Overcoming the Observer’s Paradox

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The Qualitative Interview as Applied Linguistic Research
Overview

• What is the Observer’s Paradox?
• Qualitative interviews in the social sciences
• An applied linguistic project
• Exploring chronotoposes
• Positioning through evaluation
• Implications and conclusions
What is the ‘Observer’s Paradox’?

• “we are left with the Observer’s Paradox: the aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically being observed; yet we can only obtain these data by systematic observation.” Labov, 1973: 209.

• “The problem sociolinguistics faces is that while neither the exact set of characteristics, nor the ways in which they interact with one another can be specified, their impact can be enormous.” Cukor-Avila, 2000: 254.

• “[If] … the purpose of collecting language data is to find out how some aspect of talk itself works … interviewing may not be the best method for collecting data, because the conventions of the interview as particular sort of ‘speech event’… discourage certain kinds of behaviour – interview subjects rarely initiate or change topics for instance. Rather than taking the role of the interviewer, therefore, the researcher may prefer the role of the observer, bystander or eavesdropper.” Cameron, 2001: 19-20.
But...

• “The interview is one of the most widely used research instruments in the social sciences. Consequently, much of our knowledge about the social world is derived from information generated during interviews. However, research interviews are themselves periods of social interaction between parties” Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998: 172.

• “…a great deal of the expansion in qualitative research in sociology, education research, health research, and cognate fields has been an expansion of interviewing. Likewise methodological discussions of analysis of qualitative data all too often turn out to be based on the analysis of interview transcripts.” Atkinson and Silverman, 1997: 309.

• “The interview is part and parcel of our society and culture. It is not just a way of obtaining information about who and what we are; it is now an integral, constitutive feature of our everyday lives” Gubrium and Holstein, 2003: 29
Interview Types

Quantitative
- survey based interviews
- coded open question interviews
- life story grids or matrices interviews

Qualitative
- semi-structured interviews
- open ethnographic interviews
- extended case study interviews
### Quantitative Research

**AIM**
- Testing previous claims, generalisable results, breadth of coverage

**SUB**
- Large sample, representative sample of population

**PREP**
- Detailed research design, closed questions, interview schedule, interviewers trained to follow guidelines

**INT**
- Short duration, fixed format, identical questions, short answers, straightforward content

**ANA**
- Coding according to pre-determined categories, statistical analysis, tests for reliability

**REP**
- Description of data, use of statistical graphs, highlighting outstanding statistics

### Qualitative Research

**AIM**
- Raising new issues, fresh observations, depth of understanding

**SUB**
- Small group (or single case), informants with relevant experience

**PREP**
- Overall research process, open questions to stimulate meaningful responses, interviewers encouraged to listen

**INT**
- Long duration or multiple, flexible format, questions tailored to interviewee, extended responses

**ANA**
- Sorting and discovering categories of interest, thematic exploration of ideas. Consideration of validity and relevance

**REP**
- Reporting of narrative content, conceptual diagrams, highlighting significant quotes
Reconceptualising the interview

• “The sense of precision provided by these methods is illusory because they tend to obscure rather than illuminate the central problem of interviews, namely the relationship between discourse and meaning.” Mishler, 1986: 12.

• “The interviewing process becomes less a conduit of information from informants to researchers that represents how things are, and more a sea swell of meaning making in which researchers connect their own experiences to those of others and provide stories about how we live and cope.” Ellis and Berger, 2003: 161.
Some linguistic approaches used by Mishler

- Labov and Waletzky (1967) -- six part model of oral narrative
- Agar and Hobbs (1983)
- van Dijk (1980, 1982)
- Gee (1991) stanza based model, see Reissman (1990) for an example.
- See Mishler (1986a, 1986b and 1995) for discussion
The Project

• **Interview Session 1**: 21 native speaker / foreigner English teachers in English (2004)
• **Interview Session 2**: 21 non-native speaker / local English teachers in Japanese (2006)
• **Aims**: Exploration of the different perspectives on language teaching of native and non-native teachers (Narrative analysis of identity positioning in the interviews)
• **Analysis** –
  – (1) Interview structure
  – (2) spatio-temporal focus
  – (3) evaluation and viewpoint
  – (4) professional identity
Kinds of Evaluation

Subjective (personal) evaluation → Objective (shared, universal) evaluation
Modelling evaluation – appraisal theory

Source: Martin and White, 2005: p.38
George:

1. I am willing to spend the money now (to travel to the US with my daughter)
2. because I see so many of my friends
3. whose kids are eleven and twelve
4. and they can only speak Japanese.
5. And I am like:
6. ‘How motai-nai * is that?’
7. ‘So let me ask you,’
8. I tell my friends,
9. ‘let me ask you a question.’
10. ‘If you go back tomorrow, what is going to happen?’
11. ‘Well, then they’ll learn English,
12. they’ll go to school.’
13. ‘Well what happened to (inaudible)?’
14. ‘Well my wife thought it would be better,
15. if they learned Japanese first.’
16. ‘Who’s the English teacher?’
17. Who learned that kids learn everything in the first five years?
18. Who’s the one who did all the studying?’
19. I know what language development is.
20. I know what it means.
21. I’m never going to let my wife tell me.
22. Japanese think
23. because there are more Japanese than foreigners
24. they know what is best.
25. It drives me crazy.
26. My wife never read one book on development,
27. cognitive development.
28. And she is going to tell me?
29. How to teach language to my daughter?
30. No way!

* motai-nai = ‘wasteful’ in Japanese
### Examples of force in George’s narrative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modality (attitude)</th>
<th>Raised</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Lower</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive response</strong></td>
<td><strong>Oh, god yeah (41)</strong></td>
<td>Yes, sure.</td>
<td>I guess so.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(appreciation-reaction-impact)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quantity</strong></td>
<td><strong>Kids learn everything (17)</strong></td>
<td>Kids learn most things</td>
<td>Kids learn many things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(judgement-social esteem-capacity +ve)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Degree</strong></td>
<td><strong>I know what it means. (20)</strong></td>
<td>I know a lot about it.</td>
<td>I know something about it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(judgement-social-esteem-capacity +ve)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional intensity</strong></td>
<td><strong>It drives me crazy. (25)</strong></td>
<td>It annoys me.</td>
<td>It bugs me a bit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(affect-dis / satisfaction –ve)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Judgemental weight</strong></td>
<td><strong>How motai nai is that! (6)</strong></td>
<td>What a shame!</td>
<td>It can’t be helped!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(judgement-social sanction propriety –ve)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Probability</strong></td>
<td><strong>I’m never going to …(21)</strong></td>
<td>I’m probably not going to …</td>
<td>I don’t think I will…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(judgement-social esteem-capacity +ve)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frequency</strong></td>
<td><strong>Her mum kept saying …(44)</strong></td>
<td>Her mum sometimes said …</td>
<td>Her mum occasionally said …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(judgement-social sanction propriety –ve)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hiro: De maa, oya kara shite mireba, her daughter was, not discriminated against but nevertheless,
Jibun no musume ga sono, Her daughter was,
Sabetsu sareteiru janai keredomo, not discriminated against but nevertheless,
Hiro: Aa, naru hodo. Ah, I see.
Jibun no musume ga sono, Her daughter was,
Sabetsu sareteiru janai keredomo, not discriminated against but nevertheless,
Pat: Erabarenakatta kara. Because (she) wasn’t chosen
Hiro: Sou, sou, sou. Dakara kouritsugakkou nan dakara, sono Because (it) was a state school
kachimake janakutte, (It should) not all (be) about winning and losing,
'mou chotto kyouikuteki' to iu ii kattada imashido kedo, (She) used the term ‘a bit more educational’ however,
'ano, musume mou chotto, kou, Um,
bukatsu no naka de katsuyaku sasete hoshii. (She) wanted her daughter to, as it were,
Pat: Aa, hai. Ah, yes.
Hiro: Demo koochi no tachiba chigau Be made more active in (her) extracurricular activity.
Pat: (Laughs) (laughs)
Hiro: Gakkou no daihyou de deru kara, But the coach’s position is different
Yappari tsuyoi jun ni Of course ability takes priority
Pat: Naru hodo. I see
Hiro: Soko yappari oya no tachiba to maa kochira no kurabu That’s why of course the parent’s position and the position
komon toshite no tachiba. of the person responsible for the club (differ)
De, chotto ikken kyouron ni natte And it led to clash of opinions.
Pat: Ee. Yeah
Hiro: Zuibun momemashita (laughs). The dispute really went on.
Pat: Sore de, kekkyoku dou nattan desu ka Then, what happened in the end?
Hiro: Aa, kekkyoku toshimashita jibun no kangaekata. Ah, in the end my way of thinking prevailed.
Pat: Aa, naru hodo. Ah, I see
Hiro: Ano, hokano seitotachi mo nattoku shinai desuyo ne. Well, other students could never accept it, right.
Pat: Naru hodo. I see.
Hiro: Jibun ga tsuyoi no ni, kanojo wa, gakkou no daihyou Even though I’m better, she is representing the team.
shiteimasu. Pat: I see.
Hiro: Sou desu ne. That’s right.
Examples of force in Hiro’s narrative

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<th>Modality (attitude)*</th>
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<th>Medium</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Degree (ability)</strong> (judgement-social esteem-capacity -ve)</td>
<td>hontou ni undo no shinkei ga nai (62)** (she had absolutely no athletic ability)</td>
<td>Reguraa de wa dasenai taikei (she didn’t have the physical ability to keep a regular position) (22)</td>
<td>anmari kou, undouryoku wa takakunakatta (18-19) (she didn’t really have, like, a high level of athletic ability)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quantity / frequency</strong> (affect-dis/satisfaction -ve)</td>
<td>zutto motto katsuyaku sasete (much more involvement)</td>
<td>motto katsuyaku sasete (more involvement)</td>
<td>mou chotto …katsuyaku sasete (34) (a bit more involvement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional intensity</strong> (affect-dis/satisfaction -ve)</td>
<td>zuibun momemashita (46) (argued a lot)</td>
<td>momemashita (13) (argued)</td>
<td>Anmari momenakatta (didn’t argue so much)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Judgemental weight</strong> (judgement-social sanction-propriety -ve)</td>
<td>hidoku sabetsu sareta toka (severely discriminated against things)</td>
<td>sabetsu sareteru mitai ni (sort of discriminated against)</td>
<td>sabetsu sareteiru janai keredomo (26) (not exactly discriminated against)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frequency</strong> (judgement-social esteem-capacity -ve)</td>
<td>Hotondo dasu koto ga dekinakatta (hardly ever played)</td>
<td>anmari dasenakatta (couldn’t play very often)</td>
<td>reguraa de wa dasenai (22) (couldn’t keep a regular position)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Modelling viewpoint – Us and Others

- Self
  - represented by self
  - represented by others

- Other
  - represented as antithesis of self
  - represented as target self

Approach based on Duszak ed. 2002
The self represented by others

(35) **Yuri**: de sore ga,
(36) **Yappari mijikai kenshuu demo tsujiru toki wa
(37) **Pat**: Hai.
(38) **Yuri**: ‘koko ni kitte,
(39) **Eigo no benkyou no shikata ga wakattan desu’
(40) **Toka**
(41) **Pat**: Aa.
(42) **Yuri**: ‘ima made eigo sugoku kirai dattashi,
(43) **Nigate ishiki attan desu kedo,
(44) **Dekiru janai ka na to iu kimochi ni narimashita kara
(45) **Toka**
(46) **Pat**: Hai, hai.
(47) ‘Mochiron, ichinichi de wa,
(48) ‘Eigo dekiru you ni naru to omowanankattashi’
(49) **Pat**: Hai.
(50) **Yuri**: ‘Ichinichi de nandaraou
(51) ‘To omotte kita kedo’
(52) **Pat**: Hai.
(53) **Yuri**: ‘Aa, nanka yarikata ga mietekite,
(54) **Yokatta desu’
(55) **Toka**.

(35) **Yuri**: And that,
(36) Of course, when even (in a) short seminar course (I am able to) put the message across,
(37) ‘Well, really in (what) was just five hours, nevertheless,
(38) **Pat**: Yes,
(39) **Yuri**: ‘coming here,
(40) (I) learned how to study English.’
(41) And so forth.
(42) **Pat**: Ah.
(43) **Yuri**: Somehow ‘since meeting my teacher’
(44) **Pat**: ‘Yeah, yeah.’
(45) **Yuri**: Well rather,
(46) ‘(I) used to really despise English until now,
(47) And tried to avoid it, however,
(48) (I have) come to feel that perhaps (I) can succeed’
(49) And so on.
(50) **Pat**: Hai, hai.
(51) ‘Of course, (I) never thought it would be possible ,
(52) to learn English in a day’
(53) **Pat**: Yes.
(54) **Yuri**: ‘What is one day
(55)(I) though when (I) came.’
(56) **Pat**: Yes.
(57) **Yuri**: ‘Ah, somehow (I) seemed to see how to learn.
(58) (It) was great’
(59) And so on.
Three narratives?

• (Before I didn’t know how to study English effectively.)
• I took Yuri’s course for five hours.
• I have learned how to study English effectively. (39-43)

• Before I hated English and tried to avoid it.
• (I took Yuri’s course.)
• Now I feel like I can learn English after all. (46-48)

• I came thinking that I couldn’t possibly learn English in a day.
• (I took Yuri’s course.)
• Somehow she has helped me discover how to learn. (51-58)
Other represented as antithesis of self– ‘riff-raff’.

(12) **Lucy:** Oh, well, let’s see. Well, here’s a guy.
(13) That was, um you know, he had a masters in literature
(14) **Pat:** Right.
(15) **Lucy:** And working in a junior high school.
(16) XX Junior High School.
(17) And his work ethic, philosophy was well,
(18) ‘Look, if nobody is going to have the balls to stand up to me
(19) and tell me that I can’t go home if I am not teaching a class,
(20) Well then screw them I’ll go ahead and do that.’
(21) Never mind that the man’s contract declares that he has to be in school
(22) at certain times when he’s not teaching a class.
(23) **Pat:** Ah, ha.
(24) **Lucy:** There is a lot of that,
(25) a lot of that in the prefecture
(26) There were ALTs who would have a regular meeting
(27) But then they would take an extra sort of elicit three hours off.
(28) And you know, just a general lack of commitment to the job of teaching.
(29) And I mean a lot of that is,
(30) It goes both ways,
(31) You know, people arrive at the (inaudible) for teaching
(32) just a few days after summer vacation,
(33) **Pat:** Right.
(34) **Lucy:** You look like just the next *kaiten gaijin* face that comes in,
Oliver: There was one guy for example who was a, I believe ambassador, or vice ambassador to France, Pat: Right.
Oliver: Whose first second language was French, Pat: Mm, mm.
Oliver: And he spoke excellent English.
Pat: Right.
Oliver: His English was impeccable
Pat: Right.
Oliver: And his speech was brilliant.
Pat: Yeah, yeah.
Oliver: I don't know if he wrote it himself but,
Pat: Right, right.
Oliver: I was so impressed by that,
Pat: Right, right.
Oliver: And he was basically,
he gave us,
he gave a speech on,
'remember that the students are children,
remember that English should be fun,
learning a language should be fun.'
Pat: Right, right.
Oliver: Just some really,
A really cool perspective, on language learning.
Conclusion

• Interviews are ‘periods of social interaction’
• Interviews are valid and valuable discourse events for linguists to explore
• Evaluation and viewpoint are a productive place to begin dismantling the Observer’s Paradox.
• There are many other dimensions of the interview worthy of exploration.
References

THANK YOU!

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