Elda Weizman. *Positioning in Media Dialogue: Negotiating Roles in the News*

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Reviewed by Donald Matheson

This book is a series of analyses of how interviewers and interviewees position themselves and each other in Israeli television news interviews, all based on interviews from the early evening current affairs show, 'Erev Xadash' in the early 1990s. There is a lot of convincing, not to mention enjoyable, close analysis of moments of verbal sparring in Israeli televised politics that will add to understanding of the news interview and of institutional talk in general. Weizman brings together insights from across the discourse analytic literature to tease out aspects of the relations between participants and the textual strategies through which those relations are negotiated. The chapters exploring the use of irony and terms of address in what Weizman terms the 'challenge-saturated environments' of Israeli news interviews make particularly interesting reading. It is here that the book's conclusions are concentrated – for example, that interviewees rarely make ironic statements at the expense of the interviewer, and more often at the expense of third parties, while interviewers are more likely to target political figures they are interviewing, but rarely others.

The book might easily have been a series of journal articles, by which I mean to say that it does not advance an overall thesis about its material. Its coherence is more in the case it builds across these studies for thinking of the part played by participants in this kind of talk – whether the interactional role assigned in the verbal exchange or the social role assigned by the institutional and wider political contexts – as something much less fixed than a role, and more in the nature of an act of positioning. Weizman shows the value of bringing together conversation analysis with pragmatic analysis to capture some of that dynamic interchange, demonstrating the kind of

integrative and eclectic thinking that characterises some of the most useful discourse analysis. In doing so she reminds us to be wary of the Scylla and Charybdis of reading interview data either too much in terms of the social institutions or in terms of the local management of interaction. There was scope to take the analytical approach established here further into the social realm, addressing broader questions – whether about the flexibility of social role under conditions of late modernity, or about the cultural specificity of forms of discourse, or about the political power of broadcast journalism. By the end I was left looking for a little more help in making use of Weizman's close analysis in understanding social interaction, although that is perhaps asking the book to do more than it set out to do.

For Weizman's carefulness is at the heart of the value of the research here. It is too easy to regard news interviews solely in terms of institutional norms which are either followed or disrupted. Not only are journalists and politicians much more pragmatic than that in furthering their various goals, but very often genres are much more flexible and negotiable. Weizman is sensitive to that particularity. Indeed, she reminds us that the genre she studies here is so interesting for discourse analysts partly because of 'the particularity that positionings are negotiable' in the broadcast interview, as journalists, politicians and other participants challenge and confront each other (p.32). The book begins with three background chapters that establish the argument through a survey of the discourse analytic literature on news interviews, the interactional constructions of positions or roles in discourse and the nature of challenging talk in interviews. Out of this Weizman builds an analytical framework for understanding positioning as a matter in which the positioning of the self and of the other are often mutually constitutive, and also as a matter which occurs simultaneously on the social level, where relatively fixed social roles are oriented towards in complex ways, and on the interactional level.

This kind of thinking is applied in the first empirical chapter, in which she explores first the normative expectations for interviews to be found in places such as codes of ethics, reflective statements made by journalists about the practice and previous analyses of broadcast talk, and

then the discourse norms which are apparent in her data. The difference between these two levels is established well, allowing Weizman to show that the received wisdom among discourse analysts, particularly of the conversation analytic school, about the question and answer turn-taking format is far from uniformly followed. She shows that it is not unknown for interviewees themselves to ask questions; that is, the asymmetry of the relationship can be overstated. Nor do speakers necessarily attend to such instances as breaches of norms that must be acknowledged or repaired. This is good close analysis. I would also have liked to see further analysis of the political and journalistic contexts, so we could begin to reflect on whether these features are associated with specific Israeli cultural or political conditions or whether something more general is being discovered about news interviews. Weizman collects and discusses some metastatements by journalists about the tensions in their relationship with high status interviewees, which focus our attention on the balancing acts that go with the role of interviewer on prime-time state television. I enjoyed this extension of the argument beyond the interview corpus itself into the wider discursive environment. But it seemed to me only a beginning. Some reference was needed to the literature on the complex way in which journalists' metatexts often relate to practice (e.g. Zelizer 1991). Similarly, big issues under the surface of the metastatements, such as how conscious the journalists are of the institutional discursive norms that they are following or how backstage negotiations with interviewees and off-stage talk shape the discourse audiences (and discourse scholars) receive, were not drawn out. Moreover, no reference was made to the combative tradition in Israeli journalism or what Liebes and Blum-Kulka (2004) call the 'permanent state of scandal' in the nation's politics, which seem to me central to understanding the combative discourse which the book deals with.

In the later chapters Weizman then unpacks the textual strategies by which participants achieve this self and other positioning, from the basics of competing for the floor to reformulations of the interview's assumptions to the flouting of Gricean maxims for various effects. She focuses on ironic statements and the use of terms of address in particular, suggesting that they 'act as the center-points of satellite-strategies, in various degrees of explicitness, geared as an *ensemble*

toward the co-construction of reciprocal positioning in interaction' (p.178). In other words (and a tendency towards abstract analytical language would be among my main criticisms of the book) irony and addressing other speakers by name are central techniques by which speakers try to reposition themselves in the talk. Irony – by which she means mostly textual forms of irony such as sarcasm, where what is said does not match other cues in the discourse – is interpreted here less as a direct attack on a speaker than as criticism of the way the other speaker is filling her or his position. Interesting findings result from this point, including that irony is far less often directed at the social role of someone (mocking their performance, for example, as a politician) and far more often directed at the way they are failing to meet interactional expectations (a journalist asking, for example, a floor-hogging politician if he may now perhaps ask a question). This analysis leads on to a discussion of whether the face threat of indirect strategies such as irony is less than that of direct challenges, a question that the book perhaps fails to pin down because the answer depends so much on context, and the book – if I may repeat the point – does not probe the specific political situations being discussed in the interviews.

The book then turns to analysis of how direct address functions quite differently in the middle of an interview to how it does at the end. In the context of one of the speakers challenging the other, the use of first names or more formal address such as honorific or job titles can work to reposition both speakers. Weizman uses Brown and Levinson's (1987) notion of 'face wants' to tease out moments of talk where interactional and social goals are furthered by these ways of increasing or reducing social distance. This analysis is often highly perceptive, such as when Weizman observes that disagreements or conflicts in the interview are often 'concentrated', as she puts it, in a punch line, and that at these moments term of address often have a textual function in highlighting that a key moment has been reached, as well as a face-threat reducing function.

The book's fine-grained analysis poses again the perennial methodological question of the limits of a discourse analysis which analyses text alone. The dynamics of positioning by participants in news interviews – the ironic statements, the direct addresses, the competition for the floor, and the like – all clearly function to maintain or challenge social roles. Yet surely the extent to which participants need to do face work or identity work or other kinds of social labour is only partially recoverable from the activity they perform in the immediate talk. Political interviews are interventions in a public space, in which individuals and social roles are already spoken for and about by myriads of others. To take one example, one interview concerns debate over the appropriateness of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra's decision to play a piece by Wagner, given the use of his music by National Socialism. The extent to which the interviewer, by giving voice to critics' arguments, is forcing the music expert he interviews into a corner is partly to be judged by a close reading, but also takes places against a broader picture, including the extent to which survivors of the Shoah can be criticised and the way the debate was conducted elsewhere. The nature of the challenge and the need for the mutual repositioning remain a little opaque in a textual analysis of the interview 17 years later. What Weizman undoubtedly achieves, however, is to add to the tools of close analysis available for studying this intriguing form of talk.

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Review of Weizman, Positioning in Media Dialogue

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