TELEVISION DISCOURSE

NURIA LORENZO-DUS

ISBN 978-1-4039-3429-1
90181
9 781403 934291

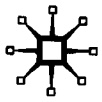
www.palgrave.com

Television Discourse

Analysing Language in the Media

Nuria Lorenzo-Dus

palgrave
macmillan



First published 2009 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN-13: 978–1–4039–3428–4 hardback
ISBN-10: 1–4039–3428–2 hardback
ISBN-13: 978–1–4039–3429–1 paperback
ISBN-10: 1–4039–3429–0 paperback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Lorenzo-Dus, Nuria.
Television discourse : analysing language in the media / Nuria Lorenzo-Dus.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978–1–4039–3428–4
1. Television broadcasting—Language. 2. Television talk shows. 3. Television broadcasting of news. 4. Discourse analysis. I. Title. PN1992.8.L35L67 2008
302.23'45014—dc22 2008037604

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09

Printed and bound in China

Abbreviations

Transcription conventions used in this book

CU/MS/LS	camera close-up/medium shot/long shot
MCU/MLS	medium close-up/medium–long-range shot
laughs	paralinguistic/non-verbal features of communication
(vo)	narrative voice-over: off-screen delivery of talk
word	marked stress
WORD	increased volume
<slow>	markedly slow speech delivery
>quick<	markedly fast speech delivery
°quietly°	quiet speech delivery
?	rising intonation
[	simultaneous starting talk
=	latching (no discernible gap) between the end of one turn and the beginning of the next turn
(.)	short pause (a second or under)
(3.0)	longer pause, in seconds
mm, er . . .	filled pauses, hesitations . . .
(xxxx)	unclear portion of talk
an:::d	prolongation ('stretching') of prior syllable
wor-	syllable or word cut off abruptly

Acknowledgements

In the process of writing this book I have benefited from the help of various people and institutions. I am grateful, first of all, to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for a research leave grant, which enabled me to complete this project. I am also grateful to Kitty Van Boxel and Kate Wallis at Palgrave Macmillan for their advice in the preparation of this book. Colleagues in Applied Linguistics and Media and Communication Studies, both at Swansea University, have provided a most intellectually stimulating and supportive research environment over the years. My thanks go also to colleagues at the Universities of Canterbury, Victoria, and Auckland University of Technology, all in New Zealand, for giving me the opportunity to bounce ideas off them in the early stages of this project, especially to Allan Bell, Meredith Marra, Donald Matheson, Philippa Smith, John Read and Jim Tully. I am particularly grateful to Adam Jaworski and Kevin Williams for their helpful and constructive advice, and to Andrew Hoskins and Rob Penhallurick for their valuable suggestions on various chapters of this book.

At a personal level, I would like to thank Sonia Ferrer, Cristina Izura, Patricia Bou Franch and Gaynor Bracchi. My parents José and María Virginia have given me more than I will ever be able to thank them for. My sisters María and María José have always been there for me, as has Alejandro in recent times. The limited sleep and time that Clara's birth brought along two years ago has been more than compensated for by the perspective that her sunny personality has provided. Finally, Steve has continuously been a kindred spirit and loving pillar of support. It is to him that I am most grateful and to whom I owe the most.

NURIA LORENZO-DUS

The author and publishers wish to thank the following for permission to use copyright material:

The BBC, for permission to reproduce excerpts from the following programmes: *Airport*, *Planet Earth*, *Michael Palin Around the World*, *Prime Minister's Question Time*, *Newsnight* and *Kilroy*.

CBS News Archives, for permission to reprint an excerpt from the CBS broadcast of the third Presidential Debate between George W. Bush and John Kerry.

Channel Five Broadcasting Ltd, for permission to reproduce an excerpt from *The House Doctor* (Series 6).

Elsevier Ltd., for extracts from 'A rapport and impression management approach to public figures' performance of talk' (*Journal of Pragmatics*, 37 (2005), 611–35).

Granada Ventures and ITV plc, for permission to reproduce stills from an episode of *Trisha* (2004).

Granada: Comares, for extracts from 'The discourse of lifestyles in the broadcast media' (*Ways into Discourse*, P. Bou Franch (ed.) (2006b), 135–50).

Sage Publications Ltd., for extracts from 'Buying and Selling: Mediating persuasion in British property shows' (*Media, Culture and Society*, 28 (2006a), 739–61) and 'Real disorder in the court: An investigation of conflict talk in US courtroom shows' (*Media, Culture and Society*, 30 (2008), 81–108).

Every effort has been made to trace the copyright holders but, if any have been inadvertently overlooked, the authors and publishers will be pleased to make the necessary arrangements at the first opportunity.

Arts & Humanities Research Council

The AHRC funds postgraduate training and research in the arts and humanities, from archaeology and English literature to design and dance. The quality and range of research supported not only provides social and cultural benefits but also contributes to the economic success of the UK. For further information on the AHRC, please see our website, www.ahrc.ac.uk.

Contents

Extracts

Figures and Tables

Figures

Tables

1 Introduction

1.1 The broadcast discourse of television

This work marks the coming together of two of my great interests, namely television and talk. Of course, interest alone is not necessarily sufficient to justify a book. For me the rationale for writing this work now and in the way that I have done stems from my judgement that the study of talk in the medium of television remains comparatively limited and that a better understanding of what it is now is both important in its own right and can contribute much to debates about television as it may become.

This relative lack of extant research may initially sound strange, given the predominance of television as a medium of communication over recent decades. Let me elaborate. The study of television as a whole has actually been – and remains in the eyes of many – a somewhat dubious endeavour. Also, as Corner (1999: 121) cautions in respect of significant change in the British broadcasting context, the study of television can be seen as being 'caught in a position of double embarrassment [. . .] It has barely begun to make a full political, social, and cultural assessment of "television as we know it", yet its very object of study is shifting towards "television as we knew it" with some speed.'

Now is arguably one of those periods of substantial change in the international media landscape. On the one hand, increased competition has encouraged media providers to appeal, 'commodity-like', to specific viewers. Corner (1998: 95) refers, for example, to the process of hybridisation within the print and broadcast media, whereby elements from what previously were different conventions are combined, with the result that some traditional genres break down, 'including those dividing off "higher" from "lower" forms of demarcating the "serious" from the "entertaining" '. On the other hand, technology is enabling 'new media', which many argue will progressively challenge television's dominance as a communication medium. The advent of satellite and cable 'narrowcasting', as well as a seemingly progressive drift away from television towards the internet, are seen to pose, for example, questions about the social primacy of television.

Several implications ensue from the above, some of which are important to

the analysis of television talk, as we shall see in later chapters of this book. For instance, channel proliferation since the 1990s means that the number of programmes likely to be experienced by viewers 'out of time', despite being textually designed for particular schedule 'slots', has increased (e.g. Christmas episodes of recurring series being broadcast not only at Christmas) as programmes are recycled as repeats. This situation, which is likely to continue once we are 'fully immersed' in the digital era, may lead to changes in ways of expressing the referentiality of, for example, factual statements bounded in specific temporalities, such as house prices in a given property show.

Change is not *per se* a motivating factor for this book. There is already a considerable body of speculative research about the future media landscape and its drivers. Rather, *Television Discourse* is driven by a concern that the contemporary might be lost too quickly and with too little understanding to help not only current scholars to engage effectively in debates about how television talk may evolve, but also future scholars to look back and assess the impact of change on talk over time. This is why I shall examine recent and current forms of talk in specific television contexts (see Section 1.3 for my selection of these contexts).

This begs the further question of why talk is the feature of television selected for study. The answer lies principally in the relative neglect of 'form' in media research and in the general consensus within its study (when applied to radio and television) about the importance of spoken discourse. It is the latter that unites a wide range of disciplines studying 'media form', including literary criticism, applied linguistics, critical linguistics, cultural sociology/studies and media studies.[1] Spoken discourse (talk) is thus treated in this book as being responsible for generating the socio-communicative arena in which television images exist. True, it is television's distinctive ways of generating and combining images that most immediately engage viewers and secure their attention. It is, nevertheless, through its spoken discourse that 'television addresses its viewers and holds them in particular relations both to specific programmes and to channel and station identities' (Corner 1999: 37).

Given the centrality of the spoken discourse of television, it is surprising that it has not figured as strongly as it might have done in media research. There are a number of reasons for this, three of which are of special interest to this book. First, studying audio communication in media, especially sound, poses a significant methodological challenge. The multi-modal discourse of television requires competency in visual as well as audio and verbal communication (Tolson 2006). 'With speech', Tolson (2006: 5) further observes, 'there are methods for conversation and discourse analysis, but these require media students (and their teachers) to take some steps into another discipline.' The high level of interdisciplinary competence needed is thus responsible in part for the comparative scarcity of studies of television (and radio) talk over the years.

Secondly, research on media form has been criticised by some as too narrow in scope and, hence, as too limiting. Admittedly, to focus solely on texts at the expense of production and reception processes and practices undoubtedly risks missing important aspects of 'the whole picture' of television's communicative

dynamic. Examining how television texts are produced is, indeed, a valuable exercise in its own right, as Born's (2004) work on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) illustrates. Born's ethnographic study of this emblematic institution unveils, for example, the role of what we may term production forces in the consolidation of programme types such as docusoaps in the 1990s. Consider the following extract from an interview conducted by Born with the senior executive of BBC documentaries in 1996:

> We were trying to make very popular programmes and compete with the other side. But these shows [docusoaps such as *X Cars*] also act as valuable commissioning loss-leaders; they give me a lever to get through more serious stuff. Right now, we're making a special on Nazi gold. It's investigative, a dynamite story, front-page stuff, and very expensive to make. It's one of those things that might wither on the vine in this new BBC. Well, *X Cars* got me the money to do it. [. . .] It's a trade-off; it really is trading. (Born 2004: 437).

This quote exemplifies that there are some important factors shaping broadcast communication that studies of form (or of reception, for that matter) cannot access, but to which production studies are ideally suited. Similarly, studying how media texts are received/interpreted, or 'consumed', affords invaluable insights into many key debates in the history of media research, including the pervasive and thorny one of media influence.

As Corner (1998: 14–16) explains, much new work on media in the 1970s focused on 'language' – both on how the media used it and on the linguistic ordering of society and consciousness. Examples include the work of Lévi-Strauss in structuralist anthropology, Freud's analysis of unconsciousness, neo-Marxian concepts of ideology and the work of Barthes and Eco on semiotics. The early 1980s, however, witnessed a gradual but significant shift in media research – one spurred by the realisation of the extent to which the 'meaning' of media texts resides in acts of interpretation rather than in the texts themselves. Several lines of enquiry on the social conditions of interpretability established the implausibility of a direct media-text–influence link. Some of these lines of enquiry also, and importantly, denounced the 'negative bias syndrome' under which much research on media influence had developed. In Corner's (1999: 7) words,

> In this view of television power it is all high mountains – the varying contours of culture are ignored. In the context of the multiple, indirect ways in which cultural meanings are produced in a modern society [. . .] the general question of "influence or not?" risks banality. Enquiry into television's power needs to rid itself of some of the assumptions behind one of its key terms.

The issue at stake, in other words, is not whether television exerts a strong, misleading influence on viewers' minds and hearts. Instead, questions to be

asked are: 'What kinds of power? How exercised? In support of what and against what other factors of social structure and action?' (Corner 1999: 7).

The third factor contributing to the comparative dearth of studies of media form also takes the form of a criticism: these studies too often drift into speculation about the complexities of signification, rather than centring on close textual description and/or engaging with the socio-political consequences of textual mediation. Some scholars, of course, have avoided this trap. The work of critical linguists such as Fairclough (1992, 1995, 1998, 2000), for instance, clearly counters the latter charge, for it is oriented towards the tripartite relationship that exists between texts, processes (design/production and consumption) and socio-cultural practices (how society and culture shape and are shaped by these texts). However, this has not absolved them from criticism and/or lament. Such work adopts a 'hermeneutics of suspicion', which assumes that language and the media are 'systems of representation that, in ordinary practice and use, misrepresent the reality which they re-present' (Scannell 1998: 256).[2] This critical approach to television, echoed in the traditions of critical theory and literary criticism especially, prompts Hartley (2004: 33) to observe that

> whereas many traditions of study in the general area of the arts have presumed some pleasurable investment by the student in the object of study, the textual tradition in television studies set out with the avowed intention of denouncing television and all its works [. . .] the successful student [of television] was the one who could catalogue most extensively the supposed evils associated with television, although of course these evils only affected *other* people, possibly because the students were not encouraged to watch TV themselves, only to opine haughtily about it (original emphasis).

Change, though, is in the air – and I am not just referring here to television's transformation in the era of digital, cable narrowcasting and internet platforms and the 'hype of speculation' (Geraghty and Lusted 2004: 1) that surrounds the nature, scope and development of such a transformation. Studies of media form are making a comeback.[3] Following the academic interest in language in the 1970s and the shift to interpretation in the 1980s discussed above, the 1990s experienced a quantitatively modest but qualitatively significant renewal of interest in the spoken discourse of broadcasting. Scannell's edited collection *Broadcast Talk* (1991) was the first and subsequently perhaps most influential academic book devoted exclusively to radio and television talk. It was followed by Fairclough's (1995) *Media Discourse* and Hutchby's (1996) *Confrontation Talk*. The former examined both print and broadcast contexts and, as noted earlier, considered media texts as one of three equally important aspects in the study of media discourse. The latter provided a detailed analysis of verbal confrontation in radio discourse. More recently, several projects squarely within a 'broadcast talk' research framework have focused on specific broadcast formats (e.g. Tolson's (2001a) edited volume on talk shows and Montgomery's (2007) monograph on broadcast news) or have provided overviews of the discourse of broadcasting (Hutchby 2006; Tolson 2006).[4]

Television Discourse builds on the momentum and the body of knowledge offered by all this research to provide – to my knowledge – the first book-length investigation specifically and thoroughly focused on television talk. It examines the relationship between the *what* and the *how* of the discourse of television. Using data from formats as diverse as make-over shows and political interviews, *Television Discourse* explores how television shapes and is shaped by the interactional exchanges that it features. It thus focuses, for example, on the interplay between the stories typically told in docusoaps (stories built around conflict–resolution structures) and the ways in which these stories are relayed in order to keep viewers switched on.

As such, *Television Discourse* is located within a body of scholarly work concerned with the analysis of media discourse, even if there is no single, overarching definition of the term 'discourse'. Indeed, discourse is conceptualised as, amongst other things, 'language above the sentence or above the clause' (Stubbs 1983: 1), 'language in use' (Brown and Yule 1983: 1), 'language use' (Fasold 1990: 65) and 'language use, whether speech or writing, seen as a type of social practice' (Fairclough 1992: 28).[5] Across definitions, one aspect recurs: discourse analysis does not examine language in the abstract but in use. The interplay between language use and the context of this use, however, is viewed differently across subdisciplines of discourse analysis.[6]

Within this discourse analysis approach, *Television Discourse* adopts a 'hermeneutics of trust' rather than of 'suspicion'. Language and media (television in this case) are seen as 'things that simply, routinely and ordinarily work (whether for or against human interests is not, in the first instance, at issue)' (Scannell 1998: 257). These two lines of enquiry need not, in fact, be seen as contradictory. As Montgomery (2007: 21) argues in the context of broadcast news, 'If we wish to understand and explain the news as a phenomenon we need thorough analysis of how it works. Criticism of the news is best conducted on adequate description of its discourse in which the full range of its communicative practices is captured.'

1.2 Who is talking to whom and when on television?

There is one aspect of television discourse that makes its analysis distinctive vis-à-vis that of other, unmediated, spoken discourse contexts: its double articulation. As Scannell (1991: 1) puts it, broadcast talk 'is a communicative interaction between those participating in discussion, interview, game show or whatever and, at the same time, is designed to be heard by absent audiences'. Television discourse is indeed explicitly designed and produced to be heard *and* seen by these absent audiences, which is why camera work, background music, screen graphics, language, voice quality, intonation, spatial arrangements in studio sets and performers' attire are all treated as meaning-making semiotic resources and, hence, as relevant to the analysis of the discourse of television in this book.

Consider, for example, the significant number of highly edited programmes

on our television screens. The filming of each episode of property make-over shows on British television tends to last between three days and a week. Yet, its actual broadcast time is between thirty and sixty minutes, often inclusive of commercial breaks. Viewers are therefore presented with a strategically selected, arranged and articulated proportion of the entire filmed material for each episode. For instance, the 'moment of revelation' (Bonner 2003; Moseley 2000) or 'the reveal' (Spigel 2006; Heller 2007) – the moment during which the made-over property is shown to viewers and participants for the first time – is often synced with music appropriate to its interior decoration style (classical music for traditional properties, upbeat tunes for modern houses), rapidly interleaved long-range, medium-range and close-up shots of decorated rooms and ornamental items, and with flattering descriptions of the presenters' interior decoration achievements. Such a polished confluence of semiotic resources from different modes of communication (visual, aural, verbal) results from a range of decisions with regard to the discursive realisation of these shows.

The double articulation of television talk also makes its analysis challenging within traditional speaker–hearer models of communication, such as the one proposed by French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). His notion of the 'speaking circuit' (1916: 11–15), unsurprisingly given the time at which it was formulated, cannot account for the 'wittingly, knowingly *public*' (Scannell 1991: 11; original emphasis) nature of television discourse. The speaking circuit rests on the idea that concepts are transferred between two persons, 'A' and 'B'. Communication results when person 'A' encodes them through speech and person 'B' subsequently decodes them. Subsequently, more sophisticated communication models have been developed, including those by Shannon and Weaver (1949), Sebeok (1988), Sperber and Wilson (1995) and Goffman. The last one is especially relevant to our discussion of the double articulation of talk on television.

North American sociologist Erving Goffman did not set out to model spoken communication *per se* but a significant part of his work did investigate the particulars of how people talk to each other in given social encounters. In *Forms of Talk*, for example, Goffman (1981) explored the interplay between three general themes to investigate talk, namely:

- the ability of talk to be other- or self-referential, which he termed the 'embedding capacity' of talk;
- 'the moments, looks and vocal sounds we make as an unintended by-product of speaking and listening . . . acquire a specialized communicative role in the stream of our behaviour' (1981: 2), which he collectively designated as a 'ritualisation process';
- the 'participation framework' of talk, which he loosely described thus: 'When a word is spoken, all those who happen to be in the perceptual range of the event will have some sort of participation status relative to it.' (1981: 3)

For Goffman, the traditional notions of speaker and hearer were too simplistic. He replaced them respectively with those of the 'production format' and the