

INTERPERSONAL MEANING CONSTRUCTION IN THE *OPRAH WINFREY* TALK SHOW

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Abstract

This article explores the variation of interpersonal meanings construction in the *Oprah Winfrey* talk show. It focuses on how Oprah Winfrey, the host of the program, constructs meanings interpersonally in the progress of her conversations. Using systemic functional grammar, a transcript of the Oprah dialogues was analyzed through identification of clause mood structure and speech function. The patterns of mood structures and speech functions, the use of mood elements, like subject, finite, complement, adjuncts and modals were investigated. In analyzing the data, the researchers also explore the use of non verbal communication features by Oprah during her talk. This is used to enrich interpretations towards the data being analyzed.

The results suggest that Oprah uses her time asking questions to her guest/s. Oprah uses various ways of digging more information by especially employing those probing and rhetorical questions. The first one is indicated by *confirming*, *clarifying*, *exploring points* and *exclamation* and the second is done by *gaining agreement*, *cross questioning* and *reviewing questions*. Another finding is the fact that she is also very good at integrating non verbal language features in her talk such as facial expressions and tones in order to make meanings easy to transfer.

Keywords: *interpersonal meaning and functional grammar.*

Introduction

For many EFL teachers, natural English speaking in a form of dialogue seems to be a source of interesting field to study. The complex settings and meanings within the dialogue have been considered as potential learning sources that can enrich teaching and learning materials of EFL classes. This use of natural dialogue in EFL/ESL context has once studied by Mari (2005). According to her, this use of dialogue could be

focused on both content and language. Other benefit is that it makes interaction in the classroom is more dialogic. In all contexts, she further added, it appears to be critical that teachers attend to both intellectual and affective dimensions of learning in order to create a productive classroom community.

Results of the study conducted by Mari above shows that using natural dialogues in a language teaching gives students wider opportunities to learn not only about the language (refers to what Harmer (2007) says) but also the contents within the dialogue which, to some extent, offers students various number of information. This fact could be an ideal practice of teaching and learning English. As Harmer (2007) said, learning English is not simply learning about the language but make use of it for a real life interaction. This implies that information is vital for students in order to actively participate in their real daily interaction.

One very potential place to seek for natural English materials in a form of dialogue is television programs, which provide lots of variation in terms of forms and functions of spoken English. This kind of dialogue could be found in the *Oprah Winfrey Show* program which has been very popular all around the world as a resourceful talk show program (<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/win0bio-1>). Being resourceful could indicate that the program also offers lots of variations of spoken English which surely be very advantageous for EFL teachers and learners.

A research study conducted by Wijayanti (2004) reported that Oprah Winfrey has been very effective in every of her speaking activity. She is able to use language in such a way that leads her interlocutors to give detail answers. By saying *yeah* with a certain gesture or facial expression, for instance, she can attract her guests to share more detail information of the topic discussed. This fact, linguistically, is interesting to study by especially language teachers because using language effectively, as exemplified by Oprah, will give a wider horizon and understanding on how make and maintain a good communication where by roles exchanges keep going (Thomson, 2004).

The phenomenon above seems to be clear for us that Oprah Winfrey has quite been very successful in building various meanings through her choice of expressions and non-verbal language features combination. This kind of language use could be a form of implementation of what Mehrabian (1971) found in his research which reveals that only seven percent of communication comes from spoken words, 38% is from the tone of the voice, and 55% comes from body language. In addition, Ann (2008) says that 95% of a message is conveyed through non-verbal actions. She also adds that non-verbal cues could completely change the meaning that is taken by receivers of the message.

This fact, finally, is also supported by Eggins (2006) who said that an expression or utterance is a context-bound. These share us a light that the use of the expression will be much influenced by the surrounding context of situations including the paralinguistic features used.

The use of both verbal and non-verbal language in such an authentic communication process would be an interesting object to be more investigated through out this research. The researchers, therefore, would focus their attention on investigating the interpersonal meaning construction to negotiate the social identity and relation made by Oprah Winfrey through her talk show program. The existing of this interpersonal meaning refers to what Halliday (1985) believes that there are at least three types of meanings in one strand of text; textual, experiential and interpersonal meanings. Other interesting focus of this study is the fact that Oprah is also one of the best hosts with an excellent use of non-verbal language. She can construct interpersonal meaning variations in such a casual way for different purposes by combining them with various uses of paralinguistic features as part of non-verbal language. Therefore, her use of paralinguistic features in constructing meanings would also be an important analysis unit of the study.

In an EFL context, the researchers believe that studying this language use phenomenon would bring many advantageous effects to the improvement of students' English mastery both oral and written. This study could be a good way of introducing students with numerous facts of variations of using English in a spoken mode. In addition to that, students, in this sense, can explore how meanings are constructed and influenced by different situations for different purposes (Nepomuceno, 2008). Finally, it is also hoped that they have a feel and an idea of the way these resources are used across different contexts.

Systemic Functional Grammar (SFL)

The discussion on Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) has been very popular in recent years. This is driven by the fact that this notion offers a new perspective of seeing language in terms of its function. Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), as many of us know, is part of a broad social semiotic approach to language called systemic linguistics. The term "systemic" itself refers to the view of language as "a network of systems, or interrelated sets of options for making meaning" (Eggins, 2004, Martin et al, 1997). The term "functional" indicates that the approach is concerned with the contextualized, practical uses to which language is put, as opposed to formal grammar, which focuses on compositional semantics, syntax and word classes such as nouns and verbs.

Further, systemic functional grammar is concerned primarily with the choices the grammar makes available to speakers and writers. These choices relate speakers' and writers' intentions to the concrete forms of a language. Traditionally the "choices" are viewed in terms of either the content or the structure of the language used. In SFG, language is analyzed in three different ways (strata): semantics, phonology, and lexicogrammar. SFG presents a view of language in terms of both structure (grammar) and words (lexis). The term "lexicogrammar" describes this combined approach

In addition to that, in systemic functional linguistics approach, language is viewed as a resource for making not only one meaning at a time, but also several strands of meaning simultaneously. The first meaning is called interpersonal meaning that has to do with the speaker's resources for interacting in the dialogue and for expressing his or her opinions and attitudes. The second one is called ideational. This meaning involves grammatical resources for constructing people's theories of experience and how people construct reality in ways that seem natural to them. Finally, the last is textual meaning which has to do with the problem of organizing what we have to say with respect to what we have said and what we are going to say and making what we have said relevant to the context in which we are speaking (Edwards, 2008).

Text, Context and Culture

The use of language in a form of text is an interesting to study. This is mainly caused by the fact that to study this, we need to go beyond the text itself. In other words, we need to see the surrounding context of situation related to things told or written through the text. This is supported by Eggins (2004) who said that to make a sense of a text, it might not only come just from within the textual environment from the extra-textual context. Thus, the context here also employs culture, which is very important in creating meanings through the text.

The word context itself, in functional grammar perspective, is viewed in two different perspectives: from the point of view of the immediate and specific material and social situation in which the text is being used, and from the perspective of the general 'belief and value system', or 'cultural paradigm', or 'ideology' (Miller 2005) in which it functions and with which it is aligned, or not.

According to Edwards (2008), the context of situation includes three components, which are *Field*, *Tenor*, and *Mode*. *Field*, in this sense, concerns with any kind of actions occur and the social nature. In a simple way, it can be called as a topic. *Tenor*, in addition, sees the interactive roles involved in the text creation (who is taking part, his or her status and discourse role), and *Mode* refers to the function of language in the organization of the text.

Non-verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication (body language, paralinguistic) has been a focus of attention for some time in areas such as the refinement of presentation skills, developing social skills, and even as a realistic alternative to the lie-detector test. Relatively little attention, however, has been given in language teaching to non-verbal communication as a complement to spoken language, though recent trends in neuro linguistic programming regarding mirroring and parallel body language have filtered into current research and practice (Atwood, 2007).

In her further explanation, Atwood said that as we communicate with our voices, even when we are not using words, nonverbal speech sounds such as tone, pitch, volume, inflection, rhythm, and rate are important communication elements. When we speak, other people "read" our voices in addition to listening to our words. These nonverbal speech sounds provide subtle but powerful clues into our true feelings and what we really mean. The aspects of spoken communication that do not involve words are commonly called as paralinguistic. It includes factors such as tone of voice, loudness, inflection, and pitch. These may add emphasis or shades of meaning to what people say. The use of tone of voice in creating a meaning of a sentence, for example, will give powerful effect to the listeners. When said in a strong tone of voice, listeners might interpret approval and enthusiasm, but the same words said in hesitant tone of voice might convey disapproval and lack of interest.

In addition to that, nonverbal communication also is bound to culture. In particular, there are differences among cultures and nationalities about the relative value of speech versus silence, the relative value of talk versus action, the social role of small talk or gossip, and the role of animation, rhyme and exaggeration in speech. Because of these differences, the study of verbal and nonverbal communication always must be done within a social or cultural context.

Findings and Discussion

Results of this research reveal that many variations of constructing meanings in a casual conversation as that shown in Oprah Winfrey Talk Show. In constructing those interpersonal meanings, to researchers' analysis, non-verbal language has a very potential role in creating those variations of ways in constructing understandable meanings. The use of eye contact, facial expressions and tone, for example, helps to enrich meanings of expressions used during the progress of the talk. This

phenomenon is interesting for us to study in detail because some implied purposes might be realized through such a choice of talk or conversation.

Analyzing the data collected, it is found that Oprah uses a number of ways in building interpersonal meanings with her guest as the interlocutors. Other interesting fact is that her ability to combine her utterances or questions with certain non-verbal language use like gesture and facial expression. This use of non verbal language seems to be her way in strengthening points she would like to ask, confirming or clarifying to her guest as the information source. Hence, this way of constructing interpersonal meaning seems to be very effective in her attempts to get important information from her guest. In addition, this use of non-verbal language also indicates that she is very attractive in expressing what she has in the mind and at the same time, helps her audiences to actively involve during the progress of the program.

Other general finding shows that Oprah Winfrey is very selective in using words. She is able to explore more details of the issues under discussion (this will be more elaborated in the following part of this section). Further, she is very aware of cultural beliefs and shows her enthusiasm as her attempts to attract more attention from both her guest and audiences. This section will give details findings of the research by exploring the identification of clause mood structure and speech function. The first one will be highlighted in the earlier of this section. The second one would be discussed in the following part of this section.

Mood Structure and Speech Function

Most of utterances used by Oprah are actually questionings interesting facts based on the discussed topics. This is much influenced by her role in the program as the Host whose main job is mediating the audiences and guests as the source of information. What is interesting in her way of questioning is the fact that she makes some of them in a declarative mood structure which is according to Thompson (2004) is an interesting phenomenon in a real language use. This phenomenon shows us that to ask a question, Oprah does not use or stick only on interrogative mood structure. She uses another mood (declarative), with a certain tone, as a way to ask for certain information from her interlocutor. In an EFL context, this fact is interesting for both teachers and students of English especially in using English in a spoken mode. They can have a feel that using language is not that strict in form/structure as they are faced into a casual or non-formal situation. Thus, understanding this, the two sides, could vary their use of English in such wider contexts of situations with multiple purposes. In short, it could be said that teachers and students of EFL should be aware that there are many variations or alternative ways in saying *A* that means *B*.

By knowing this, students are hoped to be more motivated in observing and practicing the real use of English in their oral activities.

In addition to that, the other mood structure used by Oprah is interrogative mood structure. Using this mode, it is found that Oprah uses two types of questionings. Those types of questions are *probing questions* such as confirming, clarifying, and exploring points. By confirming, she uses certain word like "really?" to make sure that what she asks is right. Clarifying is used when she ask whether she is in a right position or at the same understanding with her guest as her interlocutor. Finally, exploring points are use when she manages to explore the case using her existing knowledge or information upon the topic being discussed. The following table highlights some examples of probing questions.

Table 1. Sample of Probing Questions

Probing Questions	Sample of utterance
<i>Extending</i>	<p>You were recently here in New York, and as I understand it, you went to Ground Zero with Mayor Giuliani. <i>What was that like?</i></p> <p>When this first happened on September 11, I think it came as a shock to so many of us that other people in the world hated us so much. <i>Can you help explain that to us?</i></p> <p>What we're trying to do on this show today is to bring about an understanding of what it's like to be Muslim in the world, and what is Islam. I think there's a lot of confusion. You're very westernized, and then we see women wearing the hoods, the <i>burqas</i> and the <i>hijabs</i>. <i>What makes one acceptable and the other not?</i></p> <p><i>Are you accepted in your country not wearing the scarves?</i></p> <p><i>What does the scarf represent?</i></p> <p><i>What is life like for Muslim women in Jordan?</i></p> <p>One of the things that we have been horrified by in the U.S., and I've actually done several shows about here, is an honor killing. I know you have campaigned against honor killings; the Jordanian parliament however, as I</p>

	understand it, has rejected laws that would treat those crimes as seriously as other homicides. <i>Where does that stand now?</i>
<i>Clarifying</i>	<p>I've heard you say that as we attempt to fight this war against terrorism, whether it is militarily, diplomatically, through other resources, which this is an opportunity for the United States to perhaps reach out to other disenfranchised countries. <i>Is that true?</i></p> <p>So you as an individual choose whether or not you want to be robed or not robed, or wear your head covered or not? <i>That's not imposed upon you by your religion?</i></p> <p><i>Are you a practicing Muslim?</i></p> <p>I think we all have a misinterpretation that the women wearing the robes are dominated by men, that the women don't have a voice of their own. <i>Is any part of that true?</i></p> <p><i>So anything that we see that doesn't represent what you're saying is a distortion of Islam, correct?</i></p>
<i>Evaluating</i>	Newsweek magazine reported that there are some Muslim fundamentalists that see you as a threat. They've said, 'She is attacking our ancient values, tearing at our social fabrics as a member of our moderate Muslim brotherhood.' <i>How do you respond to that?</i>
<i>Emotional</i>	<i>Do you feel that you represent a large portion of the Arab world in terms of women being progressive, forward-looking, being smart, and thinking for themselves?</i>

The table above suggests that each type of question has a special characteristic and purpose. In her utterance like "You were recently here in New York, and as I understand it, you went to Ground Zero with Mayor Giuliani. *What was that like?* Oprah extends her question by exploring her knowledge on her guest' experience. This is done, probably, in order that the guest could have a feel and give more information, which is important for her audiences. Doing this, Oprah enriches her way of asking by showing sympathetic facial expressions to show that she really feels what the guest once felt.

In the second type of questioning, Oprah uses her existing knowledge on the topic and confirms this to the speaker. This is meant to evaluate her understanding and at the same time ask for the right information. Other interesting way of asking question is by using emotional question. In the last sample *“Do you feel that you represent a large portion of the Arab world in terms of women being progressive, forward-looking, being smart, and thinking for themselves?”* In this kind of question, Oprah tries to uncover what she and her guest probably feels on something, a case or a phenomenon attracts people attention.

Other types of questions are called as rhetorical questions, which are not really questions, but statements given in questions format. The intent of these questions is to engage the guests in thinking and consider what answer they would give if they could. The questions are indicated by gaining agreement, cross-questioning, reviewing questions and multiple questions. The first one is used when she invites agreement like saying *“isn’t it?”* The second one is indicated why she asks back questions from her interlocutor. Review questions, then, are used when she repeats what her guest has said previously and multiple questions are used when questions are given where the questions are not expected them to be answered. The following tables highlight some examples of each type of question.

Table 2. Sample of Rhetorical Questions

Rhetorical Questions	Sample of utterance
<i>Gaining agreement</i>	So anything that we see that doesn't represent what you're saying is a distortion of Islam, correct? Right? Right?
<i>Cross questioning</i>	And why is that? Because?
<i>Reviewing questions</i>	So you as an individual choose whether or not you want to be robed or not robed, or wear your head covered or not? That's not imposed upon you by your religion?
<i>Multiple Questions</i>	What makes one acceptable and the other not? Are you accepted in your country not wearing the scarves? What does the scarf represent?

Subject

Most of subjects used in Oprah utterances is pronoun *I* and *You*. This use of subjects shows that there is an interactive relationship between a speaker to another. In other words, Oprah and her guest have

successfully built a warm relationship by using such an interchange. In addition, Oprah uses the pronoun *I* to state her personal point of view about the topic being discussed, for example in *as I understand it*. The use of *I*, in this sense, is to show her background knowledge of the issue that does not refer to all audience as a whole. Other subject used is *We*. As it is known, this is used as a collective pronoun, which refers to Oprah and her guest and, probably, all her audiences. This use of pronoun indicates that Oprah manages to involve all existing participants in the program. Besides, the use of this pronoun will also take a role as a representative of audiences' perspective. Different from *as I understand it*, in the expression of *you're very westernized, and then we see women wearing the hoods ...*, the pronoun *we* is used to show that most of people, including the audience, share the same general opinion of the issue. It will represent that the existing information is generally believed by general people, and the use of *we* is also showing how the guest (*you*) is demanding to share the information to all people (*we*), not only to the host (*I*). Due to different culture of the issue being discussed, the use of *you* and *we* will show how different culture is shared in the session. In the conversation, *you* (the guest), which is from Jordan and a Moslem, have different culture with the host and the audiences (*we*), which are Americans. This indicates that there is the opposition between *you* (the guest) and *we* (the host and the audience) regarding culture. Dealing with this kind of matter, in the context of EFL teaching and learning process, teachers and students of English, can use this kind of pronoun to mean more than the word *I* and *We* themselves. More than it, they can use those two kinds of pronoun for various purposes in their conversation activities. This could imply that cultural beliefs and rules are subject influencing the use of these two pronoun. It is therefore important for both teachers and students to really aware that pronouns could represent culture.

Finally, it could probably be inferred that knowledge on pronoun does not simply know what they replace (*I* to replace first person singular and *we* to replace first person plural) but also know their other functions with certain cultural implications that will influence our way of using it.

Tense finites

The participants in this conversation use present tense finites. This probably happens because the topics discussed are in a present mode. Using this tense, the speakers focus on present circumstances, events, feelings and thoughts. Other tense used is past tense. This might be a way to show a relationship between what has already happened and what has it influenced to the recent events. In another case, the use of past form is also used to indicate an informal context for example, *you*

were recently here in New York, and as I understand it, you went to Ground Zero with Mayor Giuliani. What was that like?. This example is used by Oprah to open the program. She wanted to call for attention from her audience. Using *were* in the example, she might want her audience to refer back to what they experienced in the past and bring it to the present discussion in the talk show. The implication of this is that teachers and students of English can learn that opening a conversation could be done in a “past tense” when they want to share their past experience. This means that opening a conversation is not strictly that static by, for example, greeting and asking present condition, rather, they can also directly invite others to think of what is going to be discussed by using certain clue (as *were and was*, in the example above).

Other interesting phenomenon on the use of tense is the fact that speakers, as Oprah has shown, could decide on whether or not they want to elaborate the case. When they do more elaboration, there is tendency of using a past form as a reference for what happens in the present in time as shown in this example *When this first happened on September 11, I think it came as a shock to so many of us that other people in the world hated us so much*. The given example also shows that a casual conversation make use of more than one tense finites depending on what they are discussing. They can refer to what has happened in the past and bring it to what is happening at the time of speaking to show a link between them. This means, to some extent, that past and present are related to each other.

Pedagogical Implication on EFL Classes

The study on interpersonal meaning could be one alternative way to help students of EFL understand more the nature of English as a foreign language especially its use in a casual form of conversation. Exploring these meanings, in terms of function will give students a feel and an idea of the way these meanings are constructed across different context of situations in which culture is significantly influencing them. This way, students are more apt to build a practical repertoire of workable language resources for making interpersonal meanings. This kind of activity as suggested by Nepomuceno (2008), also, can build a rich repertoire of text elements when students are introduced to the structural patterns of different genres.

Other implication is their cross-cultural awareness. Students can learn how Americans as represented by Oprah Winfrey, for example, use English in their casual or formal conversation activities. They can also learn the social rules, which somehow control the use of the language itself by observing how Oprah selects words or expressions in her questioning activities. Bearing this fact, it is therefore suggested that

students of EFL expand their knowledge not only on the grammar of English but also the social rules (culture) of using the language. Observing real use of English like those shown in Oprah Winfrey Talk Show could be a place for their improvement.

Closing

This research has shown that interpersonal meanings could be created in such a complex way. This is usually indicated by the involvement of contexts and other supporting elements surrounding the meaning creation process. In other words, the interpersonal meanings are not subjects to be isolated.

In Oprah Winfrey case, an interesting fact has been revealed. Her ability in integrating words and non-verbal language has made her successful enough in conversing and gaining more information from her guests as source of information. This way could also be part of her effort to control her audiences' attention. Dealing with her guest, interpersonal meanings seems to be built through those creative combinations between words and non-verbal language. Using pronoun *WE*, for example, Oprah manages to represent herself and others. This proves to us that the choice of words is one of the main factors in maintaining a good interchange in a conversation activity. Finally, the choice of mood and tense are also important part, which brings the dialogue into a dynamic interchange during the progress of the dialogue itself.

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