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Realisation of Bracket Signals in British, American and Georgian Talk Shows

**Abstract** 

This paper deals with special signals which show that parts of the message are not right on-line with the message of the moment. On the basis of talk shows, these signals are examined according to setting, communicants' roles and culture. After a thorough study of linguistic and empirical data, verbal, non-verbal and paraverbal bracket signals have been classified; as a result, verbal and non-verbal signals have been

singled out as initiators of bracket constructions.

The study has revealed that bracket signals can be initiated by the speaker himself or by another person or they can be provoked by an external noise, fact or listener's reaction. Correspondingly, two groups of bracket signals can be distinguished: bracket signals initiated by the speaker and bracket signals initiated by

external factor.

Bracket signals are also classified according to their function and the following groups have been singled out: 1) showing opinion, 2) apologizing; 3) showing gratitude; 4) specifying something; 5) repairing; 6) giving advice; 7) asking for silence; 8) expressing emotion.

**Key words**: bracket signal, talk show, side-sequences.

1. Introduction

The talk show as a face-to-face discourse type is a relatively recent and an insufficiently explored area of pragma-linguistic studies. Although a number of scholars have lately devoted their attention to this particular type of media communication (Ilie, 1999; Mittel, 2003; Penz, 1999; Tolson, 2001), bracket signals

have not been researched yet in talk shows of the three cultures (British, American and Georgian).

This work introduces the realisation of bracket signals cross culturally on the examples of British, American and Georgian talk shows. As is known, in all communication there must be signals to show that parts of the message, "side-sequences", are not right on-line with the message of the moment. Goffman calls

these *bracket signals*. The brackets are like instructions for putting the ongoing talk on hold so that you can return to it later (Hatch, 1992: 26).

The aim of this paper is to explore a) the realisation of bracket signals in English (British and American) and Georgian talk shows; b) types of verbal and nonverbal signals used; c) functions of bracket constructions; and d) shift of target audience during the bracket constructions.

#### 2. Methodology

The approach taken here draws on research in discourse analysis (Brown & Yule, 1983), pragmatics (Brown & Levinson, 1987), sociolinguistics (Goffman, 1979) as well as media studies (Tolson, 1991; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994; Timberg, 2002).

In order to reveal overlaps and differences between the three cultures, the study presents comparative as well as contrastive methods of analysis of British, American and Georgian talk shows.

Data collection and analysis:

The empirical data embraces an equal number of British, American and Georgian talk shows viz.:

British Talk shows: The Graham Norton show; The Alan Titchmarsh Show; Loose Women.

American Talk Shows: The Late Night with Conan O'Brian; The Ellen DeGeneres Show; The View.

Georgian Talk Shows: The Vano's Show; Nanuka's Show; Dghis Show.

The selection of the empirical material was often dictated by practical reasons, in particular availability. The material I have examined is made up of transcripts of the above mentioned talk shows. Various websites have been used for collecting empirical data. While watching the programmes, transcripts have been made which were later used for analysis. It should be emphasised that together with transcripts I had to watch the talk shows several times as bracket signals include non-verbal ones which could not be included in total in the transcript. During the research the visual side has been highlighted as well to illustrate nonverbal bracket signals.

#### 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Bracket Open Signals

After a thorough study of the linguistic literature (Hatch, 1992) and empirical data, verbal, nonverbal and paraverbal bracket signals have been distinguished. Correspondingly, there has been singled out verbal and nonverbal signals that start the bracket constructions and/or close them. The study has shown that in the British talks shows the following types of bracket open signals are used:

#### **Verbal signals** (by the way, oh, well):

(1) Graham: This is sure, don't worry. By the way, (looks away from guests and gazes the audience) Twihearts don't worry. We are talking about Twilight. We'll be talking about twilight, (shifts eye contact and gazes at the guest again) but first let's talk about your new movie "Snow-white and Huntsman" (The Graham Norton Show, May 12, 2012).

In the given excerpt (1) the host inserts a side-sequence and in addition changes the addressee. Verbal (special phrase) and nonverbal (gaze shift) signals are used as a bracket open signal. These signals mark not only the aside, but by changing eye contact and gazing at other people a listener receives a signal for who the bracket construction is for.

#### As for **nonverbal bracket open signals** they are:

- 1) eye contact. The empirical data has shown different eye contacts that mark asides.
- a) Gazing at another person or thing a host or a guest changes his or her target audience prior to the bracket construction, gazes at audience, a host or a guest. The study of empirical data has shown that such types of bracket open signals not only indicate a start of aside, but also change of an addressee as well.

The given example can serve as an illustration where the host of a British talk show talks with his guests. At some point, he inserts a side-sequence and changes an addressee as well. This is signaled nonverbally by gazing at another person.

b) *Lifting eyes* – this signal has been mainly used by hosts in the British talk shows analyzed, as they are the ones who are holding a paper and reading out something from it.

In this example, the host is reading something out from the paper, but at this point he inserts an aside and uses eye lifting as a signal. Later, after finishing the side-sequence, he again looks at the paper.

It should be noted that eye contact as a bracket open signal has been quite frequently used in British talk shows.

- 2) *Gestures* as the result of the study a number of groups have been singled out:
- a) *Hand movement* pointing at something or someone. It should be noted that the hand is mainly pointed towards something or someone the bracket construction refers to.

There is a case when a host points his hand towards the audience. He is talking about something. However, the noise from the audience makes him insert an aside and he uses gesture as a signal, in particular he points his hand towards the audience.

- b) *Covering one's mouth with a hand* –a speaker also lowers his voice while uttering bracket construction. Therefore, judging from these two factors we can conclude that the given aside is not for a wide audience. In addition, such kind of bracket signal was only used in British talk show (*The Graham Norton Show*).
- c) *Shifting body position* before the start of the bracket construction, a speaker changes his body position, turns left, right, back or bends. In this case the target audience of the bracket construction also changes and a speaker addresses those people towards whom he turns or bends.
- 3) *Mimics* prior to the bracket construction a speaker changes expression on his face. The study has shown that asides marked by mimics mainly expressed a speaker's personal opinion or some comment.

In the given example, the host is speaking about something then expresses his personal opinion and changes the expression on his face.

- C) Paraverbal raising or lowering one's voice it should be noted that paraverbal signals, as bracket signals are used alongside other verbal and nonverbal signals. In addition, the analysis of the empirical data has shown that raising one's voice indicates that the bracket construction is for a wide audience, while lowering of the voice shows the contrary, that the size of the audience reduces.
- (2) Host: Our next guest can be described as someone like Onenigma, an enigma (*looks on one side and lowers her voice*) I can't say it properly (*turns again towards audience and camera*) dressing in women's clothes (*Loose Women*. 14 Nov., 2012).

In the example above, the host cannot pronounce a word correctly and makes a comment in relation to this. Furthermore, she lowers her voice trying to hide this comment from the audience.

As for American talk shows, the following groups of bracket open signals can be distinguished:

- a) Verbal signals: so, by the way, oh, well.
- (3) Ellen: So, let's talk about your dog because I know that your (*looks from a guest to audience*) well, I love animals, everyone knows about it (*gazes at the guest again*) your relations with your dog are normal (*The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, 23 May, 2013).

In the given example (3) a host uses both verbal and nonverbal signals to mark the start of aside.

- b) **Non-verbal signals** a number of types can be distinguished in the given category:
- 1) **Eye contact** a) gazing at another person/s

A guest is speaking with the host and keeps eye contact with him. However, at some point he decides to insert aside. With the help of the bracket signal we can guess that he starts a bracket construction and in addition, his target audience changes, he addresses the audience and gazes them.

- b) *Lifting eyes* the analysis of the empirical data has revealed that this bracket signal is mainly used by hosts as they are holding something from which they read. However, in the American Conan show there was a case when a guest has used this signal.
- 2) *Gestures* a number of types have been distinguished:
- a) Hand movements Prior to the bracket construction, the guest raises her hand/s.
- b) Shifting body position a person shifts his/her body position before a bracket construction.

In the given example, the host bends towards two children. Prior to this she was addressing the audience and looking at them. However, at some point she inserts a bracket construction, makes a comment and this comment is addressed towards the children. Correspondingly, she bends towards them.

c) **Paraverbal** – raising or lowering one's voice.

In Georgian talk shows bracket open signals are as follows:

- a) **Verbal signals** უი (oops), აა (aha), აუ (ooh), სხვათაშორის (by the way)
- (4) ვანო: მინდა გითხრათ, რომ (turns left as one of the people standing next to him is forcefully taken away), აი, კიდევ ერთი კაცი წაგვგლიჯეს ხალხნო. კიდევ ერთი კაცი, კიდევ ერთი თანაპარტიელი წაგვგლიჯეს და გადაიყვანეს ქართული ოცნების რიგებში (He turns back and looks at a camera) ქართული ოცნება უამრავ ფულს გვთავაზობს (The Vano's Show 22 Feb., 2013). 1

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Vano: I'd like to tell you, that (turns left as one of the people standing next to him is forcefully taken away), here folks, they have taken away one more person. They have taken away one more man, one more party member and transferred

In this excerpt (4) the host is speaking about one of the Georgian political parties, when suddenly someone rushes into the studio, chains and takes one of the guests away from the studio by force and the host inserts aside. It is marked verbally by the word –  $\delta \sigma$  (here) as well as nonverbally by shifting body position and eye contact.

In all three cultures verbal bracket open signals have been used alongside other nonverbal and paraverbal signals.

#### b) For the **non-verbal bracket open signals** are:

1) *Eye contact* – the analysis of the empirical data has revealed different types of eye contact used as a bracket open signal: a) *Gazing at another person or thing* – by changing eye contact the target audience also changes. The focus is on people or thing a person gazes at.

In the given example a guest is talking about a particular topic and suddenly he hears a bird singing noise coming from a particular part of a studio. He looks towards that direction and makes a comment about this noise.

b) Lifting eyes – unlike American talk shows, in Georgian talk shows this signal has been used merely by hosts.

Eye contact as a bracket open signal has been most frequently used with other bracket open signals or alone.

- 2) *Gestures* several types have been distinguished in Georgian talk shows:
- a) *Hand movement* a hand is pointed towards something or someone that the bracket construction is about.

In the given example the host suddenly notices something back on the screen, points her finger to it and her bracket construction refers to the thing she has seen.

- b) Shifting body position
- 3) *Mimics* the study of the empirical data has shown that in Georgian talk shows asides marked by mimics have mainly expressed a speaker's personal opinion or some comment. In the example below, the host inserts an aside containing her personal information.
- c)Paraverbal raising or lowering one's voice.

to Georgian Dream (*He turns back and looks at the camera*). Georgian Dream offers us a lot of money (*The Vano's Show* 22 Feb., 2013).

(5) ნანუკა: ხო, გეთანხმები მაგრამ კაცმაც ბევრი რამე უნდა გააკეთოს, (lowers her voice) ეს ჩვენი გადაცემაა და თქვი რომ კაცზეც ბევრია დამოკიდებული. (raises her voice again) აუცილებლად კაცზეა დამოკიდებული (Nanuka's Show 27 March, 2013)<sup>2</sup>.

The voice lowers when the bracket construction is for those who are close to the speaker, whereas when a speaker addresses larger audience the voice rises.

### 3.2. Bracket Signals Initiated by a Speaker and by an External Factor

The study has revealed that bracket signals can be initiated by a speaker himself, by another person or it can be provoked by an external noise, fact or listener's reaction. Correspondingly, two groups of bracket signals can be distinguished: a) **bracket signals initiated by the speaker** – a speaker decides himself or herself without any external factor, to insert an aside in his speech or talk.

- (6) Ellen: Now, of course, we wanted (*points to a photo which is behind on a screen*), here's a picture of you two, (*turns again towards audience*) we wanted to picture a baby, but you are not showing a picture of a baby (*The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, 6 June, 2013).
- (7) ნანუკა: მე მინდა ყველაფერს ქრონოლოგიურად მივუყვე, ამ თემას კიდევ მივუბრუნდები, მაგრამ მინდა რაღაც ქრონოლოგიურად წავიდე წინ. (*Nanuka's Show*, 10 April, 2013)<sup>3</sup>.

In the above examples (6 and 7) communicants themselves see a need to insert something in their talk.

- b) **Bracket signal initiated by external factors** a speaker interrupts his or her speech due to something happening at that moment or as a reply to a listener's reaction makes a comment in relation to this and then returns to the main topic.
- (8) Ellen: I am not addicted. I can play it and then put it down. I'm gonna show you, (*someone drops an ipad*) oh, great, (makes a step forward and takes the gadget away from him and gazes at him) all right, so you're trying to line up three rows (*Ellen DeGeneres Show*, 6 June, 2013).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Nanuka: Yes, I agree with you, but a man must do a lot as well (lowers her voice) it is our programme and say that a lot of things depend on a man, (raises her voice again) it definitely depends on a man. (*Nanuka's Show* 27 March, 2013)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Nanuka: I want to follow everything in chronological order, I will return to this topic again, but I want to move forward in chronological order (*Nanuka's Show*, 10 April, 2013).

(9) ვანო: დენის ტარიფი შემცირდა სამი თეთრით (laughter from audience. A host turns towards the direction from where laughter is heard), დაგაცდით სიცილს, ქალბატონო, არ არის პრობლემა (The host straightens again and gazes at the camera) მხოლოდ გარკვეული კატეგორიისათვის (The Vano's Show, 18 January, 2013)<sup>4</sup>.

In the above mentioned examples (8 and 9) an external factor, some noise, made a speaker insert an aside.

#### 3.3. Functions of Bracket Constructions

This paper also explores bracket constructions according to their function. Correspondingly, as the result of the observation the following groups of bracket constructions have been singled out:

- 1) **Showing opinion** the function of bracket construction is to express a communicant's opinion in relation to any particular topic. In the examples below from English and Georgian talk shows the bracket constructions express this function:
- (10) Graham: You know, it's a dangerous place and you went (*gazes at the audience*), I don't think British police would let you do this, (gazes at the guest again) but you went on this long ride at night with the real policemen (*Graham Norton Show*, 1 Dec., 2012).
- (11) ნანუკა: მოკლედ დღევანდელი დღის ჩემი სტუმარი არის ქალი, რომელიც მარტო პირველი კი არ არის, ერთადერთია საქართველოს ისტორიაში რომელიც არა თუ სათქმელად არამედ ჩინით არის გენერალი, მას ფეხზე ადგომით მხედრულ სალამს აძლევენ ყველგან, (changes mimics) უფ, წარმოვიდგინე, რა მაგარია ესე რომ გიკეთებენ. ხომ არ გვეცადა? გვეცადა? კარგია. თან ჩემს სტუმარს, მიუხედავად ჩინისა არც სამხედრო განათლება მიუღია და არც ნორმატივები ჩაუბარებია (Nanuka's Show, 27 March, 2013). 5

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Vano: The energy bill has been reduced by three Tetris (*laughter from audience*. The host turns towards the direction from where laughter is heard), no problem madam, I will let you finish your laughter, (*The host straightens again and gazes at the camera*) only for certain categories (*The Vano's Show*, 18 January, 2013).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Nanuka: So, today my guest is a woman, who is not only the first, but the only one in the history of Georgia, who is a General, everywhere she is greeted with a military salute, (changes mimics), oh, I imagined how cool it might be. Should we try? Let's try. Good. In addition, my guest has neither received a military education nor passed examinations (*Nanuka's Show*, 27 March, 2013).

In the given examples (10-11) the hosts express their personal opinion towards what has been uttered by them. In addition, it has to be pointed out that the gaze shifts indicate not only bracket constructions but the change of the target audience.

- 2) **Apologizing** during a speech a communicant interrupts his utterance in order to apologize.
- (12) Graham: I understood men and women more. I realize that men really do things differently from women from the onset, from the word go, it's just like, (turns to one of the guests who he punched accidentally) I'm sorry (turns again and looks towards audience, then turns to a guest again) I am talking with my hands, I'm sorry (turns again to audience) aam, but yes definitely there is, you know different ways of thinking (Graham Norton Show, June 1, 2013).

In the given example (12) the need to apologize was provoked by the fact that the communicant accidentally punched a person sitting next to him.

(13) სტუმარი: არიან სტილისტები რომლებიც არიან გაპიარებულები, მაგრამ ეს არის მხოლოდ ცარიელი პიარი, (looks round) მაპატიეთ ეხლა ამას რომ გამბობ (looks again round) არა მე ამას ყველაზე არ გამბობ, მაგრამ ზოგიერთი არის ცარიელი პიარი (Day Show, 14 May, 2012)<sup>6</sup>

The study has shown that prior to the bracket construction expressing apology, a speaker gazes at a person or people to whom he or she apologizes.

3) **Showing gratitude** – in the bracket construction gratitude is shown towards different individuals (it can be a host, guest, guests, an audience member or the whole audience).

Below are examples for illustration.

(14) Guest: I was outside of the building and I was there with my manager and I, and I (*laughter*, the guest turns his head) Thank you guys. (*again turns towards audience*) and I assume I was standing outside of this building and George Lucas comes out (*Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, 1 May, 2007).

In the above example (14) a guest expresses gratitude towards audience for applauding him.

(15) სტუმარი: ძიძა არ მყავს შერჩეული მე დეიდაჩემი მეხმარება.

ნანუკა: ამიტომ ძიძა არ გჭირდება. (Turns to the camera) ვისარგებლებ შემთხვევით და დიდი მადლობა მინდა ვუთხრა ჩემი შვილის ძიძებს (Nanuka's Show, 2009)<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Guest: There are stylists who are promoted, but it is mere PR, (looks round) please excuse me for saying this (looks again round), no, it does not apply to everyone, but some of them are only PR (*Day Show*, 14 May, 2012).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Guest: I have not got a nanny, my aunt helps me.

In the given example (15) they are talking about nannies and the host decides to interrupt her speech and insert an aside containing gratitude towards her son's nanny. The bracket refers to a person who is watching TV and therefore the host looks at the camera.

- 4) **Specifying something** sometimes a speaker feels or sees a need to provide additional information, as in the examples below.
- (16) Graham: Only clean it with a soft. Dry cloth, preferably cotton, (*lifts his eyes from a notebook*) this is really specific, isn't it? Yeah. (*Again lowers his eyes and looks in a paper*) Don't use any liquids (*The Graham Norton Show*, Dec., 10, 2012).

In the given example from a British talk show, the host interrupts his speech in order to provide additional information.

Guest: I actually ran across, (raises his head and changes voice) I didn't cross him (lowers his eyes again and returns to his usual voice) I ran into him once (Late Night with Conan O'Brien, May 1, 2007).

- 5) **Repairers** sometimes we say something and later we realize that the information we have provided is incorrect. Therefore, we try to repair it in a bracket construction.
- (17) Ellen: I thought I would give you a little tour, so come with me, (*turns back and then again towards the audience*) no you stay here, (*turns back again*) the camera will come with me and I'll show you what's happening backstage (*The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, 22 May, 2013).
- (18) წამყვანი: რეკლამის შემდეგ მე მინდა ერთი არაჩვეულებრივი, აა ეხლავე რეკლამა არ არის საჭირო, სალომე ხომერიკი რომელიც ჩვენთან სტუდიაში იმყოფება, ძალიან ლამაზად გამოიყურება. ის მის მსოფლიოდან არის ჩამოსული (*Day Show*, 12 Sept., 2012)<sup>8</sup>.

In the given example (18) from a Georgian talk show the host announces a commercial break but then inserts an aside (which is opened verbally by - aha) repairing what she has already said.

6) **Giving advice** – in the given type of bracket constructions a speaker gives advice to a listener. The advice can address a host, guest, TV or studio audience. Below are examples as an illustration.

http://www.etag.ge/journal/

Nanuka: Therefore, you don't need a nanny. (*Turns to the camera*) I would like to use this chance and thank my son's nannies (*Nanuka's Show*, 2009).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Host: After the commercial break I want to introduce one wonderful, oh, now, a commercial is not necessary, Salome Khomeriki who is in our studio looks wonderful. She has just arrived from Miss Universe (*Day Show*, 12 Sept., 2012).

- (19) Guest: I was not very good at coping. And I think that sort of hurt me on Loose Women because they saw me fall apart and probably drink Vodka for a couple of, nine months, (*changes eye contact and gazes audience*) I wouldn't recommend it (*gazes the host again*), but I didn't cope with it at all, everybody saw me falling apart (*The Alan Titchmarsh Show*. Sep., 20, 2008).
- (20) Ellen: Would creating nothing on nothing day count as something? (Looks on one side gazing audience and changes mimics) Think about that, blow your mind. (Looks at a camera again) it will print the rules of doing nothing on the nothing day (The Ellen DeGeneres Show, 13 April, 2013).

In the above examples a listener gives advice to another person depending on his or her experience and knowledge.

- 7) **Asking for silence** we might feel that what we have said can provoke noise or we see it. In this case, a speaker uses a bracket construction to calm listeners or warns them and gives them advice to keep quiet. In the examples below, bracket constructions give such advice:
- (21) Guest: Well, one tiny, tiny thing comes to mind (*gazes at the host and points his hand to her*) don't get mad, (*lowers his hand and looks down*) ok, so I make dinner (*The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, 22 May, 2013).

In the above example, a guest of an American talk show feels that what he had said might have a strong reaction and therefore, inserts an aside giving advice to keep calm and quiet.

- 8) **Expressing emotion** we encounter this type of bracket construction when there is a strange noise or something odd is happening at a studio.
- (22) Alan: Tell us about this play. It was first on in the 70ies. Julia Walters was in your role. It's an adult comedy, it isn't for children. I mean language (banging noise is heard, a host looks from guest to audience). Oh, what was it? (Looks again at a guest) adult comedy (The Alan Titchmarsh Show, March 15, 2012).

In the given example (22) the bracket construction was provoked by a strange noise in a studio.

The study has revealed that bracket constructions with this function are always caused by non-participants, who make a speaker deviate from the main topic and make a comment.

#### 4. Conclusions:

Thus, this substantial study of the subject allows us to make the following inferences:

Bracket signals are amply used in talk shows by hosts as well as guests, however the observation on the empirical data has shown that the hosts still dominate;

Bracket signals can be classified according to different characteristics. I have distinguished between bracket open and close signals which are further subdivide into verbal and nonverbal signals. Correspondingly, this study has revealed that there are specific groups of bracket signals and bracket constructions;

In all three cultures (British, American and Georgian) eye contact was mostly used as a bracket signal alongside other verbal, nonverbal and para-verbal signals.

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- 4. Late Night with Conan O'Brien, 1<sup>st</sup> May, 2007 <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nP78aHLekoU">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nP78aHLekoU</a> retrieved date
- 5. The Alan Titchmarsh Show, 6<sup>th</sup> Sept., 2012 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\_6wdQYi5Yzg
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- 7. Ellen DeGeneres Show, 9<sup>th</sup> May, 2012 http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/UkBJjQYlsyY
- 8. Ellen DeGeneres Show, 14<sup>th</sup> Nov., 2010 <a href="http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/Wa\_12mFRX3M">http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/Wa\_12mFRX3M</a>
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- 12. Nanuka's Show, 27th March, 2013 <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhsFdWDDMQE">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhsFdWDDMQE</a>
- 13. Day Show 12th Sep., 2012 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8bhKQEppV0M
- 14. Day Show 14<sup>th</sup> May, 2012 <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svZPN8q8Eb0">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svZPN8q8Eb0</a>

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