A STUDY ON THE POPULARITY OF THE TELEVISION PROGRAM *READERS* FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MENTAL REPRESENTATION

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ABSTRACT: *In recent years, various kinds of variety shows are piled up on screen. Consequently, audiences have been bored with these programs since they are similar in contents and are lack of innovations. Readers, as a cultural variety show, takes the creative forms combining interview, reading and slight analysis of classic literary works together. Through "one person corresponds to one piece of story behind his or her reading text." it successfully reveals the close relationship between human life and literature. Accordingly, research tends to focus on the innovative forms and communicative values of this program. However, few studies pay attention to the cognitive reasons for this program's popularity. Therefore, this paper aims at analyzing Readers based on the theory of mental representation. Probing into the topics, reading texts, the studio and reading pavilions of Readers, this paper further shows the triggers and importance of mental representation in Readers.*

KEY WORDS: *readers*; cultural variety show; mental representation

INTRODUCTION

With the development of economy and technology, television program has become a major form of entertainment for Chinese people. Nowadays, television programs in China are becoming more and more various in forms and abundant in contents, especially the variety shows. However, many television programme producers tend to indiscriminately imitate the programs overseas and try all means to seek profits. As a result, television programs are becoming more and more lack of originality.

*Reader*s is initiated and directed by the famous hostess Dong Qing and is broadcasted during the prime time. There are 12 episodes in total for each season and every episode revolves around a certain topic. During the interview readers share their personal experience closely related to the topic and choose a specific reading text（an essay, a poem, a letter or a film script） to read for themselves or someone they cherish. When it comes to classic literary works, there will be literary schlolars offering background information or slight analysis of the texts. As a cultural variety show, *Reader*s takes the creative forms combining interview, reading and slight analysis of classic literary works

together. Integrating personal growth, emotional experience, background stories with classic literary works, *Readers* chooses graceful words and aims at utilizing literature to affect, encourage and educate public audiences.

Object and Structure of the Research

This paper aims at analyzing *Readers* based on the theory of mental representation. Probing into the the triggers and importance of mental representation in *Readers*. This paper contains seven parts which are organically connected to each other. The first part is an introduction in which the background, the innovative features and the influence of *Readers* are demonstrated. The second part provides a literature review of *Readers* and mental representation. The third part centres around the theoretical foundation for this program's popularity, namely mental representation and the triggers of mental representation which cover the topics and the context of the program. For the former, analysises include the two strategies for arriving at mental representation; while for the latter, the reading texts, the studio and reading pavilions of *Readers* are mainly studied in detail. Based on the analysises, the fourth part reveals the popularity of *Readers* by some statistics. The fifth part further shows the importance of mental representation in *Readers* which accounts for the popularity of this program. Finally, there is a summary including the restatement of key points, limitations of this paper and some suggestions for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous Studies on Readers

As a cultural variety show, it is obvious that *Readers* has contributed a lot to the development of domestic cultural variety shows. Since its release, there have been many discussions and studies on it. By and large, researches from the linguistic point of view mainly focus on the content of the conversation in the program, including turn-taking, the Cooperative Principle and the Speech Act. While most investigate from the perspectives of mass media and mass communication. There is a small part of literature which analyzes the program's success from the multiple means of broadcasting and the personal charisma of the hostess.

Previous Studies on Mental Representation

In the field of cognitive science and psycholinguistics, representation or mental representation refers to the inner representation of external objects in psychological activities and the presenting of information on mind (Jia, 2015). The earliest research on mental representation was carried out in cognitive psychology. With the emergence of psycholinguistics, some experts and scholars also joined in the study of mental representation. After the 1960s, cognitive psychology arises and takes information representation as a focus, thus greatly promoted the study of mental representation of

language (Li, 2002). In China, studies on mental representation was first carried out by Professor Gui Shichun in cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics. Since the 20th century, there were more and more researches on mental representation. However, few researches combines the theory of mental representation with television programs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To analyze the cognitive reasons for the success of *Readers,* this paper draws on the theory of mental representation which is triggered by the topics and the context in the program. With regard to the triggering factors in the topics, two representative topics are listed and studied in respect of the two different strategies for arriving at mental representation respectively. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the context, which includes the reading texts, the studio and the reading pavilions, contributes a lot to the triggers of mental representation.

Mental Representation
Mental representation, as a form of knowledge in the brain, can be considered as a representing model and the replacement of real entities (Jia, 2015:18)**.** In general, mental representation can be thought of as representing "state of affairs" (Johnson-Laird 1983: 397). It is composed of elements covering entities, properties, or relations (Johnson-Laird 1983: 398). The process of external objects' mental representation consists of four stages: mental presupposition, perceptual screens, action strategy and concept formation.

Strategies for Arriving at Mental Representation
As discourse hearers and perceivers of situations, we have two strategies for arriving at mental representations: bottom-up processing and top-down processing (Adams and Collins 1979: 5). Bottom-up processing begins with "unique perceptual events" which will eventually occupy the lower levels of the hierarchy, and constructs successive generalizations to make sense of the data (levinsohn, 2008: 52). While top-down processing is confronted with a certain range of facts, in which we quite early "jump to a hypothesis". This involves bringing in an entire schema, with all of its ready-made " off-the-shelf " structure and unfilled slots, and checking to see how well it fits the facts we are being given (Brown and Yule, 1983: 235).

Triggers of Mental Representation in *Readers*
For a certain discourse or context, mental representations are mainly triggered by key words and the situations in which the topics are centered around.

Topics of Every Episode

Topic is the entity that an utterance is primarily about, while part or all of the comment is the focus, depending on the context (Levinsohn, 2008: 63). The focus of an utterence is that part which indicates what the speaker intends as the most important or salient change to be made in the hearer's mental representation (Levinsohn, 2008: 62). The topic serves as the core of the program that connects the stories, experience and emotions of every person with reading. The central topic represents the program's thinking dimension and makes audiences rapidly grasp the key of the program, thus it must have strong emotional tension so as to arouse people's abundant mental representations. For a basic concept or an entity, there is a hierarchy of the representations associated with it. The representation at the top of the hierarchy is sufficiently general to capture the essential features of all members of the class. While at the lower level the representations are more specific and concrete. In a certain situation one's utterance moves to and fro in the hierarchy and the scope of that concept. That are the strategies for arriving at mental representation, namely the top-down and bottom-up processes. In *Readers* every topic is introduced by the hostess through a few words in the opening remarks, thus the opening remarks are not only the preface of each episode, but also a crucial guide for the audiences to generate specific mental representations in their minds. Based on the two strategies for arriving at mental representation, the top-down and bottom-up triggers in the opening remarks obviously bridge the gap between the program and its audiences, and realize the goal of attracting the audiences' attention and interests.

Table 1. The topics of *Readers*

The First Season		The Second Season	
Episodes	**Central Topics**	**Episodes**	**Central Topics**
The First	Encountering	The First	Original Heart
The Second	Accompany	The Second	Miss
The Third	Choice	The Third	Life
The Fourth	Gift	The Fourth	Day of Commemoration
The Fifth	The First Time	The Fifth	Waiting
The Sixth	Tears	The Sixth	Road
The Seventh	Farewell	The Seventh	Father
The Eighth	Courage	The Eighth	City
The Ninth	Home	The Ninth	Thanks
The Tenth	Taste	The Tenth	Pain
The Eleventh	That Day	The Eleventh	Decade
The Twelfth	Youth	The Twelfth	Hometown

Bottom-up Triggers of the Topics' Mental Representations

Encountering

Since long there are so many words describing various kinds of encountering, in *The Book of Songs* there is a tantalizing encountering: "Green reeds are thick and dense; Clear dews become frost thence. My love lives far away; She lives across the bay" (translated by Wang Rongpei and Ren Xiuye). "I have met this cousin before", this is an exciting encountering between Baoyu and Daiyu in *A Dream in Red Mansions*; "Charmed! How are you this evening? ", this is a muddleheaded encountering of princess Anne in *Roman Holiday* (Dong, 2017).

On mentioning the topic "encountering", the mental representations may project a lot of slots including persons, places, situations, a certain mood and so on. The depiction of three kinds of encountering triggers representations at the outset, which may coincide with many audiences' experience.

Top-down Triggers of the Topics' Mental Representations

Hometown

"Hometown is the place where we eager to escape when we are young, yet we endeavor to go back when we are old." For our Chinese people, hometown is the incense burned memorizing our beloved ones on the Tomb-Sweeping Day; it is the bright moon hanging in the sky during the Mid-Autumn Festival; it is the tickets we grasp during the Spring Festival travel rush and it is the accent we revealed unconsciouslly. From the general definition to the concrete entities, images (incense, moon, tickets, accent), the mental representations triggered by the topic are moving from the higher level to the vast number of concrete things associated with it at the lower level.

Context of the Program

Context is a basic concept in the study of pragmatics. It is ganerally considered as constituted knowledge shared by the speaker and the hearer. The shared knowledge is of two types: the knowledge of the language they use, and the knowledge about the world, including the general knowledge about the world and the specific knowledge about the situation in which linguistic communication is taking place (Ma, 2018: 137). The context of *Readers* include the reading texts, the studios and the reading pavilions. Context plays a crucial role in the program's atmosphere and serves as an importment trigger of mental representation.

The Reading Texts

The selection of the reading text that matches the guests' experience and emotions is a heavy work since different guests have different experience and stories. The reading texts cover the excerpts of novels, plays,essays, poems and even personal letters. On the one hand, the texts bear the key part of reading; on the other hand, they   shorten

the distance between literature and people by triggering the audiences' mental representations.

The Studio

The studio as the main context where the program is broadcasted arouses many representations. First, the stage background designed as a huge shelf full of books triggers people's perception of literature. Second, in the middle of the stage there is a door leading to an enclosed room where the interview takes place. The whole stage makes people think of a study and a sitting room where friends gather together and chat with each other. When the guests walk out and read their texts at the stage, this background transforms into various situations to render help. For instance, in the fourth episode of the second season, the famous actor LiuYe chooses excerpts of *Little Prince* as the reading text. During his reading the whole stage turns to a vast universe with countless stars and the background is the same as the cover of the book he holds. Last, the soothing piano makes audiences pleasant in mind and are more easily absorbed in listening.

The Reading Pavilions

The reading pavilions have been set in 15 cities around China and have recorded videos more than 4000 hours. Every episode begins with a short video excerpted from the reading pavilion videoing readers from oridinary people. The reading pavilion is very crucial for *Readers*, for one thing, it offers people a good chance to open their hearts and talk to themselves. For another, it serves as a emotion collector that provides people with a platform to slow down their pace, to talk to themselves and to think about their life in a fast-paced society. Thus through reading pavilion the program extends into common people's lives, experience and their living status so as to build a close bond with the public. Audiences can find much more similarities with the people in the pavilions, thus their mental representations are easily evoked.

Popularity of *Readers*

Since its release, *Readers* has gained much public attention and appraisal. A total of 68 guests, including scientists, diplomats, writers, artists and ordinary people, have been invited in the first season. On the Chinese website Douban for reviews, the program has obtained a score as high as 9.2. Up to the end of the first season, the new media video of the first season has been played 970 million times online, audio listening up to 425 million times, related Weibo topics are read 1.41 billion times.

Readers arouses public interests in reading and their reflections on the relationship between human and literature. The reason why *Readers* can make such an influence lies in that the program itself connects public with literature through reading successfully. Mental representation bridges the gap between the program and the public. Furthermore, compared with the first season the second one has made many progresses. This provides evidence for the advancement the program makes by itself.

The following tables are the audience rating of the two seasons of *Readers*, from this we can see more clearly of the program's popularity.

Table 2. The audience rating of the first season of *Readers*

Episodes	Air Date	Central Topic	CSM52 City's Audience Rating		
			Audience Rating%	Ranking	Market Shares%
The First	2017-02-18	Encountering	0.976	10	2.742
The Second	2017-02-25	Accompany	0.907	10	2.471
The Third	2017-03-04	Choice	1.011	9	2.883
The Fourth	2017-03-11	Gift	1.207	6	3.504
The Fifth	2017-03-18	The First Time	1.107	8	3.213
The Sixth	2017-03-25	Tears	1.024	7	2.982
The Seventh	2017-04-02	Farewell	0.74	7	2.266
The Eighth	2017-04-08	Courage	0.865	10	2.541
The Ninth	2017-04-15	Home	0.76	11	2.338
The Tenth	2017-04-22	Taste	0.766	12	2.374
The Eleventh	2017-04-29	That Day	0.734	11	2.437
The Twelfth	2017-05-06	Youth	0.878	10	2.777

1. The above statistics are from CSM Media Research, among audiences over the age of four;

2.Rating rank is based on self-produced programs during Saturday night from 19：30-24：00, not all at the same time.

Table 3. The audience rating of the second season of *Readers*

Episodes	Air Date	Central Topic	CSM52 City's Audience Rating		
			Audience Rating%	**Ranking**	**Market Share%**
The First	2018-05-05	Original Heart	0.656	10	2.212
The Second	2018-05-12	Miss	0.671	13	2.393
The Third	2018-05-19	Life	0.744	10	2.697
The Fourth	2018-05-26	Day of Commemoration	0.678	10	2.463
The Fifth	2018-06-02	Waiting	0.364	10	1.575
The Sixth	2018-06-16	Road	0.620	9	2.181
The Seventh	2018-06-23	Father	0.654	10	2.210
The Eighth	2018-07-07	City	0.832	10	2.931
The Ninth	2018-07-14	Thanks	0.792	9	2.870
The Tenth	2018-07-21	Pain	0.812	6	3.087
TheEleventh	2018-07-28	Decade	0.679	13	2.537
The Twelfth	2018-08-04	Hometown	0.862	5	3.251

DISCUSSION

The Importance of Mental Representation in *Readers*

Nowadays, under fierce competitions, many programs tend to take advantage of celebrities to cater to the public's preferences. Generally speaking, it is not easy for a cultural program to arouse people's much attention. Moreover, since long people have thought that reading belongs to a limited group of educated people. Thus how to integrate audiences with the program is a big challenge for *Readers*. However, mental representations are common to everyone and thus *Readers* successfully makes people realize that reading belongs to all. The core of *Readers* is not to entertain audiences but to enlighten the public. Through mental representation, *Readers* successfully brings audiences into the program, brings emotions into literature, brings reading into life and thus realize its values of a cultural program. The integration of human life and literature achieved through mental representation, and the commonness contained in people experience and emotions will be discussed in the following three parts.

People's Life Experience Connected with Mental Representations

Nowadays, the profits-oriented variety shows fail to bridge the distance between TV programs and audiences. Through mental representation the audience can integrate their own life experience with the program and can identify with the people in terms of similar mental representations. They are participants instead of onlookers. This is an essential difference between *Readers* and other variety shows. Mental representation provides a platform for this kind of integration, and it enables the audiences to see their

own life in other people's life. A good program can trigger people's memories and instructs them to think independently. *Readers* successfully makes it.

Common Feelings Contained in Life Experience

Toward different topics people will recall different memories and mental representations, which are directly or indirectly obtained from their experience. Though people's experience varies, there are common feelings that are contained in it. Triggered by certain topics and the whole situation, mental representations bring people back to their experience, and because of the similar feelings contained in experience, people can find some kind of commonality. Just as Dong said in the program, there will always be a literary work that leads the readers to their former experience and there will always be a certain kind of feeling that connects the reader with literature and brings them together. Mental representation serves as an important part that leads people to the shared feelings.

Close Relationship between Human and Literature Revealed in *Readers*

Readers not only arouses the new trend of nationwide reading, more importantly, it rather turns its focus on the combination of literature and life, and pays more attention to personal life. "Reading" is to spread the beauty of words and language, while the "reader" is to show life. The program does not take literary analysis or even appreciation as the trump card, instead, it focuses on people, life experience and inspirations from life. It sparks pubic concerns about the relationship between human life and literature, which is particularly important for the current society.

CONLUSION

In this paper the triggers of mental representation in *Readers* are mainly focused, including the topics and the context of the program. With regard to the triggering factors in the topics, two representative topics are listed and studied in respect of the two different strategies for arriving at mental representation. Then thia paper focuses on the context, covering the reading texts, the studio and the reading pavilions of the program. Through the analysis of these triggers we can see that how this program integrates audiences with the program itself and arouses peoples' emotions. The triggering of mental representation greatly shortens the distance between audiences and the program. The last part further shows the importance of mental representation in *Readers* which accounts for the popularity of this program.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Every coin has two sides. *Readers* has been fovored by the audiences, but it also has been criticized by scholars for its incoherent and repetitive topics between the two seasons. For instance, "That Day" and "Day of Commemoration", "Home" and

"Hometown", "Tear" and "Pain". We must admit that there are similarities between the topics chosen in the two seasons and this is worthy of conducting critical research. As to the methodology in this paper, there are still shortcomings that need being revised. Since mental representations are cognitive concepts stored in people's mind, it is hard and onerous to collect the data. Therefore, further research may conduct questionaire or post-experiment interview to gain more original ststistics of the program's influence. Besides, due to the limited time and resources, this paper is limited to the representations that expressed in the program. Therefore, to obtain the mental representation of the general audience, it is necessary to experiment cognitive tests and collect systematic data statistics.

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