

## **The Discourse Structure of Antagonistic Political Television Interviews**

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### **1. Introduction**

Given the rapid growth of global communications, the burgeoning development of international contact and association through meetings, negotiations and conferences and the necessity for access to the most up-to-date information through the news media, all conducted through the medium of the English language, there is a clear and growing need for those involved in the world of politics to attain at least a receptive proficiency in this language. The aim of this paper is to look at the discourse structure of one genre, that of television interviews in the political context, which forms part of the broad language variety of English for Politics. The genre of the television interview is one which has been the subject of some research within Media and Cultural Studies, but one which has not been researched from a discourse studies perspective. This analysis of the genre could act as a basis for course design in this potential growth area of ESP.

In this paper, I propose to introduce two categories for the description of political television interviews by subdividing the genre into two sub-genres: 'information' interviews and 'antagonistic' interviews. The 'information' interview is a term which describes an interview that takes place between the interviewer and an expert, with the purpose of providing detailed information or analysis on a particular subject. By contrast, the 'antagonistic' interview is one which takes place between a politician and the interviewer in which the purpose is for the interviewer to force the interviewee to admit something disadvantageous to him/herself or his/her political cause, to contradict a colleague or the official line or to admit deficiencies in their party or their policies. This paper concentrates on 'antagonistic' interviews for two reasons. Firstly, because of the formalism that marks this genre as institutional talk (Drew 1994) and secondly because this type of interview is perhaps more representative of the discourse of the political world by reflecting its adversarial nature, as illustrated by the fact that most political systems manifest competition between discrete parties, politicians or ideologies. This paper will analyse this sub-genre by establishing the context of situation, identified by the use of Hasan's (1985) Contextual Configuration, by offering a model of the discourse structure and a detailed examination of the moves through which the discourse progresses in such a

model, and finally by commenting on the key linguistic features of the sub-genre. The research is based on a corpus of 30 interviews, taken from a range of British TV channels during the spring and summer of 1994. The interviews were carried out by a number of different journalists and the interviewees were all from within the sphere of political activity, e.g. politicians, trade unionists, civil servants, members of pressure groups. Due to the constraints on space, a full examination of the scope of English for Politics and the pedagogical implications such analysis has for ESP are beyond the scope of this paper, but a comprehensive treatment of these areas together with the fully analysed transcripts of the interviews referred to below can be found in Hyatt (1994).

## 2. Antagonistic Interviews

### 2.1. Context of Situation

Following Systemic Functional Theory (Halliday 1976), which forms the theoretical underpinning of this research, there are three basic questions which need to be answered in an examination of context of situation. We need to know **Who** is involved in the discourse, **What** is the topic, and **How** the message is communicated. These are the three aspects of context of situation, or 'motivational relevancies' as Hasan (1981) refers to them.

Halliday (1985) calls these three aspects the **Field**, **Tenor**, and **Mode** of the discourse.

**Field** refers to what is embodied in the discourse and the purposes for its inclusion.

**Tenor** refers to the participants in the discourse, their roles and their relationships.

**Mode** refers to the nature of the language in the discourse and how it is communicated.

### 2.2. Field

The interviewer and the interviewee have different real world goals that they hope to achieve as a result of the interview. The interviewer's goals include trying to get a 'scoop', an exclusive news story that will provide interest or entertainment for the mass audience and also hopefully raise controversial issues that could increase the viewing figures. A further goal for the interviewer might be to maintain his/her personal or his/her organization's reputation for effective journalism. Idealistically, he/she may consider his/her goal to be the search for truth, but realistically it may be simply an attempt to get the better of the interviewee, with the aim of achieving the previously mentioned goals.

By contrast, the interviewee is often in a difficult situation, on the defensive in the face of some form of attack by the interviewer, perhaps seeking to avoid a politically indiscreet admission, a contradiction of the official line or an admission of political deficiencies. This being the case, the interviewee's goals may include: the limitation of damage to his/her cause; the preservation of the unity, or the facade of unity, in the party; persuasion of the viewers, rather than the interviewer, to his/her point of view; and, on a personal note, the avoidance of public embarrassment or a bad performance which could be detrimental to the interviewee's career. A final goal for both participants is to control the interview. By this I mean they wish to control the choice of topics under discussion, in order to advance their own particular agenda of objectives to be achieved. Indeed, the model I propose for the discourse structure will show how the interviewer has the greater opportunity for control, whilst the interviewee can effect control by the skilled use of linguistic and non-linguistic resources.

During the exchange, each participant performs different kinds of acts. The interviewer, who usually starts from a powerful standpoint, tries to elicit direct, or revealing, answers from the interviewee, and to follow up on, and exploit, what are considered to be 'unsatisfactory' answers. In the event of 'successful' answers, the interviewer changes tack by presenting a new antagonistic proposition in order to maintain the pressure. The interviewee, who usually starts from a weaker standpoint, tries to hedge or equivocate in order to avoid answering potentially damaging questions through the skilled use of available language resources, to utilize facts, or a subjective analysis of those facts, to answer or diffuse a potentially damaging exchange, and/or to suggest that the interviewer's assertions are incorrect, unfair or biased.

### 2.3. Tenor

A consideration of the nature of the participant roles in the interview yields interesting initial data. Clearly, the participants are the interviewer and the interviewee but, as Heritage and Greatbatch (1991) point out, the interview is also addressed to the mass audience. This results in what Fill (1986) terms 'divided illocution' where the interviewer and interviewee address each other explicitly while implicitly addressing the mass audience of viewers/listeners. Occasionally, this addressing of the mass audience is made explicit through phrases like 'as the viewers at home are no doubt aware', but this is comparatively rare and would therefore represent a 'marked' feature in this type of interaction.

The Agent Roles of the participants here are also worthy of consideration. The interviewer acts as an initiator of the exchange, a propositioner and an interrogator. The interviewee, on the other hand, has the role of respondent, avoider of unwelcome propositions and counter-

propositioner, suggesting that the interviewer is wrong or biased. There is a degree of social distance and this is dependent on the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. Many interviewers are public figures (e.g. Jeremy Paxman, Brian Walden), even international figures (e.g. David Frost), and in such cases the social distance would tend to be more minimal. Furthermore, when a television interviewer is a public figure, he/she may be known to the interviewees by appearance on previous unrelated broadcasts or by reputation, and such a situation would further reduce the social distance. In certain cases, where the interviewer regularly interviews those in the political sphere, the participants may even know each other personally and in this context the social distance would be still further reduced. For some interviewees however, the interview may be a unique occurrence and he/she may have no personal acquaintance with the interviewer. In such cases the social distance would tend to be more maximal.

The dyadic relationship between the participants is interesting, as despite projecting an explicit display of equality in status, there is in fact some degree of variance here depending on the seniority of the office held by the interviewee. In reality each participant views his/her position as superior. The interviewer considers his/her position superior as his/her job is to expose deficiencies or inadequacies in the interviewee, or in his/her organization or political position. Simultaneously, the interviewee views his/her position as of higher status as a result of his/her public office or the presumed correctness of his/her organization or policies. This is, however, only the starting point and as the model presented here will show, the status shifts during the interview depending on which participant is achieving greater success in his/her goals.

#### 2.4. Mode

The role of the language is constitutive as the language makes up the exchange. There is, however, a conventionalized expression of gratitude at the end of the exchange usually preceded by the interviewee's name or title (for example, in an interview with the then Chairman of the Conservative Party, Sir Norman Fowler 'Sir Norman, thanks very much for joining us this morning', or in an interview with a Liberal Democrat MP 'Malcolm Bruce, thank you very much' - the transcripts of all interviews referred to in this paper can be found in Hyatt 1994). This expression of gratitude, which is always present in unedited interviews, also acts as a coda to the interview and signals the interview's conclusion to both interviewee and audience. The interview is usually conducted through a fairly informal conversational style, through which the language can dissemble itself as having an ancillary role rather than a constitutive one, with the aim of disguising the antagonistic nature of the interview and perhaps catching the interviewee 'off-guard'. This feature is also dependent on the individual interviewing style of the journalist

which has to be seen as a significant feature of this genre, though one which cannot be viewed as having any one standardised, conventional form. For example, Frost uses a familiar, jocular style with interviews, and so attempts to disguise the antagonistic nature and attempts to promote disclosure 'amongst friends', Paxman is openly antagonistic aiming to anger the interviewee into disclosure as a result of loss of control and Walden is openly unctuous using excessive politeness strategies to mask the antagonistic character of the interview. Indeed, the use of politeness strategies, as we shall see later, is a generally used technique to disguise the true nature of this type of interview. Another reason for the use of informal conversational style is to promote the view of an equal dyadic relationship and so enhance the status of the interviewer and help to achieve the goal of maintaining the reputation of the television channel.

Both participants share in the process of the creation of the exchange. The interviewer's ideal process sharing situation would perhaps be more towards the passive end of the continuum, a situation that would mean the interviewer was in control of the exchange. The interviewer attempts to achieve this through the use of questions and presuppositions which try to anticipate or direct the interviewee towards a particular answer. The interviewee is also trying to control the content and so again this indicates the participants' different goals. As noted before, the nature of a television interview dictates that the channel is phonic and the medium is spoken. The visual element of television interviews is undoubtedly important but such a semiotic analysis is beyond the scope of this work.

### 3. A Model for Antagonistic Interview

The model that the data has suggested for the analysis of the discourse structure of antagonistic interviews displays a geometric progression of potential proposition and response movement as shown in Fig. 1:

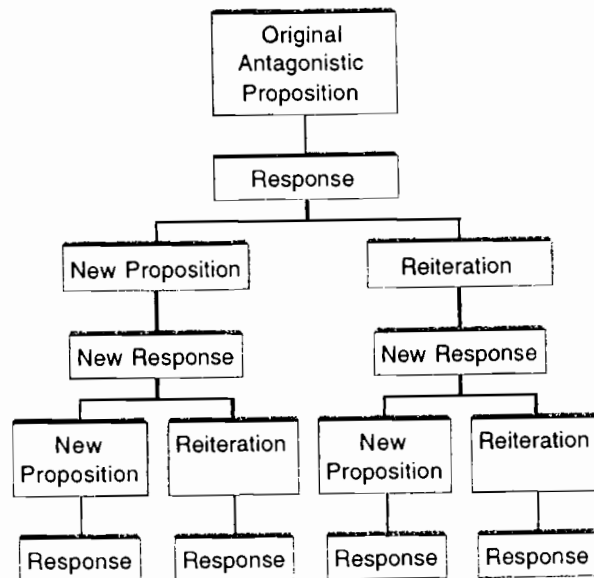


Fig. 1: Model of Discourse Structure of Antagonistic Interviews

The interview begins with an Antagonistic Proposition from the interviewer which is met by either a successful or an unsatisfactory Response from the interviewee. This in turn either provokes a New Proposition, a Reiteration of the original proposition or a New Antagonistic Proposition, which in turn provokes a Response and the progression continues. In effect, of course, the above model represents one element of a cyclical process. The number of turns is determined by the length of the interview. The model is consistent with views of systemic-functional linguistics in that the structure of the discourse is not determined by any pre-ordained pattern but by the choices made by the participants. At this point it may be appropriate to consider another useful concept developed by Hasan (1985) - the Generic Structure Potential (GSP). The GSP for a particular Contextual Configuration expresses the total range of optional and obligatory elements and their order. The GSP for the antagonistic interview shows that the first two moves of Original Antagonistic Proposition and Response are obligatory. The other two possible moves of Reiteration of original proposition and New Proposition are optional, depending on the success or failure of the Response. The notions of success or failure within these moves will be considered during the commentary on the Response move.

#### 4. Move 1 - Original Antagonistic Interview

By definition, Move 1 begins the interview and needs to be provocative. In the case of an edited interview or a pre-recorded interview, this proposition is often reported in the introduction and the interview itself begins with the response. The original proposition can take a number of forms.

**a. The Direct Question** (examples of this include, 'Sir Norman, were the results as bad as you expected or were they worse?' or 'All 12 European leaders have approved the choice of Mr Jacques Santer. What right have you got to try to reject him?' etc.). The questions include presuppositions, such as in the first example that the results are bad for Sir Norman or in the second that the European Parliament will veto the appointment of Mr Santer. The use of these presuppositions is to channel the interviewee into a response that will achieve the interviewer's goals. This is by far the most common mode of proposition used in this move.

**b. A Statement** (examples of this include, 'You're in even more trouble, aren't you?') Again there is presupposition serving to direct the answer and this is reinforced by the tag, and its accompanying intonation, which also expects an affirmative response.

**c. The Projected Argument of a Third Party** (examples of this include, 'The Tories are going to say that's fine, wonderful signposts, very very uplifting. What's it going to cost and when are you going to tell us?' etc.). This device distances the interviewer from the antagonistic proposition whilst still requiring a direct answer.

#### 5. Move 2 - Response

This move consists of the response to the original proposition and responses to subsequent reiterations and new prompts. The move is made up of two phases:

- a. the initial response to the preceding proposition, where the interviewee attempts to fend off the antagonistic proposition;
- b. the predetermined point which the interviewee wants to make. This has probably been researched or at least considered in advance and projects the interviewee, his/her party or policy in the most favourable light.

I would like to consider the modes of initial response first, comment briefly on the predetermined point and, finally, consider the definition of how a successful or unsatisfactory response is made.

### a. The Initial Response

There are a number of possible ways in which the response is initiated.

1. **Denial** - the suggestion in the interviewer's proposition is denied (examples of this include, in response to a suggestion that lawyers do not have enough time to prepare cases, the Home Office Minister's reply, 'No I don't think that's the case at all').
2. **Contradiction of interviewer's proposition** (examples of this include in answer to a question about whether the Prime Minister will change his policy or his job, Sir Norman Fowler's reply, 'Well he won't do either').
3. **Direct Answer** (examples of this include the leader of the Socialist group in the European Parliament's response to a question about why she believes she has the right to reject the newly appointed President, 'Well, good heavens, the Parliament has a right because it was given a right in Maastricht to be, to take part in this process').
4. **Rephrasing or making a statement of fact.** (examples of this include the Home Office Minister rephrasing a question about a victim of deportation by stating the facts of the case which appear favourable to his position.)
5. **Agreement** - this is usually qualified in some way and 'a brave face' is put on if the facts accepted are unpleasant for the interviewee (examples of this include Tony Blair response to a question about the Tories being the party of change 'Yes, but change in what way?' and the Home Office Minister's response to a statement that too many innocent asylum seekers are being put behind bars, 'Yes they are locked up, but we're talking about a tiny proportion of the number of immigration cases that are being considered.')
6. **Ignore Proposition** - this technique involves simply disregarding the antagonistic proposition and moving to the predetermined point (examples of this include Malcolm Bruce, when asked a question about the current prospects for the Liberal Democrats, replying 'I have to say I welcome the election of Tony Blair....' and continuing with the party line).
7. **Hedge** - this is usually demonstrated by using a diversionary statement to avoid a direct question and redirecting the discussion to the interviewee's agenda. It resembles **Ignoring the Proposition**, but differs from it in that a **Hedge** involves an active procedure to avoid the question whereas **Ignoring the Proposition** merely relies on disregarding the proposed point (examples of this include Tony Blair's reply in response to a question on Labour's ability to pay for its projected policies, 'It's not just about spending more money' and his redirection of the discussion to one of overspending and proliferation in the administration of the National Health Service).

8. The final possibility, but I find could no evidence of this from my corpus, would be a **complete inability to respond**, and this would be the most extreme example of an unsuccessful response.

### b. The Pre-determined Point

As suggested earlier, once the interviewee has deflected the antagonistic proposition, he/she can proceed with the item of policy or comment that he/she wishes to project to the wider audience. This point is predetermined in the sense that it has been selected as significant by the interviewee and has probably been researched in advanced and/or scripted in a way that will project the interviewee, his/her party, policy or other agenda in the most favourable light, or present his/her opponents in the least favourable light.

### c. Successful/Unsuccessful Responses

The judgement of whether a Move 2 response has been successful or not depends on a number of factors. A response can be deemed successful if :

1. it answers the proposition fully, covers all points or charges in that proposition and gives sufficient detail so as to leave no room for disagreement.
2. the respondent may also make a successful counter-proposition which refutes the original proposition (e.g.- Charles Wardle's penultimate response to the proposition that Mr Tamarat may not have understood what Algeria would be like on his return - 'I'm perfectly sure he did understand ... bearing in mind that he had just gone back voluntarily'). This second criterion is optional but if present adds strength to a successful response.

A Move 2 response may be deemed unsatisfactory if:

1. it does not deal fully with the proposition;
2. it does not address the proposition;
3. the information in the response is disputable.

### 6. Move 3 - Reiteration

If a response is deemed by the interviewer to have been unsatisfactory, the interviewer reiterates the original antagonistic proposition, but in greater detail. This is usually accomplished in one of three ways.

1. **Concentrating the proposition** - where the interviewee has introduced more than one argument to dilute the original proposition, the interviewer attempts to concentrate on the issue or issues which he/she feels will bring him/her the most success (e.g. 'Can we just deal with some of those points - first...').
2. **Emphasizing the point** - where the interviewer believes the interviewee has not given sufficient attention to an issue the interviewer considers to be a key one, the interviewer attempts to concentrate the argument to this particular point and thus force the interviewee to address the issue. This move type is often characterized by the use of the adverb 'though' and/or the use of uncontracted question tags in order to seek a concession of the point by the interviewee (e.g. 'he had been shot at though hadn't he, had he not, in Algeria').
3. **Rephrasing** - the interviewer may rephrase the proposition by either rephrasing his/her own proposition or that of another person/group (e.g. where John Tusa rephrases the propositions he speculates the Tories would make). The purpose of this rephrasing is to continue the attack from a different angle.

#### 7. Move 4 - New Proposition

Where the response is deemed by the interviewer to have been successful, the interviewer changes tack and introduces a new antagonistic proposition. This is usually marked by an acceptance of elements of the response (e.g. 'given that you say... and given...') followed by a new proposition often introduced with a negative interrogative e.g. 'doesn't that mean...'. The latter form is one of the most significant linguistic features of the genre and will be looked at in more detail in the conclusion.

#### 8. Move Progression

A brief explanation of how the move structure fits together facilitates the understanding of the previous explanations.

The original antagonistic proposition (Move 1) is met with a response (Move 2). If this is a successful response, the interviewer gives up on this approach and attempts a new proposition (Move 4). If the response is an unsatisfactory response, the interviewer continues to pursue this approach and counters by reiterating the original proposition (Move 3). The new proposition or reiterated proposition is then met with a further response, the success or unsatisfactoriness of which determines the form of the interviewer's next proposition. This progression continues throughout the interview (See Fig. 1).

### 9. Linguistic Features

#### 9.1. Lexicogrammatical Realizations

The most significant and frequent linguistic features of this genre are the use of negative interrogatives and use of politeness markers by the 'Wouldn't that be...' and 'doesn't that mean...' - to name but a few - are a consistent feature and their purpose is to attempt to put words into the mouth of the interviewee. The structure suggests a particular answer consistent with the interviewer's point and in order to answer as he/she wishes, the interviewee has to break normal conventions of language use either by answering in a way the convention does not suggest or by ignoring the interrogative.

The use of politeness is fascinating. It acts to mitigate the illocutionary force of the question or presupposition and equates with Bakhtin's (1981) notion of the taking up of a neutralistic posture to distance the interviewer from the antagonistic nature of what he/she is suggesting. Throughout the interview, the interviewer will use politeness devices before calling a point into question e.g. 'With respect...'. If the interviewer feels that he/she is being successful, then these devices become more polite e.g. 'with the greatest of respect' as the interviewer does not wish to risk the success of his/her arguments by allowing the interviewee to respond to a lack of courtesy instead of responding to the proposition. This feature would seem to contradict the arguments of Fairclough (1989: 67), who noted in a *New York Times* report that the formality of the interview discourse in the US Senate investigation of the Watergate affair constrained the strength of the possible challenge by forcing the protagonists into a question plus answer format. The conventions of US Senate investigations require the challenge to be presented solely in this rigid format and so senators were often constrained by having to make challenges implicit and indirect in order to fit the obligatory question-answer pattern. However, before making such a judgement it would be prudent to note that a US Senate investigatory interview and antagonistic interview are two different (sub)genres and that there are also cultural differences in play here. Also, perhaps, interviewer style could be one of the variables here. The examples from my mini-corpus would, however, suggest that the formality heightens the strength of the challenge possible.

#### 9.2. Pragmatic Considerations

One interesting consideration with this genre is whether one is analysing a 'real' interview or the edited version. Bell (1991) suggests the main reason for editing is to maximize the news value, through cutting and clarifying and standardizing the language. Interviews are edited

frequently, even though such editing is disguised through techniques such as 'noddies', where the interviewer is recorded nodding or looking sagely off camera and these shots are later edited into the final version of the interview to give the appearance of a live and complete interview. With the underlying two-move foundation of proposition-response in this genre, it is not of overwhelming significance from a discourse analysis point of view if we are viewing part or all of the interview. However, it is extremely significant from a pragmatic point of view, as editing affects the emphasis and ultimately can affect the meaning. Nevertheless, the form of the genre that appears on the screen is that which the model represents, the 'truth' behind the interviewer is for the observer to judge.

As noted earlier, television interviews are implicitly oriented to a mass audience who are explicitly ignored. The interviewee's aim is not solely to convince the interviewer, but, more importantly, to persuade the mass audience and so the response is ultimately addressed to them. This is a powerful technique as it crosses the boundary from one layer of interaction to another in the same way as a soliloquy in a play. This multi-layered idea of an audience as consisting of an 'unknown' audience beyond the 'known' audience of those present leads to expressions such as 'as the people watching at home know only too well' in order to establish a link and acknowledge their existence without overtly addressing them. Inevitably, this multi-layering affects the way a proposition is responded to and the way a proposition may be offered.

### 9.3. Pedagogical Implications

For the pedagogic applications which this analysis seeks to facilitate, I would suggest the choice of interviewee be made from well-known figures, if possible, as this may help to activate students' schematic knowledge and go a little way to redressing the cultural advantage of familiarity that the native viewer is likely to have over the foreign viewer. This need not be a prime consideration in the selection of appropriate material but I feel it is a factor worthy of consideration.

Furthermore, for pedagogic purposes, the notion of duality in audience needs to be made clear. Antagonistic interviews provide an excellent opportunity to exploit situations where participants have different personal goals and each is trying to achieve those goals through persuasion and compromise. The potential for conflict results in interaction that reflects the unpredictability of such conversations. Conflict situations provide students with experience in activities that require a flexible response under social pressure of a type that is often missing from classroom language. Divergent tasks that give students practice in this type of interaction should be a significant part of a course in spoken English (Di Pietro 1987) and the antagonistic interview

provides students with an excellent opportunity to observe L1 speakers performing such tasks in an authentic context and additionally provides valuable experience of the linguistic resources utilized.

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