Confrontation Talk

Arguments, Asymmetries, and Power on Talk Radio

Ian Hutchby

Case Studies of Everyday Communication Behavior in Context

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Editors' Preface

The case studies included in the "Everyday Communication" series examine human communication behavior as a patterned process occurring within particular cultural and social contexts. *Confrontation Talk: Arguments, Asymmetries, and Power on Talk Radio* by Ian Hutchby is the third volume to appear. Actual conversations (in the form of transcript data) from talk radio shows take center stage in this book's analyses.

Hutchby uses conversation analysis to examine verbal confrontation as it occurs in a single context, talk radio shows that are broadcast in England. As talk radio reaches a larger audience, not only in England but in the United States and other parts of the world, research that treats its institutional and structural aspects seriously is welcome. This is particularly the case when we consider the potential influence talk radio has on and through other media (as in similarly conducted talk television shows on the one hand, and newspaper articles and television reports about discussions that occur on talk radio on the other).

Confrontation plays a central role in talk radio. By choosing to focus on confrontation, Hutchby not only illuminates our understanding of how arguments develop on talk radio, but he offers conclusions that apply to arguments in other contexts as well. Hutchby demonstrates that arguments are interactional accomplishments: They require the active participation of all the communicators. One cannot have an argument alone. Despite the fact that participants disagree on content, they must agree, in at least a limited way, about the formal constraints of the genre in order to have an argument.

Hutchby's study quickly turns into an investigation of power, particularly what happens when power appears unequally distributed among participants in an interaction. By definition, the caller and the radio host have unequal status, implying differential ability to initiate, sustain, and terminate arguments. Investigating this asymmetry, Hutchby shows how power works subtly, in everyday contexts, running through even brief conversations between strangers. This is not an overview of large (but largely unseen) social forces, but a careful study of how the words used between two individuals display and reinforce inequities.

Confrontation Talk thus brings the study of social forces to an accessible level: We may not all be callers to talk radio shows, but we have all participated in arguments in some context; close examination of talk reveals the mechanisms that some communicators may employ to initiate, exacerbate, moderate, and/or terminate confrontation. Everyone has experienced conversations that developed into arguments, wondered how exactly that escalation occurs, and how it sometimes can be prevented. Hutchby guides us through the process, showing how interruption is used as a strategic tool, and how this and other strategies can be resisted.

In short, using talk radio as his context, Hutchby provides a study of institutionalized power—how it is displayed and how it is reproduced in conversation. He does not offer broad generalizations about the nature of power; he shows us in specific, concrete detail.

Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz
Stuart J. Sigman

Acknowledgments

A great many people have given me the kind of help, encouragement, criticism, intellectual challenge, and support without which I would probably not have begun, let alone finished, this book. I would like to thank Colin Sparks at the University of Westminster, for whom I worked as a research assistant during the time when the original idea of studying arguments on talk radio shows occurred to me. The fact that he allowed and even encouraged me to develop this line of research, which was completely unrelated to the work I was doing for him, coupled with the fact that he undoubtedly had serious reservations about my methodological move toward conversation analysis (CA), both testify to his great intellectual generosity.

Also for continuing intellectual generosity, I would like to thank Paddy Scannell at the University of Westminster. During the same early period, his selfless donations of personal time, advice, and enthusiasm for Harvey Sacks' work were invaluable to me as I first fumbled with the literature of CA. Paddy was, and remains, important in encouraging me to continue with the work of applying CA to the language of the media.

During my doctoral research at the University of York, Paul Drew did his level best to train me in the hard grind of actually doing CA. His careful, considered, and always incisive comments and criticism of my work have been crucial not only in developing my own analytical skills, but also in shaping many of the analytic directions taken in these pages. His influence pervades the book, although I have no doubt that he would not agree with many of the things I use that influence to say.

At the University of Surrey, where the bulk of the work on the book was done, Nigel Gilbert was another generous boss who allowed me far more intellectual space and academic time than I first anticipated, in order to get the book finished.

A special mention must go to Robin Wooffitt, erstwhile colleague at Surrey and continuing friend, who was the one who talked me into writing this book in the first place. For his cajoling, as well as for one or two stylistic leg ups, I thank him.

The book is dedicated to Joanna Thornborrow, who has seen it through with me, and a lot else besides. Both personally and intellectually she has been, and remains, an inspiration.

Two of the chapters included here are extensively revised and updated versions of previous publications. My thanks to the British Sociological Association for permission to include, as chapter 4, a version of my paper "The Pursuit of Controversy: Routine Skepticism in Talk on Talk Radio" (1992), published in *Sociology, 26*(4), pp. 673–694. And my thanks to Sage Publications for permission to include, as chapter 5, a version of "Confrontation Talk: Aspects of 'Interruption' in Argument Sequences on Talk Radio" (1992), originally published in *Text, 12*(3), pp. 343–371.

All of the transcripts of the *Brian Hayes Programme* included herein are my own. All names of people and places have been changed.

Ian Hutchby

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1 Talk Radio and the Discourse of Argument

This is a study of how arguments are conducted in a particular social setting: an open-line radio phone-in broadcast, or talk radio show. Open-line talk radio shows are notorious for generating a high degree of controversial and confrontational talk between their hosts and the callers—ordinary citizens, for the most part—they encounter. This notoriety extends deeply enough into Anglo-American culture for it to have provided the focal point of a movie released in the 1980s, *Talk Radio*. That film centered around the daily life and work of a controversial talk radio host whose character, although fictional, was loosely based on a real-life host, Alan Berg. Berg generated such controversy through his show that he ended up being shot by a vengeful listener.

Thus, when I decided to begin researching the interactional properties of argument, and was casting around for likely sources of data, an argumentative talk radio show seemed a good idea. In Britain (where the research was done) the most well-known talk radio show at that time was *The Brian Hayes Programme*, a daily show on London's LBC station. Hayes' propensity for skepticism and sarcasm was notorious enough that a profile for the national magazine *Radio Times* (Purves, 1991) described his show in these terms:

> For 14 years his reign of terror stretched across Greater London, as he daily pulverised Dave from Dalston and Janice from Walthamstow with terrifying put-downs and rebukes like, "A teeny bit muddled there" or, "You keep on saying that" or, ultimately, "We've gone through this several times, and if you don't understand now you never will." Click. (p. 18)

I randomly recorded nine entire broadcasts of the Brian Hayes phone-in, and ended up with a corpus of just over 120 calls.[1] These calls (not all of which involve Hayes as the host; in fact, three different hosts appear on the tapes I have) comprise the principal database for this book—although for comparative purposes I occasionally draw on other sources of data such as telephone conversations between friends, psychotherapeutic conversations, televised news interviews, and others.[2]

I considered talk radio to be a data source with distinct advantages over others used by researchers on argument, such as taped family discussions (Billig, 1991; Schiffrin, 1985; Vuchinich, 1990), recordings of children's play either on the street (M. H. Goodwin, 1990) or in the nursery (Corsaro & Rizzo, 1990; Eisenberg & Garvey, 1981), or recordings made in some kind of laboratory setting (Lein & Brenneis, 1978). The reason for this is simple: Although the participants were undoubtedly conscious of the fact that their talk was being broadcast to an overhearing audience, I took it that they could not reasonably be said to be aware—or to suspect—that some particular member of that audience was taping the proceedings in order to engage in sociological analysis of their talk. Essentially, what I captured on my tapes were interactional episodes that were as unaffected as they could possibly be by my presence as a researcher. That is, each of the broadcasts I recorded contained talk that would have been produced just the same if I had not turned on the tape recorder that morning. (Indeed, I recall listening to some broadcasts on mornings I had not elected to record, deeply regretting my decision, because they seemed to contain such good examples of argumentative talk!)

Yet the fact remains that the arguments I had recorded took place in a particular kind of setting: not in the family home or the psychology lab, but on the radio. Radio is of course a principal medium of mass communication, and media analysts in the past have shown some interest in studying talk radio as a mass communication phenomenon. The kinds of questions that have been asked, however—such as how effective is talk radio as a democratic forum, or how does it influence public opinion—are quite different from the questions that animate my research. I am interested in analyzing the actual *talk* that is at the heart of the talk radio show, without which, indeed, there could be no such thing as a talk radio show. As I have said, that talk involves argument as

[1] I should perhaps note that at the time of writing, the *Brian Hayes Programme* has been canceled by the broadcasting company. Although Hayes was remarkably popular, and his show had run for 14 years, one apocryphal story had it that his style was too abrasive and controversial for the radio company's attempt to construct a "new image" in the early 90s. Hayes subsequently went to work for BBC Radio 2, possibly the least abrasive radio station imaginable within the British broadcasting context.

[2] Throughout, I have tried to indicate in the text from what kind of setting cited examples are drawn, usually by stating that the extract is "from a conversation" or "from a news interview." In the case of the talk radio examples, it's made even more evident by the fact that the speakers are always designated "Host" and "Caller" in transcripts.

a central activity. But a second theme of this book considers how the arguments that take place can involve a particular set of power relationships between the two participants: the host and the caller. In the empirical chapters of the book one of the things I will do is to trace the social forces at work associated with these asymmetrical participant statuses, because these footings carry with them an unequal distribution of resources for initiating, sustaining, and terminating arguments.

The analytic approach I take comes from the perspective of conversation analysis (CA).[3] CA has two key methodological features. The first is its basic aim: "To describe the underlying social organization—conceived as an institutionalized substratum of rules, procedures and conventions—through which orderly and intelligible interaction is made possible" (C. Goodwin & Heritage, 1990, p. 283). The second is its central belief that that underlying social organization need not be reconstructed from field notes or members' reports on social happenings, as in traditional ethnography. Rather, it is directly available to observation in the details of naturally occurring interactions, which can be recorded using audio or video equipment (Sacks, 1984).

Accordingly, throughout the book, I base my analyses on recorded actual calls to a talk radio show. Transcripts of these calls are reproduced not just as illustrations, but as part of my analysis. They should be read as such, because I am dealing with events occurring in the real world, and the ultimate criterion by which my account may be judged necessarily lies in the organizational detail of those events. Of course, the transcripts themselves are only one kind of rendition of real-world events; but they allow the reader as far as possible, within current technological constraints, to match my interpretations to the details of the data on which they are based—and of course, if necessary, to disagree with me.

ANALYZING TALK ON TALK RADIO

This is not the first time that talk radio—or public-access broadcasting more generally—has been subjected to sociological and communicational analysis. Analysts in the past have brought a range of questions to bear on this genre of broadcasting. But this is the first time that talk radio has been studied from the distinctive perspective of conversation analysis. Consequently, many of the questions I will be asking about the data in this book are somewhat different from those that have previously been addressed.

A central focus in previous studies has been the question of how "demo-

[3]A general introduction to the perspective and method of conversation analysis is provided in Hutchby and Wooffitt (in press). Shorter introductions can be found in Levinson (1983) and in Heritage (1984).

cratic" talk radio is. These analyses tend to come from a media studies perspective, and focus on the fact that talk radio (and counterpart audience participation shows on TV) can be seen as a means of providing ordinary citizens with access to the public sphere represented in large part, in modern society, by broadcasting. Many years ago, the playwright and radical Bertolt Brecht (1932/1964) put forward the idea that "The radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network. . . . That is to say, it would be if it knew how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him" (p. 52).

To some extent, these possibilities are realized in the talk radio show. And this has led some media analysts to try and assess the extent to which talk radio in fact functions as a democratic forum. For instance, both Crittenden (1971) in one of the earliest studies, and Verwey (1990) in a more extensive, book-length treatment, explicitly address the democratic functions of talk radio, by examining the degree to which arguments put forward in talk radio discussions permeate the wider population of the overhearing audience, or by evaluating how different talk radio hosts facilitate open debate between themselves and members of the public.

But from the standpoint I adopt in this book, there is something radically missing from these studies of talk radio as a democratic forum (see also Avery & Ellis, 1979; Rancer, Miles, & Baukus, 1994; Step & Rubin, 1994; Turow, 1974). Nowhere in these studies does one find a consideration of the actual *talk* that talk radio shows broadcast. For instance, Verwey (1990) presents no examples of words actually spoken, or an exchange actually broadcast, during the many shows she recorded for her database. Verwey's preferred method is to transform the words people spoke into coded units or categories, such as expressions of opposition or support for some proposition, and then quantify the results in order to represent those positions in statistical tables.

This statistical approach does tell us something, albeit on a relatively gross level, about certain types of patterns in talk radio discourse, for instance, patterns of agreement and disagreement with various propositions, or at least patterns of positive and negative viewpoints given airtime by the show's producers. But, in the process, it leaves completely out of account the underlying question of the actual, situated speaking practices by which citizens' opinions on issues, and their debates with hosts, are managed in the public arena represented by the talk radio show. In other words, the talk that is at the heart of the talk radio show—through which, indeed, the talk radio show is constituted—is taken for granted as a window on underlying sociological variables, rather than being treated as a topic of analysis in its own right.[4]

[4]This observation relates to a long-standing issue in social science methodology about the relationship between language and reality, which has been discussed at length since the 1960s in a series of important texts, among them Sacks (1963), Garfinkel (1967), Garfinkel and Sacks

There have been other studies that have avoided this pitfall, and focused on the central role of talk in talk radio shows and their television counterparts. One of the earliest was by Moss and Higgins (1984). Their interest was in the ways in which different roles or discourse identities are embodied at different moments in the talk of hosts and callers to a talk radio show. To conduct this analysis, it was necessary to consider some actual examples of radio talk. Using Halliday's (1978) linguistic model of register, Moss and Higgins began to reveal the relationship between cultural knowledge and communicative intentions in actual talk radio discourse, and showed both the expressive dimensions of that discourse and the way in which the medium itself has a language whose features it is possible to delineate empirically. In short, Moss and Higgins' approach contributed to a shift in attention in media studies toward the question of *how* talk radio interaction is conducted, which is one of the central themes underlying the present book (see also Scannell, 1991).

This tendency is also evident in Carbaugh's (1988) study of the TV debate show *Donahue.* Here, the theme of democracy and the kind of public sphere being created by these shows again emerges, but in a different way from the survey-based statistical studies mentioned previously. Carbaugh suggests that one kind of significance of the public discourse of shows such as *Donahue* is that it can tell us a lot about the symbolic patterns and cultural structures of meaning circulating in mundane civil society: "Just as we have learned about Roman society by studying orations in the Assembly, and Colonial society by studying negotiations in the town hall, so we should learn much about contemporary American society by studying the kind of talk that is heard on *Donahue*" (p. 4).

Carbaugh takes an anthropological approach to the talk of debates on *Donahue,* using the contributions of audience members as a trace for the cultural categories and symbolic systems that circulate in contemporary American culture as a whole. He shows how, in the contributions of ordinary audience members, complex cognitive models of the self, authenticity, and "communicating" can be found. Thus, the discourse of *Donahue* interfaces the public and the private not only in terms of being the public talk of private citizens, but also in the sense that it illustrates the routine reflection of wider social patterns of reasoning in the speech of individual participants.[5]

Most recently, Livingstone and Lunt (1994), again focusing on TV debate shows, have been concerned with the contribution such shows make to the creation of a modern, mediated public sphere. In addition to analyzing the relationship between private and public themes and dimensions in the talk, Livingstone and Lunt discuss a number of dimensions such as the relationship

(1970), Zimmerman and Pollner (1971), Gilbert and Mulkay (1984), Pollner (1987), Moerman (1988), and M. H. Goodwin (1990).

[5]This theme has also preoccupied the social psychologist Billig (1991) in his work on everyday rhetoric and argumentation.

between expert and lay perspectives (and the way in which these shows subordinate the former to the latter), the relationship between abstract argument and lived personal experience in discussions of issues, and the broader political question of the media management of debates and consequences for the kind of participatory space that such shows in fact open up for the public.

The principal contribution these studies make, from my point of view, is to take seriously the fact that what talk radio broadcasts and their television equivalents consist of is, above all, talk. More specifically, they consist of what Goffman (1981) dubbed "fresh talk," talk that in general does not involve the speaker recalling memorized texts or reading aloud from a text, talk that is more or less spontaneous and, crucially, sensitive to its immediate context of production.

However, there are numerous ways in which the role of talk in such settings can be approached. In the studies just mentioned, the main concern is with how the content of the talk itself relates to wider social and cultural issues. Less attention is paid to the question of how that talk is actually produced, to the interactional and sequential contexts in which different participants speak, and to the relationship between the talk and the local organizational constraints of the setting itself. It is these latter three interests that represent my principal concerns in this book.

One of my main interests in the following chapters is in how sequential patterns in talk reveal participants' construction of social realities and communicative activities, and their orientations to social contexts and identity relationships. Beginning from this perspective, I will analyze the ways in which the communicative activity of arguing is practically accomplished through sequences of talk within the social setting of talk radio. In line with the general policy of conversation analysis, I will begin by bracketing the commonsense assumption that organizational features of talk radio, and/or the specific identity categories of host and caller, are *automatically* relevant for the course and outcomes of the interactions I recorded. This is not to deny that such factors may be relevant. In fact, one of the things I will show is that they are. Rather, it is to emphasize that the discovery of their relevance must be an empirical matter (Schegloff, 1991).

As this chapter proceeds, it will become clear that I aim to reveal the fundamental impact that organizational structure and the operation of power have on the trajectories of calls in my data. I will seek to show the way that the talk radio format itself is structured to promote a certain type of argument and confrontation. And I will examine how, as a consequence of this, the framework of interaction within calls functions to both enable and constrain the particular kinds of argumentative activity available to and undertaken by hosts and callers. This, I will argue, represents a way in which we can articulate the relationship between talk, asymmetry, and power in the discourse of social institutions.

In the rest of this introductory chapter, I outline in more detail just what all this entails. Beginning with a discussion of talk radio as a form of "institutional" discourse, I then discuss some broad themes in the conversation-analytic approach to that form of talk, before moving on to suggest how my analyses in this book will make a contribution to CA-oriented research by adopting its fundamentally local, sequential approach to address the question of power in institutional interaction.

TALK RADIO AS INSTITUTIONAL DISCOURSE

Talk radio is a form of institutional interaction. The talk takes place within an organization, the broadcasting company, which has its own structure and stability. That structure and stability are themselves phenomena which are produced and reproduced through talk and interaction (Boden, 1994; Drew & Heritage, 1992). The activities of the organization's members at all levels, from executive offices to the production floor of the studio, operate to provide the environment in which the host–caller interactions analyzed in this book can take place. Yet the talk and the interaction of calls themselves has an institutional character of its own: It is not just by virtue of being "talk in an institution" that talk radio is a form of institutional discourse.

How can we characterize the institutional nature of talk radio interaction? As Goffman (1961) once pointed out, institutions are things that sociologists "do not have a very apt way of classifying" (p. 15). But those who have studied talk in institutional settings in recent years have focused on two core features of that form of discourse: Institutional encounters are seen as "basically task-related and they involve at least one participant who represents a formal organization of some kind" (Drew & Heritage, 1992, p. 3).

Calls on talk radio possess both these features. The interaction is task-related in the sense that the talk is principally designed to discuss personal opinions about public issues. These discussions in turn take place in the context of telephone calls between ordinary citizens, who tend to be speaking from the private domain of their homes, and a host who both occupies the specialized space of the studio and is an employee and public representative of the broadcasting organization.

At the same time, however, the institutional space in which talk radio interactions take place is somewhat unique. It is a space created at the interface of private and public spheres of modern society. In calls to talk radio shows, a specialized form of talk—talk about personal opinions of public issues[6]—is

[6]This is not to say that such a form of talk is specialized in the sense of being *restricted* to this particular context. Clearly, people discuss their personal opinions of public issues in all sorts of places and for all sorts of reasons. But in the open-line talk radio show, this form of talk is pretty much the only type that gets produced. It is in this sense that I refer to it as specialized.

produced by two individuals respectively occupying what Scannell (1991) describes as the "completely separate . . . places from which broadcasting speaks and in which it is heard" (p. 3). For the most part, in broadcasting, the studio represents the primary location from which broadcast talk emerges; it is "the institutional discursive space of radio and television" (p. 3). Listening and viewing, on the other hand, "[take] place in the sphere of domesticity, within the spaces of the household and normatively in the small, family living room" (pp. 2–3). On talk radio, the voices of ordinary citizens are carried from that domestic sphere into the institutional space of the studio, and then projected back again, via the radio, to the domestic sphere of the audience.

It is not, then, that both participants occupy an institutional space (e.g., as in medical consultations that take place in the doctor's surgery), nor that the professional participant comes into the private space of the layperson (as would be the case when the doctor visits a patient in his or her home). Rather, the talk takes place at, and at the same time constructs, a mediated interface *between* these spheres. This makes talk radio a rather special form of institutional discourse, and it represents one of the reasons for it being subjected to analysis in the pages of this book.

But the uniqueness of the discursive space of talk radio is only one reason why I believe it is important to analyze the talk that goes on within calls in the kind of detail that I do in the following chapters. Analyzing talk radio discourse not only tells us something about the nature of institutional interaction and the role of talk in the construction and maintenance of institutional contexts (a point to which I return in more detail later). Because I focus my attention on *arguing* as the central speech activity within calls, there is also the opportunity to discover new things about the interactional structures and processes associated with conflict talk itself.

Argument is a form of interpersonal conflict made possible by a fundamental feature of human social life: the fact that people can entertain and be committed to entirely competing versions of reality. The importance of competing versions of reality has always been crucial for the social sciences; for instance, that issue is at the heart of many of the social phenomena studied by mainstream sociology, such as ideologies, revolutions, and the management of deviance. But the question of the practical strategies, procedures, devices, techniques, and formulas that people actually use in situated, real-time disputes over competing versions only emerged comparatively recently (Grimshaw, 1990). Nonetheless, by now substantial literatures exist on the practices of disputing among children, in legal contexts, and in a variety of other settings such as the family, the neighborhood, the workplace, and in the media (Brenneis, 1988).

My interest in conflict talk on talk radio concerns how participation in these disputes can be *asymmetrical.* In institutionalized settings for dispute, one topic of interest might be the relationship between verbal patterns and

resources used in conflict talk and the asymmetric social identities associated with the setting (bearing in mind that this is to be treated as an empirical question, and not as an a priori assumption). In this book, I will argue that the asymmetries we identify can be conceptualized in terms of the power of certain participants to engage in communicative actions not available (or not available in the same way) to others. One of my central claims will be that a CA approach can reveal, in fine detail, the ways in which arguments on talk radio articulate with, and are shaped and constrained by, the organizational parameters of the social setting in which they occur.

This concern with the relationships between patterns of conflict talk and the institutional setting of talk radio disputes raises two broader theoretical issues. The first is the question of how we are to approach the relationship between the small scale details of talk-in-interaction and "wider" social contexts for action. The second issue is that of how institutionalized power may be related to, and instantiated in, the local practices of talk-in-interaction.

TALK, ACTION, AND CONTEXT

The first of these issues, the relationship between talk and context, brings into play a broader sociological debate about the relations between agency and structure. In the wake of what Giddens (1979) terms the "linguistic turn" in sociology—the emergence of research paradigms that ceased to treat language as merely epiphenomenal and came to consider it as central to the reproduction of social relations and social structure—a large body of research has aimed to trace out the connections between the micro level details of situated interaction and more macro level, structural phenomena such as power, ideology, bureaucracy, class, and gender. Crucial to much thinking on this topic is Giddens' (1981, 1984) idea of the "duality of structure." Rather than seeing agency (i.e., people's actions) and structure (i.e., the relatively stable patterns of form and continuity in social systems) as disparate elements which compete for analytic attention, Giddens proposes that the two are interdependent. Social structure is treated as both a resource for people's actions and an emergent outcome of those actions. In Giddens (1981) terms, it is "both the medium and outcome of the social practices it recursively organizes" (p. 171).

This idea is very close to the one I adopt in the following chapters. The difference, however, is that Giddens does not demonstrate in any close empirical detail *how* the duality of structure operates. The approach adopted within CA, on the other hand, although closely related to Giddens' theoretical stance (Boden, 1994), aims to demonstrate the recursivity of agency and structure by focusing on the sequential details of talk-in-interaction. CA treats talk as a vehicle for social action, as the means by which social organization is mutu-