

Networking on the Network: A Guide to
Professional Skills for PhD Students

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66000 words

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Chapter 5

Academic Language

As a new graduate student, you face a whole series of institutional problems that are hard to explain to someone who hasn't already mastered the workings of the institution. One problem is endemic to human life in general, namely that you're always entering conversations in the middle. You show up someplace – a new job, perhaps – and the people there already have a conversation going on. They probably have quite a few running conversations, and they have probably accumulated a big network of shared background assumptions. Many words have probably acquired specialized local meanings whether the people are aware of it or not. Meanings will have been shaped by long-past events (what anthropologists call “critical incidents”) and by political fault-lines that nobody ever needs to mention. Even an innocent word choice can place you on one side of a conflict or another. These phenomena need not be spectacular or pathological, but they are certainly universal, and they can seriously confuse a newcomer.

One way to understand academic language is that this entering-a-conversation-in-the-middle effect is amplified about twenty times relative to any normal setting. That's because academics are paid to say things that are new, which is very hard, so that they are continually torquing their language – usually for good reasons, but of course not always. As a result, you can be forgiven if you feel like you are walking around in a linguistic minefield. What is worse, the language that you will encounter in academic settings is a kind of capital. That is, the ability to use the language is a valuable commodity. Talking a specialized academic language is what one gets paid to do, or at least it's a precondition of what one gets paid to do, which is hopefully to say something, and so it is understandable if you feel obligated to learn the

languages you hear.

As a teacher, I find these things frustrating. I encounter students who feel compelled to learn the latest fashionable jargon whether it serves them or not. Usually I demur. My first question is always: what do you care about? Once we answer that basic question, we can go looking for suitable conversations to join. But graduate students are not stupid, to the contrary, and if Foucauldian vocabulary is valuable capital then they can spot that fact a mile away. They are intimidated by the job market, and they intend to get the capital they will need to get a job. I don't mean to overgeneralize. Everyone is different. Still, I often find myself saying, no, you really don't have to learn to talk that way unless you intend to join a conversation in which everyone else talks that way. But that's not how it seems when you're new and you have to graduate in five years and you don't yet have a differentiated sense of the terrain. Who's really right?

As an example of the train-wrecks that these phenomena can cause, let us consider the famous problem of importing French philosophy to the United States. The French think highly of philosophy, and they have an exceedingly centralized and hierarchical meritocratic system for identifying and training the best philosophical talent. Even though they take their philosophical training system for granted and even harp on its defects, it nonetheless works very well. True, most of the really famous French philosophers are consigned to the margins of the system. (See Pierre Bourdieu's entertaining preface to the English edition of his *Homo Academicus*.) But they exist, which is more than we can say for the other systems. What this means is that French philosophers assume an audience that is widely read and deeply sophisticated, and that will know and recognize all of the precursors of their ideas.

This system may sound bad to American ears, but it works: it enables these authors to get a great deal of intellectual leverage from the background of knowledge that they share with their readers. It is the kind of pressure-cooker that, as Randall Collins suggests in his stupendous book *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change* (Harvard University Press, 1998), is required for any great philosophy to get done. It is the ongoing-conversation effect multiplied by fifty instead of twenty, and its decline is probably why (with the possible exception of Michel Serres) no great philosophy is being written right now. To get an idea of what I mean, have a look at Mark C. Taylor, ed, *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press, 1986). It is a scholarly source-book of the precursors of Derrida's method of deconstruction, and it is a

revelation. Derrida suddenly seems not like something from another planet but like an incremental advance beyond a whole series of people like Levinas, Bataille, and Blanchot. Now, serious specialized scholars in the United States certainly understand this. But it takes real work to become that serious, and most people, not having been brought up in the French system, will never have the time.

Now pick up some French philosophical texts and move them to another country, such as the United States. It is a notorious fact that some American scholars have copied the style of a Foucault in a superficial way, and now we're in a position to understand why this causes so much trouble. Academic discourse only works if it's part of a dialogue. In France, philosophical dialogue works because everyone knows the background. Individual authors can develop highly personal writing styles without disrupting the conversation. Everyone has read Leibniz, and so everyone can allude to him constantly without naming him. Some of those writing styles have more of a point than others, and I've chosen Foucault as my example because his own style (prior to the relatively plain language of his last few books) was much less motivated than that of the others. When Americans copy these styles, disaster often results because the conversation is broken. Readers in the American context generally cannot see the language as part of a densely organized dialogue, so the whole thing locks up. The dialogue loses its dynamic, forward-moving quality, and everyone falls into a kind of intellectual autism, a black hole from which nothing can emerge.

This is not to say that Foucault, for example, has had no beneficial impact on American scholarship. Scholars who employ the ideas without copying the style often have useful things to say. An example would be John and Jean Comaroff's multiple-volume anthropological history of the Tswana in northern South Africa, *Of Revelation and Revolution* (University of Chicago Press, 1991 and 1997). Their research is influenced by Foucault, but you wouldn't know it to read their prose, which is somewhat mannered to be sure but for their own reasons and not because they are copying anybody. Instead of falling into a solipsistic vortex of writing style, they have engaged with the ideas and digested them into their own thinking, along with everything else that they have engaged with, which is a lot.

There is one final reason why people in academia, including graduate students, often feel compelled to acquire specialized languages that are not necessarily suited to their own projects: academic languages exhibit network effects. Just as people around the world invest in learning and speaking

English because so many other people already speak English, likewise the theoretical vocabulary of a particular author can become the de facto standard of conversation in a certain field. And in case you think this is just an artefact of the fashion-ridden humanities, you should know that mathematics is one of the fields where it happens most furiously. A mathematician who invents a new formalism (what they call “machinery”) will be forgotten unless other mathematicians use that formalism to prove theorems of their own. Often a variety of formalisms are available that do generally the same kind of work. Each mathematician has an incentive (not necessarily overriding, especially when the choice of machinery makes a major difference in the results one can obtain, but still significant) to use the same machinery that everyone else is using, precisely for purposes of compatibility. In this way the development of mathematics is path-dependent, with some well-promoted or centrally-networked authors defining the basis of subsequent development in their fields while other authors retire in obscurity. I don’t mean to disparage the mathematicians’ culture, which is perfectly nice. It’s not about anyone’s human qualities. Network effects happen whether people are elbowing one another or not.

The same thing is true in many other fields. Once Foucault becomes the vocabulary of choice for talking about the social construction of the body, for example, people will use Foucault-speak for that purpose even though some other author’s vocabulary might be better-suited to a particular purpose. And just as newcomers to a field of mathematics frequently sledgehammer a problem with machinery that is too general to reveal the problem’s inner logic, likewise newcomers to social theory will use five-star Foucauldian jargon to say things that could be said using the admirably plain language of John Commons or Anselm Strauss. Outsiders will mistake this for academic empty-headedness, and that’s sometimes what it is. But at least as often it’s more complicated. And the humanities and social sciences get a disproportionately bad reputation for doing it because outsiders haven’t the slightest clue what the mathematicians are saying, whereas they think they have a clue what the others are saying.

So that’s what happens. As a graduate student, you are walking into the middle of a complicated set of dynamics that nobody ever explains. It’s little wonder, then, if you feel compelled to master arbitrary codes that your career seems to depend on. It’s that structural situation that I am interested in, not the properties of graduate students themselves.

Because you are not yet in a position to see the inner logic of your pro-

fessional community, you may find yourself wanting to fasten onto formal aspects of the process: politicking your thesis committee, passing exams, mastering jargons, and so on. You can't ignore that stuff, but you can get it into proportion by focusing your attention on the communities you want to join. Needlessly esoteric academic languages can give you the wrong idea: they portray research as a matter of becoming someone else, rather than becoming a professional version of yourself. They make it seem like becoming a researcher means acquiring someone else's voice, rather than developing your own. And they exaggerate the degree to which success in research depends on making yourself accountable to other people's agendas, rather than actively seeking out a community of interlocutors whose agendas can be brought into productive dialogue with your own.

The institutions of research are hardly perfect. But I think that their imperfections would be best alleviated not by blowing them up and placing them under the power of some extraneous authority, but rather by systematically teaching graduate students the things that I am saying here. Owning and applying a powerful model of the institutional dynamics around you is where sanity begins, and it is the best way to dissuade people from the misguided strategies that reproduce institutional pathologies rather than dissolving them.