THE TABLOID TALKSHOW AS A QUASI-CONVERSATIONAL TYPE OF FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTION

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Abstract

Media discourse, and in particular programmes such as talkshows, are certainly practices that have extended, enriched, and often taken to the limits, conversation as a speech event. The number of possibilities arising from conversational practice have certainly found a new dimension in the context of the mass media, and on TV in particular (cf. Vande Berg et al. 1991 and 1998). In this article I describe tabloid talkshows as one type of speech event. I focus on the description of the turn-taking organisation in tabloid talkshows by comparing their characteristics to those outlined by Sacks *et al.* (1974) for conversation. In order to carry out such comparison, I first propose a review and, consequently, a reform of the 14 features listed by Sacks *et al.* in their article 'A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking in conversation'. The results show that there are differences between both types of interaction.

Keywords: Media, Talk show, Conversation, Turn taking

1. Introduction

Conversation is a complex phenomenon and so are the practical applications arising from it. Media discourse, and in particular programmes such as talkshows, are certainly practices that have extended, enriched, and often taken to the limits, conversation as a speech event. The number of possibilities arising from conversational practice have clearly found a new dimension in the context of the mass media, and on TV in particular (cf. Vande Berg et al. 1991 and 1998; Charaudeau 1997). In this article, I try to characterise the tabloid talkshow as a speech event. The question I pose is, "What features make tabloid talkshows a unique form of interaction, distinct from any other face-to-face discourse type? Gallardo (1996: 49) argues that one can describe conversation "mediante el recurso a rasgos sociolinguistics, todos ellos sensibles al contexto," therefore concentrating on features which depend on the context. From a pragmatic perspective, that is "cuando tratamos de esbozar una caracterización pragmática del *funcionamiento interno conversacional*, la bibliografía se centra en las características de la toma de turno" i.e. 'in describing conversation one can focus on sociolinguistic features, all of them context sensitive […] when we do a pragmatic characterisation of the internal functioning of conversation, the bibliography focuses on the characteristics of turn-taking'. It is the internal functioning of the interaction that I am interested in; my description focuses therefore on turn-taking features in order to characterise the Tabloid Talkshow.

As many previous papers in the tradition of conversation analysis (henceforth CA) have done, I use comparative analysis (Drew and Heritage 1992) in order to determine the characteristics of tabloid talkshows. To the ethnomethodologists and to conversation analysts, ordinary conversation occupies a central position among the speech exchange systems. In the tradition of CA, a lot of work is inspired in the fact that conversation is one predominant medium of interaction in the social world against which other kinds of interaction are recognised and experienced (Drew and Heritage 1992: 19), and offers a comparative framework against which other speech events may be characterised. Such comparison is carried out here by comparing systematically those characteristics attributed to ordinary conversation by Sacks *et al.* (1974) to turn-taking features in American tabloid talkshows. I am aware that the formalistic model introduced by Sacks *et al.* has received much criticism (e.g. Edmondson 1981; O'Connell et al 1990; Power and Martello 1986), however, I believe it to be an insightful description of conversation and a framework which may help to characterise other types of interaction.

2. Tabloid talkshow

Tabloid talkshows have been a familiar television genre since the 1960s. The label tabloid talkshows (Fischoff 1995) is applied to *daytime talkshows* such as those hosted by *Montel Williams*, *Gordon Elliott, Donahue, Tempestt, Geraldo, Jenny Jones, Ricki Lake, Leeza, Oprah Winfrey, Maury Povich, Sally, Richard Bey* and *Mark Grauberg,* among others. As Livingstone and Lunt (1994: 38) argue, no accepted term for this now-familiar genre has emerged. They refer to such programmes as audience discussion programmes. On the other hand, Carbaugh (1988: 2) differentiates between personality-centred and more issued-centred shows. It is the second type that I refer to as tabloid talkshows, since their guests are mainly ordinary citizens (Livingstone and Lunt 1994; Hutchby 1996). The tabloid talkshow is a cheap daytime television genre which proceeds more through audience discussion and commentary than through an interview with a personality (Carbaugh 1988: 2). Tabloid talkshows deal with sensationalist, personal, intimate, involving and contentious private and highly controversial topics, often classified as 'women issues' (Munson 1993; Livingstone and Lunt 1994).

3. Corpus

The present article is one result of a larger study on talkshows carried out in Gregori 1998. The corpus of data studied is based on the video-tape recording and transcription of tabloid talkshows from US television. The programmes were randomly recorded during February-June 1995 and August 1996. The data analysed included a reference corpus with a list of more than forty tabloid talkshows. This reference corpus was employed on ad hoc basis for exploratory purposes and to verify the generality of particular phenomena. Out of those, twelve opening phases (see appendix) were subjected to statistical analysis (cf. Gregori 2000 for a description of the most relevant results). Of the four categories that are usually part of the interaction (host, guests, audience and expert), the expert is excluded since there

aren't any experts in the opening phases analysed[1]. The excerpts were carefully transcribed, paying attention to interruptions, overlaps, stuttering, repetitions, etc. The final transcription was presented in such a way that it would facilitate the comprehension of the reader (cf. Cook 1990; Stubbs 1983: 212) and did not include more details than those required (Stubbs 1979/1983; Stainton 1983) for the analysis. Transcription conventions are included in the Appendix

4. Pragmatic characterisation of tabloid talkshows

I shall assume that readers are familiar with the article by Sacks *et al.* (1974) and merely outline the 14 features which Sacks *et al.* observe to occur in any conversation, and which are used in this article as the key pragmatic features that allow the characterisation of conversation as a speech event. It is by inclusion or exclusion of such features and their distribution that tabloid talkshows may be defined.

1. Speaker change recurs or, at least, occurs.
2. Overwhelmingly, one party talks at a time.
3. Occurrences of more than one speaker are common, but brief.
4. Transitions from one turn to a next with no gap and no overlap between them are common. Together with transitions characterised by slight gap or slight overlap, they make up the vast majority of transitions.
5. Turn order is not fixed, but varies.
6. Turn size is not fixed, but varies.
7. Length of conversation is not fixed, specified in advance.
8. What parties say is not fixed, specified in advance.
9. Relative distribution of turns is not fixed, specified in advance.
10. Number of parties can change.
11. Talk can be continuous or discontinuous.
12. Turn allocation techniques are obviously used.
13. Various "turn-constructional units" are employed.
14. Repair mechanisms for dealing with turn-taking errors and violations obviously are available for use.

As stated by Gallardo (1996: 50), in relation to the 14 conversational features in Sacks et al (1974), "varios de estos rasgos aparecen en otros acontecimientos, pero sólo cuando aparecen los catorce nos encontramos ante una conversación " i.e. 'most of these features may also be present in other speech events, but it is only when the fourteen co-occur in the same event that we are facing a conversation'. Hence, a systematic comparison of tabloid talkshows with the set of characteristics enumerated by Sacks *et al.* will show that they share some features with ordinary conversation, but not all those attributed to it.

The characteristics listed by Sacks *et al.* for conversation are not only a definition for ordinary conversation itself, but they are also a reference point that allows implicit and explicit comparisons with other discourse types. My purpose here is to carry out an implicit

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[1] See Gregori (in press), for a description of the figure of the expert.

comparison (cf. Drew and Heritage 1992) between tabloid talkshows and ordinary conversation using the list of features provided by Sacks *et al.* (1974). However, I find it is necessary to re-organise those characteristics and unite some of them under more general headings, since commenting on each of them individually may lead to redundancy. Hence, I will first proceed to group those features which I see as referring to similar aspects of the interaction. Features 1, 2, 3, 4 are all related to *how speaker change occurs*. Features 5, 9 are related to *whether the order of speakers is variable* . Features 6 and 13 are related to *size or duration of turns (fixed or variable)*. Features 7 and 11 can be related to *the length of conversation*, whether it is fixed or specified in advance. Features 12, 14 refer to *turn-allocation* techniques and *turn-taking repair* mechanisms employed in the system. The rest stay as they are. The result of this reorganisation is a list of seven questions whose answers may help define different types of discourse:

1. Is the number of parties fixed or variable?
2. How does speaker change occur?
3. Is length of the encounter fixed or variable?
4. Is turn order fixed or variable?
5. Is duration of turns fixed or variable?
6. Is the content of turns fixed or specified in advance?
7. What allocation techniques are employed in the system?

It is therefore by answering these questions and by comparing them to conversational features and, by extension, to other types of discourse that we may discover the real nature of the interaction in tabloid talkshows.

5. The turn-taking system for tabloid talkshows

5.1. *Is the number of parties fixed or variable?*

Tabloid talkshows can take a different number of parties and, similar to conversation, "in being compatible with differing numbers of participants, it is compatible with varying numbers of participants within any single conversation, since there are mechanisms for entry of new participants and exit for current participants" (Sacks *et al.* 1974: 22).

Different examples of tabloid talkshows vary in the number of participants, but this is by no means due to randomness. We may say that primary and secondary participants (cf. Gregori 1998) are pre-determined beforehand. That is, for a particular show the number of guests and experts and the number of seats for the studio audience is decided prior to the interaction itself. However, the number of people from the studio audience who make contributions - although it may be partially determined (i.e. we know that there are planted members who are paid to contribute to the interaction) - is not totally pre-specified. Contributions from the studio audience are usually spontaneous, bar a few exceptions: "Some studio members appear on the programmes not intending to speak" (Livingstone and Lunt 1994: 164) although in the end, they do so. Whatever the final number of participants, the most relevant factor here is that tabloid talkshows are examples of multiparty conversations, and that before the interaction, there is a pre-specified number

of potential participants, as opposed to the freedom observed in unplanned types of interaction. In the excerpts analysed, there were seven male hosts, five female hosts, twenty-seven female guests, twelve male guests and the participation of the audience all came from females, with a total of seventeen members of the audience which took part in the interaction. To give but an example, in the extract from Maury Povich   *How hard married life can be* there were two participants while in Donahue *The problem of being an effeminate man or a masculine woman,* there were six.

5.2. *How does speaker change occur?*

The dialogic nature of tabloid talkshows is proved by the fact that speaker change recurs, since the question-answer process that predominates in the interaction implies a constant change of speaker. There are four categories (audience, expert, guests, and host) who are expected to participate in the interaction, and it is a must that speaker change recurs in tabloid talkshows. The frequency with which speaker change occurs varies and so some examples are carried out at a faster pace than others. That is, in a period of time that ranges between 5-10 minutes, each extract shows a different number of turns, as is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of turns

Extract	Number of turns
1	96
2	204
3	68
4	121
5	93
6	50
7	218
8	114
9	242
10	110
11	173
12	152

Notwithstanding, speaker change does not necessarily occur always at possible transition relevant places, as seems to be the tendency observed for conversation by Sacks *et al.* (1974), but often depends on agenda-setting and on the host's decision. The flexible nature of the tabloid talkshow, however, always allows changes and alternation between free speaker change and *host-guided* speaker change. As illustrated by the two following examples:

(1)   R   Hi there. Unfortunately many people have gotten behind the wheel of a car after having a few drinks. And afterwards they HOPEfully thought about how stupid it was, and never did it again. What if you had a friend or a relative who repeatedly got into their car and drove after drinking. In fact their attitude is I drink, so what, what's the big deal. Meet Valery. Valery says her sister Paddy, Patsy, I'm sorry, has been drinking and driving ever

since she can remember. **Tell me about it Valery**

(Ricki Lake. 1996. *I drink and drive. So What!*)

(2)   H   So how can you possibly be capable of driving an automobile if you don't remember? You have blackouts!
[*Patsy keeps quiet. The expression on her face showing that she has no intention to answer Her sister takes the floor instead.*

G   **Ricki, let me tell you**. We were driving home one day from a bar, and I was drunk, and I admitted it, and I said to Patsy, I said Pat, I am NOT driving. I pulled over on the highway. She got out of the car, pushed me over to the driver— to the passenger's side and took off driving. I was seeing double and she was drunker than I was.

(Ricki Lake. 1996. *I drink and drive. So What!*)

In example 1 it is the host who gives the turn to the guest. In example 2, however, the guest herself self-selects for the next turn.

Sacks *et al*. (1974) argue that in conversation, the sequential ordering of participation is free. Each participant has equal rights to take turns and there is only one limit to this turn-taking which comes from one of the basic rules in conversation, that is "one party at a time" (Schegloff 1968), a feature also supported by the description provided by Duncan and Fiske (1974). Both models prioritise one general principle underlying any analysis of spoken genres: They argue that in the course of interaction, participants will try to preserve the widely accepted principle of one person talking at a time. As has often been argued, simultaneous talk would not permit communication; it would be problematic in that it would not allow communication due to inaudibility.

In her paper, Edelsky (1981: 137) reacts against those works (Duncan 1973; Goffman 1967; McHoul 1978) which claim that more-than-one-at-a-time talk is "degenerate, a breakdown or something requiring repair." In defending this position, Edelsky reports the results of works such as those by Spelke, Hirst and Neisser (1976) and Reisman (1974), which show that simultaneous talk is frequent, expected and processed in certain contexts and speech communities. Edelsky concludes that one-at-a-time is not a universal, and that instances of more-than-one-at-a-time are not always brief, repaired, or degenerate. Along the same lines, Denny (1985: 46) claims that "overlapping exchange, a pragmatically unmarked index when occurring among friends, is pragmatically marked on a formal occasion and can have the effect of making formal more informal." The perception of simultaneous talk as rude is therefore situation-dependent. Many other studies have also expressed the view that occurrences of more than one speaker at a time are frequently encountered in conversation (cf. O'Connell *et al.* 1990; Oreström 1983; Power and Martello 1986; Stainton 1987).

In tabloid talkshows a lot of simultaneous talk is frequently encountered. There are several types of more than one speaker at a time: E.g. host and guest overlap, audience-reactions (side-comments, etc.) overlap with discourse by guests, hosts, expert, etc. and then there are *confrontational sequences* (cf. Gregori 2000) in which simultaneous talk is withheld over several turns. Let us illustrate this with an example :

(3)   T   That was part of the
[problem, communication.] They didn't have it.
D   [You never came to me.

K	[You were always arguing.
D	You didn't live there!
	[You don't know Theresa.
T	[No. But I cared about you guys Dori.
D	Oh [I'm sure.
T	[I cared about you.
D	Yeah. Right.
T	Believe what you want to.
	[Believe what you want to.
D	[And this is how (XXX)
T	[It don't matter.
D	[(XXX)—men. And you cared about my daughter too.
T	Believe [what you want to.
J	[Do— do your neighbours] know what was going on?

(Jenny Jones. 1996. *Confronting Unfaithful Spouses*.)

It may be observed that the interaction in tabloid talkshows often occurs in ordered sequences of question-answer (cf. Ilie 1999) and that one-at-a-time is, for the most part, respected, but not always. The percentages show that 32.7% of the turns are questions, 31.1% are answers and 36.2% are comments. Additionally, the presence of *confrontational sequences* which can be defined as segments characterised by long overlapping and simultaneous talk cause disruption of order, chaos and verbal fights with continuous overlaps, interruptions etc. Confrontational sequences may be seen as the norm, and as a generic feature of tabloid talkshows, an almost obligatory element which serves to differentiate them from other more formal types of interviews or talkshows, where an excessive number of confrontational sequences may not be adequate for the programme itself. In the words of Power and Martello (1986), tabloid talkshows better fit the definition of a *counter-example*, since the confrontational nature of the genre itself normalises what in other cases may be considered as deviant:

> […] if persistent deviants are inferred to be incompetent or anti-social, then we have grounds for thinking that the postulated rules are indeed a convention for our society. A counter-example would have to be a case in which a deviation from the rules failed to provoke such reactions, either in the participants, or (if the incident was recorded) in subsequent observers.
>
> (Power and Martello 1986: 31)

In a medium such as television the existence of a genre depends on the listener/audience in order to be successful. Hence, one may initially assume that the one-at-a-time principle should prevail in tabloid talkshows since it facilitates the task of the listener. However, the concept of "successful communication" has to be interpreted differently in such a context.

O'Connell *et al.* (1990: 346) claim "that the ultimate criterion for the success of conversation is not smooth interchange of speaking turns but the fulfilment of the purposes entertained by two or more interlocutors." The purpose of tabloid talkshows is to show confrontation and deviant cases, stories and behaviours on American national television. Overlaps and simultaneous talk are expected to occur, due to the confrontational nature of the exchange. Moreover, although it may impede the listeners' understanding, this "deviant behaviour" is one of the essential features of tabloid talkshows. Confrontational sequences and verbal fights are claimed to be a feature that contributes positively to gaining audience

and is, therefore, fostered by the producers themselves. Consequently, the observers will not judge this continuous rule-breaking as incompetent or anti-social but as an inherent characteristic of the tabloid talkshow genre itself.

The existence of confrontational sequences brings tabloid talkshows somewhat closer to conversation, if interruptions and simultaneous talk can be taken as markers of social distance between the participants (cf. Stainton 1987). Additionally, audience feedback (i.e., reactions, laughter, etc.), which is almost continuously heard as a background, turns the interaction into a continuous *multi-voice dialogue* (cf. Bakhtin, in Todorov 1995: 74) with more-than-one-at-a-time being the unmarked for tabloid talkshows. I agree with Edelsky in that *more-than-one-at-a-time* is not a deviation of the norm, or right and wrong, but a situation-dependent generic feature (cf. Edelsky 1981). The recurrence of simultaneous talk in tabloid talkshows can be said to be a characteristic that shows the indeterminacy of the tabloid talkshow genre itself, as it oscillates continually between the more formal and the more conversational style.

Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) affirm that, in conversations, transitions from one turn to another usually occur with no gaps and no overlap, and that the turn-taking system provides repair mechanisms for dealing with turn-taking errors such as overlaps (cf. Clark 1996). Labov and Fanshel (1977: 73) focused their interest on the knowledge of contexts and affirmed that: "In any particular context we will not know if a particular rule applies unless our knowledge of the contextual conditions is accurate." The context is, therefore, a key feature to correctly interpret the turn system, its rules and the deviation from them. In this sense, transitions with gaps longer than those argued to exist in ordinary conversation are accepted and frequent in tabloid talkshows, since the way in which the interaction proceeds provides for it. Longer gaps occur for a variety of reasons:

a)   The host sometimes extends the gap between one question-answer and the next question to allow for audience-reactions, to create expectation, to think about the next question and to arouse the audience's reactions (e.g. Montel Williams. 1996. *Marital rape*).

b)   Another reason why the gap between turns may be extended is because speaker change sometimes implies waiting for the next speaker to come to the stage. The gap between turns is therefore longer since the participants wait for the next speaker's arrival to go on talking. For example in Ricki Lake *I drink and drive. So what!*, the second guest was backstage. When Ricki calls her on stage, the conversation is suspended until she crosses the stage and sits down.

Overlaps appear frequently in tabloid talkshows and they occur for several reasons: a) the willingness of some participants to answer quickly causes overlaps, since in trying to provide answers as soon as possible, they miscalculate the end of the utterance (e.g. guests being addressed by the host); b) overlaps are used as a way of signalling the current speaker that the new incomer wants the floor (e.g. usually the host uttering a new question); c) overlaps are seen to occur in cases where questions show a more complex "question delivery structure" (Heritage and Greatbatch 1991: 99; Ilie 1999; Penz 1996). Hence, for example, the guests may interpret as a question a statement that the host produces as a prefatory and therefore answer prematurely, overlapping with the host's talk. Overlaps are part of the tabloid talkshow interaction type and a relevant feature - since they allow

identification of conflictive moments (linguistic or not) between the interviewer and the interviewees.

In the data analysed, I divided turns according to whether they were part of a smooth exchange of turns or an intervened exchange of turns (Gregori 1999). The results showed a prevalence of smooth turn exchange (60,3%) over intervened turn-exchange (39.7%). However, 40% of intervened turn exchanges is a significant percentage which certainly indicates a type of interaction far from smooth. As for the type of intervened turns, the most common type was the overlap which accounts for 39.1% of all intervened turns. Confrontational sequences add up to 24.1% of all intervened turns, and butting-in interruption, 8.4%. Silent interruptions account for 8.4% of all exchanges of turn and simple interruptions, 13.2%. Finally, parenthetical remarks account for 6.7% of all exchanges.

5.3. *Length of the encounter is not fixed, specified in advance*.

The length of the interaction   for tabloid talkshows, in contrast to casual encounters, is fixed and specified in advance by the genre conventions themselves. Tabloid talkshows last some 45 to 60 minutes. Furthermore, the parts which make up the interaction are also pre-specified. Tabloid talkshows are usually divided into 7 blocks - although this may vary - of 5 to 15 minutes in order to fit in the advertisements. The opening and the closing of the event are determined by the time slot which television assigns to that particular programme. Hence, it is not the on-going development of the interaction that leads to the closing of the interaction, but the fact that the institution itself stipulates the duration.

The continuity or discontinuity of the encounter itself is related to length, since the length of the conversation in media discourse is directly linked to the length of the parts that conform the event itself. Conversation, as specified by Sacks   *et al.* (1974) is discontinuous if there are lapses at possible transition places. I go further in interpreting continuity and state that in tabloid talkshows, discontinuity is a must, and it occurs because of the type of discourse and the medium in which it takes place. In that sense, TV discourse is fragmented (Gronbeck 1979), hence, it requires talk to be split into several segments in order to fit in advertisements. This is done, basically, for economic reasons, since sponsors of the programmes advertise their products during the breaks. The discontinuity is physically observable and openly referred to by the host him/herself as observed in example 4 below:

(4)   H   That's what they say. And they also say, you know I'm sorry, if women are stuck on stupid, then men may as well take advantage of them. That's how they feel. So we're going to take you take little break. *[acc]* I'm going to give an opportunity to talk to them because they're going to come out here in a minute. **When we come back**, *[acc]* we're going to find out about this guy that was Brandie's boyfriend ex-boyfriend. His name is Paul. He's going to come out here to talk to us. I'm going to let the ladies go off the stage first. I want to hear Br-Paul 's side of this because Paul doesn't even know which girl is here. He's been out with so many and we said, how old are the women that you've been out with? He said, o::h thirteen to forty nine. How many have you been out in the last year? Over a hundred. Which one could it be? Who knows. We'll find out. **We'll be back right after this**.

(Montel Williams. 1996. *Men who con women into relationships*)

Additionally, the opening phases analysed have different durations depending on the host and on that day´s programme. For example, in Jenny Jones *Cyberlovers meet for the first time,* the first phase lasts only two minutes and twenty seconds, while in another of her programmes, *Confronting Unfaithful Spouses,* it lasts eight minutes and fifty three seconds.

5.4. *Is turn order fixed or variable?*

Generally speaking, turn-taking can be either predetermined - as is usually the case in trials, masses, interviews, or debates - or freer. In debates, for example, turns are pre-allocated, and the turn at talk is not as flexible or negotiated by the participants as is the case of casual conversation (cf. Larrue and Trognon 1993; Sacks *et al.* 1974). One key difference between conversation and tabloid talkshows can be pinpointed by clarifying the nature of the *control* of the turn-taking system. Sacks et al. point out how, in conversation, the ordering of speakers, being locally (i.e. turn by turn) controlled, can vary. In tabloid talkshows, at least partially, the turn-taking system is globally *controlled and partially pre-established* by the tabloid talkshow's juggernaut, which is represented by the figure of the host, who exerts the greatest power in the interaction (cf. Gregori 2000; Penz 1996; Dolón 1998).

Hence, the bias which is claimed by Sacks *et al.* (1974: 18) to be particularly important in conversation, i.e. "one bias that is particularly important is for speaker just prior to current speaker to be selected as next speaker," is not as relevant here. It has been observed that in tabloid talkshows, while turn order varies and the variation may be due to different choices by different participants. There is, nevertheless, a feature which recurs and which organises the ordering of speakers as dependent on the host, and which could be explained as follows: In tabloid talkshows the most common order of speakers is A then host, B then host, C then host, etc. That is, the most common turn order implies an almost dual alternation of speakers in which the first element is often the host and the second is variable, e.g. host-guest A, host audience (cf. Gregori 1998), etc. However, the flexible nature of the tabloid talkshow allows for variation, specially in confrontational sequences in which the host may refrain from participating.

According to the rules that govern conversation, a speaker may assign his/her turn to another party or may leave it open to self-selection. In a conversation, the fact that a speaker usually ends his/her turn without assigning it to another speaker implies an opportune moment for a self-selected turn. This feature differs considerably in the tabloid talkshow interaction, where the participants' behaviour seems to indicate that when the current speaker is different from host, the fact that s/he does not assign the turn to any participant implicitly signals that the s/he expects the host to take the turn. The consequences are that although the ordering of speakers is apparently free, it is somehow restricted by external factors to the turn-taking system's basic functioning, such as status and role, which privilege the host. Thus, although turn-order varies, the variability is more often than not in the hands of the host. This affirmation is confirmed by the results obtained from the analysis: 73.2% of all turns are self-selected and 26.8% of turns are non-self-selected. It is significant that the highest degree of self-selection is displayed by the host, whose total number of self-selected turns is 99.4% of all his/her turns. This represents 54%

of all the total number of self-selected turns in our data.

A further implication of such recurrent patterning in turn-order affects the possibility of "colloquy" (Sacks *et al.* 1974: 19) which, in the case of tabloid talkshows, is systematically restricted. Hypothetically, although the answer of a guest may influence the next turn and alter its structure, in tabloid talkshows this is only partially true, since the host may choose to go on with the agenda of questions regardless of what the previous answer is. Furthermore, the compliance of the different parties (i.e. guests, audience, expert, host) to their institutional identity (cf. Gregori 2000) eliminates many possibilities of agreeing, disagreeing or extending the discussion of the content of any turn. It is the host who usually decides what subtopic to extend and how and for how many turns.

So, turn ordering is determined globally by the agenda of the tabloid talkshow and locally by the recognition of the status of the host which almost invariably grants him the condition of "next speaker" when current speaker is different from the host. Due to the flexible nature of tabloid talkshows, however, this is always subject to changes. Let us illustrate this with two examples, one which fits and recognises the status of the host, example 5; and another, example 6, in which guests appear to be challenging his/her status:

(5)	H	*[acc]* So you moved out of your mother's house and moved in with your grandmother *[acc]*
	G	Right.
	H	And then you had your aunt, *[acc]* who we're going to meet later on in the show, came to your rescue and said hey, this is true love. He really does love you, right? *[acc]*
	G	Yeah.
	H	You thought he really loved you
	G	*[Nods yes]*
	H	*[acc]* So that's why you had the intimate relationship with him *[acc]*
	G	Yes.
	H	Mm. OK, so you want to talk to him today, right? What do you want to ask him?
	G	I just wanna mainly ask him why he played my emotions like he did a::nd —⟦

(Montel Williams. 1996. *Men who con women into relationships*)

In example 5, the guest answers the host's questions, without extending her turn. Besides, the other two people on stage and the audience present also respect the question-answer process between host and guest by not intervening at all. Example 6, however, shows a different picture, in which the participants do not so much respect this principle, therefore a freer alternation between the speakers ensues. The order of participation is not so much controlled by the host, but instead the participants self-select more often:

(6)	H	Very good. Before you ask them, you were one wild thing out there
	G1	*[acc]* I wa— I was interrupting the president, I was running the area of D.C. I me— I mean I was doing all that < D- Yeah > But I've since then seniorized.
	H	[* And you were—
	G2	[& What's wrong with that? What's wrong with that? Why can't =
	H *	But the—
	G2	= they be sissyfags and butch dykes?
	G1	You can be. But do you need to make such a deal out of it. Why is it that we— we— [when we choose =
	G3	[Why is it that Newt Gingrich has to make such a deal out of what he feels?
	G1	= *[acc]* choose to be] — when men choose to be feminine women choose to be masculine,

            that's fine. But if we— if we're really comfortable with that, why are you trying to force
            everybody else to accept it? When I— if I— when I chose to be Luke Sissyfag I knew that
            people wouldn't like it OK?— I — it was a choice. Now why would you, y'know, if you
            do something an — n — you expect people to react that way, why do you get upset when
            they react that way?

G3   Well wha— what I don't
        [understand is what you're =
G1   [* I mean if you—
G3   = saying is that we're trying to force people to accept it. I'm just trying to be exactly who
        I am and <V- right > create a community in which everybody — I can be exactly who I am,
        the — they are. I have a thirteen year old son I want him to be able to be exactly who he
        is < D- right > <L- right >
        [I'm not out there blah blah blah. Well I am out there.
G4   [(XXX)
G5   [People want people want—
H   [& If I'm understanding — just a mom—] if I'm understanding Luke, he's saying all that
        posturing and the preening, for example in the gay pride parade, those video tapes that Pat
        Robertson and Falwell love to show
        [(XXX) you were in one of them you know
G3   [Wait a minute why (XXX) please
H   = you were in one of them you know, with all these crazy clothes on half naked,
        you got things hanging— don— don't show me. I'm afraid to look. Oh you wore this did
        you?
            (Donahue. 1996.*The problem of being an effeminate man or a masculine woman.)*

The examples above prompt us to comment upon feature number 9 outlined by
Sacks *et al.* for conversation, which says that *relative distribution of turns is not fixed,
specified in advance.* In tabloid talkshows relative distribution of turns can be said to be
pre-specified to a certain extent. It is initially pre-specified who will speak, when and in
what part of the talkshow itself. The *initial* distribution of turns is set by the team who
manages the tabloid talkshow according to the effect they want to cause in their audience
(e.g. to cause a confrontation, they may give the turn to someone who holds an opposite
view on a matter right after the conflicting view has been expressed). Additionally, a fixed
number of turns such as the openings and closings of the different sequences is assigned
to the host as the institutional figure whose contractual situation places him in charge of the
development of the interaction (cf. Calsamiglia *et al.* 1996). Tabloid talkshows are an
example of semi-institutionalised discourse (cf. Ilie 1999; Gregori 2000) in which, to a
certain extent, the order of participation can be said to be fixed, but which is able to adapt
to almost any possible variation. The order of participation is a mixture between
established and spontaneous participations, as illustrated in the examples above.

5.5. *Is duration of turns fixed or variable?*

One may argue that in tabloid talkshows turn-size or duration may vary, and that all
participants are allowed to alternate between long and short turns. Notwithstanding, as is
the case with interviews, the interaction usually proceeds in question-answer sequences (cf.
Illie 1999), and it is more common for the guests, when answering, not to exceed the
propositional content of the question. Somewhat, then, the size of the turn seems to be pre-
determined by the format of the question. However, tabloid talkshows do not have a fixed

duration of turns (as may be the case in rituals, for example), but allow different sizes of turns. Let us not forget, nevertheless, that the macrostructure of the tabloid talkshow itself only allows for a certain amount of talk for each of the participants, due to time limitations. In this sense, although turn-size variability exists, it is somehow time-related and therefore dependent upon the agenda set for the programme. The ability to control the participation is in the hands of the host, who will have to provide for a fair distribution of participation. The excerpts analysed show a distribution of turns between all the participants in which the highest participation comes from hosts (the average number of turns by host is 54.1; guests 22.4; individual members of the audience 7, and the studio audience 1.9).

5.6. *Is the content of turns fixed or specified in advance?*

In tabloid talkshows, a substantial part of what is said may be specified in advance in the sense that each story told by the guests has been revised by the production team. They have discussed each story in order to determine its appropriateness for the programme. This pattern is not uncommon in some TV interviews, e.g. formal political interviews, where the participants have carefully gone over the material and questioning beforehand (cf. Kurzon 1996: 217; and Kowal and O'Connell 1997: 310).

The host is also given instructions and information about the way to handle the interview, the attitude to be adopted; and the questions have been written down beforehand. In the same way, guests are often given instructions about what to say and how to present their case. However, it all indicates that the degree of pre-specification is only partial. By no means can we classify tabloid talkshows as an example of *ideal delivery* (Clark 1996), in which the participants seem to "speak with a pre-formulated fluency: Flawlessly, without hesitations, and without long pauses" (Kowal and O'Connell 1997: 310). If that were the case, tabloid talkshows would be in clear contrast with other speech-exchange systems such as conversation, since turn-taking organisation in conversation makes no provision for the content of any turn, nor does it constrain what is done in any turn. Kowal and O'Connell (1997: 319) criticise the concept of ideal delivery, especially for interviews: "The ideal delivery is an entity invented out of the implicit conviction that language must be entirely formulated in advance, i.e., before onset of an utterance. It isn't, it shouldn't be, and, in fact, it cannot be, because in an interview the interviewee has to *react* to the interviewer's questions".

The literature on tabloid talkshows clearly indicates that participants learn no script but are merely given instructions about the rules and indications as a mode of guidance (cf. Livingstone and Lunt 1994: 164) before the programme. Livingstone and Lunt (1994: 165ff.) report on the reflections of participation by people who have taken part as studio audience in this type of programmes: "The studio audience members differed as to whether they felt the conversation to have been genuine… others felt that the constraints of the genre prevented spontaneous interaction." Hence, talk itself may be partially specified but never totally. Furthermore, the *element of surprise,* an important feature commonly used in tabloid talkshows, should guarantee the affirmation that tabloid talkshow interaction is constructed turn-by-turn and not completely planned. That is, even if some parts of the discourse have been previously agreed on by some participants, tabloid talkshows often depend on an element of surprise (e.g. bringing in some unexpected guest, the host reveals

information which the guests were unaware s/he had, etc.) to cause confrontation, therefore forcing the participants to react spontaneously, and immediately, in the direction of the on-going talk (cf. Ventola 1987; McCarthy 1998).

The nature of the study carried out on tabloid talkshows (cf. Gregori 2000) made it impossible to determine the degree of pre-formulated fluency, rehearsing, or to what degree the discourse was "unnatural." Getting to know this would imply a direct and intimate knowledge of the interaction (previous and broadcast) of the participants themselves, and of the related events. It is not possible to discover this information if one analyses the interaction from the perspective of an outsider, i.e. outside the physical space and time in which the interaction took place. What is clear, though, is that the content of some turns may be partly pre-specified and is clearly restricted in terms of topic. In a tabloid talkshow, participants are obliged to adhere to the topic of the day and are not free to introduce topics of their own choice.

5.7. *What allocation techniques are employed in the system?*

Sacks *et al.* (1974) classify turn allocation techniques as belonging to either the group of *current selects next* or *self-selection*. The tabloid talkshow displays both types of turn-allocation techniques. Techniques of *current selects next* are addressed questions, nomination, non-verbal selection of speaker, topic-speaker-reference, among others. Examples of self-selection include interruptions, overlaps, parenthetical remarks (Goffman 1976: 275), etc.

Sacks *et al.* (1974: 33-38) argue that turns can be projectedly one word long or, for example, sentential in length. In tabloid talkshows, a wide variety of turns has also been observed to occur but, contrary to what is observed in conversation, turns do not always display the three-part structure (Sacks *et al.* 1974: 36) that may reflect their occurrence in a series. As argued by Sacks *et al.* (1974: 36), a turn in conversation is to be thought of as a turn-in-a-series, with the potential of the series made into a sequence. Turns, they claim, regularly have a part that addresses the relation of a turn to a prior turn, a part involved with what is occupying the turn, and a part which addresses the relation of the turn to a succeeding one. Along the same lines, Gallardo states that if we want to talk about conversation, "son necesarias al menos tres intervenciones que giren en torno al mismo asunto. Es lo que autores como Donaldson llaman *regla común* "(i.e. there have to be at least three contributions related to the same issue. Donaldson refers to this rule as the '*common rule*'" (cited in Gallardo 1996: 54).

In tabloid talkshows, however, turns are not necessarily part of a series which completes a sequence. On the contrary, although it may be the case that most turns can be interpreted locally, others cannot be understood unless we bring in the global dimension and relate those turns to the whole speech event and to its topic. In tabloid talkshows, turns are not necessarily locally related or form sequences; but, instead, they sometimes show a more global dependence: One example of the latter is frequently observed when the host changes from one speaker to the other. In such cases, the relation between turns is only discernible if we are conscious of the overall topic and of the relationship between the participants. Let us illustrate this with a brief example.

(7) H *[acc]* Oh, that's—you know, he's claimed that you acted and told him you were a little older *[acc]*

G1 No.

H Not true?

G1 No =

H   [* OK. You

G1   = My [aunt] even told him how old I was.

H   Now, Danielle why don't you tell me about — er — David?

G2 OK. Well, about three years ago, I met David. I was coming out of an abusive relationship, so:: he started telling me things that he knew that I would—I wanted to hear. He told me he loved me, he wasn't gonna do me wrong. He told me he wanted me to have his baby—

(Montel Williams. 1996. *Men who con women into a relationship*)

In example 7 above, the three turns in bold would not be seen as a sequence unless we understand that it is the host who can select who the next speaker is and that the topic of the day is *men who con women into relationships* and that the host has finished with G1 and wants G2 to give more information on the topic. The host changes speaker and subtopic without recognising G1's last intervention. This proves that turns in tabloid talkshows do not necessarily form part of local sequences but are found to hold a global relation with the speech event.

6. Conclusions

It was the purpose of this article to characterise tabloid talkshows as a speech event. In order to do so, I systematically compared the characteristics established by Sacks *et al.* (1974) - which they consider to be typical of turn-taking in ordinary conversation - to those of tabloid talkshows, following the line already established by numerous studies in conversation analysis. The comparison between both conversation and tabloid talkshows, using Sacks *et al.*'s (1974) model, implied a revision of the model and the consideration of the literature that criticises it (e.g. Power and Martello, Edelsky 1981). Informed by such views, I argued that it was first necessary to simplify the number of features, and thus united the 14 turn-taking features listed by Sacks et al. under more general headings, in order to avoid redundancy in the description of the characteristics of tabloid talkshows. The outcome of the reduction was a list of seven questions which may help to define any type of discourse and which allow both explicit and implicit comparisons between different types of speech events.

The discussion was intended to be an implicit comparison between those aspects of turn-taking functioning in conversation and those in tabloid talkshows. Although tabloid talkshows and conversation may have some features in common, my conclusion is that the tabloid talkshow speech event is different from conversation. The differences between both can be summarised as a list of features which prove the quasi-conversational or semi-institutional nature of the tabloid talkshow interaction. Hence, regarding turn-taking organisation tabloid talkshows are characterised by:

1. A partially pre-determined number of participants.
2. A duration of turns partially specified in advance.

3. A turn order partially specified in advance.
4. A length of the encounter specified in advance.
6. A distribution of turns which indicates some degree of planning.
7. Content of turns is partially specified in advance.

Let us not forget, nevertheless, that Power and Martello (1986), in pointing out some of the weak points of the system proposed by Sacks *et al.*, argue that the set of rules proposed by Sacks *et al.* (1974) does not describe a pattern of behaviour but rather the force of a cultural convention, and that one must take into account not only the degree to which people conform to the postulated rules but also how people react when rules are broken. If people treat deviations from the rules as problems that call for repair measures, and if persistent deviants are inferred to be incompetent or anti-social, then we have grounds for thinking that the postulated rules are indeed a convention for our society. A counter-example (cf. Power and Martello) would have to be a case in which a deviation from the rules failed to provoke such reactions, either in the participants, or (if the incident was recorded) in subsequent observers. In characterising tabloid talkshows, one may venture to say that they are a counter-example, since the tabloid talkshow conventions present them as a unique genre characterised by a quasi-conversational turn-taking system which combines conversational features with others characteristic of more formal speech events. Their flexible and dynamic nature (cf. Livingstone and Lunt 1994; Hutchby 1996) adapts to and allows any alterations and innovations in the genre (cf. McCarthy 1998). The participants in and the audience of these programmes expect and know that   *deviant* behaviour has become unmarked in the tabloid talkshow genre and that failing to show such behaviour would probably mean the extinction of the genre itself.

On a more global level, the analysis presented here underlines a fundamental point about the evolution of the tabloid talk show as a genre, which locates its development in the broader changes that have occurred in public and institutional discourses,what Fairclough calls the 'conversationalisation' of public discourse. Issues such as those tackled by the tabloid talk show were, in the past, treated on radio and TV through discourse-types such as face-to-face interviews, ´behind-the-desk´ panels and more formal settings, with experts playing the major participant roles. The tabloid talk show changes the setting to a more familiar, home scenario, with easy chairs and ordinary, for the most part non-expert participants, presented to the viewing audience in conversational poses. The level of disclosure and exposure of subjects is akin to that of casual talk among intimates. The turn-taking borrows features of such ordinary, non-public conversational settings, but is realised amid the competing tensions of conversational verisimilitude and controlled, timed, ´staged´ broadcast talk. This analysis has attempted to illustrate that tension in operation.

Appendix

=	when lack of space prevents continuous speech from A from being presented on a single line of text, then '=' at the end of the box and '=' at the beginning of the other shows that it is the same turn

(+)	Noticeable micropause (< 0.2. second)
(0.0)	Timed pauses longer than 0.2 seconds, applauses, reactions from audience
wORd	very emphatic stress.
italics	used to indicate and explain non-verbal features, reactions, extralinguistic information in the transcript.
bold type	is used in the examples to highlight the feature being discussed
::	extended sound; lengthened syllables
(XXX)	unintelligible segment.
[	overlap. A bracket connecting the talk of different speakers shows that overlapping talk begins at that point.
]	overlap finishes at this point.
wor(h)d	embedded laughter.
—	Cut-off speech. Voluntarily: hanging discourse, speaker interrupts his/her own discourse, in order to produce a repair, paraphrase and leaves it grammatically incomplete. Or involuntarily when interrupted, placed at the end of an incomplete utterance.
&	Single interruption: Exchange of turns; simultaneous speech; 1st speaker turn incomplete.
*****	butting-in interruption (no exchange of turns).
Σ	silent interruption (exchange of turns; no simultaneous speech; 1st speaker turn incomplete).
∏	intonation contour shows that speaker wants to yield the turn. Only used in cases where it may appear confusing because the speaker's utterance is incomplete.
.	sentence final falling intonation
,	clause-final intonation ("more to come").
p	spoken slowly
acc...acc	spoken quickly, and/or without the usual pauses between words.
Δ	Highly confrontational moments characterised by a total disruption of the turn-taking. It is perceived by the speaker as chaotic, verbal fighting, confrontational, aggressive etc. The transcription of these moments is sometimes merely representative since most of the discourse cannot be understood because of complex overlaps, shouting, censoring on the part of the programme itself, etc.

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