

“Evaluator in Chief”: The interactional making of Trump as the Boss

Brion van Over

This work focuses on the interaction between Trump and his guests at the 2017 Black History Month Listening Session during a communication event described by Trump as “a little breakfast,” though the political stakes of the event are undoubtedly high, as a President repeatedly accused of racist and xenophobic remarks leads a meeting of Black Americans in the public celebration of the lives and accomplishments of some of America’s greatest Black historical figures. The analysis employs the theoretical and methodological framework of the Ethnography of Communication (Hymes, 1974), identifying a communication event constituted by a progression of rounds of “introductions”, as well as his prepared, and seemingly spontaneous remarks ahead of these rounds. The event is analyzed, following Carbaugh (2007), with special attention to messages about personhood, relations, and communication that are presumed and enacted in the event, as well as its sequential organization, and the temporary interactional positions (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) inhabited by participants throughout. The analysis draws attention to a cultivated set of norms for speaking that emerge over the course of the event and suggest that Trump’s talk during his opening remarks, and throughout the “introductions,” functions to establish a patterned form of participation that routinely places Trump in the position of “evaluator” and his guests as “evaluatee,” akin to the emergent roles of “problematizer/problematizee” identified by Ochs and Taylor (1995) in the “father knows best dynamic”. This positioning in turn informs the social work done in each “introduction” as guests shape their verbal participation into the evidentiary structure of Trump’s implicit assessment criteria, and the larger norms for verbal participation, as well as presumed and enacted messages about personhood (what is a right person?), relations (what rights/obligations do we have?), and communication (what is the proper role of communication between relations such as these?). This dynamic is conceptualized here, following Ochs and Taylor (1995), as the “what have you done for me lately” dynamic, which functions to elicit declarations of commitment and loyalty in the discursive co-construction of Trump’s authority accomplished by Trump and guests over the course of the meeting. As a result, this analysis identifies one means by which power is manufactured and consolidated at the level of cultural discursive practice.

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