

Talk show: the audience represented in television for the audience of television

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0. INTRODUCTION

The increasing role of the mass media, particularly the television, in the construction of the psychosocial identity of individuals is a central subject of psycholinguistics applied to mass communication. The participation television of audience discussion programmes produces involvement (Livingstone et al. 1994) and, as a further consequence, social identities (Livingstone and Lunt 1994).

The **objective** of this research is to focus on the type of involvement in viewing talk shows. The **hypothesis** is the following: if genre expectations generate a sharing experience, then it builds a possible Self. Through the sense of belonging to the same group, by assimilation or contrast, the discourse of talk show suggests «a cultural performance of individual» (Carbaugh 1988). My research work is about the comparison between the audience reception patterns come out in the textual analysis of an Italian talk show, Maurizio Costanzo Show, and the actual interpretation of its viewers. This **methodological choice** aims at comparing psycholinguistic techniques with detailed analysis such as focus group discussion.

1. THE FRAMEWORK OF APPLIED PSYCHOLINGUISTICS

The psycholinguistics applied to an inquiry into talk show needs to shape the linguistic activity «as a dialogic and contextualized process of communication» (Titone 1986, 17). The «dynamic-contextual model» (Slama-Cazacu 1959/1961, 1968/1973) just shapes language as an act of communication and connects the message with the interlocutors by integrating it into context of various levels.

The diatextual analysis (Mininni 1992, 1995), **here employed, is a specification of this dynamic-contextual theory** because the diatext is a context cognitively validated and held as binding by the interlocutors.

2. THE TALK SHOW: AN IDENTITY BUILT BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND POWER

According to Goffman (1981) the traditional roles of speaker and hearer are upset in **the verbal interaction of talk show**. The face to face interaction of the host and his guests is staged for the theatre/studio audience, but as a matter of fact, the interaction of host, guests and theatre audience is staged for the home audience. The guests (the audience on the stage) and the audience in the hall (the theatre audience) are absorbed in the home audience (the general audience). A strong identification results: every person of the home audience knows that he

can become a «personality» (Tolson 1991) by speaking, by telling his own story, which is linked with other stories through «common sense» (Carpignano et al. 1990). The sense of shared experiences puts all the stories side by side without looking for an agreement among them. So the talk show is the mere approaching of contraries, under the direction of the host and, above all, following the **rule of the talk** (Mininni 1988, 1995a).

It is the programme where the language shows its power, helped by the image. It orientates the social representation people have of themselves because it represents the Self as a speaking Self, and as a consequence, as a thinking Self. It is a Self placed between the hearing in order to communicate and the seeing in order to know (Neisser 1988), between the public «communicating» and the private «knowing», it is an identity at the psychosocial crossing. The interlacement between ways of communicating and ways of knowing (Cheli 1992) is the space of psychosocial construction of individuals. The interlacement between public and private is well expressed in the sociosemiotic opposition of power and solidarity (Hodge and Kress 1988). This space of psychosocial construction of identity intersects, in audience participation programmes, the space of discursive construction of identity between transparency and opacity (see fig. 1). When the enunciation roles are settled following the statu quo of power relationships, the discourses are transparent. On the contrary, when the enunciation roles are charged with the identities of individuals, then discourses become opaque.

3. THE AUDIENCE TAKES THE FLOOR

Maurizio Costanzo Show is the most popular Italian talk show, but it is also a «centripetal» talk show (Grasso et al. 1996, 508) because everything turns around its host. Its topics waver between the smaller private story and the larger social issue. It narrows and widens the focus on fragments of personal and social identity. In this way it doesn't narrow its range of consumers, as it is a generic direct access programme where every Italian wo/man, who masters the common sense techniques, is allowed to speak.

My data are composed of 5 transmissions of MCS, from January 28 to February 3, 1992. They are partially transcribed, i.e. only the conversational sequences involving theatre audience are transcribed.

To analyse the public in MCS I have worked out a **diatext of the audience** in order to discover: the kind of relationship set up between the host plus guests and the theatre audience and, through it, the relationship between host, guest plus theatre audience and the home audience.

3.1. The communicative outline of the audience in MCS

The audience in the hall participates only through cheers and laughs which form the 10% of all conversational contributions and symbolize the silent and assenting position of the theatre audience in MCS.

In the 5 transmissions analysed (Annese 1995, 1996) there are 15 conversational sequences involving the theatre audience, in a fortuitous way. The exceptionality of this participation strongly marks audience contributions, as if it wants to oppose himself to the traditionally acquiescent role assigned by the show.

The categories used to analyse the interventions of the audience are four:

- *silencing* (TAC), MC addresses to the whole audience, or to a group or to a single member of the audience in order of keeping them silent (see conversational exchange L);
- *support* (SOS), a member of the audience, pressed by the host or one of his guests, accepts a specific argumentation, so he supports the communicative play (see exchange C);
- *differentiation* (DIF), the member has a detached verbal behaviour as he gives a different argumentation and so he doesn't accept the conversational trend (see exchange A);
- *decision* (DEC), the member, requested to arbitrate a dispute, shows his point of view and radicalizes it (see exchange H).

The average of all transmissions (see fig. 2) reveals 2% of silencing and 28% of support. On the active side there is the 37% of differentiation and 33% of decision. We can infer that active roles cover 70% of audience interventions against 30% of passive roles (see fig. 3).

We can infer that even if the audience is represented as an anonymous gaze in MCS, when a member succeeds in taking the floor he uses it to turn that gaze in a speaking face. To recall the opposition power/transparency and solidarity/opacity we can state as follows: if the image of the audience is built in a detached way, its member can freely act, i.e. he can charge his role with subjectiveness, a subjective identity which makes his discourses opaque. If the image of the audience is built according to the rules of the show there is no disobedience and his discourses are transparent, lacking identity.

In order to verify this communicative outline I have used speech acts, too. They are acts of enunciation tested as methodological tools by Charaudeau (1991). They are: assertion (A), question (Q), supporting question (QV), answer (R), positive and negative supporting answer (RV+, RV-), validating agreement (VA), validating disagreement (VD), validating reception (VR), validating iteration (VI), acts management (GA), conversational turns management (GP), topics management (GT), communicative contract management (GC), putting into contact (PC) and breaking contact (RC). By the frequency of these acts in audience interventions (see fig. 4) we can deduce that members of the audience always put in action answers, questions, the assertion and validating agreement/disagreement. Agreement/disagreement and answers are incited by others, so they can be easily included in the passive role of silencing and support (see conversational exchange L). On the contrary, questions are provoked by the speaker himself, so they can be included in the active role of differentiation and decision (see exchange H).

Finally, we can state that the communicative dynamics of audience follows **two steps**. In the first one, members of the audience try to give themselves **a defined role**, an image, by taking the floor against the rules of the show. In the second one, they use this image to disclose themselves, **to build an identity**. Of course the Self-disclosure can take place only if there is access to the talk, an access managed by the king of the show.

3.2. The social representation of an identity

By perceiving himself as «invited», the audience accepts the power the «inviter» has over the communicative event; but, at the same time, he tries to participate. The anonymous gaze of the theatre audience speaks, acts, struggles and so he settles a **relationship of signification with the home audience**. The guests, as an audience on the stage, become a type settling a relation-

ship of signification as interpretation: the home audience can identify himself with this **type**. The audience in the hall becomes a **prototype** settling a relationship of signification as replacement: the home audience are represented by this prototype.

We can conclude that the theatre audience is conscious of being the alter ego of the viewer, the social representation of the ordinary man; whereas the home audience is conscious of a «sense of engagement» (Livingstone 1994) which makes him accept the social representation of himself shown on the screen. The theatre audience and the home audience feel that they are **members of the same community**, a community built by the TV (Livingstone 1990), a community **where they acquire the awareness of themselves, of their identity**.

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Conversational exchange L

HOST: are you from Genoa, you too? (QV)
FEMALE MEMBER OF AUDIENCE: yes (RV+)
?: (?) from the quarter of fair (A)
HOST: you, ah, ah, yes, mrs ..., yes, yes, you (?) of evictions ... Is he from Genoa, too? *Could it be the fate?*
(VA+QV+Q)
ANOTHER FEMALE MEMBER: *I know, I know* (VA)
AUDIENCE: *laughs* (VA)
HOST: but, it's better you settle the matter by yourselves. The advertisement on AIDS, the night TV-news and the commercials. <TAC> (A+GC)

Conversational exchange C

HOST: *No, there are continuously* accusations, continuously, how can you say no? Yes, yes, but have you ever seen a teacher? Yes, every so much time, every 40 years, you say, that teacher who plagiarized my son, but every 40 years (R+QV+A)
TEACHER, FEMALE MEMBER OF AUDIENCE: *yes, sure, it is not a secure category* <SOS> (VA)

Conversational exchange A

HOST: I find it also lightly *treach'* (A)
MALE MEMBER OF AUDIENCE: *I think it's not only right, but necessary* <DIF> (A)
HOST: yes, but I think it is also treacherous that you raise your hand, I let you *speak, while* (A+GC)
MALE MEMBER: *I come* from Milan, *only to do* <DIF> (A)
HOST: *but you can also come from, but I know* (VD)
MALE MEMBER: *to do something in order of saving the life of somebody* <DIF> (A)
HOST: *I agree with you*, but you can come even from Stockholm, this is not the point. The problem is that, eh, there are some rules, eh, then, if every person who has written, also with very serious problems, comes here, raises his hand and wants to speak, you understand, it would not be a transmission, but a bullfight. So *you* (VD+GC)
MALE MEMBER: (?)
HOST: at least partially, respect the rules of the play, speak now, over there, to someone of my staff, after that, if the staff, I, my co-author, will find it right, in this same transmission you will be able to speak. All right? (GC+QV)
MALE MEMBER: *Thanks* (RV+)
HOST: *ok, thanks.* (VA)

Conversational exchange H

HOST: but, to lift the receiver, and tell: so, call her Cerasella, *and that* (A)
FEMALE MEMBER OF AUDIENCE: *no, no, call the magistrature who is conducting the inquiry* <DEC> (VD+A)
HOST: *no, no ... but I seem, no* (VD)
FEMALE MEMBER: *forbid to call them by name, surname and nickname* <DEC> (A)
MINISTER, GUEST: but the magistrate has to do it, indeed, really, *he would not do it* (A+VD)
FEMALE MEMBER: *eh, sure! But doesn't the magistrate depend on you, excuse me?* <DEC> (VA+Q)

- TAC – silencing
- SOS – support
- DIF – differentiation
- DEC - decision
- A - assertion
- Q - question
- QV - supporting question
- R - answer
- RV+ - positive supporting answer
- VA - agreement
- VD - disagreement
- GC - communicative contract management

Figura 1 – Discursive space of psychological construction of the individual

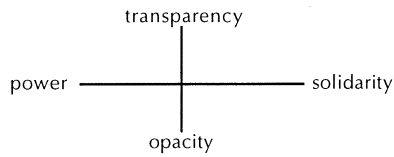


Figura 2 – Categories of intervention put in motion by audience members

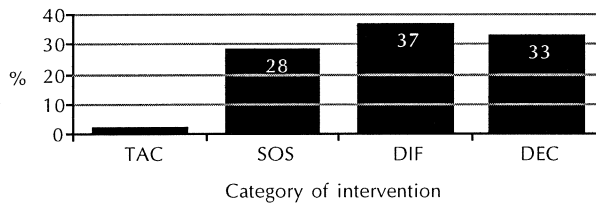


Figura 3 – Conversational roles of audience members

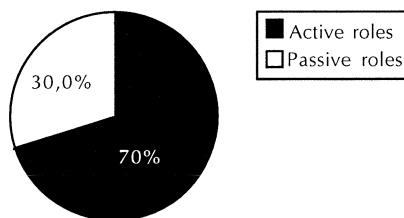


Figura 4 – Speech acts characterizing audience members' interventions

