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A rapport and impression management approach to public figures' performance of talk

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Abstract

This article draws on an extensive corpus of broadcast material to examine the performed aspects of a media personality's talk—the host of a long-standing audience participation debate in the United Kingdom. The context of interaction in which this host engages in rapport and impression management work plays a crucial role in the analysis. It is a context that resembles some of the patterns of ordinary conversation but that is first and foremost oriented towards an overhearing audience, and hence, *performed*. The analysis reveals that the host of this audience participation debate regularly performs four principal self-constructions, or roles, which I label *the fair moderator*, *the one of us*, *the therapist* and *the social engineer*. These roles are interwoven with each other and with the show's underlying communication ethos, termed *emotional DIY* (for 'Do It Yourself'). The analysis also reveals that, unlike many other public figures, he draws mainly on his media personality status when performing these roles. This finding thus challenges the reported pervasiveness of the re-valorization of the discourse of lay experience, at least in the case of some public figures.

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1. Introduction

This article examines public figures' performance of talk in televised audience participation debates. The debate selected for this purpose is the long-standing British

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show *Kilroy* and the public figure in question is its host, former Labour Party Member of Parliament (MP) Robert Kilroy-Silk.

Whilst inspired by politeness constructs, my work moves beyond the traditional scope of politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987) in three main ways. Firstly, it considers both rapport management *and* face-work. The former embraces the “use of language to promote, maintain or threaten harmonious social relationships” (Spencer-Oatey, 2000: 3) and has been traditionally the focus of much work in the field of politeness. The latter addresses issues of self-presentation and impression management as a whole and has remained relatively unexplored to date. Secondly, my analysis consists of detailed examination of stretches of talk beyond the speech act level. This is because rapport and impression management are not realized through discrete utterances that are inherently (im)polite, but through stretches of discourse during which interactants produce and interpret any type of (non)verbal behaviour as transgressing or otherwise the norms of appropriateness of the relevant context of interaction (cf., e.g., Mills, 2003). Thirdly, my study is deliberately located in an institutional context of talk. Unlike much explored conversational settings, institutional / professional contexts of talk have been less investigated from within a politeness framework.¹ Yet, these settings often operate from within idiosyncratic interpretations of what constitutes (un)acceptable rapport and impression management. In the context of the talk show, such interpretations are framed by, and simultaneously frame, the type of talk performed therein. Talk show talk has characteristics that differentiate it from other species of broadcast talk such as news interviews talk, social documentaries talk and so forth. Tolson (2001: 27–28) summarizes these as: it (1) “has some affinities with the patterns of verbal interaction normally found in everyday conversation”; (2) unlike ordinary conversation it “is produced in an institutional setting”; and (3) unlike any other kind of institutional talk it “is produced for, and oriented toward, an ‘overhearing audience’”. Talk shows therefore perform naturally occurring, every-day conversational talk within the parameters of the institution of broadcasting and for their all-important home audiences (cf. also Haarman, 1999, 2001; Scannell, 1991). For instance, talk show hosts at times address viewers directly. They also interactionally mediate, or “narrativize” (Thornborrow, 2001), participants’ stories so that these may be entertaining for the viewers by, for example, emphasizing some facts whilst glossing over others. It is ultimately the overhearing audience who, through their loyalty or otherwise, shape the evolving features of talk show talk.

In sum, in this article I discuss how the media personality *Kilroy* engages in rapport and impression management during the show that he hosts. This involves firstly identifying the components of this talk show that are particularly salient to the analysis of its host’s performance. Secondly, it involves clarification of key terms within the subsequent analysis, namely those of fresh talk and of discourses of expertise and lay experience. Thirdly, the article discusses illustrative extracts of *Kilroy*’s performance of talk within four roles for self-presentation, namely what I term *the fair moderator*, *the one of us*, *the therapist* and *the social engineer*.

¹ Notable exceptions include Culpeper (1996), Culpeper et al. (2003), Harris (2001), Lakoff (1989), Lorenzo-Dus (2005) and Pérez de Ayala (2001).

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