

# Supporting Your Argument – Persuasion in Radio Public Speaking Panel Discussions

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## **Abstract**

The contribution uses a corpus of BBC Radio 4 Any Questions panel discussions, which were taped and transcribed in 1996 and 2011 and the author looks at strategies used by speakers on the panel to persuade the audience about their value judgements and opinions. The main focus is placed on some sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects of public speaking discourse. Research results have implications for teaching spoken EAP and ESP through videoconferencing.

**Key words:** radio public spoken discourse, persuasion

## **Introduction**

The paper provides an insight into a sample of spoken public speeches that are not prepared in advance, and thus are not scripted. The material is a sound sample of authentic use of language in society.

The corpus was collected from the BBC Radio 4 'Any Questions' panel discussions with the aim to look at different strategies used by speakers on the panel to persuade the audience about their value judgements and opinions.

The observations introduced in this paper are well-founded in interdisciplinary studies – in the research area concerning language, power and ideology. Within the framework of Hallidayan functional grammar (1994), I use insights from discourse analysis, critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis.

## **Corpus description**

I worked with a 50 minutes long BBC Radio 4 'Any Questions' panel discussion, which I originally taped every week in mid 90's, ten years later the programme can be accessed on the internet.

The advantage of the format of this programme is that there is one question answered in turns by all four speakers on the panel (public figures), which makes it easier to compare with regard to the field of discussion and the tenor, i.e. the relationship between participants.

In my research I also looked at the role of questions, which are carefully prepared and asked by a member of the public and the variety of questioning type used in this type of discourse.

## **Basic concepts**

The paper is well-founded in interdisciplinary studies, from the research area concerning language, power and ideology. Within the framework of Hallidayan functional grammar (1994) I use insights given by discourse analysis, critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis. The reason for using such a complex approach towards discourse (pragmatics, interactional sociolinguistics, conversation

analysis and variation analysis) is my attempt to bring a deeper insight into language means used for persuasion by different speakers on the panel.

There is a number of studies that more or less touch on the topic, however, their focus is different. To name a few, there are studies from the borderline of linguistics, theory of communication and psychology, for example Goffman (1969, *'face-to face interaction'*), or Reardon (1981, *social research*). Rhetorics, which deals with the art of persuasion, has enriched linguistics – see for example Jakobson's model of speech acts and their function. The speech act theory, developed by Havránek (1929), a member of the Prague Linguistics Circle, influenced his followers – e.g. Vachek (1976) when describing the differences between spoken and written English. I also worked with observations made by Chafe (1982).

Lakoff (1982) defines persuasive discourse as a non-reciprocal discourse whose primary aim is to persuade listeners or readers to change their behaviour, feelings, intentions or opinions by communicative means (linguistic or non-linguistic, e.g. gestures).

The present paper covers only some linguistic means of communication and shows what language scales are used by different speakers, for example, whether the speaker uses modality and if so, what modality and with what intention. In cases when speakers do not use modality at all, the impact on listeners is studied.

For the description of the theoretical background it is necessary to explain the terms Register, Field, Tenor and Mode, which are currently used in Halliday (1994), Kress and Hodge (1979), Martin (1986) and Fairclough (1988). The theory of modality according to Hallidayan Functional Grammar (1994), in which he distinguishes between modalization and modulation, is also included.

- (1) Modalization (*indicative type*)
  - i. probability ('may be')
  - ii. usuality ('sometimes')

MODALITY TYPE

- i. obligation ('is wanted to')
- (2) Modulation (*imperative type*)
  - ii. Inclination ('wants to')

Figure 1: *Types of modality*. Halliday (1994)

Halliday further distinguishes orientation, i.e. whether the speaker is explicitly included in the activity (explicitness of speaker involvement) and value/strength of modality.

Value of modality refers to the strength or power and Halliday does not present it as a scale but a system of possible choices available to the speaker.

	Probability	Usuality	Obligation	Inclination
High	certain	always	required	determined
Median	probable	usually	supposed	keen
Low	possible	sometimes	allowed	willing

Figure 2: *Three values of modality* (Halliday, 1994:358)

**Field** of discourse refers to what is happening, to the nature of the social action. *A member of the audience asks a carefully prepared question. All four speakers on the panel answer the question in turns, and they do not compete to hold the floor.*

**Tenor** of discourse refers to who is taking part, to the nature of the participants. *Interaction occurs between individuals representing institutions.*

**Mode** of discourse refers to what part the language is playing. *Any questions panel discussion is a public, spoken and institutionalised discourse broadcast on the radio. The programme has its rules concerning a topic and turn-taking management.*

**Field, Tenor and Mode** are matched in texts by the three metafunctions: ideational or experiential, interpersonal and textual.

SITUATION	realised by	TEXT
Feature of the context		Functional component of semantic system
Field of discourse (what is going on)		Experiential meanings (Transitivity, naming, etc.)
Tenor of discourse (who are taking part)		Interpersonal meanings (mood, modality, person, etc.)
Mode of discourse (role assigned to language relations)		Textual meanings (theme, information, cohesive relations)

Figure 3: *Text and Context relation*, Halliday and Hasan (1985:26)

The relation between context and text is represented above as Fig.3 ( Halliday and Hasan, 1985:26). The items in the brackets show the lexico-grammatical systems associated with each metafunction. There is no one-to-one determination between Field and experiential meaning, but Field will influence all meanings, particularly the experiential one. Martin (1986) finds some influences of Tenor problematic. "In male oriented heterosexual pornography for example ... males take on a large number of agentive roles while females do not ... Put technically males are realised as Agent or medium, women as Medium only. This is problematic if we want tenor to affect only interpersonal choices – agency is an experiential system. Given a level of ideology however we might argue that it is the realisation of power in sexist discourse that we are observing here, not simply the realisation of the tenor category status." (Martin 1986:253).

Some authors (Heritage 1985) note that there is a potential conflict between some of these aspects. For example, a chair of the panel, giving additional questions, is not always neutral. The panellists also develop strategies, in which they avoid strong formulations (Heritage 1985) and convey commitment to the truth of their propositions. A desirable image they want to create includes features like knowledgeable, honesty and humaneness. I look at some linguistics features, which are employed for these purposes in an analysis of modality. I believe that modality understood in a broader sense as an open system of linguistic means is used to achieve the above mentioned images. All four speakers on the panel try to persuade

the audience of their certainty, truth and want to show that their opponents are wrong.

Some writers have proposed that language be seen as a semiotic system which realises other semiotic systems, specifically genre, register and ideology. Martin, for example, proposes a set of connotative semiotic levels or planes of which language is the lowest and ideology the highest (Martin 1986: 227). He draws a mutual relationship between concepts Ideology, Genre, Register and Language (see Fig. 4 below). Martin attempts to account for all the features in a text by reference to these levels of meaning. In Martin's model, genre precedes or is superordinate to register. In other words, 'The genre ... is predictive of the combinations of field, mode and tenor choices we find'. (Martin, 1986:248).

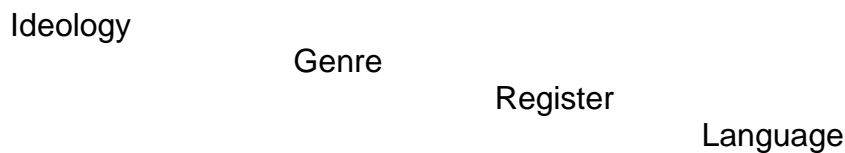


Figure 4: The relation between ideology, genre, register and language (Martin 1986:227)

The relation between language and ideology is dealt with by authors in the area of social theory: Louis Althusser, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas and other, whose findings influenced critical linguistics, pragmatics and critical discourse analysis (Fowler et al. 1979, Gumpres 1982, Faircough 1989, 1995). The main problem in studies of this kind is that there are many theories of power and they can lead to different approaches to language. For example, Fairclough understands discourse in three dimensions in his analytical model which he developed over the course of several years and publications, but in all forms it includes analysis at the level of text, discourse practice and sociocultural practice. Effectively what this means is that the linguistic description of a text is always embedded within the context of the processes of production and consumption involved. The wider sociocultural context, which involves both the role it plays in its immediate environment, and its relation on a larger scale to the cultural context in which it is produced. This not only allows, but almost compels the analyst to consider not only the purely linguistic features of the text, but also the conditions at other levels that may either restrict or enable its production and interpretation in certain ways. This three-dimensional conception of discourse is an attempt to bring together three analytical traditions. " These are the tradition of close textual and linguistic analysis within linguistics, the macrosociological tradition of analysing social practice in relation to social structures, and the interpretivist or microsociological tradition of seeing social practice as something which people actively produce and make sense of on the basis of shared common sense procedures." (Fairclough 1992:72)

## Comments on the corpus examples and results

### Ex. 1 Pre-questioning/hedging as a discourse tactic to avoid a face-threatening act.

*In the light of a report concerning another incident involving a person with a serious mental health problem, how does the panel propose we should deal with these failings of community care of the severely mentally ill?* (Q1,AW)

The role of question

As I observed, questions are not usually straightforward, they are frequently prefaced by a variety of pre-questioning/hedges as a discourse tactic, which from the pragmatic point of view avoid a face-threatening act. From the sociolinguistic point of view, speakers on the panel, on one hand, and the audience, on the other, do not have the same status. As I show, yes/no questions are usually asked by the chair of the panel or by another member of the panel. When a yes/no question is used by an inquirer from the public, it is always hedged and not interpreted as a basic yes/no question. The form of questions is one of the discourse tactics used by the inquirers.

#### The role of answers

Each question is answered by every speaker on the panel and they are given an extended turn by the chair. So, there is no need to compete in holding the floor. The main aim of all the speakers is to persuade the audience about their views. People can get things done with words (Austin 1962). Persuasion refers to affective or cognitive changes of message recipients. Different speakers employ different strategies to influence their audience. To tack this task I decided to carry our research into

- (1) modality and
- (2) transitivity within the Hallidayan framework, also
- (3) representation of social factors (how language relates to social cognition), which is used by sociolinguist.

#### Ad (3)

Speakers on the panel differ from one another in the frequency of occurrence of inclusion and exclusion of social actors, by exhibiting different focus. I also found out they change strategy from question to question. I attempted a question concerning ways in which social actors are represented in my corpus. Which choices do the speakers on the panel prefer when referring to people? How are relevant social actors represented? Are there any differences among speakers as to the perception of relevant social actors?

The analysis of social actors reveals more about the real life role of people than for instance an analysis of the grammatical subject, since the grammatical subject of a clause does not distinguish between, for wxample, Agent and Patient. For example, people is the subject of the quoted clauses below, but people is not the Agent of the processes involved as it refers to 'mentally ill'.

### Ex. 2 Social actors

... people ... are requiring care and community, they [people] require ... not just the roof over their head. (DM1)

The analysis also proves differences among speakers on the panel in the pronominal distribution. The pronominal distribution of one speaker can change depending on the question. It is primarily the speaker's intention to manipulate meaning (see I/we, exclusive and inclusive, which is seen as a sociolinguistic marker in political interaction). The pronominal selection tends to be variable in terms of context and individual choice.

#### Ad (2)

In the transitivity analysis I expected some differences in the presentation of individual participants and processes. The analysis proves that some speakers

create an impression of authenticity and involvement by using mental process verbs and including themselves under we.

**Ex. 3 transitivity and participants – mental process verbs and ‘we’ to create an impression of involvement and authenticity**

Speaker 1 (DM2) ... we do need an independent food agency...

Speaker 3 (CS2.1) ... ministers are busy telling us...

versus

Speaker 4 (BA1) One gets the impression ... showing detachment.

**Ex. 4 mental process verbs showing involvement**

Speaker 1 (DM2) Well, I think there's an agreement all round ...

Speaker 3 (CS2.1) Uhm, the case of Martin Marcel, I fear, is the case that I know all too well ... I can remember

On the other hand, the lowest frequency of references to himself makes the speech of speaker 2 (government minister) rather formal and lacking involvement. The intersection of the two types of analyses is significant and gives deeper insights into how meaning is manipulated.

Ad (1)

For the introduction into the modality within Halliday's framework (1994), see above. The importance of modal features in the grammar of interpersonal exchanges lies in the apparent paradox on which the entire system rests – the fact that we only say we are certain when we are not. The basic questions on projecting clauses (metaphor of modality) investigate first whether factual knowledge is attributed to agents and second, what linguistic means are used to present facts. I have assumed differences in terms of different degrees of subjectivity and certainty. A close look at the choice of report verb confirms that it indicates an attitude of agreement or towards the proposition. Ideology plays its role in deciding whether the speaker's own self, common sense, an authority or no source are the bases upon which a judgement is made.

**Ex. 5 Explicitly objective –not attributed**

Speaker 4 (BA2.4) Well, it may be that the journalists who told us were wrong.

**Ex. 6 Explicitly subjective – attributed to the speaker's own self**

Speaker 1 (DM1) I think there's an agreement all round.

According to Hunston (1993) projecting clause complexes report to what other people have said. Halliday would not include these instances.

**Ex. 7 Attributed to an authority**

Speaker 1 (DM2) Our spokesman, Paul Tyler for a long time now was saying that ...

**Ex. 8 Attributed to common sense**

Speaker 1 (DM2) Everybody else can see that things have gone badly wrong...

... most people in this country have common sense to see that ...

Speaker 3 (CS2.1) ...everyone knew that a report of this seriousness...

Implications of attribution of judgement sources or not attribution at all (a cline, significant non attribution reflects social position of a speaker) have been evaluated. Non-attributed source reflects social position of a speaker, their social status as it is them who hold power. There is also a main difference in the choice of orientation (some speakers use subjective implicit and explicit modalization and modulation – probability and obligation mainly whilst a govern.minister uses both objective and subjective modalization).

I claim that speakers have the choice of focus. Whereas modalization (epistemic modality) concerns mainly knowledge, beliefs and opinions more than facts (Lyons 1977), and includes speakers point of view towards a proposition, it is modulation (deontic modality) which concerns necessity or possibility of acts which are performed out by responsible actors (Lyons 1977:823) that is used in language primarily to influence other people's behaviour.

## Conclucions

1. Speakers try to avoid a direct answer.
2. Speakers intentionally include or exclude themselves as social actors, if they want to influence listeners in a certain way  
(Chafe, 1982; *institutionalised versus individualised language*)
3. Speakers very carefully choose how they refer to social actors and differ in frequency in which they include or exclude real social factors. They show or hide power to influence the scene. (see the frequency and role of pronouns)
4. Presentation of activities and participants of these activities reflect what speakers think about the topic and what they want to stress. The reason for including or excluding activities or participants are central in the grammar analysis.
5. The modality analysis explains the influence on listeners.

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