EXERCISING POLITENESS: MEMBERSHIP CATEGORISATION IN A RADIO PHONE-IN PROGRAMME

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Abstract

The paper seeks to demonstrate that, first, over the course of interaction in the radio phone-in events, participants display orientation to various aspects of their co-participants’ identities, second, since membership categories emerge and are developed at various sequentially relevant times, membership categorisation processes are closely tied with the event’s sequential organisation, and, third, categorisation bears on politeness aspects of interaction as the participation in the public ‘arena’ causes participants’ faces to be constantly at stake. The methodological underpinnings of the paper represent the approaches of Membership Categorisation Analysis and the model of politeness based on the conceptualisation of face. The data are drawn from the corpus of Nočné dialógy (‘Night Dialogues’) radio phone-ins broadcast on the Slovak public radio over the period of 1995-2004. The paper further attempts to demonstrate that participants are engaged in category work which sequentially unfolds in the course of the production of phone-in calls. Participants’ progressive involvement in talk is closely linked with the construction of ‘layers’ of their categorial identities. The membership category of ‘location’ represents the minimum agreed-upon canon of callers’ call-relevant identities. As the category is universally applicable, it bears the least face-threatening potential, for which reason it is used explicitly. In contrast, strategies of non-explicit categorisation, i.e. invoking categories through category-relevant predicates, apply to those topic-relevant categories which carry a significant face-threatening ‘load’ (e.g. ‘family status’, ‘political affiliation’, etc.). In summary, sequential organisation and category work are seen as being closely intertwined, with the latter also being employed as a positive and negative politeness strategy.

Keywords: Politeness; Face; Conversation Analysis; Membership Categorisation Analysis; Identity construction; Radio phone-in.

0. Introduction

Among the interactive broadcasting formats that have emerged on the mass-media market in Slovakia over the period of the past fifteen years the genre of radio phone-in conversation holds a prominent position. It might be considered one of the prime manifestations of the process of democratisation in the post-1989 Slovakian society which has led, among other things, to the opening of the mass-media space for

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uncensored public live participation. In the case of the analysed phone-in format, citizens are given direct telephonic access to the radio studio whereby they can voice their opinions on various issues and confront them with those who occupy prominent positions in the institutions of political, social and economic power. By means of a direct access to this on-line discussion forum the public has gained an unprecedented opportunity to participate in the shaping of the emerging public discourse and, at the same time, to help build a specific democratic institution of public radio. Of various modalities of the phone-in type of participation that have emerged in the burgeoning Slovakian mass-media space the present article examines a specific instance of a phone-in discussion programme, Nočné dialógy (‘Night Dialogues’) broadcast on the public Slovak Radio. The general format of the programme, the management of participation, its broadcast hours, the character of guests invited, the age structure of the callers and the in-depth treatment of discussed issues rank this programme among the more ‘serious’ mass-media genres.

The focus of the paper is threefold: a) to point at the ways participants to the radio phone-in engage in the process of construction of their sociocultural identities by means of social categorisation, b) to suggest that categorisation is intertwined with sequential organisation, and c) to suggest that categorisation is closely tied with politeness considerations, viz. with participants´ reciprocally shared effort to protect and enhance their own as well as others´ faces. Methodologically the paper is nested in two quite different approaches: Ethnomethodological Conversation Analysis (CA), notably in a particular stream practiced within its framework, viz. Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA), and in a particular scientific conceptualisation within the Politeness theory, viz. Brown and Levinson´s (1987) ’face-saving’ view of politeness. I shall attempt to suggest that there is a good reason to include the processes of membership categorisation, i.e. the ways participants categorise their partners and their actions, among those ’areas of pertinence’ which are closely linked with politeness: „there is a great deal of current work on the structure of conversation, which [...] has turned up many properties of conversational organisation which tie in directly with matters of politeness” (Brown and Levinson 1987: 29). By linking these methodologies I intend to demonstrate that the two lines of research, viz. membership categorisation and politeness, rather different in their origins and frameworks of reference, can be brought together to be seen as mutually compatible in an attempt to elucidate the intricate and multifaceted nature of conversational organisation.

1. The data

The data are drawn from the corpus of recorded and transcribed radio phone-in programmes Nočné dialógy (‘Night dialogues’) broadcast on the ‘high-brow’ Slovak public radio (Slovensko 1) every Friday between 10.30 p.m. and 01.00 a.m. over the period of 1995-2004. The standard format of the analysed phone-in programme is such that the host invites callers (members of the public at large) to become involved in discussions with invited guests (representatives of the established power structures in the Slovakian society) of the current social, economic, political and cultural issues which feed the public discourse in the country. In the analysed programmes, the invited guests were the Minister of Culture, a diplomat, and the General Manager of a large private enterprise.
The structure of the phone-in programme is comprised of an introductory section, in which the host introduces the guest whereby setting the range for the subsequent callers’ input in the form of a question, remark or a comment. The ensuing callers’ contributions form the main part of the programme and the object of the present analysis. Figure 1 schematically presents the process of communication in the analysed speech event.

**Figure 1 The communication scheme of the phone-in programme Nočné dialógy**

- two-way face-to-face interaction (Host - Guest)
- two-way mediated (telephone) interaction (Host/Guest - Caller)
- one-way mediated (radio) interaction (Host/Guest/Caller – Audience)

### 1.1. Radio phone-in as a research agenda

Within the framework of CA it is assumed that talk holds a key role in the production of social life; accordingly, it is central to the making of institutions. Interaction in institutional settings, among which the genre of radio phone-in can be included, is characterised by the systematic variation, especially simplification, specification and transformation of practices found to be pervasive in mundane talk (which serves as a benchmark against which other types of interaction can be assessed). The focus of CA has been to identify the ways in which participants display their orientation to institutional contexts. The range of the analysed institutional settings represents classroom, courtroom, business, workplace, social work and medical settings (for the overviews of the researched settings, topics and authors see e.g. Heritage 1989; Hutchby and Wooffitt 2002; Drew 1994; Hutchby and Drew 1995). The present discussion pertains to the environment of mass-media in the study of which some insightful advancements have been made, esp. in the area of broadcast news interview and radio phone-in conversations. As Hutchby (1996b) notes, prior to his publication the latter genre was subjected to analyses from the perspectives of anthropology, sociology and media studies focusing on its nature as a ‘democratic’ forum, on the ways the talk is conducted and on the relatedness of its content to wider social and cultural issues. The application of a distinct conversation-analytical stance in Hutchby (1996b) brought a shift of perspective to how “‘sequential patterns in talk reveal participants’ construction of social realities and communicative activities, and their orientations to social contexts and identity relationships“ (Hutchby 1996b: 6). The potential of radio phone-in talk
shows as a „gold mine for the study of conversational techniques and language styles“ (Shields-Brodber 1992: 487) has been discovered by researchers from different socio-cultural settings, who examined prosody (Panese 1996), conversational ‘mechanics’, such as overall organisation (Hutchby 1991; Ferenčík 1995), turn-taking and code-switching (Shields-Brodber 1992), opening routines (Liddicoat et al. 1992; Ferenčík 2002), repair (Ferenčík 2006a), but also a variety of ‘relational’ issues, such as power and confrontation (Hutchby 1996a, 1996b), social organisation and argumentation (Hutchby 1991a, 1992b, 1995, 1999; Liddicoat et al. 1994), discursive devices used in legitimating/authenticating lay speakers’ opinions (Hutchby 2001), management of participation and the role of questions (Thornborrow 2001a), establishing community (Fitzgerald 2002). The recent studies of the ways phone-in participants’ public identities are constructed and displayed (Hutchby 2001; Thornborrow 2001b; Fitzgerald and Housley 2002) are of particular relevance to this paper. I also draw upon my previous and on-going research in which I have attempted to utilise the methodologies of CA/MCA to examine politeness aspects of this public access media genre (Ferenčík 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2006a, 2006b).

2. Methodology

Central to this paper is the notion of identity of participants to the public-participation talk show. He (2004) pinpoints a recent turn in the conceptualisation of identity: From its treatment as an a priori, independent constant to its understanding as an emergent, intersubjective entity. The redefined perspective on identity construction was also enriched by CA, notably by that strand which directly addresses the issue of identity, viz. Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA). For CA practitioners, talk is seen to play a crucial role in the process of identity negotiation; through talk participants construct their personalities by the presentation of selves to others and explication of their actions. MCA offers a methodological tool designed to approach participants’ moment-by-moment identity negotiation from their own perspective, i.e. from the angle of their own engagement in the interaction (Francis and Hester 2004). By revealing their orientation to various aspects of the surrounding reality (including others’ identities), participants attempt to arrive not at an understanding which is either totally ‘subjective’ or ‘objective’, but at one which is ‘intersubjective’, i.e. dialogically based, shared, constantly negotiated and renegotiated. It has been pointed out (e.g. by Nekvapil 2000/2001) that speakers’ category work is a kind of on-line ‘practical sociology’ enabling them to make sense of each others’ activities through the recognition of existing ties between categories (category devices) and specific predicates and activities which are mapped onto them. Categorisation is connected to sequential organisation of talk, as categories are invoked, developed and negotiated over the course of interaction.

The second methodological foundation of the paper is the model of politeness as elaborated by Brown and Levinson (1987). Their rationality-based understanding of interaction sees participants’ employment of particular interactional procedures as being driven by their face wants. By attending to the opposing wants of their positive and negative faces participants wish to avoid, or at least relieve, tension and thus control potential aggression and/or conflict. The authors claim that participants’ faces are constantly at stake and that practically any action they take poses a threat to their faces. Since the mitigation of face-threat is seen to occupy the core of participants’ polite
behaviour, Brown and Levinson’s politeness model presents an elaborate system of strategies for the softening of face-threatening acts (hence the ‘face-saving theory’ of politeness). Their system consists of a hierarchy of five superstrategies which are ranked according to the degree of face-threat posed by an FTA which they are supposed to counterbalance: Not doing an FTA, off-record, negative politeness, positive politeness and bald-on-record.

It is only obvious that the theory elaborated to such a fine-grained detail has instigated criticism from many directions which addresses such aspects as the claim for its universal validity, its epistemological underpinnings, fuzziness of its basic concepts, rationality, neglect of impolite behaviour, intrinsic politeness value of certain acts, decontextualised data, focus on the speaker etc. I shall resort here only to the commentary on what I believe are some of the most serious arguments levelled against the theory which come from two directions; neither of them, however, attempts to discard the model completely. According to Watts (2003), the theory is usable provided that politeness is seen in the context of other types of interpersonal meaning, or relational work, of which it is only a part. Brown and Levinson, Watts claims, try to extrapolate their theory of politeness from strategies aimed at minimisation of face-loss, i.e. from facework, which is “misleading” (Watts 2003: 89). Building his own theory of politeness on different epistemological foundations, Watts also departs from Brown and Levinson in seeing politeness as a discursive concept, viz. as one based on interactants’ own perceptions of what is (not) polite (hence Watts’ is a first-order theory of politeness).

The second revision that I wish to address here has been suggested by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1997) who offers a more ‘optimistic’ re-examination of what she believes to be a negative, pessimistic or outright ‘paranoid’ conceptualisation of politeness as a means of “keeping everyone’s aggressiveness within reasonable limits” (1997: 13). She offers a way of upholding Brown and Levinson’s model by introducing the concept of face-enhancing act (FEA) which would counterbalance FTAs. She goes on to stress that “being polite in interaction means producing FEAs as much as softening the expression of FTAs – and even more so: In fact, negative politeness is basically a restricted impoliteness, more or less neutralised by some redressive action; but positive politeness is ‘genuine politeness’ (praise is even more polite than softened criticism; the expression of agreement is even more polite than a mitigated disagreement, etc.)” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1997: 15). In spite of vigorous criticism and calls for revisions, Brown and Levinson succeeded in grounding their model in a firm social theory and elaborating it in sufficient detail so that it can be tested against empirical data from various cultures, languages and disciplines. As Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1997) observes, in the late 1990s Brown and Levinson’s theory had “no other serious competitor on the ‘politeness market’” (1997: 12).

The tradition of linking CA with politeness has not been particularly fruitful, even though Brown and Levinson themselves pointed out that there is much work in conversation analysis „that is pertinent to our themes“ (1987: 40) and which „conspires to show how complex and intricate are the ways in which conversational organization is interwoven and informed by the concern with participants’ self-esteem and its preservation (1987: 41). The identified ‘areas of pertinence’ include preference organisation, repair, pre-sequence, or entire sequences of turns.
3. Membership categorisation in the radio phone-ins

The results of recent research using the analytic tool of MCA have pointed out that the processes of membership categorisation are one of the central tasks that participants to interaction solve; being permanent and locally-managed they are entwined with other sources of ‘orderliness’ within these speech events, viz. with the levels of their overall, thematic and sequential organisation. Over the course of interaction within the public access media events, participants’ identities are progressively developed, which is demonstrated in the ways participants display their orientation to relevant membership categories. Relevancy of membership categories arises from different aspects of the phone-in structure at different stages of its progression. At least in theory, almost any feature of participants’ identities may be utilised for categorisation and, what is more, more than one category may be applied to a given person. Newly emerging categories, however, do not replace the ‘old’ ones; rather than that, “layers of categorization are built up and developed within the interactional flow” (Fitzgerald and Housley 2002: 580) whereby participants’ identities are progressively established (see the model of a ‘layered texture’ of interaction, Figure 2). Emerging categories are located in particular contexts of their production and change on a turn-by-turn basis over the course of interaction (cf. the notion of “category flow” used by Watson (1997); cited in Fitzgerald and Housley 2002: 582). Procedures by which particular membership categories are selected thus form a substantial part of participants’ interactional activity.

3.1. ‘Layers’ of membership categories

The analysis of the on-going interactions in the phone-in data reveals that conversationalists display orientation to the following types of membership categories which pertain to relevant aspects of phone-in organisation: Institutionally/programme-relevant, call-relevant, topic-relevant and topic-opinion categories. Overarching these layers is a ‘supra-layer’ of sequential categories with which membership categories are intertwined; they are built into the interaction and change on the turn-by-turn basis (Figure 2). It should be added, however, that of these ‘layers’ of identities it is only one which is seen as relevant at a particular moment of talk.

Figure 2 ‘Layers of categorial relevance and the ‘category flow’ in the phone-ins

As a preview of a more detailed discussion of individual ‘layers’ of categorisation, the following example will illustrate the emergence of which individual ‘layers’ of membership categories in the course of the development of a single call. The show,
which hosts the then Minister of Culture, discusses a sensitive issue of ‘bilingual school reports’ which divided the nation into the proponents of the view that school reports should be printed only in the official state language of the country (Slovak) and those who were convinced that they should be bilingual, i.e. printed also in the language of the largest (Hungarian) minority. As the call evolves, the caller’s ‘identikit’ progressively emerges via the establishment of her incumbency of relevant membership categories. The first three layers of the caller’s identity are established by the host in the call’s opening turn (line 01) in the following way:

a. by the host’s acts of summoning and introducing the caller she establishes caller’s membership of the sequential categories of ‘summoned’ and ‘introduced’,

b. by the host’s orientation to the caller as poslucháčka (‘female listener’) she invokes her membership of the institutionally-relevant category,

c. by the host’s adducing the caller’s location (of which the host had been informed by the radio staff) of Považská Bystrica she invokes her membership of the call-relevant category of ‘location’.

As to the remaining categorial memberships of the caller, viz. the topic-relevant and topic-opinion ‘layers’, these are established in line 06a by the caller herself who raises the issue and at the same time positions herself on that issue as being ‘against’:

(1)²

1M .hh dobrý večer želáme do Považské Bystrice? naša ďalšia? poslucháčka chce vstúpiť do rozhovoru do Nočných dialógov .hh s hostom ministrom kultúry Slovenskej republiky Ivanom Hudecom. teda ešte raz dobrý večer že ste tak dlho vydržali .hh čakať na tú svoju otázku // alebo vyjadrenie názoru .hh

‘we wish good evening to Považská Bystrica? our next? female caller wants to enter a conversation in Nočné dialógy with the guest Minister of Culture of the Slovak Republic Ivan Hudec. so once again good evening you have waited for so long for your question // or expression of an opinion’

2G

// dobrý večer
‘good evening’

3C no ja nemám ani takú otázku? dobrý večer? ja vás zdravím? pán minister?

‘well I do not have a question? good evening? I´m greeting you? Minister?’

4M .hh dobrý večer.
‘good evening’

5G

dobrý večer.
‘good evening’

6C

.hh a:: viete. .h nechcem sa blbo vyjadriť ale ide ma šlak trafť. .// hh ja to

‘you know I don’t want to sound silly but I´m going to have a stroke.’

7G

(((laughter)))

6aC nemôžem počuťa prečo .hh eh prečo by c:h malo byť niekolko eh rečť? n ako čo ja viem ako by som to povedala .hh na na vysvedčeniach. no tak v tej Amerike by mala byť jakože ešte tá

---

² Transcription symbols

+ pause .hh/hh. Inbreath.outbreath
// overlapping talk ? rising tune
(( )) unclear talk/ (((laughter))) continuing intonation
. falling tune nepočul stressed syllable
: vowel prolongation == no gaps between turns
3.2. Sequential categories

Being a minimal structural unit of conversational action, adjacency pair (AP) can be defined both sequentially and categorically. When conversing, speakers produce structurally bound slots of sequential order and carry out specific actions predicated to sequential categories associated with them. For example, in a question-answer (Q-A) AP speakers occupy mutually related positions of sequential categories of ‘questioner’ and ‘answerer’ to which the actions of ‘asking question’ and ‘answering question’ are predicated respectively. Sequential categories are thus paired entities and represent essential loci of interactional order. Other examples of sequential categories (or ‘categories-in-action’; Fitzgerald and Housley 2002), are ‘summoner’ and ‘summoned’, ‘requester’ and ‘requested’, ‘introducer’ and ‘introduced’ and ‘informer’ and ‘informed’ (for the summary of the common APs utilised in the phone-ins, their associated sequential categories and predicated category-bound activities see Figure 3). Being associated with the indispensable ‘infrastructure’ of interaction, sequential categories are entwined with membership categories and are omnipresent throughout the interaction. Thus, for example, ‘asking questions’ and ‘answering questions’ are actions predicated to different membership identities, be it a programme/call relevant or a topic-relevant category.

Figure 3 Sequential categories and related category-bound activities in the phone-ins

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjacency Pair</th>
<th>Sequential category</th>
<th>Category-bound activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summons</td>
<td>Summoner</td>
<td>summoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answer</td>
<td>Summoned</td>
<td>answering summons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Questioner</td>
<td>asking question(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answer</td>
<td>Answerer</td>
<td>answering question(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Introducer</td>
<td>introducing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answer</td>
<td>Introduced</td>
<td>answering introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request</td>
<td>Requester</td>
<td>requesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comply/Deny</td>
<td>Requested</td>
<td>complying with/denyng the request</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform</td>
<td>Informer</td>
<td>providing information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledge</td>
<td>Informed</td>
<td>acknowledging (the receipt of)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.3. Institutionally/programme-relevant categories

A specific type of membership categories includes ‘institutionally/programme relevant’ categories which are directly related to the organisational aspect of the interaction and which include membership categories of the ‘host’, ‘caller’, and ‘guest’. Taken together, these categories may be seen as forming a membership categorisation device (MCD) called ‘parties to a phone-in’. They are a part of the ‘participatory framework’ and may be practically invoked at any time during interaction (hence ‘omni-relevant’ categories; Fitzgerald and Housley 2002). Each of these categories is associated with a number of category-bound activities (cf. Figure 4).

A note is needed to be made on the ‘double’ status of the caller: In the course of the entire talk show s/he appears as poslucháč (‘listener’), i.e. a member of the listening audience who, upon having decided to actively participate, having taken necessary steps (viz. dialling the access phone number) and having been successful in getting through to the live broadcast, is shifted to the category of volajúci (‘caller’) for his/her time on-air. While there exists such an orientation to this ‘double’ institutional identity of the callers on the part of the host, they often remain categorised as poslucháč (‘listener’) throughout the entire call, as is evidenced in the extracts below. These two categories are also used as a means of reference and address, since in this particular programme no personal names are used to this end.

One remark is due also on the grammatical aspect of the Slovak words poslucháč (‘(male) listener’) and volajúci (‘(male) caller’) pertaining to the double institutional status of the caller and which may have consequences upon the way introductions are managed - these words are sensitive to the contrast of grammatical gender; while their ‘basic’ forms poslucháč/volajúci (‘(male) listener/caller’) are used both for masculine gender as well as generically, their feminine gender forms are marked with gender-specifying morphemes -ka/-a: poslucháčka/volajúca (‘female listener/caller’). The relevance of the contrast is demonstrated in call openings when the host elicits and/or negotiates the means of caller address/reference to be subsequently used.

Figure 4 Institutionally/programme-relevant categories and the related category-bound activities in the phone-ins

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutionally-relevant categories</th>
<th>Category-bound activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Host</td>
<td>summoning the caller, bringing participants in to the ‘participatory framework’, introducing the programme issuing on-line cue, establishing the ‘channel link’, providing access phone numbers, introducing the invited guest, greeting the caller, producing callers’ identities for their time on-air, inviting the caller to participate, setting the topic for the programme, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caller</td>
<td>answering the summons, greeting the host/guest, accepting the invitation, presenting an opinion, asking question(s), asking for advice, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Another important thing to be mentioned is that the caller is oriented to by the host as the incumbent of the related categories (cf. Figure 5). In this way, institutionally/organisationally-relevant categorial co-memberships are sequentially established and a layered categorial texture of talk is produced.

Figure 5 Institutionally/programme-relevant categorial co-memberships in the phone-ins

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Host</th>
<th>Caller</th>
<th>Guest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summoner</td>
<td>Summoned</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introducer</td>
<td>Introduced</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inviter</td>
<td>Invited</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greeter</td>
<td>Greeted/Greeter</td>
<td>Greeted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioner</td>
<td>Questioned/Questioner</td>
<td>Questioned</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Extract (2) demonstrates the procedure of sequential unfolding of the three institutionally-relevant categories of ‘summoner’ - summoned’, ‘inviter’ - ‘invited’ and ‘greeter’ – ‘greeted’ which, rather than being evoked one after another, are unfolded in an overlapping manner. Before approaching the next caller, the host opens his Introductory turn (line 01) by performing two acts predicated to the category of ‘host’: provision of a metacommunicative remark which contains a self-identification (the name of the programme and the access phone numbers) and the identification of the guest. Afterwards he addresses the next caller via his/her locational category and, using a greeting token, initiates the first part of the summons-answer AP. The caller answers the summons with a greeting (line 02) which the host interpretes as the first part of a greeting-greeting AP and responds accordingly (line 03). Thus, within the span of the three introductory turns the participants engage in institutionally/organisationally relevant actions essential for the faultless launch and ensuing progression of the talk.

(2)

01H  na čísla 391 400 a 392 400 sa dovolali ďalší poslucháči ktorí chcú vstúpiť do Nočných dialógov?  ho e:h s hostom?  ho eh Ministrom kultúry Slovenskej republiky Ivanom Hudecom? takže pekný dobrý večer najskôr do Nových Zámkov?

‘the numbers 391 400 and 392 400 have been dialled by some more listeners who wish to take part in Nočné dialógy? with the guest? Minister of Culture of the Slovak Republic Ivan Hudec?, so good evening first to Nové Zámky?’

02C  dobrý večer

‘good evening’

03H  dobrý večer

‘good evening’
3.4. Call-relevant categories

Call openings are also locations where procedures of displaying institutionally-relevant identities are overlaid with those by which members of the public waiting for the call are shifted from their positions of anonymous members of the audience to positions in which they occupy call-relevant identities. The purpose of this initial category work is, through the establishment of the ‘participation framework’, to bring callers to the main point of the call, i.e. to the place where they can embark on the on-topic talk and reveal further layers of categorial relevance (viz. the topic-relevant category).

Within this particular radio phone-in format callers’ call-relevant identities include a MCD of ‘location’. As a rule, it is the host who initiates a sequential action to seek after this identity of the caller’s whereby to transpose him/her from the anonymous (i.e. an audience member waiting for the turn) to the known status; callers opt to self-categorise only rarely, as is done in Extract (3). As a result of this practice, a considerable amount of interactional work is sometimes spent on eliciting from the caller his/her locational category. Once elicited, however, it is used during their on-air time as a part of the means of their address (cf. the practice of names being also used, in conjunction with location, as a call-relevant identity in some types of public access media programmes in Britain; cf. Hutchby 1991). A canonical way of addressing or referring to the callers in this programme then rests in using their institutionally-relevant and (optionally) call-relevant categories (see Figure 6).

The following two extracts demonstrate the orientation of both the host and the caller to the (grammatical) category of gender of the caller. In Extract (3) in line 01 the host makes available both options (poslucháč/poslucháčka, ‘male listener’/‘female listener’) and invites the caller to self-categorise, which he does in line 02 whereby establishing himself as a male listener; the host’s immediate acknowledgement of the caller’s (grammatical) gender category in line 03, however, creates an overlap which results in a comprehension problem. This is immediately repaired - the host initiates a Q-A sequence (lines 04 and 05) to elicit the caller’s call-relevant category from the MCD of ‘location’.

(3)
01H→ .hh dobrý večer prajeme? ďalšiemu nášmu poslucháčovi? alebo poslucháčke?
‘we wish good evening to our next male listener or female listener?’
02C dobrý večer? poslucháčovi // z Dolného Smokovec?
‘good evening? to a male listener from Dolný Smokovec?’
03H // poslucháčovi a od
‘to a male listener and from’
In Extract (4) gender is elicited by the host’s using generic categories of muž (‘man’) and žena (‘woman’) from the MCD of ‘humankind’ (line 01). Since the caller’s gender is displayed in his ‘voice signature’, it receives no further attention.

As a rule, the call-relevant category is established routinely, and the absence of this layer of the caller’s identity, or any problem arising from the inadequate assignment of this category, is made noticeable. In such a case a participant may initiate a repair procedure to elicit a misheard category (as in Extract 3, line 04; the host’s other-repair of caller’s location), or s/he may repair the misplaced category him/herself (Extract 4, line 02; caller’s other-repair of the locational category):

(4)

01H  hh a v Nočných dialógoch privítame ďalších poslucháčov poslucháča z Považskej → Bystrice? žena? muž? // dobrý
                          ‘we welcome in Nočné dialógy more listeners a listener from Považská Bystrica?
                          man? woman?      // good’
02C→     // z Nitry. z Nitry.
                          ‘from Nitra. from Nitra.’
03H  z Nitry. Z Nitry. zle som si poznáčila.       // tak nech sa páči. dobrý večer.
                          ‘from Nitra. from Nitra. I marked it wrong // so go ahead. good evening’

3.5. Topic-relevant categories

Topic-relevant categories represent another ‘layer’ of caller’s identity emerging over the course of the talk. They offer a bridge between the callers’ experiential background and the topic under discussion. Placement of callers to a topic-relevant category is a justification of the relevance of their contribution to the programme and underlines the authenticity of their opinion which is expected to be developed in the subsequent talk. Extract (5) is taken from the talk with Minister of Culture whose agenda is assumed by the callers to be, among other things, the maintenance of the contacts with the communities of Slovak expatriates. The caller displays her belonging to the MCD of ‘those whose family members are Slovak expatriates’ whereby authenticating her claim for the reduction of shipping costs of books in order to be able to mail some to her grandson (line 08).

(5)

03aC  ... hh pán minister // h ja by som mala také konkrétne otázky.
                   ‘Minister I would have some concrete questions’
07G  nech sa páči
                   ‘go ahead’
08C→ .hh eh mám tiež syna v Amerike? no aj zos eh rodinkou. .hh no a ten môj vnuk už e:h
                    akosi zabúda na tú slovenčinu. .h chcela by som mu posielat knihy odtiaľ. .h lenže
                    strašne drahé? je poštovně ....
3.6. Topic-opinion categories

The last ‘layer’ of categorisation to be activated involves the position of the caller on the current topic of discussion. The analysed talk programme, however, does not usually have a central topic to be oriented to by the callers; it is the guest’s position in the structures of political, social etc. power that informs its topical organisation. It is one of the predicated tasks of the category of ‘caller’ to have an opinion of the topic which makes the occupancy of this category expectable. Callers thus may be positioned as being either ‘for’ or ‘against’ the issue under discussion (Fitzgerald and Housley 2002).

In Extract (6) the caller refers to the process of economic transformation in Slovakia in the early 1990s as ‘the division of wealth among the few chosen’ (the ill-famous process the idea behind which was to create Slovakia’s own capitalists). By using this non-neutral, (negative) value-laden category the caller displays his belonging to the topic-opinion category of ‘against’ the process referred to. As categorisation is a sensitive process and bears on politeness issues of the interaction, it is interesting to observe the subsequent action of the host: In order to offset the serious threat to the guest’s face (who was directly involved in this process as one of the ‘privatisers’ of the former state-owned enterprise), repairs caller’s rather blunt denotation and provides the officially used term privatizácia (‘privatization’).

(6)  
08C .hh no, máť by som dotaz na pána inžiniera Hatinu? .hh jak to bolo s tou miliardou korú he rozdelili dvadsať .hh ludi.  
I would have a question to ask Mr. Hatina? how was it with that billion of crowns that twenty people divided among themselves?’
09H→ ++ .hh mysliete pri privatizácii // Slovnaftu  
‘you have in mind the privatization of Slovnaft’
10C // âno ne pri po teraz teraz // v tej druhej vlne  
‘yes now during the second wave’
11H // âno  
‘yes’

4. Categorisation and politeness

The awareness of politeness considerations, which participate in the shaping of the phone-in interactions, comes from two directions. One of them is from the classical politeness model of Brown and Levinson’s who suggest that face considerations present “an important functional pressure on language” (1987: 279). I suggest that, in order to attend to their face needs, participants employ membership category work as a strategy of (negative and/or positive) politeness. The other direction is represented by CA/MCA
practice which points out that the choice of category is a sensitive matter and may affect the structuring of the talk, or it may itself become a topic (cf. Nekvapil 2000/2001). It is also claimed that categorising is not something that is done for its own sake, but “to accomplish something other than just categorizing” (Leudar, Marsland and Nekvapil 2004: 244). Accordingly, categorisation is not to be regarded as socially neutral but rather as laden with social values. As Bourdieu puts it, “... practical classifications are always subordinated to practical functions and oriented towards the production of social effects” (1991: 220, cited in Eelen 2001: 37). It is the repercussions of politeness-oriented behaviour of participants resulting from the category work they engage in that can be seen as having these important ‘social effects’.

4.1. Membership categorisation as a negative and positive politeness tactic

I propose that the very fact that there is only one agreed-upon membership categorisation device constituting the ‘call-relevant layer’ of caller’s identity can also be accounted for by politeness considerations. By encompassing very large sections of population the MCD of ‘location’ is so general that it may be considered safe as to its face-threatening potential. For this reason, it is used explicitly, viz. it is expressly named (cf. Extracts 1, 2, 3 and 4). Further, it may be assumed that its use may generally be motivated by two opposing wants: By an effort to attain a certain degree of identification which is necessary for the purpose of referring to and/or addressing the callers while at the same time not to impinge upon their “claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction” (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61); in the latter case they may be used as a negative-face redress strategy.

The corpus data provide numerous evidence of the intense link between categorisation and negative politeness. In Extract (7) I focus on that phase of call opening in which the host invites the caller to move on to discuss the specific topical agenda. In line 10 the caller attempts to elicit from the host the relevant identity of the guest and, having acquired it (in line 11), he goes on to introduce the reason for the call, viz. asking a question. In this way he displays his orientation to the host’s relevant category membership of the General Manager of a petrochemical plant (which operates a wide network of petrol stations throughout the country) and establishes the ground upon which to warrant the relevance of his subsequent contribution. Then, in line 13, the caller goes on to address the problem of the cancellation of the special stands at petrol stations designed to serve two-cycle cars. However, in an effort to soften a possible negative impact of the attribution of blame (i.e. an act threatening guest’s positive face want; cf. criticism as an ‘intrinsic positive face-threat’, Brown and Levinson 1987: 66), he disclaims the full responsibility of the guest’s company for what he feels to be an unfavourable situation. In this way the caller demonstrates his sensitivity to the inferential implications of the category ascription and acts in such a way so as to diminish a potential disruptive effect of this action on the guest’s positive face.

(7)

09H nech sa páči? chcete diskutovať s pánom Hatinom?
‘go ahead? do you want to talk to Mr. Hatina?’
10C no ta ja som nepočúl (ne) začiatku som nepostrehol jaka je to relácia ale akosi počúvam ako ste okolo benzinu proste ako riaditeľ jako:
Exercising politeness

‘well I didn´t hear at the beginning I didn´t understand what kind of programme this is but I’ve been listening and (it’s about) petrol and (there’s) a manager’

11H .hh áno generálny riaditel’ // Slovnaftu je naším hostom.
‘yes the General Manager of Slovnaft is our guest’

12C // generálny riaditel
‘General Manager’

‘right. I’d like to ask him even though this may not apply only to his but also to other companies which offer and which sell fuel? okay? why did they cancel the stands for two-cycle cars and vehicles well automobiles’

The concept of MCD is assumed to encapsulate ready-made information about the incumbents of respective categories, often in the form of stereotypes. In Extract (8), the host elaborates on the caller’s locational category of ‘Vysoké Tatry’ (‘the High Tatra Mountains’) by adducing a particular predicate that goes with the category, viz. počasie v Tatrách (‘the weather in the Tatra Mountains’), i.e. the predicate which is stereotypically associated with this geographically and culturally unique region in Slovakia. The ensuing small talk about the weather in the Tatras as being a ‘safe’ topic is employed in the role of a positive politeness tactic (cf. Strategy 5: Seek agreement; Brown and Levinson 1987: 112) and helps ‘lubricate’ the caller’s transfer to the ensuing on-topic talk.

(8)
06 H a:j zd’aleka. ako máte v Tatrách?
‘ah from far away. how are you doing in the Tatras?’
07 C no eh eh
‘well eh’
08 H sneh nemáte dúfam už.
‘I hope you haven’t got snow any longer’
09 C sneh už nie
‘no snow any longer’
10 H ((laughter)) .hh ako máte pekne? pekné počasie?
‘how are you doing, nice weather?’
11 C no: eh trošku chladno,
‘well a little cold’
12 H áno
‘yes’
13 C ale jak všade asi. h teraz
‘but perhaps as everywhere now’
14 H áno. má sa ochladiť aj tu. h tak nech sa páči
‘yes, it should get colder here too. well go ahead’

4.2. Membership categorisation in politeness ritual

The following two extracts present two instances of the participants’ engagement in a politeness ‘ritual dance’ involving membership categorisation (not dissimilar from the ‘proximity dance’ observed in non-verbal communication; cf. also ‘balance principle’ in
Brown and Levinson 1987: 236). In Extract (9) the host assigns the caller the categorial predicate of ‘using specialised vocabulary’ whereby applying to him the topic–relevant category of ‘expert’ from the relational pair ‘expert’–‘layperson’ (the possible MCD being ‘knowledgeability of the topic’). The subsequent explicit placement of the caller to the category of ‘expert’ (line 11) appears to be employed as a means of positive politeness strategy (Strategy 1: Notice, attend to H; Brown and Levinson 1987: 102). It seems to fit with what Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1997) conceptualises as a FEA: Praise is not just positively polite, it is genuinely polite. In his response the caller, in contrast, self-categorises as a ‘layperson’ (line 13) and attempts to neutralise the ‘praise’ by adducing (in line 18) his prior preparation for the discussion as the reason for his positively evaluated performance (cf. Leech’s (1983) Approbation and Modesty Maxims to which the participants seem to orient). Further on (in line 20) the guest categorises the caller as an ‘in-group member’ using the explicit category of dobrý zákazník (‘good client’) as a positive politeness strategy (Strategy 7: Presuppose/raise/assert common ground; Brown and Levinson 1987: 102). The extract demonstrates the basic ‘mechanics’ of politeness: Maximising other’s benefit while minimising one’s own merits.

(9)

09C // dobrý večer prajem. takto. chcel by som sa dotknúť takých eh hlavných bodov
I wish you good evening. well. I would like to touch upon some main points

10G // dobrý večer
‘good evening’

09Ca reklamy?oktánových číslov? kvality oleja a aditív do nafty. + // .hh
of advertising? octane numbers? quality of oil and diesel fuel additives’

11M→ // á vy ste nejaký odborník.
‘you are an expert’

12G ((smiech))
((laughter))

13C→ nie. práve že laik. ((smiech))
‘no. on the contrary a layperson’ ((laughter))

14M áno?
‘really?’

15C áno. (smiech)) // .hh ale ale
‘yes ((laughter)) but but’

16G // zh z zhurta ste to zobrali.
‘you started right away’

17M // ((smiech))
((laughter))

18C→ // ((smiech)) lebo som sa už pripravoval na to trochu? .hh // no takto. využívam
((laughter)) ‘because I had been preparing for it a little? well. I’ve been using

19G // nech sa páci.
‘go ahead’

18Ca vaše služby od roku tisíc deväťsto šesťdesiatštyri + // a to eh
your services since nineteen sixty four and’

20G → // tak to ste našim eh
doobrým zákazníkom. =
‘then you are our good client’

In Example 10 (which is the continuation of the call in Extract 7) the caller complains about the lack of facilities to serve the owners of two-cycle engine cars (in the given
Exercising politeness 367
culture the owners of cheap East German car models, such as Trabant, have formed
a stigmatised group). Over the course of the talk the participants have tried to avoid the
explicit establishment of the caller’s incumbency of this category in order to avoid
putting his positive face at risk (cf. contempt and ridicule as ‘intrinsic’ face-threats to an
individual’s positive face wants; Brown and Levinson 1987: 66). The caller, however,
implicitly self-categories as a member of the MCD ‘owners of a two-cycle engine
car’; the very issue that he comes up with is in itself sufficient for his ascription to that
category. The extract presents that part of the talk in which the caller formulates the
problem of lacking facilities at petrol stations to attend to those drivers’ needs (line 31);
the awareness of the potential interpersonal destructiveness of his act, which is a double
FTA by its being a threat to guest’s both negative (i.e. his right of a businessman to
close inefficient businesses) and positive face (complaint, disapproval, criticism as
‘intrinsic’ positive-face threats), is demonstrably present in participants’ actions. The
caller’s request is presented in the guise of an advice – it is hesitant, non-fluent and
tentative. The host adopts a defensive stance on behalf of the guest: She raises doubts as
to the practicalness of the measures to be taken by the management of the petrol stations
as claimed by the caller. The guest, however, in order to offset a possible unfavourable
impact of the host’s action upon the caller’s positive face, himself offers a compensation
and tries to restore the ‘balance sheet’ of face support and threat.

(10)
31C  e:h v jednom meste a: to už je jedno či proste jako alebo vo váčsom meste hej? meste?
   .hh jak Bratislava alebo Košice: nie je (naško) alebo by sa jako malo nájišť nejaké
   miesto na niektorej stanici proste aspon e:h
   ‘well in one town and it doesn’t matter which in a bigger town? such as Bratislava or
   Košice there should be a place at least in some gas station’
32 H  + .hh a vy si myslíte že keby bolo napríklad na jednom konci Bratislavy taká pumpa
   → že by: povedzme s tým trabantom ste šli na druhý kon z druhého konca Bratislavy? ja
   nie s s som si istá že by to tak robili vodiči
   ‘and you think that if for example there was at one end of Bratislava such a station that
you would go with your trabant to the other end of the town? I’m not sure whether other
drivers would do the same’
34 G  viete mate: mate jednoduchšie riešenie. pretože eh s skutočne: .hh by som sa: čudoval?
   A samozrejme že by sme si správili aj poriadok? keby vás omdietl .hh obslužit v tom
   smere? že by vám poskytli e:h túto možnosť eh .h u zmixovať eh toto palivo priamo na
   čerpacej stanici.
   ‘you know there is a simpler solution because really I wonder and of course we would
take proper measures if they refused to serve you in the sense of offering you a
possibility to mix the fuel directly at the station’

5. Conclusion

In the paper I have attempted to demonstrate that membership categorisation,
being one of the sources of interactional order, is a permanent and situationally
conditioned activity conducted through the joint participation of co-conversationalists in
the phone-in. Participants’ identities, which emerge over the course of unfolding
interaction, may be conveniently seen as consisting of several category ‘layers’. Being sequentially unfolded, these layers of category relevances include institutionally/programme-relevant, call-relevant, topic-relevant and topic-opinion categories; among these, sequential categories represent a ‘unique’ layer of identity which is directly linked to the ‘infrastructural substratum’ of interaction and is relevant at every moment of its course.

The call-relevant category of ‘location’ represents a universally agreed-upon, non-negotiated identification minimum of each caller; being applicable to large groups of population, the face threatening potential of locational category is low, which is sufficient for the justification of its explicit use. Categories from the topic-relevant layer, however, tend to be invoked non-explicitly, i.e. through their category-relevant predicates, as they bear a significantly higher face-threatening potential. Membership category work can thus be seen as being closely linked with the politeness-oriented behaviour of the participants.

To conclude, the air space that public radio offers for its audience has emerged as an interesting ‘sociological showcase’ involving real-life participants who are given practically unconstrained floor to voice their opinions or challenge those who are in the structures of social power. The involvement of lay participants in the creation of the programme, transferring thus a significant part of the responsibility to them, has proved to be a highly successful strategy on the part of the mass-media. This general trend, present perhaps most visibly on the ‘electronic’ mass-media market, has resulted in the establishment of some mass-media programmes, including the analysed talk-show, as prestigious opinion-making institutions.

Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AP</td>
<td>adjacency pair</td>
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<tr>
<td>CA</td>
<td>Conversation Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEA</td>
<td>face-enhancing act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FTA</td>
<td>face-threatening act</td>
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<tr>
<td>MCA</td>
<td>Membership Categorisation Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCD</td>
<td>membership categorisation device</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q-A</td>
<td>question-answer</td>
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