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‘(laughs loudly) I don’t believe you’

Metadiscursive comments in Flemish print media interviews

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Print media question-answer interviews in the Dutch-speaking press in Belgium show a formal characteristic which is not widely spread in other languages: in the interviewee’s answers, often side comments made by the interviewer are incorporated between brackets. These comments are forms of metadiscourse (Hyland 2019) and we can consider them to be ‘asides’ in the sense Goffman (1981) assigned to the term. This study describes the different forms these asides take in question-answer interviews in two Flemish popular magazines and analyzes their discursive functions. Interviewers who integrate asides in their texts, stage themselves and the readers as participants in the conversation. The analysis of the asides shows that written interviews should be considered as a form of discourse in which three participating parties are involved and in which communication in different directions takes place, rather than as an account in written form of a conversation between interviewer and interviewee.

1. Introduction: Side comments in print interviews

Interviews published in newspapers, magazines and on websites of the Flemish press show a formal characteristic which is not (often) found in written interviews published in other languages. In the answers of the interviewees (IEs), side comments made by the interviewer (IR) are integrated between brackets. Ex. 1 illustrates this phenomenon.

(1) IR: Zijn Bicky Burgers beduidend lekkerder dan andere hamburgers?

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- ‘Are Bicky Burgers significantly better than other hamburgers?’
IE: (oprecht verrast) Natuurlijk! Bicky staat op nummer een.¹
‘(genuinely surprised) Of course! Bicky is the number one.’

These comments originated in the popular press², but they can nowadays be found in all kinds of interviews, also hard news interviews, in all publications of the Dutch-speaking Belgian press. The use of them may of course vary depending on the idiosyncratic style of the journalist writing out the interview, but the practice is widespread.

The form of the comments is related to that of “editor’s notes” (Pander Maat 2008), which are internationally used in written interviews and which add factual information to the interview, like specifications of names or years. The comments that are studied here, are more subjective than these editor’s notes, and add information of a different kind.

A parallel can also be drawn with audio description (Ramos 2015, Fryer 2016), which is “a type of audiovisual translation that describes the images associated with different audiovisual products (e.g. cinema, theatre, dance). It inserts descriptions of the images in the gaps left between dialogue and music in order to make these kind of cultural products accessible for the visually impaired” (Ramos 2015:68). While acknowledging that subjectivity is difficult to avoid in audio description, Fryer (2016:166) still mentions guidelines which try to limit subjectivity. In the comments I will discuss however, subjectivity is often more the goal than a side effect of the journalist’s communication.

This study will not focus on quantitative questions like how often the phenomenon occurs in the Flemish press nor the frequency of occurrence related to topic and type of interview, but it will rather show the variety of forms these comments take and try to find out what the nature is of these comments and which purposes they serve.

As ex. 2 shows, comments indicating that questions and/or answers are uttered laughingly, also occur in the French press.³

- (2) IR: Quel est le dernier livre que vous ayez lu ?
‘What is the last book you read?’
IE: *Germinal*. En Reader’s Digest. [*Rires*.] Non, le dernier livre que j’ai lu, c’est le bouquin de Giesbert sur Chirac.

¹ The sources of the examples are listed in the appendix.

² Guy Mortier (former editor-in-chief of the popular Flemish magazine *Humo*), personal communication.

³ This example was brought to my attention by Sébastien Vandenitte (Université de Namur).

'Germinal. In Reader's Digest. [Laughter.] No, the last book I read is the booklet by Giesbert about Chirac.'

The French examples I came across always have to do with the laughing manner in which the utterances occur. As I did not perform a systematic analysis of a French corpus, I cannot generalize this observation, but the examples from the Dutch-speaking Belgian press certainly show a lot of variation.

This article will give an overview of the types of comments that occurred in 81 interviews from two Flemish popular magazines and suggest a number of interpretations of the functions they fulfil.

2. Metadiscursive comments

Several authors have studied comments having a reflexive communicative function in different kinds of discourses, which can thus be labelled "metadiscourse". In the definition of Hyland (1998:438), "metadiscourse is not an independent stylistic device which authors can vary at will", but it is "integral to the contexts in which it occurs and is intimately linked to the norms and expectations of particular cultural and professional communities."

Makkonen-Craig (2011:684) mentions two different traditions in the study of metadiscourse. The first is the reflexive tradition, which approaches metadiscourse as "discourse that refers to the current evolving text, i.e., either to the text itself or its writing process". The second is the participant-oriented approach, "where a reference is made not only to the current text, but also to the current writer and the imagined current reader". This kind of discourse has a "guiding" function, as it helps the reader interpret the current text correctly, and an "interactional" function, as it sets up an interaction with the reader. The second approach is most suitable for the metadiscursive comments in our study.

According to Fiertes-Olivera et al. (2001:1292), metadiscourse creates solidarity between people communicating, in that it refers to shared knowledge or a common frame of reference. Dafouz-Milne (2008:97) defines metadiscourse as "those features which writers include to help readers decode the message, share the writer's view and reflect the particular conventions that are followed in a given culture", thus perfectly capturing the form and function of the side comments which are the topic of this article. In ex. 1 "genuinely surprised" is an interpretation of the journalist, which helps the reader "decode" the IE's answer. Its position

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preceding the interviewee's answer and its presentation between brackets inform the reader about the way this addition should be read.

The pragmatic function of these comments brings to mind the concept of "aside" as introduced by Goffman (1981:72):

Part-way through his turn he [the speaker] can break frame and introduce an aside, alluding to extraneous matters, or, reflexively, to the effort at communication now in progress--his own--in either case temporarily presenting himself to his listeners on a changed footing.

This is indeed what seems to be at stake in the metadiscursive comments I encountered in the interviews. The term is borrowed from dramatic theatre, where the audience is treated as a "fourth wall" and where "a marked break occurs when a performer turns and addresses a comment directly out to the audience" (Seizer 1997:64). Asides have been studied in different types of discourse. Strodt-Lopez (1991:122) found them in university lectures, uttered by the lecturers, and describes them as "an effective discourse strategy for stepping back and gaining new and/or greater perspective". Georges (1981:245) studied the narrative function of asides in folk stories and points out that, while at first sight they seem to be superfluous, they do have a function and "they invariably judge, explain, compare and contrast and assess". Stewart (2012:311) mentions asides in parliamentary debates and labels them as tools for "reflexive and interactive positioning" of the self.

I first noticed asides in journalistic interviews when I studied ways in which journalists tried to present themselves as competent interviewers (Temmerman 2011). I noticed that, in some cases, journalists copy a remark made directly to them by the interviewee (e.g. 'that is a good question') in the written-out interview. Interviewees may have several reasons for making this kind of statement. They may be stalling for time, collecting their thoughts or they may want to show their appreciation for the question. If journalists include the reply in the written-out text, they may do so in order to signal to the reader that the interviewee approved of their question, thereby emphasizing their competence as interviewers. In other cases, metadiscursive comments have this same function. Ex. 3 was one of the examples in this study:

- (3) IR: Als u een tweederdemeerderheid wilt vinden, moet u Elio Di Rupo haast smeken om mee in de regering te stappen. Bizar toch?

‘If you want to find a two third majority, you almost have to beg Elio di Rupo to join the government. Bizarre, isn’t it?’

IE: (laconiek) Daar hebt u een eerste paradox gevonden. En als u nog even doordenkt, zult u er nog vele andere vinden. [...]
‘(laconically) There you have found a first paradox. And if you think a bit further, you will find many others. [...]

By noting that the interviewee answers in a laconical way, the interviewer might want to show the readers that this was a good question and that s/he is well-informed about the political situation. The metadiscursive comment pays a kind of compliment to the interviewer. The example sparked my interest in these metadiscursive comments, so that I embarked on a more systematic analysis.

3. Corpus

For this study, I have analyzed a corpus which was already available to our research group⁴ and which consisted of 81 interviews from two Flemish popular magazines (*Humo* and *Dag Allemaal*) from the year 2011. 39 interviews were from *Humo*, 42 from *Dag Allemaal*. *Dag Allemaal* is the most read Flemish weekly magazine. It focuses on showbizz and television news. It is published by De Persgroep Publishing, with an average weekly circulation of 422,067 copies in 2010 (Van Gorp 2014:2). *Humo* is described as a progressive, relatively highbrow television weekly (Van Gorp 2014:4). At the time, it was published by The Vijver Media, with an average weekly circulation of 256,558 in 2010 (Lefevere & Dandoy 2011:7).

In the *Dag Allemaal* interviews, 422 metadiscursive comments were found, consisting of 152 different tokens, whereas the *Humo* interviews contained 443 comments, yielding 206 different tokens.

Table 1 shows the frequency of tokens in the top 20 for *Humo*, table 2 shows the same for *Dag Allemaal* (*DA*). The comments can take a number of grammatical forms. They can be finite verbs (e.g. “laughs”), participles (e.g. “hesitating”), qualifying adjectives or adverbs (e.g. “enthusiastic(ally)”), nouns or noun phrases (e.g. “(deep) sigh”), adverbial phrases (e.g. “in a low voice”), clauses (e.g. “wipes away a tear”) or imperatives (e.g. “notice the glasses”).

⁴ The corpus was assembled by our student Eveline Vrolix in 2012.

Table 1 Top 20 comments from Humo

1	(lacht) 'laughs'	175
2	(denkt na) 'thinks'	12
3	(knikt) 'nods'	10
4	(lachje) 'laugh'	8
5	(schudt het hoofd) 'shakes the head'	7
6	(verbaasd) 'astonished'	5
7	(brede grijns) 'broad grin'	4
8	(enthousiast) 'enthusiastically'	4
9	(grijnst) 'grins'	4
10	(hilariteit) 'hilarity'	4
11	(zingt) 'sings'	4
12	(zwijgt) 'keeps silent'	4
13	(blaast) 'puffs'	3
14	(lacht luid) 'laughs loudly'	3
15	(onverstoorbaar) 'imperturbably'	3
16	(zucht) 'sighs'	3
17	(aarzelt) 'hesitates'	2
18	(begint te zingen) 'starts singing'	2
19	(denkt lang na) 'thinks for a long time'	2
20	(diepe zucht) 'deep sigh'	2

Table 2 Top 20 comments from DA

1	(lacht) 'laughs'	71
2	(lachje) 'chuckle'	46
3	(knikt) 'nods'	18
4	(zucht) 'sighs'	17
5	(schudt het hoofd) 'shakes the head'	9
6	(schatert) 'roars with laughter'	7
7	(blaast) 'puffs'	6
8	(zucht diep) 'sighs deeply'	6
9	(aarzelt) 'hesitates'	5
10	(grijnst) 'grins'	5
11	(krijgt het moeilijk) 'struggles with emotions'	5
12	(glimlacht) 'smiles'	4
13	(grinnikt) 'chuckles'	4
14	(onderbreekt) 'interrupts'	4
15	(stil) 'in a low voice'	4
16	(denkt na) 'thinks'	3
17	(pauzeert) 'pauses'	3
18	(windt zich op) 'gets enraged'	3
19	(aarzelend) 'hesitating(ly)'	2
20	(denkt even na) 'thinks for while'	2

It is clear that in both publications, the indication of laughter (in various forms) is by far the most frequent. Other comments have to do with other perilinguistic indications like sighing or even singing, movements of the head (nodding, shaking), conversational behaviour (enthusiasm, imperturbability) and pausing (thinking, hesitating). As there are no marked differences between the examples from both magazines, I will treat the whole of the instances as one corpus.

In the next section, I will list the different functions the comments show to have in different contexts.

4. Metadiscursive functions of the comments

4.1. *Describing – giving factual information*

In some cases, the comments add factual information the reader is not presupposed to have. This information can be visual, as in ex. 4, where the interviewee's non-verbal behaviour is described (a shoulder shrug), or auditory as in ex. 5, which renders the interviewee's verbal behaviour (a trembling voice).

- (4) IR: Vind je dat een goede reden om te sterven?
'Do you think that is a good reason to die?'
- IE: (haalt schouders op) Een goeie reden zeker niet, maar zo is papa's dood toch niet helemaal nutteloos geweest. Ik probeer uit elke negatieve ervaring iets positiefs te halen.
'(shrugs) It's certainly not a good reason, but daddy's death has not been completely useless this way. I try to get something positive from every negative experience.'
- (5) IR: Praat je in gedachten met Wouter over jullie dochttertje?
'Do you speak with Wouter about your little girl in your thoughts?'
- IE: 'Toen ik nog zwanger was, heb ik dat enkele keren gedaan aan Wouters graf. (met trillende stem) Maar het is er nog niet van gekomen om Alizée mee te nemen naar het kerkhof.
'When I was pregnant, I did that a few times at Wouter's grave. (in a trembling voice) But I haven't come around to taking Alizée to the cemetery yet.'

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These comments describe the setting of the interview or the interviewee's behaviour and give information that was verifiable for everyone who was present at the moment of the interview. In ex. 4, a shoulder shrug is mentioned, but what this adds to the meaning of the answer, is not made explicit. It could indicate a certain indifference or a hint that the interviewee is not really sure about what she is saying. In ex. 5, the trembling voice suggests emotion.

4.2. *Interpreting emotions shown by the interviewee*

A second category of comments is interpreting, rather than describing. Ex. 6 shows how the interviewer describes the interviewee getting emotional. The reader however cannot infer how these emotions were shown. Maybe the interviewee was fighting her tears when she was asked about the gender preference of her deceased husband for their unborn child, but the comment only mentions that the interviewee has difficulties answering, which leaves more room for interpretation than was the case with the comments in 4.1.

(6) IR: Had Wouter een voorkeur?
'Did Wouter have a preference?'

IE: Ja, een jongen. Om mee te ravotten en te sporten he. Enfin, één dag later had Wouter al ingezien dat je dat met een meisje ook kan. (krijgt het weer moeilijk)
'Yes, a boy. For playing and doing sports, you know. Anyway, one day later, Wouter had realized you can do that with a girl as well. (it gets difficult for her again)'

4.3 *Assessing the interviewees' conversational behaviour*

Interviewers in some cases not only interpret the interviewees' emotions, they sometimes also assess their conversational behaviour. In ex. 7, the interviewer labels the pause the interviewee leaves before continuing his answer as a 'meaningful silence'.

(7) IR: Heeft Vanessa jou expliciet om geld gevraagd?
'Did Vanessa ask for your money explicitly?'

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- IE: Ze zegt dat ze mijn geld niet nodig heeft. (laat een veelbetekenende stilte vallen) Dan vind ik het toch bijzonder vreemd dat ze bij vrienden van mij heeft gevist naar mijn maandsalaris. Natúúrlijk is het Vanessa om het geld te doen, maar dat is niet het enige. ‘She says she doesn’t need my money. (leaves a meaningful silence) Then I still find it very strange that she has been trying to find out with my friends what the amount of my monthly salary is. Of ‘course money is what it is all about for Vanessa, but that is not the only thing.’

The interviewee first quotes his ex-girlfriend saying she does not need his money. After the ‘meaningful silence’, he continues with an oppositional phrase containing *toch* (still). His final phrase starting with the emphasized adverb *natúúrlijk* (of ‘course’) shows that he does not believe her. The metadiscursive comment is the first hint to this interpretation for the reader.

4.4 Adding meaning

A last category of comments can be defined as “adding meaning” to the utterance. Here, the interviewer implies a meaning that is not made explicit, but that has to be inferred by the reader. Again, we can refer to Goffman’s (1981) conversational framework to understand what goes on in these instances. The phenomenon of innuendo applies here, defined by Goffman (1981:134) as

a speaker, ostensibly directing words to an addressed recipient, overlays his remarks with a patent but deniable meaning, a meaning that has a target more so than a recipient, is typically disparaging of it, and is meant to be caught by the target, whether this be the addressed recipient or an unaddressed recipient, or even a bystander

As exs. 8 and 9 show, the disparaging element is not present in the examples in our corpus, but there is an extra layer of meaning which is to be caught by the reader.

- (8) IE: ‘t is [...] een vreemd programma. Onlangs, nogal laat, ben ik eens langs *Inbox* gezapt op 2BE. En wat ik dààr heb gezien...

'It's a weird programme. Lately, late in the evening, I came across *Inbox* on 2BE. And what I saw there [emphasized]...'

IR: Ja?

'Yes?'

IE: (bloost door de telefoon heen) Wel, 't ging daar over...
eh... Och nee laat maar, ik zeg het liever niet.

IR: '(blushes over the telephone) Well, it was about... ehm.. O no,
never mind, I'd rather not tell you.'

In ex. 8, the comment 'blushes over the telephone' has a humoristic effect and makes the reader imply that the interviewee was embarrassed talking about this subject.

Ex. 9 is an extract from an interview with the Dutch pop singer Anouk. The first comment in this extract "(laughs loudly)" already indicates that the interviewee enjoys the interview. In the next exchange, the interviewer compares her music to that of big names in the international pop music scene, to which the singer apparently replies in an "excited" tone. She is represented as being flattered with the comparison, and an extra layer of meaning we can discern here, is that the interviewer is well versed in the world of pop music and that he is able to express an expert opinion on her record. The reactions of the interviewee can be interpreted as appreciative.

- (9) IR: Ik heb heel eerlijk waar nog een muziekvraag.
'To tell you the truth, I still have a question about music for you.'
- IE: (lacht hard) Ik geloof er niks van.
'(laughs loudly) I don't believe you.'
- IR: Je plaat klinkt erg eighties. Mee eens?
'Your record sounds very eighties-like. Do you agree?'
- IE: Ja, best wel.
'Yes, I do.'
- IR: Ik hoor echo's van George Michael...
'I hear echoes of George Michael...'
- IE: (opgewonden) *That's nice!* Die hoor ik niet, maar ga vooral verder!
'(excited) That's nice! I don't hear them, but do continue!'
- IR: Ik hoor Sting, de jonge Michael Jackson, The Sugarhill Gang...
'I hear Sting, the young Michael Jackson, The Sugarhill Gang...'
- IE: Ja hoor, toe maar!
'All right, go on!'

This is the phenomenon I already referred to in section 2, which I also encountered in interviews with politicians (Temmerman 2011). By integrating tokens of appreciation of the interviewee, journalists demonstrate their own competence as interviewers.

5. Discussion and conclusions

In this article, I have highlighted a phenomenon which frequently occurs in print media interviews in the Belgian Dutch-speaking press and which is hardly known in print interviews in other regions and languages, i.e. the insertion of metadiscursive comments between brackets by the interviewer in the interviewee's answers. These comments are different from the "editor's notes" which are common in written interviews in magazines and newspapers. Overall, they help to have the interviews reflect the multimodality of the conversation to the reader. Just like the photographs illustrating the interviews, they enliven the monomodal text the reader is presented with.

The metadiscursive comments can take different grammatical forms, but in most cases they are finite verbs describing the interviewee's communicative behaviour. Laughing is by far the behaviour that is described most frequently.

The function of these metadiscursive comments is mostly describing. They add information the reader does not have, e.g. by describing the setting in which the interview takes place and the interviewee's non-verbal or verbal behaviour. In a second and third category, the interviewers not only describe, but also interpret the emotions or assess the conversational behaviour of the interviewee. A fourth category goes even one step further and adds innuendo to the interviewee's utterance, thereby inviting the reader to infer new meanings, like humor or the suggestion of the interviewer's competence in conducting an interview. The humoristic overtone was only found in examples from the *Humo* corpus, but the sample is too small to draw any conclusions from this observation.

With every category, the presence of the interviewer in the utterance increases. While describing is a rather neutral activity which creates verifiable content, interpreting and assessing are more subjective and add more personal elements from the interviewer. The fourth category in which the interviewer adds new meanings to the utterance which have to be inferred by the reader can be considered to be the most subjective.

At the same time, also the presence of the reader increases in the fourth category. While the reader's activity in processing describing, interpreting and assessing comments remains more or less stable, in the fourth category of innuendo, a more active participation from the reader is expected: the reader has to infer which meanings the interviewer intended to add to the interviewee's answer.

Goffman's (1981) terms of 'aside' and 'innuendo' apply to the function of these comments, but they also prove to be instances of metadiscourse (cf. section 2). Flemish readers are used to finding these comments in print interviews and know how to interpret them, so that the definitions of metadiscourse as discourse which is linked to the norms and expectations of particular cultural communities, which refers to a common frame of reference and which share the writers's view and help readers decode the message, apply (Hyland 1998:438, Fuertes-Olivera et al. 2001:1292, Dafouz-Milne 2008:97). The participant-oriented approach to metadiscourse (Makkonen-Craig 2011:684) helps to explain how journalists use these comments to stage themselves and the readers as participants in the communication process and to set up an interaction with the readers.

A written interview is never a mere account in written form of a conversation between an interviewer and an interviewee, but the metadiscursive comments we encounter in Flemish interviews make the interviewer's interventions more explicit. They show us that a written interview is a communicative act in which three parties are involved, i.e. the interviewer, the interviewee and the reader, and where communication in three directions takes place: selfevidently from interviewer to interviewee and vice versa, but also from interviewer to reader. Figure 1 visualizes these three directions.

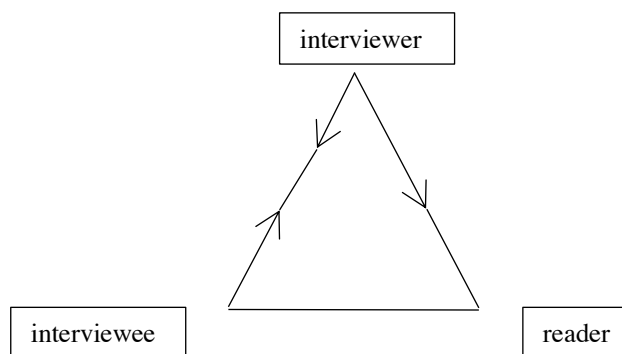


Figure 1 Three possible directions of communication in print interviews

It is not unthinkable that also communication from the interviewee towards the reader is possible. Interviewees might try to address the reader directly instead of answering the interviewer's question. This is something which is worth investigating further. Another question that remains to be answered is how interviews in other languages can convey all necessary information without these metadiscursive comments. This raises the question whether readers in other languages miss essential information in written interviews, or whether there are other means to convey the same meanings. Also this question is food for further reflection.

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7. Appendix: Sources of the examples

- (1) *Humo* 2011, 27 - interview with Lies Lefever, comedian.
- (2) *Libération* 06/09/2006 (https://www.liberation.fr/medias/2006/09/06/je-ne-va-is-pas-dire-que-j-ai-beaucoup-de-talent_50404/) - interview with Benjamin Castaldi, French tv host.
- (3) *De Morgen*, 2007, 13/06 – interview with politician Bart De Wever, chairman of the Nationalist Flemish Alliance
- (4) *Humo* 2011, 4 – interview with Kim Clijsters, tennis player
- (5) *Dag Allemaal* 2011, 37 – interview with Ann-Sophie De Graeve, widow of Wouter Weylandt, a cyclist who was killed in an accident while his wife was pregnant
- (6) idem
- (7) *Dag Allemaal* 2011, 35 – interview with Nacer Chadli, football player
- (8) *Humo* 2011, 7 – interview with Sophie Dewaele, tv-host
- (9) *Humo* 2011, 20 – interview with Dutch pop singer Anouk