Dragons’ Den: Enacting persuasion in reality television

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A B S T R A C T

This article aims to cast more light on how persuasive practices in business are enacted for an audience on television by comparing two versions of the television programme Dragons’ Den. The main objective is to examine different interactional features of the programme within a cross-cultural analysis. Drawing on data from the Spanish and UK versions of the programme, the present paper is placed at the intersection between routine and cross-cultural business practices on the one hand and reality based broadcast on the other. The results show that the analysis of the key structural patterns in exerting interpersonal influence makes it possible to measure the impact and effectiveness of specific social influence tactics in entrepreneurial discourse.

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1. Introduction

This paper investigates how business persuasive practices are enacted for an audience in reality television. Given the complexity of persuasive effects and the identification of any particular persuasive tactic that is effective in all situations (O’Keefe, 2002), “persuasive practices” is used here as a cover term for any conscious attempt by one individual to change the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour of another individual through communication (Perloff, 2010). As such, persuasion in general and business persuasive practices in particular are here understood as a psychological phenomenon, which is inexorably bound up with language (Wilson, 2002).

The interactional architecture of persuasion, argumentation, and manipulation has been approached from the adjacent domains of linguistic research as varied as rhetoric (Jowett and O’Donnell, 2012; Wallace, 1963; Warmick, 2007), discursive psychology (Billig, 1999), and argumentation theory (Toulmin, 1959; Eemeren and Van Grootendorst, 2004). More specifically, contemporary approaches have started to realise that any form of communication is persuasive insofar as it attempts to influence people’s behaviour and thinking (Díez-Prados, 2016; Díez-Prados and Cabrejas-Peñuelas, 2013). Drawing on data from the Spanish and UK versions of the TV programme Dragons’ Den, I take the prevailing persuasive feature of language use (Dillard and Lijiang, 2013; Tindale, 2004) and try to bring forth the interactive nature of persuasion (Antaki, 1994) in order to conceptualise persuasion as an analytical tool that can give an account of the way(s) persuasive business discourse influences people’s behaviour and thinking (Shotter, 1983) and determines interpersonal relations (García-Gómez, 2012).

The structure of the present papers is as follows: I begin with a brief and necessarily selective review of the literature, focusing primarily on televised entrepreneurial discourse. This is followed by a discussion of the data collection. I then explore the (in)effective deployment of social influence tactics in the data. I conclude the paper with a summary of the key findings of the study and a discussion of the implications.

2. Literature review

2.1. Media discourse: Televised entrepreneurial pitch

The potential of discourse analysis in the study of entrepreneurship has been recently acknowledged (Ahl and Marlow, 2012) and, over the last two decades, a new and increasingly dominant generation of entrepreneurship researchers has been trying to engage with entrepreneurship as discourse (Ahl, 2004; Bill et al., 2010; Stiff and Mongeau, 2003). These studies present entrepreneurial discourse from different and sometimes opposing angles. More specifically, most of these studies have attempted to broaden entrepreneurship research by including the social and cultural variations of entrepreneurship (Steyaert and Katz, 2004, p. 192). As a result, there is now a substantial body that conceptualises entrepreneurial discourse as a grand narrative (Hjorth and Steyaert, 2004; Weiskopf and Steyaert, 2009) and focuses on the effects of ideological control in conventional entrepreneurial

By drawing on discourse analysis, these leading-edge researchers have shown that discourses play a central role in producing social realities insofar as they shape and construct, for instance, entrepreneurial identities and perceptions (Phillips and Hardy, 2002, pp. 1–2). Although these studies have permitted the exploration of academic research texts and gender discourses into women’s entrepreneurship and they all have added to our understanding of the phenomenon (Neegaard and Ulhøi, 2007), power and ideology have received the most attention and the power of persuasive discourse has been somehow neglected.

Furthermore, there seems to be an important gap in media discourse in entrepreneurship research. With the exception of Spalton’s (2010) and Daly and Davy’s (2016a, 2016b) work, little attention has been paid to the televised entrepreneurial pitch as a sub-genre. These studies have mainly focused on defining what an investor pitch is and identifying its main characteristics and types. In particular, Daly and Davy (2016a, 2016b), drawing on the British version of Dragons’ Den, take a multi-dimensional approach and concern themselves exclusively with the study of the structural, linguistic, and rhetorical features of the entrepreneurs’ pitches; however, no attention has been paid to the instrumental process of negotiation after delivering the entrepreneurial pitch (i.e. strategies for enhancing compliance).

2.2. Social influence tactics: strategies for enhancing compliance

Over the years, many researchers have investigated social influence, persuasion, and interpersonal change from various fields such as psychology, sociology, and linguistics. The result has been an eclectic body of research that has covered the (in)effective use of different social influence tactics in a wide range of contexts and settings. Although the proposed number of tactics may vary (cf. Bauer and Erdogan, 2009; Dolinski, 2000), most researchers agree that understanding of compliance cannot be achieved without understanding the concepts of negotiation¹ and social influence tactics (Hughes, Ginnett, and Curphy, 2011). Yet how exactly compliance is induced (i.e. resistance and attitude change) has been a matter of debate.

Given that this study focuses on the interactive part of the programme that takes a question-and-answer format by which business experts negotiate a business contract, I will concern myself here with the social influence tactics for gaining compliance that use multiple requests²: (1) the foot-in-the-door tactic – a multiple-request technique in which the focal request is preceded by a smaller request that is likely to be accepted (Freedman and Fraser, 1966; Petrova et al., 2007); and (2) the door-in-the-face tactic – a multiple-request technique in which the focal request is preceded by a larger request that is likely to be refused (Gialdini et al., 1976; Hogg and Vaughan, 2008). The extant literature indicates both the high effectiveness of these social influence tactics and the scarce theoretical studies explaining their working (Burger, 1999; Burger and Caldwell, 2003).

By putting persuasive discourse at the forefront, this paper contributes to the field of media discourse in entrepreneurship discourse by exploring the under-researched field of televised entrepreneurial pitch as a sub-genre. More specifically, this study attempts to throw light on the strategic use of business persuasive social tactics – the deployment of communicational strategies in business negotiations aimed at enhancing compliance and persuading people to comply with requests (Redlien-Colot and Lefebvre, 2015) – in both the British and Spanish versions of the TV programme Dragons’ Den. In other words, I analyse how business experts from two different countries, after having listened to the entrepreneurs’ pitch, deploy specific social influence tactics in order to persuade entrepreneurs to comply to their requests as a condition for investing and becoming partners. In doing so, this study is placed at the intersection between routine and cross-cultural business practices on the one hand and reality-based broadcast talk on the other.

3. Method

3.1. Dragons’ Den: Description of the data

Dragons’ Den was first launched in Japan and it is now an international brand with versions airing in the UK and Spain (“Tu Oportunidad”, among many other countries in the world. Since it was first broadcast in January 2005 on the UK’s BBC2, the British version has become particularly popular in UK – as series fourteen is being aired at present; however, the Spanish version of Dragons’ Den (“Tu Oportunidad”) was first broadcast eight years later on the national channel TVE1 and it has only run for two series.

In the British and the Spanish versions of the programme, the entrepreneurs’ pitch must be persuasive enough so as to convince a panel of business experts consisting of three male and two female venture investors who, as the programme’s website claims, are willing to invest their own money in exchange for equity. The programme’s success is based on some basic golden rules that give structure to both the entrepreneurs’ persuasive pitches and subsequent negotiations.

Firstly, entrepreneurs have up to three minutes to introduce themselves and to explain the name of the business, the amount of money they are pitching for, and the exact percentage of equity they are willing to give away in their company. Right after the entrepreneur’s pitch, the five business experts are free to ask questions to get some further details about what they have just heard. Although entrepreneurs do not have to answer all of their questions, the amount of information they provide and the way they sell their product do affect the outcome. In addition, entrepreneurs are allowed to have an advocate in the Den in case they need some help answering some of the business experts’ questions. After the entrepreneurs answer the questions posed, the business experts can declare themselves ‘out’ if they are not interested. Finally, the entrepreneurs are free to accept or refuse investment if they think the deal does not satisfy their financial needs.

3.2. Dragons’ Den and “Tu Oportunidad”: The selection and classification process

This research reports the results of quantitative and qualitative discursive analyses of the social influence tactics both British and Spanish business experts deployed during the interactive part of the programme. Initially, a content analysis of all the programmes broadcast in the first two series was conducted. This content analysis made it possible to subdivide the interactive part into topically defined segments. Given that the focus of this paper is on the strategic use of business social influence tactics, only those business negotiation episodes which shared the following features were selected: (a) the entrepreneurs asked for a similar amount

¹ In this paper, the concept of negotiation is used to describe the interaction between business experts and entrepreneurs, in which entrepreneurs are induced to comply with the business experts’ requests as a condition for investing and becoming partners.

² The first request functions as a set-up for the second, real request (cf. Hogg and Vaughan, 2002).
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