

Antonio García Gómez 2007: *Habla Conflictiva como Acción Social. Discurso y Cognición*. Oviedo: Septem Ediciones. 151 pp. ISBN 13:978-84-96491-52-6

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Television is a part of our lives and conflict talk is an important part of it. As such it deserves our full attention (cf. Hutchby 1996). Television programmes with a focus on discussion and argumentative and opinionated content consciously use verbal conflict to try to manipulate, change or at least modify aspects of social life that affect us (cf. Carbaugh 1988). The study of controversial discussion has been approached from many different angles, for different purposes and often from a one-sided view. Within the field of linguistics, there are very few works that combine social psychology and discursive analysis (but see Grimshaw 1990; Hutchby 1996; Lorenzo-Dus 2000). In this sense, García Gómez's analysis of conflict talk in talk shows is a worthwhile contribution to both fields; it brings together the principles of social psychology and discourse analysis in an attempt to define this complex phenomenon and explain how it is used by participants in order to establish and construct their own social identity in line with authors such as Carbaugh (1988: 61-86) and Livingstone and Lunt (1994) who deal with those aspects.

The analysis focuses on the pragmatic strategies (with particular emphasis on verbal politeness) that the participants in a discussion use in order to construct, negotiate, manipulate or alter their own reality. From amongst many examples of talk shows, García Gómez has chosen to analyse the television programme *Kilroy*, which was successfully broadcast between 1986 and 2004 on British television (BBC1). In this respect, García Gómez's book can be viewed as following the same methodology seen in the works of, for example, Lorenzo-Dus (2000), who also examines the construction of identity in *Kilroy*, and Thornborrow (1997, 2007), who argues that it is through 'positional' stories that talk shows participants adopt a stance in favour or against a particular argument.

On the whole, García Gómez's specific choice of the television programme *Kilroy* and the framework for the analysis are satisfactory. In *Kilroy*, conflict talk emerges from the confrontation between two groups; the 'wrongdoers' and those who disagree with the wrongdoers' behaviour. In discussing what is right and what is wrong, the participants engage in verbal duels in which each type of participant chooses the strategies that will help him/her save face before the audience. Special attention is paid to politeness strategies and the concept of the *self*. Politeness strategies are classified according to the concepts of inclusion vs. exclusion. That is, speakers will use different strategies according to their objectives, which range from moving from one group to the other and gaining group approval to attacking the actions of a group in particular. As for the concept of the *self*, García Gómez's work highlights its dynamicity and the fact that it may be activated or de-activated during discussion (e.g. participants with

more discourse power usually abandon their *self-individual* and adopt their *self-social* so as to impersonate and transmit what is socially accepted behaviour).

The book starts with the author's definition of conflict talk, followed by a justification of his choice of analytic framework. Departing from the principles of social construction, the author proposes a combination of social psychology, discourse analysis and politeness theory in order to study conflict talk. Chapter 1 starts with some preliminary considerations of conflict talk as social action and then gives a justification of the structure chosen for the analysis in chapter 2. It concludes with an introduction to the three variables that will determine the function or dysfunction of conflict talk (22), namely: contextual factors, personality factors and credibility factors. Chapter 2 characterises the use of conflict talk as one type of social action that extends to three perspectives: psychological, sociological and psycho-sociological. He chooses the last one as the best option that would help characterise conflict talk within the talk show context. One relevant feature of conflict talk, according to García-Gómez, is that it should never be defined in terms of bad or good but in terms of functionality. He thus establishes a continuum, with dysfunctional at one extreme and functional at the other, which represents conflict. Chapter 2 also deals with the principles under which the corpus has been compiled.

In Chapter 3, the author suggests the union of both pragmatic-discursive and psychological dimensions as the most suitable framework for the study of the conflict talk featured in *Kilroy*. In the pragmatic-discursive field, he justifies the decision to draw upon verbal politeness to examine the interpersonal level of conflict talk. However, as the author states, the study would be incomplete without a psychological study, for "the emotional state has a direct influence on strategies of politeness" (42). Thus, García Gómez offers a classification of self-categorisation in order to be able to classify and understand "the variety of ways in which an individual can build his/her identity" (45). Following Turner (1987), García Gómez argues that participants compare themselves with the rest and thus perceive similarities and differences which make them adhere to one or other group. At the same time, group-identity requires a certain type of behaviour, which can be seen to respond to three different variables: a) *ethnocentrism*, or the process through which an individual considers as positive the values represented by his/her group; b) *intergroup favouritism*, or the process by which an individual adopts a type of behaviour which benefits his/her group; c) *intergroup differentiation*, or the process by which an individual adopts a type of behaviour which emphasizes the differences between his/her and the other group.

Chapter 4 gives attention to the process of the construction of social identities within controversial discussions, defending again the fundamental role of discursive psychology and explaining its objectives. These can be summarised as follows. First, the author justifies why the definition of conflict talk is only possible if we unite discourse and cognitive dimensions. Second, he tries to explain the process of social categorization, social comparison and the building of social identity on the part of the participants, while concomitantly taking the concepts of dynamism and speakers' positioning into account. Finally, the relationship between the discursive and psychological levels is established as a type of social action in *Kilroy* (53). The chapter concludes by establishing three variables that are common to participant positioning,

namely: a) the notion of *agency* which is defined according to the level of responsibility that the speaker assumes over the action – as a mere spectator or as the victim or the result of a particular action; b) *responsibility* over the action itself; and c) the *intentionality* present in the action itself. My reservation here is that the list of factors and the framework itself seemingly fail to account for the possibility that strategies may be pre-established, pre-designed and, therefore, that there may be an intent to manipulate the outcome of the discussion, which possibly affects the conflict talk being performed. The author himself acknowledges this implicitly when he points out that: “the acceptance of one role or another as regards the speakers determines their discursive rights” (30). This, in my opinion, is crucial when analysing TV discourse or broadcast talk in general (cf. Scannell 1991). Television conflict talk is used first and foremost as a means to attract audiences (Lorenzo-Dus 2009). Works such as those by Gregori-Signes (2000, 2002) which provide quantitative results on the use of turn-taking in similar programmes, have clearly indicated the relationship between verbal conflict, type of turn (question, comment, challenge etc.) and the role of the speaker (Gregori-Signes 2002) as well as between the category/role adopted in the programme and the type of turns that seem to prevail in their discourse. Therefore, in broadcast talk one should always consider the possibility that these roles may well be explicitly performed and so the discursive strategies may be adopted by the participants. In other words, are the strategies of inclusion and exclusion, used in García Gomez’s analysis and the distribution of power pre-established by the directors of the programme, or do they emerge spontaneously? Is the distribution of strategies pre-established by the talk show itself with the purpose of attracting the audience? An attempt to answer these questions in more detail is what García Gómez’s analysis seems to lack.

However, this is well counterbalanced by García Gomez’s choice to study in detail the politeness strategies used by the different types of participants (i.e. less vs. more powerful participants in the interaction could be differentiated on the basis of the types of discursive strategies that prevail in their discourse). His analysis of politeness strategies, therefore, helps clarify what the position of each participant in the verbal conflict is, as well as his/her power relation vis-à-vis the rest of the participants. Moreover, García Gómez’s use of self-categorisation theory justifies the fact that, throughout the duration of the programme, one participant may choose to change to a category that may or may not agree with their personal category (*self-individual*) in the outside world, thus implying that broadcast talk may not always reflect real life. His decision to raise the concept of the *self* as something dynamic is thus very pertinent (cf. Terry, Hogg and Duck 1999). In this sense, he adds: “I would expect that in different contexts, motivation would vary, and therefore, that it would alter the process of self-categorisation” (45).

The bulk of the analysis is concentrated in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, which focus on the roles adopted by the speakers with lesser (usually the wrongdoers) and greater discursive power; and analyses the inclusion and exclusion strategies used by these two basic speaker types. Notwithstanding the qualitative – as opposed to quantitative – analysis provided in the book, one aspect lacking in the classification of speakers is the basis upon which this classification has been established. It may well be the case that the type of strategies that prevailed among the wrongdoers, for example, coincided as well

with those used by more powerful speakers. Nevertheless, it would have been useful to include qualitative information leading to such a clear-cut division, since the distribution and examples presented in the analysis give the impression that speakers always conform to what is expected from their category. This takes us back to the questions raised above: were the participants asked to follow any pre-arranged rules which limited the strategies they ended up including in their discourse? Were there examples in the corpus in which speakers did not conform to these rules and used unexpected strategies from the analysis? A possible reason hinted at, but not sufficiently explained, by the author is provided on page 109: “speakers who have more discursive rights know that they are in possession of the truth since they are backed by the audience. This will grant them the power to use coercive and persuasive strategies in a try to alter and change the other speaker’s beliefs and social behaviour”.

García Gomez’s analysis links the use of less discursive strategies with the tendency to forget one’s own personal dimension and to perform instead a *self-social* role. Thus, more powerful speakers in his corpus positioned themselves within sanctioned norms (i.e. they performed the *self-normative*) and exercised their power by punishing those who did not comply with such norms (i.e. they performed the *self-disciplinary*). The *self-normative* is characterised (according to the features introduced in chapter 4) by [-] agency, [±] responsibility and [-intentionality], and his/her strategies are oriented to satisfying both the negative and the positive image of one’s interactional opponents. The *self-disciplinary* role, in turn, is characterised as [+] agency, [+] responsibility and [+intentionality]. Performing this role clearly positions the speaker as an active member of society who belongs to a social category that is radically different from that of his opponent (122). Accordingly, the politeness strategies that tend to be used by the *self-disciplinary* are bald-on record strategies against both the positive and negative image of the opponent.

Participants with less discursive power, on the other hand, use strategies of inclusion in order to move socially from one undesirable social group to a better one (e.g. from being unfaithful to one’s wife to being faithful). In order to do so, they often perform *self-redeemed* or *self-altruist* roles. The former shows a higher degree of involvement and identification with the exo-group, or the one he intends to become part of, after repenting. The latter shows a lesser degree of identification with the exo-group and just looks for its approval. The different features for each type can be summarised as follows.

- a) *Self-redeemed* positioning is classified as [+] agency, [+] responsibility, [-intentionality]. Thus the speaker, after having evaluated the characteristics of the exo-group, decides that s/he wants to improve his/her social identity. In this process s/he uses a range of negative and positive politeness strategies in an attempt to gain the acceptance of the exo-group, namely, positive politeness, which tries to please the opponents’ image and find things in common with the exo-group, and negative strategies addressed to avoid any impositions on others.
- b) *Self-altruists* positioning, on the other hand, only looks for approval and is more autonomous. Its characteristics are [±] agency, [±] responsibility and

[±intentionality], thus indicating that there is usually a dual manipulation of all these features which will allow the speaker to distort reality in order to gain approval. The politeness strategies used are those that help him face the attacks to both his negative and positive image, and those oriented to satisfy his own positive image.

Both types of speakers (less and more powerful speaker types in García Gómez' data) make use of strategies of exclusion. The less powerful speakers do so by performing the *self-victim* and *self-antisocial* roles. The *self-victim* is characterised by [-agency], [-] responsibility and [-intentionality]. The use of politeness strategies aims to satisfy the positive image of the opponent. The *self-antisocial* on the other hand, is characterised by [+agency], [-] responsibility and [+intentionality] and performs direct attacks on both the positive and negative image of the opponent. In sum, the analysis in chapters 5, 6 and 7 is rigorous and neatly illustrated with examples and tables that summarise the different positions adopted by the speakers in order to reach their goals. It could have been improved, however, by having recourse to works within the field of critical discourse analysis (for instance, Wodak and Meyer 2001 for a framework of analysis). This would have enriched the evaluation of the strategies and of the participants themselves, showing even more clearly that the relationship holding between power, language and action and therefore ideology or positioning is intrinsically linked when facing a controversial theme.

Finally, in chapter 8 conclusions are laid out which confirm the adequacy of the adopted framework for analysis. In particular, the analysis seems to have confirmed the initial hypothesis that suggests that the self is a “reflexive, social and discursive product” (Giddens 1991; Lorenzo-Dus 2000) and that the analysis of discourse politeness strategies facilitates the understanding of the categorisation and social comparison of different social identities adopted by participants. We should not forget, however, that throughout this process, language develops a fundamental role both in terms of the speakers' roles and in terms of the adoption of the various identities. This would support certain claims made by critical discourse analysts when they argue that “language is not powerful on its own – it gains power by the use powerful people [and less powerful people, we should add, CGS] make of it” (cf. Wodak and Meyer 2001: 10).

In terms of target audience, this book would be recommendable for any university course on sociological, cultural and even discursive aspects in relation to the individual and his/her identity or positioning when discussing a socially controversial issue. The analysis of *Kilroy* programmes by García Gómez, moreover, provides a framework for analysis that can be translated and applied to discourses of a different nature, mainly those in which the role of the author clearly implies the adhesion to one social group or another. At the same time, it facilitates the understanding of the dynamics of conflict talk and other types of broadcast talk. What is more, the book is clearly and reasonably structured, which eases its reading. The reader feels that s/he is all the time being guided step by step and informed of what is under analysis, including quotation and references to each of the sources used or to back up every statement made. One greatly appreciates the organisation of the chapters as well as the meticulous presentation and clarity of the conclusions and introductions in each chapter. Last but not least, the publication of this

type of work in Spanish certainly enriches the field of intercultural pragmatics. Often publications about programmes broadcast in English are published in English. The work presented here, therefore, allows an insight into this type of programme which is not easy to find.

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