

Discourse Strategies in Hungarian Political Interviews

1 Introduction

The study aims at the analysis of broadcast political interviews focusing on female and male interviewing strategies, recorded from the Hungarian ATV “Straight Talk” program. Political interviews have been investigated since the 1980s and are viewed as special situations where partners of symbolic and real power relations have a discourse. The parameters of talk (length, theme) are defined by the presenter, who can favour cooperative or competitive discourse patterns in governing the discussion. The cooperative discourse strategies mostly characterise the female-led interview, while the competitive style is more masculine according to previous research. The main purpose of this study is to reveal the dominating discursive norms in broadcast political interviews in Hungary, a country which is still considered a chauvinist society based on the theory of Hofstede¹. Analysis of speech acts, verbal communication and description of female and male stereotypes is also included.

The female interviewer investigated is Olga Kálmán, who is not only a pre-

sender of the program, but also a news director. As a substitute for her we can see Péter Németh - a male interviewer – on the screen. So, the program is the same, the only factor of change is the gender and personality of the interviewer. The programs with Olga Kálmán were recorded last October. The length of talks is usually 8-10 minutes, though sometimes 15-17 minute discussions might occur. Two distinctive genres may be observed: political and non-political or expert interviews, and the analysed conversations include both. The partners of the presenter are in all cases male. They are Péter Szíjjártó, the spokesman of FIDESZ (Alliance of Young Democrats), József Sipos the MSZP (Hungarian Social Party) member of the Socio-political Department and Tamás Kovács, Head Attorney.

The programs led by Péter Németh were recorded in early summer 2007. His partners are also men according to the principles of the study. They are Zsolt Nyitrai, a member of FIDESZ, Péter Kiss the Chancellery Minister and Imre Repa, a member of the State Reform Committee and the Director of Kaposvár Hospital.

The content-based comparison of the style of political interviewing involves: speech acts, turn-taking, cooperative coefficient and interruptions. Among the factors influencing the choice of discourse strategies of the interviewers,

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¹ Hofstede, G. & Hofstede, G. 2004, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind: Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival*, New York: McGraw-Hill.

gender, age and power distance relations may be observed. They play a role in setting the tone as well as controlling the questioning. The social structures serve as frames for the interview situation, and the earlier mentioned masculine society – i.e., the social, economic and political power positions are mostly held by men – also affects the conversational styles.

The analysis applies the results of Walsh's study², "Gender and the Genre of the Broadcast Political Interview", where the interviewing styles of a female and a male presenter are compared. I also rely on Mullany's work³, "Linguistic Politeness and Sex Differences in BBC Radio 4 Broadcast Interviews".

Walsh claims that the program "Today" has privileged a masculine style of political interviewing and marginalised the female voice. The aggressive, combative tone became a norm of the program and it is characterised by entrapment questions, that seek to drive interviewees into a corner. It could originate from traditional gender roles and unequal rights.

The linguistic studies of the 1970s-1980s found that female speakers prefer cooperative conversational strategies and are more polite than men. Opposing that, males used a competitive talking style. The political interviews – favouring men – can be seen as competitive events while the expert interviews set the cooperative scene.

Interruptions are the most often used tools of the competitive conversational strategy; they indicate the fight for control. There may be a difference in attempted interruptions and their success rate, though attempts most often succeed in the Hungarian context. The British studies suggest that the unsuccessful interruption attempts are less threatening as the potential interrupter realises the Face Threatening Act⁴ and withdraws. It can also mean, however, that the potential interrupter does not have enough power to succeed and take over the speech.

Earlier simultaneous talk and interruptions were analysed as opposing and competitive strategy elements⁵, however, Edelsky⁶ argues that simultaneous talk may function as cooperative linguistic behaviour too, where both speakers can speak at the same time to create their common ground. Media interviews should be distinguished here. To facilitate the understanding of the audience, the principle of Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 'one speaker at a time' can be expected. Short overlaps, simultaneous talk still occur. They either support or threaten the face needs of the partner. The context and the length of the speech might indicate which of the two is activated.

For most male interviewers the purpose of the conversation is to elicit information but their female counterparts pay

² Walsh, C. 2006, Gender and the Genre of the Broadcast Political Interview. In Baxter, J. (ed.), *Researching the Female Voice in Public Contexts*, Pallgrave: Macmillan, pp. 121-138.

³ Mullany, L. 1999, Linguistic Politeness and Sex Differences in BBC Radio 4 Broadcast Interviews. In *Leeds Working Papers in Linguistics and Phonetics*, 7, pp.119-145.

⁴ Goffman, E. 1955, On Face – Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction. In: Wardhaugh, R (2005): *Szociolingvisztika*, (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó), p. 266.

⁵ Sacks, H., Schegloff, E., & Jefferson, G. 1974, A Simplest Systematics for the Organisation of Turn-taking for Conversation, *Language*, 50, pp. 696-735.

⁶ Edelsky, C. 1981, Who's Got the Floor? *Language in Society*, 10, pp. 383-421.

the most attention to their partners' face needs and tend to be as supportive as possible with regard to previous theories. There is a characteristic difference between the British interviewer, Sue MacGregor, and the Hungarian Olga Kálmán in terms of cooperation. Our female interviewer applies a more combative style than her British colleague. In Mullany's work, similarly, there has been a significant increase in the attempts of interruption made by female interviewers when having a male partner, but the attempts and the success rates show considerable difference – i.e., female attempts, 36.2%, success 13%. In the case of the Hungarian Olga Kálmán, we hardly ever see unsuccessful attempts.

2 Straight Talk

Olga Kálmán has a special interviewing style in which the female voice applies a rather masculine conversational strategy. Her comforting, supporting tone may turn smoothly into a confident, assertive, sometimes aggressive, style. With the aim to elicit information she appears to consciously choose the appropriate strategy to suit the communicative style and power position of her partners. She insists on receiving a response either with more direct questions, repetitions or hidden questions in the form of statements.

In the style of Péter Németh, feminine and masculine traits may also be noticed. His requests for information are put forward in different ways; at first like sharing information, later with more direct questions. His supportive tone helps theme evolution. Though his conversational speed is slow and he seems to be constrained, the use of entrapment questions can be noticed in his strategy:

“ I won't let you, I won't release you out of this question.” The male interviewer is more straightforward in his criticism, affording himself open remarks about the government party. It must be deliberate, as the Hungarian ATV is known as a left-wing channel; the interviewer tries to prevent bias and applies a neutral, sometimes bantering style: “ Excuse me for saying so, but it is not sure that you are always right”

Péter Németh's conversation with the oppositional party's MP shows a classic example of a power/relation based discourse. The male interviewer positions himself under the partner's power, his tone of greeting the FIDESZ member implies subordination, though the partner is also male and even younger than Péter Németh. The choice of strategy cannot be incidental, he supports the partner's face needs, emphasises his competency, thus hoping to convince the opposition's voters that this program does not serve any political powers. Very rare application of face threatening acts may be noted. He makes a single salty remark before saying good-bye to the interviewee with regard to the oppositional party's financial background: “I see, you know what to do with the government's budget, most probably with yours as well.”

3 Comparisons

3.1 Cooperative coefficient

The concept introduced by Huszár⁷ indicates the willingness of the partners to cooperate during a conversation. In an average interview situation the interviewer speaks less than the partner. The

⁷ Huszár Á. 1994, Az együttérzés beszédaktusai, *Studia Nova*, I. pp. 99-109.

Cooperative Coefficient

	Government party partner	Oppositional party partner	Expert partner
Female interviewer	1.7	2.08	1.68
Male interviewer	3.09	2.1	2.2

more words the interviewee uses, the higher the coefficient. In their study Huszár and Batár⁸ analysed interviews of the program called “Napkelte” (Sunrise) on Hungarian TV channel 1 and found that the cooperative coefficient is 1.3 in the interviews led by István Verebes. The coefficient is usually between the values of 1.5-2.5 in political conversations.

The values of the analysed “Straight Talk” interviews demonstrate that the female presenter appears to use a competitive discourse strategy while her male colleague rather applies a cooperative interviewing style. In the case of the opposition party conversations there is only a slight difference in the values of the cooperative coefficient. In spite of it, the female interviewer seems to have a real viewpoint fight with her partner. The male presenter is more supportive and seldom tries to hold the conversational floor for long.

The male interviewer’s conversation with the government party politician provides a remarkably high coefficient, most probably due to the partner’s similar attitude to the interview and the context.

3.2 Turn-taking, Words/Turns

Turn is an important concept of speech acts. It means that for a certain period one person alone holds the conversational floor and primarily behaves as a speaker while the other acts as a listener, rarely contributing to support, encourage and providing feedback⁹.

The number of turns can represent whether a person holds the conversational floor with a lengthy response or the interviewer and the interviewee combat each other to take over the floor with short statements, questions. Utterances can certainly be supportive as well.

Turn-taking, Words/Turns

	Government Party partner		Oppositional Party partner		Expert partner	
	turns	words/turns	turns	words/turns	turns	words/turns
Female interviewer	60	22	102	14	30	44
Male interviewer	74	35	40	22	33	34

⁸ Huszár Á. & Batár L. 2006, Hogyan fojtsuk bele partnerünkbe a szót avagy párbeszédirányítási stratégiák a közszolgálati televízió egyik szombati műsorában, *Élet és Irodalom* L/25, 4,8 június 30.

⁹ Beattie, G. 1982, Turn-taking and Interruption in Political Interviews: Margaret Thatcher and Jim Callaghan Compared and Contrasted, *Semiotica*, 39-1/2, Amsterdam: Mouton Publishers, pp. 93-114.

The number of turns in the non-political or expert interviews is lower in both cases than in the political ones. They mostly aim at information flow rather than combating. The number of words/turns in the female-led interview seems to be higher as the social and power distance between Olga Kálmán and her partner is bigger. Péter Németh is closer to his partner in age, it is a male/male dyad, so cooperation develops from both sides.

The conversations with the opposition politicians should be discussed here in more detail. The most turns of Olga Kálmán and Péter Szíjjártó are accompanied by the lowest number of words/turns. What can it mean? A possible explanation is the preliminaries. The discourse would not have included more than 60 turns according to the interviewer's intention, if Péter Szíjjártó had not requested extra opportunities to share more information. His comments are far too contrastive with the presenter's point of view thus she cannot stand making her salty remarks, even metalinguistic evaluations. They more often try to take over the conversational floor from each other than in any other recorded interviews. The extreme number of turns suggests a 'popping tennis game', so a competitive discourse evolves. Masculine traits predominate in their conversation.

The conversation of Péter Németh and Zsolt Nyitrai is moderate. Forty turns are associated with 22 words/turns. Shorter statements/turns may be noted. This male-led interview contains the lowest number of words/turns. Earlier it was mentioned that Péter Németh intends to be polite and avoid making face-threatening acts, yet we can hear inconvenient

questions due to his wish to keep control.

The discourses with the government party politicians significantly differ in context. The female interviewer discusses a case of 'information slip out' with the 'culprit', the male presenter leads a conversation with a politician to be promoted about his future responsibilities and opposition suppositions. Péter Németh gives a chance for his conversational partner to make his claims and talk about his ambitions; undoubtedly they build the common ground. The interviewer's attempts to control the interview situation is made clear as it was stated before, but not in a very confrontational style. This latter situation is non-problematic while the former provides an opportunity to the interviewer to banter about the mistakes and so she does. Her tone suggests irony.

3.3 Interruptions

Interruptions are utterances that signal a battle to control the conversational floor. They are mostly considered masculine competitive discourse strategy elements, but the recorded Hungarian interviews do not confirm the traditional theories.

The female interviewer's interruption attempts show a considerable increase compared to her male colleague. While the British studies revealed that the interruption attempts were highest in the male/male dyads, the interruptions of the Hungarian interviewers illustrate a rather contrastive result. The female presenter represents a combative type in political conversation based on the analysed interviews. However, the lowest number of interruptions can be observed in the female/male non-political/expert interview. Here the partner's position,

Interruptions

	Government Party partner		Oppositional Party partner		Expert partner	
	a	b	a	b	a	b
Female interviewer	19	11	30	26	3	4
Male interviewer	6	6	7	5	8	5

age and the topic determine the conversational style of Olga Kálmán and the ‘female voice’ characterises the co-operative strategy. So, the gender role played is a question of choice, it can be female or male, sometimes both in the same interview. It is a continuous construction. Also a notable finding is the similar interruption rate in the male/male conversations. The mature male substitute interviewer’s interpretation of his job could be a reason for that.

4 Conclusion

The writer of this study does not intend to overemphasise the competitive discourse strategy of Hungarian female interviewers, as this paper only analyses the interviewing style of one female presenter compared to her male colleague, though aims at drawing attention to the application of different discourse strategies and the possible causes of their

choice. Adjusting to the interviewee the interviewer has to identify the frames of the situation, reading the verbal and non-verbal signs of the actual partner. The social structures (masculine/feminine societies), power (high rank positions), age, gender and political identity roles of the conversational partners considerably influence the chosen interviewing style, which can be rather confrontational or the opposite, cooperative. Personality traits also determine the style and determine who will hold the conversational floor and control the information flow. This study investigated two types of media discourse, the competitive and the cooperative. As a result it could be claimed that both types were applied by the interviewers, and the analysed female interviewer would more often use competitive discourse elements than her male colleague. Whether the audience is manipulated by the discourse strategy of the presenter can be a question of future study.