Everyday Talk and the Conversational Patterns of the Soap Opera

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Abstract

The soap opera has been explored from many different angles. This article examines the relationship between one of the general characteristics of the genre, the fact that there is far more talk than action, and the ways people actually talk in the soap. The article uses Bakhtin's concept of speech genre as its source of inspiration and as an analytical tool that has the potential to be used in respect to many other genres that, in various ways, are constituted in talk.

Key Words: soap, tv-drama, speech genre, Bakhtin, gossip

Introduction

"Good evening, this is the six o'clock news" or "Welcome – this evening we are going to meet …" The media are filled with interpersonal conversations and various kinds of talk that are adapted in different ways to the medium and the genre in which they unfold. TV in particular is characterized by a good deal of talk and jargon (e.g., Hjarvard 1999: 238f), so the audience experiences a sort of simulated conversation with hosts and other players (Horton & Wohl 1997 (1956)). Much TV fiction also enacts and represents everyday conversation. In this article, I will examine how the relationship functions between program genres, regarded as a unique mode of communication, and oral conversations related to everyday life in order to propose a method for qualifying our analysis of talk. My starting point is the soap opera, where, as studies have shown, talk is plentiful. International research has repeatedly pointed out (e.g., Gledhill 1992) that, as a genre, the soap opera is characterized by far more talk than action. Some of the particularly popular themes are personal dilemmas, love and relationships, a circumstance related to several factors including the soap opera's overriding interest in the personal and the universally human. At the same time, the soap opera also exemplifies the many different kinds of small talk that also characterize everyday life. This is related to the fact that the soap opera takes place precisely in an arena that most people are somewhat familiar with: a hospital, an office, a police station and so forth. In this respect, it appears obvious to make use of the soap opera in a sociolinguistic analysis of the relationship between concrete conversations (micro-level) and more general genres (macro-level), as an organizing principle of conversations. In addition, I will emphasize in particular two constitutive features of the soap that are also significant for the spe-

cific conversations within the series in question.[1] First of all, the soap is typically based on some sort of community. It is the order and disorder of the community that generate the narratives, and the soap deals with the human, shared and personal conflicts that arise when people live or work together. One Danish soap opera by the name of *Hotellet* ("the hotel," TV2, 60 episodes, 2000-2002), which is the case to be analyzed here, is based on a family-owned hotel in a provincial town. Together, the family and staff must make their daily life work, and it may be said that the hotel is a shared project that must be kept free from outside "threats" of various kinds: dissatisfied guests who create negative publicity or bigger hotel chains that would like to buy up the hotel. The threat can also be of a more internal nature, such as when Erik Faber commits suicide, bringing to life secrets about financial difficulties and the story that he could not have been the biological father of Adam, Julie and Nikolaj, due to his sterility. The idyll is broken, and together the characters must build up a new order. Hence, the soap reflects a number of topical and typical – albeit caricatured – conflicts that concern our social universe.

On *Hotellet*, 2000-2002

Hotellet, 60 episodes of approx. 45 minutes. Aired Thursdays at 8 p.m./various times. Aired the last season, autumn 2002, Wednesdays at 8:35 pm

The series was created by Morten Arnfred, Søren Sveistrup and Peter Nyrén.

Creative producers: Morten Arnfred, Morten Giese, Kristoffer Nyholm. Main authors: Jørgen Kastrup and Per Daumiller. Scenografer: Jette Lehmann. Producer: Bo Mortensen. Editor: Adam Price.

The series had an average of 700,000 viewers and 37% of the total number of viewers.

Produced by Jarowskij for TV2.

Budget: approx. 1 million DKK per episode. An episode was recorded in 2.5 days with two directors (corresponds to 5 playing days).

The plot: *Hotellet* depicts life in a family-owned provincial hotel. The family consists of Erik and Alice Faber and their three adult children: Adam, Julie, and Nikolaj. In the first episode, Eirk Faber commits suicide during Adam and Maria's wedding party, effectively launching the plot and the 60 episodes. In the kitchen, the head cook Lasse, the cook Jimmy, and the waitress Anette are regular characters in the first seasons. Later, a new head cook, Dorte, is introduced. At the reception desk the focal point is Adam's wife, Maria, and the receptionist Louise, while Aminah functions as the maid. Last but not least, there is the rather mystical handyman, John, who knows a lot about the hotel and its inhabitants' secrets, but who is rarely very talkative. In this sense, the serial is structured as a traditional soap with interweaving storylines. But each episode also typically contains an episodic and finished storyline, where the story of one or more guests is in focus.[2] Quite a few love relationships, friendships and hostilities take place at the hotel, and in this context one of the issues that I will deal with is the relationship between Adam and Maria, which is shaky because Maria has been with the cook Lasse, who himself has had a relationship with Anette.

Finally, the soap is characterized by what could be called an operationalization of parallel action and open endings. The staging of ten-twelve characters, each with their own history, means that there are always many stories taking place at once – often five or six stories in a single episode. The stories become intertwined like an arabesque, and while conflicts are being solved in various ways, new characters and new conflicts appear.

Generally speaking, the textual analysis part of the research has dealt particularly with the narrative structure of the soap and with the community as the thematic focal point, while there are fewer suggestions as to how to characterize the essential function of the conversations and how to analytically identify the conversation.[3] This article, therefore, primarily sets out to propose how to theoretically and analytically identify *how* the conversations function on a micro-level as well as in respect to the soap as the overriding framework.[4] This analytical identification draws on theory introduced by the Russian theorist on language and discourse M. M. Bakhtin in the shape of his *concept of the speech act* (Bakhtin 2002 (1986)). Methodically, this article is based on a single episode, illustrating how the various levels of the speech genre are related. It is, thus, a question of condensations and exemplifications, especially as regards how the speech genre functions on a structural level.[5] At the same time, one of the points is that the work on genres in fact makes it possible to work across very large quantities of text, because the genre analysis crystallizes relatively fixed and stable patterns. In this connection, I will argue that the kind of gossip or inside talk among the staff, which characterizes *Hotellet*, is also present in other soaps, and that the mediating conversation characterizing the episode analyzed here is also found in the other episodes.

Speech Act Theory and Microsociology

In his essay "The Problem of Speech Genres," Bakhtin distinguishes between primary (typically oral) and secondary (typically written) speech genres. In respect to what we will be examining more closely here – the speech genres in the soap (primary speech genres) and the soap as a speech genre (secondary speech genre) – one of the points is that the primary speech genres and the ways in which the characters' conversations reflect everyday conversations are related to the secondary genre, the soap. Overall, this means that the conversations are contextualized as regards the other generic features of the soap: its emphasis on parallel action and community themes. This also means that the interplay between the secondary genre, the soap, and the particular arena of the individual production is decisive for which conversations are started and how they develop. The everyday conversation typically characterizes the overall linguistic expression of the soap, in that it is the quotidian as a context, as a theme, and often as a composition (an episode typically begins on a working day while the end of a single episode typically corresponds with the end of the day) that constitutes its framework. The everyday conversation is, of course, a highly complex entity, but in this context I will argue that the everyday conversations that unfold in the soap are characterized by containing elements of small talk and/or gossip, which is connected with the fact that gossip, as a speech genre, has a quality in respect to linking the many instances of parallel action together and focusing on the subject of community.

Bakhtin furthermore argues that every expression, whether primary or secondary speech genres, has an individual style that is linked to the entity or subject that transmits the expression. In other words, this is a dynamic concept of genre in which what is framed and formal is united with the individual style. Thus, genres are defined as general stylistic expressions that are "inseparably linked to particular thematic unities: to particular types of construction of the whole, types of its completion, and types of relations between the speaker and other participants in speech communication" (Bakhtin 2002 (1986): 64). The style of the individual production is tied up with the

angle taken on the material, the particular composition, and the unique arena in the series. The special concentration and linguistic style can be explored by means of linguistic analysis, insofar as the analysis, contrary to more traditional linguistic analyses, works with the overall linguistic expression that it has built up in relation to theme, style, and composition and especially context.[6] In this respect, Bakhtin's theory shares many points of similarity with John Austin and John Searle's argumentation theory (Andersen & Lundquist 2003: 107), which is why the concepts from this field are sporadically present in my analysis. What is special about Bakhtin's reflections is, however, the concept of speech genre, which in an exemplary way makes it possible to speak systematically about various kinds of jargons and not least about the relation between primary and secondary genres. Bakhtin criticizes traditional linguistics for not being interested in real, social subjects communicating from and in concrete situations and contexts. In this context, all conversations are the product of the specific sphere, the speaker's and the addressee's mutual relation, the theme, and so forth. The utterance "Is anything available?" will thus be conceived of differently according to whether it is said at a hotel reception desk or at a public employment agency and would be considered odd if it was the hotel receptionist addressing the client. This means that utterances cannot be considered neutral; rather they always relate to the interaction between the context, sender, and receiver. Bakhtin views the utterance as delimited by the speaking subject, but the delimitation does not necessarily correspond to the concept of turn-taking in conversational analysis, which marks shifts between speakers in a dialogue (see also, e.g., Wiese 2003). According to Bakhtin, the utterance may thus consist of a single word, but also of an entire work. In addition, every utterance will refer to other utterances in an intertextual structure, and this means that the analytical work on the concept of the utterance will emphasize the very process of speech, other utterances, and cultural communication, in which will be embedded viewpoints, approaches, and philosophies of life. Dialogue is therefore a key concept in Bakhtin's theory of speech acts, inasmuch as for Bakhtin every utterance can be understood in relation to previously made utterances, and in continuation of this, the speech genres function as general yet dynamic frameworks for how we can speak about certain topics. This is true for both everyday genres (e.g., greetings or small talk about the weather) and various sorts of conversations, lectures, and official speeches. The transition between the various genres normally goes unnoticed because speech genres are conceived of as natural, almost as part of the mother tongue (Bakhtin 2002 (1986): 78), but in an analytical perspective, these very transitions can make visible the relations between the content of the dialogue and the relationship between speaker and addressee, situation and space. For example, we will see how a conversation between a guest and a receptionist changes from a formal conversation to a more private conversation.

The analytical focus on the function of everyday conversation in the soap in relation to theme, context, fundamental dialogical principles, and composition may benefit theoretically and methodically from the support of microsociological theory and speech act theory. Bakhtin's speech act theory is compatible with, for instance, Erving Goffman's face theory and theories of interaction (see, for instance, Andersen & Lundquist 2003), and a combination of these theoretical directions enables us to examine how utterances and dialogue play through and contradict norms and conventions for human action, which constitute such a central part of the world of the soap. Thus, in Goffman's analyses, it is a question of cooperation between "senders" and "receivers" who jointly maintain a number of conventional sets of norms for inter-

action. In respect to the following analyses, Goffman's analyses of social interaction – which take a dramaturgical perspective on everyday life, viewing humans as organized in *teams, front region* and *backstage* – is interesting. Our way of understanding, acting, and speaking is determined by our situation, and the soap establishes spaces in which examples of these different situations can unfold. Above all, Goffman says that all human performance takes place both on *stage* and *backstage.* There are eyes that observe the *front,* and this lays an essential role in the way humans stage themselves. *Backstage,* a calculated presentation of the self is not as necessary, but this also means that it would seem "wrong" if a person acted as if he were *in front* – for instance, at a hotel reception desk when he was really in the living room with a good friend. The metaphorical reading of human exchange as being organized in well-defined teams that can either be regarded as "performers" or "observers/audience" is thus key. One team serves as actors – another as observers: "I do not know of any general reason why interaction in natural settings usually takes the form of two-team interplay, or is resolvable into this form, instead of involving a larger number, but empirically this seems to be the case" (1959: 91f). However, at the same time, it is a clear and important point in Goffman's work that the distribution of roles regarding who performs and who observes often changes position in the course of a given situation. It is clear, therefore, that the characters and themes in, for instance, *Hotellet* are created by means of the interaction between the manners of speaking in relation to a *front region* and a *backstage.* When the characters are at work, they have "guests," which means that there are a number of very specific sets of norms that apply to the "right etiquette." There is a general and reigning definition of a given situation that the two groups normally maintain.

I will return to the transitions and the relationship between arena and conversational form after first analyzing the role of gossip in the soap, which at a general level has often been characterized as a particularly important speech genre, and then taking a look at how it interacts with a number of generic and fundamental features in the secondary genre.

"You don't Say!" Gossip as a Speech Genre

To begin with, it seems appropriate to specify what is meant by gossip in the context of the soap. In this context, gossip is considered a kind of small talk that concerns people who are not present. Gossip can be directed toward many different themes and news of both a positive and negative character, but is typically characterized by someone having done something or acted in a way that diverges from "normal behavior." Thus, gossip may be considered a ritualized negotiation of norms for what we can and cannot allow ourselves to do (see, e.g., Coupland 2000). At the same time, gossip is typically driven by a kind of secrecy that, do not involve significant costs for those involved, even though they are exposed. As a communicative tool, gossip serves the purpose of creating coherence and relationships between people. In other words, it is directed toward relational connections rather than, for instance, being action or goal oriented.

In the soap, gossip serves several functions, and the soap research that has focused on the significance of dialogue has relevantly pointed out that gossip and rumors play a key role in respect to "binding together the various plots and the different characters and making them coherent" (Geraghty 1981: 24) and repeating points to the viewer who follows the series more sporadically.[7] A more concrete analysis might contribute to further qualifying this point. In, for example, *Hotellet,* there are obviously two sorts of

gossip and rumors: an internal kind, which concerns the main characters of the series, and a more external kind, when, for instance, the staff intercept various pieces of information that they share among themselves or vice versa, when two guests gossip about the staff. Both offer insight into what is going on *backstage* in the hotel, but it is particularly the internal gossip that ties together the action and spaces. Episode 25 in the series (13 September 2001, the opening episode in the third season) offers an illustrative example of the internal function of gossip in the narrative, showing how gossip can serve as a speech genre in the soap. The viewer's knowledge remains status quo throughout the entire episode, so that the gossip and the story about Lasse's and Maria's affair forms a repetitive and annotating pattern in the slight variations of the story, while the story circulates from person to person – from situation to situation.

> Summary of episode 25: Maria has had an affair. She has cheated on her husband, Adam, who is the hotel director, with the hotel's head chef, Lasse. Both Lasse and Maria feel very bad about the affair, and now Maria is pregnant and does not know which of the two is the father of the child. Adam has moved home to his brother, Nikolaj, and tells him about Maria's affair. Anette, who is a waitress at the hotel, and her husband, Claes, have problems, and Louise, who is the receptionist, comes to serve as a go-between between two guests: a dominating mother and her daughter, who has bulimia. The office girl, Aminah, who used to be Nikolaj's girlfriend, has started flirting with Said, who is a cleaner at Hotel Faber and of Turkish descent. The episode covers a single day, which is typical of many soap episodes.

The scene that introduces the story about Maria and Lasse takes place in the hotel kitchen, where Lasse misunderstands a conversation between Louise and the chef Jimmy. Lasse thinks they are talking about him – *before* they actually do so. Between the lines, it is clear that Lasse has a guilty conscience and sees his two colleagues' conversation as a "clique formation". The example, thus, exposes the common and certainly familiar situation in which something that does not need to be embarrassing becomes so because the context is embarrassing.

> Louise enters the kitchen with an order:
> Louise: Hi, here you are
> Jimmy: Hi – no way, who in the hell orders duck and pancakes?
> Louise: Yeah, someone who's really hungry. You can pass it on to Lasse, you know.
> Jimmy: No, I'd damn well rather ride a rodeo bull!
> Louise: The worst thing about a hotel is the staff!

> Lasse comes out of the small office. A crosscut is done between Lasse and Jimmy. Both are filmed in medium close shots, with Jimmy in a close-up in between.

> Lasse: What the hell are you talking about?
> Jimmy: Pancakes.
> Lasse: You're talking about me, you're pointing over here.
> Jimmy: What are you talking about?
> Lasse: You're talking about me.
> Jimmy: (Ironically) We're talking about you, we ONLY talk about you, Lasse.
> Lasse: Damn it. People just can't keep their mouths shut.
> Jimmy: It would probably help if you gave us your own version of it.
> Lasse: What are they saying about us?

> Jimmy: Whew! It's pretty big, it's …
> Lasse: What the hell, why can't women keep their mouth shut!
> Jimmy: Which one of them are you thinking about?
> Lasse: Yeah, Maria, that's damn well the only one I slept with.
> Jimmy: Did you sleep with Maria?
> Lasse: Yeah. Keep your mouth shut!

As mentioned above, it is characteristic of the conversation that Lasse presumes that they have already spoken about him. In this way, the series imitates a universe in which people talk about each other at workplaces and a situation in which one is afraid of being exposed. The viewer knows, however, that they have not gossiped about Lasse and Maria, and one of the points of the episode is that, on a metalevel, the scene thematizes the gossip through phrases such as "What are you talking about?", "We're talking about you, Lasse…", "… people can't keep their mouths shut", "… your own version." Even though the affair is still a secret, the dialogue points out the possibility of slips of the tongue and revelation in respect to an obvious topic of gossip: infidelity and sex between co-workers, which thematically speaking are important focal points in the soap.

In addition, the conversation is typical that it is between co-workers/friends. The reciprocal relation between the speakers is reflected in a jargon with many swear words, irony and honesty. Lasse, thus, clearly finds himself in a dilemma where he would rather they did not talk about him, on the one hand, but wants to let off steam and tell Jimmy about the affair, on the other.

In the next scene, Lasse wants to know whether Maria has told anyone anything, so he goes to see her in the office behind the reception desk. Again, the scene provides no new information and no real action, and again it is the potential of the affair to develop into gossip that is key. In its slowness, the situation illustrates how embarrassing the whole thing is for all of them. The scene is composed around a series of crosscuts focusing on the person speaking (or attempting to) and captures the atmosphere by showing their wandering eyes, rapid speech and hesitant questions. The sluggishness characterizing the scene establishes a situation in which what cannot be said becomes just as important as what is actually put into discourse.

> Lasse: Maria…I'd just like to talk to you for a second. I have a … um…maybe it's me… a feeling that people are talking about us.
> A receptionist enters and leaves again.
> Maria: Who would know something about it?
> Lasse: No, that's just it. Yeah, so I'd just like to ask you if you've told anyone?
> Maria: No, I haven't, Lasse. Yeah, Adam knows, but you know that.
> Lasse: Has he told anyone?
> Maria: No, I don't think so.
> Lasse: So maybe it's just me.
> Maria: Have you told anyone?
> Lasse: No, no.

In the third follow-up on the situation, it is two "interlopers" – Adam's brother and sister, Nikolaj and Julie – who use the story as a topic of conversation, and on a certain level, it is not until this point that Lasse and Maria's affair can be said to end up as "real" gossip, where the people involved are not there themselves.

Julie: What's going on with Adam these days?
Nikolaj: Yeah, that's a good question.
Julie: What is it, Nikolaj?
Nikolaj: How the hell should I know?
Julie: Oh stop, I'm not dense, you know. What's he done?
Nikolaj: He hasn't done a damn thing.
Julie: Usually you can't keep your mouth shut about this kind of thing.
          Come on, Nikolaj….I'm his sister, you can tell me.
Nikolaj: No, I can't…
Julie: I won't tell anyone.
Nikolaj: Promise?
Julie: Mmm….
Nikolaj: Maria, she slept with Lasse.
Julie: What… ?
Nikolaj, You heard me…
Julie: (Giggles)
Nikolaj: Is that funny?
Julie: No. Lasse and Maria???
They break out in laughter.

The example illustrates how the gossip stems from a genuine interest in a family member's well-being and surprise about his behavior. In addition, it is natural for Nikolaj to withhold the secret, which seems to reflect a generally valid convention in respect to this kind of gossip. When a story refers to something hidden and relates to someone we care about, we consider whether we can take the liberty of passing it on. And maybe we just can't refrain from doing so: "Usually you can't keep your mouth shut about this kind of thing."

Again, it is characteristic that, beyond having a repetitive and binding function, the gossip reflects the relationship of the speakers. In this context, it is siblings talking together, and because Adam is their brother and she is Nikolaj's sister, she feels entitled to know what is going on.

The repetition of the rumor four times helps create a reference back to a conflict presented earlier that concerns Julie and Jimmy, who have a classic conflict underneath the surface of their relationship. Julie does not want to have children. Jimmy does.

Julie: Well, you can ask Louise yourself… yeah, or Maria, she was there too.
Jimmy: Yeah, Maria, she certainly gets around.
Julie: What do you mean?
Jimmy: Nothing.
Julie: I don't think she's doing too well these days.
Jimmy: Have you talked to her?
Julie: Well, what do you mean by talk?
Jimmy: Since you say that she's not doing too well.
Julie: No, not like that, I mean I talked to Nikolaj after we had been up at
          my mom's
Jimmy: About the thing with Lasse.
Julie: With Lasse?
Jimmy: I promised not to say anything.
Julie: Has Lasse told you everything?
Jimmy: I think so.

Julie: I just don't understand why she told Adam.

Jimmy: You wouldn't have?

Julie: But seriously, to say it, it just makes it worse for both of them...

Jimmy: This means that if you had gotten pregnant with someone else, you wouldn't have said anything?

Julie: But that's different, they were a couple once, and it's pretty unlikely that Lasse's going to be a father.

Jimmy: That doesn't matter a damn bit, it's the principle of the thing.

Julie: Well, yeah. I can't really see that it's a problem for us.

Julie tries to kiss Jimmy, but he pulls away.

Jimmy: No, you don't want to have children.

In the dialogue, the two individuals need to find out how much the other person knows, which they do by making statements that are somehow ambiguous: "Yeah, Maria, she certainly gets around" and "I don't think she's doing too well these days." When Jimmy is certain that Julie also knows what he knows, he says it directly and Julie wonders out loud why Maria told about her infidelity. The story then acquires two new functions. It initiates a conversation about the conventions for what one should do in the case of infidelity to one's partner and it instigates a crisis in Jimmy and Julie's relationship on which the subsequent episodes build. In this way, one can say that the gossip, as a constitutive feature of the soap opera, has both a synchronous function in the individual episode and a more diachronic function as concerns linking the various episodes together.

In the individual episode, it is characteristic that the rumor circulates among the seven main characters and from the kitchen through the office to Alice's apartment at the hotel, ending in Jimmy's private apartment. The many rooms of the hotel are linked together by means of the story and provide insight into everything that is happening *backstage*. As a speech genre, the gossip thus manifests a conversational form essentially different from the way in which one speaks, for instance, with guests at the reception desk or the restaurant – the *front region* of the hotel arena in Goffman's terminology. This also means that the gossip manifests private space and "private" or intimate conversation, which is key to the way in which the world of the soap opera deals with the everyday and emotional aspects of life. This speech genre, among others, illustrates the norms existing in our emotional and private life for how, for instance, love and friendship can be handled. In this connection, one can clearly argue that the reason there is so much talk in the soap opera is that, on the thematic level, the genre deals with private and universal human relations (see, e.g., Mumford 1995). On the other hand, the various ways of expressing oneself constitute independent reflexive spaces whose frameworks are determined by the particular arena of the individual production. Thus, in the following analysis, we will take a closer look at how the specific arena of the hotel generates specific conversational forms, but also at how the soap opera's unique thematic orientation toward the intimate and private at the same time undermines conversations typically taking place in a front region, causing them to become private conversations. In this way, it may be argued that the distinction between *front region* and *backstage* loses its force. Instead, a radical "middle region" emerges, which is the concept that Joshua Meyrowitz uses to describe the situations and transitions in which players must redefine a certain situation because one of the parties has inadvertently, for instance, acquired insight into the intimate organization of the *backstage* region (Meyrowitz 1985).

"I don't Want to Interfere, but…"
The Mediating Conversation as a Speech Genre

The arena, and in this case perhaps the reception desk and the restaurant in particular, gives direct insight into well-known situations such as checking into a hotel. But while reality's maintenance of roles and stages shields us from knowing what happens *backstage*, the medium, and in this case the fiction, gives us the possibility of witnessing conversations in the back room when the guest is out of earshot. From a kind of Olympian position, we can take in both rooms in a way that reality never allows. The arena and the almost simultaneous gaze toward the *front region* and the *backstage* reveal that our conversations change character according to our situation. The conversations in *Hotellet* endlessly present a series of implicit rules for social behavior, and the lines between "right" and "wrong" are drawn by means of, for instance, humor and irony. Occasionally, we experience a series of breaks with the prevalent norms, which means that the rules come to appear precisely as active and unavoidable. For instance, in the final season, Aminah's gum-chewing sister is hired as an office assistant, and she clearly has no sense of the etiquette of Hotel Faber. As a case in point, Aminah overhears her sister making fun of a German tourist without him understanding what is going on. Through his cheerful gestures he keeps trying to communicate, while what she does is effectively to make him and, in a sense, all the rules of the trade look ridiculous. Quite typical of such a situation, Aminah pulls her sister into the back room to reprimand her. As Goffman writes, "[w]hen a member of the team makes a mistake in the presence of the audience, the other team members often must suppress their immediate desire to punish and instruct the offender until, that is, the audience is no longer present. After all, immediate corrective sanctioning would often only disturb the interaction further and, as previously suggested, make the audience privy to a view that ought to be reserved for teammates" (Goffman 1959: 89). So a point is being made when Aminah takes her sister away to reproach her; otherwise the situation would have been even more embarrassing. We do what we can to preserve the roles and the situation. The exaggerated character of the story demonstrates how humor and irony can show how the exception confirms the rule about the nature of a desirable relationship between receptionists and hotel guests. And whereas it does not have a major function as far as the action is concerned, it has a function in relation to establishing small episodic sequences as unique to the arena and thus to *Hotellet.* The point becomes clearer below, where the general argument is that, while one can say that as a speech genre gossip is characteristic of the soap opera as a secondary genre, in relation to the specific arena the individual production establishes a dominant speech genre that becomes the special stylistic mark of the particular production. As regards *Hotellet,* the speech genre is what can be called the *mediating conversation.*

The examples to be analyzed stem from the same episode (25) and are based on storylines resolved and closed within the specifics of the episode in which the receptionist Louise gains insight into a guest's private sphere. In establishing the relationship between Louise and Beate, for the first time we see a reproduction of the prevalent norms and conventions for how a receptionist receives a customer. However, it is noteworthy that Louise uses the more informal Danish "hej" (hi) rather than "goddag" (hello) or "velkommen" (welcome), because she's talking to a young person.

> A young gum-chewing teenager approaches the desk.
> Louise: Hi. What can I do for you?
> Girl: My mom's reserved a room.

Louise: Yes, what's your mom's name?
Girl: Helle Bramsvig.
Louise: Helle Bramsvig… Yes, it's a double room, 202.
Girl: Yeah, but that needs to be changed. I want my own room.
Louise: Yes, okay, but do you want two single rooms then?
Girl: I just want my own room!
Louise: I think we'll just wait till your mom arrives.
Girl: Why?
Louise: Well… you're welcome to sit out here and wait, or inside the restaurant.

In the middle of the conversation a shift occurs from the girl, as a customer, having the right to give orders, to Louise deciding that she cannot have the room that she is asking for and closing the conversation with a professional phrase: "you're welcome to sit out here and wait, or inside the restaurant." The closure is just firm enough that the girl does not protest and just professional and polite enough that the girl does not lose face. When the mother arrives at the reception desk, the conversation progresses as follows:

Louise: Yes, I gathered from your daughter that you wanted to have your own room?
Mother (directed toward the daughter): That was very kind of you dear, but I don't mind us sleeping together. (Directed toward Louise): My daughter just came home from England.
The daughter turns on her heels demonstratively.
Louise: Well, I'll just change that again, then?
Mother: That's very kind of you. (Looks casually at Julie walking by, says to Louise):   Where have I seen that face before?
Louise: It's from a commercial.
Mother: Soap?
Louise: Sanitary napkins.
Mother: Pretty face. She could make better use of it. Yes, all of you young girls could! Come on, dear!

As in the example with the office assistant and the German man above, the scene focuses – albeit in a different, more common manner – on the theme of small-talk at a reception desk, but in this case the story develops into a characteristic episodic or closed storyline within the episode (opposite the parallel and open-ended storylines), for one thing because we follow the characters in a series of different situations and in particular in the restaurant, for instance, where the daughter is also repeatedly impolite and domineering. It may be considered a characteristic closed storyline – not just a characteristic description of the arena – largely because Louise interferes in the relationship between the daughter and mother. In this way, the episodic or closed storyline of the episode is defined as a story that has an effect on or relates very directly to the main characters in the series without continuing over several episodes. Later, Louise has to enter the girl's room to turn off a noisy television. She can see that the girl has eaten too much and is throwing up.

The girl: What are you doing here?
Louise: Well, you turned the TV up full blast, so the neighbors complained. Is that something you do often, what you're doing there?
The girl nods.

The girl indicates that Louise has encroached on her "private" sphere and attempts to mark a distance to Louise, while Louise's very direct tone and approach breaks down the distance in the concrete exposure of the girl's actions. The girl's insolent and provocative tone and expression at the reception desk (gum, no smile, "that needs to be changed. I want my own room") have a cause and conceal an unhappy teenage girl.

After a scene that takes place in Aminah's apartment, the conversation continues between Beate and Louise, and Beate clarifies her personal problem. In the middle of the conversation the mother enters the room:

Louise: Why haven't you ever talked to your mom about this?
The girl: How the hell could I talk to her?
Louise: It's not that bad, is it? She's a little bit nice, isn't she?
The girl: She's so nice that she lets me sit and rot in some horrible boarding school in England.
Louise: She must come and visit you once in a while?
The girl: How many times do you think she's been to visit me?
Louise: … I don't know.
The girl makes a zero sign with her fingers.
The girl: She's been to England several times, only not to visit me. It doesn't make a damn difference anyway.
The mother knocks and enters.
Mother: Why in the world have you changed rooms? Oh no – Beate, but my dear, you shouldn't eat that all that garbage if you've got a stomachache. Now pack your things, and this has got to stop.
Louise: I'm afraid that it's not going to. Your daughter doesn't want to go back to her school.
Mother: Tell me, what is that you two have been up to?
Louise: May I speak with you out in the hallway?
Mother: Beate doesn't know how privileged she is.
Louise: Beate needs you to listen to her. I don't think you are. You're losing your daughter.
Louise leaves. The mother looks after her thoughtfully.

The dialogue demonstrates that a potential antipathy for the girl turns into sympathy – that, in other words, the scene reverses the relationship to the girl from negative to positive. This reversal in the scene is a characteristic feature of the construction of the episodic chain of events in *Hotellet,* a fundamental philosophy of which seems to be that a hotel is a place where a great number of people whose personal stories are all worthy of being told go in and out of the revolving doors. The reversal and the knowledge that Louise gains results in Louise playing the role of go-between (Goffman 1959: 149), which also means that she steps out of the role of receptionist. In other words, the language of the *stage* and that of the *backstage* region are being negotiated, and the conversational form and the situation have to be redefined (Meyrowitz 1985). The first disintegration of the distinction occurs, as mentioned, when Louise enters the room without the guest behind the door having said "come in." The confidences are motivated by Louise posing some (naïve) questions that the upset Beate answers aggressively and ironically: "She's so nice that she lets me sit and rot in some horrible boarding school in England." Louise poses the questions that are necessary (for the viewer) to understand why the girl acts and speaks as she does. When the mother comes in, the characters and the viewers know that the mother has misunderstood the

daughter – consciously or unconsciously – by not knowing why she changed rooms and stating, "you shouldn't eat that all that garbage if you've got a stomachache."

Louise asks if she can speak with the mother, and when they are alone she adopts a direct form of address, using the Danish informal second-person singular pronoun "du". While the mother and daughter are both present, Louise maintains the "etiquette", which for one thing is evident from her language: "*Your* daughter" ("Deres" in Danish, the formal second-person singular/plural possessive pronoun), and so on. When she is alone with one or the other, however, she moves onto a more private platform, which in Goffman's terminology is *backstage,* but which for Meyrowitz is precisely an example of the emergence of an entirely different situation. The *mediating conversation* usually plays a role in respect to episodic storylines and continuously represents how situations are redefined, with a bias towards the more intimate and private spheres of life (Meyrowitz 1985: 48). In continuation of this, Laura Mumford operates with a thesis on the collapse of the public and private spheres in the soap opera:

> … soap operas actually *redefine* both the public and the private spheres, specifically through their treatment of the concept of privacy. Soap opera characters conduct their lives in physical settings whose public and communal nature ultimately makes privacy impossible, and this in turn works to conduct a fictional community whose members have an unrestricted right of access to each other's most personal experiences and feelings. In effect, there is no private sphere in the soap opera community because there is no privacy. (Mumford 1995: 49)

The paradoxical point is, thus, that the various speech genres are constantly moving into the intimate and private conversational forms and thereby undermining the distinction between the private and public sphere, but instead of everything becoming private, the private sphere becomes shared by so many people that it does not make sense to say that something is private.

The Potential of the Concept of Speech Genre

We have seen how, by means of Bakhtin's theory, it is possible to point out a dynamic relation between primary and secondary speech genres and their particular compositional structures. At the same time, Bakhtin's theory involves certain operational difficulties; therefore, in conclusion I will focus on how the analyses also disclose elements that can further illuminate and systematize the variations within the speech genres. The analyses disclose that variations, for example, can be further described by bringing situationally defined and spatial factors into the foreground (McCarthy 2000: 85). The analysis has already outlined the spatial element as essential insofar as the hotel arena as a particular sphere establishes certain kinds of interaction and roles, some people serving as hosts – others as guests. It is also natural to point out that, for instance, the scene in which Lasse experiences that Jimmy and Louise are talking about him is elaborated and experienced in its own special way because it unfolds in a kitchen. The kitchen is a workplace, and with its bias toward *backstage* language, the concrete jargon serves as a probable result of the interplay between space and, for instance, the characters' relationships. I have also argued that it is relevant to expose the situations in which, for example, a formal conversation between a guest and a receptionist changes to a private conversation and servicing is replaced

with mediation or giving advise. In this sense, I will argue that we need to systemati-
cally categorize the current activities in an attempt to better understand speech genres.
Furthermore, it is natural for the analysis to systematically work with the attitudes that
characters bring with them into conversations (McCarthy 2000: 85). If we compare, for
instance, the behavior of the mother and daughter at the reception desk, it stands to
reason that, in spite of the fact that the sphere (the reception desk) and the activity (the
servicing) are the same, specific situations and modulations of conversational forms are
in fact played out. Based on this, it may be argued that the analysis can clearly make
use of additional sociological theories, if it manages at the same time to maintain the
general perspective on the speech patterns creating the particular style of the
production and the genre. Even though we view the speech genres as condensations
existing parallel to a number of other speech genres, this particular analytical per-
spective offers the possibility of pointing out *how* the many conversations and the al-
most endless talk function as fundamental techniques in the genre. Together and inde-
pendently, the gossip and the *mediating conversation* contribute to concentrating the
sense of a "middle region" and a collapse of the public and private spheres.

   The experience of this insight as something other and more than a perspective on
backstage conversational patterns is not unique to the soap opera; if anything it is
characteristic of the sum of genres, formats and programs that, via the media, deal with
and represent everyday life and its many conversational forms in new ways. It is,
therefore, possible to use the concept to shed light on conversations in other genres –
for instance, reality shows that use a number of different speech genres to create
various kinds of reflective spaces, and where gossip, among other things, is particularly
prominent in the structural organization of the programs.

   In any case, it may be argued that the fundamental conversational mode in these
genres ought to be an analytical focus, because on a number of different levels, it is
central to the story being told. Conversation, thus, functions on a thematic level as a
representation of everyday life in such a way that it is the (private) problems of
everyday life that are dealt with. In addition, conversation reflects the everyday
colloquialisms through which everyday life is dealt with. In the soap opera, conver-
sation and in particular gossip furthermore constitute a key compositional technique
that, along with the theme of community and the parallel action, firmly anchors the
genre and its special attraction, which is all in all also a meta-commentary on the many
speech patterns and various reflexive spaces of everyday life.

Notes

1. The following definition is highly simplified, in that I do not discuss the historical develop-
   ment of the genre, the various sub-genres, and existing and very different interpretations of
   the concept of the soap. I do not, for instance, differentiate between *community soaps* and
   workplace soaps, daytime soaps and *prime-time soaps,* the *luxury soap* as opposed to the
   everyday soap, and so on. It is necessary to use this simplified definition due to the limited
   scope of this article; it is based on supporting generic principles that I have developed in my
   work in light of the existing research in the area (From 2003).
2. Bennedikte Hammershøy Nielsen (1999) introduces the genre category of "character-based
   dramas" for series combining episodic and serial stories. I do not deny that we need new
   terminology to describe this kind of series, but in this context I would merely like to point out
   that the series can be described on the basis of the essential features of the soap.
3. Rather than dealing with empirical and receiver-oriented research, which has focused in
   particular on the ways in which women experience soaps, I will consider the soap solely from
   the perspective of textual analysis.

4. The analysis is independent and theoretically developed but is based on ideas outlined in my doctoral dissertation, "*What do* they *talk about – what do* we *talk about?" A Genre Analysis of Danish Soap Operas* (From 2003).

5. In earlier work (From 2003), I have dealt systematically with all 60 episodes and found these speech genres relevant.

6. Bakhtin criticizes Saussure, for example, for carrying out this more traditional kind of analysis (Bakhtin 2002 (1986): 68).

7. Another dimension is that the audience also uses the soap as an object of conversation in various ways, and various chat fora and weekly magazines help reinforce the soap as a topic of conversation (see, e.g., Riegel 1996).

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