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Language and the Media: An emerging field for social psychology

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Introduction

The modern media possess a hitherto unprecedented power to encode and circulate symbolic representations. Throughout the western world, people spend a considerable proportion of their leisure hours with one mass medium or another, together totalling more hours than children spend in school or families spend in conversation. Through the media, people are positioned, or position themselves, in relation to a flood of images and information about both worlds distant in space or time as well as the world close to home. A considerable body of research from diverse disciplines over the past century has traced the complex and subtle ways in which the media have become an integral part of our everyday lives, implicated in the structuring of our domestic practices, our social relationships, our very identity. On a more macro level, a growing body of research is also charting how the media are increasingly central to broader socio-cultural, even global, flows of communication and information. Thus the media play a key role in how, in our everyday lives, we understand the world around us and our place within it, while that very 'we' is becoming more culturally dispersed as a result of those same media processes.

Yet despite the popular anxieties which flare up sporadically over media content and regulation, it is easy to take the media for granted, failing to recognise their importance precisely because of their very ubiquity as background features of everyday life. Perhaps for this reason, systematic treatments of the media within social psychology are rare. This stands in curious contrast to the social psychological nature - in terms of questions, influences, concepts and methods - of the emerging field of media and communication, or media studies. Drawing on the resources of several disciplines across the social sciences and humanities, this field has established itself as a more or less autonomous discipline in recent years, more so in some countries (e.g. America, the Nordic countries) than in others, developing a rich and diverse panoply of theories and methods concerning the media and recently, information and communication technologies more broadly.¹ Social psychology played a key role in the establishment of this new field. Most significantly, social psychology bequeathed to media studies from the 1940s onwards an emphasis on 'effects'² and on 'uses and gratifications',³ both of which dominated media and communications research in the following decades. Yet since then, social psychology has tended to marginalise the media in one of several ways. If one looks at social

psychology textbooks or journals, the media are either barely mentioned or bracketed off in a separate chapter, as if their role in social influence, social construction and social identity can be unproblematically contained. If one turns to more linguistically or discursively oriented social psychological research, a more subtle version of this strategy is evident as the media are treated either as an obviously important source of social influence or, paradoxically, they are treated as a convenient source of material for analysing public understanding.

By contrast, the force of intellectual developments across many disciplines, most obviously media and communication itself, is to recognise the nature of the media as multifaceted artefacts embedded in a production-consumption cycle of considerable complexity which is in turn embedded in economic, political, cultural and psychological structures of modern society. It is the consequences of this recognition for social psychology which we wish to pursue in this chapter, making the question of language in the media our central focus. Given that the media represent a key constituent of contemporary life, how might social psychology best encompass their cultural and communicative significance? And further, how might social psychology develop a positive contribution to media and communication research beyond the effects and uses and gratifications positions?

Within media studies, an analysis of the role and significance of the media involves a focus on the three core components of media systems (institutional production, text, and audience), on the interrelations among these components, and last but not least, on locating these processes and interrelations within their social contexts (Abercrombie, 1996). This is an ambitious project encompassing a wide range of theoretical and methodological perspectives and borrowing freely from neighbouring disciplines from political economy to literary theory to anthropology. On the face of it, social psychology is well positioned to make a significant contribution but finds itself on the margins. This is partly because those social psychological theories which have proved influential in media studies (especially media effects and media uses and gratifications) tend to assume a particular, and heavily critiqued, model of communication.

Traditional psychological models of communication adopt a view of the relation between representation, language, interpretation and culture which fits neither with current, discursively oriented approaches to communication within social psychology nor with new approaches to communication and culture within media studies. In the present chapter, we consider these new approaches to communication and culture -- from which social psychology could gain and to which it could contribute -- in terms of their response to the traditional psychology of communication. By identifying responses to each of five key elements of the traditional model of communication, we hope to show how valuable approaches to language and media are emerging that not only represent critical responses to each of these elements but also take the research agenda forward. These five linked elements of the traditional model are that (i) the communication process is essentially linear, with the result that (ii) audiences are passive receivers at the end of a chain of media influence (iii) whose key function is the transmission of information, (iv) in the performance of which the media work no differently from any other, face to face, source of representations, while (v) simultaneously (and paradoxically) adopting the rhetoric of public address.

From linear to cyclic communication

When television first entered American society, Harold Lasswell (1948) charged researchers in the then-fledgling field of media and communication with the task of discovering 'who says what in which channel to whom and with what effect'. This task was widely adopted for several decades, especially by social psychologists (most notably, the Yale Program of Research on Communication), viewing mass

communication as a special case of the 'general linear model of communication', namely sender → message → receiver. However, the implications of this linear model – namely, that social influence is unidirectional, that communications are initiated by the sender, that messages are pre-given packages of meaning passed from source to recipient, that no feedback occurs along the way, that audiences are just the end-point of a communication, to be affected but not involved -- all of these implications have been variously challenged. Perhaps most influential has been the alternative, cyclic model of communication offered in Stuart Hall's paper *Encoding/Decoding* (Hall, 1980). Hall (1994) was later to reflect that this model, intended as a programmatic sketch for cultural studies, represented an attack on the then mainstream, social psychological model of mass communication. Rejecting the linearity of this model, Hall stressed the links between processes of encoding and decoding, contextualising these within a complex cultural framework. On this view, mass communication is understood as a circuit of practices: production, circulation, consumption, (re)production (Pillai, 1992).⁴

Influenced also by the work of reception theorists such as Umberto Eco (1979; see below), who stresses how 'readers' strive to complete the necessarily partial meaning of a text by drawing on their own cultural resources in the process of interpretation, Hall re-conceptualised the ideological effect of the mass media in terms of a series of dominant codes which place structural limitations on the interpretative process, leading readers/viewers to articulate the 'preferred' or normative meaning, thereby reproducing rather than resisting the dominant ideology. However, in moving beyond classic Marxist accounts of ideology which propose deterministic ideological codes, Hall (1980) also allows for the relative autonomy of culture, suggesting a looser relation between media texts and audiences than previously accommodated by theories of ideology. Thus, oppositional readings – those which run counter to the preferred reading – remain possible, precisely because texts do not stand in a deterministic relation to the reader but rather must be actively reproduced, or otherwise, by interpretative work on the part of the audience, depending on the variable social and cultural resources available to them in the reception context.

The cyclic model of encoding and decoding was first explored empirically by David Morley, setting the paradigm for many cultural studies' projects to come (Morley, 1992). Following an earlier textual analysis of ideological encoding in the 1970s current affairs programme, *Nationwide*, Morley (1980; 1981) conducted a series of peer-group discussions which showed that audience decodings diverged as a function of socio-economic position, resulting in interpretations which were politically framed. For example, decoding by bank managers and by schoolboys was highly consistent with the normative assumptions which structured the programme, while trainee teachers and trade union officials made politically inconsistent, ambivalent or negotiated readings. Yet other groups, for example shop stewards, took a clearly oppositional position, constructing a critical reading grounded in their social experience but unintended by the text. And a few viewers were wholly alienated from the text as it did not afford them a reading congruent with their own cultural position (for example, black further education students).

As anticipated by Hall, Morley showed how particular groups respond in different ways to the preferred reading offered to them by media texts, depending on the degree of correspondence between the conditions of encoding and decoding. For the most part, this correspondence is sufficient for the preferred reading to predominate, while the emancipatory potential opened up by a lesser degree of correspondence provides the counterbalance presumed by the theory of hegemony. While in principle, therefore, the moments of encoding and decoding are indeed relatively autonomous, in practice, the possibilities for critical or oppositional readings are restricted both by the degree of closure linguistically encoded into the text (a matter of ideological dominance) and the unequal access to symbolic resources

available to audiences (a matter of socio-economic positioning). In sum, despite some continuing theoretical and methodological debate, the advantage of this approach lies in its recognition of divergence in interpretation (particularly of the connotative meanings of texts), pointing up some significant indeterminacy in media texts, while at the same time preserving a view of ideology construed in terms of the production and consumption of meanings.

From passive to active audiences

From a social psychological perspective, cultural studies shifts us away from questions of attitudes towards or effects of media contents, both these being approaches which implicitly construe the media text as a 'stimulus' (Livingstone, 1998), towards questions of the context-dependent (but not deterministic) symbolic activity engaged in by audiences in order to generate the inherently variable meanings of a text, as part of a 'circuit of communication' that constitutes relations of media production/ consumption. While Hall et al are primarily concerned with ideology, and hence focus on the normative structuring of texts and the concomitant role of social class in framing audience response, the force of their arguments ties in with those stemming from reception-aesthetics within literary theory, opening up a more general set of questions about active audiences. In other words, while cultural studies sees the struggle between texts and readers in class terms, other dimensions of the cultural conditions of both encoding and decoding may also be important to mass communication. Thus, a challenge to the linear model of communication involves a parallel challenge to the conception of the text as pre-given and of the audience as a passive recipient. The assumption of passivity is strong in social psychological approaches to the media, although the uses and gratifications tradition had long advocated a more selective and motivated conception of the audience (-- unfortunately not followed through into a re-conceptualisation of media texts).

Audience reception became a focus for media research during the 1980s and 90s (Livingstone, 1998), drawing on developments in reception aesthetics (or reader-response theory). For reception theorists, the question was how to legitimate a non-elitist, more interactionist analysis of high culture (Holub, 1984; Suleiman & Crosman, 1980). Emphasis shifted from the structuralist analysis of meanings 'in' the text to an analysis of the process of reading a text, where the meanings which are activated on reading depend on the interaction between text and reader, although the application of this approach to popular or mass cultural forms remains contentious. Further, the media effects question is reconceived in terms of a dialectic between text and reader thus: "a well-organised text on the one hand presupposes a model of competence coming, so to speak, from outside the text, but on the other hand works to build up, by merely textual means, such a competence" (Eco, 1979, p.8). On the one hand, therefore, reception theorists argue that an implied or model reader - an ideal decoding strategy - is encoded into the text, thereby specifying the "horizon of expectations" (Jauss, 1982) or "textual competencies" (Eco, 1979) required to decode the text. On the other hand, the reception context may or may not meet this specification of the ideal reader presumed in the construction of the text, and as with Hall's theory, actual contingent circumstances provide the interpretative resources -- here theorised in terms of textual and extra-textual codes -- available to audiences in practice.⁵

Within media studies, numerous empirical projects have explored the proposed activity of the viewer, typically using qualitative methods to uncover the subtle and context-dependent responses of audiences to specific media texts. For example, Liebes and Katz (1990) examined potential resistance to cultural imperialism (as represented by the prime-time soap opera, *Dallas*) among diverse cultural groups. While their prior textual analysis had stressed such primordial themes as family lineage, property inheritance and sibling rivalry, viewers from

different social and cultural backgrounds generated different interpretations of the same episode: Russian Jews made ideological readings centred on underlying moral and political themes; Americans focused on the personalities and motivations of the characters in making their readings coherent; Moroccan Arabs emphasised event sequencing and narrative continuity (Liebes & Katz, 1990). While each group's reading was clearly constrained by the text, the interaction between diverse cultural resources and a degree of textual openness resulted in divergent readings being made.

While Liebes and Katz were concerned with cultural divergence, Radway (1984) explored the contribution of gender in interpreting media texts. Her analysis of the contrast between the readings of popular romance novels made by ordinary women readers and by literary critics demonstrated how members of different 'interpretive communities' read differently, responding to print differently and for different purposes.⁶ Other studies have examined different aspects of the cultural conditions of reception, while more generally, audience reception research has generated considerable theoretical and methodological debate, further qualifying and clarifying but not essentially challenging the active role of the audience in making sense of media texts (Livingstone, 1998).

From information transmission to ritual communication

Inherent in the linear model of communication is not only a concept of the audience as passive but also a conception of the function of communication as the transmission of information. Again, this conception is particularly, though not solely, tied to traditional theories in social psychology, where a more influential relative of the transmission approach is the information-processing paradigm in psychology. Traditionally, social psychologists have held that mass communication centres on the flow of information ('the message') from sender to receiver in order to inform, influence, or persuade, while the media themselves represent transmission channels, whether these are seen as accurate or flawed, neutral or biased. As Carey (1989) notes, many of our common metaphors for the media are based on this transmission model - sending and receiving, storing and carrying, coverage and reach - as if symbolic meanings were physical packages to be transported by road or rail to their destination.

As an alternative model, Carey develops a neo-Durkheimian view of communication whose function is that of cultural ritual which supports the social order through the construction of 'mechanical solidarity', moments in which all participate in a public ceremony and thus affirm their shared membership of a national or international community. Drawing especially on anthropology, on micro-sociology and on socio-linguistics, he outlines how the media can thus be analysed as generating occasions akin to ceremonies which hold us - producers and consumers of media meanings - in place within a shared culture. While in pre-modern societies, ceremony and ritual serve as liminal moments -- necessary points of reflection, sometime even turning authority on its head (Bakhtin, 1981) -- modern societies increasingly use the mass media for such ritual communication, similarly opening up the potential for reflection on everyday social practices.

Dayan and Katz (1992) apply an anthropological framework to the live broadcasting of 'historic' events such as the Olympic Games, Kennedy's funeral and the British royal wedding of 1981.⁷ Without requiring citizens to leave their homes (i.e. while 'not being there'), the celebration of such 'media events' allows for national or even global participation in a potentially transformative ritual whose form and meanings must be negotiated among organisers, broadcasters, public relations experts, technicians, fans, and ordinary readers and viewers at home. This transformation may occur in several directions, a key one of which is the way in which the structures of this new genre -- rhetorical, symbolic, narrative, and ritual --

are increasingly shaping the nature and outcome of cultural and political happenings as media events. While the dangers of the manipulation of media events are obvious, as is the notion of these as 'pseudo-events' (see the next section), for Dayan and Katz the ritual importance of media events is more interesting for its potential to enfranchise the audience as participants in their culture, providing liminal moments for a society to reflect on, and at the same time to authenticate, its vision of itself. Theoretically, this work has been important for stressing the ritual significance of mass communication in society instead of, or in addition to, their function as transmitters of information. This shift is commensurate with those outlined earlier, for the ritual model presumes cyclic rather than linear communication processes, actively participating rather than passively receptive audiences, and a complex account of media products as text rather than as stimulus, to be analysed in terms of genre, narrative, symbolic codes, and so forth. Whether media events can be shown to have the long-term effects claimed for them (e.g. promoting public debate, shaping the climate of opinion, displacing intermediaries or socializing citizens) remains to be seen, but the more political nature of these issues leads us to the next domain of research, one where the specific role of the media in shaping public participation and public debate has been hotly debated.

From 'just talk' to public communication

Participation in politically-oriented media events raises questions not only about media influence but also about the nature of media contents. As noted at the outset, social psychologists have often assumed that political talk in the media is just like everyday talk, neglecting the specific nature not only of media *qua* text but also media *qua* social institution. Are the media just another place where talk is to be found, or is there something special about mediated conversation? Arguments in favour of the latter position arose from the recent debate over the public sphere, giving rise to a specific body of literature relevant to social psychology as well as stimulating the development of a more general social theoretical account of mediation (see Thompson, 1995).⁸

The debate about the media and the public sphere was prompted by the work of Jurgen Habermas (1969, 1981). Arguing that dominant, institutionally-based, instrumental reason is not capable of generating a critical rational consensus as the basis for legitimation, Habermas is concerned that the very problem of legitimation has been subverted by the media, for these provide the illusion of public consensus rather than promoting actual consensus. His own attempt to construct a theory of communicative action looks to pragmatics for a theory of communication that links theory and practice in the interests of emancipation. In an intellectual climate where post-structuralist theory had rejected the possibility of pragmatic universals (by first defining rationality narrowly in terms of instrumental reason and then arguing that everyday talk and practice could not be seen as rational in these terms), Habermas claims instead that the ways in which people talk in concrete situations have a social significance not because of their constitutive (or discursive) properties but because they make claims to truth. While not necessarily narrowly logical, these claims to truth are pragmatic insofar as they invite the hearer to share knowledge, to trust the speaker and to join in a shared value system. The potential of such a 'universal pragmatics' lies in legitimating – i.e. in being seen publically to validate – the production of political consensus within a fundamentally unequal society, a society where the social system has become 'polluted' by everyday life and vice versa.

In this context, it becomes clear that the mass media have a key role to play in this process of public legitimation, and therefore that, for example, in principle it is the case that talk on television is not necessarily 'just talk'. However, Habermas is pessimistic about possibility of today's media coming close in practice to providing the conditions of open access, unconstrained conversation and consensus-seeking

that his theory would require. Instead, he sees the claims to truth, the integrity and the value of utterances on television as reflecting the institutional contexts and constraints of production while simultaneously giving the appearance of spontaneity. This leads us directly back to the question of active audiences. Given the interpretative activity of audiences discussed earlier, the traditional question of whether the audience is duped by this apparent spontaneity has been replaced by the question of whether audiences can combine a positive engagement with 'talk on television' with a critical awareness of the institutional constraints within which this talk occurred.

We explored some of these questions in our empirical study of the audience reception of politically-oriented day-time talk shows (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). In these shows, the moderator or 'host' plays an active role in the management of discussion, mediating between expert and lay participants, encouraging certain kinds of talk over others, keeping the conversation fast moving while ensuring contributions from a diversity of participants. Despite widespread cynicism about audiences for such programmes, the viewers were both engaged – in a 'para-social' manner - in the debate and, at the same time, they were critical of many aspects of the programmes. Their critical evaluation focussed on the host as manager of the supposedly 'spontaneous' discussion, on the experts' implicit claims to authority, on the degree to which the studio audience is representative of the 'public', and on the potential impact such discussion might have for their own lives. While such talk programmes indeed fall short of the consensus-building necessary for a Habermasian rational-critical public sphere they do, however, conform to those alternative conceptions of the public sphere that emphasise the public expression of diverse points of view and the search for compromise rather than consensus (Fraser, 1990; Negt and Kluge, 1990).

From addressing the public to a diversity of rhetorical forms

The analysis of media events focuses on major, global communication ceremonies, and the public sphere debate focuses on the possibility of ideal conditions within which rational-critical discussion might occur. However, the majority of mediated discourse is far more ordinary, more everyday and so more diverse than can be captured by either of these approaches. Despite this obvious diversity, in much early social psychological work on the 'mass media of communication' the media are regarded, implicitly, as a new version of a very old rhetorical form, that of public address. In other words, as in the speeches and sermons of old, the media are regarded as a source of public pronouncements intended to inform or persuade while the response of the audience is conceived in terms of attitude change. Our final challenge to the traditional model of communication, therefore, is directed to this assumption about the rhetorical nature of mediated communication.

Before the mass media, a large audience could only be addressed if they were gathered together in the same place at the same time. The rise of the press and later, broadcasting, radically altered this requirement, reaching a mass audience bounded by neither space nor time. Thus the advent of the mass media opened up new possibilities for public address that allowed authoritative elites to address a mass audience without the need for co-presence. Rather than analysing media texts in terms of public modes of address -- an elite speaking down to an appreciative but silent audience – Paddy Scannell (1991) traces how television and radio developed a more conversational model of address -- more personal, more intimate, as if speaking face-to-face. By simulating informal conversation, broadcasting encourages the audience to feel that they are engaged in, or at least overhearing, a conversation rather than that they are attending a lecture or a sermon. Following the early days of broadcasting, broadcasters realised that there would be resistance to a medium that adopted the register of public oratory but whose reception context was the privacy of

people's homes. Hence the media developed a form of communication that was produced in public but received in private: consequently, 'the communicative style and manner of broadcasting approximate to the norms not of public forms of talk, but to those of ordinary, informal conversation, for this is overwhelmingly the preferred communicative style of interaction between people in the routine contexts of day-to-day life and especially the places in which they live' (Scannell, 1991, pp. 3-4).

Empirical work in this area tends to follow either a conversation analytic or a discursive approach, examining talk in particular social settings in order to identify the communication features that make that talk intelligible and bind participants to a co-operative ethic. In broadcasting, for example, they inquire into the devices adopted to create 'liveness', that sense of being 'here and now'. Unlike Habermas' concerns discussed above, the aim is not to produce a theory of consensus but rather to understand the anterior conditions that make social interaction intelligible and that, for broadcasting, create the sense of 'taken for granted' that allows television to insert itself so effectively into the routines of everyday life. Scannell's *Broadcast Talk* collection contains several useful examples of this work.⁹ For example, Garton et al. (1991) use the notion of 'register' to show how 'chat' (central to much studio-based broadcasting) is characterised by topic shifts towards personal (as opposed to institutional) and private (as opposed to public) discourse, by displays of wit or humour and by opening up the possibility of transgression. Adopting a more conversation analytic approach, Clayman (1991; see also Heritage et al., 1988) demonstrates how the openings of television news interviews accomplish the 'staged' quality of news reporting. In these and other ways, the broadcast media adopt specific linguistic conventions to create a spontaneous, 'natural' feel to programmes.

To develop one example, Gamson (1992) that people organise their often lively and well-informed discussion of political events in terms of discernible themes or 'collective action frames'. These frames are 'hot cognition', to be distinguished from other organised belief systems because they are, first, motivated by feelings of injustice, second, they include a subject position which confers meaning onto actions and third, they confer identity onto the actor. Thus for a series of specific issues (concerning, for example, nuclear power, the Arab-Israeli conflict or problems in American industry), Gamson identifies the degree of convergence between these three components found within news media frames compared with lay conversational frames. By contrast with Morley's study (see above), where audiences are identified broadly as normative, negotiated or oppositional in their responses, and where the oppositional response is implicitly construed as politically resistant, Gamson suggests that only when the specific issue in the news matches the concerns of the viewer, and only when both are framed in terms of these three components (injustice, action and identity) can 'hot' beliefs 'legitimate and inspire social movements activities and campaigns' (Gamson, 1992, p.7).

Whether one begins with an interest in the linguistic and rhetorical forms of media content analysis (exemplified by the *Broadcast Talk* collection), or with a social/political problem to be pursued through analysing a specific media form (exemplified by Gamson's concerns about political participation), these projects represent a considerable advance on the conception of media language and media content typical of traditional effects research, showing how any reduction of media contents to a straightforward notion of public address greatly underestimates the subtle and diverse structures of media discourse.

Towards a new social psychology of language and media

As we have seen, partly in response to the inadequacies of traditional social psychological work on the media, different strands of research within media and communication have rethought the complex relations between media production,

media texts and genres, audience interpretation and the discursive contexts of everyday life. Focusing primarily on assumptions about language and communication, we have organised these developments in terms of alternatives to five key elements of the 'general linear' model of communication central, in historical terms, to psychology as a discipline. Hence we have explored alternatives to the assumption of linearity in communication, where this is replaced by the notion of complex circulation of meaning with relative autonomy at the different moments in communication networks. Audience response has been elaborated by reconstruing the audience as active interpreters of media texts, making a contribution, therefore, to the construction and reproduction of meaning in society. The earlier emphasis on the media as information transmitters has been replaced by growing interest in media-managed rituals as constitutive of culture. The institutional power vested in the media led to an analysis of how mediated talk - especially on issues of public significance - differs from that of private conversation and yet, as our last section above argued, the media have abandoned the rhetorical form of a system of public address in favour of more intimate, conversation-based generic forms of address which draw the viewer into a shared, if media-managed, culture.

It would be misleading, however, to imply that all social psychologists have adopted the five assumptions about communication which we have challenged in this chapter, and nor still do all neglect the importance of media and popular culture in everyday life. Indeed, some are now drawing productively on developments in media studies and discourse studies, moving towards a social psychology of the media which treats language and the media in a more explicit and more sophisticated way than hitherto. For example, Michael Billig (1991) analyses the rhetorical construction of the Royal Family in both the mass media and family interviews. This work is strongly influenced by Hall's assertion of the relative autonomy of culture and by his appropriation of Gramsci's notion of 'hegemony' to explain indirect, symbolically mediated social influence. Billig reveals the 'ideological dilemmas' underlying arguments and contradictions he observes in 'talk about the royals' (concerning such values as heritage, family, etc). He concludes that in reaffirming the value of ordinary life, such common-sense talk in fact serves a palliative ideological function.

A further prominent reworking of the relation between social psychology and media studies, Teun van Dijk (1991) combines a discourse analysis of prejudice in news media with interviews with ordinary people. Challenged by the pernicious nature of prejudice in modern democracies, van Dijk is concerned that traditional social psychological attitude measures no longer reveal widespread racism. Rather than opting for complacency, he suggests that racism indeed endures, but that the explanation involves a complex relationship between ideology, the public and the press.¹⁰ His discursive approach does not lead to a rejection of psychology but instead sees social cognition as mediating between discourse and society. Specifically, he shows how the elite views expressed in the media provide the resource from which white people construct models of ethnicity which in turn influence beliefs and behaviour concerning ethnic minorities.

While we lack space to discuss further developments within social psychology, we would direct readers particularly to the following. First, social psychologists working in the reception tradition are developing the text-reader paradigm by theorising the process of 'making sense of television' from the viewers' perspective, to complement the theory of the text as developed within literary and cultural studies (Hoijer, 1990; Livingstone, 1998). Second, researchers working in the tradition of Moscovici's theory of social representations seek to understand the role of the media in disseminating expertise to the public while also tracing how conversations among ordinary people respond, this feeding into a broader socio-cultural process in which individual beliefs, shared representations and mass media contents are integrated (Doise, 1993). Third, social psychologists following the discourse tradition within political communications: for example, Bull (1998) identifies the linguistic and

situational features specific to media interviews which distinguish them from other social situations. In sum, social psychologists from diverse theoretical traditions, using different methods, have responded to the theoretical and empirical challenges of studying the media, thereby opening up the possibility of a new social psychology of the media in which questions of language and interpretation are of central concern. However, this is not a well organised 'school of thought' but rather a loose collection of researchers responding in varied ways to the current situation. How can we make sense of this diversity?

John Corner (1999) identifies 'talk' as a key debating point in contemporary media theory. While there are many varieties of linguistic/discourse analysis, he divides current work on the media into one of two broad approaches. One, allied to applied linguistics, provides close readings of media discourse, thereby highlighting the often sketchy and informal account of language in media research elsewhere (e.g. Fairclough, 1995; Scannell, 1991). Despite the sometimes narrowly linguistic focus, this approach is not only interested in technical issues of language deployment but typically has an underlying concern with issues of social relationships and power. Similarly, within social psychology more generally, discursive approaches are increasingly following this linguistic turn, subordinating social theoretical considerations to a relatively implicit commitment to the analysis of power (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). The second approach also offers a more detailed analysis of language than is traditional in media studies, but from a broader, interdisciplinary and social theoretical perspective; thus it trades a less technical or systematic approach to language against a greater stress on social theory and social context (here he cites our book, *Talk on Television*; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). Another example is the social semiotics approach (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Jensen, 1995) where both visual and verbal codes are included in analyses linking production and reception.

A key problematic here is the relation between language use and context. Linguistic-centred approaches emphasise indexicality, viewing context as immanent in discourse, and so conducting the analysis of spontaneous speech with a minimum of social and psychological assumptions, no appeal to abstract analytic concepts being required beyond those required to analyse the indexical codes. The difficulty of analysing language use in context when it comes to the media is that the possibility that indexicality works better for informal conversations between friends than it does for mediated quasi-interactions and institutionally structured forms of talk. The difficulty of arguing for indexicality for the complex interplay between different forms of knowledge in complex institutional relationships suggests that social theory is a necessary adjunct to the analysis of discourse (Thompson, 1995).

While the argument over whether an analysis of language alone is enough, or whether a non-linguistic account of the context (institutional, cultural, situational, psychological) must also be included will continue, it is surely clear that the study of language and the media is at the forefront of a revitalisation of social psychological interest in media and communications. A wide range of recent work takes seriously both language in the media and language surrounding the media (among audiences, publics, and elites). While little synthetic work on language and the media has yet appeared in the social psychological literature, partly because disciplinary lines are difficult to draw between social psychology and media studies, the questions, the debates, the methods and the insights are undoubtedly interesting and likely to be productive of further development.

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Notes

¹ Useful overviews of the field may be found in Thompson (1995), Levy and Gurevitch (1994), Mackay & O'Sullivan (1999).

² While the 'effects' tradition was premised on the idea that the media have a direct effect on such behaviours as aggression or voting, the 'minimal effects tradition' shifted the focus towards the contingent factors which make social influence processes work much more indirectly. Yet despite many effects studies, few sizeable, direct effects were observed, and even indirect effects proved difficult to establish convincingly (Livingstone, 1996). Consequently, the effects tradition, and the contribution of social psychology to media studies has been heavily criticised.

³ This alternative social psychological approach reversed the effects hypothesis. Rather than investigating what the media do to the audience, uses and gratifications research proposed the study of what audiences do with the media (Blumler & Katz, 1974). Rejecting the passive conception of the audience that underpins effects research, it introduced the idea of an 'active' audience which selects specific media to gratify particular needs such as escapism, relaxation, and social monitoring.

⁴ Hall draws directly on Marx's political economy which emphasises cycles of production/consumption but he emphasises that the media operate through symbolic exchange. Thus relations between the practices linked by this circuit are understood discursively as 'articulation' by analogy with exchange in the economic sphere.

⁵ In theorising 'the role of the reader', Eco (1979) stresses that our analytic focus should be on the interface between text and reader (or programme and viewer): "The existence of various codes and subcodes, the variety of sociocultural circumstances in which a message is emitted (where the codes of the addressee can be different from those of the sender) and the rate of initiative displayed by the addressee in making presuppositions and abductions -- all result in making a message... an empty form to which various possible senses can be attributed" (p.5).

⁶ Specifically, Radway found that women readers emphasised the literal meaning and the factual nature of language in romance novels in preference to narrative consistency (preferred by the critics) when the two conflicted. Thus when the heroine is initially described as independent and yet ultimately appears to submit to her hero's demands, women readers were found to resist the normative patriarchal message by generating their own meanings in which the heroine is seen subtly to win over her hero unbeknownst to him, thus revealing her true strength, as stated at the outset.

⁷ According to Dayan and Katz, the events themselves can be seen as scripted in one of three ways: as Contest (e.g. the Olympic Games), Conquest (e.g. Sadat's visit to Jerusalem) or Coronation (e.g. the Royal Wedding).

⁸ Adopting a historical, social theoretical perspective, Thompson's (1995) central argument is that to understand modernity, we must understand the media, for the media are supplementing or even displacing face to face interpersonal communication within a shared locale as the primary means through which the symbolic character of social life is constructed. In place of such interpersonal communication the media offer mediated interaction, the transformation of publicness and the public sphere, the re-mooring of tradition and a challenge to authority and expertise.

⁹ Montgomery (1991) analyses the devices that manage the tensions between private experience and public broadcasting in the context of radio broadcasts of personal life histories. This is also a feature of talk shows whereby the juxtaposition of discourses of personal experience and expertise are managed using a variety of rhetorical devices (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994).

¹⁰ Other social psychologists of the media have also explored the role of the media in exacerbating the gap between publically expressed opinion and individuals' privately held attitudes (e.g. McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Noelle-Neumann, 1974).