

# Backing Footing

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**ABSTRACT.** Potter (1996) makes many interesting comments on our paper. Unfortunately we cannot address them all in detail and we therefore focus on four points which we consider focal and of interest to the readers. According to Potter, we are too swift in our dismissal of the treatment of footing in discourse-analytic work; we hold a naively realist account of footing; we adopt too finicky a notion of context; and finally we are half-hearted in our appreciation of reflexivity. We provide a brief set of comments on these sympathetic misgivings, drawing on the relevant controversies in studies of talk.

It looks like we all agree that psychologists should be aware of the footing on which they and their subjects speak, and not do anything with the talk that wrenches the 'meaning' off the footing on which it was originally given. Where, though, do we differ? Potter (1996) cautions us sympathetically against four kinds of sin: too swift a dismissal of discourse-analytic work; too realist an account of footing; too finicky a notion of context; and too half-hearted an appreciation of reflexivity.<sup>1</sup> One way of gathering Potter's cautions together is to read them as the proper reining-in of an initial position which was, like all enthusiastic calls for reform, too purist for its own good. Fair enough; we're happy with a trim, so long as the main outline survives. But let's see if we can work away at Potter's four cautions and make the bolder argument stick. Not for the sake of purism, but for the sake of making discursive analyses—among other sorts of psychological analyses—as transparent as they need to be.

## 1. Does Discourse Analysis Already Cope Well Enough with Footing?

Let us first pick up Potter's caution that a footing analysis is either unnecessary, unhelpful, or in any case already present in certain kinds of discourse analysis. We don't think his case is quite proven for the material he provides, let alone the fuzzy penumbra of 'discourse analysis' that surrounds it. We regret it would be easy to find in the current literature many cases where the analyst was (brutally, we would say) re-presenting

informants' words with no account whatever of the footing on which they were given and received—so implying an unacknowledged, retrospective, analysts' account, for the analysts' own argumentative purposes. But let us not criticize absent voices, and stick instead to Potter's own material; for example, the case of the politician's words.

Here, our argument is that discourse analysts have a story to tell, as a part of their campaign against cognitivism—a campaign that we are happily persuaded by. This story rests on a double layer of 'original words'—the journalists' and the politician's. Potter says that the story just rests on these layers; the analyst doesn't do anything to them, or, at least, nothing untoward. Not so, we say: the words are being used to promote the analyst's argument; so if you count footing as being part of talk's meaning, which we all seem to do, then something has been done. To select a stretch of talk, and put it forward as evidence in a case, is very different from blankly reporting its original exchange, were such a thing to be possible. Plausible, telling and vivid as the case is, it may depend on inspiring in the reader understandings very different from those afforded by the talk's original exchange, unless careful hygienic procedures are followed. And those hygienic procedures include an account of the participants' footings at the time of the original exchange.

We are not saying that Potter and Edwards's analyses are wrong, implausible or anything less than a good story against classical attribution theory. We are saying that they've left out the step of assuring us that the forensic footing of the talk in the report hasn't overwhelmed or distorted the circumstances of its original exchange. And you can, we assert, multiply that example by a large figure to accommodate a lot of other such work.

## 2. Are We 'Realists' in Our Conception of Footing?

Potter finds us committed to treating the original footings as 'real'. The implication is that we maintain that 'there is a determinate, objective footing status that can be assessed independently of what else is going on in the talk' (Potter, 1996, p. 35). But we don't, and our argument doesn't need it.

Let us take 'real' or 'objective' footing here to be something independent of the speakers' construction of what is going on—something real in, for example, the grammarians' sense. Now Levinson's treatment of footing might just admit such a reading: a pragmatic account where the participant statuses are linguistic objects of the same sort and ontological status as grammatical categories, which are arguably real independently of the speakers' dealings with them. But Levinson (1988) himself—if we may speak for him—goes on to provide the kind of ontological status for footing

which we use in the paper, namely its existence or subsistence for the participants then and there, for-all-then-current-practical-purposes. This is what we have in mind when we comment on discourse analysts' second readings. Our point is not that these second readings are not—or might not be—the 'real' original readings, but that they are not—or might not be—the then operative original readings. What happens in the first place is determinate, but not in the naïve realist sense which Potter attributes to us. The footing is determined by what the participants do, and not to take account of that, when writing about it later, is what we are making a fuss about. Footing is a relevant aspect of context.

In fact, we agree with Potter that using the notion of footing in a simplistically realist manner is just implausible. Let us build on the example he gives from Clayman (1992). Clayman reads Goffman as saying that there is a closed set of footings that participants in interactions may adopt—such as 'principal', 'animator', and so on. The participants design their contributions to talk with these formats in mind—they choose the footing first and then design their talk from that footing. The audiences perceive the contributions as coming from such, more or less discrete, footings. Clayman, of course, agrees that the participants in conversation talk from different footings, but argues that these are not given a priori. Footings are situated joint achievements negotiated by participants in talk. We agree that this is undoubtedly true, but yet the account is arguably incomplete. If we think about Goffman's notion of footing as a script or a frame, each performance of footing will be in detail different and to some degree new in each new situation. For example, one will be a motivator differently with a child, with a colleague writing this reply, and so on. One can therefore exaggerate the rigidity implicit in Goffman's stance.

We found one aspect of Clayman's argument revealing. When Clayman demonstrates how participants achieve their positioning, he actually shows how they achieve being 'principals', 'spokespersons' or something describable in these terms. In other words the participants, including the analyst, orient to given categories of dialogue participation and use them as resources. Such categories therefore are not *wholly* invented anew in each new interaction; neither are they imported fossilized into the interaction.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, categories may be enriched and transformed in a lasting way in interactions. These aspects of the activity of footing—footing can be a verb—become even more clear if we consider social identity positions more intricate than the dialogical ones.

### 3. What About Context?

We read Potter to imply at one point that we demand that discourse analysts provide a complete specification of context of the excerpts they

use. He not only points out that is this impossible in practice, but he also recruits Derrida's critique of Austin to argue that such a requirement is misguided in principle. And of course Potter is right; and of course we do not demand that discourse analysts of whatever stripe provide such an impossible object as 'all the context'. What we do ask is that discourse analysts provide the *relevant* context, and part of that is the information on the network of footings in which the talk was produced, including the talk of the analyst/participant.

The wholesale deconstructionism that Potter sets up is well argued against by Coulter (1994), who points out that although in general neither the participant nor the analyst can give unambiguous and complete specification of context, this does not mean that contextualization isn't called for, and can't be done *on occasion*. Coulter points out that for Garfinkel every specification of context is indexical, and he argues that contexts are variously constrained just as discursive productions are. Since we agree, we would not even attempt to provide *general* instructions on how to specify a relevant context of interaction. We would certainly, however, be interested in how participants actually manage contextualization, and even encourage people to say how contextualization was achieved.

Now why is it impossible to give general, 'de-contextualized principles for adjudicating the certainty or determinacy of a given contextual specification' and yet it is often the case that there is no room for a doubt about the relevant context on a specific occasion? First, because locutions and contexts are mutually constitutive (Dewey, 1898/1975) or 'inter-articulated', to use Coulter's term. Not only does the context affect the reading of a locution (cf. Potter, 1988), but the locution partakes in the selection of its context. Context is not independently specifiable, and certainly not as a freely variable set of detachable assumptions (Wittgenstein, 1953, pp. 179–180). Second, talk, including its contextualizing aspect, is an activity, which is not just in words so it cannot be reported directly (cf. Latour, 1992; Woolgar, 1986).

#### 4. On Reflexivity

There seems to be more room for a disagreement between Potter and us on reflexivity. We ask ourselves: when is reflexivity necessary, useful and interesting, and how does it practically affect our and his work? What counts as reflexivity in practice? Let us start with a small clarification of what we might take reflexivity to mean. Reflexivity can be seen simply as a consistency requirement—one should practise what one preaches and one's practice of science ought to be subject to one's theory, where the two are relevant to each other. Reflexivity can also be seen, more interestingly,

to be a practice which clarifies and foregrounds the researcher's role in producing his or her facts and theories. On this reading, reflexivity requires empirical investigations of research practices. (There are, of course, other readings of what it means to be reflexive.)

In fact, both we and Potter reflect on the consistency of each other's work in this sense. Our reflexion is as follows. Discourse analysis as a theory of talk stresses the indexicality of language. Interpretation and understanding in discourse, as Edwards and Potter (1992) rightly insist, are situated accomplishments. But then, taking this for granted, reflexion produces the following argument. Discourse analysis is itself done in discourse. It takes place in talk and it involves interpreting talk. Potter (1988) points out that with small qualifications discourse analysts' interpretations of talk are not essentially different from the participants'. (This may not be so in other domains of analysis, e.g. psychoanalysis.) The theoretical stance and the practice of discourse analysis thus point jointly to two conclusions. First, discourse analysis that stresses the situated nature of everyday talk cannot formulate context-free descriptions of its material and remain consistent. Second, discourse-analytic work has to be itself seen as a situated accomplishment in which the analysts partake. (This is of course the second reading of reflexivity—we have begun to analyse the role expert interpreters play in production of the facts.) Our work specifically implies that discourse analysts, like other social psychologists, are in an interesting inter-textual position. They must participate in both mundane and technical language-games and effectively function as 'go-betweens'. Our aim in the paper was to point out this feature of social science, and take some steps towards clarifying how the coordination of mundane and technical language-games is managed. So to make the point again, we see our paper as in part an exercise in reflexivity.

Potter, of course, also reflects on the consistency of our work as we did on his. It is perfectly fair of him to point out that the features of discourse analysis we 'criticized'—de-contextualization of texts, their transportation into different language-games, and their use and re-contextualization in 'reports'—apply with equal force to our own (critical) practice in the paper we are discussing. It is, however, not correct to suggest that we 'complain' or wish to reform the practice of discourse analysis in this respect (by, for example, requiring full contextual information—see above). But here precisely is the locus of misunderstanding. We do not *complain* about abstraction of texts and their re-contextualization—we might as well complain about the rain in Manchester (of which there is plenty). The re-contextualization of talk in reports and its situated use in the context of report is unavoidable and interesting in its own right. This is why we have drawn an analogy between the studies of reported speech and discourse analysis. As all judiciously used analogies, it was meant to clarify certain aspects of social psychological investigations including discourse-analytic

practices, but not to foreclose and to say, for example, that discourse analysis amounts to merely reporting talk in a technical register.

In summary, there is a great deal more commonality in this set of papers than there is difference. Discourse analysis in psychology is obviously productive. Closer attention to footing is certainly possible, and in our view will be beneficial.

### Notes

1. As we describe Potter's account of what we are up to we should, of course, acknowledge the standing likelihood of misinterpretation, selection and reworking of his arguments for our own rhetorical purposes; a likelihood which this to-do is all about.
2. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the relationship between dialogical footing and social positioning in discourse. It is clearly possible to draw a logical distinction between the two, yet it is also possible to argue that the two involve a common activity of identity management.

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