Discourse Strategies of Expressions of Opinions in Radio Talks

Siti Nurbaya Mohd Nor +
University of Malaya, Malaysia

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 (Thornborrow, 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); 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); question 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 as 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, 2001b; Fitzgerald and Housley, 2002). These studies have shown that the participants to a radio phone-in are 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:

+ Corresponding author. Tel.: +603 79673192.
E-mail address: snurbaya@um.edu.my
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 English language 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.