

Reclaiming oral discourse on television

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- *Our broadcasting media progressively relinquish oral language in their search to control messages and to express information accurately. They do so via highly effective technological tools such as the teleprompter, but the price that must be paid in order to achieve this has been the dehumanisation of communication and a certain deception of the public. We pretend that we are perfectly informed machines because we are capable of saying the texts we read without making mistakes, but the use of technology that allows us to read what we are saying by means of a screen or paper has blurred our capacity to communicate spontaneously and has made us give up a part of the empathy we are able to establish when we simply explain what is happening to people, as we would do to those around us. This article considers the price of reclaiming orality in audiovisual language.*

Keywords

Audiovisual discourse, television quality, incidence of technology, spontaneity, teleprompter.

These are personal reflections on an experience that has allowed me to reclaim, in a news programme called *La nit al dia*, a way of telling the news that technological facilities have gradually been altering. Renouncing the use of any technological "prop", such as the teleprompter, has allowed me to reclaim the oral language that, today, on radio and television, is generally assisted or conditioned by the printed word, previously drafted in order to be spoken but inevitably read. This will therefore not be a theoretical article but a practical extension of the reflections I was able to make at the time in these very *Quaderns del CAC* regarding the concept of quality applied by media directors that also affect news messages (Terribas, 2002) and in the *Informe de la comunicació a Catalunya 2003-2004* on the details of how television information is produced in the present-day context and how judgement and spontaneity have been constricted (Terribas, 2005).

When technology makes us lose humanity

The loss of orality in audiovisual discourse can be explained in technological terms. The case presented in this article shows how technology allows greater ease and control of what we say via oral media but also how this control and ease have, in some cases, become a kind of communicative barrier more typical of the era before radio existed, i.e. the distance created by a language designed to be read but not to be spoken.

One of the great values of the so-called Marconi era, with the appearance of radio, was the recovery of orality and the democratisation of universal access to communication. With radio and, later on, with television, those people who felt alien to the dynamics of the printed word regained a communication tool that allowed them to take part in the

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world. They didn't need to read or write: they listened. The value of listening and understanding, of quickly decoding oral language, everyday language, information, news, comments, helped them to take part in a reality that had, until then, been confined to newspapers or books, with access that was not entirely free of charge and, above all, with implications of culturisation and literacy that could inevitably lead to resistance or discomfort. This democratising feature of radio and television led to the great boom in the broadcasting media and to these media achieving huge audiences right up to the present day, while the press has enjoyed much less coverage. The direct language of radio and television means that the effort required to decode messages is less than that involved in reading a newspaper. For this reason, it is paradoxical that, when technology has allowed improvements to be introduced, it has created new distances between oral discourse and audiences.

This would be the case of the teleprompter, the machine embedded in the camera that means you can read a previously written text on a glass pane, without moving your eyes away from the viewers' gaze. This tool, translated quite simply on the radio to some sheets of paper in front of the speaker, means that the speaker no longer trusts the guide-lines given by the brain. We live in a world where we constantly try to cushion our slip-ups. Technology allows us to do this and it's justifiable to make use of it, and even necessary, to be precise, to say what we mean, not to make a mistake. But we must admit that this quest for perfection, for accuracy, often makes us lose the naturalness with which the brain and emotions connect to explain things to those around us and, consequently, also makes us lose the humanity of error, as well as constructing a false image of perfection that does not correspond with reality. For those of us who share the profession of bringing news to society, technology helps us pretend that we master absolutely everything, a background that does not correspond with the

training we have, as well as a kind of imposed safety net. Technology manages to blur personality, with all its strengths and weaknesses. In some way, it homogenises the person and makes them aseptic, supported by the printed pane of glass, passing on to society a discourse designed with the certainty that it will be read. Without underrating the many advantages of teleprompters, I believe that, on the other side of the scales, are two fundamental factors: the sender's loss of empathy with the receiver and the sender's loss of orality in transmitting the message.

The sender's loss of empathy with the receiver can be overcome by using non-verbal language, often artificial and studied, with gestures and facial expressions. But the key is in how we say the news, in how we tackle the discourse at any given time, depending on the latest piece of information or image we have seen. Empathy also comes from the speaker's gaze attempting to find the "eye" of the camera, where inevitably we find a text with written lines that are read from left to right and from top to bottom, that hinder this search from one side of the camera to the other. We will return to this point.

The loss of orality in sending the message is evident. The exercise is simple. It's a question of suppressing the teleprompter when broadcasting a news item and seeing how differently the journalistic discourse would be structured when it is spoken, explained, without the protection of the printed word. There are oral resources that foment understanding, emphasis, that are very difficult to predict in written language. However, it is also true that, in oral discourse without a safety net, the brain fabricates spaces for thought that are often uncomfortable for those listening, as they are no longer accustomed to this.¹

These two losses are the main reasons that have led me to renounce one of the softest cushions in modern television, where the work of prior writing allows you to concentrate on how you present and captivate, without the brain

1 Recently, a viewer of *La nit al dia* sent an irate and indignant email to the programme because the presenter had unwittingly used "ah... ah...", hesitating before starting some sentences. This unattractive resource (which allows the brain some time to find the right words) is not very frequent in the formal oral language of the media because it has been lost, basically because the media are now based on reading off a screen. When we speak, we all use props to think, "oasis" words that allow us to structure the discourse, but in an environment where discourse is read, this characteristic of orality disappears and, when it does exist, it surprises and even bothers some people.

having to worry so much about what is being said, because this has already been written. And below I recount one of the many possible stories about the experience of wishing to reclaim oral language to provide the greatest opportunity for empathy between the sender and the maximum connection between the brain and emotions at the time of speaking about and interpreting reality.

Reclaiming spontaneous control of discourse

When the director of TVC (Televisió Catalunya) at that time, Joan Oliver, suggested I should do a news programme on channel 33, I expressed my desire to renounce teleprompters, a decision which he immediately shared because he had also done the same during his time as director and anchorman for the morning magazine programme *Bon dia, Catalunya*. It was, however, awkward working without teleprompters in a news programme. Dynamics of time control had led to teleprompters being systematically used, but I was lucky to have, right from the start, the belief, agreement and complicity of the person who had previously directed *La nit al dia* and is now head of news, Rosa Marqueta. This is no banal detail: the everyday dynamics of the news has led to a dependency on this instrument that allows, on the one hand, the collective control of the news discourse, previously written and revised and, on the other hand, the certainty that, when broadcasting the information, anchors would not depend exclusively on their discursive skills and their background concerning the news items. That's why renouncing an instrument that allows this dual security of content control and accuracy in the broadcast was risky and, at least, uncomfortable, because it meant breaking a habit that had been acquired and unquestioned to date. Moreover, since teleprompters were first introduced, the great majority of television programmes have used them, whether or not they are news programmes. I have had previous experiences on television of the usefulness of teleprompters when the accuracy of the discourse has led to excellent results (the case of Miquel Calçada, Mikimoto, in *Persones humanes*, has always seemed to me the most effective example and has become a model for later formats). The teleprompter is also an extraordinarily useful tool for timing with delicate staging. For example, Joaquim M.

Puyal, in *Un tomb per la vida*, only used it to cut to advertising and to synchronise the discourse with the music. And it is naturally valuable in the news, where timing is fundamental with regard to the breakdown and a news item cannot be introduced that might last between 20 seconds and 1 minute depending on how inspired the presenter is. So it should be clear that giving up teleprompters is not to deny their usefulness but is a desire to reclaim the oral nature of language in a programme where timing is not essential, and the degree of communication between sender and receiver, i.e. the degree of empathy, in my opinion, is fundamental in a night-time complementary news programme that does not have to provide a machine-like or automated attitude in any way.

So, although renouncing this tool was nothing extraordinary, it was at least surprising for some people on the editing team, who also use the teleprompter as a tool to be able to guarantee consensus in the criteria used to explain the news. At the same time, giving up teleprompters also partly entailed losing control of the content and losing guaranteed perfection, accuracy and security in what was said, a risk that we were prepared to take in order to achieve something that, I believe, is always more valuable: communication with the receiver without barriers. What we know is expressed; what we have doubts about, flourishes; when we make a mistake, we acknowledge it. Orality without the glass pane passes on real knowledge, with the weaknesses inherent in the speech of each and every person and this, for me, was a value and it still is today.

The decision to give up the teleprompter was therefore simply a desire to regain spontaneous control of how information was communicated and of oral language in the way it comes out of the brain. It also represented a personal challenge because it forces you to take on the information with more context and more data in order to be able to improvise, if necessary, at each point in the discourse and as the news item demands and, therefore, in the long run, it nurtures the brain, nourishes it, exercises the muscle - and that, so doctors say, is healthy.

The necessary consensus of discourse

Teleprompters have made the work of professionals easier in several ways, but the main factor among all these advan-

tages is that they allow agreement concerning discourse. They have given communicative work as a whole a coherence that has allowed agreement as to the way in which we explain each news item to the audience. So as not to give up this advantage, the breakdown for *La nit al dia* (the instrument that contains the order and content of the information with the duration, text and production instructions) includes the script previously written by the person responsible for presenting the whole or part of the programme, i.e. what we believe we must say about the news item. This content is available to the whole editing team to ensure that everyone is aware of and can specify the content and, if necessary but while the programme is live, these are the reference notes that are, however, not reproduced exactly. When the camera light comes on, the news item comes out of the brain, more or less faithfully reproducing the text but, above all, with spontaneous language, non-verbal language (gestures, position, facial expressions) that would be usual if we were explaining it to someone in front of us. This absence of the interposed glass pane with writing allows us to carry out this spontaneous exercise practically from scratch to convey the information to those watching us, having to reflect and agree on the content previously (data, names, positions, order, absence of qualifications, etc.) in order to maintain the thoroughness and the distance required for a news programme. It therefore allows us to regain spontaneity in how the information is said but, however, maintaining the required consensus with the rest of our colleagues (who delegate to us the responsibility of explaining the news at certain points) in order to agree common criteria that make us all co-responsible.

The safety net is represented by the fact that the anchor, in this case, has been able to discuss the basic concepts, the information that will be given to viewers, with the specialists from each section (society and territory, international, politics, economics, culture, meteorology, sports), so they have been able to pass on their judgement and opinions, ceding responsibility once the minimum required content has been agreed, so that everyone feels comfortable with it, irrespective of the way in which it is finally conveyed to viewers. Improvisation must be in how this is said, expressed, in how the discourse is accentuated, not in the essential concepts of the news item and even less so in classifying the news, the work of journalists specialising in

editorials or conversation-based programmes. Consequently, we shall now look at the particularities caused by the absence of a teleprompter and reclaimed orality.

Gestures

Reading is not the same as explaining. The brain reads lineally, from left to right and from top to bottom, and explaining narrates, looking into the eyes of the other or the eye of the camera. These are different actions, although very often the act of reading directly what is written on the camera screen is imperceptible for those watching, but not for the person doing it, and this is the key point. Whoever is reading, reads, and whoever is explaining or narrating, explains or narrates. And this person is completely aware of the difference because the person who knows he or she is reading forgets about their body or, if they don't forget, they apply movements with the hands and arms, even with the facial muscles, that become systematic props, non-spontaneous, because the action of reading does not require gestures if it is not a dramatised reading. How different is an actor when acting out a text than when simply declaiming or reading from the stage. He or she cannot take their eyes off the page, no matter how well they enact the text, and their head is dependent on reading, which acts as a brake to acting or tempers it. Something similar happens, albeit on a different scale, with professionals reading from a teleprompter when presenting the news, or even when doing a programme that is not the news but that makes use of this tool, as mentioned previously.

With teleprompters we have also lost the art of gestures, naturalness and the capacity to communicate body language, which also communicates and helps to build ties (or to destroy them). The news may make us tense, may relax us, may generate more or less intensity in us that is often expressed through the hands, the body position. Our body is an essential communication tool on television. Interposing a table, we cut our expressive capacity in half. When we subject it to reading, any gesture accompanying the voice forms part of a facial choreography that is all too often rehearsed and controlled, because it cannot be spontaneous, given that the brain is focusing on another activity.²

Without being aware of it, the act of reading has made us lose the force associated with oral language, which is also non-verbal language. Giving up reading also means helping the body to construct the discourse, to change the body's posture depending on the news item, not systematically but spontaneously, letting the brain coordinate the content with the gestures in order to make them more sincere.

In general, if we observe the stances of presenters with regard to the news, we will notice that smiles correspond to information on culture, sports and the weather (providing bad weather has not led to a tragedy). On the other hand, a serious or aseptic face is maintained when the information is international, political, economic or social. Smiles are used for news items that are supposedly less significant. It's the part of the programme for relaxing, even when the sports perhaps involve a social or economic swindle or when culture talks about a theatrical representation of a dictator's atrocities. They are automatic gestures that we apply without realising that the very essence of orality lies precisely in when the brain and the body synchronise all by themselves in order to find the suitable nuance for the tone or content of the news item. If we read, this exercise in spontaneity in gestural language, is not sufficiently sincere.

Spontaneity

Reclaiming oral discourse that comes from previously digested or produced information allows us to incorporate perceptions, recent data or sensations at the time of saying the news item. One example that often happens to us in a format such as *La nit al dia* is where the news item coincides with the presence of guests to the programme and we therefore automatically get the impact on their presence and, consequently, their reaction. So it often alters the result or way in which we go on. An example: during the preparation, we think about how the guest will be presented, we structure a presentation in line with the content of the preceding news item, which is logical and also makes the guest feel integrated (or alert, depending on

the case). But it often happens that the person, being already prepared for their appearance, speaks, explains, contributes ideas. One advantage of trusting improvisation in discourse is that it often allows us to include these spontaneous comments or ideas that have also come from our guests, which enrich the discourse. It is a question of trusting the other person and, above all, of trusting the intuition of that moment in order to communicate more frankly what is happening inside, while viewers cannot see us. Making them a part of the process increases empathy and turns the studio into an extension of their homes where, at that time of night, it is vital to construct a sense of complicity to keep everyone awake. Surely this kind of attitude would actually be more difficult to handle, and even impossible, on a prime time news programme, given that the time of day and pace are different.

Information sources

Reclaiming orality by giving up reading off the screen forces us to work language from another dimension. Here we turn to the services of the Department of Linguists of *Televisió de Catalunya*, which provide us with their opinion concerning how to combat the bad habits of written language. But the origin of these bad habits transferred to orality is clearly caused by the way in which the information is handled and passed on via the media. In this point we also find a loss of orality in the quest for information.

We journalists have stopped talking while we work. We find everything we need in front of a screen. When we prepare information, we are dependent on already written sources; written news items from agencies, press releases from institutions, information contained in dossiers or in online or printed newspapers. These are our primary sources of information. The Internet and direct access to data have also allowed us to give up a fundamental source: discourse expressed via telephone or in face-to-face conversations. We are increasingly less used to looking for confirmation via the voice. We wait for written messages,

2 The scientific and informative studies of lecturer Sebastià Serrano on non-verbal language applied to this consideration are pertinent, as well as the thoughts of Joan Bellés (1999) on how to give information.

the confirmation that does not create work, that comes to us. And we don't use telephones. We live off writing and we reproduce writing. We should also reflect on this dependence that distances us even a little more from oral language. We journalists have stopped talking to the people involved in the news: due to laziness, lack of resources, the ease of press offices that already send us what we need, due to precarious working conditions that do not provide us with the time to inform ourselves... We journalists talk little and, because we have stopped talking, we have lost communicative skills, a richness of language, a vital tool of our profession, as vital as a non-stick pan for a cook.

The consequence of this dependence is also an excessive use of often complex, technical language that comes directly from documents provided by press offices and which we reproduce word for word, without considering how intelligible it is. So we help even more to distance the simplicity of oral language and we give up translating information into understandable language.

The consequence of all this is that progress and the pressures of time, efficiency and technological innovation lead us, perhaps unconsciously, to fundamentally give up the essence of the audiovisual media: the use of oral discourse. We have subjected our professional practices to the automatic restrictions of the written word, sometimes to the complexity of a literary text, and this reduces, especially in the area of information, our empathy and credibility. Automatism distances us from the viewer and turns us into aseptic readers of data coming from texts written on a screen. Technology provides us with a security that deadens our brain and, what might be worse, makes us lose the essence of the medium: the capacity to make someone feel that we are explaining whatever the item is directly to them and in their own language. However, the brain's accuracy and precision is not necessarily incompatible with emotions and human communication skills.

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