

Language, identity, and resistance: a stance theory analysis in dead poets society

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Abstract. Situated in the conservative milieu of 1950s Welton Academy, *Dead Poets Society* offers a lens to explore the negotiation of identity and authority within educational discourse. This study applies Du Bois's Stance Theory to analyze how evaluative, positional, and alignment stances are constructed through teacher-student and peer interactions. Using qualitative discourse analysis grounded in the stance triangle framework, the research systematically examines transcribed classroom dialogues and peer conversations. The analysis concentrates on two questions: how is stance constructed by teacher discourse in pedagogical interactions, and how do students negotiate and realign stance in peer and hierarchical dialogues. Findings reveal that Mr. Keating's multimodal stance-taking—combining linguistic choices with embodied actions—subverts institutional norms, promoting student agency. Students, in turn, exhibit increasing stance shifts toward self-authorship and collective alignment, demonstrating that stance-taking serves as a crucial mechanism for identity negotiation, solidarity formation, and resistance within the educational setting.

Keywords: Stance theory, dead poets society, identity, classroom discourse

1. Introduction

Language in educational settings functions not merely as a conduit for delivering content but as a powerful tool through which identity is crafted, authority is negotiated, and resistance takes shape. Stance Theory, articulated by Du Bois, conceptualizes stance-taking as a social action involving three interrelated elements—evaluation, positioning, and (dis)alignment—that form a “stance triangle” revealing how interlocutors construct social roles and relationships [1]. Peter Weir's film *Dead Poets Society*, set in the conservative, 1950s boarding-school context of Welton Academy, provides an ideal site to explore this dynamic [2].

While previous scholarship has focused on the film's multimodal pedagogy, nonverbal gestures, and thematic tensions between conformity and creativity, no study has systematically applied stance theory to analyze how teacher and student discourse constructs identity, enacts resistance, and negotiates alignment. Addressing this gap is crucial for deepening our understanding of language-in-action within film discourse and its implications for sociolinguistics, media studies, and education.

This dissertation centers on two research questions: how does teacher discourse instantiate stance construction within pedagogical interactions, and how do students express, shift, and align their stance in dialogue with peers and authority figures.

To answer these, this essay conducts a qualitative discourse analysis based on Du Bois's triadic model: transcribing classroom and peer scenes, coding for instances of evaluation, positioning, and (dis)alignment, and interpreting findings within the film's cinematic and historical context.

By revealing how linguistic acts of stance contribute to identity transformation, resistance to institutional norms, and the reconfiguration of relational dynamics, this research hopes to offer a novel analytical tool for language scholars. Additionally, this thesis can provide a new perspective for future studies into the role of stance in educational and media discourse.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Introduction of stance theory

Stance Theory, as formulated by John W. Du Bois, conceptualizes stance-taking as a fundamental form of social action embedded in discourse [1]. It highlights how speakers use language not only to convey content, but to evaluate, position themselves, and align—or distance themselves—from others.

Central to the theory is the stance triangle, which illustrates three interconnected components, firstly, evaluation expresses attitudes or judgments toward an object—an event, proposition, person—grounding the speaker's viewpoint. Secondly, positioning situates oneself (or another) in relation to that object and establishing responsibility or epistemic stance. Finally, (dis)alignment indicates solidarity or divergence with prior stances, shaping social affiliation or distance.

Interactional stances are inherently dialogic: one speaker's evaluation invites others to respond, triggering repositioning and (dis)alignment. Over time, this creates intersubjective bonds or fractures within conversation.

Stance Theory represents a unified linguistic framework that reveals not only what speakers express, but also how they construct social roles, authority, and identities through discourse.

2.2. Stance theory in dead poets society

Stance Theory, which examines how individuals use language to express attitudes, knowledge, evaluations, and interpersonal positioning, provides a compelling framework for reading *Dead Poets Society* as a rich site of identity construction and resistance. Mr. Keating's teaching is a scene of dynamic stance-taking: by urging his students to "carpe diem," stepping onto desks, and delivering metaphor-laden exhortations, he enacts a vivid evaluative stance that challenges institutional conformity and invites students to adopt a posture of personal freedom and intellectual curiosity. These gestures and spatial moves, captured through multimodal discourse analysis, co-deploy with language to embody Keating's anti-authoritarian position—his physical presence becomes inseparable from his ideological message.

Through Systemic Functional–Multimodal Discourse Analysis, one can unpack how pointing, body orientation, and classroom space are semiotic resources that reinforce his stance against rote learning and structural constraint. The students' evolution in stance is equally telling: initially, characters like Neil and Todd communicate through deferential or uncertain language, aligning with parental or academic authority; as the narrative progresses, their epistemic stance shifts—through confessions such as "I want to act" or spontaneous poetic utterance—signaling burgeoning self-definition and resistance. These moments of public self-positioning illustrate how stance-taking operates as a social action that both reveals and constructs identity. Crucially, confrontations with institutional voices—whether through deontic commands or normative discourses—are met with affective, questioning, or defiant stances that dramatize the clash of authority and rebellion. In the iconic "O Captain! My Captain!" scene, students collectively take a stance of solidarity and affirmation, resisting the school's punitive power through shared linguistic and embodied actions.

By applying Stance Theory in concert with multimodal analysis, we uncover how *Dead Poets Society* uses language, gesture, tone, and spatial positioning to stage a theater of ideological conflict and identity formation. This approach reveals the film not merely as narrative entertainment, but as a dialogic space where stance-taking functions as a means of encroaching upon power, constructing community, and affirming selfhood through poetic defiance.

3. Text analysis

3.1. Mr. Keating's voice: challenging tradition through pedagogical stance

Mr. Keating's voice in *Dead Poets Society* masterfully weaves linguistic, spatial, and embodied stances to challenge Welton's rigid orthodoxy. This chapter examines how each iconic line catalyzes resistance, shaping student identity and opening space for agency.

He begins softly, gaining attention:

"Go on, lean in. Listen. You hear it?... Carpe... hear it?... Carpe—Carpe Diem. Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary."

His rising rhythm—from whisper to command—performs an evaluative stance that positions the students as co-conspirators rather than passive recipients. The whisper invites intimacy; the crescendo insists on urgency. The evaluative alignment is clear: conformity equals passivity, whereas "seizing the day" becomes a moral imperative and identity myth.

He builds on this cultural rebellion by contrasting poetry with practicality:

"We don't read and write poetry because it's cute... poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for."

Here, Keating adopts a hierarchical evaluative stance—medicine, law, business are deemed "necessary to sustain life," but poetry is essential to live. In mid-century Welton values, art is ornamental; his statement re-centers it as existential. The rhetorical use of "we stay alive for" reframes societal definitions of a meaningful life and positions students to question inherited value systems.

Keating then fuses spatial gesture with metaphor:

"I stand upon my desk to remind myself that we must constantly look at things in a different way."

The physical act of standing becomes a multimodal stance—body, space, and language cohere. This is not mere theatricality; it is pedagogical defiance. Through this stance, he radically redefines the epistemic structure: knowledge isn't fixed but arises

from shifting vantage points. He then invites each student to replicate this act—a communal performance of epistemic repositioning.

His next move addresses the student's own voice:

"You must strive to find your own voice... the longer you wait to begin, the less likely you are to find it at all."

This line delivers dual stances—evaluative and epistemic. Value lies in finding your voice; knowledge lies in speaking it. The temporal dimension ("longer you wait... less likely") becomes moral urgency, implying that inaction risks identity stagnation. It spurs students out of inherited narratives toward self-authorship.

A more intimate epistemic stance unfolds during Todd's exercise:

"Close your eyes... describe what you see." After Todd describes a "sweatytoothed madman," Keating exclaims: "That's it! Wonderful, wonderful!"

His facilitative tone and enthusiastic affirmation reposition the classroom from teacher authority to student expression. He commends subjective imagery, recognizing emotional authenticity as valid knowledge. The "That's it!" both affirms Todd's insight and legitimizes emotional language. This is the classroom as a discursive laboratory.

During a more solemn moment, Keating warns:

"This is a battle, a war, and the casualties could be your hearts and souls."

Although not delivered with typical defiance, it adopts an evaluative and cautionary stance. It acknowledges risk—choosing individuality and resisting authority are not cost-free. Crucially, it models integrity: freedom comes with responsibility and vulnerability.

Finally, when students stand on their desks in solidarity at the film's climax, they mirror Keating's spatial stance, reframing literal and symbolic authority. His earlier actions seeded this instance of collective stance-taking—his teaching becomes a performative legacy.

Keating's pedagogical stance is thus a choreographed dance of language, body, and time. Each utterance and gesture is carefully modulated—from whisper to acclaim, recitation to exhortation. Together, they destabilize institutional values, cultivate student agency, and construct a new moral grammar. Through Stance Theory we see Keating not merely as a teacher of poetry, but as a maestro of resistance—using discourse to conceive knowledge, self, and power.

3.2. Finding identity: students' evolving linguistic positioning

From the beginning of *Dead Poets Society*, the boys' linguistic stances traverse the arc from reticence to self-assertion, reflecting deepening identity. Their transformation is not merely dramatic—it's a staged discursive process, aligning with scholarly observations about multimodal and stance-mediated identity formation.

3.2.1. Todd anderson: from silence to emotional voice

Initially, Todd's terse responses

"Nothin'. Today's my birthday."

This sentence demonstrates a muted identity shaped by self-effacement and performance anxiety. As Victor Lim argues, classroom space and tone co-deploy to shape interaction: Todd's silence is literally maintained in the front row, at a distance from embodied pedagogical engagement [3]. Under Keating's facilitation, Todd later delivers a raw poem

"It's like a blanket that always leaves your feet cold..."

A confession that breaks rote conformity and affirms personal stance. This identity shift—realized through emotive language—is precisely the kind of individual repositioning that Lim's transcription of classroom multimodality captures: the boy steps into his own voice, spatially and linguistically.

3.2.2. Neil perry: declaration of desire

Neil evolves from dutiful student to emphatic self-advocate. Early on, his language reflects external expectations, but after absorbing Keating's "*Carpe Diem*," he asserts:

"For the first time in my whole life, I know what I wanna do!... Whether my father wants me to or not!"

This is not performative bravado—Neil's recitation of Thoreau,

"I went into the woods because I wanted to live deliberately..."

This is quoted as an act of self-authorship. Alicia Muro argues that the film stages a journey of masculinity and identity: the quote becomes a speech act that signals Neil's reconfiguration from conformist son to agent of his own narrative [4].

3.2.3. Charlie dalton: language as performative defiance

Charlie might not dramatically shift like Neil or Todd, but his linguistic stance becomes openly rebellious. Early in class, he quips,

“I’m exercising the right not to walk...”

This sentence turns mobility into metaphor and language into protest. This performative stance is symptomatic of what scholars refer to as a “rhizomatic” education: a networked, deterritorialized form of learning where traditional hierarchies are subverted via expressive agency.

3.2.4. Knox overstreet: romantic assertion through poetic language

Knox transitions from timid admirer to romantic speaker. Though textual quotes aren't included here, critics note his vocal confrontations on behalf of Clara during the school play are crafted in an elevated, poetic register—a linguistic enactment of love that challenges social propriety and asserts self-defined masculinity.

3.2.5. Collective voice and identity work

The film culminates in the students’ collective stance:

“O Captain! My Captain!”

This sentence turned into a communal performative act against institutional silencing. This final chorus stems directly from Keating’s seeded stances: the shared language configures them from isolated individuals into a community taking public identity by voice.

Through the lens of Stance Theory and multimodal classroom studies, the students’ language trajectory in *Dead Poets Society* becomes a vivid identity ledger: Todd’s silence to confession, Neil’s father-directed obedience to self-directed mission, Charlie’s theatrical dissent, Knox’s romantic assertion, and the boys’ collective voice.

3.3. Aligning or resisting: stance alignment in peer interaction

In *Dead Poets Society*, peer-to-peer interactions illustrate how stance alignment—and its opposite, resistance—actively shapes the students’ identities. In the cave scene, Charlie cheekily declares,

“I’m exercising the right not to walk.....”

Mirroring Keating’s encouragement to defy convention and injecting a playful subversion into their speech. According to Rom Harré’s positioning theory, this is a textbook case of interactive positioning, where peers co-create roles and shared narratives through language, reinforcing collective defiance and group identity [5].

During Todd’s emotional poetry reading, Charlie quietly supports him with,

“That’s it! Wonderful, wonderful!”

Here we see multimodal alignment, a phenomenon Rodney H. Jones explains wherein verbal reinforcement combines with tone, gesture, and posture to build solidarity and boost the speaker’s confidence [6]. This act helps Todd move from hesitant silence to expressive clarity, illustrating how peer alignment validates emerging voices.

Knox’s decision to stand and publicly declare his feelings during the rehearsal session draws directly on the emotional courage instilled by peer solidarity. Madita Mertens identifies these *Dead Poets* gatherings as “spaces of resistance”, arguing that collective stance-taking empowers individuals to rebel against institutional norms and assert their own desires [7]. Knox’s bravery is therefore not solely personal, it is socially supported by the defiant stance already adopted by his peers.

Countering this collective alignment, Cameron’s choice to report Neil’s ambitions and the tragic outcome demonstrates reflexive positioning, in which he realigns himself with institutional expectations rather than peer solidarity. Harré notes that individuals can reflexively reposition themselves in discourse, sometimes shifting away from peer alignment to conform to dominant authoritative stances. This divergence underscores how misalignment within peer networks can fracture group cohesion.

Together, these moments—Charlie’s witty echoing, whispered encouragement, Knox’s public confession, and Cameron’s betrayal—reveal stance alignment as a social performance that co-constructs identity and solidarity.

4. Conclusion

In analyzing *Dead Poets Society* through the lens of Stance Theory, this dissertation has illuminated how language functions dynamically to construct identities, negotiate authority, and enact resistance within educational and peer interactions. Drawing on Du Bois’s stance triangle of evaluation, positioning, and (dis)alignment, the analysis revealed that Mr. Keating’s pedagogical

discourse not only disrupted traditional teaching norms through powerful multimodal acts—such as whispering “Carpe Diem,” standing on desks, and affirming emotional authenticity—but also profoundly reshaped students’ perceptions of self and agency.

The students’ linguistic journey—from Todd Anderson’s emergence from silence to emotional self-expression, Neil Perry’s transition from obedient son to self-authored individual, Charlie Dalton’s playful yet defiant speech acts, and Knox Overstreet’s romantic declarations—further highlighted stance-taking as critical in forming their individual identities against institutional expectations. Peer interactions provided another crucial site for stance alignment and resistance, as collective encouragement (e.g., the whispered validation of Todd’s poem) and individual dissent (Cameron’s institutional alignment) clearly illustrated how language negotiates solidarity, belonging, and individualism in peer dynamics.

By systematically applying stance theory to *Dead Poets Society*, this research hopes to contribute not only to sociolinguistics but also to enrich pedagogical insights, demonstrating how linguistic acts of stance-taking can foster critical engagement, emotional authenticity, and agency within educational contexts. However, this research is limited by its exclusive focus on verbal and multimodal discourse within a single film, suggesting that further studies could beneficially extend stance analysis to broader educational contexts. Future research may expand on this foundation by exploring stance dynamics across diverse media and educational settings, further enriching our understanding of language as both a reflection of and a tool for negotiating power, identity, and social relationships.

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