PSYCHICS AND THE 'OTHER SIDE': A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF TELEVISED PSYCHIC READINGS

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Abstract

This article provides a discourse analysis of a large corpus of televised psychic readings. The goal of this study is to uncover the relationship between the linguistic structure of psychic readings and the psychics' linguistic agenda. The findings of this study suggest that the psychics' engage in linguistic tactics that allow them to negotiate and extract specific information from their subjects. The discourse structure of psychic readings facilitates deception, since the subjects, rather than the psychics, are the actual source of subject-specific information in a reading.

Keywords: Discourse structure; Linguistic agenda; Feedback technique; Feedback markers; Psychic readings; Topic-response analysis.

1. Introduction

In his article *The New Paranatural Paradigm*, Paul Kurtz (2000) describes how psychics use the mass media to satisfy the public's desire to connect with the *spirit world*. Kurtz argues that as a result of this massive media onslaught "polls in the last decade place the United States as number one in belief in life after death in the democratic world, and higher than virtually all European countries" (29). This intense popular interest in the occult sciences is evidenced by the great number of popular books, magazine articles, movies and television and radio shows that are devoted to the discussion of paranormal phenomena.

This new age of embracing the occult in the presence of cameras and millions of people creates a new type of expert who is not credentialed by long standing institutions. Even so, people who consult with psychics about the fate of a love one confer expert status upon the psychic. They believe psychics possess unique skills and expert understanding of the spirit world (Wooffitt 2001). Psychics further this notion by asserting that they have expertise in the occult. They argue that they possess a unique talent that allows them to communicate with the deceased and decipher what Edward (1998) describes as the *psychic-sign language*:

In some cases, I can give a good reading simply by passing on what I'm hearing, seeing, and feeling. But in most instances, I must interpret the information so that the meaning is understood. I call the entire process "psychic sign language." What I've been able to do in the years since I started this work is to become more fluent in understanding the symbols, making it easier for me to validate the presence of the spirits. (43)

The psychics' main role when performing a reading is to translate for their subjects information they allege to receive from the *other side*. Psychics contend that the information they receive from an occult source provides factual and subject-specific pieces of evidence which, once validated by their subjects, serve to prove the psychics' unique connection with the occult. As Edward (1998) remarks the primary goal of those who are on the *other side* is "to convey enough specific, irrefutable information to prove that this is real and they are actually still here with us, albeit not physically" (44).

Skeptics (Christopher 1970; Hyman 1977, 1981; Randi 1981; Roe 1995), on the other hand, argue that psychics are charlatans who use their position as *experts* to exploit credulous individuals. They contend that psychics achieve their dishonest objectives by providing no original, verifiable information.

In this article, I will perform a discourse analysis of the televised-psychic readings of the psychics John Edward and James Van Praagh to evaluate whether the primary goal of these television psychics is to decipher information for their subjects or to obtain information from them so as to further an illusion of expertise. This study will examine first how the psychics assert expertise in a reading by using linguistic tactics that are consonant to those used by experts in professional discourse settings. Second, I will evaluate the psychics' linguistic agenda based on their linguistic strategies. This analysis will examine the topics initiated by the psychics and the responses given by their subjects. Furthermore, I will evaluate whether the subjects' responses have a particular effect on the psychics' next initiating move, such as the psychics' choice to elaborate on a topic or the psychics' choice to dismiss their subjects' responses. Once I have discerned the psychics' agenda, I can determine whether their goal is to provide specific and verifiable information to their subjects.

2. Data

The description of psychic readings presented in this study is based on 79 hours of videotaped recorded data¹ which consist of 138, 1/2 hour and 1 hour television shows of *Beyond* with James Van Praagh and *Crossing Over* with John Edward. These shows were recorded during the months of February, March, April, and May of 2003. Both psychics have comparable reading styles and are equally represented in the data.

The fact that the shows may be edited to portray the psychics in a more favorable light does not interfere with my ability to decipher the linguistic structure and function of psychic readings. First, both of these psychics have made guest appearances on television shows that have a live audience, such as *Larry King Live*. When the psychic readings on *Larry King Live* were compared to taped shows of *Beyond* and *Crossing Over*, I did not notice any differences in the linguistic style of the psychics. Second, the data set is sufficiently large to be a representative sample of these psychics' linguistic style. Third, only direct readings rather than testimonials will be used in the data analysis sections of this study. Fourth, the analysis will not estimate the degree of accuracy of psychic readings, for which editing could bias the data, but rather will examine the linguistic strategies used by psychics in a reading.

¹ The data do not include commercials.

3. Exchanges: A linguistic analysis of the discourse structure of psychic readings

The discourse of professionals and their clients is often marked by type of initiating move (Byrne and Long 1976; Coulthard and Ashby 1976; Coulthard and Sinclair 1992): Eliciting, directing, and informing. In eliciting exchanges, which are the preferred type in professional-client exchanges, the initiation consists of some type of question such as *who is John?*, and the response consists of an appropriate answer such as *my brother*. In directing exchanges, the initiation is some type of command or instruction such as *write the information down*, and the response is the requested action such as the physical act of writing the information down. In informing exchanges, the initiation consists of transmitting some information such as *your mother told me that you were seeing John*, and the response is an acknowledgement of attention and understanding such as *yes*.

A large part of the interactional exchanges observed in psychic readings also consist of the psychic establishing what is discursively relevant by initiating the tone of the exchange. Table 1 shows the distribution of all initiating moves by type of speaker and exchange:

Table 1: Initiating Move by Type of Speaker and Exchange

Who Initiates Type of Exchanges	Psychic	Subject	Total
Eliciting	2,220	243	2,463
Informing	400	0	400
Directing	112	0	112
Total	2,732	243	2,975

The data show that most of the exchanges (2732/2975 or 92%) are initiated by the psychics and take the form of eliciting exchanges. The few instances in which a subject initiates an eliciting exchange, it consists of the subject asking for some clarification of the psychics' previous eliciting or informing move, as in, *you mean someone who has passed?* The data also show that the psychics are the only ones who initiate an informing or directing move. These patterns are consistent with the discourse structure of more traditional professional-client exchanges. The question that arises from these patterns is, *what do the psychics accomplish by asserting this control?*

In traditional expert-non-expert exchanges, as for example doctor-patient exchanges, experts exercise control over their exchanges because knowledge of a specific topic lies with them (Drew and Heritage 1992; Fairclough 1989; Sarangi and Roberts 1999). Doctors, for example, ask questions of their patients so as to provide a diagnosis. Psychics also assert expertise and control over their exchanges with their subjects even though the validity of their knowledge is open to debate. To establish

whether the psychics perform as experts in providing new and verifiable information, I will perform a topic-response analysis of psychic-subject exchanges.

4. The psychics' linguistic agenda: A look at the psychics' topics and their subjects' responses

I classified the topics introduced in the psychics' eliciting exchanges as either general or specific. Topics are classified as general if the specification of their properties is not present in discourse (Prince 1981; Browne and Yule 1983). This classification includes topics that take the linguistic form of indefinite referents, such as *a male/female figure* or *somebody/something*, which can refer to a large number of human or non-human entities, and proper names, if they are used to refer to any individual in an exchange (Browne and Yule 1983: 210). For example, in the interrogative phrase *who is John?*, *John*, although a proper name, could refer to any number of men. The referent *John* only becomes specific with the subject's response; as for example *John is my father*. Since the topic is not subject-specific when it is first introduced, it is classified as a general topic.

Topics are classified as specific if the specification of their referential properties is present in discourse. This includes topics that evoke the psychics and the subjects' shared knowledge and are connected uniquely to the subject:

- (1) Psychic: Is your father's name Michael?
Subject: Yes.

Responses will be classified as general or specific following the same specifications for topics. An example of a general response to the wh-question *who had a black car?*, is *a cousin maybe* since it is not a definite cousin. General responses will include also responses that are hedged with terms such as *maybe* or *possibly*. These responses are observed often when the psychics' topics fail to effectively activate shared knowledge.

On the other hand, a specific response often takes the first person and applies specifically to the subject rather than to a large number of the population, as it is illustrated in the following example:

- (2) Psychic: Who has the 'I' sounding name? (Topic)
Subject: My sister's name is Eleanor. (Response)

In addition to general or specific responses, there are other types of responses used in the data. Following is a comprehensive list² of all the types of responses that are present in the data:

Responses

1. Provide general/hedged response.
2. Provide specific response.
3. Respond positively to yes/no questions.
4. Respond negatively to yes/no questions.

² For a complete description of possible response types in discourse see Shuy (1990: 87).

5. Offer no verbal response at all (a non-verbal response may be provided instead, such as a nodding of the head).
6. Respond with a feedback marker (uh-uh, yeah, okay, etc.).

Although in this work I will not perform an in depth analysis of non-verbal responses, specifically of non-verbal cues, I will consider the effect that non-verbal cues may have on psychic readings. Psychics may use non-verbal cues to assess the success or failure of a topic, which may influence whether the psychic pursues the topic further or changes the topic either temporarily or permanently.

4.1. *The psychics' use of general topics to negotiate specificity in a reading*

Psychics often use general topics to elicit specific responses from their subjects at the onset of a reading, as in this representative example:

- (3) Edward: I'm here in this area, there has to be a Tina or a T sound around here, I think I'm in the top row, between the blue and the green, somebody's father is trying to get my attention, back there [pointing to a woman sitting in the back section of the gallery]. The lady in blue is there a father figure for you that's passed?

Audience Member: Father-in-law (*Crossing Over* 3-21-003).

Psychics also introduce general topics at other points in a reading, such as at the point of topic elaboration or topic shift. The following example illustrates the psychics' use of general topics to elaborate on the subjects' specific responses:

- (4) Van Praagh: Was there a heart attack involved here?
 Pat: My husband died in a car accident.
 Van Praagh: Car accident?
 Pat: We were on a motorcycle and he, they told me he was killed instantly.
 Van Praagh: What's his name?
 Pat: Jerry. (*Beyond* 2-2-2003).

The psychic introduces the corollary topic³ *heart attack* to arrive at the substantive⁴ topic, *Jerry*, without providing the information himself. In this sense, the psychic negotiates, rather than reveals, the identity of the topic. In example 4, the psychic is unsuccessful in making a connection between a *heart attack* and the manner in which the subject's husband passed away. The subject, however, is cooperative and assumes that the psychic's comments about a *heart attack* relate to her husband. The subject reveals that her husband passed away in a motorcycle accident and was killed instantly. Although no direct link can be established between the psychic's input and the facts provided by the subject, the psychic is successful in negotiating the content of the reading with his subject and ends the reading knowing not only the manner in which the subject's husband passed, but also his identity. This information may be used at a later

³ Corollary topics are used as "ways of achieving or arriving at the substantive topics" (Shuy 1990: 87).

⁴ Substantive topics are "what the goal of the conversation was all about" (Shuy 1990: 87).

point in a reading to either elaborate on a topic that was successfully negotiated or to facilitate the use of the feedback technique (see section 4.2).

Topic shifts also allow for the psychics' general topics to be matched by their subjects' specific responses. The following example, which is a continuation of example 4, illustrates this general to specific exchange during a psychic's shift in topic:

(5) Van Praagh: What's his name?

Pat: Jerry.

Van Praagh: Okay, before, let me tell you there is a lady here also who wants to talk to you, so I'm not sure a mother vibe. There is a mother feeling here...

Pat: Well that's great, my mom and dad are there also... (*Beyond* 2-2-2003).

Topic shift markers (Fraser 1988) such as *before* indicate the psychic's temporary shift in topic from *Jerry*, the audience member's husband, to another figure whom the audience member has identified as her mother. The psychic's temporary shift in topic allowed him to use the positive relationship he has established with his subject and continue the reading by introducing another general topic, such as *a mother vibe*. The subject's response provides the psychic with additional information about her background, specifically that she has a mother and father who, along with her husband, have passed. This additional information is crucial for the continuation of a successful psychic reading.

4.2. The psychics' use of the feedback technique to establish a subject's specific response

Once a psychic has introduced a general topic in a reading and received a specific response from his subject, the psychic may decide to initiate the second or subsequent exchanges by introducing topics that are specific in nature. One strategy that psychics use to initiate a specific topic in a reading is the feedback technique. The feedback technique (Hyman 1981: 179) consists of the psychic literally feeding back to his subject a response that the subject provided at an earlier point in the reading:

(6) Edward: ...Someone who passed.

Audience Member: My brother Ritchie?

...

Edward: Where does the Ritchie connection come in?

Audience Member: [surprised look] That's my brother Ritchie (*Crossing Over* 4-23-2003).

Example 6, which is an excerpt of a quite long reading, began with Edward trying to initiate a connection with a member of the audience and not being successful. After various attempts on Edward's behalf to initiate a reading, a producer of the show indicated to Edward that there was a man who worked in the garage that is located next to Edward's studio who was listening to the reading and who had remarked that his reading *was hitting very close to home*. The man, who was a Jamaican national, was brought to the studio to talk to Edward. Part of the reading occurred in front of the audience and the other part occurred backstage. During the part of the reading that took

place in front of the audience, the man stated that he had a brother named *Ritchie* who had died some years before. When the reading moved backstage after the show's taping, but while the cameras were still rolling, Edward continued the reading on a more personal level and asked the man what was his connection to *Ritchie*. Since many minutes had gone by since the man had mentioned the name *Ritchie*, Edward's introduction of this referent gave the impression that he, rather than his subject, had introduced the referent for the first time.

In this example, Edward is neither asking to have his memory refreshed nor asking for clarification, but instead is merely repeating information that was previously supplied by the audience member. This may suggest that Edward is trying to convince his subject that he has insights about *Ritchie* that are beyond those of a lay person.

4.3. Positive responses to the psychics' use of general or specific topics

In televised psychic readings, the psychics' eliciting topics are often matched by the subjects' positive responses. The psychics elaborate on a topic by using the subjects' positive responses as cues for their next eliciting move:

- (7) Edward: I have a male-figure who's coming through over here that I see as being a husband a brother. They're coming through in this area [no response]. They're telling me to talk about Jack, Jacqueline, Jake [no response] and they also have somebody who lost their son it would be separate families, but I have two separate things that are happening. Some of you may have a male figure to the side, but I also have a son who has passed. It's coming through this area, so if this makes sense raise your hand [no response] and when I say son I'm probably confusing you. It could be your son, it could be your nephew, but I know it's coming from this area [pointing to a section of the gallery] and there is somebody who is connected to the right, to the side, there is a husband, brother, or friend, you understand this? [pointing to a woman]. Where does the Margaret connection come up for you?
 Audience Member: My mother-in-law.
 Edward: Is she still here?
 Audience Member: Yes.
 Edward: Did she lose anyone male?
 Audience Member: She lost her son.
 Edward: Would that not be your brother-in-law?
 Audience Member: Yes.
 Edward: Okay. Sometimes I have to go through a back door (*Crossing Over* 5-14-2003).

Edward, who had not been successful at obtaining verbal or non-verbal responses at the onset of his reading, opts to take a more direct approach by asking a female member of the audience whether she knew a woman named *Margaret*. After the audience member nods in agreement, she responds that *Margaret* is her mother-in-law. Edward proceeds to elaborate on the topic *Margaret* by asking the audience member whether *Margaret* had lost anyone male. The audience member's affirmative response allowed Edward to link *Margaret* to the male figure he had mentioned at the onset of

the reading but which had received a null response. The psychic continues the reading with the subject's accepted knowledge of the topic, which the subject may now attribute "to a paranormal source" (Wooffitt 2001: 356).

The psychic's linguistic technique when building on his subject's affirmative response appears to be consistent with Wooffitt's (2006) comments about the role of affirmative responses in psychic readings. He proposes that "... the information or claim proposed in the psychic's question can only stand as provisional evidence of the use of paranormal powers. For that potential to be realized, the sitter has to confirm the relevance of the proposed claim" (26). In this study, the psychics' management of affirmative responses seems to further two goals: Confirm the relevance of their claims and build on their alleged insights.

4.4. Negative responses to the psychics' use of general or specific topics

One of the possible outcomes of a psychic-initiated eliciting exchange is for the subject to disagree with the psychic's assumptions about a particular topic. In these cases, the subject expresses his or her disagreement by using a variety of negative responses, such as *no*, *I don't know*, or *I have no idea*:

- (8) Edward: I have a mother figure coming through. She is talking about some illness. About being sick for a while, you understand this?
Audience Member: I'm not sure. I don't know (*Crossing Over* 2-10-2003).

In this example, Edward's initial attempt to make contact with the audience member fails. The psychic reacts to the subject's response by initiating a new topic. This approach, however, is not observed often in the data. The subjects' negative responses are often treated as dispreferred responses. Psychics in this study often approach the subjects' negative responses by dismissing, disclaiming, and recycling the topic that elicited a negative response. In section 5, I will discuss in more detail the psychics' treatment of these types of responses in the data.

4.5. Non-responses to the psychics' general eliciting topics

The psychics' general topics are often matched by their subjects' null responses at the onset of a reading:

- (9) Edward: Hum, I think I'm on the third row. I'm with you [pointing to a woman in the audience]. I have a father figure coming through, either a dad, brother, grandfather, and he wants to acknowledge that there are two women with him. I would say this is a mother, sister. There are two women that come up.
Audience Member: [No response].
Edward: Who has a birthday coming up?
Audience Member: My sister (*Crossing Over* 5-28-1003).

In example 9, the psychic's initial attempt at making a connection with his subject is unsuccessful. The mismatch between this portion of the psychic's reading and his

subject's actual history prompts the subject to provide a null response. Although this behavior is not verbally cooperative (Grice 1975), that is, the subject is not volunteering either positive or negative information to the psychic, the null response allows the psychic to change the direction of the reading and initiate a new, or modified, topic that may be more successful.

4.6. *Feedback markers: A response type in psychic readings*

Feedback markers are found occasionally in the data and take the form of discourse markers, such as *okay* and *uh-huh*. Although to the lay person a feedback marker such as *okay* may indicate a positive response to the psychics' eliciting exchanges, these types of markers do not signal strong linguistic agreement:

Feedback markers such as "uh-huh" or "okay" signal "I hear what you are saying." Genuine agreement is signaled by a stronger wording such as "Yes, that's right" (double agreement), "Oh, very good" (intensified agreement) or "Right," "yes," "good," etc. (single, but clear agreement). Weaker or lax agreements include lax-tokens ("uh-huh," "huh-uh," "hmmm") or other feedback markers such as "yeah," "OK," "I see," etc. These should not be confused with agreement. They signify "I hear what you're saying," "I'll hear you out," "I understand," or "I don't agree, but I'll listen to what you have to say" (Shuy 1990: 94-95).

In this study, psychics use their subjects' feedback markers as cues to elaborate on a topic introduced in their readings:

- (10) Van Praagh: Your mother's mother in spirit, please. That's who this lady is
 Audience Member: Uh-huh.
 Van Praagh: She says this is grandma.
 Audience Member: Grandma Vivian?
 Van Praagh: She has a child with her, okay? Uh. He's, uh-huh, around seven or eight, he would be.
 Audience Member: Uh-huh.
 Van Praagh: And she's trying to hold him and he wants to run around.
 Audience Member: Okay (*Beyond* 3-21-2003).

The feedback markers *uh-huh* and *okay* do not signal strong agreement in this example. They signal, however, the subject's willingness to listen to the psychic and to be receptive to the content of his reading. The psychic, in turn, uses his subject's receptiveness, or lack of negativity, to elaborate on a topic. The psychic's behavior in this case is similar to that which is observed when the subjects respond affirmatively to the psychics' queries. The psychics' lack of distinction between feedback markers and positive responses in psychic readings suggests that aside from the subjects' specific or general responses, the psychics interpret their subjects' responses in one of two ways: As a negative response or as a positive response. The former often needs to be fixed and the latter needs to be linguistically exploited.

4.7. Topics and responses: Summary statistics

A quantitative analysis of the psychics' topics and the subjects' responses reveals that in my data psychics often initiate general topics (1912/2220 or 86%) that elicit specific responses from their subjects (1460/1912 or 76%). Table 2 presents these results:

Table 2: Psychic-Initiated Topics and Subject Responses in Psychic Readings

Psychic-Initiated Topics Subject Responses	General (1,912)	Specific (308)	Total (2,220)
Provides General Response	20	0	0
Provides Specific Response	1,460	251	1,731
Responds Positively	11	30	41
Responds Negatively	217	15	232
Offers No Response	135	0	135
Responds with Feedback Markers	69	12	81
Total	1,912	308	2,220

This strategy is telling because it suggests that the psychics Edward and Van Praagh, on average, do not introduce subject-specific topics in their readings. The source of specificity is often the subject. In those instances in which the psychics introduce specific topics, these topics had been provided in the subjects' specific responses and had been established at a prior point in a reading.

Although using eliciting exchanges is not an unusual practice among experts and those in positions of authority, it is not consistent with the psychics' claims that they provide original information from the *other side*. Furthermore, the manner in which the psychics react to their subjects' responses, specifically their positive and negative responses, is also inconsistent with the psychics' claims of expertise. In the next section, I will show how the psychics in this study use follow-up moves to manipulate their subjects' positive and negative responses and maintain their claims of expertise.

5. The psychics' use of follow-up moves: A further look at the psychics' linguistic agenda

In this study most exchanges are composed of two-moves; an initiating and a responding move (Schegloff et al 1977). On occasion, however, psychic readings may include three-move exchanges. In these types of exchanges, the psychics' general or specific topics may prompt a positive response from their subjects which is matched by

a psychic-initiated follow-up⁵ move. Coulthard and Ashby (1976) define these types of moves as follows:

Follow-up moves comment on, or indicate understanding or acceptance of, what has gone before in the exchange; they follow responding moves and also some initiating moves that do not require a response (75).

In the data, positive responses may be matched by follow-up moves that are marked by lexical items, such as *yes*, or a *high-pitched key* at the beginning of the utterance. These linguistic markers suggest that the psychic knew, or alleged to know, the correct answer to his own question, as it is illustrated in the following examples:

- (11) Van Praagh: He's been jumping in [Audience Member: Laughing], jumping in, because he can't let an opportunity like this go by... Have you remarried yet?
Audience Member 1: I'm getting married.
Van Praagh: Yes, you are (*Beyond* 4-23-2003).
- (12) Van Praagh (I): Who has the ulcerous condition, ulcers?
Audience Member (R): I do.
Van Praagh (F): Yes, you do (*Beyond* 4-23-2003).

In examples 11 and 12, the psychic uses testing follow-up moves to assert that he knew details about his subjects' lives that were not provided by the subject. In these types of exchanges, the information appears to be transferred in the third follow-up move.

Although this strategy is used often in traditional asymmetrical exchanges to mark the expertise of the dominant speaker, its use in these types of readings is suspect. In psychic readings, the flow of information goes from the subject to the psychic. The psychics, more often than not, do not provide any insights or concrete information to their subjects. Since Edward and Van Praagh are unable to provide consistently specificity in a reading, it seems improbable that their use of follow-up moves in these examples is indicative of expertise in the occult.

In addition to positive responses, psychics in this study also use follow-up moves to dismiss or disclaim the subjects' negative responses. The following example illustrates Edward's use of an informative move to disclaim a subject's contribution:

- (13) Edward: I have a female that is coming through in this family and I feel like I'm supposed to talk about them being misdiagnosed or being treated for something that wasn't what caused their passing, you understand this?
Audience Member: My mother's husband.
Edward: OK. So it's your mother-in-law. OK. I feel like I'm supposed to say that what happened and or as a result of whatever this is happening, they found out there was something else wrong with her, so maybe by doing tests or
Audience Member: I don't know.
Edward: This is what they are showing me (*Crossing Over* 2-10-2003).

In this example, the disclaimer serves as a metadiscursive element (Bird 1979: 150, Frasier 1988: 28; Thomas 1989: 144) that indicates to the subject that the information provided by the psychic is accurate. In an asymmetrical exchange, such as this, where

⁵ Psychic-initiated follow-up moves are observed 120 times in the data.

the control of the reading lies with the psychic, the psychic can use an informative move such as *this is what they are showing me*, to rebuff a subject's negative response. The psychics' use of informatives often signal to the subject that he or she should not be dismissive of a reading simply because he or she cannot make sense of the psychic's alleged insights.

In addition to disclaiming, the psychic may chose to dismiss the subject's negative responses. This strategy is commonly used in confrontational interactions between non-peers:

There are many ways in which a dominant participant can dismiss a contribution he or she considers irrelevant. He or she can, for example, interrupt the current speaker (cf. section above) or simply ignore what the subordinate says or fail to take up his/her point...the dominant speaker can dismiss as irrelevant contributions which he or she does not welcome, by reference to that purpose ('We're not here to talk about that'), or by reference to discourse rights or by interjections or backchannels ('turn-disruptive moves') which have that force (Thomas 1989: 144-145).

In this research, psychics often assert their discourse rights by using a directive move to mark the end of an unwanted subject response. If the subject accepts the psychic's dismissal of his or her response, the psychic may use a follow-up move to comment on the subject's acceptance:

- (14) Edward: She makes me feel like this so-called secret sauce that you guys came up with is actually based on something that your mother made.
 Audience Member: Well, my mother was a terrific cook, my mother never made this, but,
 Edward: But, but, but. No, no (directive) [Audience Member: smiles and nods in agreement]. If this were a court of law (laughter from the audience) and you had to respond yes or no, would this sauce be based on something your mother made?
 Audience Member: Yes.
 Edward: I rest my case (*Crossing Over* 2-17-2003).

Edward is disallowing the contributions of the subordinate speaker by using contrastive discourse markers, such as *but* and *no*. In their role as experts, psychics can dismiss their subjects' comments and questions by interrupting them. The use of a directive in psychic readings ensures that the subordinate speaker will not be allowed to wander from the topics that the psychic chooses to discuss. On most occasions, the subordinate speaker accepts the psychic's direction so as to minimize disagreement between what Thomas (1989: 147) calls "the self and other." The psychic follows-up the subject's acceptance of his dismissal by making a comment, such as *I rest my case*, that shows that he, and not the subject, was right all along.

The most common approach used by the psychics to deal with their subjects' negative responses is to recycle the topic that caused disagreement. In asymmetrical exchanges, the dominant speaker may recycle a topic that has not been dealt with to his or her satisfaction (Shuy 1990; Thomas 1989). This process can occur with or without the expert using follow-up moves that violate the subordinate speaker's face (Brown

and Levinson 1976; Goffman 1956). The following example illustrates the psychics' use of topic recycling without the use of face-threatening behavior:

- (15) Edward: Uhum, I think I'm on the second row. I'm with you, uhum, I don't know if, I, let me just say this, as a matter of fact I'm not going to even look at you when I say it [unintelligible] ah, I have a mom that is coming through and she wants me to acknowledge that there are two men with her. I either would see this as a husband and a brother, two brothers, but there is two boys that come with her okay. So they may be separate, but there is two men that come up (pause).
Audience Member: [No response].
Edward: What's the connection to April? The fourth month of April? Or the fourth of the month?
Audience Member: [Nods as if out of loss].
Edward: It's not for you?
Audience Member: [Again nods as if bewildered] No.
Edward: Are you sure there is no birthday in April or on the 4th?
Audience Member: The fourth October.
Edward: That's what I thought (*Crossing Over* 5-21-2003).

There are other instances, however, in which the psychics may recycle a topic and dismiss the subjects' responses using face-threatening behavior:

- (16) Edward: He wants me to let you know that he's okay. He wants me to let you know that he's glad you have his key. I don't know what that is but he acknowledges the key, can you explain that?
Audience Member 1: I have no idea what the key is.
Edward: You should, somebody gave it to you.
Audience Member 1: Gave it to me?
Edward: Somebody gave you a key.
Audience Member 1: No one gave me a key.
Edward: He gave you a key.
Audience Member 1: He didn't give me a key.
Edward: [Pointing to the woman sitting next to audience member 1] This is your husband?
Audience Member 2: Yes
Edward: Why is he claiming to have given his brother the key?
Audience Member 2: I don't know.
Edward: Remember we are talking about planes and stuff. A key to something specific, do you remember?
Audience Member 1: I hate his plane.
Edward: Did you hear me ask for an opinion? But thanks for sharing (*Crossing Over* 2-12-2003).

In example 16, Edward is unable to convince his subject (audience member 1) that his lack of understanding of the reading is probably due to his faulty memory rather than to Edward being wrong. In response to his subject's lack of cooperation, Edward chooses to break down the will of his subject. He attempts to get the subject to admit

that the reading was accurate, even though neither audience member gives him any confirmation. Once this strategy fails, the psychic uses a follow-up move to forcefully indicate to his subject that he thinks he is being uncooperative and unhelpful. Psychics who are incorrect in their readings, even if infrequently, run the risk of being perceived as inaccurate which is an undesirable outcome of any psychic reading. Psychics depend on their alleged accuracy to credential their work, to assert their expertise, and to engage successfully in an asymmetrical exchange with their subjects. In those cases in which the psychics' ability may be questioned, psychics may use their status as experts to eradicate the threat the subjects' negative responses place on their perceived television persona.

6. Conclusions

In this research, I have shown that psychics often introduce general topics that are matched, on most occasions, by specific responses from their subjects. In turn, the subjects' responses trigger a somewhat predictable linguistic behavior, such as the psychics' use of the feedback technique, the psychics' use of follow-up moves, or the psychics' use of face-threatening behavior.

The analysis of the data suggests that psychics introduce general topics in their exchanges to draw specific responses from their subjects. The psychics in the study are aware that their subjects are interested in obtaining a reading and, thus, will be cooperative on most occasions. Cooperation includes answering the psychics' eliciting questions, preferably with a specific or affirmative response, and participating in the negotiation of psychic-initiated topics. In those instances in which the subjects do not cooperate to the psychics' satisfaction, the psychics use their status as experts to dismiss, disclaim, or recycle a topic. On occasion recycling a topic includes the psychics' use of face threatening behavior. Threatening the subjects' face is intended to change their subjects' negative responses into positive ones. In those cases in which the subjects do not change their responses, the psychics may use a face-threatening tone to suggest that their subjects are uncooperative participants. In these cases, the psychics' linguistic style cast doubts on their subjects' ability to recollect past events or, more importantly, on their subjects' integrity. The latter, which has a more powerful effect, promotes the idea that the subjects' lack of cooperation reflects their inability to be upfront about their lives rather than the psychic's inability to connect with the *other side*.

In sum, this study has shown that psychics, such as Edward and Van Praagh, appear to engage in linguistic tactics that promote the illusion of expertise. The linguistic behavior often observed in these types of psychic readings is highly suggestive of deception or what could be described as a language trick.

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