

DOCTORAL THESIS

A discourse analytical study of TV talk-show therapy

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A Discourse Analytical Study of TV Talk-show Therapy

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Abstract

Using therapeutic conversations from a televised talk show as the source data, this research investigates how people solve emotional problems in an institutional setting within a specific social cultural context. A combined methodology of Genre Theory, Conversation Analysis, Systemic Functional Linguistics and Sociolinguistics disciplines is employed to examine the problem-focused discourse.

The research considers TV talk show therapy a valid genre. This claim is based on the generic evidence drawn from the data. As a task-oriented interaction, the talk show therapy has been characterized with the communicative intentionality to resolve emotional problems and to promote mental health to the public. These components in turn have shaped the generic structures, which become the crucial criteria that constitute a text as a genre.

Hierarchically, the TV talk show therapy emerges as a four-layer-structure. On the top layer, this social event is “Therapeutic Interview”, working to solve emotional problems. This interview is then composed of a lower rank of “Phases”. Each “Phase” is in turn composed of “Stages”. A “Stage” is further composed of the next layer of “Sub-moves”. Sequentially, this interview progresses through nine stages, which are labeled as *Orientation*, *Elicitation*, *Identification*, *Confirmation*, *Explanation*, *Intervention*, *Advice*, *Reformulation* and *Projection*. The internal structure of this social event has a clear beginning, a carefully organized closing, and a recognizable body of *Problem-Construction* and *Problem-Solving Phases* in between.

Two sub-genres, namely, the talk show genre and therapy genre predominately direct the “track” of the conversation. The goal of resolving emotional problems via the talk show interview is met by focusing on two thematic topics. The first thematic topic is to identify the problem that afflicts the client in the Problem-Construction Phase. The second thematic topic is undertaken in the Problem-Solving Phase to alleviate stress and resolve problems for the client.

As talk show therapy, intervention in this program is executed by means of conversation, and the verbal interaction is action-centred. This type of intervention is illustrated by the two action-focused stages of Confirmation and Intervention, wherein the client is invited to join in the therapeutic activities in order to make an accurate diagnosis and to exert influence on the client’s perspective or behaviour.

The healing talk employs the use of dialogue rather than a monologue in its effort to resolve emotional issues. This is shown by the predominance of the discursive structure of question-answer in therapeutic counseling. As the therapeutic conversation proceeds, questions typically switch from open-ended types to close-ended types. Such

Table of Contents

Declaration	I
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgement	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Tables and Diagrams	ix
Chapter 1 Introduction	
1.1 Background to the study	1
1.2 Objectives of the study	5
1.3 Outline of the thesis	6
Chapter 2 Literature Review	
2.1 Introduction	8
2.2 Psychotherapy	8
2.2.1 History of psychotherapy	8
2.2.2 Psychotherapy and counseling	11
2.2.3 Studies in the related areas	13
2.3 Institutional conversation	16
2.4 Conversation Analysis (CA)	18
2.5 Birmingham School	20
2.6 Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)	21
2.6.1 Three metafunctions	22
2.6.2 Generic Structure Potential Model (GSP)	23
2.7 Study of conversation in sociolinguistics	26
2.7.1 Ethnography of the “Speaking” Model	26
2.7.2 Interactional Sociolinguistics	29
2.7.3 Internal Narrative Structure Model	30
2.8 Genre Study	31
2.8.1 Development of genre study	32
2.8.2 Defining features of genre study	35
2.8.3 Application of genre in pedagogy	36
2.8.4 Application of genre in other contexts	37
2.9 Discourse and productive power	38
2.10 Summary	39
Chapter 3 Research Methodology	
3.1 Introduction	40

3.2	TV talk shows	40
3.3	About the data	41
3.4	Research focus	44
3.5	Theoretical framework	45
3.5.1	Genre study as the major framework	45
3.5.2	Approaches combined with the major framework	48
3.6	Data processing	50
3.7	Data transcription	51
3.8	Summary	53
Chapter 4 Generic Structures of the TV talk show therapy		
4.1	Introduction	55
4.2	Identifying the communicative purposes	55
4.3	Identifying the generic structures	57
4.3.1	Emergent stages	57
4.3.2	An example of analyzing a complete interview	60
4.3.3	The prototype of the generic structure	64
4.4	Discussion	68
4.4.1	The overall structure	68
4.4.2	Salient features of the generic structure	69
4.4.3	Relationship between the communicative purpose and structure	71
4.5	Summary	72
Chapter 5 Analysis of Opening and Closing Phases		
5.1	Introduction	73
5.2	Analysis of the Opening Phase	73
5.2.1	Functional moves in Opening	73
5.2.2	The structural prototype in Opening	75
5.2.3	Interpersonal functions in Opening	83
5.3	Analysis of the Closing Phase	87
5.3.1	Functional moves in Closing	87
5.3.2	The structural prototype in Closing	93
5.3.3	Ranking of the functional moves in Closing	97
5.4	Summary	98
Chapter 6 Analysis of the Problem-Construction Phase		
6.1	Introduction	100

6.2	Stage of Elicitation	100
6.2.1	Functional moves in Elicitation	100
6.2.2	Questions in Elicitation	102
6.2.3	Responses in Elicitation	105
6.3	Stage of Identification	112
6.3.1	Functional moves in Identification	112
6.3.2	Questions and answers in Identification	115
6.3.3	Exchange patterns and power	118
6.4	Stage of Confirmation	122
6.4.1	Functional moves in Confirmation	122
6.4.2	The structural prototype of Confirmation	126
6.4.3	Politeness in Confirmation	129
6.5	Summary	132
Chapter 7 Analysis of the Problem-Solving Phase		
7.1	Introduction	136
7.2	Stage of Explanation	136
7.2.1	Functional moves in Explanation	136
7.2.2	Authoritative voice in Explanation	140
7.3	Stage of Intervention	143
7.3.1	Functional moves in Intervention	143
7.3.2	The structural prototype in Intervention	148
7.3.3	Differences between Intervention and Confirmation	150
7.4	Stage of Advice	154
7.4.1	Functional moves in Advice	154
7.4.2	Advice-seeking move	156
7.4.3	Advice-providing move	157
7.4.4	Advice-evaluation move	160
7.5	Stage of Reformulation	161
7.5.1	Changes in the client's perspective	161
7.5.2	Changes in the client's modal expressions	167
7.5.3	Modal expressions in the conversation	168
7.6	Summary	171
Chapter 8 Conclusion		
8.1	Introduction	175
8.2	Talk show therapy as a hybrid genre	175
8.3	How talk show therapy differs from conventional therapy	180

8.4	How therapy focused talk shows differ from traditional talk show	182
		183
8.5	Communicative purposes determining the generic structure	184
8.6	Integration of Chinese culture in therapy	185
8.7	Talk show therapy as institutional discourse	186
8.8	Talk show therapy as empowering discourse	187
8.8.1	Empowering through genre	188
8.8.2	Empowering through “troubles telling”	189
8.8.3	Empowering through introspection	189
8.8.4	Empowering through reformulation	190
8.8.5	Empowering through politeness	190
8.8.6	Dynamic power in talk show therapy	190
8.9	Implications of the research	191
8.9.1	Theoretical implications	191
8.9.2	Pedagogical implications	193
8.10	Limitations and future direction	195
8.11	Conclusive remarks	196
	References	198
	Appendixes	218
	Curriculum vitae	276