

UNDERSTANDING MEDIA DISCOURSE: A PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO POSITIONING ANALYSIS IN IDENTITY CONSTRUCTIONS.

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ABSTRACT. Drawing on an analysis of TV Talkshow Kilroy, this paper examines how participants exploit different politeness strategies in Talkshow conflict and how the conflictual episode is organised. More precisely, this paper focusses on a global approach to Conflict talk within the framework of Schema Theory.

RESUMEN. El presente estudio parte de un análisis de los episodios de disputa verbal en el Talkshow británico Kilroy con el fin de analizar el uso de las estrategias de cortesía verbal y la organización global de un episodio de habla conflictiva. En concreto, este estudio presenta un enfoque que conceptualiza de una manera global los episodios de habla conflictiva

1. INTRODUCTION

In the literature, studies of verbal conflict often use some kind of structured laboratory task to introduce verbal conflict (Gottman, 1979). People are typically brought into a laboratory and given an interaction task designed to produce conflict. Behaviour is then recorded and analysed. Along with Vuchinich (1987), I suggest that for the detailed study of conflict talk we must be concerned with whether laboratory tasks distort normal patters. One way of addressing this problem is to do naturalistic data collection in routine situations in the home – taking family disputes as a representative of conflict talk (García Gómez, 1998).

However, my concern was that my findings would not reflect conflict patters of only one subculture, ethnic group, social class or a particular social structure – such as the family, which lead me to select talkshow interaction. The sample chosen for analysis meets this condition since it was drawn to include a cross section of British people, although it is by no means representative in a rigorous statistical sense. The corpus of data is then based on the video-tape recording and transcription of a popular British Talkshow: *The Kilroy Show*. This Talkshow selected for analysis is quite an open-line show (Gregori Signes, 2002; and Lorenzo Dus, 2005; García Gómez, 2004).

In order to argue the conflictive nature of this sort of interaction, I assume, with Gregori (1998: 76-77), that 'Talkshows are a cheap daytime television genre which deals with sensationalist topics and whose guests are mainly ordinary citizens'. The overall topic of the programmes is usually the discussion of a controversial topic/issue (Hutchby, 2001), supposedly of general interest, with social and cultural consequences in society. In addition, Talkshows often encourage people to emotionally rip themselves open, since the nature of the topics usually implies emotional risks, some kind of dispute, verbal duel and even physical fights between the participants. In a nutshell, the development of the Talkshow agenda usually includes confrontation as a constant generic feature. In fact, most writers refer to Talkshows as confrontational or Conflict Talk (Gregori 2000).

This study can be located within the framework of Pragmatics, linking the study with Discourse Analysis and Schema Theory. Finally the paper is organised into two different sections. Section 1 focuses on a global approach to Conflict talk within the framework of Schema Theory is concerned with a local analysis of this sort of interaction. Section 2 compiles the main conclusions derived from the analysis.

2. UNDERSTANDING MEDIA DISCOURSE

In this section, I will devote myself to characterising the nature of media discourse and more precisely Talkshow conflictual episode. For this purpose, I will draw on the insights of Schema Theory to propose the expectations and speakers' personal goals in a Talkshow verbal conflict.

Rumelhart (1980) describes the schema as a cultural model of buying as made up of the purchaser, the seller, the merchandise, the sale, and the money. Among these parts, there are several relationships: there is an interaction between the purchaser and the seller, which involves the communication to the buyer of the price, maybe bargaining, the offer to buy, the acceptance of sale, the transfer of ownership of the merchandise and the money, etc. This model is needed to understand not just buying, but also enrich such cultural activities and institutions as lending, renting, etc.

Following Cook (1995), I accept knowledge schema as mental representations of typical situations and which enable participants in discourse processing to predict the contents of the particular situation which the discourse prescribes. The idea is then that the mind stimulated by key words or phrases in the text, or by the context, activates a knowledge schema, and uses it to make sense of the discourse. Furthermore, these mental representations may predict stereotypical roles and participants, or they can be stereotypical text types, predicting plot structure or conversational development.

This characterisation of our knowledge of familiar event sequences are called in Schank and Arbib's terms (1977) script. They use it to refer to the stereotypical knowledge structures that people acquire about common routines, such as going to a restaurant. Their characterisation of this kind of knowledge was an elaboration of the concept of frames introduced by Nelson and Gruendel (1986). A frame, used to describe our knowledge about scenes and events, is roughly conterminous with the concept of schema. Thus, a script refers to a particular event schema, understanding event schema as a hierarchically organised set of units describing generalised knowledge about an event sequence. It included knowledge about what will happen in a given situation and often the order in which the individual events will take place. It is organised like a categorical structure in that the knowledge is arranged in a hierarchy with more classes of events containing more specific events nest within them.

Contrary to Mandler's (1980) claim that one of the problems with the notion of script is that people have specified-level scripts, and subsequently there would be an enormous number of individual scripts for each type of event, I argue that a script is not such a fuzzy concept. However, a constraint upon my research is that the formulation of the phenomenon of conflict talk emerges from the data, rather than being imposed by a pre-established theory or by an operational definition. The proposed prototypical scenario was not pre-formulated, but was grounded in and constructed from the data under inspection. Moreover, it should be pointed out that the intention is not to provide a detailed script of a conflictive situation, but just to approach to the predicting and stages.

My point of departure here shall be to test the viability of the following assumptions: that a verbal conflict involved a whole pattern of events (Schank and Abelson, 1986) and this, in turn, will provide an interpretational framework to understand the development of such episodes as well as to predict stereotypical roles and relationships of participants (Cook, 1995). The point I am making is that the structure in memory that we use as both container of memories and of information relevant to a verbal conflict must contain the following items: a set of expectations about a Talkshow conflictual episode and a prototype.

2.1. *Expectations about a Talkshow conflictual episode*

As the “restaurant script” evokes the series of events which typically occur in going to a restaurant, a Talkshow verbal conflict script activates knowledge of the sequence of events associated with a verbal conflict. Knowledge of the script makes it possible for a person to assign default values to unobserved episodes. In view of this criterion, I shall postulate the basic items and actions in a Talkshow verbal conflict:

a) There should be at least two participants who are in interaction and who support a different point of view about the disputed issue statement; that is to say, disputant A thinks X of the disputed issue statement and disputant B thinks Y of the disputed issue statement. X always being different from Y.

b) Disputant A argues in favour of X and disagrees with disputant B; whereas disputant B argues in favour of Y and disagrees with disputant A. Disputants reinforce their opinion and try to undermine their opponents’ point of view. Therefore, X’s and Y’s meaning is negotiated.

c) The interaction comes to an end through one of these formats: submission, compromise, stand-off and withdrawal. In a submission, one person gives in to the other. The conflict is ended by one person agreeing with another – which in turn implies the submitting person’ face loss. In a compromise, the disputants find a middle ground that they can both accept. The compromise can be offered by a disputant or by a third party – the host – and its acceptance may be overt but it is often implicit. In a stand-off, the disputants drop the conflict without any kind of resolution. They tacitly agree to disagree and move on to another activity. Nobody wins or loses, the conflict essentially ends in a draw. In a withdrawal, one disputant overtly leaves the interaction by refusing to talk and does not allow a smooth transition to other activities.

The following extract serves to illustrate this point:

MFTA (1) : He left me holding the baby.

A(W): Can I ask you something? You said you loved your son to pieces. Have you got any idea of what you are doing to him by leaving when he is a week. He is going to know when erm How old is your boy now?

B(M): He is coming up for two in December

A: He is going to know one day that when he was a week old his daddy left erm have you got any idea of what he is going to feel?

B:] I can imagine

A:] Because I can tell you right now what he is going to feel. He is going to feel that he wasn’t]

B:] It would have been better for him to stay there arguing and make his life miserable?

A: I feel very sorry for you, because my mother lived the same situation she was left when we were very small, when you said that Darrel had problems on and off with alcohol. Did you think that he was a good candidate as a father to your children?

C(W): For four years he didn’t drink, he only started behind my back, if you like, I have no idea that this was going on, I did not know anything

A: It seems to me as if both of you are being under pressure, I think it’s common mix, people think there are some problems in the relationship that the baby might mend, erm rubbish I feel sorry for you both

The speaker A elicits the addressee to provide some dangerously emotional information. The speaker – by means of indirect discourse devices – presupposes that the addressee does not know the consequences of what he has done. By taking advantage of the elicitation, the speaker does not simply disapprove of the addressee's behaviour but makes him assume the wrongness of his acts. This strategy does then threaten the addressee's positive-face.

The speaker B does not provide the personal information and challenges the speaker's presupposition about him, not knowing the consequences of what he has done. By challenging the presupposition, he recovers, on the one hand, his positive face loss, and threatens, on the other hand, the speaker's A positive face. The negotiation involves deception and hurtful communication, and the speaker A increases the ranking of imposition by supporting her position on the weaknesses of the addressee's position. This criticism is aimed at emotionally blocking the addressee.

The addressee B tries to balance the ranking of imposition and disagrees with the speaker; that is to say, he offers some supporting reasons for his position. The content of knowledge displayed in the response attempts to dominate access to available knowledge, since this factor determines the ranking of imposition and legitimates his power position. In doing so, he recovers his face loss and invalidates the speaker's goals.

The speaker A does not accept the blockage and plan a subsequent move where winning will be more probable. The speaker then distances herself from the matter by making a general negative evaluation in which she includes the addressee's wife. The intention would be to cause the addressee's positive face loss indirectly through eliciting his wife (C) to provide personal information which threatens the addressee's (B) positive face. The new addressee provides then more evidence that qualifies the speaker's (A) position. By revealing his drinking problem, the addressee (B) is emotionally blocked and his challenging position is invalidated.

2.2. A basic event schema of a Talkshow verbal conflict

The above mentioned actions in a verbal conflict exhibit a very predictable temporal structure in which one stage is a prerequisite for the next stages. Thus, I have worked out a basic event of Talkshow verbal conflict that throws further light on this type of interaction. Three main stages can be postulated: Pre-conflict, Conflict and Post-conflict.

- a) The first stage is what I have called "talking". It is in this stage when interaction starts and the disputed issue statement is introduced by any of the participants.
- b) The second stage is the "conflict" proper. It in this stage, I have distinguished three sub-stages. First, "presentation" in which both disputant argue in favour of their point of view and disagree with the opponent's. Second, "negotiation" of meaning takes place. In doing so, A claims his/her point of view and undermines B's point of view, and so does B. Third, the highest degree of tension appears and that is why I have called this sub-stage "climax". In this sub-stage, participants are more competitive since this is the last attempt to reinforce their point of view. It is then a fight for leadership.
- c) Finally, the third stage or the "post-conflict". It is certainly beyond the scope of this study to work on how a conflict ends, mainly because clear-cut winners and losers are not usually established in such episodes. The study of how conflictive episodes are closed will be restricted to the exploitation of politeness strategies – aimed at threatening the participants' face – which in turn will be argued to determine the kind of closing. Yet, in dealing with this stage, four basic alternatives may be drawn: submission, compromise, stand-off, and withdrawal.

The extension of the prototypical scenario may vary in size from a few number of oppositional exchanges – where the episode is soon closed – or may consist of longer stretches of conversation. In addition, the end of the conflict is determined by the figure of the host or the time limit.

3. CONCLUSION

In summary, what I have spelled out in this paper has been a reflection on some key analytic elements for understanding media discourse and, more precisely, Talkshow conflictual episodes. By taking advantage of Rumelhart's Schema Theory, I have postulated that (a) Rumelhart's cultural model of buying may be adapted to the understanding of this kind of interaction and predict stereotypical roles and relationships of participants; (b) that detailed inspection of the data results in a verbal conflict exhibiting a very predictable temporal structure in which one stage is a prerequisite for the following stages.

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