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Analysing Research Interviews

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Introduction

Much of the research in the social sciences starts with questions and answers, whether in survey research, semi-structured interviews, interviews repeated over time in panel studies, focus groups, casual conversations as part of ethnographies or recordings made for oral history. Even relatively small research projects produce dozens of hours of recording and millions of words of transcripts. The usual approach to these data is to reduce what the participants said to some sort of content categories. This process may involve summarizing themes common to many of the transcripts, and perhaps quoting a few passages from the transcripts to illustrate or support the researchers' assertions. In quantitative research, the analyst may develop a system of codes to ensure that all sections of the transcripts are treated in the same ways by all researchers (Bauer 2000). In reports of such studies, the reader may hardly be aware of what the interviews were like, moment to moment.

An alternative way of approaching research interviews is to see them as a form of interaction that can be analysed in the same ways one might analyse talk between a doctor and a patient, or an interviewer and interviewee on the news, or for that matter an ordinary conversation at a bus stop or coffee machine. The participants, both interviewer and interviewee, are taking their turns at appropriate times, relating one turn to the last and the next, strategically presenting themselves to the other, and making assumptions about what sort of event this is.

EXAMPLE 7.1

From: Edley (2001:199)

1. Nigel: Give me an imaginary picture of a feminist.
2. Adrian: I seem to think of a feminist person as like ugly women (.) with like shaved hair (.) stuff like that you know (.) who can t get a chap and so they think I ll become a feminist

3. Nigel: Right
4. Adrian: Lesbians (.) that sort of thing (.) I don t know.

Drawing on Example 7.1, this could be summarized in some coding system as 'physical appearance or 'feminist = ugly' or in other ways. But that would be to ignore what Nigel and Adrian are doing in their talk. In what circumstances can one give another person a directive such as in turn 1? What is the effect of Adrian's hedging such an opinion at the beginning of turn 2 ('I seem to think')? What is the effect of 'you know' – does the interviewer know? What is the function of the narrative and reported thought, 'I'll become a feminist'. What is the effect of Nigel saying 'Right' in turn 3, just there, and how does Adrian respond to that in turn 4? What is 'that sort of thing'? And why does Adrian end 'I don't know' – or rather, why does Nigel treat this as marking an ending? Edley quotes the whole exchange, not just Adrian's turn 2, so he allows us to see it as an interaction between two young males who are strangers to each other and who have constrained roles in this interaction.

There is, of course, a place for content coding, if one wants to know the range of different views expressed in a set of interviews, or how widely one view is expressed, or how the holding of a view correlates with other factors, such as age, gender or experience (Bauer 2000). But all such coding assumes that for each question the meaning stays the same in each interview because the context of utterance stays the same, and assumes that one knows, reading the transcript, what this context was. If one goes back and looks not only at what was said, but at how it was said, one will be able to consider much less of the data, but will be able to give a more detailed analysis, situated in the particulars of each interview.

In this chapter we review some of the disciplinary approaches applying this kind of detailed discourse analysis to interviews, and relate some of this work to the levels of analysis applied in other chapters in this book: each unit can be related to the rest of that text, to other texts, to the immediate situation in which it was produced, and to the wider historical and socio-political context of this situation.

Approaches to discourse analysis in different disciplines

In the methodological literature of the social sciences there are many insightful comments on the wording of interview questions and responses.[1] Most of these comments are aimed at improving reliability by ensuring uniformity, and enhancing validity of traditional instruments by removing a potential source of distortion. They treat interviews as something different from conversation, simpler and more controllable, with the emphasis on the interviewee's side of the interaction. As Thompson puts it in a handbook of oral history methods,

An interview is *not* a dialogue, or a conversation. The whole point is to get

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the informant to speak. Your role is above all to listen . . . The time for conversation is later on, when the recorder is switched off. (Thompson 2000:238)[2]

It is only in the last twenty years that the complexities of the interaction have been seen as an opportunity for researchers, rather than as a problem that hinders the efficient extraction from subjects of attitudes or information. There are several different strands to this approach, and it has raised different issues in different disciplines, such as science studies, social psychology, linguistics, women's studies and oral history. We can think of these disciplines as raising issues about the collaborative ordering of social interaction, the construction of versions of reality, the methodology of social research and the ethical and epistemological issues underpinning a project.

Approaches from *conversation analysis* (CA) (see Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998; Silverman 1998; ten Have 1999; Peräkylä 2004) run through many of these studies of interviews. CA looks in detail at the sequence of talk in interaction to see ways participants organize mundane conversation, how they indicate who should speak when, and how one turn at talk relates to what comes before and after it. The CA approach does not define questions in terms of their grammatical structure (such as subject–verb inversion, or other), but looks at the ways they are treated by the participants, as the first part of a two-part sequence, an *adjacency pair*. Some kinds of turns are regularly followed by another kind of turn, such as an answer. Of course a question may not be followed by an answer, or by the kind of answer the questioner expected (see *preference structure*) – and the participants typically acknowledge that something unexpected is going on, for instance by starting a turn with a delay or 'well . . .' or using hedging, caution or an explanation. Researchers have also applied CA to doctor–patient interaction, broadcast political interviews, classroom talk, courtroom cross-examination, and other forms of institutional interaction (see Boden and Zimmerman 1991; Drew and Heritage 1992; McHoul and Rapley 2001), In institutional contexts such as these, there are constraints on participants' roles (usually one asks questions and the other doesn't), on the sequence of turns and on the ways participants interpret turns (in terms of the implicit or explicit purpose of the interaction).

For CA, research interviews are not a simpler and more controllable form of conversation, but a complex hybrid of conventions from everyday talk and from this specific genre (Suchman and Jordan 1990; Houtkoop-Steenstra 2000). For instance, in everyday talk, a question may be followed by an answer which may be followed by some sort of evaluation or comment from the questioner. These third turns are often missing in interviews, where the interviewer may go on right after the answer to ask another question (Antaki and Rapley 1996). In Example 7.1, Nigel's 'Right' does not necessarily mean he agrees with Adrian's view; it signals that he is not going to take a turn here, so Adrian can continue talking. Adrian pauses twice in his response. Nigel has said nothing after 'Lesbians', so Adrian then reformulates this as the more general 'that sort of thing'. In the continued absence of any audible response from Nigel, Adrian offers a downgraded 'I don't know', a typical way of closing a turn and finally

giving up the floor. The particular views expressed are embedded in a complex interaction, as Nigel prompts candidate answers from Adrian, who, in producing them, monitors how they are received by Nigel. As such, both interviewer and interviewee work to make the interview happen as an event.

One of the influential early applications of CA to social science research interviews was in the sociology of scientific knowledge. Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) did interviews with scientists involved in an important discovery, and found different accounts of what they and other scientists had done in these events and why. They could have tried to choose between these accounts, and assemble a definitive explanation of what had happened. Instead, they analysed the ways scientists used these accounts in the interview, for instance in the course of explaining why two scientists could disagree. Gilbert and Mulkay identified two *interpretative repertoires*: empiricist (explaining behaviour in terms of the facts of nature) and contingent (explaining behaviour in terms of social and institutional factors). An interviewee might explain the view of another scientist using the contingent repertoire by referring to their training, their need to get research grants, or their desire for publicity. However, he or she could explain his or her own view using an empiricist repertoire, as following from the structure of the molecule and the progress of a research programme. These repertoires do not necessarily correlate with two kinds of scientists or two views of the discovery; an interviewee may use both. An analyst identifies repertoires not by grammatical structures or content words but by their place in the interaction and the function they perform. In this case the repertoires are a response to the interviewer's challenge, in implying that science could produce contradictory results.

Social psychology has a long tradition of study of the sorts of actions one might expect from interviewees in research interviews: giving accounts, making attributions, recalling memories, constructing categories and stereotypes, and expressing and defending attitudes. Most of these studies are experimental and quantitative, but over the last twenty years some social psychologists have reinterpreted these concepts in terms of the ways they are used in interaction and persuasion (see: Billig 1987; Potter and Wetherell 1987; Antaki 1994; Edwards 1997; Antaki and Widdicombe 1998). For instance, Wetherell and Potter (1992) studied interviews with people in New Zealand about the boycott of a visit of a rugby team from South Africa, which was at the time of the study still under apartheid. They found a range of interpretative repertoires, and devices for expressing what might seem to be racist views while presenting oneself as not a racist. This line of research leads away from trying to find a single underlying attitude, deciding who is really racist and who is not, and towards understanding the functions of racist or non-racist statements in discourse, for the individual speaker and a wider ideological moral code. Recent work has considered shifting presentations of identities by people talking in a group, and interactions between these groups and an interviewer who may be seen as an outsider bringing their own expectations and predictable views (Abell, Locke *et al.* 2006). Nigel Edley, in the study from which we quoted in Example 7.1, takes a similar

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approach, identifying two repertoires used by his interviewees, one that explains feminism in terms of women's desire for equality, and one that explains it in terms of women's failed heterosexuality. Both repertoires are used as these young men position themselves in relation to each other and to this interviewer.

The discourse analysis of research interviews in linguistics came first, not through CA but through a concern with the collection of valid survey data. Labov and other sociolinguists (1972) had shown that the distribution of some variables depended on the context, so that for instance a New Yorker might pronounce the /r/ after a vowel while reading a word list, but not pronounce it in casual conversation when they weren't monitoring what they were saying. Sociolinguists looked for ways of eliciting more or less natural speech, for instance by prompting subjects to tell narratives. But Wolfson (1976) and others raised the issue of just what sort of speech event a sociolinguistic interview is; for instance, she noted that the openings of narratives prompted in interviews are different from those in conversation. Schiffrin and others re-analysed interviews that had originally been conducted to elicit evidence for studies of sociolinguistic variation, finding this time around that they had complex discourse structures as the interviewees related to the mostly but not entirely silent interviewee. Schiffrin noted for instance the way having an argument can serve as a kind of sociability (Schiffrin 1984), or the circumstances in which one person can speak for another (Schiffrin 1993). The emphasis in interactional sociolinguistics has moved from trying to find some 'natural' form of talk to analysing the different constraints of various speech events.

Much of the current toolkit of analysts of research interviews comes from these lines of work in CA, the sociology of scientific knowledge, social psychology and linguistic discourse analysis. Other lines of research methodology, in anthropology, women's studies and oral history, focus on ethical issues. Briggs's classic *Learning How to Ask* (1986) traces his gradual acquisition of the cultural competence needed even to begin asking about the Native American culture he was studying. As the title suggests, the entitlement to ask questions, which he as an academic researcher had taken for granted, needed to be earned over the course of years of learning and engagement. Anthropologists typically have a much longer engagement with the people they study than do social scientists, who tend to do one-off research interviews, and they often write up their interactions in a form that highlights the different cultural perspectives and the asymmetries of power and knowledge (another example is Basso 1996). Feminist and cultural studies researchers, though their methods and aims may differ from those of the anthropologists, also highlight the power relations implicit in a researcher eliciting and using the talk of others, and in juxtaposing academic frameworks of knowledge with popular or vernacular knowledge (for a review see Kitzinger 2004). These concerns do sometimes, but not always, carry over into the analysis.

Oral historians are a special case in their taking up of discourse-analytic approaches to their data, because of their focus on the authenticity of neglected voices. In earlier work, the aim was to produce the effect of a monologue,

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in which the interviewee could be heard to speak from the past to the present. Thus interviewers were trained to intervene as little as possible, and to keep such interventions inaudible, and transcripts did not usually include backchannel utterances. More recently, researchers have seen the interaction as contributing to the interviewee's self-presentation, not interrupting it; analyses take up issues of narrative, and treat the interviewees as artfully crafting an identity in a specific context, often for an interviewee who is younger, who comes from elsewhere, or who has different experiences.

The different disciplines that have contributed to the discourse analysis of research interviews look at various features in the data, as we will see in the next section. They have different emphases: conversation analysis is part of a radical shift in what social sciences study, social studies of science are concerned with the production of knowledge, discursive psychology critiques the concepts developed in social psychology, and taken up in other academic areas, sociolinguists raise issues of naturalism and methodology, anthropologists and feminists raise issues of power and difference, and oral historians use voices to challenge a documentary version of history seen from above. But they share an implicit or explicit critique of social science methods that abstract away from the contexts of interaction and cover up the processes by which academic claims are developed.

Contexts for discourse analysis of research interviews

The different disciplines reviewed so far have identified various features for discourse analysts to study in research interviews: turn-taking, preference structure, categorization, topoi or commonplaces, repertoires, accounts, narratives. There are already good methodological guides for most of these approaches; instead of going into detail about any one of them, we could give an overview of the kinds of context they address. Following some of the other chapters in this collection (see Chapter 1 by Wodak), we will organize our discussion on the following levels:

1. the immediate, language or text internal co-text;
2. the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between utterances, texts, genres and discourses;
3. the extralinguistic social/sociological variables and institutional frames of a specific 'context of situation' . . .;
4. the broader socio-political and historical contexts (Wodak 2001:67).

In terms of research interviews, study of the *co-text* involves relating each utterance to what comes before and after it, and to the other utterances in the interview transcript. *Intertextual and interdiscursive relationships* include links between the talk in an interview and other talk, as in the use of keywords or topoi. The *context of situation* concerns the frame participants have for this

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kind of interaction, such as their expectations of the role of the interviewer or facilitator. The study of *socio-political and historical contexts* raises the question of how this kind of interview is possible (or impossible) and what sorts of knowledge and power relations it presupposes. We will consider each of those levels of context while drawing on Example 7.2.

EXAMPLE 7.2

Hermes, in *Reading Women s Magazines* (1995), is one of the few researchers in any discipline to give large parts of an interview transcript in an appendix, showing how she excerpted comments that she could use in her argument and allowing us to see what we are calling here the co-text. Here is an excerpt in which she has put in bold the parts she coded as dealing with her topic, women s magazines. Mary has been talking about reading a book first loaned to her and then given to her by her neighbour, about women growing older. She has been laughing about this choice of reading matter, which implicitly involves admitting that she is concerned with her age. Here Joke, the interviewer, comes in:

Joke: [I laugh.] Yeah, so can I ask you how old you are?
Mary: Me? I will be sixty-three in October.
Joke: So you re a Scorpio
Mary: That s it, yet! Yes it is, yes. When you pinch, when you pinch, they say, they bite! [She laughs.]
Joke: I know, my father is a Scorpio.
Mary: Is he?
Joke: Yes.
Mary: We re all good teachers, Scorpios! [She laughs.]
Joke: Do you read things like that, you know, the stars and . . .
Mary: Oh yes, **I always read my stars, I do**. I ve been to twenty fortune-tellers, you know, I ve been with people and that, and they d say to me, Well you know,- we ll pay for it, pay for you, if you come with us , sort of thing. Some of them are six pounds a day! I said I would not waste money on that you know. **But, eh, anyway, I like the stars. I like to read the gardening in the . . . I do like the gardening. I don t do any knitting, but I crochet.**
Joke: Oh, right, that s a kind of embroidery, or . . .?
Mary: I do, I used to do embroidery, crocheting is different. Crocheting . . . you do it with a crochet pin.
Joke: And is it . . . you make a sort of lace?
Mary: That s it! Like old lace, look . . . this . . . here. That s crocheting, it is, yes. I make, eh . . . you make cushion covers and blankets and things like that, you know. **And if there are any crocheting patterns in, I like to have a look at those, sort of thing.**
Joke: You take them out? Do you have the patterns out of the magazine?
Mary: **Sometimes, it depends on what I want, you know, things. Some things are beyond me, you know. [She laughs].** (Hermes 1995:170, bold in original)

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Co-text

The first step in most analyses of interviews it to extract bits out of their immediate co-text, so the first step in a discourse analysis is to put them back, looking at what comes just before and after the quoted bits in the transcript. One simple approach to co-text is the concordance, checking what sorts of words typically go with a selected term (McEnery and Wilson 2001). Here for instance starting with 'I always read my stars', we might look at what collocates with *read* throughout the interview. In the quoted passage, there is 'I don't read serials', 'I read books', 'I'd read little bits', 'I read my stars', 'to read the gardening', 'reading the letters'. There are also other verbs used for consuming magazines: 'they get used', 'she has *Women's Realm*', 'have a look at those'. It is hard to tell how this exercise would turn out, from the bit of transcript here, but it might be that *read* is invested mainly with positive associations, and that it implies serious attention, while other verbs may signal for other, more casual uses of the magazines.

While co-text refers to the immediate textual collocations of an expression, it may also cover the CA approach that looks at the preceding and following turns. For instance, in this passage we can see the way the construction of topic is done collaboratively. Let's start with the coded passage, 'I always read my stars, I do'. This is prompted by Joke's question, 'things like that, you know, the stars and . . .', referring back to their previous talk about her being a Scorpio: 'things like that, you know, the stars and' is presented as a category that Mary will recognize, which she does. Mary elaborates with another example of 'things like that', going to fortune-tellers. This is relevant to Joke's question, and the previous talk about Scorpios, even though it does not seem to be directly related to the overall topic of the interview: how she reads magazines. Mary then changes the topic herself, back to the magazines, marking clearly that she is closing one topic and opening another that is relevant: 'But, eh, anyway, I like the stars. I like to read the gardening.' The 'anyway' suggests a return to a previous topic. 'I don't do any knitting, but I crochet' completes a list of three – stars, gardening, crochet – that fits together as a series of possible columns she could read. Joke's response is an 'oh' indicating that this is something new to her (Heritage 1984), a 'right' indicating her receipt of this information, and a tentative offer of a possible category, 'a kind of embroidery' (Hester and Eglin 1997). This leads them into talk about crochet, but Mary leads it back to talk about magazines. For all the wandering of the unstructured interview, as in a casual conversation, both participants are careful to indicate that they are on topic, and to show they share the same set of categories.

Analysis of the co-text goes beyond the immediately adjacent turns. An analyst might for instance pick up the reference at the end 'some things are beyond me' (here, because of her eyesight) and connect them to many references through the quoted transcript to her age and the ages of others. One might pick up the reference to money ('six pounds a day!') and link it to other

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references in the same interview about saving money (not surprising for a woman on a small fixed income). But one need not just look for consistency across an interview. Hermes refers in her methodological note to the danger of reducing her interviewees to 'positions' (Hermes 1995:184). That is why she instead categorizes her findings in terms or interpretive repertoires, such as the 'repertoire of practical knowledge,' and 'the repertoire of emotional learning and connected knowing'. The quoted passage might seem to be a clear example of 'practical knowledge'. But Hermes uses it, instead, to show an underlying tension (Hermes 1995:48), that Mary is interested in such columns in magazines even though she can no longer see well enough to enjoy crocheting. Or one might find a tension between talking about horoscopes and 'things like that' as a sceptic who would never pay a fortune-teller, and as an eager participant in chat about Scorpios. An approach through repertoires acknowledges this tendency to tensions (Potter and Wetherell 1987; Wetherell and Potter 1992) and contradictions (Billig 1987; Billig, Condor *et al*. 1988) in people's talk, as they orient to the ever-changing local context of the interaction.

Intertextual links

The analysis of the co-text focuses on the transcript itself. But participants can bring other voices into the interaction, in quotations, commonplaces and other forms of *intertextuality*. Mary refers to a saying about Scorpios: 'When you pinch, they say, when you pinch, they bite!' This evokes a whole discourse in which people just know, from shared experience, what Scorpios (or people born under other star signs) are like. And she uses direct reporting of speech to re-enact her situation when people invite her to come to a fortune-teller. The report is presented not as their actual words but as an example of what people would generally say ('sort of thing'). But she also presents it with discourse markers that make it sound like speech ('well you know'). Reported speech allows participants to set up opposing positions, dramatize situations, try out hypotheticals and present evidence to support their views.[3]

Intertextuality need not involve direct quotation of another person; interviewees often invoke generally used arguments or *topoi* (Myers and Macnaghten 1998; Reisigl and Wodak 2001; Myers 2007). If we look back to Example 7.1, we see that Adrian is invoking a compressed form of argument that goes something like this:

- All relations between men and women are fundamentally sexual.
- All (normal) women want male approval.
- Feminists do not want male approval.
- Feminists must not be normal women.
- Feminists must not be capable of sexual relations with men (because they are undesirable or they do not themselves desire men).

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But Adrian does not have to explain this step by step; he assumes it is a form of argument available to his interviewer, that just needs a phrase like 'shaved hair' to invoke the whole set of shared attitudes. Commonplaces may be notable by the absence of fully formed statements of shared knowledge in the text; participants may feel they need only give a hint for the others to fill in the gaps. Commonplaces, like reported speech, are used at specific points in talk for specific functions – for instance responding to a challenge or closing off an interactionally problematic topic.

Context of situation

The term 'context of situation' refers to all the conditions immediately surrounding an act of speech (Goodwin and Duranti, 1992:14–15, trace how this term is taken from Malinowski via Halliday). In the case of an interview, these include the place and time of the interview, the references to texts, objects and activities in the surroundings, the face relations between the interviewer and the interviewee, their understandings of the purpose of the interview, and the sort of speech event they think they are engaged in. All these issues are of course part of the planning of the interview, but they are also part of the analysis.

So, Hermes for instance accounts in detail for her interview methods: the way she contacted interviewees, the interview schedule, the sequence of questions. The genre here is obviously an interview, in that Joke is asking Mary a series of questions, and Mary does not usually ask any back (though as we will see there is an exception to this rule). We can also see how she leads discussion back to specific kinds of information, such as the question at the end of the quoted passage about taking pages out of the magazine. Mary also seems to grant an overall purpose to the interaction, as when she interrupts her comments about fortune-telling to return to magazines. They follow the conventions of a genre in which each participant is assigned a role.

But it is also clear even from this bit of transcript that these interviews are not impersonal encounters with someone with a clipboard collecting information: they are informal talks over a cup of tea, and the participants carefully maintain – and enjoy – the experience of chatting. We see that in the way Joke volunteers the comment about her father's astrological sign. Joke can guess at what crocheting is, and Mary can pick up an example that is to hand to show what it is. There are four episodes of transcribed laughter: Joke at the beginning laughing at Mary's comment about telling friends facts from the book about older women, Mary twice laughing about her astrological sign, and at the end Mary laughing after admitting that she can no longer do some of these crochet patterns. Mary goes on to say how her worsening vision is keeping her from crocheting as she used to do, and after this passage shared laughter plays a role in a move out of troubles talk (Jefferson 1984). Laughter is used as part of the interaction, not just as a response to it (Glenn 2003).

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The clearest indication of the flexibility of their roles is the way, in an earlier part of the transcript, Mary asks Joke about *her* reading. This reversal of roles happens now and then in research interviews. I can recall a focus group of mothers breaking off their talk about children to ask the moderator if *he* had any children (no, but he had a dog). That kind of reciprocity is just what is missing, not only in research interviews, but in most institutional encounters. But the gap between interviewer and interviewee can be an opportunity. Joke can draw on the resource of being different – Dutch rather than British, a generation or two younger than Mary, an academic with her own interests – and Mary responds to this difference, for instance by explaining what crochet is. Similarly, focus group interviewers may present themselves as strangers so that participants explain local issues (demonstrations, a power plant, ethnic divisions, unemployment) on the record; they talk about what would in other situations be too obvious to need to be said. The oral historian Roy Hay found his ignorance proved to be useful in interviewing Clydeside shipbuilders:

> On many occasions older workers have greeted my na ve questions with amused tolerance and told me Naw, naw laddie it wasn t like that at all, followed by a graphic description of the real situation. (Quoted in Thompson 2000:223)

The situation of sociability, though it works well for Hermes, is not the only possible kind of situation for interviews, nor is it necessarily always the most productive. Attempts to create a sense of solidarity with interviewees may backfire (Abell, Locke *et al*. 2006).

For instance, one commonly observed feature in studies of racist discourse is that interviewees try to present themselves as non-racist (Wetherell and Potter 1992). But such findings assume a certain kind of interaction in which interviewees are careful about the image they present to outsiders. The assumed identity of the interviewer (as liberal, older, associated with the university) may prompt displays of attitudes that are anything but subtle. In Example 7.3 the apparently innocuous question about political arrangements sets a group of young women off on a kind of game of increasingly extreme expressions of dislike of various national groups.

EXAMPLE 7.3

1 Susan: So wh- what do do you think about Scotland having their own
2 parliament?
3 Chloe: What?
4 Susan: You know, eh Scottish people, they ve recently got got their own
5 parliament uh and Wales have got an Assembly

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6 Gem: I hate the Welsh
7 ((laughter))
8 Katie: Yeah. Sheep-shaggers.
9 ((laughter))

(Condor 2006).

They continue with a series of increasingly virulent denigrations of the French, Chinese and Pakistanis, all with a chorus of laughter. Condor asks about the kind of exchange here, and the interviewer's role as audience to it. A research interview, like any other social encounter, is open to the participants constantly shifting redefinitions of what is going on here.

Another example of the issues of 'context of situation' is provided by an interview conducted for the classic oral history *The Edwardians* (Thompson 1975). We have used the project's transcripts,[4] but have listened to the sound file (also available online), have added in square brackets the responses of the interviewer, and have added in parentheses the parts of the transcript not included in the sound file. The excerpt comes at the end of a long standardized interview (see Example 7.4).

EXAMPLE 7.4

Interviewer: Do you think your parents had any disputes over religion or differences of opinion?

Interviewee: Never. No. I never heard them have any disputes at all. One thing as a boy I didn t like and it sticks in my mind today. I came to the conclusion that church-goers were something like the railway carriages were at one time — lst, 2nd and 3rd class. [yes] You see, my Mother was a person of the lower class — was a poor woman — [yes] and she and her friends were all poor but they were great church-goers, regular church-goers, kindly gentle people. [yes] (But they had to sit in the middle of the church or rather at the back. I say middle because there wasn t so many going at that time.) They had to sit in the back pews [yes] in the middle of the church were the local shopkeepers and people who were considered to be a little bit superior to the others — better educated, perhaps. [yes] And right at the top of the church, behind where the choir used to sit were the local farmers, the local bigwigs, you see. [yes] Posh [yes] people. [yes] [yes] And when people left the church, although as I said, he was a nice old kindly vicar, he didn t seem to have any time for the lower classes. [no] Mother and her friends would pass out of the church door — the vicar would stand near the church door — and he would just nod and smile, perhaps not that, even. But when the higher class people came out he would shake hands and beam [yes] to everyone of them as if they was somebody far superior to my Mother and her friends, [yes] the poor, the very poor.

(Interviewer: Very unchristian.

Interviewee: Yes.) And I didn t like that. I thought my Mother was worth a handshake as well as the rich.

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While we don't know much about this particular interview, one of the 500 done for this project, some aspects of the context of situation are apparent from the transcript and the sound file. There is a domestic setting (on the sound file one hears, under it all, an old clock ticking). The interviewer asks a standard interview question about a sensitive personal issue (disagreements between parents over religion or other opinions) and the interviewee responds instead with a comment on social class, which he presents as relevant to this question ('one thing as a boy I didn't like and it sticks in my mind today'). The interviewer punctuates the following narrative with (untranscribed) minimal responses, and only when the story is complete gives an evaluation ('very unchristian'), just where a narrative typically has such a slot. This excerpt comes at the end of the interview, where, after answering so many questions about daily life, the interviewee asserts his own opinion: he is not just a source of facts; he has his own interpretations of the time.

Sociopolitical and historical contexts

Condor's example reminds us that the origins, the framing and perhaps the effects of a research interview go well beyond the immediate context of situation. On the most basic level, interviewers and interviewees bring to the interview assumptions about the attitudes and identity of the other, and about the purpose of the interview. These assumptions may not be correct, but they shape everything else. To take the most obvious example, a young interviewee may monitor their expressions on out-groups in deference to an interviewer from the university – or may exaggerate these expressions in playful taunting of the interviewer's sensibilities, as in Example 7.3. Briggs (1986) notes that the researcher trying to enter such close-knit communities has to have cultural capital that is not provided just by institutional connections. The way the interview goes is not *determined* by class or gender or ethnic or generational identities, but these identities may emerge as relevant as the talk develops.

The whole genre of the research interview is contingent on a socio-political and historical context in which institutions ask individuals for their opinions, these opinions are aggregated for purposes the interviewees may never know about, and there is a promise that there will be no consequences for the interviewee (Myers 2004, 2005). Interviewees may be aware of this kind of speech event from broadcast interviews, market research focus groups, government consultation exercises, or political polls; usually they do not ask much about what all this is for. It is only when the interviewer enters a community that feels threatened, stigmatized, marginalized, powerless or misrepresented that the tacit assumptions underpinning the exercise may come to the surface: Why me? Who are you? Who will read this? What will happen? Hermes (1998:, see Example 7.2) found her informal style hard to reproduce when she approached women in the Surinam and Antilles communities in Amsterdam, because they had good reason to be wary of outsiders asking questions. The

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interviewer may suddenly become aware of the resemblance of what he or she is doing to other sorts of work, the queries of social service or law enforcement officers, the support offered by counsellors or therapists, the attempts of parties and campaigns to enrol support. Often it is only in the interviews that don't work for the interviewer that these possible alternative views of the situation become apparent. Researchers like Agar, Basso, Hermes and Condor have used such awkward moments to interrogate the uses of their own research.

Issues in analysis and explanation

The approaches to research interviews I have outlined have different aims, but they all share an interest in the interview as one kind of interaction, in which both or all participants construct the event moment to moment, and there are complex shifts in the roles and relations of interviewer and interviewee(s). They share a belief that detailed analyses of the interaction can improve the researcher's understanding of (1) what the questions and answers mean for the participants, not just for the researchers, (2) how the expressions used link to other talk and other discourses and (3) how the participants are constructing this particular event and their roles in it. The analysis also leads them out to a wider set of issues: (4) how such an interview becomes possible, how it is used in academic knowledge and how that knowledge is used in social change.

- Researchers across a range of disciplines would, we think, agree about the importance of linking analysis at all four levels. But they disagree about the nature and directions of these links.
- Does one start with the co-text – whether concordances, sequences or narratives – and generate the relevant identities and categories from them, or does one start from what one knows about the encounter and the socio-political context, and use that to guide interpretation of the text?
- Are the intertextual links, such as reported speech and topic, reflections of underlying ideologies, or are they creative and even playful individual uses of language?
- Granted that the conventions of everyday conversation be applied to interviews, does this strange and constrained genre of the interview tell us anything about how people talk in everyday conversation?
- As we have seen, these interviews clearly have links to wider socio-political issues – gender equality, ethnic conflict, consumer culture, class divisions. But what is the nature of those links. Are the interviews evidence for social change, or responses to it, or attempts to shape it?

The most basic issues raised by many of these researchers are who and what these interviews are for. Attention to research interviews as interaction opens up many of the traditional ethical and political issues around research on

language: how the experience is seen by participants, how their words are transformed in academic genres, how academic texts construct knowledge and how that knowledge does or does not have an effect back in the participants' world. Of course the same ethical and political issues apply to any social science research, but they arise with particular clarity in interview research, where the whole academic project can be traced back to a situated encounter, face-to-face contact, and their words.

Notes

1. See for example: Lazersfeld (1944); Payne (1951); Merton, Fiske, *et al.* (1956); Sudman and Bradburn (1982); Becker (1998).
2. Italics in original.
3. See also: Holt (1996); Buttny (1997); Buttny (1998); Myers (1999); Matoesian (2000).
4. The transcripts are available online at http://www.qualidata.ac.uk/edwardians/original/introduction.asp

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