

The Power of Language Use in the Mass Media: A Case of Opinion Court on Citizen Television, Kenya.

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Abstract

The study sought to investigate how power relations are constructed and negotiated in the talk show. A programme aired on Citizen Television. The following objectives guided the study: to describe the structure of the talk show in the opinion court programme; examine patterns that emerge in the programme and account for the patterns observed in the opinion court. Literature was reviewed on; talk show: opinion court, conversational Analysis and Language and power. The study was guided by the Sociology of Conversation Theory by Goffman (1967) and Conversational Analysis Theory. Purposive sampling method was used to select the television as opposed to radio, Citizen Television in particular and opinion court talk show programme, this was necessary because power and language interplay can best be examined when there are two opposing sides, and thus opinion court provided this forum. Data was collected through both direct viewings of the programme and audio-video recording of the conversation. The data were then transcribed, analyzed and described qualitatively aiming at establishing the structure and the patterns of the discourses. The findings of the study revealed that opinion court talk show had some structure and followed some patterns which could be accounted for. The study, therefore, concluded that the opinion court did not count because other smaller opinions emerged. This implies that power is won, held and lost in social struggles.

Key Terms: Power, Conversational Analysis, Talk Show, Opinion Court, public opinion

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INTRODUCTION

Language connects people in society by being the primary domain of ideology. This language can be interpreted in the context of power play. However, little is known on how this power is negotiated in programmes aired through media texts. In particular, how language is used as a means of exercising power in talk-shows in Kenya is not known. This paper, therefore, sought to investigate how power relations are constructed and negotiated in opinion court talk show, a programme aired on Citizen Television.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Talk shows have been considered as one of the primary means through which people express their feelings and opinions about issues that affect the common Mwananchi. These talk shows are aired through either the radio or television. The programmes in the talk show touch issues to do with politics, health, sports, economy, and social lives, among others. In Kenya in particular, there are talk show programmes on both the television and the radio and most of these programmes majorly feature politics and relationships. Through the programme, the audience can observe how participants use language to exert power over others. This paper investigated how language is used in Opinion Court, one of the famous Citizen Television talk shows that attract many people. Through this programme, people have a chance to judge the conversation by following a given topic. This paper, therefore, examined the following major areas: talk show, opinion court, conversational analysis and language and power.

Heath and Luff (2000) define a talk Show or a chat as a live television or radio programme genre in which an individual or a group of people discusses(s) various topics. The topics are introduced by a talk show host. In many instances, the guests comprise a group of people who are learned or who have a great experience on the topic being discussed on the show at that particular moment. At other times, the guests can discuss their work or area of expertise. Guests

may already be seated but are introduced by a host and enter from backstage. There are live calls made while the show is in progress from the audience at home, in their workplace, in their cars, passenger service vehicles, among others. To focus on the show and the desired direction, the talk show host moderates the direction of that show. The host allows the guests to contribute to the topic as freely as possible but ensures that the maxims of conversation are observed. This paper examined how the participants in the talk show contributed meaningfully to the discourse in relation to a given topic.

Goodwin (2009) points out that even when texts are essentially spoken, the talk can be interwoven with a non-verbal form of communication. Non-verbal features such as gestures, facial expressions, posture, and movement, among others, can accompany the verbal message to give it meaning. Paralinguistic features such as stress, intonation, pitch and pause also can communicate a lot. This paper established how non-verbal means of communication and paralinguistic features complemented the spoken word and the kind of messages conveyed through the same.

Every television or radio station in Kenya has its programme aired at varying times of the day or night. Within the talk show genre, there are sub-genres. They include Breakfast Chat, Power breakfast, Cheche Talk show, late night show, Sunday talk, Political discussions, The Strength of a Woman, Opinion Court, among others. These shows feature elected political figures, government officials, prominent people, commentators, Journalists among others. The focus on this paper was Opinion Court talk show which is a Citizen Television of Kenya programme aired on every Thursdays from 9.30 pm.

Public opinion is characterized by discussion and disagreement among participants, and indeed both are necessary for an effective democracy. It is an assumption

that disagreement in a political conversation contributes to opinion quality as it is likely to expand one's understanding of others' perspectives. There is a perceived 'opinion court' whereby a case is presented which culminates to an argument that further gives participants a chance to support their own opinions, as well as reasons they can offer to support opposing points of view of numerous explanatory variables. Price, Cappella, and Nir (2002) point out that exposure to the disagreement contributes to people's ability to give reasons, and in particular reasons why others might oppose their views.

Opinion court was a television programme aired on Citizen Television station, Kenya. This talk show is aimed at judging participants'. There were usually two opposing sides: the antagonist and protagonist. The semantic field in this talk was politics. The process of the opinion court is defined by articulation and contesting of opinions. There is usually one excellent opinion but within it generates other hidden discourses. The discourses in this court are supposed to be open, free and to enlighten the audience. Through opinion court, people have an opportunity to push their agenda through conversation.

The programme offers a platform through which it demonstrates how power relations are constructed through opinions. Participants compete over the meaning and struggle for power of representation among groups. According to Shapiro (1988), Participants in interactions position themselves from others and refers to this as 'politics of representation.' Participants used a variety of strategies to ensure that their framing of the nature of a particular issue predominated in the talk. The way in which power is represented in the spoken or written discourses in media texts could be established in opinion court. The audience can judge whether the language has been used appropriately. This paper aimed to explore how power relations are constructed through the opinion court programme.

According to Delin (2000), conversational Analysis herewith abbreviated as CA is a method of exploring the structure and procedure of social interaction between humans. It embraces both verbal and non-verbal conduct in everyday life. CA argues that most of the interaction that people engage in is conducted through a medium of speech. Through conversation, one may learn how people create structures and make sense of their world. CA has been adapted to embrace more task-oriented and institution-centred interactions such as mass media. According to Heritage, Steve and Clayman (2010), conversation Analysis does not only deal with the conversation, but it is also applied in a talk in the profession, workplace settings, and political speeches among others. Researchers develop a model to explain the occurrence of the patterns of a conversation. This paper, therefore, examined the patterns of the talk show in opinion court.

Schegloff (2007) points out that the basic structures in CA include Turn-Taking, among others. Cameron (2001) observes further that conversation requires speakers to take turns, and this requirement is managed in a particular way. Sometimes turns are allocated in a conversation and stretches of silence are not allowed in a conversation, and if they do occur, they are repaired by participants. Other times participants are constrained to issues the utterances in allocated turns and enlist various mechanisms to obtain them. In multi-party conversations, the mechanisms of turn-taking are complicated where the current speaker selects the next speaker is a possibility. Cameron (2001) further notes that the turn-taking system provides a basic framework for the organization of talk in interaction because it allows the floor to move systematically between speakers. The uniqueness of CA is the way in which it shows how action, structure, inter-subjectivity and practically is achieved and managed through talk and interaction. This paper aimed at establishing the methods

used by participants to obtain turn-takings. It further sought to find out the structures in opinion court talk show.

CA explores both prosodic and paralinguistic features in the interaction among the interlocutors. Sidnell (2010) points out that CA researchers now simultaneously examine speech, prosody, gaze, gesture, facial expressions, body language, spatial arrangements and manipulation of materials in the environment. Goodwin (2009) concurs with this assertion by noting that such elements can be analysed as elements of a single integrated process. The present paper sought to find out if these patterns occurred in the opinion court programme. Other conversational features include: who leads in the talk, who chooses or changes the topic, who interrupts or backs down others, who comments on what is said, who uses politeness strategies, who uses face-threatening acts, who talks most and who uses directives and what kind among others. The present paper explored all these conversational features.

Fairclough (2001) observes that power relations are always relations of struggle, a process whereby social groupings with different interests engage with one another. He further says that power relations are discursive. These power relations between social groupings in institutions include dominated and dominating, ethnic groupings, social class, political divides, among others. The focus on this paper was on power struggle among people of different political divides and different ideologies. It aimed at examining how participants use language to influence others' opinions. Power is seen in the public domain and how public discourses can be used to manipulate or maintain public opinion. Diamond (1996), for instance, says that power in the individual often comes down on how effectively the individual can use their language abilities to interact with others. This paper, therefore, sought to establish how participants in opinion court used language

as a tool to manipulate and maintain public opinion through the talk show.

The nature of the discourse in terms of conversation and transformation depends on the relations of power obtained between the social forces and the way in which these relations develop in the course of social struggle. Van Dijk (2000) in Critical Discourse Analysis asserts that dominance, social power abuse and inequality are approved, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. The way power is represented will reveal whether it is influential or instrumental, political, personal or social. This paper helped to determine how individuals maintained dominance through the use of language. Power may be wielded for various reasons such as creating allegiance to a political stance and decision-making and defining identities among others. How institutions or individuals maintain dominance through the use of language in the mass media will be revealed through this paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The structure of the opinion court talk show

The show comprised a host and guests. The host moderated the talk show. There were two levels of moderation: first within the participants to be moderated where there was a resident debater Secondly; there was the host who regulated the conversation and ensured that the talk took the desired direction. The host decided who talked by allocating speaking turns, appointing the next speaker. For instance, in the show '**who fixed who?** The moderator used the following: *Yes... senator..., I want to bring in the lovely lady... Ladies and gentlemen let's have hon... talk about..., hon... what's..., hold on a minute... let me bring in hon..., let me take you back...,* among others.

The moderator further regulated the conversation by stopping the other speaker in case of interruptions or over-speaking and helped to cool down the guests' tempers

whenever they were high. This is evidenced by the following instances in ‘**who fixed who**’ show: *hold on please, please indulge me, hold on, I beg your pardon, I am sorry... , order I want sobriety in this conversation, no no you are out of order... we must also hear each other, let’s give each other a chance to speak, lady and gentlemen, we will not proceed this way... , I will cut this conversation short if you don’t give each other a chance to speak... , I think you have made your point... , no no hoh.. I must ask you to pause...*

Some participants could select themselves to speak, but the moderator could try to restrain them. Sometimes the host could play the role of ratification by using terms such as *... sure, precisely, that’s right, alright, correct, exactly, okay, mmh, em* among many others. Goffman (1967) argues that the identity assumed by one party is ratified, not by one’s own actions but by the actions of another who assumes a complimentary identity toward one. There was one main agenda that was discussed at a particular talk show, but the host played around in a skewed manner, asking leading questions until the preferred direction was reached. The topics discussed in opinion court included: Who fixed who? Waiguru’s impeachment, what is the state of our nation? Uhuru’s shake-up, new parliament Agenda, EACC crisis, is the president abusing his veto power? Should Waiguru step aside? Hate speech, Kenya is not broke among many others. The structure for all these topics was almost similar.

There were two opposing sides which were the antagonists and the protagonists. For instance, in the show ‘who fixed who’ expressions such as the following were used: a protagonist could say. *That’s immaterialistic, divert the attention of the people... , who could be sacrificed... , which group of people could be sacrificed... , to get scape-goats, .hon..is making fun of two innocent people who are facing trial... , is making funs and jokes about... who are suffering of...because she doesn’t understand the pain they undergoing...* The antagonists tended not to support the

topic as in *...even when people know the propaganda they go round spreading... , praying even when in the Bible...praying in the public places and street corners... , ..neither did we start this new chorus of who fixed who... , every time we have had a choir-member behind this song...ICC is not a fish market where you just walk in and... to mean members of a certain coalition and this is said with a sarcastic tone. This is consistent with Pomerantz (1984) notions of agreeing and disagreeing with assertions between the two opposing sides.*

Sacks (1995) and Goodwin (2009) note that units of discourse are portrayed precisely by prosodic features such as intonations, stress, pause, among others. From the study findings, each of the parties used non-verbal features and paralinguistic features to push their agenda. The use of the hands, raising the tone, looking from the corner of the eye, scolding at a colleague, shouting and pitch seemed to emphasize some points. It was also possible to notice the participants who seemed to be sly or hiding some information by using hedges like ‘aaha’ ‘mmm’ and empty fillers like ‘you see’ ‘you know’ among many others.

The patterns that emerged from the opinion court talk show

To track the ‘hot’ issue, which was the controversial subject, there were many sides to it such as interests, propaganda, perspectives, individualism, among others. The process of the talk show was defined by articulation and contesting of opinions. The parties to the conversation took the roles of antagonists and protagonists, moderator and commentary. The moderator seemed to have no interest in the contest. S/he was just there supposedly to give a neutral viewpoint. She appeared to connect the two opposing sides, get the audience focused on the idea, and a regulator of the conversation. For the contestants, the participants in the conversation used both formal and conversational features in building an argument, but they had undertones. Also, the participants in the conversation

broke the maxim of quality. Instances included cases where some guests used personalization, lying, ridiculing, and sarcasm, among others. Sidnell (2010) says that a participant may use a particular prosodic pattern to do the action of ‘reprimanding’ or conveying a joke, and this was indeed encountered in the study findings. The moderator and the host tended to lean towards one side. They appeared like prosecutors of a case in their interrogation whereby they could start taking the roles of witnesses. They could sometimes get the participants in the conversation fixed by the nature of their questions which were seemingly biased. They tricked guests into saying what they did not want to say. This implies that the context was skewed; there was the prosecution; they had evidence and asked questions that drove people to the desired direction. There seemed to be one grand opinion at face value but around it there emerged other smaller opinions.

Accounting for the patterns

The discourses are supposed to be open, fair and to enlighten the public in the court of opinion show. However, it was evident that the opinion did not count since there were other ‘smaller’ opinions that came out of the grand opinion. This means that the Citizen Television opinion court has one issue on the surface structure, but at the deep structure of it, they had a point that they wanted to prove. This clearly indicated that power is inscribed in the

conversation. Sometimes people use supra-segmental features to push their agenda. This was evident in the show. A participant could support, work against or expose some elements through the body language. For instance, when a participant was lying, speaking the truth, or protecting an individual, not in the show, all could be observed through the body language. Through the non-verbal form of language, it was also possible to note when the host acknowledged responses, took sides instance through nodding given a preferred choice or person, allocating more speaking turns to individual guests among others. This is consistent with Schegloff (2007) who acknowledges that any observable conduct in interaction that the participants use to interact are treated as relevant.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In conclusion, it was evident that the conversation in opinion the court has a structure. There are also several patterns that emerge from the discourses. On the one hand, power is exercised and enacted in the discourse, and on the other, there are relations of power behind the discourse. In both cases, power is won, held and lost in social struggles. The process of the talk show in opinion court is defined by articulation and contesting of opinions.

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