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Participation frameworks in the reception situation: the television as ratified speaker

Despite the ubiquity of the television in most societies, the specific forms of talk that accompany watching television have hardly been described. In this paper I will trace the linguistic and other behavior of television viewers. We will see how the role of the television changes, or, more precisely, how the participants create different participation frameworks in their talk with respect to the television.

The ATTAC (Analysing The Television Audiences' Conversations) - Corpus on which the presentation is based consists of video recordings of friends and families watching the men's football World Cup live on television. The television in people's living room has often been assigned a function similar to wallpaper: "unanalysed and unattended background decoration" (Scollon 1998:151). However, in the ATTAC-Corpus, the participants gathered explicitly for the purpose of watching football, and the television holds a central place in their interactions. For this reason, the reception situation is characterized by an 'open state of talk' (Goffman 1981), i.e. the participants do not have to talk, but they can talk.

As far as the role of the television is concerned, different footings or frames are created: for instance in a story-telling frame, the talk by the viewers is not different to that in face-to-face talk-in-interaction in general. It is fully cohesive and there are no links to the media text. However, even during these passages, a number of 'view signs' (Scollon 1998) mark the participants' general attention to the television text. The 'watchers' (Scollon 1998) face the television and not each other signaling in that way that the television is part of their 'contextual configuration' (Goodwin 2000). Also, their gaze behavior differs fundamentally from conversation in general (Goodwin 1980), since the listener is not obliged to search for eye-contact with the speaker in this setting. These 'view signs' are 'embodiments' (Goodwin 2000) of the constant likelihood of a shifting footing to the 'watching football' frame. 'Contextualisation cues' (Gumperz 1982) such as interjections or rise in volume mark these shifts.

Within 'watching football', on the other hand, the viewers' talk is only coherent with reference to the media text which is understood here as encompassing both talk and pictures. A number of cohesive ties link the interpersonal interactions to the media text. For instance, third person pronouns or the definite article can be used both intertextually (by referring to a person already mentioned on TV) or multimodally (by referring to someone visible on the screen). Also, interlocutors may construct coherence interactionally through sequentiality (Schegloff 1990). They backchannel to utterances on television or they construct adjacency pairs together with the commentators, for instance when answering questions put forth on television. Also, the television is granted turn rights so that the viewers leave gaps in their interaction to accommodate the language from the television. In these intense moments, the television is turned into the ratified speaker in the participation framework of the viewers' talk.