

Constructing pseudo-intimacy in an Italo-Australian phone-in radio program[☆]



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Received 9 December 2015; received in revised form 31 May 2016; accepted 31 July 2016

Abstract

Notions such as ‘pseudo-intimacy’ (O’Keeffe, 2006), ‘illusion of acquaintance’ (Liddicoat et al., 1992) and ‘faked familiarity’ (Bazzanella, 1994) have been widely employed to interpret the interactional dynamics between host and callers in radio talk. In this paper I examine how pseudo-intimacy is discursively constructed in the interactions between the host of an Italian phone-in radio program in Australia, and his callers – predominantly elderly dialectophone migrants. Firstly, I explore the semiotic resources employed by both the host and the callers to collaboratively enact solidarity from the very beginning of the interaction. Secondly, I show that in this context pseudo-intimacy can act as a strategy that facilitates repair when linguistic problems arise and the host intervenes to ensure a successful interactional outcome. Thus pseudo-intimacy helps to frame this program as a context where all listeners are able to participate, irrespective of their linguistic abilities, providing a social space for a group whose voice is not often heard in the public domain.
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Keywords: Radio phone-in; Pseudo-intimacy; Bilingualism; Repair; Identity; Italian; Migration

1. Introduction

Within the study of media discourse as a form of institutional interaction, phone-in radio programs have been singled out as displaying talk that, to a greater degree than other programs, presents features of both institutional talk and casual conversation (e.g. Hutchby, 1991; O’Keeffe, 2006). According to O’Keeffe (2006: 90), phone-in programs tend to simulate ordinary conversation in order to contribute to the illusion of a relationship between the host and the audience as well as the callers, thus creating and sustaining what she calls the ‘pseudo-intimacy’ of media interactions.

In this paper I employ this notion of ‘pseudo-intimacy’ in radio talk to interpret the interactional dynamics occurring in a phone-in program broadcast by an Italian-speaking radio operating in Australia, *Rete Italia*. The program is called *Il mercatino delle pulci* (The flea market) and through it the callers advertise general household objects that they wish to sell. It is very popular amongst the old cohort of Italian post-war migrants, who have a limited knowledge of English and therefore rely on the Italian-speaking media as a major source of information and entertainment.

In this program a high degree of pseudo-intimacy is discursively constructed by the host and the callers from the very beginning of their interaction, leading to the successful outcome of the interaction and more broadly contributing to the creation of an ‘in-group’ identity. In the first part of this paper I explore the establishment of pseudo-intimacy through the analysis of the openings of the calls, focusing on the range of semiotic resources that are employed to build solidarity

[☆] I thank the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on the previous version of this paper.
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(Brown and Gilman, 1972) between the host and the callers. As will be shown, both parties resort to elements of casual conversation to construct pseudo-intimacy, overriding the institutional frame of the program. In the second part, I argue that pseudo-intimacy becomes an element that enables the positioning of the host as the linguistic expert who regulates language use without posing a threat to the callers' face (Brown and Levinson, 1987). This, in turn, allows for the accomplishment of repair, especially other repair (Schegloff et al., 1977), by the host, in particular when the callers resort to English or dialect, in line with their everyday domestic practice.

Pseudo-intimacy emerges as a strategy that is enacted by both parties, the host and the caller, for the manifold purpose of clarity of communication for the broader audience and success of the goal of the interaction (i.e., the potential sale of the object), and consequently the good reception of the program more generally. Importantly, pseudo-intimacy helps to frame this phone-in program as a context where all listeners are able to participate, irrespective of their linguistic abilities, thus providing a social space for a group whose voice is not often heard in the public domain. More broadly, this study sheds light on the role played by media in immigrant languages in diasporic contexts, an area that is still largely underresearched in linguistic studies.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study draws on a number of research areas. A first area is media talk, where phone-in programs have been the focus of several studies (e.g., Hutchby, 1991, 1999, 2006; Jautz, 2014; Liddicoat et al., 1992; McCarthy and O'Keeffe, 2003; O'Keeffe, 2006; Zhang, 2005). Specifically, the openings of the calls have been explored as a 'key locus' to observe some initial crucial dynamics that can affect the whole encounter (Hutchby, 1999; Liddicoat et al., 1992). While in some studies openings (and closings) are often the segments displaying more formal registers compared to the rest of the interaction (Jautz, 2014: 19), I explore the modifications of the institutional features in the direction of casual conversation that occur in the openings of my calls.

A second area is studies in bilingualism. With regard to the bilingual practices employed by the callers, following Auer (1984: 7), I view bilingualism "as a displayed feature of participants' everyday linguistic behaviour", to be interpreted within the context of the exchange. In the corpus under investigation here, the use of different languages in conversation occurs mainly at word level, as lexical transfers. Transfer is taken as a well defined unit "which has a predictable end that will also terminate the use of the other languages (i.e. a small unit) and doesn't impact the base language" (Auer, 1988: 203). Code-switching, that is, a renegotiation and change of the base language (Auer, 1984: 24), occurs rarely in this program, due to the implicit language policy of the radio station (see below). I also embrace the language and identity paradigm, whereby identity is viewed as multiple, shifting, and constituted in interaction and through several indexical processes (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998; Bucholtz and Hall, 2005), including language alternation (Cashman and Williams, 2008). The shift in studies of language alternation towards the direction of social identity is particularly important for research dealing with talk in contexts of migration. Yet, this paradigm has only just started to be applied to the ethnic media (e.g., De Fina, 2013).

A third research area is spoken interaction, as my major analytical focus is on a range of features that emerge as prominent in this 'conversationalization' (Fairclough, 1995, in O'Keeffe, 2006: 29) of the interactions, and enact the construction of solidarity between the host and the callers. As will be shown, in the data the callers themselves play a major role in shaping the affiliative nature of these openings. The main resources employed by the participants are markers and devices creating intimacy, in particular, the first plural person 'we', specific forms of address, naming, conversational routines, repetition and discourse markers.

The pronoun 'we', in Italian as in English, is characterised by multifunctionality and flexibility (Mühlhäusler and Harré, 1990: 177). The difficulty of unpacking its plurality has been noted, specifically the relationship between 'I' and the 'non-I' as well as the boundaries of the 'non-I', since 'we' can encode all six pronouns, and different combinations of participants can constitute the 'non-I' (Mühlhäusler and Harré, 1990: 177; Pavlidou, 2014: 4). This is especially relevant to the discourse context of the media, where the distinction between inclusive and exclusive 'we' becomes even more complicated (Dori-Hacohen, 2014), as it can be employed to dynamically construe various 'collectivities' in discourse (Pavlidou, 2014: 5). These can involve the host, the callers, the audience, or the technical team in different combinations. O'Keeffe (2006: 137) talks of "a tacit participation framework range" with regard to the indexical information of 'we' in media interactions.

Forms of address are another important way of positioning participants and "managing interpersonal relationships" (Clyne et al., 2009: 79). In the openings studied here, vocatives and in particular first names are extensively used, that is, elements that are not compulsive but used by choice (Brown and Gilman, 1972: 270), and that mark great familiarity and solidarity (Leech, 1999: 110). In terms of address pronouns, both the callers and the host select the solidarity pronoun *tu* (Brown and Gilman, 1972: 276).

As an essential part of social interaction, conversational routines hold a special place in the language because of their frequent occurrence and their situated use (Coulmas, 1981: 5). Routines are particularly frequent in the 'marginal phases'

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