

Family and Identity

A Linguistic Analysis of Agency in Interviews with Four Teenage Speakers

- Naomi Shabot

Teenage youth thrive on their sense of independence and the development of selfhood. How they identify themselves within a larger community, then, proves interesting because they are at a crossroads between the development of self and their involvement in a community. Family relations is an appropriate background from which to identify exactly how a teenager's sense of agency and selfhood appears in language because, as it allows them to view and analyze the world around them, it is an integral part of their developmental process.

William Julius Wilson explains that there are many obstacles to overcome for anyone living in an urban "ghetto-like" neighborhood. I seek to understand exactly how factors such as joblessness, poverty, divorce, and dangers affect the teenagers growing up in that environment.

The language of teenagers could symbolize how they feel about their community. Moreover, James Gee points out that a discourse is not only how we arrange words, but is an identity, a way of "saying (writing)–doing–being– valuing–believing." A discourse is an "identity kit" with the tools for how to act in the world, and because it is "not mastered by overt instruction... but by enculturation," studying language will reveal more about the social structures in place in the teens' lives.

The ability to present the self as an individual is crucial if people are to maintain control over themselves and the world around them. The well-formed subject is capable of actively contributing to society and influencing situations in a variety of environments such as the Community Literacy Center (CLC), school, and home.

Kenneth Burke's dramaturgical method describes the role of an agent as embedded within a larger context. He views language as symbolic action, and points out that issues of motivation and purpose surround language itself. It follows that "a theory of language is part of a theory of action" since language itself is rule-governed. Burke utilizes a pentad to examine the motives behind a text: what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose). Dramaturgical, by its nature, invites us to consider the matter of motives from a perspective that treats language and thought mainly as modes of action. It places literature and language at the center of action in order to examine the constraints and values each plays symbolically. Motives are best understood in the same way that every other dramaturgical concept is--as elements in social interaction, not as phenomena that reside in individuals, societies, or cultures. I borrow Burke's idea that agency is established and demonstrated in symbolic actions, such as speech.

One of the main goals for the participants of the Roads to Learning/ Roads to Work program is to develop a sense of responsibility, control, and direction in life. An analysis of agency proves important in the educational establishment as well. Students in school and college are encouraged to provide reasons and a basis for their claims when making an argument or answering an

essay question. This is agentive because while the language may be detached from the self, it remains relevant to the person and subject at hand and reflective of higher thinking. As evident in dialogue with the teen writer, how she locates herself within a subjective framework is indicative of her personal sense of agency.

I set out to understand how urban teenagers view themselves and their sense of responsibility. I assumed before beginning that the role a person plays in her family shapes her view of herself. I conducted four interviews at the CLC to discover how teenagers view their family and how they derive their sense of identity from their experiences. Because I am interested in issues of agency and self-expression, I decided to look at the transcriptions of the interviews in terms of the language used. Also included in this analysis are the journal entries completed by the same four participants. These are exploratory case studies, not attempts to draw firm overarching conclusions, and are merely an endeavor to make a connection between agency and responsibility, as seen through the lens of family dynamics.

First, I looked at the type of language used by the teen and how much she talked. How she talks should prove reflective of some aspect of her sense of control over the situation and her comfort level, either with the subject matter, with the interview itself, or as a dimension of her personality.

Second, agency comes into play in finding out whether the teen placed herself as the object or as the agent in a sentence. I was concerned with noting how often the writer portrayed herself as a real agent—as the cause of something. Closely connected to this is my consideration of the use of pronouns in speech: did the teens use first-person pronouns, or employ other ways to refer to themselves? How someone places herself within her speech is reflective of how she views herself and how much confidence she has in the role she is taking in a particular situation.

Third, I examined how often the person ventured beyond a question to provide further information or to give opinions, reasons, or interpretations of the statements already provided. This seems indicative of not only a sense of confidence, but also of taking more control over the interview in an assertion of subject-hood, through claiming the right to make further forays into the discursive field.

Finally, I was attentive to the actual content of the interview--what was actually said about each participant's family. This feedback provides information on how a person views her own situation.

These methods of analysis, in conjunction with my personal impressions of the four interviews, will allow me to analyze the presence or absence of agency in the writers' speech.

Joan

Joan's language is dramatic and active. She frequently includes personal anecdotes to elaborate a point made, and displays herself to be very comfortable with the interview process and with sharing information.

Joan's eagerness to share this information and the high level of description in her story display an enthusiasm to "play" in a semi-formal interview process. She was also able to speak a great deal, which helped me find out more about her because of her willingness to share information with me. For example, a simple question such as "How old were you when your parents split?" provided a relatively lengthy response.

A final example of Joan's melodramatic language comes forth when talking about her responsibilities at home

Joan clearly sees herself as playing an essential role in her family. This dialogue is also reflective of Joan's lengthy description process, one sign of her sense of control over the interview.

Joan frequently places herself as the agent in a sentence, and uses "I" much more often than any other pronoun. She is much more of a controlling factor as an individual, and sets herself in opposition to others rather than aligning herself with them. Joan uses the first person repeatedly in her description of herself:

Rather than grouping clauses together, Joan separates them and adds more pronouns, producing several separate clauses, each with an "I" or a "my." Rarely is she the object of the sentence. More often, Joan is the agent, causing action to occur:

Joan externalizes places, people, and tasks in order to apply them to herself. All action is seen in terms of the personal subject, the ever present "I." Rather than saying, "That changed," or "The program changed me," she places the emphasis on her own agency in causing the change. This seems indicative of Joan's self-confidence and of a firm grasp of the situations discussed.

When asked a question, Joan quickly answers it and volunteers more information, usually a story or an opinion on the subject. The passage above in which I ask Joan how old she was when her parents got divorced is one example. Not only does she answer the question, she provides an explanation of what it was like to experience that, and then evaluates her current relationship with her father. Sometimes she continues the dialogue herself:

Besides being another example of grammatical agency, here, Joan takes the initiative and asserts her own feelings and opinions. She does this so often that I rarely had to speak, aside from the usual nod or agreeing words, such as "yeah" or "uh-huh." Joan led the majority of my talk with her. Once she was sure of her audience, she had no qualms about relaying past experiences and her personal commentary about them. Many times, she used my questions as a jumping-off-point for her own means, conveying a completely different message:

Joan endeavors to talk about herself and how she feels about different issues. For instance, she explains that she took the initiative after filling out the questionnaires to change her devious behavior. She shows that she can take control of a situation by seeing a problem and solving it in practical terms, and she appears eager to prove that. When explaining that the job she will start in December called her, though she wasn't sure what the message on the machine said, she quickly pointed out to me that she will call them back to make arrangements. This initiative carries over to social issues as well. In her journal, Joan writes:

It is this assertion of agency and self-assertion that Joan shows continually.

Finally, the content of Joan's speech reveals a great deal about her role within her family. She understands that it was necessary for her parents to get divorced, and has taken the initiative in regards to accepting and getting to know her stepdad. She feels that it is her responsibility, though, to separate school and her social life from what she does at home. Joan keeps school issues to herself, and even signs her own permission slips for school. She understands, however, that her mother must sign her work permit, that she cannot sign that herself. She has a clear sense of her role within the family and knows where the boundaries are located.

Both the linguistic analysis and the information she provides indicate that Joan has a very high sense of self and that she views herself as a strong agent.

Brianna

There is a striking contrast between Brianna's speech and Joan's. Brianna rarely speaks in complete sentences, and provides her answers in mumbled phrases:

It is interesting that the subject and verb are missing in most of her phrases. I wanted to ask her what it is about class that's boring or what about the people she likes, but I got the impression that the subject was closed for discussion. Each answer had to be elicited with a specific question. My initial probe, "tell me a little about yourself" provided brief answers:

I was surprised at the absence of agency in Brianna's opening comments. She might have responded to my questions with "I go to Oliver" or "I'm in tenth grade," but she removes herself from her answers to provide brief responses.

Brianna often places herself as the object of a sentence, in which case, outside agents are causing things to "happen to" her. The grammar of her sentences reflects her lack of agency. Here, she explains that her family moves frequently, and that her things somehow get lost in the process:

The grammar in her responses reflects Brianna's lack of agency. She sees an outside "they," probably her mother and grandmother, as the ones that make the rules and control the situation, and feels that she has done everything possible for herself. Brianna is acted upon; she does not dictate the action in her environment or scene. In the first response above, Brianna is the object and "they" is the agent that causes her to act, not vice versa. Her second response contains no agent at all because she takes a passive stance. In her final response above, Brianna is the indirect object and "she" is the agent.

There is a lack of context in her stories as well, and I wonder how much control she would have if she exerted herself more. Brianna is very evasive when answering questions about her family; I was not able to ask her about how she feels about her role in her family.

Brianna rarely ventures beyond the questions I asked her, but she did ask me three questions. I asked her what she likes studying at school, and she replied, "I don't know what I want to do

yet," meaning that she realized that it was a decision she needed to make, but wasn't yet prepared to make. I reassured her she had plenty of time, but she seemed to feel that she needed to decide rather quickly. I explained that I wasn't sure what I wanted to do when I left for college:

I found it interesting that Brianna took the initiative to turn the tables and ask me some questions that she wanted the answers to.

A second instance is interesting:

Once I provided her with a response to my question, she was comfortable enough to elaborate a little. However, when I asked further questions, as shown above, she was unresponsive. Unlike Joan, she didn't feel the need to elaborate on any of her answers or tell me any personal anecdotes. I was shocked at Brianna's feeling that she needs to map out her future immediately:

I wonder if part of why she feels this way is because of our program. She mentioned that writing a personal working plan was hard for her because she hadn't thought that far ahead. While we want her to begin thinking of her future, we need to be cautious of instilling a sense of panic in our writers. However, the lack of agency and control Brianna feels seems indicative of a larger problem. Even her journal entries show that she perceives that she must transfer authority to someone else. She makes decisions in groups, rather than alone, and defers to her mother often. This lack of agency may be due to her age, but I view her as lacking in self-confidence and control over situations in her life.

Tanya

Tanya doesn't talk an extraordinary amount, though she answered all my questions with an adequate amount of information and was an agreeable interviewee. She deferred to me 100% of the time; letting me know that she was glad to answer my questions, but giving me have control of the interview. She did not volunteer any extra information. I learned that she was a little uncomfortable with the interview, though, at the very outset.

Adding "I'm doing pretty well now" in a mocking voice suggested her discomfort with the interview. I was glad she let me know in a joking way that she was unsure about what was going to happen, so I could calm her fears by letting her know I just wanted to talk to her for a few minutes; no pressure.

Tanya usually places herself as the agent in a sentence. She seems to have a firm grasp of events that are happening around her and how they affect her, both directly and indirectly. At the same time, her use of differing pronouns signifies that she includes others in her concept of self. She speaks of her brother as a separate entity, not as a projection of how she feels about him, as she explains who he is and what he does. She also frequently uses "we:"

Her agency is evident in the above extract because she is the leader of the action in the scene. Instead of saying, "We have to do homework," she says, "We do homework" or "We eat dinner,"

rather than "Mom gives us dinner."

Even when she is describing an activity done by herself, Tanya uses "we." Most of the activities she describes participating in are group activities, which is part of the explanation, although the fact that she rarely uses "I" seems to reflect how she views herself. She frequently identifies herself with her family:

Her journal entry also supports this claim:

She is either uncomfortable separating herself from a group, or she identifies herself in terms of the people that mean the most to her.

Tanya seems to participate at the minimal level. She even utilizes some of the responses I provided for her:

Finally, the content of Tanya's responses supports the assertion that she views herself in terms of a larger community. We discussed some of her hobbies, and she told me she's been dancing for a number of years, but she downplays dancing alone. She likes "dancing in a group better," and has been doing that for two years.

I also asked her about the attitude shift she displayed throughout our program:

I assume that means that she was uncomfortable in her new surroundings and didn't know the people from Carnegie Mellon, because she talks about the other writers as being her friends. She displays energy and shares her opinions when she is in a group of friends, but is reluctant to come alive when she is in the larger group. Her sense of agency in a group she is comfortable with proves that she trusts that group and sees herself as able to be part of it.

Karen

Perhaps because of the fact that Karen and I have worked together for the past couple of months, my interview with her felt more like a conversation, with me asking the questions, of course. She responded to most of my questions with extra information:

Most of Karen's answers included dialogue of some kind, either of what she would say to someone or what someone says to her. She frequently is able to set herself apart from a common experience and describe it to me.

Karen inserted dialogue into her responses in order to make a point, to show me what it was like for her in those situations. Interestingly, though she told me about school, friends, and the Community Conversation, she only used her dialogue technique when she was talking about what happens at home with her mother.

Another example of this is in her journal:

Karen's pronouns are mixed. Not only does she alternate between first and third person, she frequently interjects second person pronouns into her speech:

Karen leaves out a subject pronoun from the first part of this, when she tells me what she does everyday, probably because it is so routine that it could apply to everyone. The use of "you" in her routine may be indicative of a distancing technique she is using, as if other people would do this. Perhaps she is generalizing a scenario rather than directly talking about herself. I wonder if she is presenting herself as typical, because she also frequently identifies herself as being part of a group activity.

She both talks of herself as the agent of an event, and also explains things that happen to her. She explains her involvement in the program:

Karen obviously sees herself as making the most of the program. This passage contains the most usage of first-person pronouns, and is when she talks the most about herself throughout the whole interview.

When Karen speaks about school, however, she places herself as the agent in all her sentences and uses only first person pronouns:

Finally, the content of Karen's speech tells me that she is undeniably connected to her family. She carries a great deal of responsibility in terms of helping at home with the care of her little sisters and with housework, to the detriment of her own plans. She views herself as an essential part of the family because her mother is working and her sisters are young and depend on her. She spends the majority of her free time at home, taking care of the family.

To view a teenager merely as a text falls short of our understanding of the lives they lead. However, listening closely to how someone talks is a crucial part of the process of coming to understand a person's life. Because we may not understand divorce or neglectful parents, we may jump to conclusions about what someone may need or feel, without really knowing. There must be a way to understand the complexity of issues that surrounds a teenager that incorporates gender, class, age, race, and other interests into the discussion. Language may help us bridge our understanding of this dilemma.

It is obvious to our writers that we encourage and admire a sense of identity, and some respond by embracing that ideal. Karen, for instance, took charge of the Community Conversation by writing three skits and helping make sure they were performed well. Tanya initially rebuked our expectations by closing down and refusing to participate, but we saw her change and grow to accept her place as one of the leaders of the group. Brianna wants to be a leader, but exercised that role only as Karen's sidekick. She still needs outside direction. Finally, Joan seems to crave external validation for her success as a leader and role model, but the group at large sometimes rebukes her self-confidence and arrogance. Many of our writers participated, I believe, because of the threat of exclusion. The nature of the program was to instill leadership, and had they not conformed, they would have been left out of the group.

John Dewey, in his philosophy of education, strove to eradicate 'either/ors' and to "attempt to bring together all aspects of intellectual activity, and to illustrate how all phases of activity merge..." Still, some inherent conflicts remain, when the analytical tools lead to rival answers. The different interpretive tools I use sometimes point to disparate conclusions.

For example, Joan's answers do contain some references to a group. However, she continues to show agency even as she does so:

She doesn't, however, identify herself with her group of peers at the CLC in her interview. Joan's "I" as a member of her family also transfers to an "I" as a member of the community, be it school, work, or church. In addition, as above, she maintains an individual agency and control over all situations in her life. Possibly, responsibility and agency are assets that are encouraged in Joan's family and community.

Brianna's interview indicates that she lacks self-efficacy. However, there are other possible means that she uses to demonstrate agency in her speech. One tactic that she uses that several mentors have noticed is resistance. She may gain a sense of control over someone in conversation by refusing to answer a question or participate in an activity. The fact that she felt comfortable enough to ask me questions in the interview demonstrates that she does have an understanding of how to represent herself as a strong agent; most of the time she chooses not to do so. One possibility for her brevity is that my questions contained sensitive topics, and she therefore exercised agency in her refusal to answer.

Tanya's responses indicate that she has a strong sense of community. The larger community often enters into the way a person speaks. I wonder if "we" is part of her dialect; where a person naturally places themselves within a problem or conflict and how they view themselves in terms of a larger community also affects their speech. For instance, Tanya does not get along well with her brother, but recognizes that he is a part of her family and takes the necessary tactics to avoid him. Of course, there are differences in degree, but Tanya demonstrates that those around her influence her view of herself. Tanya's parents are still married, and she describes many activities that she does with her family. Her home life, in this way, may contribute to the sense of "we" that Tanya has.

Finally, while Karen employs the distancing "you" in her speech, she also has a balance of group identification and personal agency. Her language is strongly indicative of how she places herself within a larger group. Each person naturally maintains mutual relationships surrounding the self, and uses their sense of individuality as a power in group relations. Perhaps Karen feels that she has control over her school life and is an expert in that arena, but feels this less so at home. Regardless, it is evident from Karen's language what place she occupies in her family and peer group, as well as how that balances with her self and personal goals.

Establishing an adult independence and identity among tensions of race, gender, and family is undoubtedly difficult. W. Purkey describes the self as a "complex and dynamic system of beliefs which an individual holds true about himself, each with a corresponding value." I wish to highlight the social factors that contribute to how a person views himself or herself. People are continually negotiating with an evolving environment. From this perspective, as Gilyard explains, "behavior is neither the exclusive acting out of inner drives, nor is it shaped solely by

external forces. One has personal traits and a belief system that set one's expectations and guide one's actions." This, as George Kelly names as 'the psychology of personal constructs,' describes how actions can modify a belief system, which affects how a person interacts with the world around them and how they see themselves.

Individual characteristics are instrumental to building a positive social identity. In community activities, however, individuality sometimes takes a back burner to team membership. Community-based organizations, such as our Roads to Learning/Roads to Work program at the CLC, encourage just this dichotomy between the development of the individual as a factor of the larger community, which allows teenagers to master advanced social competency skills while maintaining their identities within peer culture.

A teenager's sense of identity and future is derived from the interplay of multiple contexts: the community in which they live and move, their families, friends, and the larger society. Each person moves in and out of a multitude of contexts each day, participating in multiple discourses; their task is to negotiate their sense of control through different roles and different places. Often, they see themselves as one layer of larger network. They are very likely to develop a "cultural identity" that is stronger than their individual "personal identities."

Factors, such as the ones discussed above, provide a certain outlook within a community. Wilson writes that "the study of culture involves an analysis of how culture is transmitted from generation to generation and the way in which it is sustained through social interaction in the community." All communities have a certain outlook and share common modes of behavior, but the writers I have interviewed and the other writers at the CLC display a unique sense of community. They reinforce the feeling of a group and punish anyone who either interferes with the group (Joyce's Community Conversation pairs) or tries to leave the group (Joan's sense of power and individuality). Wilson even says that this "decision to act in ghetto-related ways... can be said to be cultural... They may endorse mainstream norms against this behavior in the abstract but then provide compelling reasons and justifications for this behavior, given the circumstances in their community."

There are always going to be different conflicts and voices that shape action and the outcome will be negotiated between members of the community. What voices our teens bring to the table seem to be a product of the self, as filtered through the larger community.