Identities at stake in social interaction : the case of media interviews

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IDENTITIES AT STAKE IN SOCIAL INTERACTION: THE CASE OF MEDIA INTERVIEWS

Within the theoretical framework of social interactionism, this paper deals with the role of identities in the joint construction of action and discourse. Identities are partly made of social cognition (psycho-sociological identities) and verbal units (discursive identities), and constitute therefore decisive resources available, involved, and displayed in every social interaction.

The focus is on the functioning of identities in a particular type of social interaction: media interview. The media interview is a complex practice since it combines two distinct interactive frames with distinct participants and goals: media information and interview. The former engages a journalist together with a collective and anonymous audience with the aim of informing about relevant events of the public sphere. The latter engages an interviewer and a guest in an interactive communication with the aim of making the guest talk freely.

The media interview often leads to interactive misfortunes, depending on whether an unbalanced focus is on the guest or the audience. Three case studies are detailed: a global failure of a media interview, a failure of an interview process, and a failure of an information process.

Keywords: social cognition, professional discourse, interactional frames.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Theoretical framework

In the present paper, I will analyse the opening of three different broadcast interviews within the framework of what is usually called *social discourse analysis* (Van Dijk 1997) or a *social interactionist perspective* on discourse and interaction (Bronckart 1997; Roulet et al. 2001). In a very broad sense, such a perspective assumes the dialogical nature of human practices, and focuses on the role of discourse and interaction in the construction of social realities. Thus *social discourse analysis* takes into account the real stakes of discourse and interaction in the real world, and speaks for the importance of the identity of the participants engaged in an interaction. In that sense, the identity is seen as a leading resource for a co-operative joint-construction of the social reality (Burger 2002). An identity constitutes a complex reality: it is partly made of social cognitions contributing to define the participants of a particular social practice (for example, to be an interviewer and to be a guest engaged in a media interview); but it is also made of talk, which is constituted by verbal units which function as conventional and communicative markers of an identity (for example, the content of a narrative talk provided by a guest and the content of the interviewer's questioning). Such discourse identities might then reveal how shared cognitions shape the ways in which the participants act and organize their discussion, as well as the ways in which they anticipate how their acting and talking will be interpreted[1]. I will address these issues by discussing the identities involved in a particular social practice: media interviews.

1.2. Data and problem

The data used for this analysis are taken from three recent interviews broadcast on the French-speaking Swiss public television (channel TSR2). Each excerpt constitutes the first communicative exchange between the interviewer and his guest just after a media presentation. In each excerpt, the guest is a celebrity: respectively, Balthus the painter

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[1] For a general discussion, see Van Dijk (1997), Charaudeau (1997), Condor & Antaki (1997), Shotter (1994).

(cf. 3.1.1.), François Daulte, a well-known publisher (cf.3.2.1.), and Daniel Vasella, the Chairman and Executive Officer of Novartis (cf. 3.3.1.). As for the interviewers, they are all media-conscious professional journalists. Nevertheless, each excerpt can be considered as expressing a kind of failure in the way the interview is initiated and conducted.

The question I will take up here refers to the means by which the participants carry out the interactive process they are engaged in to define their identities: that is, themselves as an interviewer and as a guest engaged in a media interview. My objective is to show that the reasons underlying the interactive failures the participants face cannot be explained adequately without a clear description of the organization of the *social practice* involved in a media interview, and especially the *identities* endorsed by the participants.

1.3. Identities

As a matter of fact, the participants engaged in a social interaction of any kind endorse different identities which frame the meaning and the relevance of their acting. Thus they are expected to take into account socially defined constraints upon identity, and to perform "themselves" as accountable participants at three different levels: a social, an interactive and a discursive level. Let us consider these aspects in turn.

1.3.1. Social Identities

The participants *bring to* the interaction a *social identity* which is pre-existent and relevant at the present time. In the case of our media interview, the expected social identity of the two main participants can be characterized as "to be a professional journalist" and "to be a celebrity in a certain domain". These identities express a social legitimacy of the participants which constitutes a kind of requirement for the conduct of the interaction. Therefore, such social identities guarantee a background which does not have to be invoked as long as the interaction develops in an appropriate way[2].

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[2] See Shotter & Gergen (1989), Burger (2002), Burger (2001).

1.3.2. Interactive Identities.

In taking part in an interaction, the participants carry out at the same time another identity. More precisely, they *acquire* an *interactive identity*, the actuality and relevancy of which strictly depends on the expected goals and means of the particular interaction. Therefore, such an identity does not last longer than the interaction itself. In the case of media interview, the interactive identity of the two main participants is "to be an interviewer" and "to be a guest". These interactive identities constitute the guidelines of the participants and explain the meaning of their acting and talking.

1.3.3. Discursive Identities.

Crucially, an interaction turns out to expand in a way the participants define together in a joint construction. In the case of media interview, that means not only that they have to act as a socially legitimate interviewer and as a socially legitimate guest, but also that they mutually confirm these complex identities. This matter of fact depends no longer on cognitive expectations, but on effective communication and especially discourse. Thus, the participants endorse a *discursive identity* displayed by verbal units which manifest best the degree of adequacy between expected conducts and talk and the way an interaction is carried out and negotiated in reality[3].

After having proposed these distinctions which argue for the importance and the complexity of the notion of identity, one can turn to a detailed consideration of the social practices involved in a media interview, that is the social expectations ideally shared by the participants in a media interview.

2. Media interviews

A media interview constitutes a complex social practice involving at the same time two different interactive frames with distinct participants and goals, as on the diagram:

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[3] See Burger (2002), Zimmerman (1998), Heritage & Greatbatch (1991).

Media Interview

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  INTERVIEW                                                    │
│                              with                            │
│   ┌──────────────────┐                  ┌──────────────────┐ │
│   │   Interviewer     │  ◄─────────►     │      Guest       │ │
│   └──────────────────┘                  └──────────────────┘ │
├─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┤
│   ┌──────────────────┐                  ┌──────────────────┐ │
│   │    Journalist     │  ──────────►     │     Audience     │ │
│   └──────────────────┘        for        └──────────────────┘ │
│  MEDIA INFORMATION                                           │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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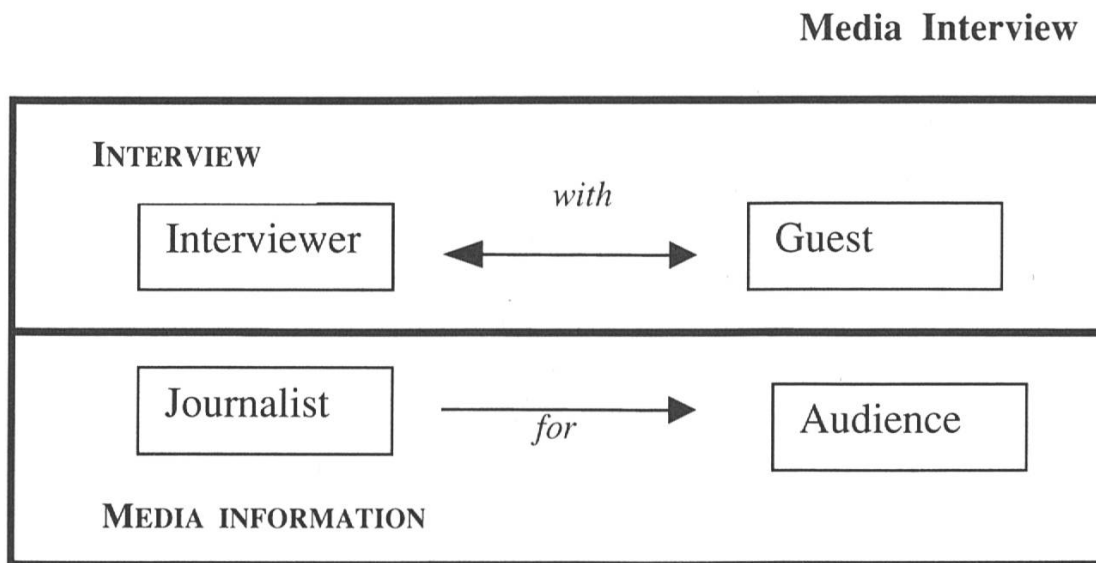
Figure 1: The complexity of media interviews

A media interview implies an interviewer engaged in a talk with his guest with the aim of having him speak rather freely. But a media interview also implies a journalist engaged in a talk for an audience with the aim of informing, that is delivering specific topics of interest through a medium. An adequate description of the complexity of media interviews forces us to consider separately these two interactive frames[4].

2.1. Media information as a social practice

Media information can be described as a social practice which is under paradoxical constraints. On the one hand, media information has a civic function, namely that of informing about the affairs of the public space. It addresses therefore citizens and is involved in the construction of public opinion. But on the other hand, the media are doing business and remain economic actors that sell information. From that standpoint, media information is rather directed at customers in a broad sense and aims at creating customers' loyalty. As on the diagram below, one can define a media information process in considering the goals, the identities, and the expected actions and discursive genres ideally performed by the participants engaged in the interaction.

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[4] Nevertheless, we have to keep in mind that both of the frames are activated at the same time.
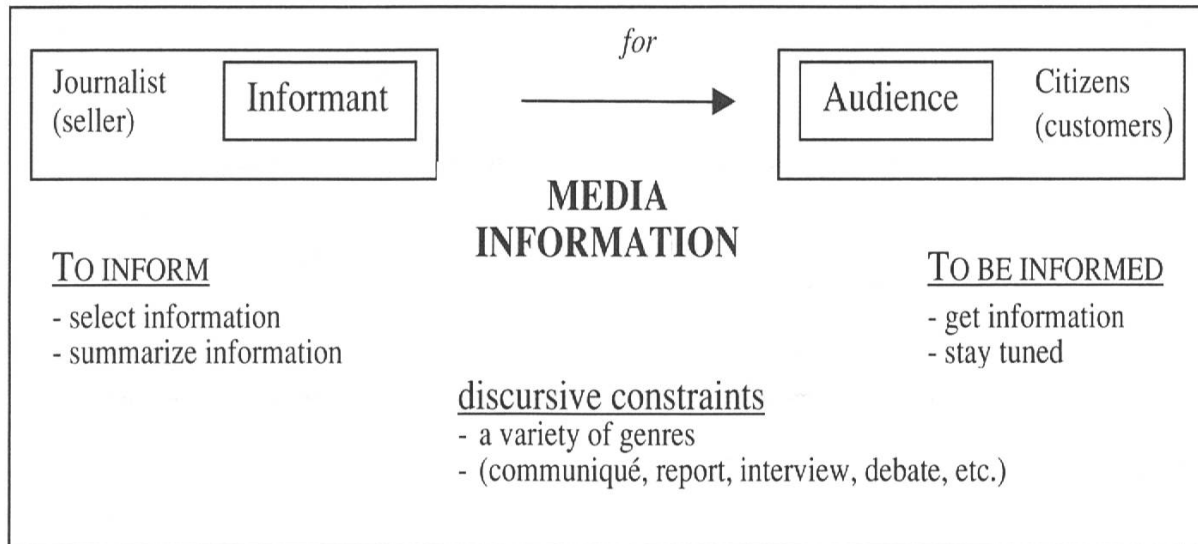
Figure 2: The properties of media information

I call *informant* the spokesperson for a complex media speaker who is in charge of informing its *audience*. To be an *informant* as well as to be part of the *audience* constitute the *interactive identities* of the participants involved in a media information process. These identities are brought into being and best sustained by particular roles: for example, to inform implies at least a selection and a summary of topics in order to attract the audience and make it stay tuned. In our case, the activation and the disconnection of interactive identities are clearly meant by the opening and closing credits of the program. Practically, the participants engage in a uni-directional interaction: that is, the media produce a talk for the audience, as indicated by the single-arrow line on the diagram.[5]

As mentioned earlier, the relevant *social identities* are somewhat paradoxical according to both the civic and the economic function of the

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[5] I follow Jucker (1995) who makes the classical distinction between a "talk for" and a "talk with" relation, that is, an interaction conducted respectively by one party (single-arrow line on the diagram in figure 1) or by several parties at the same time (double-arrow line on the diagram in figure 2).

media. Actually, at the social level, the process engages a *journalist* who is also a *seller* of a particular *media product* together with a collective and anonymous audience defined at the same time by its desire to be informed as *citizens* and as *buyers* of a *media product*.

The newsworthiness of information is an essential constraint of media information. The talk must be about current and real events rather than about fictional and past ones. In that sense, media information should produce a serious institutional talk and avoid elements which make it turn into a playful activity. To talk about an event in this particular way manifests therefore a *discursive identity* characteristic of a media information process. More precisely, in its regular attempt to distinguish facts from comments, media information resorts to a mix of very different genres. That is, depending on whether the media want to stress the "hard facts" or "comment" upon them, information will be achieved through genres privileging the expression of opinions (such as interviews or debates) or through more neutral genres (such as communiqués or reports).[6]

These genres can be analyzed as being themselves complex social practices, involving therefore specific participants' identities, actions and goals. In the broadcasts we are concerned with, media information is linked with an interview process.

2.2. The Interview as a social practice

One can characterize an interview as a social practice which focuses on the discursive expression mainly of one's party, namely what I call the guest party. As a consequence, the media party is commonly allowed to refrain from comments. The diagram below illustrates the properties of an interview ideally performed.

[6] See Jucker (1995), Adam (1997), or Charaudeau (1997).

| Media employee | Interviewer | | *with* | | Guest | Celebrity |

TO PROMOTE A FREE TALK **INTERVIEW** TO TALK FREELY
- request a talk and listen   - accept a talk and speak
- ask questions   - give answers
- « boost » the talk   discursive constraints   - develop opinions
                             - topics referring to the guest
                             - disproportion of turns
                             - genres like «discussion» or
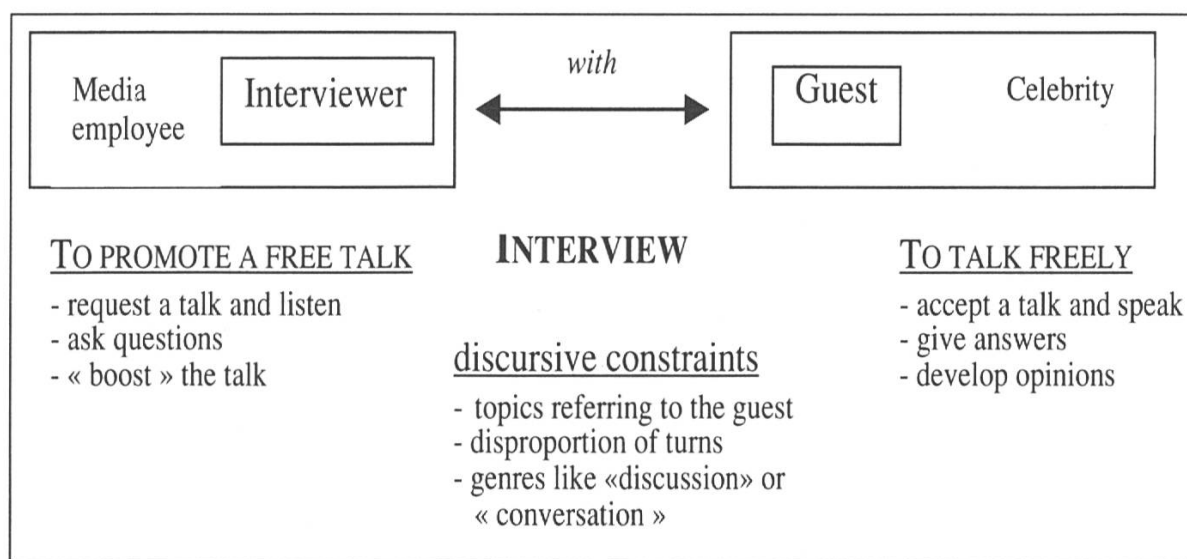   « conversation »

Figure 3: The properties of an interview

I call *interviewer* the participant who systematically questions another one, with the aim of "having him speak freely". I propose to call *guest* the respondent to these questions, that is the one who agrees to develop his opinions for the interviewer. An interviewer is expected to ask personal questions, then to listen to the guest, and to encourage the discussion if needed. As for the guest, he should not initiate a talk but respond and develop his own viewpoint[7].These are the *interactive identities* of the participants who are thus engaged in an interactive communication: each party talks *with* the other (as indicated by the double-arrow line).

The relevant *social identities* of the interviewer and the guest are "to be a professional journalist" and "to be a celebrity in a certain domain". These properties legitimate the interview itself as a media event. Being a professional journalist often constitutes a requirement of the guest's venue as it announces relevant expertise in the conduct of the interaction, namely a respectful behaviour towards the guest. At the same time, being famous constitutes a relevant social identity of the guest as it anticipates the supposed need of the audience for remarkable information about the desire of the public space. A celebrity's interview then becomes a social event the media like give attention to[8]. In this sense, we have to bear in

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[7] See Burger & Filliettaz (in press), Heritage & Greatbatch (1991).
[8] A social event which allows also both the guest and the media to gain some more notoriety, and thus a large audience.

mind that the actual addressee of the talk produced in the interview frame is the absent media audience, even if an interview implies the focus on the interviewer and the guest engaged together.

Considering the foregoing, an interview is a sort of *discussion*, that is, a rather unconstrained discursive genre which actually allows a large set of *discursive identities* to be displayed. More precisely, the interaction is led by the interviewer, who is the one to propose the main topics, but it is left to the guest to express his opinion on the topic or to branch on to some other topic of interest. Frequently, an informal and even a friendly relationship between the participants is manifested by the talk in order to make the media audience feel the privacy of the encounter. This matter of fact is reinforced all the more because interviews commonly take place at the guest's house. Thus the talk develops in relation to very intimate life experiences: that is why narratives are frequent, as well as other similar genres like testimony and confession.

2.3. Media interviews as a joint-construction

Media information and interviews constitute distinguishable social practices. Reconsidering figure 1, we can provide a more detailed diagram (figure 4):
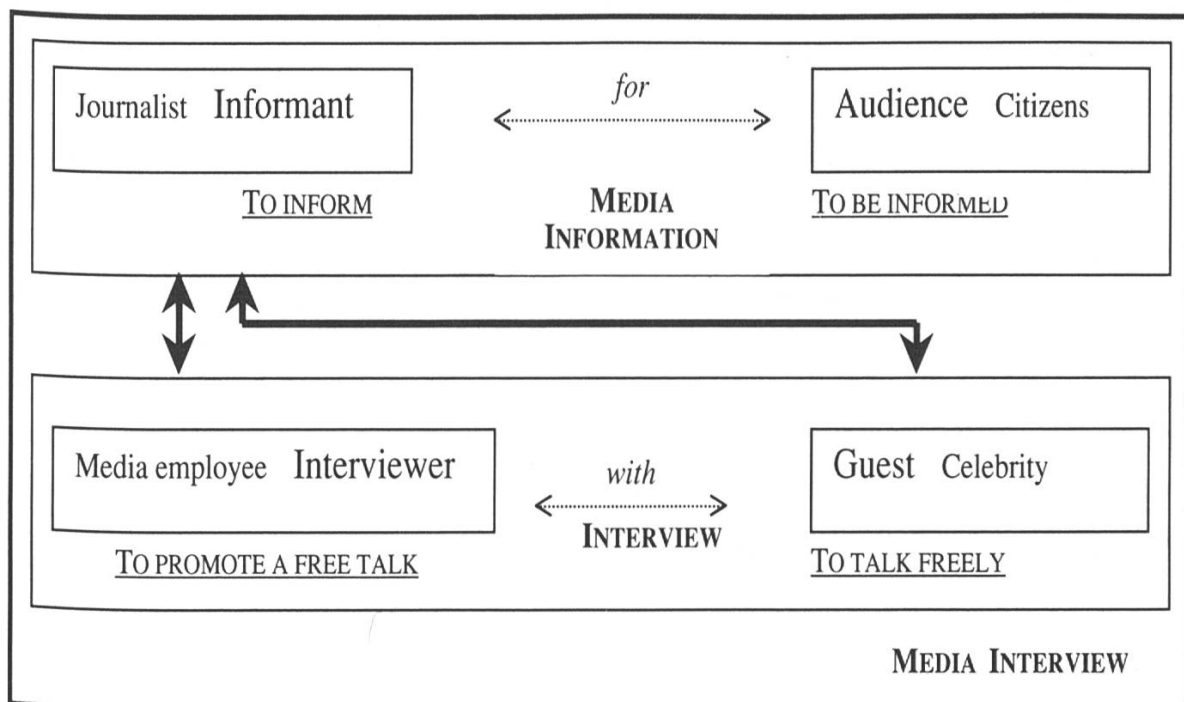

Figure 4: The properties of media interviews

A media interview is a combination which creates a particular event the stakes of which appear to be very difficult to manage for the participants. As they usually are the same person, the *interviewer* involved in a talk with his guest still has to bear in mind that he is also a *journalist-informant* involved in a talk for his audience. As for the *guest* engaged in the interview frame, he perfectly knows he is addressing the audience and endorsing as well an *informant* identity in the media information frame. In terms of interactive performing, it is generally left to the interviewer-informant to lead at the same time the two different relationships, as indicated by the vertical arrow-lines. From this standpoint, a media interview implies *mixed identities* for both the participants, and therefore manifests a constant switch from an interview frame to an information frame, or the other way round, depending on whether the relation to the guest or to the audience is emphasized (see the double arrow-lines on the diagram)[9].

One can detail the complexity of a media interview in taking into consideration the goals of each practice. On the media information side, one can observe that the absent audience constitutes a major constraint on the talk. The relevance of informing implies a selection of topics, but also a constant concern to provide a clear or lucid talk. In that sense, the journalist-informant often intervenes locally in a way which can be an encroachment on the guest's talk[10]. On the interview side, one can observe an opposite constraint on the talk as the interviewer should stand aside to promote the guest's free expression even if it does not necessarily allow a relevant media coverage.

Such a mixed identity which entails acting at the same time as an informant and as an interviewer constitutes a very ambiguous guideline to deal with. But it is also true for the performance of the guest. He should talk to the interviewer only after having being solicited in an interview frame. But he knows that his talk is at the same time reported to the audience in the media information frame. Therefore the guest can at any moment emphasize an identity which displays a media property (him as a media-conscious celebrity) rather than an interview property (him as a cooperative guest).

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[9]In fact, the legitimacy and the skill to initiate and close such frames is what makes an interview, or a debate, or talk-show etc. become a media event.
[10]For instance, reformulating, synthetizing or even making a re-contextualized presentation of certain facts because of the audience.

Considering the foregoing, it seems in any case very difficult for the participants involved in a media interview to follow a unique guideline. Frequently, media interviews lead to noticeable failures due to a framing mismatch, that is an emphasis on an irrelevant identity by one of the participants.

3. Case studies

I will now turn to a more detailed analysis focused on the feeling of an interactive misfortune linked with the display of (un)expected identities, and consider the verbal units as the expression of such failures. Three different case studies will be taken into account. First, I will briefly comment on the global failure emerging from a media interview. Secondly, I will focus on two opposite case studies: the failure of a media-information process due to an excessive consideration of the guest by the interviewer. And then, on the contrary, the failure of an interview process due to an acute media consciousness of the guest who does not talk despite the interviewer's solicitations.

3.1. The global failure of a media-interview sequence

The excerpt of the interview of Balthus the painter by Frank Peel, a professional journalist, can be considered as a global failure emerging from both the media process and the interview process[11]:

3.1.1. Balthus (painter) and Frank Peel (journalist), TSR2, 2000[12].

Balthus (guest):	Did you ever go to Ro to Rome?
Peel (interviewer):	yes (.) I have been to Rome many times
Balthus (guest):	yes (.) many times
Peel (interviewer):	many times (.) it's a wonderful place
Balthus (guest):	wonderful place
Peel (interviewer):	wonderful place

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[11] For a detailed analysis of this excerpt see Burger & Filliettaz (in press).
[12] The program was broadcast in English on the French channel. I use the following transcription notations: (.) (..) indicate appropriately timed pauses; underlining indicates overlapping talk; and material in [square brackets] indicates transcriber's commentary regarding non-verbal events.

Balthus (guest):	too much traffic now
Peel (interviewer):	sorry?
Balthus (guest):	too much traffic
Peel (interviewer):	too much traffic
Balthus (guest):	yes
Peel (interviewer):	yes well I'm afraid that's everywhere (.) everywhere now (..) and hum mm nobody has an answer to that nobody knows what to do about it
Balthus (guest):	no

This sequence of interaction reveals the construction of only a pseudo-interview frame. Indeed, the participants perform and validate reverse interactive identities: the expected guest acts as an interviewer, and the other way round, the expected interviewer acts as a respondent, which constitutes one of the role identities of the guest. The trouble with Frank Peel, that is the interviewer, is manifested by particular discourse identities: on four occasions, his talk echoes the painter's words. This matter of fact possibly constitutes an implicit desire to create (more than to restore) an interview relationship as it stops the progression of the information. But at the same time, such an echoing talk appears to be inconsistent with a social identity: that of being a professional journalist engaged to his audience with the aim of informing.

As for the guest, one can say that his interactive identity as a pseudo-interviewer tends to emphasize a relevant social identity, that is, his fame. More precisely, the idea of being a celebrity being interviewed - that is to speak freely - possibly allows the display of discourse identities of any kind, even those that clearly anchor topics of small talk like "go to Rome" or "too much traffic". From this standpoint, the discourse identities fixed by both the participants in a joint-construction are not relevant in a media-information frame.

Consequently, the data seem to show a global failure of a media interview. The interview frame is hard to fix because the social identity of the guest seems to force the interviewer to accept locally the mismanagement of the interview; but no relevant talk is carried out for the audience in the information frame. That is, the two relationships supporting the two social practices the participants are engaged in turn out to fail at the same time.

3.2. The failure of a media-information process

Let us consider another sequence where the failure is located in only one frame, the media-information frame, when the other frame - the interview frame - is excessively marked. François Daulte, a well-known Swiss publisher, talks with the journalist Bertil Galland. The excerpt is also taken from the first interview sequence after a media presentation.

3.2.1. François Daulte (publisher) and Bertil Galland (journalist), TSR2, 1998[13].

Galland 1 (interviewer):	What about France ?
Daulte (guest):	I did not want to choose between Switzerland, my father's country, and France, my mother's country.
Galland 2 (interviewer):	so you never became a naturalized Frenchman (..)
Daulte (guest):	I never became a naturalized frenchman (.) which I could have done of course easily
Galland 3 (interviewer):	member of the Institute hum associated hum (..) with your publishing house based at the same time in Lausanne and in Paris, you always stayed with the Swiss passport (..)
Daulte (guest):	I always stayed with the Swiss passport (..)
Galland 4 (interviewer):	But what an attachment to France (..)
Daulte (guest):	But what an attachment to France (..) and eventually hum my vocation for (.) and I don't say it lightly (.) certainly dates from those times in Montpellier where I spent my Easter or summer vacations very often at my grandmother's house before the war and my grandmother almost every Sunday brought me to the museum (etc.)

[13]The program was broadcast in French (my translation).

One can feel a surprising effect produced by this sequence of interaction. All responses to the questions asked by the interviewer begin with a simple echo of the last words pronounced with the same intonation. In addition, most of those responses by the guest are purely and simply brought down to these short expressions before a consistent development of talk is finally provided. This kind of «parrot syndrome» entails the destruction of a media information frame.

3.2.2. Deconstructing a media-information frame

Carrying out a media-information process means to emphasize the role of an informant-journalist engaged in a talk for the audience. It implies therefore a focus on the newsworthiness of information rather than on the promotion of a guest's talk. But one can observe in this sequence of interaction a minimization of the informant-journalist identity and, on the contrary, a maximization of the interviewer identity.

In other words, if an adequate interview frame is created by the questioner, the evidence of the media information is very low, as if the interviewer and his guest forget that they are also involved together with an audience of television viewers. The broken arrow-lines of the diagram below show this unbalanced conduct which is due to both the interviewer and the guest.
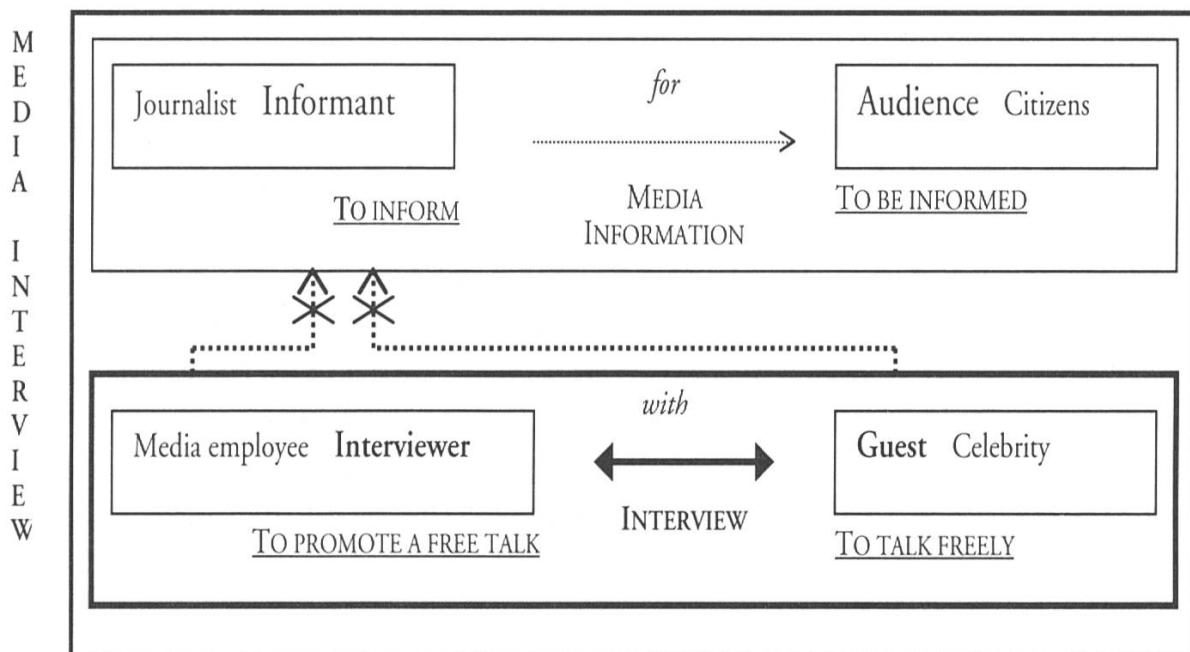

Figure 5: The failure of a media-information process

Acting as an interviewer entails asking questions, but it leads first to expressing statements framing an ideal answer. Such an interactive identity is clearly endorsed in this sequence of interaction and manifested by specific discourse identities: each move of the interviewer remains an implicit question which allows best the global goal of an interview, that is to promote an unconstrained talk of the guest. As the "questioner" shows a great consideration of the guest - in spite of the lack of development of the talk - one can say that he keeps on displaying himself excessively as an *interviewer*, and constructs therefore a strong *interview frame*.

Instead of this tactic, the interviewer could have emphasized one of his relevant media identities, namely being an informant engaged to an audience (interactive identity), or a professional journalist employed by a specific media enterprise(social identity). In that sense, the interviewer could have displayed typical discourse identities in order to anchor the talk in a media information frame: reformulate a question, to request a development or to ask for clarification. From this standpoint, only the third move of the interviewer can be considered as marked by an informant-journalist identity: he speaks for the guest and provides alone relevant informations to the audience.

The guest also contributes to the deconstruction of the media information frame. He does not develop his talk, but without declining the interviewer's repeated solicitations. That is, the guest's communicative behaviour is rather that of a restraint, as if he aligns with the interviewer's excessive consideration, and thus confirms a strongly marked interview frame at the expense of a media information frame.

3.3. The failure of an interview process

One can now briefly consider the reverse case study. It is a sequence of interaction where the failure can be located again in only one frame, but this time in the interview frame, when the boundaries of the other frame - the media-information frame - seem clearly marked. Daniel Vasella, the Chairman and Executive Officer of Novartis, talks with Pierre Stücki, a professional journalist. Like the other media interviews, the data below is taken from the first interview sequence after a media presentation.

3.3.1. Daniel Vasella (Novartis' CEO) and P. Stücki (journalist), TSR 2, 1998[14].

| Stücki (interviewer): | two years ago (.) when you became the likely candidate to steer the Novartis ocean liner (.) sincerely (.) didn't you have a moment's hesitation? (.) a desire to move back? |
Vasella (guest):	no (..) [silence and broad smile]
Stücki (interviewer):	did the magnitude of the task not alarm you? (.) what such a titanic merger involved?
Vasella (guest):	no (..) [silence and same broad smile]

In this sequence of interaction, obviously, the guest has no desire to talk. But as far as he is concerned, it seems that the very short answers he provides constitute the most relevant responses for an audience of television viewers even if the commentary is mostly unadapted to an interview frame.

3.3.2. Deconstructing an interview frame

Carrying out an interview process means to emphasize the relationship between an interviewer and a guest. Consequently, the interviewer should minimize the concern with the newsworthiness of information (which constitutes the major constraint of a media-information process) and the guest should accept to provide a sufficiently developed talk (which constitutes the goal of an interview process). From this standpoint, one can observe in the above sequence a specific kind of failure of an interview frame: the interviewer himself accepts the mismatch for he validates the guest's very laconic answers. That is, the interviewer tries to make the most of the guest's apparent uncooperativeness in order to benefit the media-information frame. The broken arrow-lines of the diagram below shows this particular matter of fact.

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[14] The program was broadcast in French (my translation).

Figure 6: The failure of an interview process
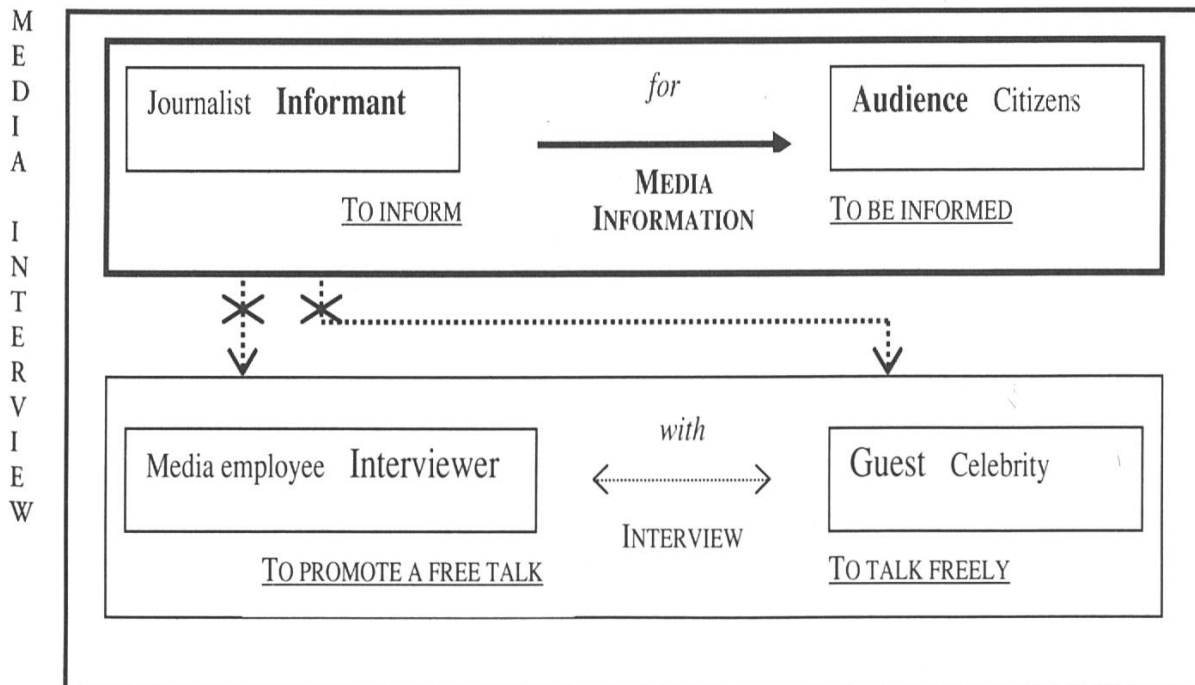
When going back to the data, one can observe that the interviewer makes a rather coherent attempt to create an interview frame. He asks questions after having expressed statements which frame the answer. Typically, the statements formulated twice by the interviewer anchor a complex discourse topic "you", that is the guest himself, and create therefore a link between an interactive identity (to be a guest) and a minimal discourse identity (the pronoun "you"). The statements thus function at the same time as a theme and as an encouragement to talk about oneself (social identity), which allows a wide range of discourse identities.

As a matter of fact, the guest's very short and categorical answers emphasized by a broad smile minimize the boundaries of an interview frame. Instead of talking, which is the expected behaviour, the guest is really performing a show. He is literally exposing himself in front of the camera and therefore he steps out of the interview frame and moves directly into the other activated frame, namely the media frame. In other words, the guest endorses another *interactive identity*, that of an informant addressing the audience of television viewers.

From that standpoint, one can argue that the guest emphasizes his relevant *social identity*, namely to be a celebrity. More precisely, the guest seems to express a desire to fit together a social dimension, that is, him as an efficient manager, and an interactive constraint, that is, to talk about oneself. In that sense, the repeatedly laconic answers constitute the most adequate acting which suits the interviewer too. As a "questioner", he puts himself in a shade in order to place the guest in the glare of the media spotlights. Consequently, both of the participants reveal a strong media consciousness, and the failure located on an ad hoc basis in the interview frame has a rather postive effect on the broadcast[15].

4. Concluding comments

In this presentation, I have tried to link general considerations regarding *media interviews* as social practice with the description of different *types* of interactive misfortunes encountered by the participants of *particular* broadcasts. The main idea is that the participants are constrained to define and negotiate their identity at different levels in order to dispaly "themselves" as engaged precisely in media interviews.

What comes out of the analysis is the leading role of identities as cognitive and linguistic resources which frame and explain the acting of the participants engaged in an interaction. In this sense, identity constitutes one of the issues to take into consideration in bridging the gap between interaction and cognition in linguistics[16].

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