Talk Shows

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Introduction

The talk show is a highly confrontational discursive genre, a widely influential media phenomenon, as well as a politically and morally controversial form of entertainment. Few discursive practices of popular broadcast culture have been more contentious and subject to cultural and scholarly examination in recent years than the talk show, particularly the television talk show.

The very notion of talk show raises issues concerning the boundaries between talk (prototypically dialogical) and show (prototypically monological), between public and private, between collective and personal experience, between expertise and experience, between interpersonal and mass communication, between information and entertainment, between discrete and overlapping identities ('me', 'you', 'us', 'them'). According to Munson (1993), the term 'talk show' combines two different, often contradictory, rhetorical paradigms by associating interpersonal conversation (belonging to the pre-modern oral tradition) with the mass-mediated spectacle (emerging in modernity). As a result, a public-colloquial language (Leech, 1966) has developed, which is modeled in varying ways upon the practices of conversational speech, through a process of 'conversationalization' of public discourse (Fairclough, 1995).

Brief Historical Survey

The talk show is a modern Anglo-Saxon institution that may be seen to echo certain pre-modern sociocultural practices of purposeful conversation. According to Burke (1993: 114–115) 16th century Italy had the academy, a discussion group for intellectuals, with fixed membership and fixed days for meetings. The 17th century saw the emergence of its French counterpart, the salon, a semi-formal social occasion organized by a hostess, normally once a week, for a mixture of ladies and men of letters. In England, the equivalent social institutions flourished in the 18th century in the form of the more informal coffee-house, the assembly, and the club.

The origin of talk shows was tracked down by Munson as early as the 1930s when interactive talk radio started to emerge in the United States and listeners were invited to phone in. Two particular formats developed in the 1960s, namely all-talk and all-news radio programs, which were intended as services to the listening community rather than stations in the traditional sense. Since the listeners were potential customers, controversial and sensationalized talk soon developed to attract them. 'Confron-talk' (Hutchby, 1996) became a syndicated television talk genre in the 1960s.

Phil Donahue was the first to adapt the audience participation talk show (also termed "audience discussion program" and "studio debate program") from radio to television in 1967. His show initiated what is known today as daytime talk show or tabloid talk show. This format was consolidated by Oprah Winfrey from 1984 as a sort of modern update of women’s service magazines in the late 19th century in that it often tackles women’s issues and targets mainly an audience of housewives. American talk shows such as Oprah Winfrey, Ricki Lake, and Montel Williams have been gradually exported to the U.K., to several European countries, and to most countries in South America. As a result of an increasing decentralization of the media, a transition from debate programs to talk shows occurred in Europe in the 1980s.

Defining Talk Shows

There are three main reasons why it is a very challenging task to define talk shows: they represent rapidly changing hybrid media phenomena, they display intertextuality through overlaps with other mediatised forms of talk, and they endlessly reconstruct themselves by violating and transgressing their own discursive conventions. The talk show displays a hybrid broadcast discourse in which patterns of communicative and social behavior can be associated with more than one discourse type, through overlaps with other mediatised forms of talk, such as interviews, debates, sitcoms, game shows, and quiz shows. To capture its distinctive features it is essential to explore the sociocultural environment and the contextual factors that generated it and that continue to shape it. The latter are principally the television show format, setting, time frame, and goal; the show host’s personal profile, agenda, and general orientation; the participants’ backgrounds, goals, and their relations.

In talk shows the interpersonal talk is geared to public debate using partly conversational, partly institutional discursive conventions and strategies, which involves blurring the boundaries between traditional dichotomies, such as public vs. private, collective vs. personal experience, expertise vs. experience. This is why the talk show discourse was
labeled quasi-conversational by Gregori-Signes (2000b), and semi-institutional by Ilie (1999, 2001). Talk shows display a certain gradation of discursive features in terms of institutionalization, with conversational features at the informal end of the speech continuum, and institutional features at the formal end. Depending on the personality of the show host, the nature of the topic, the general background and views of the participants, as well as the type of audience, talk show participants combine spontaneous and purposeful talk, non-institutional and institutional roles, non-controlled and host-controlled talk, interlocutor-oriented, message-oriented, and multiple audience-oriented talk (Ilie, 2001).

**Characteristic Features of Talk Shows**

Characteristically, talk shows bring together, through the mediation of a host, a guest panel (experts and lay participants), a studio audience and occasionally an audience of ‘callers.’ The following are some of the key features of talk shows:

1. As audience-oriented mediated events, talk shows target simultaneously a multiple audience made up of the directly addressed audience of interlocutors, the on-looking studio audience, and the overhearing audience of TV-viewers.
2. Both experts and lay people are often present as show guests. Much of the program’s focus has to do with the interchange between them.
3. The show host, usually a media personality, is monitoring most of the discussion by stimulating, guiding, and facilitating the participants’ roles and contributions to the program (for information exchange, confrontation, and entertainment).
4. Each episode of the program focuses on a particular topical issue of social, political, or personal concern. Confrontation and conflicting opinions are usually guaranteed by the selection of topics and of participants.
5. Personal experience and common sense have considerable status and increasingly appear as forms of knowledge that are opposed to expertise and to dominant discourses (of power, race, gender, etc.).
6. The discursive strategies of talk shows are: interview, narrative, debate, game, confession, testimony.
7. These programs are usually inexpensive to produce, particularly because they are not part of prime-time broadcasting.
8. Most programs are either broadcast live or recorded in real time with little editing.

A systematic account has been given by Ilie (2001) of the correlation between the discursive and linguistic features that single out talk shows as a broadcaster-controlled, host-monitored, participant-shaped, and audience-evaluated speech event. The institutional prerequisites of the talk show underpin its situational and discursive constraints. The situational constraints concern talk-related restrictions, such as time restrictions and agenda restrictions, speaker-selection restrictions and turn-taking restrictions. The discursive constraints are reflected in talk-framing patterns, such as the predetermined topic schedule, conventionalized beginnings and closings, as well as recurrent breaks. The semi-institutional aspect of talk shows is manifested in less predictable topic and subtopic shifts, interruptions, unprompted participant interventions, audience-oriented repetitions and audience-oriented questions.

The hybrid nature of the talk show can profitably be examined by adopting a comparative perspective since they exhibit both conversational features (belonging to non-institutional discourse, such as regular conversation) and institutional features (belonging to institutional discourse, such as news interviews and public debates), as indicated in Table 1. The recurrence and distribution of the two sets of features vary according to the particular framing of each talk show, including the personalities and life-roles of the show guests, the charisma and authority of the show host, and the expectations raised by the particular character of the show in question.

In strictly linguistic terms, talk shows exhibit specific features with regard to the discursive organization of talk, the sequence of adjacency pairs and turns, and the participants’ question-asking and question-answering roles. These features pertain partly to conversational, i.e., non-institutional discourse, and partly to institutional discourse, as shown in Table 2; the semi-institutional nature of this double dependency is what characterizes talk show interaction.

**Typology of Talk Shows**

Five major criteria have been used in varying ways by talk show scholars to identify and distinguish between various talk show formats: (i) discussion topics (from contemporary political issues to social or moral problems); (ii) categories of participants, particularly in terms of social and popularity status (celebrities or ordinary members of the public); (iii) broadcasting time (early morning, daytime, or late night); (iv) organizational and interactional frameworks (staging conventions and seating configurations for show guests and audience); and (v) ethical considerations (the producers’ and hosts’ moral concerns).
Table 1  Discursive Features of Talk Shows as Semi-institutional Discourse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conversational features</th>
<th>Institutional features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private setting (pre-filmed scenes in show guests’ homes)</td>
<td>Public/institutional setting (TV studio)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatively homogeneous form of talk</td>
<td>Non-homogeneous form of talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneous talk (less topic-centered)</td>
<td>Purposeful talk (more topic-centered and goal-oriented)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower topic control and predictability</td>
<td>Higher topic control and predictability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicative and interactional goals</td>
<td>Communicative, interactional, and institutional goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No particular talk-related restrictions (flexible turn-taking, topic and subtopic shifts)</td>
<td>Particular talk-related restrictions (time-limintation, speaker-selection, and turn-taking design)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-institutional/real-life roles (parent, child, etc.)</td>
<td>Institutional roles (panelist, expert, etc.) and non-institutional roles (parent, child, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneous role-switching (initiated by the show guests)</td>
<td>Monitored role-switching (controlled by the show host)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal participant status</td>
<td>Unequal participant status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal speaking rights</td>
<td>Unequal speaking rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interclocator as both addressee and addressee</td>
<td>Multiple audience as addressee (onlooking audience and overhearing audience)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interclocator-oriented talk</td>
<td>Message- and multiple audience-oriented talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-hierarchical role-distribution</td>
<td>Hierarchical role-distribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symmetrical power relations</td>
<td>Asymmetrical power relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatively weak talk/topic control</td>
<td>Strong talk/topic control</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 2  Linguistic Features of Talk Shows as Semi-institutional Discourse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conversational features</th>
<th>Institutional features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No particular talk-framing patterns</td>
<td>Particular talk-framing patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No particular role-related openings and closings</td>
<td>Role-related openings and closings performed by the show host</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal introductions of and by the participants</td>
<td>Formal and semi-informal introductions of the participants by the show host</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-monitored speaker-selection and turn-taking (unplanned interventions)</td>
<td>Monitored speaker-selection and turn-assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No explicit metalinguistic patterns for various stages of the interaction (negotiated turn-taking slots, next speaker selection, and topic agenda)</td>
<td>Explicit metalinguistic patterns for various stages of the talk show (monitored turn management, next speaker selection, commercial break announcements)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No deliberate use of performative utterances for institutional goals</td>
<td>Deliberate use of performative utterances for institutional goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly symmetrical question-asking roles</td>
<td>Asymmetrical question-asking roles (primarily audience-oriented)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversationally framed questions (primarily interlocutor-oriented)</td>
<td>Institutionally framed questions (primarily audience-oriented)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argumentatively used non-answer eliciting questions (e.g., rhetorical questions)</td>
<td>Evaluatively used non-answer eliciting questions (e.g., rhetorical questions); audience-oriented questions (e.g., expository questions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interclocator-oriented repetitions (self-repetitions, allo-repetitions)</td>
<td>Audience-oriented repetitions (addressee-shifting repetitions, message retargeting repetitions)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


According to the first criterion, Krause and Goering (1995) distinguish three categories of talk shows in the United States: the news/political analysis talk show (Meet the Press), the entertainment talk show (The Tonight Show), and the social issue talk show (Sally Jesse Raphael, Oprah). By applying the first two criteria, Carbaugh (1988) distinguishes between personality-type and issue-type
talk shows. Other authors, like Charaudeau and Ghiglione (1997), resort mostly to the first criterion
to distinguish between monothematic and polythematic
talk shows. The third criterion is widely used
by scholars to distinguish between early morning
talk shows (Ricki Lake), daytime talk shows (Oprah
Winfrey, Geraldo Rivera), and late night talk shows
(David Letterman). By applying the first three cri-
teria, Haarman (1999: ix) distinguishes three
broad categories of talk shows: the evening celebri-
ty format (Jay Leno’s Tonight), the issue-oriented
format (Oprah), and the audience format (Kilroy). In respect of the fifth criterion, namely
ethical considerations, talk shows fall into two
subtypes according to Richardson and Meinhof
(1999: 125): exploitative, like Jerry Springer, which
sacrifice human dignity to media entertainment
requirements, and non-exploitative, like Kilroy.

Taking into account the changing talk show
formats over the last fifteen years, Soulages (2002: 319–320) uses a combination of the first, second,
and fourth criteria to distinguish three categories:
‘first generation’ talk shows (of the 1980s, discussing
public issues), reality shows (of the early 1990s,
probing into the private sphere), and ‘second gen-
eration’ talk shows (of the late 1990s, confession
and confrontation-based).

It is important to note that, although the funda-
mental characteristics of talk shows are easily recog-
nizable across cultures, it seems possible to identify
cultural nuances that distinguish talk shows accord-
ing to their country of origin. The situational contexts
of the British, American, Italian, and French talk
shows, for example, differ widely. The parodically
conceived British The Dame Edna Experience
(Tolson, 1991), the American Tonight Show, and the
Italian Maurizio Costanzo Show (Mininni, 1990;
Mininni and Annes, 1999) represent quite different
realizations of the same, or similar, basic formulas.
Intracultural differences are equally important to
examine as intercultural ones. The interaction in
French cultural talk-shows, such as Apostrophes,
Bouillon de culture, and Bibliothèque Médicis
follows the tradition of the French conversation
de salon (Charaudeau, 1991; Charaudeau and
Ghiglione, 1999), whereas a typically French hybrid
talk show such as Ciel mon mardi is a mixture of serious
débat (political discussions), reality-show
(accounts of true life experience), and variétés
(musical performances and jokes) (Mazdon, 1999).
To some extent these stylistic differences can be
accounted for by deliberate choices operated by
the respective broadcasting producers. However,
deliberate or not, such choices also concern audience
preference and expectations, and thus constitute a
revealing perspective on the culture itself.

Methodological Approaches to the Study
of Talk Show Discourse

Talk shows have been examined from a variety of
perspectives, including cross-disciplinary and cross-
cultural approaches. They have recently become the
focus of attention in media and cultural studies, as
well as feminist studies. A growing number of dis-
course and conversation analysts are using social in-
teractional perspectives in their studies of talk show
interaction.

Scholars such as Mininni (1990), Mininni and
Annes (1999), Montgomery (1991), Calsamiglia
(2000a, 2000b), Simon-Vandenbergen (2000), Myers
make use of (empirical and/or theoretical) discourse
and/or conversation analytical approaches to
describe the mediated participant interaction in the
co-construction of stories and identity roles, turn-
taking strategies, closings, interruptions, personal
decisions, non-verbal communication, argumentative
functions of question-response sequences, manage-
ment of disagreement and conflict, and male-
Halliday’s (1978) sociolinguistic theory to examine
the relationship between talk as performance and the
production of identities in broadcasting.

Scholars from the fields of media and cultural
studies, as well as feminist studies, such as Carbaugh
(1988), Masciarelli (1991), Munson (1993), Ait and
Seecholz (1994), Livingstone and Lunt (1994), Peck
(1997, 1999), Mazdon (1999), and Mittell (2003)
have often concentrated on the analysis and/or critique
of the talk show as a media genre, as a political phe-
nomenon, and on its impact on ordinary viewers.
Carbaugh (1988) and Munson (1993) use performance
theories as their underlying theoretical framework.

A number of media scholars, such as Priest (1995)
and Shattuc (1997) on the one hand, and White
(1992, 2002) and Peck (1996) on the other, are
particularly concerned with two complementary strat-
ologies of the talk show, namely confessional framing
and therapeutic framing respectively. Peck’s (1994)
approach focuses on racism as an important issue in
the discourse of many talk shows. Keyes (1999) pro-
vides an ethnographic perspective on the theatrically
staged role of the studio audience on Shirley, a Cana-
dian talk show.
Psychologists, such as Nabi and Hendriks (2003), have concentrated particularly on audience response and reception of talk show messages. Guzman (1996) makes a qualitative analysis of the role of the studio audience in daytime talk shows by applying a theoretical model derived from Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) social construction of reality.

See also: Context, Communicative; Gesture: Sociocultural Analysis; Interactional Sociolinguistics; Interjections; Planning Strategies and Production of Spoken Discourse; Register: Overview; Understanding Spoken Discourse.

Bibliography


