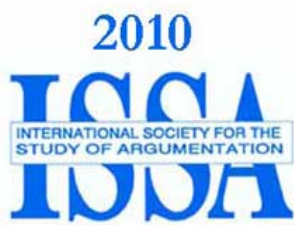


# ISSA Proceedings 2010 - How Authors Justify Their Participation In Literary Interviews: Analyzing The Argumentative Dimension Of The Interview Through Its Interactions



Disinclination to participate in interviews is common to some authors, for whom this kind of journalistic practice contradicts with the *raison d'être* of a writer, which is to express herself via her novels and other writings. The interview challenges this idea by shedding light on the image of the author and her personality, in a way that sometimes casts a shadow over her works. But literary interviews are telling, not only because of what they disclose on the author of the novels we love to read, but also because they may reveal other aspects, world views, attitudes towards literature, and so forth. In this particular paper, we choose to focus on ways in which reluctant authors justify their choice to be interviewed during the interview. The theoretical framework in which we discuss this is based on three elements.

One has to do with the literary interview and its significance to the study of literary criticism. As a genre which brings to the fore the personality of the writer, it has been subject to criticism and belittling (Barthes 1984; Deleuze 1977), even by the writers themselves. Hence some authors are reluctant to be interviewed, as we shall see in specific cases. Furthermore, little was thought of it as a framework where knowledge can be produced. However, in the recent decade, a few studies (Rodden 2001; Lavaud & Thérenty 2004; Yanoshevsky 2004, 2009), actually show its importance. In particular, Yanoshevsky has demonstrated through the study of the verbal interaction that takes place during the interview, how theoretical information about writing is processed and conceptualized (Yanoshevsky 2004, 2009).

The second is the project which is of particular interest to argumentation scholars. It concerns the argumentative approach developed by Amossy (2000, 2005, 2009), entitled *Argumentation dans le discours* (Argumentation in Discourse), to which we will refer here as ADD. Most approaches to argumentation (various approaches to rhetorical discourse like van Eemeren 1984, 1992, 2008; Leff 1997; Plantin 1990, 1998) concentrate on discourse aiming specifically at persuasion (speeches, pamphlets, conflict resolution or mediation, advertisements, etc.). However, ADD chooses to address not only discourses having an explicit argumentative aim, but also those comprising an argumentative dimension, like news reports, novels, etc. (Amossy 2005, p. 13). According to this approach, such discourses, too, belong to the realm of persuasion insofar as they tend to orient the audience's ways of seeing and judging the world, or their reflection on a given problem (Amossy 2000, p. 29). It is in this theoretical context that we choose to place the study of the literary interview. In this paper, our aim is thus not so much to ask whether the author's interview can be considered as a literary genre. Nor will we deal with the question of whether it is worthwhile to be studied per se, which to us is a given. But rather, we view it here as a verbal interaction, in the framework of which meaning is negotiated: the cooperation between interviewer and interviewee yields a certain knowledge of the author, and produces, via the interaction, ways to view literature. It is in this respect that the literary interview can be viewed as a discourse conveying an argumentative dimension.

The third element, inseparable from the two previous ones, is the adoption and adaptation of interactionist perspectives, within the study of the interview. Elaborated by Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni [i], this approach examines speech acts "in context [...] and within a sequence of acts that are not randomly linked" (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2005, p.53; our translation). It emphasizes the dialogic and dialogical character of the interview in which participants "build together a more or less coherent discourse" and at the same time "establish between themselves a certain type of relationship (of distance or proximity, hierarchy or equality, conflict or collusion), which continues to evolve over the course of interaction" and contributes to the co-construction of meaning (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2005, p. 68; our translation).

By combining the three elements, we demonstrate through the analysis of the interaction of the author and her interviewer, how justification takes place. We identify the interlocutors' communicative strategies such as paraphrasing

[relances], introduction of new themes [consignes] (Blanchet 2004), evading the question, as well as other strategies which have not been listed in the current literature on conversation analysis, like theorizing and theme extension. We also look into the interlocutors' positioning, i.e. the fact that they are alternatively situated in the dominating/ subjugated position (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1992; Yanoshevsky 2009), and their cooperation strategies (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1992, pp. 141 - 155), such as challenges and the co-constructing of an agreement. In the course of the analysis we also take into account what Genette (1987) calls paratext, that is, the prefaces to the interviews, and other relevant writings by the same authors. This allows us to show how justifying one's participation in the interview is the result of the interaction within the interview, but is also produced by the text surrounding it.

We demonstrate the above by studying sequences of interviews with two authors Milan Kundera and Andrei Makine. Both authors are known for being hostile to interviews. While Kundera rejects the genre in general, both authors are averse to highlighting the author's personality, rather than his works.

## *1. Milan Kundera and the Interview*

### *1.1. Author's rights and the interview*

From 1985 on, French speaking author of Czech origin, Milan Kundera, decided to refuse giving interviews to the media, unless they appear in written form. Despite that, and breaking his own rules, he accepted a conversation with Lois Oppenheim in 1989 [ii]. A writer herself and a university professor, Oppenheim is known for her work on Beckett and Butor, as well as for her interviews with numerous writers, amongst whom avant-garde authors.

As an interviewer, Oppenheim was well aware of Kundera's unwillingness to participate in interviews. Oppenheim therefore opens the conversation with an explicit question concerning his lack of enthusiasm. She first reminds her reader (by talking to Kundera and for the protocol) that the writer condemns "the interview as it is traditionally practiced", and notes his decision "not to grant any more interviews unless they are accompanied by your copyright". She then expresses solidarity with Kundera ("I understand your frustration...") and accepts the distinction the author has drawn between dialogue where there is a real give and take, a sincere sharing of thoughts on issues of mutual interest, and interview, where only those questions of interest to the interviewer are posed and only those answers that serve his purpose are reproduced... (Oppenheim 1989, p.7)

This opening, considered as part of the so-called “Face Flattering Acts” strategies[**iii**] , enables Oppenheim to win over the good-will of her interlocutor and to weaken his resistance. As Blanchet would have it:

The main thing in strategies and tactics [of the interview] is to diminish the factors that are susceptible of inhibiting the communication during the interview and to increase the factors which contribute to it (2004, p. 146).

At the same time, Oppenheim challenges Kundera by asking questions in a way which casts doubt upon the latter’s decision not to give interviews (“Nevertheless, I wonder if you are not somehow depriving your public in restricting the interviews you grant to those that you will co-edit?”). Kundera willingly responds to the challenge and retorts by confirming his dislike of the interview. The confirmation is followed by an explanation of such a negative attitude towards the genre: it is because the published text is reported by a journalist who becomes thus the “proprietor” of the discourse. Such a situation, according to Kundera, gives way to approximations, inaccurate citations and perversions, things which a writer cannot possibly accept: ‘An author, once quoted by a journalist, is no longer master of his word; he loses the author’s right to what he says.’ The interview’s major faults are imprecision and the author’s lack of power with regard to the interviewer. In other words, Kundera resents the interview because it fails to convey the author’s intentions.

However, Kundera’s response does not end here. He goes on to provide a solution that will enable him both to avoid the embarrassment of a traditional interview, and yet not to renounce entirely this practice:

The solution, however, is easy and, I hope, agreeable to you : We have met, you and I ; we have spoken at length ; we have agreed to the subjects that interest us ; you have composed the questions ; I have composed the answers and we are adding at the end a copyright. (Oppenheim 1989, p.7)

We can see that Kundera’s reluctance is mitigated by reviewing the rules of the interview. Kundera’s proposal here can be interpreted as a new communication contract to which he and Oppenheim should abide during the current interview.

Hence, the genre’s rules are redefined during the interview and are inserted in a larger theoretical framework, namely Kundera’s thought on Author’s copyright, rewriting and the author’s control of his text. Reframing thus the question, Kundera achieves a dominant position in the interview, which in theory is reserved for the interviewer. He seems to play the interviewer’s role by dictating

the rules and by doing so, he thus justifies his participation. Oppenheim is voluntarily game (“This seems entirely reasonable to me. In fact, I can’t see what more could be wanted than the guarantee of authenticity that the copyright provides.”). Thanks to her compliance, complicity is established between the interlocutors, contributing thereby to the productive continuity of the dialogue.

We have previously mentioned the need to look into the paratext of the interview in order to further investigate the question of justification. Indeed, we studied the preface to Oppenheim’s interview with Kundera. It is here that we can find an explicit reference to the “initial communication contract”, which – according to Blanchet (2004, p. 149) “has very important consequences on the way to achieve” an interview. In the preface, Oppenheim starts out by explaining her view of the author’s interview (“To esteem an artist is to esteem his art, not his person”) and her expectations vis-à-vis the interviewee (“the modesty of his responses [...] and the steadfast refusal to ever, even momentarily, take refuge behind any sort of facile rhetoric...”). This meta-discourse on the interview is followed by specific observations she makes on her interview with Kundera:

The scope and purpose of the interview ultimately derived from our conversations were refined, however, by a mutual interest in particularizing, in clarifying a number of concrete, and not necessarily related, points of interest. (Oppenheim 1989, p.7)

Thus, the preface is the place where the contract of communication is defined. Besides the fact that it has a bearing on the interlocutors’ positioning game (“mutual interest” implies a more or less equal relationship between the participants), it also determines the way the reader should read the interview.

### *1.2. “The novelist is not a public figure”*

The explanation supplied by Kundera during the interview on why he rejects this genre – because of the loss of the mastery on the expression of his thought – is accompanied by other justifications, as he explains in another interview: “the novelist is not a public figure obliged to speak of all the small and big problems of the moment” (Chantigny 1987; our translation). Kundera repeats here an idea he has previously expressed in his 1985 Jerusalem Discourse, where he makes a distinction between a novelist and a writer:

...novelist, I am not saying a writer. The novelist is he who, according to Flaubert, wants to disappear behind his work [...] It is not easy today, where everything of minor importance has to pass through the unbearably illuminated scene of mass

media, which contrary to Flaubert's intention, make the work disappear behind the image of its author. (Kundera 1986, p. 186; our translation)

In fact, in his correspondence, Flaubert often turns to the idea that "art [...] needs to remain suspended in infinity [...] independently of its producer" (1995, vol. 13, 27.03.1852, p.174) and a "novelist does not have the right to express his opinion of whatever it is" (1995, vol. 14, 05/06.12.1866, p. 315). On the one hand, this idea is part of Flaubert's vision of art, and on the other hand, it is a criticism directed towards his contemporaries or predecessors, especially Balzac[iv] . As for Kundera, by appealing to Flaubert's authority, he implicitly positions himself against the interview tradition as it was introduced and developed by French journalist Jules Huret, at the end of the nineteenth century in France. As a founder of the genre, Huret was mainly interested "in the personality of the writer with whom he met and whose portrait he vividly traced" (Royer 1987, p. 18; our translation).

In response, the interviewer uses paraphrasing (Blanchet 2004), with a take on Kundera's concession: "In your prize of Jerusalem speech you have said: [...] by taking on himself the role of public figure, the novelist endangers his work which might be considered as a simple appendix of his gestures, his declarations, his taking a stand..." Do you still think that?" Kundera confirms this idea laconically ("more than ever"), but uses the occasion to expand his reflection on the issue: The Agelasts, whatever one may say, are always in power...the word Agelast means: he who never laughs, who doesn't have a sense of humor. It is in this context that I have quoted this remarkable Jewish proverb: Man thinks, God laughs. Rabelais himself had heard God's laughter. Hence, his terror and his hatred of the Agelasts of his time, just as we should be fearful of those of our time. [...] Only laughter, God's laughter, can save the individual (Chantigny 1987; our translation)

Siding with Rabelais, Kundera thus implicitly justifies his participation in this dialogue: one should save the world, we should therefore speak, we should make sure the voice of those who laugh are heard. At the same time, it is precisely by an answer which does not respond to the question asked, that the interviewee proceeds in reversing once more the roles, as he takes again the dominant position in the interview.

It should be noted that in the preface to this interview, the interviewer writes:

Can you imagine a writer who settles for writing nice books and refuses all interviews with those Misters and Missis of the press? Hence like a sly [sournois] hypocrite, I ask him to kindly write a dedication in his last book (ibid.; our translation)

This preface's double meaning is of significance. First, by revealing to the reader his own slyness, the journalist regains the dominant position that was initially his, but was confiscated by his interlocutor during the interaction. Secondly, this starting point, different from the one posed by Lois Oppenheim in the interview we analyzed earlier, can provide justification for reversing the roles: given that this is not an interview but a conversation[**v**], one shouldn't have to abide to the normative laws of interview, and dialogue takes place spontaneously.

Despite the initial difference between the two situations (determined and concerted interview in the first case vs. spontaneous conversation in the second), the interviewee uses the same justification strategies in both cases, that is, the reversal of roles and the integration of ideas which surpass the questions posed by the interviewers. These strategies allow him to gain back his position as an author and to present his point of view on questions which seem of importance to him.

## 2. *Andrei Makine and the Interview*

A French writer of Russian origin, Andrei Makine is equally negative about the interview, which to him, as for Kundera, is a place where the author's reputation is celebrated. For the sake of justifying his hostility, he, too, appeals to Flaubert's authority[**vi**] : "to speak of one self is a petit-bourgeois temptation which one should always resist [...]. If not, one becomes miserable, looking to sculpt out one's own statue" (Thibeault 2004; our translation). Why then give interviews? While justification is never really made explicit, it seems to lie in what he says during interviews with journalists. As an example, we chose Makine's interview with Catherine Argand, a *Lire* magazine journalist and an expert on author interviews[**vii**]. It is perhaps her expertise that allows her to constantly keep her dominant position throughout the interview, as we can see in the introduction of new themes, requests for precision, and reformulations.

Her command of the interview is visible from the onset, as she announces a provocative theme, which may be considered as a challenge for the interviewee: "It seems like you are not very sociable or talkative..." (Argand 2001, p. 24; our translation). Makine chooses to ignore this challenge and responds in a

generalization in which he compares Russian civilization – silent and grounded on the “ontological communion” of souls – and the French one belonging to a discursive culture “worried about controlling the world”(p.24). The inference allows him both to avoid a direct response to the interviewer’s question and to regain his own place, by continuing to discuss the essence of literature. By not providing a direct answer he continues to refrain from speaking in personal terms while developing themes in which he is particularly interested:

... when one writes [in Russia], it is for the sake of saying something very important, [...] to establish a communion between the souls, the hearts, human beings. The novel’s ideal is that one is unable to say anything about it...(Argand 2001, p.24; our translation)

Using this strategy of avoidance Makine is able to confirm his dominant position because he is able to outdo his interlocutor’s expectations by offering an unexpected point of view.

The interviewer then challenges Makine once more (in an effort to take hold of her dominant position) and asks for a clarification of the meaning of a word “soul, a word which is rarely used by French contemporaries...” This time, the writer cooperates with his interviewer and tries to explain to her the reasons for his love for this word:

I like this word “soul”, because it avoids social, professional, racial etiquettes [...]. It is the story of my novel by the way, of a man without characteristics who manages to get rid of everything that society has imposed on him, like denominations. It is a stripped soul under the skies (ibid., p. 24; our translation). Nevertheless, he remains silent with regard to Argand’s remark on contemporary French, that is, he uses a strategy of avoidance. By choosing to respond to some questions and themes while ignoring others, he once more regains his strong position in the interview. The short discussion on the soul’s liberty is followed by a series of rephrasing on the meaning of Makine’s works and the role of literature. These questions tend to side with Makine, enabling him to render explicit his thoughts on literature. He cooperates voluntarily with the interviewer and gives several definitions of what literature is to him **[viii]** .

Argand’s dominant position is also evident in the frequent paraphrasing of Makine’s replies. For instance, Makine’s reflection on “the stripped soul under the skies” is met with the following paraphrase: “In other words, existential liberty?” (p. 24) or:



*Makine* : ... When I describe the battle field [...], I speak of bodies that stink and groan and it isn't art for art sake . Do you know that in a battlefield it is not the odor of blood which dominates?

*Argand* : Er, no...

*Makine* : It is excrements, exploded intestines.

*Argand* : Shit, to put it crudely? (ibid., p.25; our translation)

These two deliberately provocative paraphrases, where the interviewer seems to get a hold on Makine's vocabulary, give the impression of a stranglehold on the interview by the interviewer, who seems to know where she is heading. The objective of these paraphrases seems to be to force Makine out of his own territory and perhaps to extract from the writer opinions and ideas which he would not have otherwise shared or discussed during the interview. However, Makine does not comply with these attempts to extract responses. Instead, he constantly manages to introduce into the conversation themes he considers worthy of being elaborated, such as literary creation, the language of literary works, and literary thought on society and Man. In fact, following the question on "shit", Makine revolts against the sinking of language and indulges in a thought on French language. His obsessive revisiting of the same themes is significant. It seems like the need to expose them to the public explains and justifies the author's participation in an interview, where he nevertheless expresses his dislike of the genre.

During their conversation and by recurring to the strategy of definition, Argand tries to define Makine as a rebel ("Wouldn't you be a rebel?"). While confirming this definition, Makine extends the discussion:

The writer has the power to recreate time, to abolish it, to dominate it by words; the power to recreate a being according to his own experience. He is the only one capable of transforming reality, that is to see it as it is under the golden, silver or copper layers shown by TV on the one hand and intellectuals subjugated to political, media and sociological discourses on the other. Sub-culture floods the air and the screens. By promising happiness, songs, millions, it works like a mental drug... Literature is the last square of resistance in face of the dumbing down machines. It is the last safe haven of free thought... (ibid., pp.25-26; our translation)

Makine's generalization here contains a grain of provocation. We can see how, while accepting the interviewer's definition, he takes advantage of it for his own

sake: he wants to discuss the role of literature in contemporary culture. Thus, despite the dominant position held by the interviewer during most of the interview (it is she who determines the questions and their order, the demands for clarifications, the paraphrasing etc.), Makine confirms his dominant position too, by constantly subverting the meaning of the questions and bringing the discussion back to things he considers cardinal.

We have seen how from the moment Makine accepts to be interviewed, he advances his own agenda. Since he is convinced that the novel should neither be intellectualized nor theorized (Authier 2001), his thoughts on literature and its role in contemporary society cannot be expressed directly in his novels. He then uses the interview as a framework to develop his own literary theory. In this way, Makine's reader can find in the interview not only a certain physical presence of the writer, but first and foremost a fresh outlook on literature, which complements his previous works.

### *3. Conclusion*

The application of interaction analysis to the literary interview, for the purpose of exposing the argumentative dimension of discourse shows that despite their explicit hostility to the interview as a genre, the authors implicitly justify their participation in the interview. Using different strategies, they manage to turn the interaction into something that corresponds with their aims or points of view. In both cases discussed, the interviewees benefited from the exchange because they were able to discuss their respective viewpoints. Thus, Kundera redefines the roles of the interlocutors as he wishes and appeals to the authority of other renowned writers (Flaubert and Rabelais) to justify his position vis-à-vis the interview. Makine chooses the strategy of avoidance and generalization in order to ignore the topics suggested by the interviewer and emphasizes themes he believes are of importance. The interview thus becomes an additional framework for the authors, where they can develop their non-published ideas or propose their own interpretations of their works.

In addition, in both cases it was found that the respective positions occupied by the participants during the interaction are constantly reshuffled. Despite the efforts of the interviewers to occupy the dominant position, strategies such as paraphrasing, reformulation of the game's rules, theme extension, and avoidance of questions allow interviewees to switch to the dominant position and justify thereby their participation in the interview. This provides an additional

explanation of the interviewees' dominant position: as the interview is the product of a constant interaction, whose objective is to obtain information from the interviewee for the benefit of the reader, interviewers often follow the interviewees' initiatives.

Finally, the analysis can benefit from an understanding of the paratext. Thus, the inclusion of interview's prefaces in Kundera's case enables us to see how the author's dominance is counter-balanced by the interviewer's constant quest to control the interaction, by way of introducing a preface that orients the reader's perspective.

We have thus seen how the analysis of the interview enables us to solve the apparent tension between the author's reluctance to take part in an interview and his actual participation in the interaction. It is within the interaction itself that the arguments in favor of such participation are produced.

## NOTES

**[i]** It should be stressed that this perspective has already been initiated by Goffman's sociological theory that studies face-to-face interactions and according to which "the individual will have to act so that he intentionally or unintentionally express himself, and the others will in turn have to be impressed in some way by him" (Goffman 1969, p.2). Without going into the details of Goffman's theory, however, it should be noted that Goffman is concerned not only with speech but with all social behavior in a given context as it is reflected in the gestures, facial expressions or clothing (Amossy 2010, p.26).

**[ii]** One should note that even prior to his decision not to give any interviews Kundera has always chosen his interviewers with great care. Some of the more renowned include Alain Finkielkraut, Guy Scarpetta, Normand Biron, and Philip Roth.

**[iii]** This term is a positive variant of "Face Threatening acts" (FTA) first conceptualized in Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987). It has been taken up and developed through the analysis of verbal interactions by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1986; 2005). It takes into account not only negative speech acts, which threaten the faces of the interlocutors (the FTA) but also the positive acts which she calls "rewarding Face Flattering Acts" (FFA).

**[1v]** Regarding Flaubert's contempt of public life, cf. Wall 2006.

**[v]** The journalist does not introduce himself as one to Kundera, neither does he ask him to participate in an interview, but he pretends to be a simple reader who tries to engage in a conversation with his favorite author. This is why we claim

that the rules of the interview as such are not really applicable here.

**[vi]** This quotation seemingly represents a reformulation of Flaubert's idea expressed in his letter Alfred le Poittevin: "The only means not to be unhappy, is to lock up oneself in Art and not to consider at any price all the rest; vanity replaces all when it is seated on a large basis" (Flaubert 1995, vol.12, 13.05.1845, p. 449).

**[vii]** Among her interlocutors we can find Pascal Quignard, Michel Houellebecq, Linda Lê, Annie Hernaux.

**[viii]** "Let these people speak, these phantoms of ordinary life confined to the limbs [sic.], give them life, it has been for me a true literary challenge" (p. 25); "To me it is the writer's task: to show that beyond the troops of victims or idiots, there were rebels and men who did not comply with their role as hangmen" (p.25); "Today, only literature can synthesize, avoid quick schematizing, abusive generalization" (p.25), etc.

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