement, her specific trouble has to do with the fact that Tamar's interpretation is potentially competing against her own. Thus, Kelly seems to be caught between satisfying the tasks of both asserting her independent understanding of the article and aligning with Tamar. On the one hand, the cut-off (i.e., "he–"), hedges (i.e., "almost like saying," the three micro pauses), and sound stretches (i.e., "brea:kdown," "stra:tegy," "u:se") that accompany the delivery of Kelly's counter-interpretation (lines 11-12) constitute the "delayedness" which characterize a dispreferred action (Pomerantz,1984, p. 72). On the other hand, the same sound stretches coupled with the stresses also create a sense of deliberateness and emphasis that foreground Kelly's own distinct interpretation in the context of Tamar's. Also evidencing Kelly's dilemma is her body movement in line 13, where she noticeably looks toward the professor (who responds with a nod of approval) as she finishes her own interpretation. That is, she makes an attempt at balancing the competing needs of asserting her independent understanding and aligning with Tamar by looking to the professor, the official mediator and "knower" of the discussion, for validation of her understanding.

A more overt measure taken by Kelly to resolve the dilemma, however, lies in the second part of her response (lines 13-15) where peer referencing plays a major role. She begins with the stressed conjunct "Or," indicating that the ensuing explanation is equally feasible. Her subsequent incorporation of Tamar's conjecture is, nevertheless, parenthetically qualified with "as you were saying" (line 13). Note that Kelly accentuates the word "you," and therefore makes a point of foregrounding Tamar as the "animator," "author," and "principal" (Goffman, 1981) of the other interpretation—one that Kelly could share but would hesitate to focus

upon despite its contribution to an enriched understanding. This second part of Kelly's response is also distinctly hearable as a rush-through. The increased speed and lowered pitch (lines 13-15) contrast sharply with the earlier pauses, stresses, and sound stretches (lines 11-12). Again, Kelly makes it clear by virtue of her turn design, that although Tamar's conjecture is not far-fetched, it is not what Kelly believes to be the main thrust of the author's claim. As shown in the last line of the transcript, Kelly's stance is much more in alignment with Libby's subsequent argument that the author would encourage a holistic consideration of combined measures rather than prescribing a simplistic solution. Including Tamar's perspective while displaying Kelly's own is somewhat similar to Lerner's (1994) finding on list construction where "incorporating a prior utterance into a list of related items" is used to "achieve a qualified acceptance" in "balancing multiple social concerns" (p. 20).

Through peer referencing, Kelly acknowledges Tamar's view while withholding instant endorsement of that view. She displays her wish to align with a fellow speaker without actually and completely doing so. She makes visible not only her willingness to contemplate an interpretation which she clearly regards as secondary, but also her orientation to maintaining her "footing" (Goffman, 1981) away from that view (see also Myers, 1999 for the emphasis on detachment performed by reported speech). In short, saying "as you were saying" allows Kelly to curb, but not completely compromise her orientation to disagreeing with Tamar. That said, it is also clear from the analysis that peer referencing is only one contributing device among a host of co-occurring interactional features (e.g., prosody) which function to achieve the balance between disagreeing with a fellow member and displaying one's own comprehension.

In summary, the interactional significance of peer referencing is amenable to subtle changes in composition and locally interpretable. When the stress is placed on "you" in "as you said," peer referencing can serve to preserve the integrity of one's position without overtly disagreeing with a potentially competing one. Otherwise, it can function to either acknowledge or push the collaborative construction of a critique. Thus, compared to other argumentatively formulated "saying" expression (e.g., "So you're saying X" in Gonzales, 1996; "You say X, but what about Y?" in Hutchby, 1996), peer referencing works in much more affiliative than disaffiliative ways.

ASSERTING VULNERABILITY

I use the term *asserting vulnerability* to refer to the sorts of utterances found in the data (16 instances) where the speakers frame themselves as being vulnerably confused, uncertain, lost, not knowing, or admit that their arguments have been less than accurate, consistent, coherent, or plausible. They are composed of the first person pronoun "I" followed by expressions of vulnerability, such as "I'm really lost," "I don't know," "I wasn't sure," or "I'm really off the deep end." In an

institution that values knowledge, the paradoxical practice of essentially saying "I really don't know what I'm talking about" seems particularly interesting.

On the surface, what I call "asserting vulnerability" might bear some resemblance to hedges or disclaimers (e.g., Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Holmes, 1982, 1984, 1995; Hyland, 1994, 1996; Skelton, 1988) in its non-assertiveness. However, asserting vulnerability differs from hedges or disclaimers in both composition and interactional significance. Hedges are linguistic devices used to express tentativeness or to "weaken or reduce the force of an utterance" (Holmes, 1995, p. 72). They mostly contain a conventional set of lexical items such as "perhaps," "would," "suggest" or pragmatic particles such as "I think" or "you know." Although Hyland (1996) calls attention to some discourse-based hedges in scientific articles such as "admission(s) to a lack of knowledge" (e.g., "We do not know whether the increase in intensity of illumination from 250 to..., p. 272"), the nature of these devices/practices is very different from vulnerability asserting utterances such as "I'm really lost" or "I don't know." The hedge "We do not know whether ... ," for example, displays a cautious concern for the accuracy of what is being claimed. It is very precise about what is not known. It is content-based. In fact, in academic discourse, hedges are considered to evidence "judicious restraint and meticulous accuracy," "higher cognitive functioning," or "cognitive sophistication" (Holmes, 1995, p. 111). By contrast, vulnerability asserting utterances such as "I'm really lost" tend to sound general, less founded, and almost dramatic. More importantly, they occur in specific sequential environments where ratification is observably sought but persistently absent. In what follows, I will show that asserting vulnerability may be used to untie certain interactional deadlocks by backing down from 1) an unratified disagreement or challenge (11 instances) or 2) a successively reasserted critique (5 instances).[5]

Backdown from Unratified Disagreement

In the following segment, the group is attempting to choose one main idea based on the differing main ideas the students came up with after reading the same article. At the end of their previous meeting, the professor handed out slips of paper asking each student to write down the main idea of the article. The segment begins with the professor stating/explaining her rationale for designing the task:

[05] [1021.8]
1 Prof: [lines omitted] I want O:NE point I want people to commit (.) to one thing
2 One (.) statement of ⌈some sort.=
3 Libby: ⌊.hhh =When when we talk about
4 committing to one statement, do we also include (.) preknowledge of
5 genre because if you know that (.) in academic articles like Leki, she's
6 always going to make (.) a research point and a pedagogical implication point.
7 It's kind of part of (.) the genre. Therefore it's not so much one point.=It's
8 it's two points. Two interrelated points. I mean there may be more. I'm not
9 saying it just stops at two but then I

10 —> say- does- shall I repeat it again or does everybody get me. I'm real lost D'y
11 get me? ((*turning to the professor*))
12 Prof: I mean- the book that she wrote was research based but it's [continues]

Partially challenging the professor's notion of "committing to one point" in summarizing an article, in line 3 Libby goes into a multi-unit turn proposing that there could be more than one main point. Note that throughout Libby's turn at least five possible completion points are available for next speaker uptake. In fact, the turn constructional units (TCUs) following her claim that "it's two points" (line 7) are merely restatements of what has already been made clear: "Two interrelated points. I mean there may be more. I'm not saying it just stops at two but then I say-..." (lines 7-8). In these four additional TCUs, Libby continues to recycle the same point to create new transition-relevance places for next speaker uptake. When that fails, she uses a question that commands a direct answer (e.g., "Shall I repeat again or does everybody get me."). She then claims to be "really lost," and finally, directs the question "D'you get me" straight to the professor. Such is the context in which the assertion of vulnerability "I'm really lost" (line 9) is embedded.

Given the lack of any apparent inconsistency or confusion in what Libby is saying, her claim of being "lost" seems hard to justify. She might be "lost" in terms of not hearing any feedback, receiving any uptake, or gaining any agreement from the group throughout her multi-unit turn, but not so with reference to developing her argument. Put otherwise, Libby's assertion of vulnerability has nothing to do with the substance of her claim, that is, the co-existence of multiple main points in one article. In fact, her claim is rather forcefully advanced. For example, she not only says that an author like Leki often makes two points (line 5-6), but also legitimizes the practice by pointing out that making two points is a requirement of the genre (line 7). Later on, she further upgrades her claim by saying "I mean there may be more. I'm not saying it just stops at two" (lines 8-9). What is observably lacking, though, is any uptake following her challenge of the professor either from the professor herself or the rest of the members. By asserting vulnerability at this moment of interactional deadlock, Libby shifts her role from one who is aggressively advancing a challenge to one in need of guidance and reassurance. She redesigns her turn so that it calls for advice rather than a second assessment (i.e., agreement or disagreement). Although what eventually brings about the professor's uptake are undoubtedly the two questions (in line 10-11), or more precisely, the last question "D'you get me?" (cf. "current speaker selects next" in Sacks et al., 1974), what fundamentally changes the dynamics of the interaction, or rescues the interaction from the narrow strait it has come to, appears to be Libby's backdown remark "I'm really lost."

Although to my knowledge the term "backdown" has not been explicitly defined in previous literature, its use tends to involve some sort of reversal or revision of one's earlier position. In Coulter's (1990) study on argument sequences, for example, he characterizes a backdown as a third position action after an ex-

change of assertion and counter-assertion, and calls attention to "backdown-implicative silences" (e.g., silence after a counter-assertion) and "explicit backdowns" (e.g., the utterance "I know" after a sequence of accusation and denial). Pomerantz (1984) also discusses a type of backing down in the case of potential disagreement:

[06] SBL: 3.1-8 (from Pomerantz, 1984, p. 76)
B: ...an' that's not an awful lotta fruitcake.
(1.0)
—> B: Couse it is. A little piece goes a long way.

[07] JS: II: 48 (from Pomerantz, 1984, p. 76)
L: D'they have a good cook there?
(1.7)
—> L: Nothing special?

Compared to these examples, "I'm really lost" does not contain any explicit reversal or revision of position. Thus, I use the term backdown somewhat differently from the way it has been used in previous literature. Although Libby renders questionable an important basis upon which her previous assertions were made by characterizing her mindset as being "really lost," without any explicit indication of position reversal or revision, her backdown is more symbolic than substantive. What is being reversed is her role from a "challenger" to a "vulnerable student" in search of guidance and reassurance. Asserting vulnerability is therefore a backdown tactic exercised to exit an interactional deadlock created by unratified disagreement. It is Libby's solution for resolving the competing agendas between asserting her independent understanding on the one hand, and seeking approval from the professor and the rest of the group on the other.

Backdown from Successively Reasserted Critique

Asserting vulnerability is also used as a strategic backdown when one's critique of an article persistently fails to induce any endorsement from the group. For example, leading up to the following segment has been Jack's argument that strategy training is necessary, a point at odds with what seems to be suggested in the assigned article. Meanwhile, this critique of Jack's has been repeatedly countered by the professor's attempt to render Leki's point acceptable. The professor first called attention to Leki's argument that a simplified text designed to teach how to read (i.e., do strategy training) would not help one develop the ability to eventually read authentic materials. She then interpreted Leki's point as suggesting that strategy training is not enough because a reader's ultimate goal is not to read, but to get information out of the reading materials. Jack, however, insisted that the ultimate goal is a distant one while learning reading strategies is a necessary, intermediate step. Immediately before the segment below, the professor pointed out that the

gist of Leki's critique of strategy training has to do with her concern that books often stop at teaching isolated strategies without addressing when, where, and how the strategies can be used to get information from reading:

[06] [1021.20]
1 Prof: [omitted talk] Ultimately don't you want to be able to use these?
2 (0.2)
3 Jack: Right.⌈M. I-
4 Prof: ⌊I think.
5 Jack: I agree with her um strategy choice selection is that something that good readers
6 —> are able to deal with. Not something that ( ) not as good, but (.) I don't know. I
7 just thought- I wasn't sure either whether she was saying that strategy,
8 teaching strategy (is) um a good thing? I thought she was saying that it
9 was (.) unnecessary.
10 Prof: Is she saying that?

Jack's seemingly veiled critique is first of all enfolded in the "I agree with her...but" structure (lines 5-6). It is also repeatedly alluded to in the talk prior to the segment. At one point earlier in the discussion, Jack said, "there are strategies that I have to develop (.) um to read magazines and newspapers in this language." Ten turns later, he expressed the same concern again in a much more direct tone: "they [Leki's points] just seemed sorta- it's so anti-pedagogical to me." He persisted eight turns after that: "but I think it [strategy training] does help you because even in simplified texts, there are strategies that are going to be um (.) highlighted (.) that can identify to the (.) authentic text." And he pressed on yet again later: "bu-don't you need to be able to scan? to to um attain this (.) higher, you know, more interesting goal?"

In the above segment, Jack insinuates, for the last time, his dissatisfaction with what seems to him to be the deemphasis on strategy training in Leki's article. At this point, however, his dissatisfaction is packaged in much more tentative talk. In lines 5-6 he begins by agreeing with Leki's contention that being able to use strategies appropriately is a characteristic of good readers—a point alluded to in the professor's prior turn. However, Jack's turn construction also shows that he does not treat the issue of appropriate strategy choice as intimately relevant to his central concern—the value of strategy training. The agreement which ends in non-final intonation is immediately followed by the contrastive marker "but" and a micro pause. But instead of spelling out his critiquing position as he has repeatedly done earlier, Jack ends the main clause of his TCU with a rather general assertion of vulnerability: "I don't know" (Line 6). He then proceeds to elaborate upon the "I don't know" with "I just thought," which he cuts-off with a self-initiated repair (Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks, 1977) that transforms it into another assertion of vulnerability: "I wasn't sure" (Lines 6-7). That is, Jack replaces the originally planned "I just thought she was saying that it [strategy training] was unnecessary" with "I wasn't sure either whether she was saying that..." In other

words, despite Jack's apparent refusal to accept the importance of appropriate strategy selection as the reason for de-emphasizing strategy training, he employs interactional practices to tone down his original assertion.

Again, Jack is certainly not unsure about his position vis-a-vis the reading. He wouldn't have repeatedly voiced the same thesis had that been the case. This, in fact, resonates with my earlier observation regarding Libby's assertion of being "really lost" when she was clearly adamant about where she was heading. The nature of vulnerability in both cases seems more germane to the speakers' uncertainty about whether their observations are being endorsed. In both cases, these assertions of vulnerability occur in sequences where ratification is observably sought but persistently absent. They are both positioned alongside clearly formulated arguments, and by virtue of this juxtaposition, they render their arguments less presumptuous, confrontational, or uncompromising, and thereby signal an interactional backdown.

This particular use of asserting vulnerability is also observable in the following segment. Seven minutes before the segment, Libby started arguing against the notion that L2 readers have a unidimensional approach toward lexicon while L1 readers are capable of deriving various meanings of the same word from the context. Despite the various attempts made by the professor and other members to interpret this claim from different angles for the past seven minutes, Libby insists on questioning its validity by arguing that the readers' linguistic proficiency or literacy level needs to be taken into account. At the arrow below, however, Libby stops from yet another attempt to persist, and instead, switches to an assertion of vulnerability:

[07] [1007.41]
1 Kelly: ⌊When I was reading a:nd when I- oh, when I was reading, I >looked at it
2 whatever context it was in and I⌈thought of it ( )⌉
3 Libby: ⌊But that's my point.⌋ and if the context that
4 —> you have- ∞you know what? I think- I'm⌈making us all=
5 Tamar: ⌊.hhh
6 Libby: beat⌈ing a dead horse°.
7 Tamar: ⌊>°yeah°< no no no you're right. but the context is
in the text, whereas the uh the list of all the meanings of bank is in your mi:nd.

By saying "I'm making us all beating a dead horse," Libby evaluates the activities she has been engaged in, or more specifically, her insistent attempts of critiques, as useless or without consequence.[6] In so doing, she signals a backdown from her repeatedly advanced critique. The conceding tone of backing down is first instantiated in the markedly lowered pitch in which the assertion of vulnerability is delivered (lines 4 and 6). Backing down as an action accomplished in asserting vulnerability is also evidenced in the next turn where Tamar enthusiastically says "°yeah° no no no you're right" in overlap (line 7), supporting Coulter's (1990) claim that "further counter-assertions are dispreferred" after a backdown has been

produced. In addition, Tamar's affiliative uptake also confirms Pomerantz' (1984) analysis that disagreement is preferred after self-deprecation. Again, asserting vulnerability is used to terminate successive failures to achieve negotiated consensus. Meanwhile, the assertion projects a sharp contrast to the persisting position Libby has been taking, thereby mitigating its force, and re-orienting the dynamics around the table.

In sum, the device of asserting vulnerability is embedded within a sequence where the speaker's forcefully articulated disagreement or persistently advanced critique fails to occasion clear concurrence from the others. The reference to one's own inadequacy entailed in the assertion is often more interactionally motivated than substantive. It might be argued that this practice is indirectly linked to the "self-praise avoidance" constraint identified in Pomerantz (1978, p. 88). It serves to untie the communicative deadlock by recasting oneself as being less aggressive and uncompromising, expanding the possibilities of uptake, and terminating a sequence of talk in which consensus is clearly unlikely. In that sense, it is a resolution that works to strike a balance between asserting one's independent understanding and seeking alignment with the group.

In the conversation/discourse analytic literature, other practices found to "resolve" an interactional impasse include self-selection by a third party (Gonzales, 1996, p. 92) and leaving the scene (M. H. Goodwin, 1990, p. 215). According to Kotthoff (1993), concessions are dispreferred once an initial disagreement sequence is produced, and they are delivered with reluctance markers in a stepwise fashion. In fact, "unprepared position shifts can be regarded by the interlocutors as the inability to defend an opinion" (Kotthoff, 1993, p. 193). Given this background, abruptly backing down from clearly stated assertions appears to characterize graduate students' transitional stage between undergraduate novicehood and Ph.D level junior expertise.[7] In a sense, it symbolizes the pendulum swinging from being a junior expert proclaiming independent viewpoints to an undergraduate novice begging guidance and reassurance. Finally, it is worthy of note that the consensus towards which asserting vulnerability is oriented is in broad consonance with the preference for agreement (Sacks, 1987), the preference for using explicit backdowns to "terminate an argument sequence" (Coulter, 1990, p. 181) found in ordinary conversation, and more generally, the preference for maintaining social solidarity (Heritage, 1984; Pomerantz, 1984).[8]

CONCLUSION

Broadly speaking, the types of practices dealt with in this paper concern what scholars in communication and education studies recognize as the social affective domain of group interaction, which is intricately related to what can be achieved in a group (e.g., Barnes & Todd, 1995; Friend & Cook, 1992). The intricate relationship between a group's social affective practice and its substan-

tive achievements finds its unique expression in a graduate seminar, especially in the doing of disagreement and critique.

In this study, I have tried to detail the composition, position, and action of two resources employed by the participants to cope with the tricky task of disagreeing and critiquing. Depending on the subtle changes in composition and the type of interactional task at hand, peer referencing (e.g., "as you said") is used to include another's view while withholding an affiliative response and preserving the integrity and continuity of one's intellectual stance. It can also work as a building-block or an evidential piece in supporting one's challenge of the professor or critique of published articles. Asserting vulnerability (e.g., "I'm really lost") is deployed in sequential environments where one member's persistently and forcefully displayed disagreement, challenge or critique has brought the discussion to an interactional deadlock. In asserting vulnerability, the speaker makes an attempt to break the impasse by redefining him/herself as being receptive to advice rather than aggressive and resistant to negotiation.

I have demonstrated how peer referencing and asserting vulnerability operate to manoeuvre the tensions between learning and assessing, and between being a receptive, abiding learner and an assertive, independent thinker. To a certain extent, the various actions accomplished in peer referencing and asserting vulnerability combine to delineate the sense of "in-betweenness" of being a graduate student in a reading seminar. Their assertion of independently formulated positions often seems complicated by the competing interest in seeking approval of these positions. This sense of "in-betweenness" is in part captured in using peer referencing to acknowledge the validity of another's view while advancing one's own, potentially conflicting position. It is also observable when peer referencing is used to twist an otherwise independently formulated critique into a co-constructed one. Finally, it is manifested in the abrupt backdown, via the assertion of vulnerability, from clearly and persistently articulated disagreement or critique.

The discussion in this paper is by no means an exhaustive account of the discourse resources available to the participants in balancing the competing agendas in seminar discussions. In particular, the analysis in this study is based upon a small number of instances in a single seminar. Future research needs to evaluate the validity of these practices with a larger collection of instances in various seminars across the curriculum. A collection of instances where the same practice is used across different seminars will allow access to a deeper understanding of how a particular strategy works. Overall, it is hoped that this study has provided a glimpse into the ways in which the participants of a graduate seminar managed the complex tasks of disagreeing and critiquing. It is also hoped that the findings of this study will serve as a potentially valuable resource for the growing efforts to include discussion skills in the design of pedagogical activities.

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APPENDIX
TRANSCRIPTION SYMBOLS

(.)	untimed perceptible pause within a turn
underline	stress
CAPS	very emphatic stress
↑	high pitch on word
.	sentence-final falling intonation
?	yes/no question rising intonation
,	phrase-final intonation (more to come)
-	a glottal stop, or abrupt cutting off of sound
:	lengthened vowel sound (extra colons indicate greater lengthening)
=	latch
—>	highlights point of analysis
[ ]	overlapped talk
°soft°	spoken softly/decreased volume
> <	increased speed
( )	transcription impossible
(words)	uncertain transcription
[ ]	comments on background or skipped talk
(( ))	non-speech activity such as laughter

(adapted from Atkinson and Heritage, 1984)

NOTES

[1] I owe this clarification of focus to an anonymous reviewer and Leah Wingard.
[2] The wording used here and on several occasions after this (i.e. "undergraduate novicehood" and doctoral level "junior expertise") was suggested by an anonymous reviewer.
[3] These are pseudonyms.
[4] Sacks notes such preferences in questions like "Ken you walk?" or "Ud be too hard you yuh?" (Sacks, 1987, p. 64)
[5] It needs to be pointed out that I use the term "backdown" in a sense that is more symbolic than substantive (see discussion next section).
[6] I thank Leah Wingard for suggesting this elaboration.
[7] I owe this insight to an anonymous reviewer.
[8] Here I have taken the liberty of using terminology that is more "interactant's world"-based (Pomerantz, 1989). In fact, Pomerantz (1989) calls for "moving back and forth between different analytic approaches" in enriching our understanding of an interactional phenomenon (p. 246). In her

attempt to translate a sequence-focused analysis to an "interactant's' world analysis," Pomerantz (1989) refers to "preference for agreement" as "proper," "satisfying," or "comfortable" (p. 245), which contrasts with the sequentially based notion of preference where preferred actions are performed straightforwardly without delay while dispreferred actions are delayed and qualified (Heritage, 1984; Levinson, 1983). Similarly, Heritage (1984) also points out that "preferred actions are generally supportive of social solidarity" (p. 269), and that "issues of 'face'" are closely related to the organization of talk (p. 268). According to Pomerantz (1989), the exercise of translation is a fruitful endeavor that allows us to develop a fuller understanding of the different aspects of the same phenomenon (see also Viechnicki, 1997 on bridging the gap between Conversation Analysis and Goffman's work).

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