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Journal of Pragmatics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma

Impression management on reality TV: Emotion in parental accounts

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 15 January 2010
 Received in revised form 8 August 2011
 Accepted 9 August 2011
 Available online 13 September 2011

Keywords:

Reality television
 Impression management
 Parental identity
 Accounting
 Emotion
 Hypothetical narrative

ABSTRACT

Parental responsibility and blame are central issues in discussions of children's health. When parents are confronted about their children's unhealthy lifestyles—as they are by a nutrition expert at the beginning of each episode of an intervention-based reality television show about improving child wellbeing, *Honey We're Killing the Kids*—they must negotiate responsibility for their children's poor eating and exercise habits while simultaneously protecting their identities as competent parents. Drawing on theorizing on impression management and social accountability, I examine how 25 parents appearing on the show are depicted as responding to the expert's presentation of computer-generated projections, or visual hypothetical narratives, that show their children physically developing into overweight, unhealthy adults. In their responses to these future-oriented narratives, the parents use excuses and apologies to take responsibility in ways that attempt to save parental face and thereby repair their damaged identities. Specific linguistic and paralinguistic devices used include response cries, future-oriented non-conclusive verbs, statements of one's emotions, and emotional displays like crying. This study contributes to identifying forms and functions of parental accounting strategies on reality TV, and especially the role of emotion, while also advancing our understanding of how identity work is accomplished through narrative responses.

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1. Introduction

Studies in discourse analysis have investigated how parents, especially mothers, use language to create parental identities in various contexts, including in interviews (Collett, 2005; Petraki et al., 2007; Schiffrin, 1996), parent–teacher–pupil conferences (Adelswärd and Nilholm, 2000), online community discussions (Collett, 2005), and everyday conversations (Gordon, 2007; Kendall, 2007; Marinova, 2007; Schlenker, 1980). In outlining the linguistic means by which parental identities are constructed and negotiated, this body of research has identified interconnections between parental identities and aspects of children's identities—particularly children's behaviors, appearance, character, and accomplishments—thereby highlighting culturally relevant parental responsibilities vis-à-vis children. When a child has a “spoiled” identity (Goffman, 1963)—because for example she or he has a disability (Goffman, 1963; Adelswärd and Nilholm, 2000), misbehaves (Gordon, 2007), or looks dirty (Collett, 2005)—parental identities too are damaged. In such situations, “impression management” in the form of “face-work” (Goffman, 1959) is often used to reclaim positive parental identities.

This study investigates the linguistic and paralinguistic means through which damaged parental identities are repaired in the context of a reality television program that was filmed and aired in the United States (closely mimicking the original British version), *Honey We're Killing the Kids*. This program aims to reduce childhood obesity and improve child and family health. In a pivotal scene in each episode, a nutrition expert confronts parents about their children's poor health habits, not

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only verbally but also visually: on a giant screen and using age-progression technology, she shows parents computer-generated images that morph to offer a dreary prediction of how each of their children will physically mature to age forty, given expert analysis of the children's current health habits. (These images are very shocking; in Weber's [2009:140] description, the images "promise that chubby kids will turn into burn-out losers with sallow faces, mullets, missing teeth, paunches, and a general air of felonious misery.") I conceptualize these changing images as stories—specifically, as visual hypothetical narratives. With this, and building on prior work on parental identities, on Goffman's (1959, 1967) theorizing, as well as on work in the area of social accountability, my analysis uncovers strategies parents are shown using to attempt to repair their identities while also considering the functions these strategies serve on reality TV.

The analysis contributes to our understanding of how parents discursively attempt to establish positive self-presentation through saving face (and, more specifically, how they are depicted or constructed as saving face), in an extremely public and heightened performance context: that of a reality television show designed to modify parenting practices. In doing so, it specifies the role of emotion or affect in this type of social accountability situation, and especially in creating excuses and apologetic discourse, extending prior research on accountability and emotion. In examining attempts at parental face saving that occur primarily through response strategies to visual narratives and the nutritionist's accompanying verbal accusations and prompting, the analysis also complements prior research that focuses largely on parental identity work (though not necessarily face saving) in verbal story production. In addition, my discussion considers the multiple roles accounting plays in the show, wherein parental impression management seems to constitute entertainment for the at-home audience.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Identity and visual hypothetical narratives

In discourse analysis, narratives typically are conceptualized as verbal and as past-oriented (following Labov and Waletzky, 1967). Numerous scholars have demonstrated how individuals create identities, including parental identities, through telling stories (e.g. Schiffrin, 1996; Petraki et al., 2007). A much smaller body of research has explored how identity-work is accomplished in responses to narrative discourse (e.g. Goodwin, 1986; Gordon, 2007). One aim of this study is to contribute to developing our understanding of how narrative response strategies do identity work, in this case, through accomplishing face saving.

I conceptualize the morphing computer-generated images of children on *Honey We're Killing the Kids* (*Honey*) as hypothetical narratives, following previous research extending the definition of narrative to encompass possible future events. For instance, Beach and Japp (1983) argue that "storifying" allows participants to "time travel" in interaction, including into the future. Similarly, Peräkylä's (1993:292) work on AIDS counseling suggests that future projections work much like traditional narratives in creating a "world" or "alternate reality" separate from the "reality" of conversation. Likewise, in *Honey*, the computer-generated age progressions expose parents to an "alternate reality"; however, unlike Peräkylä's future narratives, which are intended to prepare AIDS patients and their families for what lies ahead, *Honey*'s narratives are intended to upset the parents, in order to motivate them to take evasive action (specifically, to commit to the family health plan proposed by the show's nutritionist) and (likely) to simultaneously shock the viewers at home.

Extending Labov and Waletzky (1967) in another way, some researchers consider "narrative" to go beyond the verbal to the visual. For instance, studies in multimodal discourse analysis such as by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) and Al Zidjaly (2007) suggest that images tell stories, and further, that visual narratives, like verbal stories, can accomplish identity work.

Bringing these threads of research together, I understand the morphing images showing children's possible physical development to be visual hypothetical narratives. These narratives portray potential future identities for the children, and in so doing they have implications for the identities of those who are arguably most responsible for the children's future—their parents.

2.2. Parental responsibility and impression management

Monitoring and directing children's behaviors—especially food intake, one of the primary causative factors of the health problems *Honey*'s visual narratives portray—are responsibilities that are socioculturally linked to parents. This has been demonstrated in studies of naturally occurring family interaction, such as by Ochs and her colleagues on food attitude socialization (Ochs et al., 1996; Ochs and Shohet, 2006) and by Johnston (2007) on the collaborative construction of the parental role of "nutritional gatekeeper" who guides child and family food choices. Paugh and Izquierdo (2009) examine both parent-child everyday talk about a child's overeating, and interviews with parents about family health practices. They find that in interviews, parents "claim significant responsibility for the present and future quality of their children's health," even though in everyday family interactions responsibility is often contested and negotiated (Paugh and Izquierdo, 2009:199).

Taken in the context of research addressing parental (and especially maternal) concerns about how children's behaviors (Gordon, 2007; Marinova, 2007) and appearances (Collett, 2005) reflect upon parents' identities, these studies collectively suggest that parents may hold themselves responsible, or may perceive themselves as being held responsible, for their children's health outlook. They may therefore feel the need to engage in "impression management" (Goffman, 1959) for themselves when children's health behaviors are brought into question.

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