Discourse Strategies of Expressions of Opinions in Radio Talks

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Abstract. Media discourse exhibits a variety of features which are similar to everyday conversations, on one hand, and more institutional forms of verbal interaction on the other. In investigating media interaction, we can observe how media communication affects the attitudes and opinions of society through the way it presents people and issues. Therefore, there is a need to look at why certain utterances occur in speech and to analyze why participants in media discourse have certain preferences for producing such utterances. The aim of the study is to analyze how Malaysian speakers of English engage in exchanges of speech in media talk when expressing opinions, and to investigate the strategies of expressing agreement or disagreement to the topic under discussion. The theoretical framework of Conversation Analysis (CA) (Sacks, 1992) on recorded talk in natural settings of social interaction, as well as the application of CA to the study of talk in media setting (Hutchby, 2006) are adopted for the study. These two approaches are relevant in investigating how speakers engage in exchanges of speech or turn-taking in the on-going interaction, in relation to agreement and disagreement sequences and strategies, as well as in exploring the linguistic aspects of media talk.

Keywords: Media Discourse, Conversation Analysis, Turn-taking, Agreement, Disagreement Sequences.

1. Introduction

Studies in media discourse are an increasingly popular area for sociological and discourse analytic research (Hutchby 1996; Thornborrow 2001). In media discourse, it is shown that the institutional setting influences the structural organisation of the speech event. Analysis conducted on media discourse has used the methods of Conversation Analysis (CA) (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974), which sets out to describe how conversations are structured, that is, the sequential norms of interaction in particular settings. Using CA as an analytical tool has proved very successful in the study of media discourse. These include broadcast news programmes (Greatbatch, 1988); radio call openings (Cameron and Hills, 1990); turn sequentiality of openings in a talk show (Hutchby, 1996, 1999); openings, closing and turn-taking (Bell and Garrett, 1998); the sequential and categorial flow of identity (Fitzgerald and Housley 2002); questions, control and the organization of talk (Thornborrow , 2001a); and participants' use of and display of identity within public access media events (Hutchby 2001, Thornborrow 2001b).

One particular type of media discourse which has become an increasingly popular area for discourse analytic research is radio phone-ins. Radio phone-ins possess structural features which are similar to those of telephone conversation, but their structure is influenced by the unequal power distribution of the participants (Thornborrow, 2001a; Hutchby, 1996)). Scannell (1999) views that radio talk programme minimally has a double articulation, in which it is a communicative interaction between those participating in the phone-in and, at the same time, it is designed to be heard by absent audiences. The radio phone-in forms a space within which democratic life and the 'public' are seen to air their views (Fitzgerald and Housley, 2002: 579). The approach of conversation analysis (CA) has made a significant contribution to research on radio talks and interaction. In particular, it has focused on the social organization of talk in radio phone-in settings (Hutchby, 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1999, 2001; Liddicoat et al.. 1992; Thornborrow, 2001a; and Fitzgerald and Housley, 2002). These studies have shown that the participants to a radio phone-in use a recognizable sequential organization in the orderly production and social organization of a public access media event.

1.1. Research objectives

The research objectives are:

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- To investigate how Malaysian speakers of English engage in exchanges of speech when expressing opinions in media talk.
- To analyse the discourse strategies used by participants to a radio phone-in when expressing agreement or disagreement to the topic under discussion.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. The data

The data are drawn from a corpus of radio phone-in programmes collected from *MixFM*, *FlyFM* and *LiteFM* radio stations. These are popular radio stations in Malaysia which are fully broadcast in the Englishlanguage and offer light entertainment to radio audiences. The programmes are the *Pagi Show* (*FlyFM)* and the *Breakfast Show* (*MixFM*), which are broadcast between 6-10 am from Mondays to Fridays, and *FunkyFriday* (*LiteFm)* which is only broadcast between 6-10 am on Fridays. These three morning-show programmes are selected because they represent public participation from radio listeners. The Corpus consists of 21 topics of discussion within the duration of 5- 15 minutes. The standard format of the radio phone-in programmes is such that the host invites callers (members of the public at large) to become involved in discussions concerning current social, education, work and relationship issues which feed the public discourse in the Malaysian society. In other words, these programmes consist of callers phoning the programme to air their views on a pre-selected topic and discuss their viewpoints with the hosts. For each programme, two or three radio hosts are present in the studio. In all the programmes, no studio audience is present and callers do not speak to each other. All forms of interactions are between the callers and the hosts. There are altogether 73 participants in the corpus, i.e. 8 radio hosts and 65 radio callers.

The structure of the phone-in programme is composed of an introduction to the topic of the day which then sets the range for callers' input in the form of a remark or a comment. The callers' contributions form the main part of the programme and the object of the research study. The speech data are transcribed and coded according to Jefferson's (1990) transcription conventions. The speech patterns are then analysed and variations of speech used in the phone-in interactions are identified. Instances of agreement or disagreement are then categorized.

2.2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of Conversation Analysis (CA) (Sacks, 1992) on recorded talk in natural settings of social interaction, as well as the application of CA to the study of talk in media setting (Hutchby, 2006) are adopted for the study. These two approaches are relevant in investigating how speakers engage in exchanges of speech or turn-taking in the on-going interaction, in relation to disagreement sequences and strategies, as well as in exploring the linguistic aspects of media talk. CA methods attempt to document and explain fully how participants arrived at understandings of one another's action during the back-and-forth interaction between them, and how in turn they constructed their turns so as to respond to prior turn(s). Therefore, CA focuses on those features of talk that are prominent to participants' analyses of one another's talk, in the progressive unfolding of interactions. Hutchby (2006) provides a rationale for using CA as a methodology that is both appropriate and useful for analysing media talk, since it has been used to study a whole range of different kinds of talk, especially those related to institutional or organizational interactions. The key to the conversation analytic approach is the focus on sequences. By concentrating on how utterances are produced as turns in interactional sequences, it is possible to observe and analyse participants' own understanding of one another's actions, and of what is going on in any given social context (Hutchby, 2006).

3. Findings

There are several layers of categorization involved in the sequential organization of phone-in interactions and they are, programme-relevant, call-relevant, topic-relevant and topic-opinion (Fitzgerald and Housley, 2002). Much of the work of the radio phone-ins carried out is based on these levels of categorization. In this sense, the flow of interaction within the radio phone-ins, and of making calls entertaining, relies upon the display of membership categories and the reflexive organization of predicated opinions to generate talk.

In the analysed talk programme, one of the predicated tasks of the category of 'caller' is to have an opinion on the topic which makes the occupancy of this category acceptable. Callers thus may be positioned as being either 'for' or 'against' the issue under discussion. In the data analysed, most callers either display an opinion of support or non-support of the issues raised, with the exception of a few. It is also found that the position of the caller's opinion is in relation to the host's/hosts' neutrality. That is, the host has to take a neutral position to the topic in general, so that he/she would not be heard as biased, but is equally expected to debate with the caller on the issues raised.

There are two levels of categorization involved when the caller embarks upon topical talk and debate, that is, 'topic-opinion' and 'topic-relevance'. These topical categories which shape the phone-in interactions are investigated from two directions. The first is topic-relevant category which offers a bridge between the caller's experiential background and the topic under discussion. The placement of callers to a topic-relevant category is a justification of the relevance of their contribution to the programme and underlines the authenticity of their opinion which is expected to be developed in the subsequent talk. The other direction is the topic-opinion categories which include strategies of expressing either 'for' or 'against' the issue under discussion. These strategies will encompass whether callers use direct or indirect strategies of expressing agreement or disagreement to the topic under discussion.

The following examples show speech extracts with regard to various lexical expressions that are taken from contexts where the callers offer a justification of the relevance of their contribution or 'topic-relevant category' to show the authenticity of their opinions (see in table 1).

Table 1: Topics and Opinions

Topic: Have we become too materialistic with our gifts.
I think it really has...I know an 11 year-old who's gonna be getting an iPhone for Christmas.. *Well of course...last month my son got 5As on a UPSR....and then he wanted what? An iPad I mean not an iPad an iPad2....* *Yes we have...my first year anniversary,I bought my wife a picture frame with a picture of both of us...but then she looked at it and said...I would've preferred the iPad*
Topic: Is age difference in a relat ionship a factor.
He's seven years my senior...he's a bit old-fashioned..... *It's not a factor at all cause I've dated a man who's 20 years older than me*
Topic: Does marriage co mpliment or h inder your marriage.
In my case I would say, it it did hinder my marriage because I am in the entertainment line and in ...media industry. *I think it compliments..I was working with people for over 17 years..and beginning this year I decided to close all doors and start something of my own..obviously wh en you start something new, you're new in this line and...I tell you frankly my wife is the person who really backs me up*

Topic-relevant categories are used in order to claim a relationship between the caller and the topic on a more personal level (Fitzgerald and Housley, 2001) and callers can then claim a valid and experiential connection to the topic, which can therefore reinforce or ground their topic-opinion category (Thornborrow, 2001b).

The other direction taken in analyzing topic-opinion categories is to identify the strategies of expressing 'for' or 'against' the issue under discussion. According to Sacks (1987), agreement in conversational exchanges is a preferred strategy, unless the preceding turn involves some sort of deprecatory statement. It is an option which is available when a speaker wishes to express his/her intentions. Agreement is understood in a wide sense to include various forms of positive orientation to the propositional content of a previous speaker's utterance. The form of linguistic agreement is related to the discourse meaning, for instance in expressing direct forms of agreement, a speaker might initially say 'yes' with a reply or acknowledgement with speaker utterance.

Disagreement is another way a speaker has for expressing his/her intentions. It is a dispreferred "second action" (Sacks, 1987; Pomerantz, 1984) and most cases of disagreement involve expressions of a different

viewpoint with respect to a speaker's preceding utterance (Auer, 1984; Maschler 1994). In contrast with the strategies of agreement, disagreement is preferably expressed indirectly where a variety of different linguistic resources may be used to mitigate or reduce the threat of a negative reply (Brown and Levinson, 1987). While a hearer's disagreeing orientation to the preceding utterance can be observed in the content of her/his reply, one must also look at the language choice for negotiating this meaning. A disagreement is a dispreferred move, and when a dispreferred move occurs, it is marked in a linguistic sense in some way (Pomerantz, 1984). For example, agreements can occur quickly, but disagreements are often delayed within a turn. Agreements are explicit, syntactically simple, and occupy an entire turn; while disagreements are syntactically complex, and often implicit. In addition, disagreements are often prefaced in some way, such as with hesitating prefaces (e.g. "*Well...*"), requests for clarification of the preceding turn, and/or the inclusion of weak agreement with the preceding turn.

Table 2: The Types of Strategies of Expressions of Opinions Evident in the Data

Strategies of expressing opinions	Lexical expressions of opinions
Direct agreement	*Yes, I think it really has* *Well of course* *Yes, we have* *Yeah, you are right..Malaysians do not care about the whole environmental issue* *Malaysians are overspending for their kids* *I agree with losing the momentum*
Indirect agreement	*I think we can but you know like everything else in life it has to be in* *moderation* *It would take a lot of getting used to* *Well I prefer dating older women and I think there are quite a number of* *reasons* *We'll, I think I supposed for mother nature's sake* *A lot of people are oblivious to the fact that we've just come out of a* *recession*
Direct disagreement	*We cannot go back (to the days without the internet)* *No, age is not a factor* *Age is not of a criteria* *Firstly, I think it (age) is not a factor at all* *No, never okay to lie* *No not at all, I think that's really wrong for women to do* *Women..they will not cry to gain anything*
Indirect disagreement	*Invention is good but it is human who do not know how to manage time* *I don't think we should say materialistic because you know you have to understand* *I don't think that age is a factor in a relationship* *Well, I think this is a very individual thing*

In the phone-in interactions analyzed, callers have preferences in expressing their agreement or disagreement to the topic under discussion in the first few turns of talk. The examples show findings which concern the first few turns in the interaction which show the callers topic-opinion category of either 'for' or 'against'. Two types of strategies are evident in the data: direct or indirect strategies of agreement; and direct or indirect strategies of disagreement. Direct strategies of agreement include assessments or positive evaluation, for example, *yes, I totally agree,* followed by a reply or acknowledgement to prior utterances. Indirect strategies of agreement occur with the use of hedging devices (e.g. *well, I think)*; modality (e.g. *would*), alternative suggestions, stating something as a personal opinion, phrasing it as a question, hinting, or giving a vague response. On the other hand, direct strategies of disagreement include criticism or negative evaluation, for example *I'm afraid I don't agree.* Indirect strategies of disagreement occur with the use of

hedging devices (e.g. *well I don't think*), modality, alternative suggestions, stating something as a personal opinion, phrasing it as a question, saying something to minimize the imposition, hinting, giving a vague response or understating, giving reasons, suggesting a compromise, for example, *I agree with you but...*; *This is just my opinion but...* Table 2 shows the types of strategies of expressions of opinions in the radio phone-in data.

The frequency of occurrences of direct and indirect strategies of agreement and disagreement is displayed in the following table 3.

Table 3: The frequency of occurrences of direct or indirect strategies of agreement or disagreement

Data	Direct strategies of agreement	Indirect strategies of agreement	Direct strategies of disagreement	Indirect strategies of disagreement	Total
Data 1	2	1	6	11	20
Data 2	1			5	6
Data 3	1		1	1	3
Data 4		2	2	3	7
Data 5		2		2	4
Data 6	1	3	1	6	11
Data 7	1		2	6	9
Data 8	1	3	1	2	7
Data 9			1	3	4
Data 10	1		1		2
Data 11		3	5	8	16
Data 12		2		3	5
Data 13		5	1	2	8
Data 14		1			1
Data 15		1			1
Data 16	2	4			6
Data 17		1			1
Data 18		4	2		6
Data 19		5	1	2	8
Data 20	4	4	1	5	14
Data 21		2	2	1	5
Total %	14 (10%)	43 (30%)	27 (19%)	60 (41%)	144

The findings show that there are 57 topic-opinion categories of 'for' the issue under discussion and 97 topic-opinion categories of 'against' the issue found in the data. It can also be concluded that speakers in the radio phone-in programmes have preferences for using more indirect expressions of agreement and disagreements in topic-related issues.

4. Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that a topic-opinion category is one of the sources of interactional order, which is constructed through the joint participation of co-participants in the phone-ins. This sequential category represents a layer of identity which is directly linked to the development of talk and is relevant at every moment of its course. Participants authenticate their talk with experiential background and knowledge to show the relevance of their contributions to the topics under discussion. In expressing opinions to topic-related categories of talk, participants are more indirect in their agreement or disagreement which concerned topics related to the Malaysian public.

To conclude, the air space that public radio offers for its audience has emerged as an interesting platform involving real-life participants who are given practically unconstrained floor to voice their opinions or share relevant experience. The involvement of ordinary members of the public in the creation of the programme has shown to be a highly successful strategy on the part of the mass media. This trend has resulted in the establishment of mass media programmes, such as the analysed talk-show, as a prestigious opinion-making institution.

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