Authentic Speakership in Radio Talks

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Abstract

Radio talk has been seen as key to the nature of the relationship between the media, public opinion and public knowledge (Hutchby, 2006). It provides the most accessible public spaces in which ordinary members of the populace can express their opinions on certain issues. The language of radio callers in talk shows has seldom been given much concern. Callers use certain linguistic devices to authenticate themselves as legitimate speakers on the subject in question, for instance, by acknowledging that they have been present at, experienced, seen or heard an event or item, and/or by virtue of belonging to a relevant membership category. Based on Hutchby’s (2006) ‘witnessing moves’, the present study investigates how Malaysian speakers of English as a second language claim to have authentic speakership in the public discourse arena of talk radio. The paper aims to study the lay speakers’ register of experience and authenticity. The study looks at the frequency of callers’ use of such techniques of claiming authentic speakership on the subject in question. Data taken from a corpus of radio data which dealt with issues of public concern is the basis of study. The study shows that lay speakers use certain linguistic expressions to indicate the kind of categorical membership of belonging to those who have experienced the event or in relation to the topic. The air space that public radio offers for its audience has emerged as an interesting platform, involving real-life participants who are given practically unconstrained floor to voice their opinions or share relevant experience.

Keywords: radio talk, categorical membership, witnessing moves, authentic speakership
Introduction

Authenticity has been a central preoccupation in studies of media discourse, and the concept of authenticity in relation to broadcasting have been made in a range of contexts for different reasons (Montgomery, 1999; Scannell, 1999). Scannel (1999) pointed out the close relationship between authenticity and ‘truthfulness’ in the media, particular in the context of how TV documentaries produce accounts which viewers treat as real and reliable, and which they made judgements on the ‘authenticity’ of what has been seen or heard. Livingston and Lunt (1994:102) listed the term ‘authentic’ in a set of oppositional characteristics that differentiate the discourse of professional speakers from that of lay participants in TV talk shows. In contrast to the ‘artificial, fragmented and ungrounded’ (Livingston and Lunt, 1994: 102) discourse of experts, the discourse of lay participants is seen as ‘authentic, real and grounded in experience’.

This article focuses on the talk of lay participants in public participation broadcasting and the production of ‘authentic talk’ within radio talk. Hutchby (2006) considers radio talk as key to the nature of the relationship between the media, public opinion and public knowledge. It provides the most accessible public spaces in which ordinary members of the population can express their opinions on certain issues. It also offers the space for a range of other discourse activities, such as discussion, argument, advice seeking, or opinion-seeking on matters such as health, finance, legal issues and issues of public concern. In Goffman’s (1981) terms, it provides an occasion for ‘fresh talk’. On radio, the involvement of participants in the role at hand, has to be accomplished through talk, in other words, it has to be a ‘hearsable’ involvement. This paper examines how ordinary people produce talk which authenticates their public role as ratified participants in relatively spontaneous, unscripted, unrehearsed, mediated events. I will focus on the ‘lay participants’, in this regard, radio callers, by showing how they build relevant identities for themselves in the early moments of their talk as they take up the host’s offer of the public floor. I will also draw upon Sacks (1995) observations on the ways in which speakers mobilize a range of discursive resources in their participation in the radio talk, which position them within structurally relevant and available categories in relation to the talk at hand (Vol. II: 126, 453). Sacks developed the notion of Membership Categorization Device (MCD) to explain how categories can be hearably linked together by native speakers of a culture. In light of this, categories are inference-rich, that is, a great deal of knowledge that members of a society have about the society, is stored in terms of these categories. In this context, the study will also focus on how Malaysian speakers build knowledge about the Malaysian society in their opinions on certain issues in radio talk.

In talk radio, participants bring to bear their personal opinions or standpoints on the news of the day, by making explicit links between newsworthy topics and issues connected to or experienced within their everyday lives. In such contexts, lay speakers tend to act as witnesses, in the sense of being directly involved in the
topics under discussion. Calling in with their personal opinions on issues, or their personal experience of an issue, callers tend to speak not as the experts of professional news discourse but in the lay speaker's register of ‘immediacy, experience and authenticity’ (Hutchby, 2006).

When we examine calls to talk radio, we find that callers regularly use actions which are associated with making claims to personal knowledge, personal experience, direct perceptual access, or categorial membership in respect of an event or topic under discussion (Hutchby, 2001). Hutchby (2001) described these as ‘witnessing’ moves, and they are closely involved in justifying a caller’s claim to authentic speakership in the public discourse arena of talk radio. According to Hutchby (2001), callers may use resources which function to make their talk hearable as coming from a standpoint of authenticity. One of the key means is to present themselves as ‘witnesses’ by bringing into play knowledge in proof of a claim, opinion or assertion. This category involves the mobilization of collective experience or knowledge whereby callers assert membership of a topic-relevant category in their own right.

The framework for the study follows Hutchby’s extensive work on conversation analysis and media talk (1996, 1999, 2001, 2006). The approach of Conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff and Jeffereson, 1974) is probably the most widely adopted discourse-analytic approach to the study of media talk. This method allows the analysis of the organization of interaction, which is one of the key features present in the data.

In most of the data analysed, callers mobilize their collective experience or knowledge by linking their personal experience in with other members of a particular category such as ‘parents’, ‘workaholics’, or ‘bosses’, or to suggest that their point is applicable to a wider constituency then merely their own personal experience, such as referring to ‘Malaysians’ or the ‘Malaysian society’. These membership categorization devices (MCDs) are used by callers in order to authenticate themselves as legitimate speakers on the subject in question and to bolster their position or standpoint.

In observing a corpus of calls to phone-in programmes in Malaysia, it is found that callers routinely used resources which function to make their talk hearable as coming from a standpoint of authenticity. In a sample of 65 calls, there are 27 examples or 41% of cases of ‘witnessing’ devices used by participants as legitimate speakers of the subject in question.

Data Analysis

The corpus is taken from a series of radio phone-in programmes from three radio stations which are fully broadcast in the English language, which are MixFM, FlyFM and LiteFM. These popular radio stations offer light entertainment to radio audiences. The programmes are all broadcast during breakfast time from 6am to
10am from Mondays to Fridays. These three morning-show programmes are selected because they represent public participation from radio listeners. 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 which concerned current social, education, work and relationship issues which feed the public discourse in the Malaysian society. Radio callers will phone-in to discuss their viewpoints with the hosts. For each programme, two or three radio hosts are present in the studio and no studio audience is present. The callers do not speak to each other, therefore, all forms of interactions are between the callers and the hosts.

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 formed the main part of the programme and the object of the research study. The series of radio conversations from radio talks focus on natural spontaneous speech produced by radio hosts and radio callers from a number of L1 backgrounds. The range of topics include:

- Days without the internet
- Do attractive people have bad attitudes?
- Have we become too materialistic with our gifts?
- Is age difference a factor in a relationship?
- Do Malaysians overspend?
- Does romance in a relationship suffer due to work?
- Additionally school holidays
- Sacrificing your car for a day

The talk show has a duration of 3 – 30 minutes long per episode, this depends on the number of callers who call-in. There are 73 participants in the corpus, i.e. 8 radio hosts and 65 radio callers. The subjects represent different races (Malays, Chinese, Indians and others). The researcher is able to identify the different races of the participants by the names of the hosts or when the host acknowledges the callers by their names. The backgrounds of the callers are not disclosed so they may be working adults or non-working adults, such as housewives. The hosts (H) represent the broadcasting institution and they are public persons. In some instances, they need to code-switch effectively depending on their interlocutors’ proficiency level of English. 18 radio call-ins which represent different topics were selected for the study. These involved interactions between the radio hosts and radio callers. The recordings were transcribed (refer to Appendix A for the transcription conventions) according to Hutchby and Wooffitt (2002) transcription conventions.

a. The use of witnessing devices

The term ‘witnessing’ is used as a gloss for a range of actions associated with making claims in respect of an event or topic under discussion. Hutchby (1996) offers two broad categories of ‘witnessing’ devices. The first involved first-hand knowledge, which is broken down into four sub-types: (1) claims of having been physically present in a scene; (2) claims of having had personal experience of a
complained-about event; (3) claims of direct perceptual access (having seen or heard an event); and (4) claims of having physical possession of a topic-relevant item. The second broad category involves the mobilization of collective experience or knowledge, principally here, callers assert membership of a topic-relevant category in their own right (for instance, pensioners, parents).

This paper will examine the second category of ‘witnessing’ devices, in which callers assert membership of a topic-relevant category in their own right based on collective experience or knowledge. The range of actions involved can be illustrated in the following selection of examples. For illustrative convenience, the extracts are taken out of the sequential context in which they were produced.

The following extracts show callers using one form or another of collective construction in order to link their personal experience with other members of a particular category; or to suggest that their point is applicable to a wider constituency than merely their own personal experience. These are taken from contexts where the callers offer a justification of the relevance of their contribution to show the authenticity of their opinion:

**Topic: Have we become too materialistic with our gifts?**

*I think it really has...*I know an 11 year-old who’s gonna be getting an iPhone for Christmas*  
*Well of course...*last month my son got 5As on a UPSR....*and then he wanted what? An iPad I mean not an iPad an iPad2*  
*Yes we have...*my first year anniversary, I bought my wife a picture frame with a picture of both of us...*but then she looked at it and said...*I would’ve preferred the iPad*

**Topic: Is age difference in a relationship a factor?**

*He’s seven years my senior...he’s a bit old-fashioned.*  
*It’s not a factor at all cause I’ve dated a man who’s 20 years older than me*

The linguistic devices are highlighted to show the relevance of the callers’ speech according to the topic under discussion. These use of witnessing devices of various sorts show a form of legitimization for a contribution to the topic under discussion. We have so far looked at utterances in isolation from their interactional contexts.

**b. Categorial membership/Collective witnessing**

I will further illustrate how witnessing devices are brought into play in the context of interaction between host and caller. The examples below show how callers assert membership of a topic-relevant category in their own right based on collective experience or knowledge. Topic-relevant categories offer a bridge between
the caller’s experiential background and the topic under discussion. Placement of callers to a topic-relevant category is a justification of the relevance of their contribution to the programme and underlines the authenticity of their opinion which is expected to be developed in the subsequent talk.

Extract 1 is taken from the topic ‘Have we become too materialistic with our gifts?’. The caller displays her belonging to the membership of a topic-relevant category of those who have witnessed that people have become too materialistic with their gifts, whereby authenticating her claim that she knows a young child who is ‘getting an iPhone for Christmas’. This puts herself in the position of ‘topic-relevant’ identity.

Extract 1

H1 (host 1), H2 (host 2), C1 (caller 1)

1 H2: anyway it’s a funky Friday we’re asking the question have we become too materialistic with our gifts?
2 H1: alright share your thoughts with us at 039543333
3 H1: Fiona what do you have to say
4 C1: yes I think it really has
5 H1: [really?]
6 C1: [it’s just] that, yea because in my day we had one gift and we were so happy about getting that gift
7 H2: [oh they don’t] have one gift anymore
8 C1: [but you know] from my day you got something like a magnifying glass which kinda make you go outdoors be a bit adventurous, I don’t know just explore
9 H2: Right
10 C1: and then nowadays I I know an 11-year-old who’s gonna be getting an iPhone for Christmas?

In turn 4, the caller (C1) agrees to the topic by uttering ‘yes, I think it really has’. She continues in turn 6 by relating her past experience on how happy she was about getting ‘one gift’. C1 further elaborates about getting something ‘like a magnifying glass’ can ‘make you go outdoors be a bit adventurous’ and ‘explore’ with the ‘gift’ (turn 8). Here, we can see that the caller claims membership of a topical category in the course of their talk. This category is drawn from the caller’s experience of the topic so that it can be considered as a topic-relevant category which informs their opinion.

In some instances, topic-relevant categories are used in order to claim a relationship between the caller and the topic on a more personal level. Thornborrow (2001b) claims that callers can then claim a valid and experiential connection to the topic, which can therefore reinforce or ground their topic-opinion category.

The example below illustrates how a caller upon getting on-air offers topic-relevant categories of experience as topic-relevant knowledge.

Topic: Is age difference in a relationship a factor?

Extract 2

H1 (host 1), H2 (host 2), C5 (caller 5)

1 H1: It’s a funky Friday and uh we’re asking you the question is age difference in a
relationship a factor and who is it a bigger factor for. We’re gonna talk to Double M. So Double M, what’s the age gap between you and your boyfriend?

2 C5: He’s 7 years my senior but he drives me a little bit pengsan @ yes

3 H2: So

4 C5: he’s a bit old-fashioned

5 H2: Right

6 C5: so I have to accommodate him if I I I have to date him I have to accommodate him and respect his decisions but it’s difficult because for the few years that we’ve been together as someone that we love each other

7 H2: okay

8 C5: we we I I I have to respect him because he’s someone that I love and over the past year past two years I’m stressed out you know

9 H2: you’ve had to accommodate him

10 C5: because you love him. Age is not the factor [so you just have to sort of change]

11 H2: because he’s 7 years older. It’s it’s there’s a generation gap already

12 C5: not not many people can

13 H2: right it is but you love him enough to, to to bridge that gap

14 C5: not not many people can

The caller (C5) offers a topic-relevant category by referring to her relationship with her boyfriend who is ‘seven years older’ and how she regards him as ‘a bit old-fashioned’ and needs ‘to accommodate to him’ due to the age difference, before the caller addresses the issue she called in for (turn 4 and 6). The caller further explains that even though she respects and loves her ‘boyfriend’, she still finds that the relationship has been stressful for the ‘past two years’ (turn 8). The caller admits that she loves her boyfriend even though ‘there’s a generation gap’ of ‘seven years’ and ‘not many people can’ cope with this sort of relationship 9turn 14 and 16). These linguistic devices are used in order to authenticate the speaker’s claims as a legitimate speaker on the subject in question. These are offered in such a way that experience or knowledge of the topic is predicated to the category of those members with ‘age-gap difference’.

There is also an instance where the caller offers an opinion on the topic before supporting them with his/her experience.

Extract 3 H1 host 1), H2 (host 2), C3 (caller 3)

Topic: Is age difference in a relationship a factor?

1 H1: it’s a funky Friday and we’re asking the question is age difference in a relationship a factor and who is it a bigger factor for. Let’s talk to Miss X

2 C3: I don’t think age is a factor in a relationship

3 H2: how old are you first of all

4 C3: um I’m in my late thirties

5 H2: aa I like that a woman never never [gives away her age]

6 H1: [aha @ ]

7 C3: [@@ ]

8 H2: ‘I’m in my late thirties’. Okay you’re late thirties Miss X and you date you choose to date men who are older or younger
In turn 2, the caller offers an opinion on the topic under discussion that ‘age is not a factor in a relationship’ and further supports her statement with her experience with ‘younger guys’ who the caller views as having ‘so much life’ and the experience is ‘like an adventure’ (turn 18 and 21). This example shows that the topic-relevant category of ‘age difference in a relationship’ is seen to inform and provide authenticity to the caller’s opinions.

The following extract shows certain linguistic devices used by the host to get radio listeners’ opinions on why ‘Malaysians are overspending’. The host authenticates his claim of being a Malaysian himself with the use of ‘we’ and that Malaysians are living beyond their ‘means’ and ‘spending more than they earn’ (turn 1 and 3). In turn 4, the first caller presents his opinion by uttering that ‘Malaysians are overspending for their kids’. The caller further justifies his opinion by describing how he has witnessed that Malaysians tend to give in to their children easily in terms of money as well as material wants as evident in his utterance in turn 6. This is exemplified in the caller’s speech as in ‘Malaysians spoil their kids. They give a lot of money to their kids’ (turn 6). This places the caller in a certain membership category of ‘being a Malaysian’ and that he is able to justify his opinion based on his knowledge or experience about the Malaysian society or ‘Malaysian parents’ as evident in his utterance of ‘Malaysians are spending for their kids’ (turn 4).

Extract 6: Why do Malaysians overspend?

H1 (host 1, H2 (host 2), C1 (caller 1)

1  H2:  And I tell you, Malaysians uh\, we’re overspending/
2   H1:  @
3  H2:  We are/\, we’re living beyond our means, we’re spending more than we earn. So Danny/, why do you think Malaysians are overspending?\)
4  C1:  Malaysians are overspending for their kids, [overspending on their kids].
5  H1:  [On their kids\? ]
6  C1:  =On their kids, yes/\, you see, the problem with Malaysian, when they see another kid using a 300 ringgit shoe, they’ll buy a 300 ringgit shoe. They give their kids 5 ringgit to school/, the kids will come back and ask for another extra 2 ringgit. You see this is where the Malaysians spend a lot. They spoil their kids. They give a lot of money to their kids
In the data analysed, it is found that callers associate themselves with a certain membership category or consider them as topic-relevant as reasons for them to call-in to offer their opinions. For instance, the category of callers who are ‘parents’ would usually call-in to offer opinions or relate their experience on topics of discussion that concerned ‘school/education’. Extract 7 below illustrates that the caller agrees that ‘additional school holidays will affect study momentum’ by relating her experience with her son who ‘was crying in the morning after the ‘long hari raya’ holiday was over’.

Extract 7: Do additional school holidays affect students’ study momentum?

1 C1: I agree with the losing the momentum thing because it just er er it was evident during the er long Hari Raya break, right
2 H1: Yeah
3 C1: So uh when it was time to go to school, uh my son was crying in the morning. So he he just couldn’t XXX because the holiday was over
4 H2: @

It is evident that certain pre-selected topics for the programme target specific radio audiences such as ‘parents’ or those members that belong to a certain membership category.

In order to justify opinions which involved support or non-support of the issue of the discussion, callers would bolster their opinions by providing first-hand knowledge or experience. In the following extracts, callers offer their opinions on whether it is possible ‘to go back to the days without the internet’.

Extract 8:

1 H1: It’s a funky Friday and we’re asking the question, could we go back to the days without the internet. What do you think, Shankar?
2 C2: actually if you ask me, I think we can.
3 H2: ((↑screeching))?
4 H1: @
5 C2: yea because if you still ask me I’m still a bit old-fashioned I still go and pay my bills in the required place, I don’t do it online because I did it once, and the payment actually went through but the following month the bill came in saying that the payment did not go through
6 H2: okay
7 C2: and to sort that out to be almost three months

In extract 8, caller 2 offers his view that it is possible to go back to the days without the internet because he has experienced some problems in paying bills online, therefore he still settles his bills manually (turn 5). He categorises himself as ‘a bit old-fashioned’ as belonging to those who still insist on paying bills ‘in the required place’ rather than doing them ‘online’. This further authenticates his claims as a legitimate speaker on the subject in question.

The following extract further exemplifies speaker’s authenticity on the topic under discussion from a ‘parent’ standpoint. In this instance, Caller 3 relates how his UPSR (primary school government-based assessment) son wanted an iPad2 on
account of his getting good grades in the examination. Even though an iPad2 would be a rather expensive gift to get for a 12-year old son, the caller settles for a lower version which is an ‘i pod’ which costs 800 ringgit (turn 8). This is on account of his son who would be in ‘gloom’ not just for ‘the rest of the day’ but ‘for the rest of the year’ (turn 13) if the caller does not fulfil the son’s wishes. This further shows how the caller as belonging to the membership category of ‘parents’ agrees with the issue under discussion that is, people have ‘become too materialistic with their gifts’.

Extract 9: Have we become too materialistic with our gifts?

1 H1: Al, have we?
2 C3: well of course I mean now kids especially they want the top of the range product
   you know because uh last month my son got a 5As on a UPSR okay
   [UPSR only]
3 H2: [oo okay]
4 C3: and then he wanted what? An iPad! I mean not an iPad an iPad 2, aa. I say if I
   there’s no iPad 2, what you can give? How bout an iPhone 4, I just oh my god
5 H1: @
6 C3: just for a 5A UPSR la Zak! Ah
7 H2: what what did you wind up giving him, Al?
8 C3: uh uh to low down the range and finally I bought him an an iPod touch
9 H2: @
10 C3: but it’s still around 800 ↑ringgit. Oh my god
11 H1: still, yea yea
12 H2: yea
13 C3: I’m not trying to be calculative but um uh it is it is so materialistic and then you
   know if you don’t buy they will make a gloom day for him not for the rest of the
   day, but for the rest of the year

The speech extracts exemplified in the study indicate how witnessing devices are brought into play by callers themselves and the interactional work that are developed between the hosts and callers. These can take a range of forms in order to authenticate themselves as legitimate speakers on the subject in question, that is, by having been present at or experienced, seen or heard an event, and/or by virtue of belonging to a relevant membership category.

Conclusion

Callers to radio phone-in programmes use linguistic resources to make their talk hearable as coming from a standpoint of authenticity. One of the strategies is by presenting themselves as ‘witnesses’ by bringing in knowledge as a proof of a claim, opinion or assertion. Callers tend to mobilize their collective experience or knowledge in which they will assert membership of a topic-relevant category in their own right. In other words, callers link their collective experience or knowledge with other members of a particular category such as ‘parents’ or ‘those with age-gap difference’ or to suggest that their point is applicable to a wider constituency, such as ‘the Malaysian society’. These membership categorisation devices are used by callers in order to authenticate themselves as legitimate speakers on the subject in question and also to bolster their position.
Appendix

Transcription Conventions (adapted from Hutchby and Wooffit, 2002)

: Semi-colons indicate speaker identity or turn start.

= Equal signs are used to indicate latching or no discernable gap between utterances; or to show the continuation of a speaker’s utterance across intervening lines of transcript.

[] Square brackets indicate the points where overlapping talk starts (left bracket) and ends (right bracket)

↑↓ Upward and downward arrows are used to mark an overall rise or fall in pitch across a phrase.

, Comma indicates a continuing tone.

? Question marks indicate a marked rising tone.

→ Arrows in the left margin point to specific parts of the transcript under discussion.

.. Indicates a short pause in speech.

... Indicates a long pause in speech.

XXX Indicates uncertain hearing or indecipherable syllable from the transcriber’s perspective.

@ Indicates laughter
Bibliography