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## Section:

# TEXT AND DISCOURSE LINGUISTICS

## REALITY SHOW AS A TYPE OF MEDIA DISCOURSE (A STUDY OF THE REALITY SHOW *KEEPING UP WITH THE KARDASHIANS*)

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**Abstract.** The article focuses on defining peculiarities of the US reality show as a type of media discourse. Based on a study of the reality show *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, an attempt has been made to determine intralinguistic and extralinguistic factors of creating an image of an ordinary American family in order to attract the public attention.

**Keywords:** media discourse, reality show, *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, American Dream.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

American media have captured the world's ordinary life using such forceful tools as a convincing language, a psychological impact on the audience's consciousness and depicting the life of celebrities as stunning as possible to make us feel the necessity to achieve fame and success as well as to believe in the everlasting American Dream. The latter is represented by the concept 'known for being known' or 'famous for being famous', which is a brand new trend in the US culture. At first the idea of the American Dream was devoted to hard work and great expectations as it was believed that only through these two aspects, one could become wealthy and start living a better life in a more prosperous society. Nowadays the influence of mass media changed the perception of the American Dream phenomenon, though. On TV we observe how people become rich and popular just using the ability to demonstrate their private life, daily routine, and personal misunderstandings.

The aim of our paper is to determine peculiarities of the US reality show as a type of media discourse.

The research is based on the episodes of the reality show *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and the social network profiles of its main participant Kim Kardashian.

To conduct a proper investigation, it is reasonable to use the following methods: *the method of induction* to make a generalization of the most distinctive characteristics combining various isolated elements of discourse in the reality show and Internet profiles of the media personalities, the *methods of analysis and synthesis* in order to characterize the peculiarities of media discourse and then to combine separate elements of discourse into a coherent whole. Moreover, *questionnaires* as a research means help to collect information from respondents concerning the topic under study.

## 2. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The notion of discourse (from Latin *discursus*, meaning “running to and from”) denotes written and spoken communications [7]. The linguistic encyclopedic dictionary interprets *discourse* as a text together with all the extralinguistic factors or the speech that is perceived either as a social act or as a component of people's cognitive processes [2, p. 136]. F. Batsevych defines *discourse* as a type of communicative activity that has different forms (oral, written, and paralingual), occurs within the framework of a particular communication, is regulated by strategies of speakers; a synthesis of cognitive, communicative and extralinguistic (social, psychological, mental) factors [1, p. 138]. Our investigation has to do with the spoken language, that is why *discourse* is viewed from different angles, especially those concerning the informational content of the linguistic material.

In modern society, information has become one of the most powerful means of perception and interpretation of the reality. It can influence people's minds and manipulate their behavior in a way. We suppose that reality programs create the model of thinking and behavior for those who are interested in watching them.

It should be mentioned that very little research has been done on reality shows as a type of media discourse; therefore, we will try to contribute to a better understanding of media discourse from the perspective of American reality shows.

According to T.A. van Dijk, the research on media discourse lacks profound materials and objective assessments. Scholars do not have much to offer those who are interested in a media discourse analysis. The investigations were limited to descriptions of isolated sentences and had nothing to do with whole texts. Only during the 1970s the analysts started to do serious research on media discourse differentiating it from a text. Mass media were first studied from the perspective of such disciplines as sociology and political science. “Indeed, the influence of the media — and their various modalities (a high or low impact) — was reconstructed at a rather high level of abstraction and seldom at the level of the actual texts that would have such influence or the actual recipients and their internal cognitive processing of such texts” [6, p. 3]. The notion of media discourse presupposes not only a linguistic explanation — its impact on the public is still the subject matter of research of humanities and social sciences.

Speaking of media discourse as a linguistic phenomenon, it is considered to be a type of a journalistic style that is the most essential for investigation of linguistic and extralinguistic aspects. It is discourse analysis that deals with this kind of investigation. “Critical discourse analysis is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” [5, p. 352]. In the sphere of media communications, discourse analysis helps to reveal the content of media messages, their contextual parameters, structural characteristics and methods of formation.

Three kinds of media discourse can be singled out: a television discourse, a radio discourse, and a computer-mediated discourse. A radio discourse creates a barrier between a speaker and a hearer since it excludes the possibility to clarify or ask something. A computer-mediated discourse represents conversations in social networking. This type of interaction may be either personal (via e-mail) or public (conferences on different topics) [3]. As for television discourse, which is of primary importance for our research, it expresses cultural, spiritual, social and political aspects of life. Reality television or reality show is one of the types of television discourse that combines all these aspects.

In this research, the notion of *reality show* is viewed in accordance with one of its classifications. “Despite the fact that we all seem to have a notion of what we mean by reality TV, there is not any one definition that would both capture all the existing genres and exclude other forms of programming such as the nightly news or daytime game shows” [4]. This proves once again that the whole notion of reality show is vague and ambiguous. Accordingly, we would like to probe deeper into the matter of this issue.

Reality television often highlights situations and conflicts that are happening during some period of time in the life of main characters. The genre of reality television has greatly transformed the media

environment. Its constant reliance upon relationship themes, risky behavior, and an outrageous content provide contemporary media with models of behavior. People realize that negative behavior does not always have a negative impact on your life, and sometimes it is even awarded. Very often inappropriateness of what is discussed, and exaggeration of facts are perceived by the audience as a matter of fact.

The initial idea of this genre was characterized by the following features:

- a) all events taking place on the spot;
- b) participants being ordinary people;
- c) shooting conditions being as real as possible.

Many viewers believe that all the actions are shot according to some particular script; a lot of scenes are staged and rehearsed; participants are told what to say and how to act. Reality shows use emotional drama to intensify the impact on the audience. Moreover, reality television is considered to be the product of popular culture designed for uneducated, middle-class population whose outlook is limited and whose interests are basically primitive. The reason for this opinion lies in the fact that the events, the language and the behavior of participants are characterized by their down-to-earth attitude towards life, career, personal relationships. So, viewers have an opportunity to identify themselves with the reality show actors and to make a comparison between real life and screen scenes. This blurring of private and public is believed to be the most distinctive feature of reality shows.

Popular culture works just like that: you are losing your own personality trying to fit into the mainstream. Reality television has become one of the most distinctive features of pop culture as the latter standardizes a recipient's way of perception making it common to all the members of the society.

Unfortunately, there is no one and only classification of reality shows but we can divide them into four major groups taking into consideration the reality shows of past years and the ones that are now broadcast on TV:

1. The first one deals with reality shows based on a competitive structure: there is always a participant who wins the game. For instance, *The Real World* started the epoch of reality television and is the longest-running reality series in history.

2. Talent competitions such as *X-Factor*, *American Idol*, *Master Chef*, *America's Got Talent*: taking place each week, this type of reality shows attempts at searching for talented personalities from all over the country and giving them a chance to actualize their American Dream.

3. Relationship shows that depict the procedure of building relationships in front of cameras. For example, *The Bachelor*, *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire*, *Farmer Wants a Wife*, *The Choice*, *The Bachelorette*, *Beauty and the Geek*, *The Big Date*.

4. Reality shows describing daily life of celebrities or other representatives of the Hollywood world, also called *Documentary Soap Operas*. For instance, *Real Housewives*, *The Hills*, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. We are specially interested in this type of reality shows since it demonstrates the way people communicate in the American society, in general, and in American families like the Kardashians, in particular.

*Keeping Up with the Kardashians* is an American reality show focusing on the personal lives of the Kardashian family. The series depicts each step of three sisters Kimberly, Kourtney and Khloe Kardashian, the daily life of their mother Kris Jenner, their brother Rob Kardashian, and their stepfather Bruce Jenner. It also puts emphasis on their half-sisters Kylie and Kendall Jenner as the supporting cast. Being a simple American family, the Kardashians have managed to transform their family business into a brand that is successfully sold all over the globe. From the perspective of the US cultural values, this family is the pure embodiment of the American Dream. Being culturally identified with their Armenian roots, the Kardashians are now recognised, spoken about, but mostly criticized. The way they talk, mainly the usage of harsh expressions and slang words is the subject for further research.

Searching for people's assessment of the American reality shows, we asked twenty Ukrainian students to answer a simple question concerning communication in reality television. In Ukraine the level of information noise is still not that high as, for instance, in the USA, and that is why the

Ukrainian students' perception is somehow clearer and more objective. Moreover, they are not the representatives of the US culture and they do not come under constant pressure on the part of the American media figures. The lack of the US media environment leads to the possibility to form a distinct and well-defined point of view on reality shows that is not dictated by mass media.

The exact question was: what impresses you most in the manner of conversing of social media personalities in US reality shows? The answers to choose from were: a) slang; b) harsh expressions; c) violation of the logical structure; d) your variant.

Out of 20 respondents, 14 chose "harsh expressions", 5 students were sure that it was "violation of the logical structure" that made the discourse of reality shows trivial, one of the students wrote, "the points that are discussed there are trivial and worth nothing". As a result, none of the Ukrainian students chose variant a). Though, we believe that it is slang that creates an authentic atmosphere of a reality show of a particular country. For example, in one of the episodes of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* almost ten slang words were used by different characters:

- *buddy* – a close friend or a person you do not know the name of;
- *kinda* – kind of, rather;
- *freak somebody out* – make somebody be mad at you;
- *LOL* – laugh out loud;
- *ROFL* – roll on the floor laughing;
- *frenemy* – an enemy pretending to be a friend;
- *chilling* – spending time with your friends or relatives;
- *for real* – honestly, sincerely.

Slang words and expressions indicate people's relation to a certain social or age group conveying the elements of identification and individualization. Consequently, slang lexicon in reality shows creates a casual atmosphere that helps to perceive the scenes as the real ones. Lexical peculiarities of reality shows are considered to be the most effective instrument of promoting television programs based on real life of celebrities, for instance, the Kardashian family. As far as the targeting audience of reality shows is the youth, slang is widely used in such programs. Even if you are not acquainted with the series *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, you will definitely recognize the contemporary American discourse style just analyzing the slang expressions mentioned above.

The results of this questionnaire prove that such a meaningful element of the US reality show communication as slang no longer stands out as something new and obscure. The viewers have got used to this manner of conversing since the latter adds a special tone to any contemporary TV show.

This questionnaire can be used not only within the framework of reality television but as a research instrument to investigate different social and linguistic phenomena of mass media, and cinematography where the recipients' opinions matter.

It goes without saying that in the period of globalization and the rapid spread of information, modern technologies play a significant role. Due to mass media the process of integration of world views and cultures has become one of the most discussed issues. The unclear boundary between mentalities of various nations affected the way people form their personal picture of the world and how they perceive new trends in the sphere of communication and interaction on the Internet.

When analyzing the manner of a conversation of a media personality via any social network, the first thing to do is to define a general tendency of their communication. Many modern sociolinguistic researches have tended to focus on the way social personalities express their thoughts and emotions on Facebook, Twitter or even on Instagram. "In a world where the celebrity is hardly ever told "no," a predominately self-centered orientation can occur. This kind of a self-absorbed posture is underwritten by positive feedback from the world" [8].

We have randomly chosen several posts on different Internet profiles of Kim Kardashian, one of the most popular member of the Kardashian Klan, trying to figure out the main strategy of formulating her thoughts, and how it influences the character of the followers' feedback.

1. Kim's photo on Instagram entitled "*Was trying to take a selfie*" has gathered 10,839 comments. The general mode of the feedback was positive, with such words of admiration as *flawless*, *gorgeous*,

*beautiful, pretty, stunning*. However, one-third of the comments was dedicated to criticism of Kim's appearance: *do you ever smile in pictures, plastic, I hate it when you make these faces*.

2. One of the tweets, "For reaching twenty five million instagram followers I am going to post a ton of behind Balmain campaign" received more than one thousand retweets with such comments as *so many people worldwide love you so much, so proud of you, yes queen*.

3. Due to Kim's Facebook page used for promotion the products of Kardashian Beauty and Kardashian Collection, the family brand is becoming more popular and more expensive, as Kim Kardashian has got more than twenty five million followers who represent the growing consumer culture.

The main point of this part of our research is to contribute to such diverse and complicated notion as discourse. We use the live contemporary language taken from social networks as well as from reality shows to get the peculiarities of communication in reality programs. Social networks are used by the main audience of entertaining reality shows; it is the most direct contact to the participants where the words are not edited or censored.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

It should be mentioned that mass media opened up new opportunities of interaction and dialogue placing people closer to their idols. Judging from our research on the social behavior of the reality show characters, we can draw the conclusion that the usage of simple constructions and grammar categories is motivated by the necessity to gain more popularity among the people of diverse backgrounds. Which is, for instance, based on social interaction between the reality show characters and their followers on social networks.

Despite the fact that reality television has a lot of drawbacks, it is one of the best sources for researching media discourse. It contains both spontaneous conversations and compulsory lines required by the script. This combination provides an area for further investigation of reality show communications. The social networks also build the potential basis for interpretation of various tendencies in media discourse. Hence, reality programming that is strongly related to social services gives the opportunity to do a profound research on reality shows as a culturally determined phenomenon, and a television discourse as a substantial type of media discourse.

Moreover, the series *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* permits a study of media discourse of American popular culture representatives. By the way, the reality show creates an image of an ordinary American family that attracts the public attention in the sense that having something in common (the way of conversing, the motives of behavior and solving conflicts) leads to identification with the main characters regardless of certain shooting conditions and circumstances.

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Стаття присвячена особливостям американського реаліті-шоу як типу медіа-дискурсу. На матеріалі реаліті-шоу «Keeping up with the Kardashians» зроблено спробу визначити інтралінгвістичні та екстралінгвістичні чинники створення образу звичайної американської сім'ї з метою привертання уваги публіки.

**Ключові слова:** медіа-дискурс, реаліті-шоу, Keeping up with the Kardashians, американська мрія.