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(Pseudo-)Argumentation in TV-Debates

Summary
Political debates on television constantly deal with a form of language use for which an appropriate and all-embracing genre name is lacking to date. This leads to the question of whether or not these types of dialogue addressed to circles of audiences outside the actual participants would have enough in common to be labeled with the same term, e.g., rituals of public discourse or the like, or if their specific traits would become more blurred than profiled. In other words, the question is not so much the taxonomic power of differentiation, but whether a concept of argumentation analysis is fruitful for a specific segment of public discourse.
The multiple orientation towards different addressees is an important criterion for show conversation (even if not a sufficient condition in itself). Its linguistic analysis in detail has been demanded for some time, for a speaker can carry out various acts of speech and achieve different perlocutionary effects with one and the same utterance. TV-discussions are institutionalized and partially ritualized forms of communication in which a more or less diverse public is addressed in addition to the partner spoken to directly. Accordingly, one participant can use the other to deliver a targeted message to a third party.
Today it is often heard that public debate, with its noble ideal of rational discourse and intelligent argument, has become a mere show, an exchange of blows, a posturing staged in the background with a mediocre touch of fantasy by an inner circle of floor managers. This complaint fails to recognize the fact that this is in no way a phenomenon of the triviality of our times, but has been inherent in the ritual since its inception. Even the dispute of parties at the agora of the polis Athenae or the Roman forum could hardly be ranked as symmetrical and based upon rational argument. It was and remains today a "cooperation between enemies", a form of contra-operation by co-operation. Cicero taught us the rhetorical rules of this teamwork among adversaries, the rhetoric of the verbal rituals in public exchanges between opponents during political disputes. Philostratos the Younger gives us evidence of its popularity already in the early sophist period.
The 'theatre' of political rhetoricians stands at the centre of critical interest for linguists who have investigated their television 'talk shows'. The show conversation is a kind of shadowboxing with rhetorical 'winners' and 'losers'. The specific structure of show conversation is a pseudo-dispute of the adversaries with each other will be illustrated by an empirical analysis of German and Swiss political talk shows.

1. Types of conversation in public communication

"Show conversations" are conversations staged for show, not only talk shows on television, but also dialogues on the theatre stage, fictitious conversations poetically designed but following basic structural rules of communication or violating them in certain ways with specific effects (Hess-Lüttich 2001). Panels, telephone conferences, radio phone-ins, experts appearing before public audiences, political discussions on television, liturgical rituals constantly deal with a form of language use for which an appropriate and all-embracing genre name is lacking to date (Linke 1985: 27).
Such genre references are actually not without their problems. As a rule, they refer to situations, contexts, settings, frames which determine the pragmatics of language use and which allow their subsumption under a particular concept despite their multifaceted forms. Given such heterogeneous forms of dialogue rituals as the ones here under consideration, such zeal to classify may seem somewhat risky. In view of the skepticism which I have repeatedly expressed toward rigorous taxonomies (cf. Hess-Lüttich 1089), a typology of forms of dialogue in public or media communication would hardly seem worth the effort. However, what interests me more is the question of whether or not these types of dialogue addressed to circles of audiences outside the actual participants would have enough in common to be labeled with the same term, *e.g.*, rituals of public discourse or the like, or if their specific traits would become more blurred than profiled. In other words, the question is not so much the taxonomic power of differentiation, but whether the concept is fruitful for a specific segment of discourse analysis.
The constantly changing variation of types of dialogue following a specific rhetoric of ritual and here compiled in this category of "show conversation" requires an adequately flexible concept of discourse which takes into account its historic change, its overlaps with other forms of conversation, its typical structures and specific functions. Recognizing that the complexity of what there is in reality does not fit into the taxonomies available, I developed a proposal to define category screens from which a plurality of typologies would result for classifying all sorts of dialogue, depending on the focus chosen (Hess-Lüttich 1989: 183). If the focus lies on the constellation or relationship of the participants, this leads to a different typology than if it lies on codes or media. For instance, the category of show conversation stresses its frame or setting in a media world, which defines the multiple communicative orientation of speakers and addressees.
This multiple orientation towards different addressees is an important criterion for show conversation (even if not a sufficient condition in itself). Its linguistic analysis in detail has been demanded for some time, "for a speaker can carry out various acts of speech and achieve different perlocutionary effects with one and the same utterance" (Kühn 1983: 248). Kühn is not only thinking of dialogue rituals in public communication within the narrow sense, such as parliamentary debates, interviews, panel discussions, and church services; he also considers text types such as open letters, agreements of mutual assistance, etc. These are institutionalized and partially ritualized

forms of communication in which a more or less diverse public is addressed in addition to the partner spoken to directly. Accordingly, one participant can use the other to deliver a targeted message to a third party (*e.g.* in joint statements by partners in tariff talks commenting on negotiating moves or in diplomatically hedged press statements released as tactical steps during a political dispute).
Kühn illustrates this (ibid. 239 ff.) with the example of parliamentary heckling in which the speaker is attacked while addressing the parliamentary public (party, opposition, journalists present, spectators, guests) and if necessary the political public (media consumers). This naturally applies conversely for the *riposte* which is all the more effective if handled masterfully (more intelligently, more spontaneously, more wittily, more bitingly) in defending against the attack, directing the lash back against the attacker.
Today it is often heard that parliamentary debate, with its noble ideal of rational discourse and intelligent argument, has become a mere show, an exchange of blows, a posturing speech out of the window (Dieckmann 1985: "Fensterrede"), staged in the background with a mediocre touch of fantasy by an inner circle of parliamentary floor managers. This complaint fails to recognize the fact that this is in no way a phenomenon of the triviality of our times, but has been inherent in the ritual since its inception. Even the dispute of parties at the *agora* of the *polis Athenae* or the Roman *forum* could hardly be ranked as symmetrical and based upon, as Kühn (1983: 241) hopes, "cooperative efforts between persuasive partners". It was and remains today a "cooperation between enemies", a form of contra-operation by co-operation, the (aesthetic) structure of which was already presented in the *Nibelungenlied* (cf. Weydt 1980: 95—114). Cicero taught us the rhetorical rules of this teamwork among adversaries, the rhetoric of the verbal rituals in public exchanges between opponents during political disputes. Philostratos the Younger gives us evidence of its popularity already in the early sophist period.
Thus anyone who seeks to describe 'show conversation' from a historical standpoint will not start with television. The genre has a noble tradition in rhetoric as well as theatre. The rhetorical ritualization of political discourse, the theatrical staging of political acts as symbolic action describes politics as "drama which is played simultaneously by and before many spectators from differing social circumstances" (Edelman 1976: 167).
The 'theatre' of political rhetoricians stands at the centre of critical interest for linguists who have investigated their television 'talk shows' (cf. Holly, Kühn & Püschel eds. 1989). The show conversation is a kind of shadowboxing with rhetorical 'winners' and 'losers' (Löffler 1984: 293—313). It is a conversation "with a double meaning" (Löffler 1989: 92—115) in which external dialogue perspectives must be taken into account at all times. It is a 'trialogue' (Dieckmann 1981: 266) in which a speaker moves in relationships with two groups of listeners, both groups completely different in their communicative status, for which contributions are different types of verbal action. Perhaps it is even a 'tetralogue', as Josef Klein (1989: 66) refers to the complex role structure of partners in a talk show. The multiple asymmetric communicative relations between participants, between them and the show host who guides the discussion, between this group and studio guests, between all these and the television audience produces a specific structure of this type of discourse. In its components, this structure corresponds fairly exactly to what I sought to classify for literary dialogue on the theatre stage (Hess-Lüttich 2001 a). Hence a fictitious dialogue? A type of conversation in which the *medium* performs itself as does the poetic *code*? Show conversation is pseudo-conversation, says Settekorn (1989: 12—47), a pseudo-dispute of the adversaries with each other, the adversaries with the journalists, and all together with the 'implied public'. Köpf (1989: 48—63) also stresses this pseudo-character in formulating his hypothesis that there is a discrepancy between the prototype of rational discussion (as described in the rhetoric of argumentation and always present as a model) and the type of discourse actually practiced in these discussions.
The plurality of perspectives — on television as an *institution* (the reason Dieckmann subsumes the topic to that of institutional communication), as a *medium* (both in the sociological and semiotic sense), as a *group* of actors (the research and editing teams, the moderators, the team behind the cameras, the audience and its expectations and ratings) — works as a filter: it breaks down into component parts only for the critics, maybe, or for the media theorists. For the viewing audience identifying with its role in this framework, it blends into the uniperspectivity of staging which dissolves into "communicative comfort" (Löffler 1989: 112).

2. Talk shows

When Kalverkämper (1980: 99—135) took stock for the first time some twenty years ago and sought to make a critical review of relevant literature of which he had taken note at that point, he summed things up succinctly: Given all pronounced distinctions to other established forms of 'presented communication' such as discussions, interviews, portraits, disputes, inquiries, quizzes, etc., "there aren't any 'talk shows' yet as a homogeneous television genre", let alone "scientific analyses of media theory or genre theory" (Kalverkämper 1980: 102). The fall he predicted (id. 1982: 183 f.) for the genre in Germany — at the time only two shows tried hard to maintain their audience ratings on regional TV channels: "III nach 9" in Bremen, "Kölner Treff" on Wdr — did not happen: today it is one of the most successful TV genres ever. Only ten years after Kalverkämper's gloomy predictions, Harald Burger was able to dedicate to the genre a detailed chapter of a book rich in material and examples on conversation in the media of German speaking countries: "Talk as show" (Burger 1991: 168—209). And only another two years later, the journalists Steinbrecher & Weiske (1992) present their summary of some twenty years of Talkshows in Germany.
But even Burger finds himself unable to strictly define the genre in linguistic terms. So he characterizes it descriptively by a number of traits (Burger 1991: 169). The conversation itself is the primary television event with the presentation of the participant(s) at its center. The personality of the guest stands in the foreground, expressing his or her views and attitudes, experience and opinions. Usually the guest is a prominent figure who passes from one talk show to the next. Their appearances are carefully orchestrated by their agents at a handsome fee to pro-

mote their latest book or record album. Increasingly the guests are hosts of other talk shows to which they want to draw the attention of the audience. Or they are members of all kinds of minorities outing their sexual preferences in the lunchtime show in front of an animated circle of studio guests.
The genre-specific mandatory for nonchalance is balanced by the apparent authenticity of the staged show. The chat must be a spectacle. Everyday topics are sensationalized. Every show must be hyped with something new. One may expect the unexpected. That's part of the offering. But not too unexpected, because anyone who violates the rigid rules of the show game endangers the success of a 'good conversation', building on consensus and co-operation as well as mutual image-enhancing work. Hence this has nothing in common with Nietzsche's help in giving birth to a good idea.
The strategy of the discussion leader or moderator aims consequently at allowing the to guest appear in a good light, whether by presenting him or her positively or, better yet, giving the guest the opportunity — though not too directly, as that would be too crude — to represent himself (or herself) positively. This is what Burger (1991: 190—197) calls the 'protection strategy'. Mühlen (1985: 209 ff.) adds the moderator strategies of provocation and disqualification, but they usually result in a less comfortable talk-show atmosphere ("confrontainment"). Here the question arises if the genre limits are reached, or if moderators should be partisan at all in the battle of opinions: "the rules for a talk show are incompatible with those of a political discussion; that is a structural restriction" (Burger 1991: 205).
This restriction, which to some extent still corresponds to current common media practice in Europe, poses no obstacle to Linke (1985), who analyzed numerous talk shows where also subjects of political, informative, and social aspects were discussed. As far as I can see, her book on *Gespräche im Fernsehen* was the first systematic study of structural restrictions in show conversation such as interviews, discussions, and talk shows within the German-language area. Above all she notes the gap between production 'insider' and audience 'outsider' communication circles in the crucial phases of opening and closing the conversation (Linke 1985: 269):
The most important communicative functions which the opening and ending phases fulfill regarding the outsider communication level (and thus the TV public) are: (i) restricting the telecast unit to that of the other program units, (ii) greeting and bidding farewell to the audience, (iii) introducing and justifying the discussion topic at the outset, summing up and evaluating the conversation results at the end, (iv) introducing studio guests and thanking them for their discussion input at the end of the conversation. These functions do not apply at the production "insider" communication level or are taken over there by interaction phases which precede or follow the actual telecast.

3. "Freitagnacht": the Lea Rosh show

All the rules described so far, especially the topical and constellational types of restrictions, are both circumvented and consciously multiplied by one of the early, now 'historical' talk shows in the late 1980s which I, therefore, find appealing to look at more closely.[1] As a hostess for her monthly Berlin talk show "Freitagnacht", Lea Rosh, a prominent journalist (and promoter of a holocaust memorial in Berlin), has never allowed herself to be pinned down to just harmonious entertainment and mere amusement but devotes herself programmatically to the journalistic concept of "clarity through controversy". The concept differed at the time from (almost) all other talk shows in Germany in that it debates a pre-announced topic in a both informative and entertaining way, which later led to the critical notion of 'infotainment'. Today this is a common concept of talk shows in Germany, while other concepts adopted from the USA and usually referred to as 'confrontainment' (especially shows on private stations such as "Explosiv", "Der heiße Stuhl", "Einspruch" etc.) have proven less successful on German TV.
The constellation of insider and outsider communication circles, as Linke (1985: 264) or Burger & Imhasly (1978: 91 ff.) have described them, is much more complicated here: there is an inner circle including the actual discussion adversaries, among whom the topic has been previously agreed upon and carefully prepared by the editorial team. It is as controversial as possible, supported or encircled by several small satellite rounds of invited guests (experts) in the studio audience which are 'activated' at the right time and drawn into the inner circle. The large outer circle is formed by the public in the studio. Individual participants from this row can also offer comments. The fourth communication circle is finally formed by the TV-viewing public which can also take part via telephone. Comments, questions, or objections from this circle are gathered by the editing team and presorted topically for the moderator. She uses them at a suitable moment as an impulse to initiate topics or make insertions, thus managing to guide the flow of conversation and to give it surprising turns.
In practice, neither of these outsider circles play the role obviously foreseen for them in the ideal case. The main responsibility rests on contributions from the inner circle of experts or prominent figures with whom the moderator has spoken intensively in advance and who have met each other in a previous round of discussion just before the telecast. All guests can thus inform themselves in advance on positions of the other participants on the issue in question through materials made available to them in press-kit form.
The primary function of combining information and entertainment or suspense determines the choice of topic. Due to audience ratings the topics vary between politics (for the minority of those interested) and 'modern life' (for the majority of media consumers). 'Infotainment' also determines the choice and order of guests who are intentionally not matched up in harmonious pairings but placed in a more suspenseful arena along lines of topical conflicts. Meanwhile, the concept has been adopted by Swiss TV in a successful weekly political talk show "Arena" (cf. Luginbühl 1999: see section 4 below).
Let us take a closer look at one particular show to illustrate how the concept worked in practice. The central topic of the program analyzed in detail was 'Jealousy'. The main guests invited to discuss it were identified in the transcript as Lea Rosh introduced them in a relaxed manner: Ingrid van Bergen (a then well known actress and murderer out of jealousy), Ernest Bornemann (a then prominent sexual researcher and occasionally unfaithful hus-

band), Anja Meulenbelt (from the Dutch women's movement), Rosa von Praunheim (from the German gay & lesbian movement), Elisabeth Motschmann (a representative from the Catholic Church), Lisa Fritz (for the polyandrogynous variations with husband, friend, and lover), Tirmiziu Diallo (for the view of the 'other': an African cultural anthropologist with 23 siblings from four mothers), and Marina Gambaroff (a social therapist as an expert for psychological aspects).

Space here does not permit reconstructing or even documenting a precise analysis of individual discussion phases (cf. Sonntag 1990: 1—42) or discussing the methodical problems of video and transcript analysis (for collaboration problems between camera crew, screen editing, and turn taking management, cf. Linke 1985: 122, or Holly, Kühn & Püschel 1986: 60). But it allows us to briefly focus on the 'time' factor in regard to allotment of speaking time, who fights for the "right to speak" (and how), to whom the moderator gives the floor (as well as when and for how long), when and why she cuts a speaker short, and how long men speak as compared to women (tables 1, 2). The issue is whether there are objective indicators — in speaking behavior, in organizing the turn taking, etc. — for the audiences' general impression of the Berlin program being more fast-paced, aggressive, and livelier in contrast to contemporary talk shows (e.g., "Ndr-Talkshow" in Germany, "Der Club" in Switzerland, "Club 2" in Austria) and the resolute, strict, and even rigid discussion management by the moderator.

Based on the chosen material (Demuth & Aselmeier 1990: 1—50) and tersely summarized, the answer is yes, Lea Rosh does by far the most talking, speaking the most in total (however, 79 of her 124 comments are less than six seconds). She takes her structural guidance function as discussion leader seriously in an almost dictatorial fashion, permits no digressions, allocates the floor to speakers as well as the topical impulse, defends and encourages, summons and probes deeper, interrupts and stalls, but she supplies no comments on the topic or on herself as a person. If somebody tries to provoke her (as Rosa von Praunheim did), she foils such an attempt with robust charm ("I'm the hostess here!"). Of the guests, Bornemann and Motschmann talked the most as showcased adversaries with strong positions and a tendency to pointed formulations. They goaded and interrupted each other (46 and 42 comments respectively). Battle-hardened, they warded off attempts to interrupt more routinely than Lisa Fitz, for example (just as many comments as Motschmann, but two thirds of them lasting less than six seconds) or Rosa von Praunheim (only half as many comments as Lisa Fitz, but more restrained with unsuccessful barbs: tables 3, 4).

The relationship of initial comments versus interruptions (tables 3, 4) confirms the finding: Lea Rosh clearly is a moderator, not a discussion partner (in 120 cases she takes the initiative, in only 4 cases does she allow herself to be interrupted). Yet the moderator's 78 appeals for comment contrast with 176 unsolicited comments from guests : a clear indication of the liveliness and spontaneity of the discussion. Ms. Motschmann was addressed (and interrupted) the most. Her radically clerical views provoked the most decided opposition. Usually her comments drew immediate retorts from Ernest Bornemann. The two also interrupted each other by far the most: an indication of their repeated heated dispute phases.

The relationship of interjections and back channel behaviour is also interesting (tables 5, 6). While more than three times as many reactions originated from women as from men — surely a sign of women's rapt attention and commitment — interjections from the audience came only from men. Men interrupted women almost four times as frequently (19) as they did other men (5). Women failed in their efforts to interrupt twice as often as men (20:10). Conversely they were interrupted more often by men than vice versa (67:47). Lack of coordination, simultaneous starts, and overlapping could usually be blamed on the moderator: a sign of her impatience or horror of pauses, the pressure placed upon her by fast pace.

Rosh is successful in this sense: each turn lasts only 14 seconds on average. Within a five-minute interval, a change of speaker occurs 21 times as a mean. Of these only an eighth are cooperative. There are almost no pauses in nearly three hours of total programming (naturally, without any commercial breaks either), which Lea Rosh ends abruptly without a harmonizing recap or philosophical conclusion but tough, terse, and without let-up. "Now I want to simply let that stand, because the standpoints don't really need to come any closer together. We simply have to live with the fact that there are differing positions on this topic". A truism, of course, but one needs to close somewhere. This is what the stereotype stands for. There is no time for all the elements of "opening up closings" (Schegloff) so carefully analyzed by conversation analysts. Where the observer in other television conversations is dismissed gently from the communication circle by summary, future outlook, thanks for taking part, and farewell, the corresponding steps and signals are missing here. It is the calculated pressure of the medium on this type of discourse.

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