Introduction

Many, probably most, ‘critical’ social psychologists who do empirical research would be doing something involving talking and listening to people. What linguistic relation do they have with these speakers at the time, and how do they use the speakers’ words later? We use an insight from Goffman (sharpened by Levinson) to help diagnose some worries about the footing on which people talk and hear. A lot of research proceeds on the basis that the researcher and respondent (and, later, researcher and academic audience) are ‘ordinary speaker’ and ‘hearer’ respectively, but there are about forty other possible combinations of participant status possible, some of them often much more plausible.

The argument in this chapter is going to be that we psychologists are rather bad at acknowledging different participant statuses. So, in consequence, we’re sometimes bad at understanding what people are saying, and prone to misrepresent them when we write up reports for our peers. Things are not always what they seem – even among critical social psychologists, who are much more sophisticated about language than are traditionalists.

Participant Status

The ‘natural’ roles in a linguistic exchange seem to be signalled by the Western grammatical distinction between I and you, with perhaps the third person s/he being available to represent an ‘audience’ role. But Goffman’s inspection of linguistic practice quickly revealed more to the story.

Goffman (1981) distinguished between the speaker as the principal (someone in whose interest the talk is done), the author (someone who has selected the sentiments and words in which they are encoded) and the animator (the person who does the speaking). What we traditionally think of as ‘speaker’ is just the occasional case when all of these come together – when I ask the operator to put me through to extension 3812 I am principal, author and animator. But the three can be separated. A spokesperson (such as the White House spokesman) will have written the script of what he’s saying, but he is not saying it on his own behalf. So it doesn’t mean...
quite the same thing as if President Clinton says it. The important thing to hold on to is that part of what an utterance ‘means’ depends on whether the speaker is the author, spokesperson or principal, or all combined. We’ll see examples of this in a minute.

We could stick with Goffman’s list, but Levinson (1988) has nicely shown that there is a bit more to it. The English language, as with other languages, has a large number of names for various kinds of speakers, and each one is subtly different. For example, consider the goings-on in a committee meeting.

*Chair:* I think the Fund-Raising Sub-Committee is ready to give its report

*[addressing meeting, intended for Treasurer]*

*Treasurer:* Oh sorry, is it me . . . now then . . . where are my things . . . oh yes. Report of income for the year ending March 31st . . .

*[ordinary speaker]*

*Heckler:* . . . 1892

*Treasurer:* yes very amusing

Chair, can I ask that I not be interrupted

*[relayer]*

*Chair:* *[winking]* As Chair, I have to bring members’ attention to rules of good conduct

*[double role]*

Obviously that’s all made up, but we’ll use proper examples later.

Levinson asked himself whether there might be an underlying conceptual structure on top of which these various statuses could lie in a more principled way. He came up with the following. We don’t need to follow it in detail here, but we offer it just to show that there is a principled way of generating the variety of statuses we shall be considering later.

*Producers* can:

- be present or absent;
- be transmitting or not transmitting;
- have or not have the motive for the message; and
- be responsible for the form of the message/not responsible.

For example, take a barrister in a courtroom. She is present, and speaking for her client. She is responsible for the form of what she is saying, but not for the content. That is the responsibility of the ‘principal’ in the case -- the defendant, who may be present in the courtroom, but isn’t speaking, and who, although the ultimate benefactor of what is being said, is not responsible for its form.

Or consider someone like the hapless Treasurer above – her alternate turns can only be understood as shuttling between someone who is merely relaying an agreed message and someone who is speaking, as it were, for herself.
Looking now to recipients of messages, they can be:

- present or absent;
- the intended recipient or not;
- actively addressed or not;
- physically able to hear the message or not.

For example, take the 'judge' – this is somebody who is present, but, although directly addressed, is not really meant to be the ultimate recipient of the message (as in 'Your Honour that last point was irrelevant to the issue at hand' – addressed to 'targeted overhearer', i.e. the person who actually made the last point, or her/his spokesperson; or perhaps the jury).¹

Never mind about the details of these dimensions, and all the possible participant statuses they can lead to. We're only really going to be concerned with two observations:

(a) that when considering speakers, the traditional psychological approach has been to assume that subjects are either ‘ordinary speakers’ or, in (at least some) discourse analysis circles, ‘representatives’;

(b) that when picturing themselves as hearers, psychologists usually completely ignore any variations in their own participant status either within the interaction, or, later, when they use their respondents’ words in a new interaction (e.g. in a conference paper or a written article).

Why Is This Important?

Simply, because we won't understand a given utterance until we know the status of who is sending it, and to whom. Let’s turn to real examples to show what we mean:

(from Schegloff, in Levinson, 1988, p. 166)

\begin{quote}
Sharon: You didn’t come uh talk to Karen?
Mark: No, Karen – Karen’ I’re having a fight (.4) after she went out with Keith and not with (me)
Ruthie: Hah hah hah hah
Karen: — Well, Mark, you never asked me out
\end{quote}

How do we understand Karen’s utterance? It is set out as a response, yet no-one had addressed her – on the contrary, Mark’s answer to Sharon seems to be explicitly designed not to address Karen. But look how the participant statuses are being used. By naming Karen, Mark makes her the indirect target of the utterance and thereby picks her out as an appropriate next speaker. The accusation has the conversational effect of allowing her to reply with a defence.

That was an example of a subtlety about the recipient. Consider a different example, this time to do with the producer. As you read this, ask yourself: “who” is talking? at the arrowed utterance – in what voice, if you like, is the utterance being expressed?
A: get erm a bookseller such as Blackwell
B: Blackwells to handle it
A: er or IUB
B: yeah
A: and em er it shouldn’t be too bad an investment (.) I don’t think

We think you’ll agree that it only really makes sense as if it were a continuation of A’s utterance, in A’s voice, and promoting the emergent account as a joint production.

One can draw two morals from these examples:

1 The semantics of the utterance isn’t enough
2 The voice, or participant status, of the utterance is essential.

More generally, moving away from conversational talk data: sometimes we will need to understand that an author of a text need not be a single individual, but can be a structured group, in which different aspects of message production (e.g. motivating a message, formulating its content and style, and speaking it) are distributed across the members. The participant may be in a different relation to the text in the same way that members of a production team (managers, shareholders, supervisors, workers) are in different relationship to industrial products. It is important to be clear that the contributions of some members of a collective to the production are less visible and less valued than those of others – but the hidden should be made visible. The audience is rarely an individual, or an unstructured set of individuals. Ethnomethodological studies (e.g. Goodwin, 1981) show that recipients of messages can be on a different footing to them and that messages may actually structure an audience into more or less complex collectives (cf. Leudar, 1991; Levinson, 1988). The force of some acts of speech in fact depends on this – public reprimands, commendation, work insofar as they succeed in structuring an audience. Finally, meanings are not simply encoded, sent and decoded, implying a sharp distinction between the production and the recipient statuses.

This decomposition of the message production into a set of co-ordinated functions has an interesting consequence. Note that, apart from the ‘ordinary speaker’, the producer of a message is necessarily a collective agent. This is to say, once you get away from the case where all the statuses are embodied in one person (the ‘ordinary speaker’, who is present, transmitting, the agent responsible for the form of the message and its motive), there must be at least two people acting in some kind of concert to produce the message – president and spokesperson; client and barrister; and so on.

What Has All This To Do With Social Psychology?

Just this: that it should make us suspicious about any research enterprise – be it traditional or critical – which claims to represent what ‘the speaker’ said.
Social psychological investigations are communicative transactions between two people: investigator and subject. But sometimes the researcher treats the subject as speaking as the single ‘ordinary speaker’, and themselves as listening as the single ‘interlocutor’. This is often the assumption in ‘traditional’ experiments, questionnaire studies and even in research interviews, even though there’s no guarantee that the interaction proceeded that way. And sometimes the subject is treated as a representative of some group or other (even if that is just ‘society’). That is normal in discourse analytic studies. But, again, there is no guarantee that the subject is actually speaking like that throughout the interaction.

At the time of the exchange itself, there are very many other possible combinations of participant status. It is an open question how that exchange is represented in the psychologist’s subsequent report of what happened and ‘who’ was talking. It is an equally open question whether the ‘meaning’ of what the respondent said is unaffected by any transformation in participant status s/he may have undergone as a product of the report-writing.

Let us give another crude, made-up example of the sort of worry we’re expressing, or at least the first stage of it. Suppose we were interested in (say) national identity and interviewed two people about being British. Somewhere in the transcript we see this extract:

\[ \text{A:} \quad \text{But Brits are awful, Brits are intolerant} \]

What shall we make of this? At first sight it looks like A is (‘authentically’) expressing the point of view that ‘Brits are awful’. But you could alter the intonation and make it sound different. What that would do might signal that A is ‘putting those words in someone else’s mouth’ – in turning her from authentic ‘ordinary speaker’ to (ironic) ‘statement maker’ or ‘relayer’. But supposing that it was delivered ‘flat’, without that ironizing inflexion. Wouldn’t that guarantee that meant that A is speaking for herself? Not necessarily. When we pull out a little bit to see more of the interactional context, we see:

\[ \text{Interviewer: In Spain it’s like ‘we’re tolerant’} \]
\[ \text{A:} \quad \text{But Brits are awful, Brits are intolerant} \]

Even ‘flat’, we would still want to read it as ‘not-just-A speaking’ because of the strong sense that it completes the Interviewer’s story about what the Spanish would say. That is, A is colluding with the Interviewer to put words (still) into someone else’s mouth.

Exactly whose mouth? Well, it looks like ‘Spaniards’, but suppose I now reveal that the third person in the room, B, is in fact a Spaniard, and the next line is:

\[ \text{Interviewer: In Spain it’s like ‘we’re tolerant’} \]
\[ \text{A:} \quad \text{But Brits are awful, Brits are intolerant} \]
\[ \text{B: You’re awful! That’s enough! [etc]} \]
B’s line might cast the Interviewer and A together as ‘teasing’, that is, as having B in mind when they apparently address each other. So what looked like an authentic statement about British people turns out to be a teasing joke at B’s expense.

We just raise this example not to argue about how to resolve it (which probably needs a whole-hearted conversation analytic account) but to show how the ‘meaning’ of what is said, even in a typical discursive psychology data set, depends on participant status. We’ll give real examples later.

But Surely All That is True Only About Brief Turns, Not About Larger Scale Monologues?

One objection is that discourse analysts and others are typically interested not in brief turns, but rather in larger swathes of talk which reveal serious meaning units of discourse – interpretative repertories, themes, and the like. Presumably discourse analysts and others believe that it is in these larger chunks (nowhere defined that we know of) that ‘authentic’ expressions emerge. But are these larger chunks really secure?

Here’s another invented example, just to make the point. Same trio as before.

A: [long story apparently complaining, in her own voice, that the French are badly dressed] so like when they say the french are chic, well it’s not true
B: that’s why we pay a million pounds for their clothes
A+B: [laughter]

You’ll see that we mentioned ‘authenticity’ here and there in that example. We don’t mean that psychologists have to be committed to their respondents’ being ‘authentic’ at every turn. But they do have to know when their respondents are speaking in their own voices and when they’re not.

A Little More Background

It turns out to be true that communicative games and turn-taking rituals are very often constructed to maximize the apparent distinction between the authors and the consumers. From a transactionalist viewpoint the division is, however, not necessary but a fiction which in practice is maintained with effort and self-contradictions. Why is it a fiction? One can show that the meaning of a message depends on recipients’ reaction or uptake (cf. Austin, 1962; Habermas, 1984). So if meanings are co-authored, then the individual determination of meaning is an illusion. But why is this not obvious and what gives rise to the illusion and maintains it? Metonymy, where a part stands for a whole, is a common semiotic process. In representation of transactions metonymy results in recipients’ contribution being minimized
and (made) invisible. The problem is also that we usually say that authors produce messages for recipients. We could, however, say that authors produce meanings for collectives in which they themselves participate. This is a transactionalist (or some say mutualist) conception of meaning (cf. Leudar, 1991).

The problems are: how is co-authoring controlled and how are contributions of recipients made visible, invisible or appropriated? This framework is clearly relevant to interpretation in social psychological and micro-sociological research which uses talk. This framework makes it much harder to assume that the subjects in social psychological investigations simply express information which the investigator observes and reports. In this chapter we aim to analyse and make visible the participation of subjects in such research.

We want to apply the observations about participant status to various investigations, starting with the well-flogged horse of the traditional laboratory experiment, but going on to the uncomfortably closer territory of discourse analysis – including the ‘discourse analysis’, if such it is, of psychoanalytic interpretation.

**Participant Status and the Traditional Experiment**

Let us start the ball rolling at perhaps the easiest point on the slope: the psychological laboratory. Psychologists – or experimental psychologists at least – traditionally do not engage with subjects any more than biologists talk to plants. The psychologist effectively denies that s/he has any ‘footing’ (as Goffman referred to participant status) in the interaction. But it is easy to see that psychologists do indeed have speaking positions, and that those positions are crucial in understanding just what is going on in their experiments.

**A Case Study of Slippery Participant Status**

Let us illustrate what we mean by using the example of a lovely paper by A.J. Crowle (1978). Crowle was a jobbing experimental social scientist (actually an ethnographer by training) who was recruited to help run a cognitive social psychology experiment. The set-up was this: all subjects were put in a position, before the experiment proper, of overhearing some of its details from a supposed subject who’d just come out of the experimental room. The real subjects then went and did the experiment (it doesn’t matter what it was). Half of them were asked by the experimenter if they would volunteer to come back for another session in a few days (they all agreed). This request was supposed to increase the subjects’ self-perceived commitment to the experiment.

Finally they were asked whether they had overheard anything about the experiment before they went into the experimental room. This was the
dependent measure of interest, about which cognitive dissonance theory had a strong prediction to make. Those who had been asked to return turned out to give less honest answers about their prior knowledge than those who had not been asked. The results nicely fit the cognitive dissonance story: the greater the commitment to the experiment (operationalized by volunteering to take part again), the less consonant it is to admit something that ruins it, so the greater the drive to disguise the fact that you’ve overheard its details.

But Crowle was unwilling to let it go at that. Trained to worry about such things, he asked himself what sense the respondents made of the question put to them. For our purposes, there are three ‘experimental moments’ in which the footing of the participants is crucial to an understanding of what the words they uttered meant.

The first moment was the ‘manipulation’. The subject was asked: ‘We may ask you to come back again in a few days. You will come back won’t you?’ The official story was that this had one single meaning: please commit yourself to the experiment. Now you can see that this meaning only works if the Experimenter has the participant status of an ‘ordinary speaker’ with all the personal commitment that invokes. But the very use of ‘we’ might suggest to the subject that the Experimenter is actually speaking as a spokesperson, and so not particularly committed to the invitation, and certainly not personally engaged with it; if so, then the invitation might seem rather cynical, and the flavour changes.

The second moment was the respondent’s reply: saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’ was taken to mean ‘I hereby commit myself to this experiment’ or its opposite. Again, this presupposes the natural sincerity of the ‘ordinary speaker’ (i.e. the linguistic role of ‘ordinary speaker’ – present, transmitting, responsible for the form of the message and, crucially here, with the personal motive for it) and her or his commitment to what s/he is saying; but, in the context of a peculiar laboratory set-up, the Subject may well have been speaking what s/he thought of as being the appropriate ‘lines’. Perhaps s/he was speaking as a ‘ghostee’ – someone whose apparently authentic lines were written by someone else.

The third moment was the point at which the respondent was asked whether s/he had overheard details of the experiment in the waiting room. A denial was taken to be ‘a lie to reduce dissonance’. Once again, the ‘ordinary speaker’ is assumed.

All that is a linguistic gloss on Crowle’s attack on the validity of the experimental operationalizations, whose meanings are, as he says, so plastic that they (and therefore the experiment) will admit of a very large number of interpretations. Now, you could say that this is just a question of internal validity and it could be solved by some tighter control over the wording. But it couldn’t dissolve away the Experimenter’s footing, and the Subject’s bewildered thrashing about for some sensible participant status. All that gets papered over in the report, where all speakers are assumed to live in the standard world of just two roles – speaker and hearer.
Participant Status in Other Kinds of Social Psychological Method

Let us now move on to three other kinds of research methodologies in the social sciences – questionnaires, interviews and ‘discourse analysis’. We shall argue that the kind of transaction that we described above gets obscured by waves of presentation. Each displaces the original transaction with another, until, finally, we end up with a transaction in which the author claims no intervention in the original talk, which is held up as being the subject’s own, as the morally accountable ‘ordinary speaker’.

‘Context’

To start us off, let us consider some very thought-provoking points made by Condor (1989) about context. She has in her sights what happens when researchers extract responses out of the context of a free-response questionnaire, but her message extends to other methods which use people’s ‘own words’.

The background is the standard discourse analytic (among other) objection to traditional questionnaires. Potter and Wetherell (1987), for example, complain (crudely speaking) that single items may mean different things to different people, that the very choice of how the phenomenon is described is itself prejudicial to the kind of answer one gets, and so on. The answer is, discourse analysts say, to look at text and conversational transcripts, in which people respond freely to the interviewer’s questions.

Condor diagnoses the same problem with questionnaires, but goes a step further in seeing the dangers not only in the prejudicial setting-up of the questions, but also in what happens to the answers when they are in the hands of the researcher. She observes that it is often forgotten that the answers are situated in a question/answer sequence and dialogically understandable in that way. It will be the norm that respondents’ answers are cooperative (well considered, sincere) and hence they can be reported as assertions expressing individuals’ beliefs. Normally, researchers assume that the dialogical context is really transparent and irrelevant; if it isn’t, that only happens in ‘badly constructed’ questionnaires. She points out, however, that even in ‘well-constructed’ questionnaires answers, and in fact the question/answer sequences, are positioned in social controversies. As Gergen (1973) remarks, the huge majority of social psychological investigations are about things in which ordinary people have an interest, and about which it would be impossible to ask wholly value-free questions. The same point extends to the questions on a questionnaire; by setting them in front of a respondent, one is challenging the respondent to guess what ‘side’ the questioner is on. So rather than simply expressing a belief, a questionnaire question solicits a position in a controversy and the way the respondent meets the challenge reflects the respondent’s perceived side and their view of the investigator’s side.

In other words, Condor’s diagnosis of what can go wrong goes further than the traditional discourse analytic complaint of leading questions. She
points the finger at the researchers, who all too often occlude their own part in the production of the discourse.

*A Participant-status Account of ‘Context’*

Now we want to give a pragmatic spin to Condor’s objections, by restating them as complaints about the participant status of the speakers.

As an example, consider the following response given by a student who was asked (in writing): ‘If you had to explain what “democracy” meant to someone who didn’t know, what would you say?’ We use this example because we know a lot about how it came about, since one of us (CA) was involved in setting up the research and in analysing the data.

Political organization of popular government. A vote on every issue for every person. Decision making not passed over to a representative who makes decisions for you, but make decisions for yourself. ‘Grass Roots’ politics – more chance of making change, effecting immediate initiation from bottom up. Self-government. In its best form democracy should be a situation where communities are aware of issues, are able to reach out to more people, who therefore involve themselves in all decision making and can therefore feel they have more control over their lives. Are aware of how their decisions will affect others; take more care over how they vote.

There are two things to say about this extract. The first is to admire its articulacy, and the second is to ponder what it means. If we admire its articulacy, we are in danger of forgetting the context in which it was produced. As Condor says,

The question itself (hypothetical in tone) is reminiscent of a ‘tricky’ examination question and the relevance of their identity as students was indicated by the request for information concerning their major course and year of study. The social context in which the questions were asked may also have contributed to this interpretation of the situation. The questionnaires were distributed by a university lecturer in lecture theatres or through the Psychology department’s ‘subject pool’. If it is the case that the students ‘read’ the request for information as a test of knowledge, this would or might go some way towards accounting for their use of an impersonal (‘essay’) style, their tendency to stick to ‘the facts of the case’ and attempts to provide a formal definition (often backed up, one would imagine, by a reference to a dictionary).

Now we agree entirely, but would just add a bit more pragmatic flavour. Note the actual wording of the question: ‘If you had to explain what “democracy” meant to someone who didn’t know, what would you say?’ That sets up whatever is said to be:

(a) addressed to someone other than the experimenter/interviewer; and
(b) (possibly) in the voice of the spokesperson or relayer – there is no commitment to the subject speaking for him- or herself.

And yet when we come to ‘analyse’ it, we consciously or unconsciously treat it as addressed to us as ordinary interlocutors, and as coming from an
equally ordinary speaker. But supposing the wording of the question had been different?

In sum: Condor's argument is that decontextualization (from co-text, and from the researcher's contribution) is a temptation into which even so-called discourse analysts slip all too readily. We shall follow that reading in looking at what happens to the 'subject' in three papers which represent various degrees of adherence to (a certain form of) discourse analysis. We shall try to show how the researcher is gradually effaced from the transaction by successive waves of presentation. Each wave lays a certain transaction over the last one, each obscuring the initial collaboration until, by the end, the transaction seems to be between the 'subject' and the reader, with the researcher - who had originally had half the responsibility for the transaction - present only as an authoritative participant, disinterestedly mediating between reader and 'ordinary speaker' now constituted as absent source.

Some Discourse Analytic Examples

So far we've complained about laboratory experiments and about questionnaires of one sort or another, so now let us complain about (some kinds of) discourse analysis, just to show that we are even-handed. In outline, the argument is something like this. The subject's contribution to an exchange with a researcher may, or may not, be as the traditional 'ordinary speaker'. And whatever status it had originally, that is likely to change under the literary effort of the report writer or talk-giver. One may interview a subject, subtract a question/answer sequence, discuss it with a colleague, and report its interpretation at a meeting (perhaps to block a counter-argument by one's opponent sitting in the audience; but, in any case, for some rhetorical purpose unrelated to its format of original production). The subject's reply, originally situated in an interview, changes first into reported speech and the material of a co-operative interpretative argument, and then later into a backing of one's argument against the opposition.

Now if the researcher presents him- or herself as a recipient of a message (rather than its co-author), we can still ask what kind of recipient s/he was. His or her position is relevant and will vary, depending on whether an incidentally overheard conversation, or a recording of a radio programme, or an interview is the material being reported, discussed or analysed. The dialogical positioning of the researcher with respect to the subject is not usually reported, as if it were not only transparent but irrelevant. We want to claim that it is not the case.

The investigator does not simply receive a message from the subject. S/he also reports, discusses or argues about it with his/her colleagues. So s/he participates in two transactions, one with the subject of investigation, the other with his/her colleagues. S/he is an intermediary between them, brings them together and re-contextualizes the message between the transactions. The question is what happens to a message on its journey.
In the exercise that follows, we shall take a look at three papers. One is by Wetherell and Potter (1988), which we have access to only as a published text. Because we want to say something about how things change over the development of the research from interview to written version, we will also take a look at two other papers, each of which we have some extra access to: Bowers and Iwi (1993) and Antaki, Íñiguez and Diaz (1989). These, too, are examples of the kind of ‘discourse analysis’ which uses interviews to collect ‘data’ and in which the investigators participated in the data collection; indeed, they make explicit reference to the tentative ‘ten steps’ of Potter and Wetherell. We don’t want to give the impression that these three pieces of work are especially wicked; we’ve chosen them because they seem to represent a reasonably typical range of what goes on in this corner of the discourse analysis field.

Wave 1: Introducing the Subjects and What Happens to Their Talk

In Wetherell and Potter’s interviews, talk with the respondents was recorded, transcribed and then, following the heuristic ‘ten steps’ of Potter and Wetherell (1987), dossiers of ‘interpretative repertoires’ of racism were extracted from the transcripts by theme or function. In Bowers and Iwi (1993) the authors interviewed subjects to explore how ‘in everyday talk people make reference to society, its constituents, and its “influence” over their affairs’. They then compile a list of alternative constructions of society (e.g. society as uniform-and-total, multiform, agent, entity) together with some functions and effects of these conceptualizations. The constructions are really the subjects’ constructions, the functions are really the uses they put them to. In Antaki et al. (1989) one of the authors (Díaz) interviewed the respondents about ‘democracy’ and then the researchers combed through their responses to extract ‘themes’ (like ‘balance’ and ‘mentality’) to support a certain political analysis of their talk. In all cases much is made of the importance of getting at the respondents’ natural and spontaneous talk, and, although it is clear that each respondent was actually interviewed, nothing is made of this.

In Wetherell and Potter (1988) respondents are introduced by a paragraph and readers are referred to another source (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 123) for further methodological considerations. In Antaki et al. (1989) the respondents are introduced as ‘students representing each level of secondary education’ (p. 232). The interviewer (perhaps) and the authors (certainly) take as unproblematic the respondents’ status as ‘representatives’ (in participant status terms, ‘spokespeople’), though whether they themselves thought so is not made clear.

Wave 2: Interview, Investigators/Investigated

In all three studies, the everyday-talk-people are ‘informants’, they inform the researchers. The transactional format of investigation is a question/answer one, with at least some questions prepared in advance and asked of
most informants. The informants were interviewed by one of the investigators, either individually or in a small group (in Bowers & Iwi, 1993, the interviewer is sometimes an undergraduate student). Now if the data were gathered from interviews, and given all the authors' respect for the integrity of linguistic data, we would expect to see as much of the interviewers' talk as of the interviewees'; but in fact the interviewers' turns are not always recorded. If they appear, they precede the respondents' turn setting the agenda but hardly ever respond to it in any significant way.

For example, from Wetherell and Potter (1988, p. 135):

(1) I do this bible class at the moment, not highly religious, I just think children ought to know about religion . . . and last night we were just discussing one of the commandments, love your neighbour, and I had this child who said ‘What would happen if you got a whole load of Maoris living next door to you?’ and I said to him ‘That’s a very racist remark and I don’t like it’, and he shut up in about five seconds and went quite red in the face, and I realized afterwards that obviously it wasn’t his fault he was, turned out to be thinking that it came directly from his parents.

(2) [Racist jokes] I don’t like them I don’t find them amusing.

(3) [What can we learn from Maori culture?] The extended family situation’s brilliant, they’ve got this lovely idea that a child born out of wedlock would have to be the best sort of child because it was obviously born in love . . . I think their way with children is wonderful. . . . They’ve got a lot to show us I think.

The respondents' words are set up explicitly as 'extracts' and it is assumed that the authors' gloss is self-explanatory. In the example that follows see how the authors simply assert that the extract is an uncontentious example of their category (here 'simple explicit appearance').

From Antaki et al. (1989):

Two examples of simple explicit appearance are the following: . . .

(2) One has to have balance (equilibrio). Balance supported by everyone. I think balance is fundamental. Balance all the time, in everything. For me, the word balance sums it all up. One oughtn't go beyond one's reach, nor drop short of the target either (p. 234).

Wave 3: Extract and Systematize: Scientist and Assistant

The interviews are recorded and transcribed by the authors. Wetherell and Potter (1988) follow the craft procedures of Potter and Wetherell (1987), setting up dossiers of extracts and seeing how patterns emerge. In Bowers and Iwi (1993), Bowers reads the transcripts and notices the parts which contain the term 'society'. With the help of 'critical linguistics theory' he puts together a system of categories and gives these to Iwi to apply systematically to the texts. Having done this, Iwi comes back to Bowers with problems and they discuss the examples. The fragmentary records of interviews are now interpreted as instances of possible uses of 'society' but they also partly drive the construction of the system. In Antaki et al. (1989)
all three authors separately read the transcripts – even though one does not speak the language of the respondents fluently, or, in some cases, at all – then identify themes (without the aid of 'critical linguistics theory') and in a discussion extract the ones they agree on; the transcripts are then gone through again and ‘nuggets’ extracted.

This example, from Bowers and Iwi (1993), illustrates the use of an extract to authorize a reading of the texts:

I: if you don’t have any particular prejudice against gays what do you feel is society’s general position on the matter

R: well society it’s (.). well society always gangs up against minorities (.). that’s the way society is it’s mob rule and if you’re in the minority you expect to get jumped on but (.). well I suppose homosexuality is stamped on in the bible to start with and if this country which is basically Christian (.). you wouldn’t know to look at it but most people would have their fundamental upbringing being some religious background (.). I don’t know of any religion that actually accepts homosexuality um so society is always against it and it has been labelled as perverse by society (p. 368; emphases in original)

Here, the possibility that society might have a ‘general position’ different from the respondent is suggested by the interviewer. This is taken up by the respondent, who offers a uniform account of the nature of society in terms of society involving mob rule and being essentially Christian. The Christian nature of society is used to explain why society is always against homosexuality. This is a clear example of a uniform construction being used to depict society as having an eternal (note the two occurrences of ‘always’) essence (‘that’s the way society is’). However, in contrast to the previous examples in (4) ‘minorities’ and in particular ‘homosexuality’ are excluded from society, opposed and ‘labelled as perverse’ (Bowers and Iwi, 1993).

Wave 4: Transaction 4: Reports and Arguments: Allies and Opponents

In Bowers and Iwi the fragmentary records are written up in a paper and circulated to participants in a workshop. The audience are other discourse analysts. Bowers and Iwi are criticized for not including enough contextual information. In Antaki et al. the authors among themselves argue for various readings of what the ‘themes’ they have identified mean. This is a difficult stage to illustrate, as mention is not usually made of competing ways of organizing the data.

Wave 5: The Effacement of the Researcher/Subject Transaction
Contribution in the Elicitation of the ‘Data’

The papers are submitted to journals (we won’t carry on the analysis into the refereeing stage). The reports are presented as free-standing data, which can be used to support arguments. The final version of the studies casts the authors into much the same model as the experimental social psychologist of old.
Every wave that washes over the respondents' talk, we argue, wears it down in various ways, and when it finally beaches at the high tide mark of a written paper, it has undergone so many transformations that easy interpretation of its 'meaning' becomes very hard. Of course, as readers and consumers of discourse analysis, we usually manage to make something of it, but that something is highly flavoured by the writers' own interpretation of the talk; it is not any more the raw data it claims to be.

**Interpretation in Melanie Klein**

Let us push away from these fairly familiar research genres to one outside (at least some kinds of) critical social psychology: psychoanalysis. Klein's *Narrative of Child Analysis* (1961/1975) was published in part 'to illustrate her technique in greater detail'. In this it is successful and it should be compulsory reading for anyone interested in therapeutic discourse and especially in discourse characterized by the asymmetry of power/knowledge of participants. The book reports on ninety-three analytic sessions Klein held with an eight-year-old boy, Richard. The sessions took place daily, except on Sundays, for about four months. Of relevance here are Klein's reports of her interactions with Richard and her interpretations of his activities. Some of these interpretations are accessible and seem common sense, others are striking, as the following excerpts show.

**12th session.** Mrs K. had brought pencils, crayons and a pad of writing-paper, and put them on the table. Richard asked eagerly what they were for, whether he could use them for writing or drawing. Mrs K. said he could do what he liked with them. Richard had hardly begun the first drawing when he repeatedly asked whether Mrs K. minded that he was drawing. Mrs K. interpreted that he seemed to be afraid that by drawing he was doing something harmful to her. . . . (p. 56)

**14th session.** Mrs K. had brought the toys and put them on the table. Richard was interested and at once began to play. He first picked up the two little swings, put them side by side, made them swing, and then laid them beside each other, saying: 'They are having fun.' He filled one track of the train which he called 'goods train' with small figures, and said the 'children' were off on a pleasure trip to Dover. He added a slightly larger toy woman in a pink dress, whom he at once called Mummy. . . . Mrs K. interpreted that the swings represented his parents: laying them down side by side and saying they were having fun meant their being in bed together, and the movement of swings together indicated their sexual relations. When the pink woman (whom he called Mummy) was to go away with the children (whom he called Mummy) was to go away with the children on a pleasure trip, this meant that the parents should not be together. . . . He made the train run round and into the houses. As he had left too little space, the train knocked over the houses, and he put them up again. He pushed the other train . . . and a collision ensued. He became very upset and made the 'electric' train run over everything. Mrs K. interpreted that the children's pleasure trip to Dover meant that they, too, wanted to do something sexual as the parents did. . . . Richard was extremely impressed by Mrs K.'s interpretation. He expressed his surprise that his thoughts and feelings could be shown in his play. Mrs K. interpreted that his recognizing that his play expressed his feelings also meant that Mrs K. made what went on in him clear to him. (Klein, 1961/1975, pp. 64–65)
We doubt that there is a code for us to discover which allowed Klein to make such inferences, a code which would be self-evident once revealed, and which would warrant the validity of the interpretations. What is relevant for this chapter is how Klein’s interpretations are situated in her dialogues with Richard, how Richard’s contributions to these interpretations are managed, and how all is presented to readers. We can say that Klein, Richard, the readers of her book and ourselves and possibly yourselves are involved in a complex dialogue. Klein reports on discourse in which she positions herself and Richard. He is her patient, she is the therapist and she avoids any ordinary conversation about ordinary events outside the analytic situation. She and Richard are in complementary positions: he is the source of the material to be interpreted and the subject to be changed by her interpretations. With respect to Richard she is the personal warrant that her interpretations are true and well meant. Klein also positions herself with respect to her readers. As she says, the book aims to record her technique. The technique is dialogue and the targets are either her peers in psychoanalysis or trainee psychoanalysts. The book is, however, also on sale to the public, and, judging by the number of reprints, it does well, so one can expect a large lay audience, like ourselves.

The reports of sessions follow a relatively fixed format. Each starts typically by a report of Richard’s behaviour – of what he says and does in his play – followed by an interpretation, sometimes presented as a suggestion to Richard about a meaning of what he says or does. Finally, reactions to such interpretations are also reported. In the above example, the reported conversation structure is a series of question/answer pairs. Richard’s reluctance to answer is reported. The subsequent move reported is Klein’s ‘suggestion’, which is really an interpretation, in which she ascribes Richard’s fears (parents would go to bed and Mummy would be hurt when they did things with their genitals); she points out analogies in Richard’s thinking (tramp who would hurt Mummy is like Hitler who frightened the cook). Klein then reports Richard’s reaction to the interpretation, for example that he looked surprised and worried. So the therapeutic discourse sequence that Klein reports is question-answer, question-answer, question-answer, interpretative suggestion, reaction. These are narrated to the outside of the therapeutic situation, to laypersons, other therapists, Anna Freud, and so on. Klein interprets answers to her questions, not question/answer sequences and thus she removes herself from the interpretation. Klein reports repair. She used the word ‘genital’. She writes that Richard does not seem to understand it and she initiates repair. She asks him if he knows what genital means. She writes that Richard at first says ‘no’, then admits he thought he knew. Klein writes that Richard went on to say that Daddy is nice and would not hurt Mummy. Richard is reported to reject the interpretation, but she does not report it as a dialogical rejection.

What can a measure of the correctness of Klein’s interpretations be? In Love, Guilt and Reparation (1929/1988), she writes that even in analysis of
young children the final result to be obtained is adaptation to reality. She continues: ‘one way in which this shows itself in children is the modification which is encountered in their education’ (p. 137). So you could judge the effectiveness or accuracy of interpretations according to whether the child gets better later, outside of the therapeutic situation. (And if they do not, the interpretations could still have been correct – the therapy hasn’t been long enough etc.). In other words interpretation is successful or analysis is successful to the extent that the interpretations are correct and succeed in getting rid of symptoms such as anxiety attacks, pavor nocturnus, the inability to communicate, inhibition in play, and so on. The child is not in a subject position to dialogically affect the significance of the interpretation. The child is not a psychoanalyst – the child’s reactions are a source of information, not intentional counter-arguments. Just as the minds of little children differ from those of older children, so their reactions to psychoanalysis are different in early childhood from what they are later. We are often surprised when on some occasions our interpretations are accepted. Sometimes children even express considerable pleasure in the interpretations. According to Klein, the reason for this is not dialogical but that in a child the communication between consciousness and unconsciousness is easier, and for the therapist it is much simpler to retrace the steps from one to the other.

Now this is a very clear example of how a dialogical process, in other words, children accepting interpretations more easily than, say, adults, is taken out of the dialogue in which it occurs and recontextualized in the discourse of psychoanalysis and presented to us as readers. It is of course the case that the interpretation is also presented dialogically to Richard, and as we have seen its effects are reported. Klein presents her interpretations to Richard dialogically as suggestions, and as interpretations to readers. This means that there are two discourses running in parallel, with Richard having access to only one – that of everyday discourse with Klein – but not the theoretical psychoanalytic discourse, which will remain for ever out of his grasp.

Concluding Comments

The aim of this chapter was to think aloud about what relation we have with our respondents – what participant statuses we enjoy when we talk to them, and what participant statuses we make use of when we turn their words into the building blocks of our academic analyses. The argument has been as much about our practice as psychologists – critical or otherwise – as it has been about what our informants actually say in this or that situation, or to this or that discursive end, and in that sense, it is a piece of methodological wrangling. But, as ever, method and theory are indistinguishable; if we want to say something about what people do, a bit of theory about what that saying involves will not go amiss.
Notes


1. We won’t go into the various kinds of evidence — from English-language role names and conversational practice, and from non-Western grammar — that Levinson adduces for all the observations so far.

2. The grounds for believing so are in the participants’ own reactions to what is said. We realize that we should make the conversation analytic case more fully, but can we leave it sketchily as follows: for the analyst, everything hinges on speaker A’s second utterance. In loose terms, it is A who disposes of the meanings made available in what B says. It is A’s reaction to B’s arrowed utterance in the example above which convinces us (the analysts) that A is construing B’s contribution as consonant with A’s original utterance. Imagine what we would have made of rival third parts, e.g. ‘What? How dare you?’ or silence, or . . . . We have a fuller and more tedious account of this elsewhere if anyone wants it.

References


