

Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, etc.) as on presentation of findings. The ideas of Trudgill on leveling and on dating recent changes in British English via colonial developments feature to a significant extent, as does Schneider's characterization of focusing and identity construction in the colonies. The contributors, publisher, and – above all – editor-cum-major contributor are to be congratulated on a work of the highest quality.

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GREG MYERS. *Matters of opinion: Talking about public issues*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2004. Pp xvii, 258.

Reviewed by JOANNA THORNBORROW
Centre for Language and Communication Research
Cardiff University
Colum Drive, Cardiff, CF10 3EU, Wales
Thornborrowj1@cardiff.ac.uk

Public opinion clearly matters very much to a great many people. We are constantly being given figures from the results of the latest survey and the most recent opinion poll; the losses and gains in popularity of our political leaders make headline news. Our opinions are solicited on the doorstep, on the phone, in the street; pollsters, market researchers, government departments – “they” – want to know what we think. But the mass of data collected is quantitatively processed. It is compiled as statistics, presented in percentages, reported as numerical values. In this book, through his analysis of focus group discussions and mediated opinion giving, Greg Myers takes a very different approach to what counts as an opinion on an issue. Using the findings and methods of interactional sociolinguistics and Conversation Analysis, he investigates the produc-

tion of opinion as a locally emerging, interactive and above all, contextualized phenomenon.

The first three chapters deal with the background to the research, and to issues of methodology. The next four deal with data recorded during focus group discussions, and the last two address the role of the media as a forum for public opinion giving in the context of radio phone-in broadcasts and “vox pops” interviews in the news. The focus throughout is on talk: Opinions are produced in particular settings, each with different participation frameworks and, consequently, different interactional outcomes. Opinion giving is examined primarily as a discursive activity, with due attention paid to features of turn-taking, Goffman’s participant roles, and Sacks’s work on categorization, as well as aspects of face and politeness, discourse markers and the rhetorical structure of utterances.

Myers returns to Hymes’s acronym SPEAKING as a useful schema for analyzing social interaction in his description of the focus group as a context for talk, and as a particular type of discursive activity. Indeed, I think that one of the great merits of this book is the way that Myers draws on the broad analytic traditions of sociolinguistic research and discourse analysis, bringing them together in an integrated set of research tools which he puts to exemplary use. Chaps. 2 and 3 set out very clearly his methods of transcription and approaches to the analysis of group discussion. They will provide a very useful starting point for anyone interested in looking at how such discussions might work, and wondering where to begin.

In chap. 4, Myers gives an account of the institutional practices of opinion gathering and opinion giving, pointing out the limitations of the “Quick Vote” surveys that are now commonplace on any newspaper or news broadcasting website, and considering their impact when they are constructed as “news.” This overview of the stages in the production of public opinion, how it is reported and how it is elicited, provides a useful and informative introduction to the function of opinion polls within social science, including the role of the interviewer and the design and interpretation of questions. Myers also argues that the media play a critical role in the process of democratic, representative government in the way that they structure and represent the public to the public, since “representations of public opinion do not just convey information but provide the background to further actions” (84).

Then, in a substantive analysis of focus group talk, Myers works through the stages of opinion giving, analyzing the development of topics, arguing, disagreeing, representing speech, and questioning expertise. Throughout, he considers the role of the moderator in the production of opinions, as well as that of the other participants in the group. What emerges from this analysis is that although topic generation is in the hands of the moderator, focus group participants draw on the same resources for making sense of, interpreting, and dealing with these topics that they would use in other conversational contexts for multi-party discussion. The focus group discussion is thus an “institutional hybrid,” drawing as

it does on everyday conversational routines for the institutional goals of producing public opinion.

Myers also shows, interestingly, that that while particular categories of opinion tend to be associated with particular social groups, participants in focus group discussions “resent the idea that their own opinions can be taken for granted, read off from their group identity. Other people may have fixed opinions because of where they live or what they do for a living or how old they are, but we, talking right now, are open to see what happens in the next turn.” (133).

The analysis then turns in chaps. 9 and 10 to the media, specifically, the radio phone-in and the vox pops interview. Here Myers examines the role of the phone-in as a sociable occasion for argument through the expression of diverse opinions. He points out that these kinds of arguments are never resolved, nor do they lead to a change of mind, but rather they provide a means of passing the time in a sociable, pleasurable way for listeners who are interested in hearing how people talk about issues of concern rather than in what they might say. The entertainment value of opinion giving in media talk has a high premium. Myers also argues that broadcasters’ use of the vox pops interview in television news is precisely for the same kind of reason – we want to see how people present themselves, and what kind of things they have to say: “We don’t listen for the individual opinions themselves but for the look and sound of the imaginary but necessary category they make together, ‘public opinion’” (222).

This book will be invaluable to students and researchers alike with an interest in talk and the interactional production of opinions. It is clearly and accessibly written, but it is also scholarly and well informed. The data examples given in the transcripts and the range of issues discussed are engaging and relevant. Greg Myers has made a significant contribution to our understanding of public opinion: where and how it emerges through talk in the public domain, and why it matters.

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GEOFFREY SAMPSON, *The “language instinct” debate*. Revised edition. London and New York: Continuum, 2005. Pp. xiii, 224. Pb \$30.00.

Reviewed by MICHAEL TOOLAN
English, University of Birmingham
Birmingham, B29 7HW, UK
m.toolan@bham.ac.uk

First published in 1997 under the title *Educating Eve* but now revised and expanded and with a useful foreword from Paul Postal, this book presents and critiques all the main arguments that have been offered in support of the thesis that a body of language-specific knowledge is innate in the human child. Samp-