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Politeness and pseudo-intimacy in a food radio call-in program

Kelsi Matwick*, Keri Matwick

University of Florida, 3606 NW 24th Blvd, Apt 211, Gainesville, FL 32605, United States



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ABSTRACT

Food radio call-in program offers a mediated public forum for home cooks to ask experts culinary questions. Both the expert host and the caller risk face; the expert host must be able to answer the caller to save his reputation and business, and the caller does not want to be seen as an inept home cook. In a case study of an American food radio and podcast, this article proposes that a pseudo-intimacy is created by both the host and callers through interactional and politeness strategies including small talk, expressions of gratitude, humor, and compliments. It is argued that pseudo-intimacy mitigates judgment of the expert host and alleviates the fears of home cooks. Ultimately, the food radio call-in exchange positively frames home cooking, which opens up the conversation and cooking to all listeners.

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1. Introduction

Exploring call-in radio programs has been regarded as an important research area in the study of media discourse, as the display of talk features both institutional and casual talk (Hutchby, 1991; O'Keefe, 2006; Thornborrow, 2001). According to O'Keefe (2006), radio call-in programs tend to simulate ordinary conversation that creates an illusion of a relationship between the host and the caller as well as the audience, thus constructing a "pseudo-intimacy" in media interactions (p. 90). We would add that food radio call-in programs in particular foster this notion of pseudo-intimacy, as the topic of food is familiar and relatable for participants across a range of sociolinguistic variables, such as power, status, and gender.

In this article, we examine the interactional strategies that the host and callers employ to build solidarity, which creates the "illusion of acquaintance" (Liddicoat et al., 1992) and "synthetic personalization" (Fairclough, 2010) or the "simulation of private, face-to-face, person-to-person discourse in public mass-audience discourse – print, radio, television" (p. 65), in the American food call-in radio program, *Christopher Kimball's Milk Street Radio*. The program features a caller-in session where the host and guest cohost invite callers to ask their culinary conundrums. The analysis shows that, in this question-and-answer space, both parties employ a range of discursive resources, including praise, apologies, and storytelling. The resulting pseudo-intimacy preserves the face of the host as the culinary expert and protects the face of the caller as an inept home cook. Asking questions in public is risky but the

high degree of rapport and solidarity allows for the accomplishment of other repair (Schegloff et al., 1977). It is also argued that food radio acts as a form of sociability where the exchange is a vehicle for strengthening loyalty to the hosts and the Milk Street brand.

This article seeks to advance current studies of "popular expertise" (Lewis, 2008). The hosts distance themselves from the traditional image of the "awesome, distant or threatening" expert (Chaney, 2002, p. 109) through the use of everyday language and valorization of ordinariness (Tolson, 2001). Food radio follows the shift in institutional discourse observed by Fairclough (2010) towards "conversationalisation," which "entails greater informality, and interactions have a person-to-person quality...it also entails more democratic interaction, with a greater sharing of control and a reduction of the asymmetries which mark, say conventional doctor-patient interaction" (p. 135), or in this present study, host-caller, expert-ordinary, or chef-home cook. This language shift towards more ordinary speech and increased openness in public discourse has been observed in other media forms (e.g., lifestyle television: Lorenzo-Dus, 2009; news: Tolson, 2006; cooking shows: Matwick and Matwick, 2017a).

Further, this study builds on broadcast talk, specifically radio call-in. Contributing to the rise of "public participation media" (Thornborrow, 2014), radio call-in provides a space of social interaction for 'ordinary' people to participate on the air. Lay and expert voices in public participation shows have been of interest since initial days of broadcasting (e.g., Bell, 1984; Scannell, 1996), but the increased opportunities of engagement between hosts and listeners on public media demand a re-examination of the frameworks of participation and interaction.

Food radio is part of mediated cookery, by which the meaning of cooking is mediated by a new breed of celebrity chefs who act as

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: kelsimatwick@ufl.edu (K. Matwick), kerimatwick@ufl.edu (K. Matwick).

“cultural intermediaries” (Bourdieu, 1984). Research on celebrity chefs cookbooks (e.g., Hollows, 2003a, 2003b; Brownlie and Hewer, 2007; Mitchell, 2010) and television cooking shows (e.g., Ketchum, 2005; Swenson, 2009) is now quite established, but food radio has been overshadowed with the exception of a few studies (Cooke, 2016).

We experience and understand our food, cooking, and eating practices from our interaction not only with those around us but also through the media—from reading recipes in cookbooks, food columns in magazines, and food reviews in newspapers, from watching television cooking shows, from listening to food radio and podcasts, and from using new social media forms, e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Twitter. On this basis, it becomes interesting to investigate the ways different kinds of expertise are constructed.

2. Studies of call-in radio

Radio phone-in conversations occur in a particular institutional framework, where the categories of host and caller are “omni-relevant” (Fitzgerald and Housley, 2002, pp. 583–584) with expectations of each. The host introduces the program, welcomes callers, and manages the talk. Depending on the type of radio program, callers give their opinion on a particular topic, ask for advice, or ask questions, such as food-related ones in this study. Thornborrow (2001) observes that while the role of questioner in other institutional interactions (e.g., courtrooms, medical examinations) has a strong position and controls the general direction and outcome of the talk, this is not the same in radio phone-ins. Instead, the questioner or caller in radio phone-ins is expected to respect the host, the “power holder” (Farr and O’Keeffe, 2002, p. 37) who ultimately ends the conversation (Döpke et al., 1994). Further, the host can choose not to include the conversation in the segment if pre-recorded, as is the case in this study.¹

Distinct to call-in radio is its spontaneous speech where participants interact in real-time (Liddicoat et al., 1994, p. 140). This improvised or “ad hoc” speech (Hutchby, 1996, p. 56) contrasts with traditional news speech, or scripted reporting. Montgomery (2006) makes a distinction between news report and live two-way exchanges: scripted vs unscripted, formal vs informal, unmarked vs marked modality, statements of fact vs statements of possibility, descriptive vs interpretative, institutional voice vs personal voice, then vs now, and here vs there (p. 244). The style of news interviewers’ speech is increasingly more informal with colloquial and idiomatic speech, fillers (‘uh’) and conversational discourse markers (oh, well, so, like, etc.), and the use of a collective ‘we’ that suggests a shared perspective with the general listener (Tolson, 2006, p. 69). While broadcast talk is more direct and personal in address to the viewer, Tolson (2006) cautions that broadcast talk will always remain institutional talk and thus, a type of “performance” (p. 72).

The majority of research on call-in radio follows a qualitative approach, typically grounded in conversation analysis (e.g. Liddicoat et al., 1992) or a combination of interactional frameworks (e.g. Hutchby, 1996; Thornborrow, 2001). These studies have examined particular linguistic features such as interruptions (Hutchby, 1996; Chrambach, 2007), questions (Thornborrow, 2001), openings/closings (Liddicoat et al., 1992; Döpke et al., 1994) and their pragmatic function in the creation of identity (Fitzgerald & Housley, 2002), power (Hutchby, 1996, 2006), and pseudo-intimacy (Rubino, 2016). This study builds on this research with a qualitative approach grounded in interactional sociolinguistics

in the study of the construction of solidarity and pseudo-intimacy through various politeness strategies, including compliments, small talk, humor, and expressions of gratitude.

Politeness strategies have proved to be an effective approach for studying call-in radio programs (e.g., Chrambach, 2007; Jautz, 2014; Rubino, 2016). Following Goffman’s (1967) notion that every individual has a public self-image or “face,” Brown and Levinson (1987) outline a politeness framework that establishes how individuals maintain face, which consists of two aspects: positive face and negative face. Positive face is the desire for an individual to be appreciated by others, such as being thanked for a home cooked meal, and the want for others to share the same interests, such as liking and eating the food. Negative face describes the want to be respected by others, such as being able to be vegetarian, and not to be imposed on by others, to eat meat for example.

Brown and Levinson further assert that there is mutual interest in maintaining each other’s face. Violations of face are known as “face-threatening acts” (FTA) (p. 70). FTAs that threaten negative face include, for example, orders, requests, interruptions, and of particular interest for this study—advice and suggestions. FTAs that threaten positive face are contradictions, insults, and complaints. Their model of politeness has since been revisited many times, with the general consensus that politeness should be understood within its context, both culturally and socially. Discourse analysis has been promoted as a viable approach to politeness theory (e.g., van der Bom and Mills, 2015), and is taken up here with its focus on the range of positions which the participants take within the conversation of the phone-in.

While the purpose and topic of phone-in radio differs per program, similar patterns of interaction occur. For instance, openings in the context of health advisory phone call-in function to create solidarity between caller and adviser (Brown and Crawford, 2009). Metalanguage about impending questions (e.g. “may I just ask you”; “this may seem like a strange question”) acts as relational work by the health adviser. While cooking questions may not have the potential sensitivity as health ones, food radio hosts still tread carefully in asking questions, as cooking is highly personal and can reveal one’s vices as much as virtues. The structure of callers’ contribution in phone-in radio follows an identifiable sequence, particularly in which they express a personal point of view (Liddicoat and Döpke, 1998). Closings can be notoriously lengthy, posing problems for phone-in radio due to time constraint or irrelevancy. When the caller extends the length unacceptably, such as raising new topics, they must accept closing strategies of the host that otherwise would be a breach of politeness (Cameron and Hills, 1990). The host who has ultimate control in the encounter works to protect the listening public from offensive views and their right to be entertained.

The openings and closings of radio call-in are comparable to conversational routines. In these margins of conversation, participants engage in small talk or “phatic communion” not to relay meaningful information so much as to negotiate their respective status and roles (Laver, 1981, p. 80). Through choices of formulaic phrase and address terms, participants move towards greater intimacy or greater distancing. In the case of a radio call-in, Rubino (2016) finds that greetings between the host and callers contribute to increased intimacy or pseudo-intimacy, overriding the institutional frame of the program. Greetings are also considered in this present study as well as partings, small talk, stories, and humor.

Food radio participates as a form of “mediated cookery” along with the now extensive body of work on television cooking shows. The rise of celebrity chefs on screen has resulted in studies examining various language features, including idiosyncrasies, fresh talk, and expressions of emotion in the “performance” of food-talk (Chiaro, 2013). Humorous self-deprecations are found to be used by cooking show hosts to not only entertain and construct

¹ Milk Street Radio arranges a 4-hour block one day each month and schedules 10–15 callers during this period who call in and talk with the two hosts. The calls are then edited into the program.

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