

SILVERMAN, DAVID,  
INTERPRETING QUANTITATIVE DATA  
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## 6

### Naturally Occurring Talk

When social science researchers begin to design a research study, they encounter a series of choices about how narrowly to define their research problem and which method or methods of data collection are appropriate to its study. If we consider the methods so far discussed in this book – observation, interviews and texts – our choice appears to be very clear-cut.

Using research interviews (or focus groups) involves actively creating data which would not exist apart from the researcher's intervention (**researcher-provoked** data). By contrast, observation or the analysis of written texts, audiotapes or visual images deals with activities which seem to exist independently of the researcher. This is why we call such data **naturally occurring**: they derive from situations which exist independently of the researcher's intervention.

However, like most social science concepts, the opposition between naturally occurring and researcher-provoked data should not be taken too far. Indeed, no data are ever untouched by human hands. If we choose to observe, our data do not speak for themselves but have to be recorded (and transformed) into fieldnotes. Equally, audio and video recordings usually end up being transcribed using particular researcher-designed interventions which are never 'perfect' but only more or less useful. Moreover, the character of such data will be crucially affected by where you position your recording equipment and/or point your camera.

All this suggests that here, as elsewhere, we should treat appeals to 'nature' (as in the term 'naturally occurring') with considerable caution. Nonetheless, providing we do not push it too far, it can still be helpful to make use of the distinction between two kinds of data: naturally occurring and researcher-provoked. Indeed, if we can, at least to some extent, study what people are actually doing in 'naturally occurring' situations, why should we ever want to work with 'researcher-provoked' data?

Most quantitative researchers have a straightforward answer to this question. Data gathered from naturally occurring settings often appear horribly messy and unreliable to quantitative types. If you want to measure things reliably, then, they argue, it helps to create carefully controlled settings and to use well-tested research instruments like questionnaires or laboratory experiments.

By contrast, qualitative researchers who work with researcher-provoked data do not always seem to have thought through their choices. Certainly, open-ended interviews and focus groups can give you data much more quickly than observation and/or recording – although more slowly than texts. Moreover, many researchers claim that it is often not possible to obtain access to naturally occurring settings appropriate to a given research topic – even though this sometimes shows a lack of imagination on their part (see my discussion of methods for studying ‘the family’ in Section 3.4.4).

Such instrumental factors (speed, lack of alternatives), however, conceal the appeal of methods like the interview and the focus group to a particular research model (*emotionalism*) and more generally to a set of mass-media-driven assumptions deriving from what I have called the interview society (Section 1.3).

Asking people what they think and feel appears to have an immediacy, even ‘authenticity’, which curiously is believed to be absent in naturally occurring data. So, even when you have tapes or observations of behaviour, you are tempted to ‘complete the picture’ by interviewing the people concerned about what they were thinking or feeling at the time. The arguments for and against researcher-provoked data are summarized in Table 6.1.

TABLE 6.1 Why work with researcher-provoked data?

| For                                         | Against                                                  |
|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| Speed                                       | What about texts?                                        |
| Easy access                                 | Public data usually available                            |
| Authenticity of interviews                  | Reflects temptations of the interview society            |
| Interviews help you to understand behaviour | Participants do not need access to each other's thoughts |

By contrast, some qualitative researchers prefer to work with ‘naturally occurring’ data although their reasons may differ. For the ethnographers of the Chicago School, the real form of immediacy was out on city streets and they wanted to ‘tell it like it is’ by observing life as it happened. However, their *naturalistic* focus meant that they usually sought to combine observation with interviews with key informants.

For a later generation of researchers, influenced by *constructionism* and *ethnomethodology*, audiotapes of naturally occurring conversation provided marvellous data to analyse how people actually went about constructing a social world together.

Although you may be inclined to think of conversation as trivial (‘merely’ talk), it is worth reflecting that conversation is the primary medium through which social interaction takes place. In households and in more ‘public’ settings, families and friends relate to one another through talk (and silence!). At work, we converse with one another and the outcome of this talk (as in meetings or job selection interviews) is often placed on dossiers and files. As Heritage argues:

the social world is a pervasively conversational one in which an overwhelming proportion of the world’s business is conducted through the medium of spoken interaction. (1984: 239)

Indeed, what Heritage calls ‘the world’s business’ includes such basic features as telling news, deciding if one should commit suicide, and a child learning how to converse with its mother (see Sacks, 1992; Silverman, 1998: ch. 1).

Yet, even if you are unconvinced by the argument that conversation is central to making the social world, there is still a strong methodological argument which suggests that audiotapes of naturally occurring talk are useful data. To understand why, we must return to the work of Harvey Sacks.

## 6.1 WHY WORK WITH TAPES?

The kind of phenomena I deal with are always transcriptions of actual occurrences in their actual sequence. (Sacks, 1984: 25)

Sacks stresses that one should work with ‘actual occurrences’ of talk. So, even though twentieth-century philosophers like Wittgenstein (1968), Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) have had important things to say about the things we do in conversation, they do not study actual talk but work with invented examples and their own intuitions about what it makes sense to say.

For Sacks, on the contrary:

One cannot invent new sequences of conversation and feel happy with them. You may be able to take ‘a question and answer’, but if we have to extend it very far, then the issue of whether somebody would really say that, after, say, the fifth utterance, is one which we could not confidently argue. One doesn’t have a strong intuition for sequencing in conversation. (1992, I: 5)

Unlike philosophers, ethnographers do not usually invent conversations. Instead, they observe and record their observations through fieldnotes (see Section 3.3.5). Why did Sacks prefer to use an audio recorder?

Sacks’s answer is that we cannot rely on our notes or recollections of conversations. Certainly, depending on our memory, we can usually summarize what different people said. But it is simply impossible to remember (or even to note at the time) such matters as pauses, overlaps, inbreaths and the like.

Now whether you think these kinds of things are important will depend upon what you can show with or without them. Indeed, you may not even be convinced that conversation itself is a particularly interesting topic. But, at least by studying tapes of conversations, you are able to focus on the ‘actual details’ of one aspect of social life. As Sacks put it:

My research is about conversation only in this incidental way, that we can get the actual happenings on tape and transcribe them more or less, and therefore have

something to begin with. If you can't deal with the actual detail of actual events then you can't have a science of social life. (1992, II: 26)

Tapes and transcripts also offer more than just 'something to begin with'. They have three clear advantages compared with other kinds of qualitative data:

- 1 Tapes are a public record.
- 2 Tapes can be replayed and transcripts improved.
- 3 Tapes preserve sequences of talk.

Let me expand a little on this list. In the first place, tapes are a public record, available to the scientific community, in a way that fieldnotes are not. Second, they can be replayed and transcriptions can be improved and analyses can take off on a different tack unlimited by the original transcript. As Sacks told his students:

I started to play around with tape recorded conversations, for the single virtue that I could replay them; that I could type them out somewhat, and study them extendedly, who knew how long it might take . . . It wasn't from any large interest in language, or from some theoretical formulation of what should be studied, but simply by virtue of that; I could get my hands on it, and I could study it again and again. And also, consequentially, others could look at what I had studied, and make of it what they could, if they wanted to disagree with me. (1992, I: 622)

A third advantage of detailed transcripts is that, if you want to, you can inspect sequences of utterances without being limited to the extracts chosen by the first researcher. For it is within these sequences, rather than in single turns of talk, that we make sense of conversation. In this way, tapes and transcripts preserve sequences of talk. As Sacks points out:

having available for any given utterance other utterances around it, is extremely important for determining what was said. If you have available only the snatch of talk that you're now transcribing, you're in tough shape for determining what it is. (1992, I: 729)

There remains the potential charge that data based mainly on audio recordings are incomplete. We see Sacks's response to this issue when a student on his lecture course asked a question about 'leaving out things like facial expressions' from his analysis (1992, II: 26). Sacks at once conceded that 'it would be great to study them [such things]. It's an absence.' Nonetheless, he constructs a two-part defence of his data.

First, the idea of 'completeness' may itself be an illusion. Surely, there cannot be totally 'complete' data any more than there can be a 'perfect' transcript? Second, Sacks recognized some of the undoubted technical problems involved in camera positioning and the like if you were to use videos (1992, II: 26-7). These are the very issues that have been addressed, if not resolved, by more recent work based on video-recorded data (e.g. Heath, 1986; Heath and Luff, 1992; Heath, 1997). I will return to this work in Chapter 7.

However, as always in science, everything will depend on what you are trying to do and where it seems that you may be able to make progress. As Sacks put it:

one gets started where you can maybe get somewhere. (1992, I: 26)

Getting started, in Sacks's sense, means repeated, careful listening to your tapes. As you listen, you build an improving version of a transcript. In Section 6.2, I discuss why you need to transcribe your tapes and what you need to put into your transcripts.

## 6.2 TRANSCRIBING AUDIOTAPES

As already noted, even if some people are able to remember conversations better than others, we are unlikely to be able to recall such potentially crucial details as pauses and overlaps. Indeed, even with a tape-recording, transcribers may 'tidy up' the 'messy' features of natural conversation such as length of pauses or overlapping or aborted utterances.

Features like pauses matter to all of us, not just to analysts of conversations. Indeed, they are one basis on which, as Sacks (1992) has pointed out, reading somebody else's mind, far from being some paranoid delusion, is both routine and necessary in everyday life. Look at Extract 6.1.

### Extract 6.1 (Levinson, 1983: 320, simplified)

- 1 C: So I was wondering would you be in your office on Monday by any chance?
- 2 (2.0)
- 3 C: Probably not

The numbers in brackets on line 2 indicate a 2 second pause. The presence of this pause gives us a clue to how C can guess that the person he is questioning might indeed not be in his office on Monday (line 3). This is because when there is a pause when it is someone's turn to speak, we can generally assume the pause will foreshadow some difficulty. Hence C is able to read the pause as indicating that the other person is unlikely to be in his office on Monday and say 'Probably not' in line 3.

Now consider Extract 6.2. This is taken from an interview between a health adviser (H) and a patient who has requested an HIV test. H is offering a piece of advice about condom use and her patient is a young woman who has just left school.

### Extract 6.2 (Silverman: counsel: 6.3)

- 1 H: it's *important* that you tell them to (0.3) use a condom (0.8) or to practise safe
- 2 sex that's what using a condom means.
- 3 (1.5)
- 4 H: okay?

In Extract 6.2, line 4, H asks 'okay?', which may be heard as a request for the patient to indicate that she has understood (or at least heard) H's advice about condom use. As with Extract 6.1, we can see that a pause in a space where a speaker might have taken a turn at talk (here at line 3) has indicated some difficulty to the previous speaker.

Indeed, it is likely that H heard an earlier difficulty. Note that in line 1 there is a pause of 0.8 seconds. It is not unreasonable to assume that since the patient has not used this space to indicate some understanding of what H has just said (for instance, by saying 'mm'), H's explanation of what 'using a condom means' (lines 1-2) is given precisely in (what turns out to be) an unsuccessful attempt to overcome this difficulty.

At this point you may be wondering how these transcripts can give such precise lengths of pauses. In fact, you do not need any advanced technology for this. Although transcribers may use complicated timing devices, many others get into the habit of using any four-syllable word which takes about a second to say. If you then say this word during a pause, you can roughly count each syllable as indicating a one-quarter of a second pause.

However, pauses are not the only features that you may need to record. In the Appendix (see p. 303), I provide a simplified set of transcription symbols.

It should not be assumed that the preparation of transcripts is simply a technical detail prior to the main business of the analysis. As Atkinson and Heritage (1984) point out, the production and use of transcripts are essentially 'research activities'. They involve close, repeated listenings to recordings which often reveal previously unnoted recurring features of the organization of talk. The convenience of transcripts for presentational purposes is no more than an added bonus.

As an example, the reader might examine Extract 6.3, based on the transcribing conventions listed in the Appendix, which report such features as overlapping talk and verbal stress as well as pauses (in parts of a second).

**Extract 6.3 (Her: 011: 2: 4: ST)**

(S's wife has just slipped a disc)

- 1 H: And we were wondering if there's anything we can do to help  
2 S: [Well 'at's  
3 H: [I mean can we do any shopping for her or something like that:  
4 (0.7)  
5 S: Well that's most kind Heatherton .hhh At the moment  
6 no: because we've still got two boys at home

In Extract 6.3, we see S refusing an offer made by H. Heritage shows how S's refusal (lines 5-6) of H's offer displays three interesting features. First, when S does not take an early opportunity to accept H's offer (after 'anything we can do to help', line 1), H proceeds to revise it. Second, S delays his refusal via the pause in the slot for his turn at line 4. Third, he justifies it by invoking a contingency about which H could not be expected to know.

Why should S and H bother with these complexities? The answer lies in the way in which they end up by producing an account which blames nobody. In an early work, Erving Goffman (1959) similarly suggested that a persistent consideration of interactants is to protect one another's public self-esteem, or 'face'. In doing whatever people are doing, they take into consideration the moral standing of themselves and their co-interactants that their doings project. In the ordinary course of events, this consideration entails the *protection* of the positive moral standing of the self and of others.

We can develop Goffman's observation by noting that certain actions – typically actions that occur in response to other actions, such as invitations, offers or assessments – can be marked as *dispreferred*, that is, problematic in one way or another. Thus, rejections of invitations or offers, or disagreements in response to assessments, can be performed in such a way that encodes their problematic status. Conversely, an acceptance of an invitation or offer, or an agreement with an assessment, can be performed in a way that does not exhibit such problematic status.

Subsequent research has identified a number of practices through which the *dispreferred* status of an action can be marked. According to Heritage (1984: 265-80), these practices include:

- 1 The action is delayed within a turn or across a sequence of turns.
- 2 The action is commonly prefaced or qualified within the turn in which it occurs.
- 3 The action is commonly accomplished in mitigated or indirect form.
- 4 The action is commonly accounted for.

These actions together constitute what has been called *preference organization*. But note that the concept of 'preference', when used in this sense, does not refer to inner experiences of the actors about 'problems' or the lack of them involved in performing certain actions (Levinson, 1983). Furthermore, the distinction between preferred and dispreferred actions does not involve an *a priori* categorization of actions as problematic or non-problematic. Rather, the distinction between 'preferred' and 'dispreferred' action formats involves a resource for the interactants, through the use of which they can portray their actions as problematic or as not problematic in the interaction at hand.

We can see how conversationalists can prevent problems arising if we return to Extract 6.1.

**Extract 6.1 (Levinson, 1983: 320, simplified)**

- 1 C: So I was wondering would you be in your office on Monday by any chance?  
2 (2.0)  
3 C: Probably not

C's question (at line 1) is one of those kinds of questions that we hear as likely to precede some other kind of activity. For instance, we all know that, if somebody asks if we will be free on Saturday night, an invitation is in the

offing. Here we can guess that if C had got a positive reply, he would then have gone on to offer a request or an invitation.

Why should speakers proceed in this indirect way? The answer is to do with what Goffman called 'face' and what we have called 'preference organization'. By asking a question about someone's whereabouts or plans, speakers avoid others having to engage in the 'dispreferred' act of turning down an invitation. If we reply that we are busy, the invitation need never be offered. The prior question thus helps both parties: the recipient is not put in the position of having to turn down an invitation and, if the question elicits negative information or a meaningful pause (as in Extract 6.1), the questioner is saved from losing face by being able to avoid offering an invitation that is doomed to be declined.

The detailed transcription symbols shown in Extract 6.3 and explained in the Appendix derive from the approach called conversation analysis (CA). CA is based on an attempt to describe people's methods for producing orderly social interaction. These methods include what we have called 'preference organization'.

As we have seen, CA's concern with the *sequential* organization of talk means that it needs precise transcriptions of such (commonsensically) trivial matters as overlapping talk and length of pauses. Close, repeated listenings to recordings often reveal previously unnoted recurring features of the organization of talk. Such listenings can most fruitfully be done in group data sessions. As described by Paul ten Have (1998), work in such groups usually begins by listening to an extract from a tape with a draft transcript and agreeing upon improvements to the transcript. Then:

the participants are invited to proffer some observations on the data, to select an episode which they find 'interesting' for whatever reason, and formulate their understanding or puzzlement, regarding that episode. Then anyone can come in to react to these remarks, offering alternatives, raising doubts, or whatever. (1998: 124)

However, as ten Have makes clear, such group data sessions should be rather more than an anarchic free-for-all:

participants are, on the one hand, *free* to bring in anything they like, but, on the other hand, *required* to ground their observations in the data at hand, although they may also support them with reference to their own data-based findings or those published in the literature. (1998: 124)

### Attempt Exercise 6.1 about now

However, without a way of defining a research problem, even detailed transcription can be merely an empty technique. Thus we need to ask: what sort of features are we searching for in our transcripts and what approach lies behind this search?

The rest of this chapter will outline the two main social science traditions which inform the analysis of transcripts of tapes: conversation analysis (CA) and discourse analysis (DA). I will begin with CA.

## 6.3 CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

Conversation analysis is based on an attempt to describe people's methods for producing orderly social interaction. In turn, CA emerged out of Garfinkel's (1967) programme for ethnomethodology and its analysis of 'folk' ('ethno') methods. Sacks's MCD analysis, discussed in Section 5.4, also derives from this programme.

### 6.3.1 Three fundamental assumptions

I will begin by summarizing John Heritage's (1984: 241–4) account of three fundamental assumptions of CA:

- 1 *The structural organization of talk* Talk exhibits stable, organized patterns, demonstrably oriented to by the participants. These patterns 'stand independently of the psychological or other characteristics of particular speakers' (1984: 241). This has two important implications. First, the structural organization of talk is to be treated as on a par with the structural organization of any social institution, i.e. as a 'social fact', in Durkheim's terms. Second, it follows that it is illegitimate and unnecessary to explain that organization by appealing to the presumed psychological or other characteristics of particular speakers.
- 2 *Sequential organization* 'A speaker's action is *context-shaped* in that its contribution to an on-going sequence of actions cannot adequately be understood except by reference to its context . . . in which it participates' (1984: 242). However, this context is addressed by CA largely in terms of the preceding sequence of talk: 'in this sense, the context of a next action is repeatedly renewed with every current action' (1984: 242).
- 3 *The empirical grounding of analysis* The first two properties need to be identified in precise analyses of detailed transcripts. It is therefore necessary to avoid premature theory construction and the 'idealization' of research material which uses only general, non-detailed characterizations.

Heritage sums up these assumptions as follows:

Specifically, analysis is strongly 'data-driven' – developed from phenomena which are in various ways evidenced in the data of interaction. Correspondingly, there is a strong bias against *a priori* speculation about the orientations and motives of speakers and in favour of detailed examination of conversationalists' actual actions. Thus the empirical conduct of speakers is treated as the central resource out of which analysis may develop. (1984: 243)

In practice, Heritage adds, this means that it must be demonstrated that the regularities described 'are produced and oriented to by the participants as normatively oriented-to grounds for inference and action' (1984: 244). Further, deviant cases, in which such regularities are absent, must be identified and analysed (see Section 8.3.2.5 for a further discussion of the role of *deviant-case analysis* in relation to the validity of field research).

For reasons of space, I will briefly describe just three features of talk with which CA is concerned. These are:

- 1 turn-taking and repair
- 2 conversational openings and 'adjacency pairs'
- 3 how 'institutional' talk builds upon (and modifies) the structures of ordinary conversation.

All three features relate to what Sacks calls 'sequencing in conversation'.

### 6.3.2 Turn-taking and repair

Turns at talk have three aspects (Sacks et al., 1974). They involve:

- 1 how a speaker makes a turn relate to a previous turn (e.g. 'yes', 'but', 'uh huh')
- 2 what the turn interactionally accomplishes (e.g. an invitation, a question, an answer)
- 3 how the turn relates to a succeeding turn (e.g. by a question, request, summons etc.).

Where turn-taking errors and violations occur, 'repair mechanisms' will be used. For instance, where more than one party is speaking at a time, a speaker may stop speaking before a normally possible completion point of a turn. Again, when turn transfer does not occur at the appropriate place, the current speaker may repair the failure of the sequence by speaking again. Finally, where repairs by other than the current speaker are required (for instance because another party has been misidentified), the next speaker typically waits until the completion of a turn. Thus the turn-taking system's allocation of rights to a turn is respected even when a repair is found necessary.

There are three consequences of this which are worth noting:

- 1 *Needing to listen* The turn-taking system provides an 'intrinsic motivation' for listening to all utterances in a conversation. Interest or politeness alone is not sufficient to explain such attention. Rather, every participant must listen to and analyse each utterance in case (s)he is selected as next speaker.
- 2 *Understanding* Turn-taking organization controls some of the ways in which utterances are understood. So, for instance, it allows 'How are you?', as a first turn, to be usually understood not as an enquiry but as a greeting.

- 3 *Displaying understanding* When someone offers the 'appropriate' form of reply (e.g. an answer to a question, or an apology to a complaint), (s)he displays an understanding of the significance of the first utterance. The turn-taking system is thus the means whereby actors display to one another that they are engaged in *social* action – action defined by Weber as involving taking account of others.

Thus CA is an empirically oriented research activity, grounded in a basic theory of social action and generating significant implications from an analysis of previously unnoticed interactional forms. As the next section shows, one such unnoticed form is the structure of questions and answers.

### 6.3.3 Conversational openings and adjacency pairs

In the 1960s, the American sociologist Emmanuel Schegloff studied data drawn from the first 5 seconds of around 500 telephone calls to and from an American police station. Schegloff began by noting that the basic rule for two-party conversation, that one party speaks at a time (i.e. providing for a sequence a–b–a–b–a–b, where a and b are the parties), 'does not provide for the allocation of the roles "a" and "b"' (1968: 1077). Telephone calls offer interesting data in this regard because non-verbal forms of communication – apart from the telephone bell – are absent. Somehow, despite the absence of visual cues, speakers manage an orderly sequence in which both parties know when to speak. How?

Schegloff suggests:

A first rule of telephone conversations which might be called 'a distribution rule for first utterances' is: *the answerer speaks first*. (1968: 1078, original emphasis)

In order to see the force of the 'distribution rule', consider the confusion that occurs when a call is made and the phone is picked up, but nothing is said by the receiver of the call. Schegloff cites an anecdote by a woman who adopted this strategy of silence after she began receiving obscene telephone calls. Her friends were constantly irritated by this practice, thus indicating the force of the rule 'the answerer speaks first'. Moreover, her tactic was successful:

However obscene her caller might be, he would not talk until she had said 'hello', thereby obeying the requirements of the distribution rule. (1974: 355)

Although answerers are expected to speak first, it is callers who are expected to provide the first topic. Answerers, after all, do not normally know who is making the call, whereas callers can usually identify answerers, and answerers will assume that callers have initiated a call in order to raise a topic – hence the embarrassment we feel when somebody we have neglected to call, calls us instead. Here we may convert ourselves from answerers to hypothetical callers by using some formula like: 'Oh, I'd been trying to reach you.' Having reallocated our roles, we are now free to introduce the first topic.

On examining his material further, Schegloff discovered only one case (out of 500) which did not fit the rule 'answerer speaks first'. He concluded that the person who responds to a telephone bell is not really answering a *question*, but responding to a *summons*. A summons is any attention-getting device (a telephone bell, a term of address such as 'John?', or a gesture like a tap on the shoulder or raising your hand). A summons tends to produce answers. Schegloff suggests that summons-answer (SA) sequences have the following features which they share with a number of other linked turns (e.g. question-answer, greetings) classed as *adjacency pairs*:

- 1 *Non-terminality* They are preambles to some further activity; they cannot properly stand as final exchanges. Consequently, the summoner is obliged to talk again when the summoned completes the SA sequence.
- 2 *Conditional relevance* Further interaction is conditional upon the successful completion of the SA sequence.
- 3 *Obligation to answer* Answers to a summons have the character of questions (e.g. 'What?', 'Yes?', 'Hello?'). This means that, as in question-answer (QA) sequences, the summoner must produce the answer to the question (s)he has elicited. Furthermore, the person who has asked the question is obliged to listen to the answer (s)he has obligated the other to produce. Each subsequent nod or 'uh huh' recommit the speaker to attend to the utterances that follow. Through this 'chaining' of questions and answers, 'provision is made by an SA sequence not only for the coordinated entry in a conversation but also for its continued orderliness' (1974: 378–9).

Schegloff was now able to explain his deviant case as follows: summons (phone rings); no answer; further summons (caller says 'Hello'). The normal form of a telephone call is: summons (phone rings); answer (recipient says 'Hello'). In the deviant case, the absence of an answer is treated as the absence of a reply to a summons. So the caller's use of 'Hello' replaces the summons of the telephone bell. The failure of the summoned person to speak first is heard as an uncompleted SA sequence. Consequently, the caller's speaking first makes sense within the 'conditional relevance' of SA sequences.

The power of these observations is suggested by two examples. The first is mentioned by Cuff and Payne:

The recipient of a summons feels impelled to answer. (We note that in Northern Ireland, persons still open the door and get shot – despite their knowledge that such things happen.) (1979: 151)

The second example arises in Schegloff's discussion of a child's utterance: 'You know what, Mommy?' (first discussed by Sacks, 1974). The child's question establishes an SA sequence, where a proper answer to the summons (Mommy) is 'What?' This allows the child to say what it wanted to at the start, but as an obligation (because questions must produce answers). Consequently, this utterance is a powerful way in which children enter into conversations despite their usually restricted rights to speak.

## Attempt Exercise 6.2 about now

As Heritage points out, this should not lead us to an over-mechanical view of conversation:

conversation is not an endless series of interlocking adjacency pairs in which sharply constrained options confront the next speaker. (1984: 261)

Instead, the phenomenon of adjacency works according to two non-mechanistic assumptions:

- 1 An utterance which is placed immediately after another one is to be understood as produced in response to or in relation to the preceding utterance.
- 2 This means that, if a speaker wishes some contribution to be heard as *unrelated* to an immediately prior utterance, he or she must do something special to lift assumption 1 – for instance by the use of a prefix (like 'by the way') designed to show that what follows is unrelated to the immediately prior turn at talk.

### 6.3.4 Institutional talk

Contrary to some critics (e.g. Goffman, 1981: 16–17), who accuse conversation analysts of depicting a mechanical system, CA takes very seriously the contexts of interaction. For instance, in the classic statement of CA, it is noted very early on that:

conversation is always 'situated' – it always comes out of, and is part of, some real sets of circumstances of its participants. (Sacks et al., 1974: 699)

However, although such matters as place, time and the identities of the participants are undoubtedly relevant to speakers, we are reminded that we must be cautious about how we invoke them:

it is undesirable to have to know or characterize such situations for particular conversations in order to investigate them. (1974: 699)

Two decades later, this position was clearly laid out by Maynard and Clayman:

Conversation analysts . . . [are] concerned that using terms such as 'doctor's office', 'courtroom', 'police department', 'school room', and the like, to characterize settings . . . can obscure much of what occurs within those settings . . . For this reason, conversation analysts rarely rely on ethnographic data and instead examine if and how interactants themselves reveal an orientation to institutional or other contexts. (1991: 406–7)

As already noted, talk is a feature of both 'formal' and 'informal' interactions, ranging from a courtroom to a casual 'chat'. In a courtroom, for instance, who can speak when is usually clearly defined and, unlike casual chatter, one can be ruled to be speaking 'out of order' and even held to be 'in contempt of court'.

However, it is dangerous to assume that just because talk is occurring in some 'formal' setting, it necessarily has a different structure to ordinary conversation. As we all know, people still chatter in the course of doing their jobs and some formal move may be needed for the talk to take on a formal (or institutional) character, for instance by the chair of a meeting calling the meeting to order.

In any event, as Sacks et al. (1974) suggest, ordinary conversation always provides a baseline from which any such departures are organized and recognized. This means that, in the study of institutional talk, we need carefully to examine how the structures of ordinary conversation 'become specialised, simplified, reduced, or otherwise structurally adapted for institutional purposes' (Maynard and Clayman, 1991: 407).

I will use research on the organization of TV news interviews as an example before attempting a brief summary of what is known so far about institutional talk.

#### TV news interviews

Clayman (1992) characterizes TV news interviewing as a site for much caution, given that news interviewers are supposed to be neutral or objective. How is this achieved?

When interviewers (IVs) come on to relatively controversial opinion statements, they distance themselves, creating what Clayman calls a different 'footing'. This is seen in Extract 6.4.

#### Extract 6.4 (Clayman 5: Meet the Press 12/8/85)

- 1 IV: Senator, (0.5) uh: President Reagan's elected thirteen months ago: an
- 2 enormous landslide.
- 3 (0.8)
- 4 IV: It is *said* that his programs are in trouble

In lines 1–2, a footing is constructed whereby IV is the author of a factual statement. However, at line 4, the footing shifts to what 'it is said': hence, here IV is no longer the author and the item is marked as possibly 'controversial'.

Footing shifts are also *renewed* during specific 'controversial' words and IVs avoid affiliating with or disaffiliating from the statements they report. They also may comment on the authoritativeness of the source of an assertion or comment on the range of persons associated with it.

However, the achievement of 'neutrality' is a locally accomplished and co-operative matter. Thus interviewees (IEs) 'ordinarily refrain from treating the focal assertion as expressing the IV's personal opinion' (1992: 180). For instance, they do this by attributing the assertion to the same third party.

As Clayman remarks, this is unlike ordinary conversation, where it seems unlikely that speakers are expected to be neutral. As he says, minimal responses to such things as invitations or advice are *not* usually taken as evidence of the recipient's neutrality but are hearable as constituting actual or possible rejection (as we saw in Extract 6.1).

Like Clayman, Greatbatch (1992) notes the specific ways in which participants produce their talk as 'news interview' talk. He shows how the maintenance of IVs' neutrality ties in with the mutual production of the talk as aimed at an overhearing *audience*. Both parties maintain a situation in which it is not problematic that IEs properly limit themselves to responses to IR questions, while IVs:

- confine themselves to asking questions
- avoid a range of responsive activities which would make them a report recipient rather than just a report elicitor (e.g. acknowledgement tokens like 'mmm hm', 'uh huh', 'yes' and news-receipt objects like 'oh, really, did you') (1992: 269–70).

In this context, 'neutrality' is not the only feature which contrasts with talk in other settings. Greatbatch shows that 'disagreements' have features specific to news interview talk. In ordinary conversation, 'whereas agreements are normally performed directly and with a minimum of delay, disagreements are commonly accomplished in mitigated forms and delayed from early positioning within turns and/or sequences' (1992: 273). This suggests, as we saw earlier, that agreements, like acceptance of invitations or advice, are marked as preferred objects.

Greatbatch shows how disagreements arise in the following two ways in multi-party news interviews. First, following a question repeated to the second IE, (s)he can disagree immediately with the opinion of the first IE. As Greatbatch notes, however, this disagreement is *mitigated* since it is *mediated* by the IV's question. As Greatbatch suggests:

The structure of turn taking in news interviews . . . means that disagreements between IEs are ordinarily elicited by and addressed to a third party, the IV, with whom neither party disagrees. Disagreements which are produced in this manner are not systematically mitigated or forestalled by the use of the preference features that are associated with disagreement in conversation. (1992: 279–80)

Second, however, IEs may disagree in other turn positions, for instance following a co-interviewee's turn or during such a turn. This is seen in Extract 6.5.

#### Extract 6.5 (Greatbatch 12)

- 1 IE1: the government advertising campaign is h *highly* irresponsible. h It's being
- 2 given [under huge
- 3 IE2: [Utter rubbish

This extract departs from the conversational rules of 'preference organization' (which, as we have seen, mark disagreements as dispreferred and hence delayed objects). It also seems to clash with the normal production of a news interview format (because they are not produced as an answer to an IV's question). However, Greatbatch argues, such disagreements display an underlying adherence to the news interview format, namely:

- IE2 can still be heard as responding to the question that produced IE1's answer.
- IE2 directs his answer to the IV, *not* to IE1, and this is quite different from ordinary conversation where the person being disagreed with is also the addressee of the disagreement. Such disagreements are routinely followed (data not shown here) by IV intervening to manage an exit from the disagreement without requiring them to depart from their institutional roles as IEs but not, for instance, combatants, mutual insulters etc.

Greatbatch summarizes his findings as follows:

- 1 In news interviews, many of the features of preference organization are rendered redundant, replaced by the interview turn-taking system.
- 2 Within news interviews, 'the structure of turn taking and its associated expectancies provide simultaneously for the *escalation* and *limitation* of overt disagreement' (1992: 299, my emphasis). As Greatbatch suggests, this may explain why panel interviews are so common and are assumed to produce 'lively' broadcasting.

#### *Basic features of institutional talk*

Drew and Heritage (1992: 22–5) distinguish some dimensions according to which we can analyse institutional talk including TV news interviews:

- It is usually goal-oriented in institutionally relevant ways; thus people design their conduct to meet various institutional tasks or functions, e.g. emergency calls to the police need to be rapidly but accurately accomplished (Zimmerman, 1992). Alternatively the goals of interactions can be ill-defined, creating a need for the participants to fashion a sense of what the interaction will be about (Heritage and Sefi, 1992; Peräkylä and Silverman, 1991).
- It is usually shaped by certain constraints, e.g. what can be done in a court of law or news interview; however, in other situations, like counselling or doctor–patient interaction, participants may negotiate or ignore such constraints.
- It is associated with particular ways of reasoning or inference-making, e.g. meaning of not giving response tokens in news interviews; hearing a charge in health visitor–mother (Heritage and Sefi) or doctor–mother (Silverman, 1987: ch. 10) interactions.

#### **Attempt Exercise 6.3 about now**

##### *The issue of context*

As Drew and Heritage have pointed out, while one can do 'institutional work' on a home telephone, not everything said at work is specifically 'institutional':

Thus the institutionality of an interaction is not determined by its setting. Rather, interaction is institutional in so far as participants' institutional or professional identities are somehow made relevant to the work activities in which they are engaged. (1992: 3–4)

The question that then arises is how we demonstrate what is 'relevant'. Schegloff (1992) has suggested that this is a basic methodological issue. It causes two problems which he calls 'relevance' and 'procedural consequentiality'. These two problems are set out as follows:

- 1 *Relevance* This is the problem of 'showing from the details of the talk or other conduct in the materials that we are analyzing that those aspects of the scene are what the parties are oriented to' (1992: 110). The problem arises because, as we saw in Chapter 5, Sacks reveals how people can describe themselves and others in multiple ways. This problem, Schegloff insists, is simply disregarded in social scientific accounts which rely on statistical correlations to 'demonstrate' the relevance of some such description. Instead, we need to demonstrate that participants are currently oriented to such descriptions.
- 2 *Procedural consequentiality* A demonstration that our descriptions of persons and settings are currently relevant for participants is not enough. We must also consider: 'How does the fact that the talk is being conducted in some setting (e.g. "the hospital") issue in any consequence for the shape, form, trajectory, content, or character of the interaction that the parties conduct? And what is the mechanism by which the context-so-understood has determinate consequences for the talk?' (1992: 111).

Schegloff gives two examples relevant to 'procedural consequentiality'. First, he looks at how a particular laboratory study sought to demonstrate something about how people 'repair' mistakes in talk. He shows that, in this study, only the subject was allowed to talk. Hence many features which arise in whether such repairs should be done by self or other (given that there is a preference for self-repair) were unavailable. Thus it will not do to characterize the context as a 'laboratory setting' because other features (only one person talking) can be shown to have more procedural consequentiality.

Schegloff's second example is taken from an interview between George Bush and Dan Rather in the 1988 US election campaign. The interview became famous because of the apparent 'row' or confrontation between the two men. Schegloff shows that such features were noticeable because Bush refused to co-operate in producing a central feature of 'interviews', i.e. that they consist

or question-answer sequences where one party asks the questions and the other holds off speaking until a recognizable question has been posed (Silverman, 1973).

The implication is that we cannot describe what went on as occurring in the context of an 'interview'. Instead, interactions only become (and cease to be) 'interviews' through the co-operative activity of the participants. As Schegloff shows, this may make some of the claims relating gender to interruption (Zimmerman and West, 1975) somewhat premature.

These examples show that the issue of determining context is not a once-and-for-all affair because parties have to continue to work at co-producing any context. Equally, we cannot explain people's behaviour as a simple 'response' to some context when that context is actively constructed (and reconstructed).

This means that we should not assume that what we find in talk is necessarily a feature of the institutional setting or other social structural element that our intuitions tell us is relevant. Since 'not everything said in some context . . . is relevantly oriented to that context' (Schegloff, 1991: 62), we must not risk characterizing a conversational structure possibly found across a range of contexts as institutionally specific.

This point is made elegantly in the editor's introduction to a recent collection of studies of 'institutional talk':

CA researchers cannot take 'context' for granted nor may they treat it as determined in advance and independent of the participants' own activities. Instead, 'context' and identity have to be treated as inherently locally produced, incrementally developed and, by extension, as transformable at any moment. Given these constraints, analysts who wish to depict the distinctively 'institutional' character of some stretch of talk cannot be satisfied with showing that institutional talk exhibits aggregates and/or distributions of actions that are distinctive from ordinary conversation. They must rather demonstrate that the participants constructed their conduct over its course – turn by responsive turn – so as progressively to constitute . . . the occasion of their talk, together with their own social roles in it, as having some distinctively institutional character. (Drew and Heritage, 1992: 21)

However, this does *not* mean that such work treats institutional talk as a closed system cut off from the wider society. By contrast, without making any prior assumptions about 'context', these studies are able to examine how members themselves invoke a particular context for their talk. As we have seen, Clayman and Greatbatch show how TV news interviewers produce their talk as 'neutral' or 'objective', thereby displaying their attention to an overhearing audience's presumed expectations.

Elsewhere, I have argued (Silverman, 1997b: 34–5) for the value of respecting CA's assertion that one's initial move should be to give close attention to how participants locally produce contexts for their interaction. By beginning with this question of 'how', we can then fruitfully move on to 'why' questions about the institutional and cultural constraints to which the parties demonstrably defer. Such constraints reveal the functions of apparently

irrational practices and help us to understand the possibilities and limits of attempts at social reform.

### 6.3.5 Doing CA

Despite the battery of concepts found in this chapter, doing CA is not an impossibly difficult activity. As the founder of CA, Harvey Sacks, once pointed out, in doing CA we are only reminding ourselves about things we already know. As Sacks remarks:

I take it that lots of the results I offer, people can see for themselves. And they needn't be afraid to. And they needn't figure that the results are wrong because they can see them . . . As if we found a new plant. It may have been a plant in your garden, but now you see it's different than something else. And you can look at it to see how it's different, and whether it's different in the way that somebody has said. (1992, I: 488)

However, the way in which CA obtains its results is rather different from how we might intuitively try to analyse talk. It may be helpful, therefore, if I conclude this section by offering a crude set of prescriptions about how to do CA. These are set out in Tables 6.2 and 6.3.

TABLE 6.2 *How to do CA*

- 1 Always try to identify sequences of related talk.
- 2 Try to examine how speakers take on certain roles or identities through their talk (e.g. questioner–answerer or client–professional).
- 3 Look for particular outcomes in the talk (e.g. a request for clarification, a repair, laughter) and work backwards to trace the trajectory through which a particular outcome was produced.

TABLE 6.3 *Common errors to avoid when doing CA*

- 1 Explaining a turn at talk by reference to the speaker's intentions.
- 2 Explaining a turn at talk by reference to a speaker's role or status (e.g. as a doctor or as a man or woman).
- 3 Trying to make sense of a single line of transcript or utterance in isolation from the surrounding talk.

If we follow these rules, as Sacks suggests, the analysis of conversations does not require exceptional skills. As he puts it, all we need to do is to 'begin with some observations, then find the problem for which these observations could serve as . . . the solution' (1992, II: xlviii).

## 6.4 DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Discourse analysis (DA) describes a heterogeneous range of social science research based on the analysis of interviews and texts as well as recorded

talk. It shares with CA a common intellectual ancestor in the Oxford philosopher J.L. Austin.

In *How To Do Things with Words* (1962), Austin showed that many utterances do not simply describe a state of affairs but perform an action. For instance:

Help.

I thee wed.

In both cases, the speakers are not heard to describe the state of their mind or to picture reality but are heard to perform some action ('asking for help', 'getting married'). Uttering such 'performatives', as Austin calls them, commits speakers to their consequences. For instance, when people come to give you help and find nothing amiss, it is no defence to say that you were not calling for assistance but simply singing a song. Alternatively, Austin points out, you will not escape a charge of bigamy by saying that you had all kinds of mental reservations when you uttered 'I thee wed' for the second time.

Like nearly all linguistic philosophers, Austin worked with *invented* examples, relying on his native intuition. Social scientists prefer to understand the complexities of naturally occurring talk. What they take from Austin is his concern with the activities performed in talk.

#### 6.4.1 What is discourse analysis?

At first sight, compared to CA, DA looks like conventional social science. This arises for two reasons:

- 1 DA is concerned with a range of topics which are often much closer to conventional social science concerns (e.g. gender relations, social control etc.) than is the case in CA. 'Take gender inequalities for example. [DA] Studies have considered both the way in which such inequalities are constructed, made factual, and justified in talk, and they have also considered the resources (**interpretive repertoires**, identities, category systems) that are used to manufacture coherent and persuasive justifications that work to sustain those inequalities' (Potter, 1997: 148).
- 2 Unlike CA, DA can be quite catholic about what kind of data is acceptable. So, although some DA studies use transcripts of talk from everyday or institutional settings, others are based on transcripts of open-ended interviews, or on documents of some kind. Sometimes these different materials are even combined together in the same study (1997: 147). However, not all DA researchers are entirely happy with using non-naturally occurring data such as interviews (see Potter, 1996a: 134-5).

These two features mean that DA is quite heterogeneous and it is, therefore, difficult to arrive at a clear definition of it. The following is one authoritative version:

DA has an analytic commitment to studying discourse as *texts and talk in social practices* ... the focus is ... on language as ... the medium for interaction; analysis of discourse becomes, then, analysis of what people do. One theme that is particularly emphasized here is the rhetorical or argumentative organization of talk and texts; claims and versions are constructed to undermine alternatives. (Potter, 1997: 146, emphasis in original)

Potter suggests that this Austinian concern with the rhetorical organization of talk and texts has given DA three unifying assumptions:

- 1 *Anti-realism* DA is resolutely against the assumption that we can treat accounts as true or false descriptions of 'reality'. As Potter puts it: 'DA emphasizes the way versions of the world, of society, events, and inner psychological worlds are produced in discourse.'
- 2 *Constructionism* DA is concerned with 'participants' constructions and how they are accomplished and undermined'.
- 3 *Reflexivity* DA considers 'the way a text such as this is a version, selectively working up coherence and incoherence, telling historical stories, presenting and, indeed, constituting and objective, out-there reality' (1997: 146).

To put some meat on these bare bones, I present below three concepts used in DA research:

- interpretive repertoires (or interpretive repertoires)
- stake
- scripts.

This is not meant to be an exhaustive list. In particular it leaves out DA work concerned with rhetoric and ideology (e.g. Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Billig 1992; 1995) and with issues relating to the construction of scientific texts (e.g. Ashmore, 1989; Potter, 1996b).

#### 6.4.2 Interpretive repertoires

Early DA studies attempted to identify broad 'discourses' which participants use to define their identities and moral status. As Potter puts it:

**Interpretive repertoires** are systematically related sets of terms that are often used with stylistic and grammatical coherence and often organized around one or more central metaphors. (1996a: 131)

Two examples will indicate how this concept has been used.

##### *Science as a repertoire*

Nigel Gilbert and Mike Mulkay (1983) were concerned with scientists' accounts of scientific practice. As they point out, one way of hearing what

scientists say is as hard data which bear on debates in the philosophy of science about the character of scientific practice. It is then tempting to treat such accounts as 'inside' evidence ('from the horse's mouth', as it were) about whether scientists are actually influenced by 'paradigms' and community affiliations more than by sober attempts to refute possible explanations, as in Popper's *critical rationalism* (see Section 8.1.4).

Confusingly, Gilbert and Mulkay's scientists used both quasi-Kuhnian and quasi-Popperian explanations of scientific practice. Understandably, however, they were much keener to invoke the Popperian ('sober refutation') account of how *they* worked and the Kuhnian ('community context') account of how certain *other* scientists worked.

Were these accounts to be treated as a direct insight into how scientists do their work or how they experience things in the laboratory? Not at all, given the anti-realist posture of DA. Instead, these interview data gave Gilbert and Mulkay access to the *vocabularies* that scientists use. These vocabularies were located in two very different interpretive repertoire:

- a *contingent* repertoire, in which scientists used a political vocabulary of 'influence' and 'interest' to talk about each other's institutional affiliations and ability or inability to get big research contracts etc.
- an *empiricist* repertoire, in which scientific activity was described as a response to data 'out there' in 'nature'.

Neither repertoire conveyed the 'true' sense of science. For DA, there is no more an essential form of scientific practice than there is a single reality standing behind 'atrocious stories' told by mothers of handicapped children (see Section 4.8). Everything is situated in particular contexts. So scientists, Gilbert and Mulkay note, are much more likely to use a 'contingent' repertoire in a discussion at a bar than in a scientific paper.

In this way, the research question ceases to be 'What is science?' and becomes 'How is a particular scientific discourse invoked? When is it invoked? How does it stand in relation to other discourses?'

Gilbert and Mulkay's focus on interpretive repertoires leads us to see that 'science', like other social institutions, is a *hyphenated phenomenon* which takes on different meanings in different contexts (see Section 10.7).

#### *Motherhood as a repertoire*

As just noted, it is not only sober institutions like 'science' which dissolve into a set of repertoires. The same process can be seen when we look at how women invoke the identity of 'motherhood'. My example of this will be drawn from a clinic for young diabetics (Silverman, 1987: ch. 10).

Extract 6.6 is the start of a consultation between a mother of a diabetic child aged 16 and her paediatrician. It takes place when her daughter is in another room having her blood taken and the mother has asked specially if she can see the doctor. This extract comes a little way into the consultation.

#### Extract 6.6

(D = doctor; M = mother of June, aged 16)

- 1 M: She's going through a very languid stage ( ) she won't do anything unless
- 2 you push her
- 3 D: so you're finding you're having to push her quite a lot?
- 4 M: mm no well I don't (.) I just leave her now

At line 4, there is evidence to suggest that M hears the doctor's question as a charge against her parenting. Notice how she withdraws from her initial depiction about 'pushing' her daughter when the doctor, through repeating it, makes it accountable. One way to look at what is happening here, then, is as a *charge-rebuttal* sequence.

Now why would she want to withdraw from her depiction of her daughter and herself in lines 1–2 of this extract? It seems that M hears D's question as depicting her as potentially a 'nagging' mother (it is interesting that only women can nag!). So, when the doctor topicalizes 'pushing', the mother withdraws into an account which suggests that she respects her daughter's autonomy.

Shortly after, June's mother produces another worry about how her daughter is coping with her diabetes. This time her concern is her daughter's diet (Extract 6.7).

#### Extract 6.7

- 1 M: I don't think she's really sticking to her diet (.) I don't know the effects
- 2 this will have on her (.) it's bound to alter her sugar if she's not got the
- 3 right insulin isn't it? I mean I know what she eats at home but
- 4 D: [so there's no real consistency to her diet? It's sort
- 5 of
- 6 M: [no well I keep it as consistent as I can at home

Now look at what the doctor says this time. Unlike in Extract 6.6, he does not topicalize M's 'pushing' her child. Instead, he produces what M hears as a charge against her responsibility towards June ('there's no real consistency to her diet'). In response, the mother now uses the very thing she denied earlier in order to rebut what she hears as the charge of 'irresponsibility' in what the doctor is saying.

This brings us to the issue of interpretive repertoires: in this case a repertoire of 'parental responsibility' and one of 'young adults' autonomy'. M is skilfully operating with two repertoires that apparently are quite contradictory. In purely logical terms, you can't on the one hand say 'I watch everything my child does' and at the same time 'I leave my child to do anything she wants to do'. However, by using each repertoire when situationally appropriate, the mother is able to detect and rebut possible traps in the way the doctor is responding to what she is saying.

Consonant with DA's anti-realist and constructionist position, this naturally occurring material reveals that this mother is not *intrinsically* 'nagging' or

'irresponsible'. Instead, both depictions are *locally* available and *locally* resisted. Conversely, if we had interviewed mothers, the temptation would have been to search for idealized conceptions of their role.

#### Attempt Exercise 6.4 about now

The reader will note that the gain of this analysis is that, like many DA studies, it addresses a conventional social science topic (conceptions of gender and motherhood). Moreover, it seems to have an immediate practical application. For instance, doctors were interested to learn about the double-binds present in their attention to the autonomy of their young patients. Likewise, parents' groups (largely mothers) of diabetic children found it very helpful to go through material of this kind. It brought out the way in which things they may feel personally guilty about in their relationships with their teenage children are not something that relates to their individual failings. Instead, such problems arise in our culture in the double-binds built into the parent-adolescent relationship.

#### Uses and limitations of interpretive repertoires

Both studies identify the cultural resources that participants bring to institutional settings. At the same time, as we have seen, these resources are not treated as simple determinants of their behaviour but are used locally and skilfully. As Potter puts it:

these resources have a ... 'bespoke' flexibility, which allows them to be selectively drawn upon and reworked, according to the setting. (1996a: 131)

However, as Potter himself recognizes, the concept of interpretive repertoires does present certain difficulties. Let me mention two of these difficulties:

- 1 Although the concept may help in understanding communication in well-defined settings like medicine or science, it is: 'difficult to make clear and consistent judgements concerning the *boundaries* of particular repertoires outside constrained institutional settings' (1996a: 131).
- 2 Appealing to interpretive repertoires may fail to bring out more basic conversational rules to which participants are attending. Consequently, it lays itself open to the charge of basing its analysis upon taken-for-granted knowledge about the basic structures of talk (e.g. how charges or accusations are hearable by conversationalists). As Potter writes: '[a] problem is that the generality of the notion of a repertoire may obscure local interactional "business" that is being achieved by particular forms of discourse' (1996a: 131).

Because of these difficulties, Potter (1996a) argues that the concept of 'repertoire' is being replaced in DA by rather less broad brush concepts. One such concept is 'stake'.

### 6.4.3 Stake

How is a particular type of blaming achieved? How is a particular version of the world made to seem solid and unproblematic? How are social categories constructed and managed in practice? (Potter, 1996a: 131-2)

These kinds of questions can only be answered by different concepts which allow a more fine-grained attention to conversational detail. The concept of 'stake' attempts to satisfy this need. 'Stake' is explained by Potter in this way:

People treat each other as entities with desires, motives, institutional allegiances and so on, as having a stake in their actions. Referencing stake is one principal way of discounting the significance of an action or reworking its nature. (Potter, 1997: 153)

Potter illustrates the concept of stake with a number of data extracts. The first is taken from the interview of Princess Diana by the British TV reporter Martin Bashir. Extract 6.8 is part of the extract that Potter considers.

#### Extract 6.8 (adapted from Potter, 1997: 151)

- 1 Bashir: Did you (.) allow your friends, >your close friends,<
- 2 to speak to Andrew Morton?
- 3 Princess: Yes I did. Y [es, I did
- 4 Bashir: [Why?
- 5 Princess: I was (.) at the end of my tether (.)
- 6 I was (.) *desperate* (.)
- 7 >I think I was so fed up with being< (.)
- 8 seen as someone who was a ba:sket case (.)
- 9 because I am a very strong person (.)
- 10 and I *know* (.) that causes complications, (.)
- 11 in the system (.) that I live in.
- 12 (1.0) (smiles and purses lips)
- 13 Bashir: How would a book change that.
- 14 Princess: I dunno. ((raises eyebrows, looks away))
- 15 Maybe people have a better understanding (.)
- 16 maybe there's a lot of women out there
- 17 who *suffer* (.) on the same level
- 18 but in a different environment (.)
- 19 who are unable to: (.) stand up for themselves (.)
- 20 because (.) their self-esteem is (.) cut into two.
- 21 I dunno ((shakes head))

Potter focuses on Princess Diana's two 'I dunno' utterances (lines 14 and 21). Utterances like this, he says, work as 'uncertainty tokens' (words or expressions that people use to report states of uncertainty). So, by using 'I dunno', Princess Diana invites us to minimize her *stake* and *interest* in what she is saying. In this way, she discounts the significance of her actions or reworks their nature (1997: 153).

Potter compares this extract to an interview with Salman Rushdie. In Extract 6.9, David Frost is asking about the fatwah – the religious death sentence on Rushdie.

**Extract 6.9 (Potter, 1997: 153; Public Broadcasting Service, 26 November 1993)**

- 1 Frost: And how could they cancel it now? Can they cancel it–
- 2 they say they can't.
- 3 Rushdie: Yeah, but you know, they would, wouldn't they, as somebody once
- 4 said. The thing is, without going into the kind of arcana of theology,
- 5 there is no technical problem. The problem is not technical. The
- 6 problem is that they don't want to.

Potter draws our attention to Rushdie's comment: 'they would, wouldn't they' (line 3). This treats Frost's suggestion that the fatwah cannot be cancelled as a claim which is motivated by special interests:

The familiar phrase 'they would, wouldn't they' treats the Iranians' claim as something to be expected: it is the sort of thing that people with that background, those interests, that set of attitudes *would* say; and it formulates that predictability as shared knowledge. This extract illustrates the potential for invoking stake to discount claims. (1997: 153)

The concept of 'script', like that of 'stake', helps us to understand the ways in which participants attend to the normative character of their actions.

#### 6.4.4 Scripts

As used in DA, 'script' refers to the ways in which participants construct events 'as **scripted**, as instances of some general pattern, or as anomalies and exceptions' (Edwards, 1997: 144). As Derek Edwards points out, the DA use of this concept is quite different from that found in cognitive psychology in which 'script' refers to a more or less fixed mental schema which people learn to associate with certain activities or settings (e.g. a 'restaurant script' involving a series of roles and props: see Edwards, 1997: 143).

By contrast, in DA, a *script* is a way of invoking the *routine* character of described events in order to imply that they are features of some (approved or disapproved) general pattern. Through this device, participants assemble descriptions that attend to matters of appropriateness, responsibility and blame, and:

build a picture of what kind of person the actor is – that is, his or her personality, disposition or mental state. (1997: 144)

Extract 6.10 shows how 'script' is used as a participant's device. It is an extract from a counselling session in which Mary and Jeff are talking to a counsellor about their marital problems.

**Extract 6.10 (Edwards, 1997: 142, simplified transcription)**

- 1 Mary: I went out Friday night (.) and Jeff was working (.) on call (.) and (.)
- 2 um (2.2) the place that I went to (.) like (.) *closed* at half past twelve
- 3 and I got home about one o'clock

Edwards draws attention to Mary's mention of what time the 'place' she went to closed. Her description attends to her earlier account of an argument with Jeff about the time that she had arrived home and the fact that she had met her ex-lover while out (data not shown).

Edwards argues that Mary's simple narrative (the 'place . . . *closed* at half past twelve and I got home about one o'clock') presents what happened as merely a routine set of events (a 'script') in which nothing extraordinary or morally reprehensible took place. As Edwards puts it, through scripting what happened, Mary diverts attention from other kinds of interpretations, for instance that:

she was enjoying herself and did not *want* to come home, let alone that she was enjoying the attentions of men, or even of the man with whom she had had the affair. Mary's getting home at one o'clock (a.m.) is provided as part of a narrative sequence of going somewhere that happened to close at 12.30. (1997: 142–3)

Mary also says: 'I went out Friday night (.) and Jeff was working'. Note how this part of Mary's description allows us to add to Edwards's account. In this passage, Mary chooses to account for the fact that she went out without Jeff. We are now to hear her evening out not as some wilful action of a woman ignoring her partner but as something that was unavoidable ('scripted') and, therefore, morally acceptable.

In my own data, taken from a counselling session about a possible HIV-test, a male client who had not accompanied his girlfriend on holiday also attended to the matter of his (and her) accountability. I will use Edwards's concept of script to analyse one extract from these data (a fuller discussion, addressed in terms of other related concepts, is to be found in Silverman (1997b: 78–84).

Extract 6.11 is at the very beginning of a pre-test counselling interview held at the sexually transmitted disease department of a hospital in a provincial British city. When asked by the counsellor (C) about why he wants an HIV test, this male patient (P) tells a story about what happened on his girlfriend's holiday.

**Extract 6.11 (Silverman, 1997b: 78–9)**

- 1 C: righty ho (0.2) could you tell us (.) *why* you've come for an HIV test
- 2 today=
- 3 P: =well basically (.) because I'm: *worried* that I might have AIDS (0.2) er:
- 4 (0.2) when my girlfriend (.) like she was on holiday in: (.) [X] (0.2) in
- 5 April with her friend
- 6 C: mm hm
- 7 P: I didn't go because I was busy (1.0) er:: (0.6) she came *back* but she was

8 away for three weeks she came back (0.6) er: April ( ) May ( ) April ( ) May  
 9 June July August September October November (0.8) and it's now November  
 10 she's just told me (.) that she had sex with (.) a [Xian] when she was out there  
 11 well not actually had sex with but this she said that this guy (0.2) this is what  
 12 she told me this guy had (.) forced herself (.) himself upon her you know  
 13 (0.6) er::

As with Edwards's extract, the matter of who goes away from home with whom is made accountable here. 'With her friend' (line 5) tells us that his 'girlfriend' had not gone away on her own, where going away on your own *may* be heard as implying a problem with a relationship. 'Her friend' does not tell us the gender of the 'friend'. However we know that, if that gender had been male, it would have massive implications for the story that is being told and, therefore, P would have been obliged to tell us. Given that he doesn't, we must assume that 'her friend' is 'female'. Moreover, we can also assume, for the same reason, that it is not a sexual relationship.

But P also leaves a question hanging about why he had not accompanied his girlfriend, given that 'going on holiday together' can be heard as a script appropriate to the relationship girlfriend-boyfriend.

'I didn't go because I was busy' (line 7) attends to this question. Here P shows that he analyses these inferences in exactly this way. First, he underlines what we had inferred in his original description: 'I didn't go'. Second, he shows that this 'not going' is accountable and provides its warrant: 'because I was busy'. Just as Mary accounts for her husband's absence because 'Jeff was working', so P makes accountable that he did not accompany his girlfriend on her holiday. In both cases, we have accounts which invoke the *routine* character of described events and, thereby, function to constitute the accounts as *scripts* which describe some morally acceptable 'business as usual'.

Further scriptlike elements in P's account can be seen in the way he begins his answer to C's question. Note how being 'worried' about 'AIDS' (line 3) is appropriate to the implied category 'patient' who, in C's words, has 'come for an HIV test today'. When produced as scripts, descriptions construct a profoundly *moral* universe of 'reasonable' activities conducted and perceived by 'reasonable' people. So, for instance, coming today for an HIV test is not only an 'appropriate' activity if you are 'worried', it is also sensible and reasonable, serving to protect yourself (against further 'worry') and the community (because it shows you are aware of the dangers of receiving and transmitting the HIV virus).

However, P's account also provides a description of an event that may be heard in terms of another *script*. 'She was on holiday' (4) conjures up the category 'holidaymaker' which can be heard to imply innocent enjoyment but may also be associated with other activities, e.g. holiday 'romances', holiday 'flings'. Because we know that holidays may be a time when moral inhibitions may be temporarily lifted, the upcoming description of potentially 'promiscuous' behaviour is potentially downgraded or at least made comprehensible.

'She's just told me (.) that she had sex with (.) a [Xian] when she was out there' (line 10) consists of a series of highly implicative descriptions of activities. Having 'sex' with a third party implies 'being unfaithful'. Although the earlier description 'on holiday' (confirmed by the place locator 'when she was out there') may make this description understandable, it may not make it excusable. As we shall see, P engages in considerable interpretive work to preserve the moral status of P's girlfriend in a way that does not threaten his own status as a 'reasonable' person.

'Well not actually had sex with' (11): here the damaging description 'having sex' (with a third party) is immediately repaired by B. Thus we have to suspend the implied category 'unfaithful girlfriend'.

But this repaired description is ambiguous. For instance, are we to hear 'not actually had sex' as a physical or social description of the activity?

'She said that this guy (0.2) this is what she told me this guy had (.) forced herself (.) himself upon her you know' (line 12). It is clear from his next utterance that P is attending to this ambiguity as something in need of further explication. If 'he forced . . . himself upon her', then we are given a description which implies the categories rapist-victim, where 'victim' implies the activity of not giving consent.

So P reworks his original category 'having sex', with its damaging implications, by positing the absence of consent and thus a withdrawal of the warrant of the charge 'unfaithful girlfriend' and a return to a description of the events as scripted.

However, there is a further nice feature embedded in P's description. It arises in its preface: 'she said that this guy (0.2) this is what she told me'. P's story of these events is thus doubly embedded (both in 'she said' and in 'this is what she told me'). How does 'this is what she told me' serve to repair 'she said'?

We can unpick the nature of this repair by recognizing that when somebody offers an account the upshot of which puts them in an unfavourable light, we may suspect that they have organized their description in order to put themselves in a more favourable light. So, if P had simply reported what his 'girlfriend' had said about this incident, then, although he would be implying that he was a 'trusting partner', he could be seen as 'too trusting', i.e. as a dope.

Now we see that 'this is what she told me' makes him into an astute witness by drawing attention to the potential credibility problem about his girlfriend's account – just, as in Extract 6.9, Salman Rushdie's observation 'they would, wouldn't they' functions to minimize the credibility of a reported statement. However, note that, unlike this comment, P is *not* directly stating that his girlfriend is to be disbelieved. Rather her story is offered just as that – as her *story* – without implying that P knows it to be true or false.

The beauty of P's repair into 'this is what she told me' is that it puts him in a favourable light (as an astute observer), while not making a direct charge against his girlfriend's veracity (an activity which would allow us to see him as a 'disloyal partner'). This allows a hearer of his story to believe or disbelieve his girlfriend's account and allows him to go along with either conclusion.

P's elegantly crafted story leaves it up to the hearer to decide which script best describes these 'events'. Is this the story of an unfaithful girlfriend or of someone who has been shamefully assaulted? However we decide, P fits into the script of a 'loyal partner' and so is in the clear.

## 6.5 CA AND DA COMPARED

The difference between DA and CA is a matter for debate. Some DA researchers find CA's refusal to engage directly with cultural and political context disconcerting (see Wetherell, 1998). Equally, CA specialists question the validity of some DA researchers' appeals to their own sense of context (see Schegloff, 1997).

CA gains by mobilizing information about the structures of ordinary conversation in the context of very detailed transcripts. Following CA, Derek Edwards has called for a DA which draws from Sacks the assumption that there is

No hearable level of detail that may not be significant, or treated as significant by conversational participants'. (1995: 580)

At first glance, as Edwards implies, this seems to represent an accurate reading of Sacks's programme. However, as Schegloff points out, in practice DA has not always been responsive to the relevance of all aspects of talk to the local production of sense. For instance, some DA researchers may treat particles like 'mm' and 'uh huh' as:

conversational 'detritus' apparently lacking semantic content, and not contributing to the substance of what the discourse ends up having said. (Schegloff, 1982: 74)

For Schegloff, then, DA can ignore a basic aspect of CA by treating talk

as the product of a single speaker and a single mind; the conversation-analytic angle of inquiry does not let go of the fact that speech-exchange systems are involved, in which more and more than one co-participant is present and relevant to the talk, even when only one does the talking. (1982: 72)

However, DA-based research studies do provide important insights into institutional talk based on pressing sociological and practical concerns (like doctor-patient and teacher-pupil communication). Equally, like CA, DA can be attentive to the sequential embeddedness of talk – as, for instance, in Extracts 6.6 and 6.7, when the mother's changes of tack are interpreted in terms of the doctor's glosses on what she has just said.

It is for the reader to judge whether any DA study is susceptible to Schegloff's criticisms. Certainly, there is some evidence in recent work (e.g. Potter, 1997) that at least some DA researchers pay considerable attention to the turn-by-turn organization of talk. Moreover, we cannot assume that transcripts which do not record such details as length of pause are necessarily

imperfect. There cannot be a *perfect* transcript of a tape-recording. Everything depends upon what you are trying to do in the analysis, as well as upon practical considerations involving time and resources.

Of course, if this is so, we may end up in a pointless debate about whether such work is DA or CA! Indeed, in some cases, this distinction has more to do with whether the author pays his or her disciplinary dues to, respectively, psychology or sociology.

## 6.6 CONCLUSION

The last thing I want to do is to impose conversation analysis or discourse analysis as the only acceptable ways of doing qualitative research. As noted elsewhere in this volume, everything will depend upon the research problem being tackled. Moreover, thoughtful researchers will often want to use a combination of methods.

However, my benevolent neutrality towards the varying logics of qualitative research coexists with an appeal to two very strong principles. First, researchers always need to address the analytic issues that may lie concealed behind apparently straightforward issues of method. Second, qualitative research's concern for an 'in-depth' focus on people's activities (or representations of those activities) is no warrant for sloppy thinking or anecdotal use of 'telling' examples. We owe it to ourselves and our audiences to generate reliable data and valid observations.

If there is a 'gold standard' for qualitative research, it should only be the standard for any good research, qualitative or quantitative, social or natural science – and that requires affirmative answers to two questions. Have the researchers demonstrated successfully why we should believe them? And does the research problem tackled have theoretical and/or practical significance?

## KEY POINTS

If we can study what people are actually doing in naturally occurring situations, why should we ever want to work with researcher-provoked data?

Tapes and transcripts have three clear advantages compared with other kinds of qualitative data: tapes are a public record; they can be replayed and transcripts improved; and they preserve sequences of talk.

CA attempts to describe people's methods for producing orderly social interaction; it identifies these methods in the sequential organization of talk-in-interaction.

DA studies discourse as texts and talk in social practices; it is particularly concerned with rhetorical or argumentative organization.

## Recommended Reading

For an introduction to CA, see ten Have (1998); for DA, see Potter and Wetherell (1987) and Potter (1996a; 1997). Sacks's work on conversation analysis is found in his collected lectures (Sacks, 1992, vols I and II). These lectures are introduced in my book *Harvey Sacks: Social Science and Conversation Analysis* (1998). The diabetic clinic data discussed here are taken from my book *Communication and Medical Practice* (1987: chs 9, 10).

### Exercise 6.1

This is a task designed to help you familiarize yourself with the transcription conventions used in conversation analysis. As a consequence, you should start to understand the logic of transcribing this way and be able to ask questions about how the speakers are organizing their talk.

You are asked to tape-record no more than five minutes of talk in the public domain. One possibility is a radio call-in programme. Avoid using scripted drama productions as these may not contain recurrent features of natural interaction (such as overlap or repair). Do not try to record a television extract as the visual material will complicate both transcription and analysis. Now go through the following steps:

- 1 Attempt to transcribe your tape using the conventions in the Appendix. Try to allocate turns to identified speakers where possible but don't worry if you can't identify a particular speaker (put ? at the start of a line in such cases).
- 2 Encourage a friend to attempt the same task independently of you. Now compare transcripts and relisten to the tape-recording to improve your transcript.
- 3 Using this chapter as a guide, attempt to identify in your transcript any features in the organization of the talk (e.g. adjacency pairs, preference organization, institutional talk etc.).

### Exercise 6.2

Examine Extracts 6.12 and 6.13 (drawn from Atkinson and Drew, 1979: 52, and discussed in Heritage, 1984: 248–9).

### Extract 6.12

- 1 A: Is there something bothering you or not?
- 2 (1.0)
- 3 A: Yes or no
- 4 (1.5)
- 5 A: Eh?
- 6 B: No.

### Extract 6.13

- 1 Ch: Have to cut these Mummy.
- 2 (1.3)
- 3 Ch: Won't we Mummy
- 4 (1.5)
- 5 Ch: Won't we
- 6 M: Yes

- 1 Why does Heritage argue that these extracts demonstrate that 'questioners attend to the fact that their questions are framed within normative expectations which have sequential implications' (1984: 249)? Use the concept of 'adjacency pairs' in your answer.
- 2 What are the consequences of Ch. (in Extract 6.13) naming the person to whom his utterance is addressed? Why might children often engage in such naming? Use the concept of 'summons-answer'.

### Exercise 6.3

Below is an extract from an HIV test counselling interview. Read it through carefully in terms of the transcriptions set out in the Appendix.

#### (55/2/16: DG)

- 1 C: Okay. (0.7) It may sound (0.5) perhaps a dumb question but if you
- 2 did have HIV how might you have got it.
- 3 (1.0)
- 4 P: I'm sorry?
- 5 C: If you did have HIV how might you have gotten it.
- 6 P: How might I have er gotten it.
- 7 C: Mm=
- 8 P: = er: Through gay sex.
- 9 C: Okay..
- 10 (0.5)
- 11 C: [Uh:m:
- 12 P: [How exactly how I don't know., (0.5) uh:: (3.0) I am (.) really not
- 13 sure. (.)

- 14 C: Okay. hhh When you say through gay sex I mean how long have  
 15 you been (0.4) having relationships with other guys for  
 16 P: Okay: er::: (1.0) s-well (0.3) since I was a little kid =As long as I  
 17 c(n)an reme(h)mbe(h)r. .hhhh er::: (1.5) But (0.4) before I got my  
 18 job I: (0.3) started seeing someone, (0.4) and it was the only  
 19 relationship for two and half years.  
 20 C: Mm hm  
 21 P: And might add a stormy relationship so: (0.2) I was not (.) the faithful  
 22 lover. (.) The entire two and a half years.  
 23 C: Both of you [were unfaithful or you weren't.  
 24 P: [er:::  
 25 P: h (0.6) I was not. I'm sure he was (0.5) er::: (0.2) I mean we had  
 26 several periods of falling out. (0.6) er::: (0.6)  
 27 C: Mm hm  
 28 (1.0)

- 1 List the devices from ordinary conversation that C and P use to monitor each other's talk.
- 2 In what ways do C and P produce their talk as 'institutional'?

### Exercise 6.4

Below is a later extract drawn from the consultation presented in Extracts 6.6 and 6.7.

(D = doctor; M = mother)

- 1 D: It sounds as if generally you're having a difficult time
- 2 M: Her temper is vile
- 3 D: She with you and you with her
- 4 M: Yes. And her control of the diabetes is gone, her temper then takes control
- 5 of her

Using the analysis already given of Extracts 6.6 and 6.7, consider the following:

- 1 What interpretive repertoires do M and D use to organize their talk?
- 2 How is D's interpretation on line 3 of M's utterance on line 2 hearable as a charge?
- 3 How does M's utterance on line 4 respond to D's interpretation? Is it hearable as a rebuttal?
- 4 Can we learn anything from this extract about:
  - (a) M's attitude to her daughter
  - (b) cultural assumptions about motherhood?

## 7

### Visual Images

In Chapter 6, we considered how we can transcribe and analyse conversations. As I noted, however, audio recordings will not tell us about such potentially relevant matters as who is looking at whom and their body posture. Similarly, in Chapter 5, we concentrated on written texts to the exclusion of the visual images which coexist with words (as in most advertisements and highway signs) and sometimes replace them (as in traffic lights).

Up to this point, my avoidance (or downplaying) of the visual image follows a tendency in much qualitative research. As I noted in Chapter 3, even ethnographers who gather observational data have sometimes been curiously reluctant to use their eyes as well as their ears.

In defence of this position, it is sometimes argued that concern with the image alone can deflect attention from the social processes involved in image production and image reception. For instance, Slater (1989) argues that a focus on the images used in advertisements has neglected the way in which such images are shaped by the economic logic and social organization of the relationship between advertising agencies and their clients. A similar argument lies behind the switch of film analysis in the 1980s away from the analysis of film images and towards understanding the logic of movie production in terms of the studio system.

Whatever the strength of these arguments, perhaps our focus on the verbal may, in part, reflect something altogether more mundane. Unlike artists, architects, engineers or craftspeople, academic researchers learn to prioritize verbal products ('publish or perish' as the slogan goes). So what we *see* is taken for granted and our first thought tends to associate social research with what we can *read* (texts, statistics) or hear (interviews, conversations).

However, our reluctance to consider using our eyes as a research tool points, I think, to something far deeper than academic politics. In societies where television and cinema are central to leisure, there are grounds to believe that, somewhat ironically, we have become lazy with our eyes. Perhaps our learned appetite for 'action' blinds us to the possibility of a slower, more reflective viewing (see my discussion of an ethnographic appreciation of movies after Table 3.1).

In any event, as I have found to my own cost, sit a bunch of students in front of a movie and they will tend to switch off their brains and just let the experience wash over them. So the likely output will not be close-grained analysis but mental popcorn.