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Essential tensions in (semi-) open research interviews

The Deliberate Dialogue

Qualitative Perspectives on the Interview

Utterances produced by informants in interview situations can be said to have a triple orientation. They are, firstly, descriptive or demonstrative of the *life world* of the speaker. They re-tell his or her experiences or re-express his or her viewpoints. That is their primary purpose. Secondly, they have a local relevance, within the *interview situation*, i.e. as answers to questions. And thirdly, they are used as input in a *research project*, as materials for analysis. As generally conceived, the actual interview situation is a strategic site, designed to have the informant produce statements which are both real or *natural* in relation to his or her life world, and useful or *relevant* in terms of the current research project. There is a large and varied literature which collects strategies, recipes and advice on how to conduct interviews. Writers who put the research project in first position, generally promote pre-designed, standardized interview schedules, while those who stress a natural expression of the life world favor *open* or semi-structured interviews. In both, the interview itself is seen strategically, as a designable course of events (either pre-designed or locally steered), serving transcending purposes. But, whatever the strategy chosen, on the ideological or the practical level, some tensions between the three worlds — life world, interview situation and analytic framework — seem to remain.

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In the present paper, we will consider some examples from qualitative, open or semi-structured interviews. Although this type of interview is often chosen because it allows for a less imposing, more natural kind of information gathering, our examples can still be seen to display some of these tensions. By way of introduction, we will first discuss two contrastive types of interview organization, which differ in terms of how these tensions are managed, i.e. in terms of control. Secondly, we focus on negotiations concerning the level of detail at which some answers are to be given. Detailed answering seems to fit with life-worldly preoccupations, while answering in a summarizing fashion pre-serves the analysis that is to follow. Interviewers in open interviews seem to take an ambivalent stance in these negotiations, on the one hand calling for a free and natural telling, while on the other often displaying a preference for a summarized answer, that can be easily processed in terms of the research project. We will consider some examples in which we can see how participants in such interviews deal with these essential tensions of that particular interaction type. Finally, we will consider ways in which informants' answers are taken up by interviewers, especially in the form of repeats and formulations. We will discuss how such answer receipts function at the local level of post-answer negotiations, but also try to show the ways in which they anticipate the later professional analysis of the *data*, by moving away from the details of the lifeworld.

The perspective we take when we are discussing these examples is an ethnomethodological and especially a conversation analytic one. What we are trying to do is to analyze the ways in which interviewers and interviewees *in situ* negotiate what is talked about and how that is done. What we are hunting is the actual negotiation of local and extra-local rationalities, i.e. the life world story and the research interests. We treat these tensions or controversies with what could be called 'ethnographic respect', taking care to be 'symmetrical' in the ways in which we discuss the various stances involved. At the request of the editors of this volume, however, we have added a section in which we discuss some implications of our analyses for the theory and practice of interviewing and of interviews as data-gathering devices in the social science research process.

This means that we have to leave our comfortable position of 'ethnomethodological indifference' (Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970) to join the debate among practitioners — reluctantly.

1. Two types of interview organization

In our corpus², we have found that qualitative interviews tend to be organized as one of two types. On the one hand, we have interviews in which the interviewer starts with a multi-turn *exposé* that delineates one or more topics of interest to the research and instructs the informant to treat these at length. In several cases, such an introduction also contains the *instruction* to act natural, to express oneself in one's own words. Excerpt (1) is an example from the start of such an interview.

Excerpt (1) (QW/jq)

- 12 A: u begon al even te vertelle, e:h
you started already a bit to tell uh
- 13 (.)
- 14 A: wat °voor KLACHTe u had h?
what kind of complaints you had huh
- 15 (.)
- 16 B: ja:h,=
yes
- 17 A: =MAAR, (0,5) °dat we: hebbe 't nog niet
but that we did not discuss it
- 18 A: uitvoe:rig:e:h over gehad, hh maar:,
extensively but
- 19 A: kunt u me daar wat meer v('r) v::-ertelle,
can you tell me some more about that
- 20 A: want is dat ook waar u

² We collected one or more recordings of the semi- or unstructured interviews made by researchers as part of 14 different research projects. Detailed analyses have been based on the opening 15 - 20 minutes of 13 different interviews which were transcribed using a variant version of the conventions established by Gail Jefferson (cf. Atkinson & Heritage, 1984: IX - XVI).

- 21 A: because is that also for which
die medicijne voor gehad he[bt]?
you had that medication
- 22 B: [ja:. =
yes
- 23 A: =ja.
yes
- 24 B: °inderdaad. =
indeed
- 25 A: ➔ NOU (eh) wil ik- eh 't kan me niet schele,
well I want uh I don't care
- 26 A: hoe dokters dat noeme,
how doctors call that
- 27 A: hh maar: e:h ik wil wel graag wete,
but uh I would like to know
- 28 A: h nou: hoelang u dat nou hebt, =
well how long you have that uh
- 29 A: =e::h wanneer u dat voor 't eerst hebt gehad
when did you get that for the first time
- 30 A: hh en: (.) ho(e-)
and how-
- 31 A: wat voor klachte precies
what kind of complaints exactly
- 32 A: ➔ in uw eige woor:de:,
in your own words
- 33 0,9
- 34 B: NOU: 't begon met-,
well it started with

The interviewer indicates that there already has been some exchange of information before she switched on her tape recorder (line 12, 14). She mentions that this previous discussion has not been very extensive (lines 17-8), making it clear that she would prefer to have such an extensive coverage now (line 19), referring to her research interest and her reason for selecting this informant (lines 20-1). Then, she formulates a lengthy introduction (lines 25-32). She not just explains her interests positively, in terms of what she would like to know, but she interrupts herself soon after she

has started (25) to formulate what she is *not* interested in, i.e. medical jargon, *how doctors call it* (lines 25-6). She wants to know how long the informant has suffered from the complaint, when it started, and how he would describe the complaints, and adds: *in your own words* (lines 27-32). So the introduction of the topic invites the informant to tell his story at length and it is embedded in encouragements to do so from his own perspective, first negatively (25-6), then positively (32). Following that, the informant starts a long story, marking that he picks it up at the beginning (34).

We call multi-turn units like the one above, and like the informant's story afterwards, in which one party is the *primary speaker* while the other limits him- or herself to minimal responses and other short supportive contributions as a *recipient*, Discourse Units or *DU's* (Houtkoop & Mazeland, 1985). Interviews in which the interaction is mainly organized in terms of such discourse units are called *DU interviews*.

This type of organization implies a loose kind of control by the interviewer on the informant's talking. During his *DU* the latter is largely self-directing, choosing his own relevancies, categories, and level of detail. The interviewer can try to control the style and direction of the informant's talk by including specific elements in the introductory *DU* (as in lines 28-31 above), by showing selective attention to what is being told³, by follow-up questions or by starting a new *DU*, redirecting the topic.

The other type of organization we found in our corpus is characterized by a *turn-by-turn* allocation of speakership, so we use *TBT-interviews* as a shorthand for this type. These interviews mainly consist of an alternation of relative short speaking turns, in this case mainly questions, answers and acknowledgement tokens or similar objects. This *TBT-format* is, of course, the one many people expect in interviews, in research settings as well as elsewhere⁴.

Extract (2) provides an illustration of such a *TBT-format*.

³ Cf. Ten Have (1991 a) for the use of silence by physicians in similar circumstances.

⁴ I.e. examinations in court, Atkinson & Drew, 1979; oral examination in ambulatory care encounters, Frankel, 1984; news interviews, Heritage, 1985, Greatbatch, 1988; etc.

Excerpt (2) (NJK/32)

- 72 A: e:hm: (.)
u:hm:
- 73 A: heeft u misschien 'n: composthoop of zo:
do you perhaps have a compostheap or something like that?
- 74 0,3
- 75 B: neeh:..
no:.
- 76 0,3
- 77 A: n[ee.
no.
- 78 B: [neh:
no
- 79 0,9
- 80 A: e:hm-
u:hm-
- 81 0,8
- 82 A: dan 't glas h
then the glass, you know.
- 83 (.)
- 84 A: hh wat doet u met uw glas:?
what do you do with your glass?
- 85 (.)
- 86 B: (nou) dat gaat naar de glasbak, (:hh:)=
(well) that's going to the bottlebank,
- 87 A: =jah, en: [waar is die?
yes, and where is that?
- 88 B: [jah,
yes,
- 89 B: hh (.) staat daar op 't e:h hoekje,
standing over there on the u:h corner
- 90 0,4
- 91 A: oh bij dat pleint]je daar [zo
oh near to that little square over there
- 92 B: [ja, [bij dat pleint]je, =
yes, near that little square

- 93 A: =ja,
yes

This excerpt displays some of the main properties of this type Interviewer and informant change positions as speaker and recipient in a rather quick fashion. They construct their turns mostly with just one or two turn constructional units. Speaker change occurs most often at the first possible completion point of a turn. Interviewer questions and informant answers follow each other quickly, i.e. the distance measured in turn constructional unit between the one and the other is rather small (Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson, 1978). Even this short extract already contains three question-answer cycles (lines 72-78, 80-87 and 87-93).

The questions in (2) are rather direct. They allow short answers although some could be used as starting points for more elaborate descriptions. As it happens, the answers are rather short ones, after which the interviewer acknowledges their receipt in a way that either allows for a further elaboration, should the informant elect to do so (77-9), or initiates such an elaboration (87, 91). In other words, the extendibility of answers is continuously established in local negotiations.

Although the interviews we examined tend to fall mainly in either the *DU*- or the *TBT*-type, we do find *TBT*-episodes in *DU*-interviews and the other way around. For instance, an interview may start with a series of factual questions, after which *DU*'s are used to deal with larger topics, explanations of complicated circumstance or stories, etc.

2. Negotiable control

The fact that a *TBT*-organization offers opportunities for a more strict control of the interview by the interviewer does not mean, of course, that this control will not be disputed. In actual fact, we see a more or less open negotiation going on in most of the question sequences in our corpus. Massively, these negotiations concern the extendibility of the answer, and start at the moment a minimal adequate answer is given. At that moment, the interviewer could

initiate a new questioning sequence, but most of the time he or she just waits for more to come or limits him- or herself to a minimal response.

These negotiations and their structure have been described extensively elsewhere (Mazeland, 1989, 1992). It was found that both interviewers and informants display an orientation to the overall relevance as well as to the local fit of the answers to the questions that asked for them. In their negotiations, the interactants search for a formulation that is acceptable on these counts to both parties. The correctness, in the sense of veracity, of the answers cannot, of course, be established in the context of an interview. It seems that the answer's completeness functions as a kind of substitute for such considerations. The interviewers often tended to provide a maximum opportunity for extensions of the answer, leading to a succession of completions and post-completions.

It is in these environments of a post-answer trajectory that we found instances of the phenomenon we want to focus on in this paper, one specific type of post-answer negotiation, the one dealing with the level of detail of the descriptions contained in the answer. It is that type of negotiation, we think, that most clearly displays the essential tensions that were discussed in the first paragraph of this paper.

3. Negotiating the level of answers

Answers can take enormous proportions when the negotiations concerning their extension cannot be solved, for instance when informants provide a lot of information that is not very relevant from the researcher's point of view, or that is formulated in a way that does not fit with the preceding answers. The fragment quoted below displays a relative short example of such an occasion. Various aspects of the negotiation of answers' extension are interwoven in this particular case.

The problems which surface in this extract follow from the interviewers questions in lines 163-5 of fragment (3). He asks for the location in Amsterdam to which the informant's family moved at a specific point in his life. In his reformulation of the question-word

phrase, which he adds immediately to his question (*which (...) neighborhood roughly*, lines 163-5), he displays a preference for a specific kind of description: he wants to know the neighborhood to which his informant moved at the time (lines 161-3). With the addition *roughly* he makes it clear that this description does not have to be very exact: what he wants is a rough, for *current practical purposes* sufficient kind of information.

Excerpt (3) (NL/10)

157 A: eve kijke je ging:- (0,4) tweenzestig
let's see you went- sixty two

158 A: dus met [vier jaar,
so at the age of 4

159 B: [°tweenezestig (j[ah)
sixty two (yes)

160 A: [verhuisden jullie naar
Amsterdam: =
you moved to Amsterdam:.

161 B: =°ja,
yes,

162 0,2

163 A: waar kwame jullie toen te wone,
where did you start to live then

164 A: ➔ welke eh, (0,2)
which eh

165 A: buurt onge°ve[er
neighborhood roughly

166 B: [in de [Steen]-straat, =
in the [Stone]street,

167 A: =jah, ik weet nie waar dat °is: =
yes, I don't know where that is,

168 B: =°das de[: (i-)
that's the (i-)

169 A: ➔ [in z[u-
in sou-

170 B: [(in de) [Museum]buurt,
(in the) [Museum]-quarter

- 171 0,2
 172 A: oh jah, (.) °zu[id].
oh yes, south.
 173 B: [dat is vlak [bij 't e:h
that's near to the u:h
 174 A: [°jah
yes
 175 0,4
 176 B: [Maleisia]plein;
 [Malaysia]square,
 177 0,3
 178 A: jaA:j[ɑ].
yes, yes.
 179 B: [h (.) (en vl[ak dan)
you know? (and then near)
 180 A: [jah,
yes
 181 0,5
 182 B: en waar ik op school zit.
and where I am going to school.
 183 (.)
 184 A: ja:,ja.
yes, yes.
 185 0,2
 186 A: ja: °dan weet 'k 't wel.
yes. then I know it indeed.
 187 0,3
 188 A: hhh en e:hm:- (0,4)
and u:hm:
 189 A: nou: (d)van die tijd tuurlijk =
well from that period of course
 190 A: = herinner je je waarschijnlijk °meer van
you probably (don't) remember much of that?

Although the interviewer, in his instruction contained in the reformulation of his question, made it clear what kind of answer he preferred, his recipient does not answer with a description organized

in terms of a category from the collection of *neighborhood names* which the questioner had indicated. By using a street name, he chooses a member from a collection of categories which is more specific than the one for which the interviewer has just displayed preference, i.e. *Streets versus Neighborhoods*⁵.

The interviewer received the answer in a contradictory manner. At first he seems to let the answer pass with a *Yes-receipt* (line 167; Mazeland, 1990). One might say that he concedes that the informant has given an answer that is at least relevant. He immediately, however, adds that he is unable to process the information given: *don't know where that is*, (line 167). The analysis of the membership knowledge used (Schegloff, 1972), which the informant seems to make, i.e. that co-members of the category *people living in Amsterdam* would have more or less the same topographical knowledge, proves to be false in this case. The name of the street is not a *recognitional* for the interviewer (Sacks & Schegloff, 1979).

The informant treats this claim of ignorance on the interviewer's part as a *correction invitation* (Schegloff, Jefferson, Sacks, 1977: 379). He starts his next turn in a format which marks it as an explanation (*that's the*, line 168). The moment, however, this turn's type can be recognized, the interviewer interrupts him. But although the informant does not continue his explanation, the interviewer also breaks off his interruption shortly after its beginning (line 168). The interviewer's turn is just recognizable as a formulation of a city district (*in sou-*, line 169, i.e. *in (district) south*); a member of a type of description that is even more encompassing than the one earlier indicated in the addition to his question.

The fact that the interviewer breaks off his turn at the point at which this type of formulation is just recognizable is probably not accidental. By producing a word just up to its *recognition point*, the speaker can show what he was about to say without really saying (Jefferson, 1973, 1983). In this case, one might think that the interviewer points out the kind of information he is seeking, without correcting his interaction partner openly.

⁵ This analysis is inspired, of course, by Sacks' work on the organization of Membership Categorization Devices (1972 a & b; 1992). See also Schegloff's (1972) related analysis of locational formulations.

Because the interviewer does not finish his turn, the informant gets another opportunity for self-correction. He uses that opportunity to produce a neighborhood term that should certainly be a *recognition-al* for a co-resident of the city (*in the Museum quarter*, line 170). In this fashion, he tries to make a previously given description referentially adequate by embedding it in a more global one. But he also chooses a term which is compatible with the category instructions given by the interviewer.

The interviewer immediately displays his recognition (*oh yes*, line 172; cf. Heritage, 1984 b). But he also demonstrates this recognition by transforming the information given in a term from a collection of even broader locational categories (*south*, line 172).

But the sequence isn't finished yet. The informant keeps pressing for recognition on a level that is more specific than the one to which the interviewer displays to be oriented. On the one hand, he varies the types of collections that he selects. In line 182, for example, the informant chooses a relational description based on autobiographical information (*and where I'm going to school*). He seems to appeal to the interviewer to be treated at least in this respect as no longer a *stranger*. On the other hand, he tries to bring about recognition of more specific information by relating the apparently unknown to presumably known *marks* in the city landscape (*that is near by the (...) Malaysia Square*, line 173-6).

The interviewer, however, demonstrates several times that he has been informed to his satisfaction. One of the ways in which he does this, is by producing double *yes*'s (lines 178, 184). In this way, a recipient claims to be familiar with the information that has been provided (cf. Komter, 1991). It is only when the informant has stated that *he indeed knows it now* (line 186), which explicitly revokes the assertion which led to the informant's repair work, that the sequence can be closed and the interviewer can start his preparations to initiate a new one (lines 188-91).

At the start of the sequence analyzed, one could still suppose that the informant has taken the categorical instructions, given by the interviewer, insufficiently into account. Alternatively, one might think that he has made an inadequate membership analysis of his partner. But later in the sequence, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the speakers are interested in two entirely different identifica-

tions of the location under discussion. The descriptions provided by the informant seem to be designed to enable the researcher to make a locational analysis as part of a reconstruction of the specifics of the informant's living conditions at the time. The interviewer, however, seems just to be interested in an overall formulation of the location.

In the next sequence, it becomes clear retrospectively that, in terms of interview design, the interviewer wanted to use the information as the starting point for a subsequent question (*well from that period of course you probably [don't] remember much*, lines 190-1). The question about the location of residence was designed as the start of a *pre-sequence* (Schegloff, 1980), which prepared for a subsequent question which initiates the *kernel*-activity of remembering. The expansion of the pre-sequence postpones the planned subsequent activities. The discussion of the details of the informant's residence seem to have been, for the interviewer, just a preparator activity, part of a strategy of what has been called *getting through* (Mehan, 1979: 111-4).

As concerns the interviewer's interests in the contents of the information provided, these might be limited to a formulation of the location of the informant's residence which would allow a certain way of professional generalization. The name of the neighborhood is the kind of information that makes possible an immediate sociological categorization in terms of socio-economic status, life style, etc. Of course, the name of a street also allows such operations, but only after having been subsumed under a category of the type for which the interviewer has expressed a preference in his reformulation of his question. The informant is requested, so to speak, to deliver his information on that categorical level which makes possible an immediate sociological processing as a de-contextualized datum. That level, however, does not allow a consideration of the details of the informant's life-world in itself and for itself which seems to be the informant's motive. What we may have then, is a complicated conflict between the informant's and the researcher's interests, both in terms of organizing the course of the interview and in those of the overall relevance of levels of information.

As a preparation for subsequent remembering of other details of the informant's life at the time, the evocation of the details of his place of residence makes sense. It's their recognition which may be considered superfluous. The researcher makes it clear that for him an overall locatability or sociological analyzability is enough, while for the informant a more detailed sharing of the information is desirable⁶. In and through the way in which the interviewer moves away from the informant's detailing, and — reversely — the informant tries to raise the researcher's interest in the details which constitute his life-world, these interactional partners are showing the positions from which they are ultimately interacting, as members of the relationally paired categories (professional, lay person) (cf. Sacks, 1972 a).

This material demonstrates the existence of complex problems for the participants in interviews. There is the problem of choosing the right level of description. We see negotiations going on concerning detailed description versus overall categorization. The informant tries to bring the interviewer into his world, but the latter seems unwilling to do this to a larger extent than appears necessary for his purposes. All this demonstrates that for participants the interview, as it is enacted on the spot, is a practical compromise between the interests in the informant's life world and the researcher's conceptual world of sociology.

One of the reasons why qualitatively oriented social scientists use *open interviews* is that they do not want to impose a professionally motivated conceptual framework on their informants' descriptive activities. An interviewer, however, is continuously confronted with the strategic problem that s/he would, in a *really natural* conversation, have to immerse her/himself in the informant's life world, in all its detail. That seems an impossible ideal. In her/his daily practice, s/he compromises, by avoiding too much details.

⁶ Such an orientation on a non-liveworldly level of description on the part of interviewers can also be seen in the distribution of question terms like *wat voor* (what sort of) and *welke* (which); examples from the first category are twice as frequently used in our corpus as those from the second (see, for example extract 1, line 13 and 37, extract 4, line 27).

In the extract discussed above, we can see that the interviewer operates very cautiously. His preference for more encompassing categories is expressed as in an afterthought to his question and — after he has claimed ignorance of the street's name — he produces a series of acknowledgments and recognition marks. His interest in the location as just a preliminary only becomes clear at the start of the next sequence, while the idea that his interest in the location itself was limited to it being material for a sociological reading of the informant's socio-cultural environment was our inference which we could not support with specific data in the extract itself. In the next section, we will consider an other aspect of post-answer negotiations, interviewers' reception of answers, for which similar remarks concerning practical compromises can be made.

4. *The professional processing of information: repeats and formulations*

It has often been observed that professional interviewers, whatever their trade, tend to refrain from on the spot reaction to the information interviewees have just given; they rather hide their information processing from view. Instead of commenting on the answer given, or evaluating their import, as often is done in ordinary conversation among equals, they just acknowledge receipt in a non-committing fashion (cf. Atkinson, 1982; Frankel, 1984; Heritage, 1984 a: 280-90; Ten Have, 1991 b). In this way, interviewers display a non-personal, professional attitude towards the information given; they just register what they hear. The framework which, for them, is the ultimate source of relevance, is neither the life world expressed by the informant, nor the current situation of the interview, but the analysis to be carried out later, to be made public in papers and research reports. This restraint, then, helps to constitute the interaction as an interview, an example of its *genre* (cf. Ten Have, 1984 Heritage, 1984 a, 280-90).

In our corpus, this tendency is also strongly observable, exemplified in extracts (2) and (3). Minimal responses, as frequently produced by our interviewers, seem mainly to serve local organizational purposes. They mark receipt of the preceding and function as

continuer (Schegloff, 1982)⁷. Sometimes, however, a response is given that does some more elaborate interactional work, for example a *display* of understanding, in contrast to the *claim* of such understanding made by acknowledgements. *Oh at that small square there* (in (2), line 91), would be an example.

In our corpus we specifically found examples of two different types of more elaborate response, *repeats* and *formulations*. Repeating the answer just given is most frequently done in (phases of) interviews that are organized in a *turn-by-turn* fashion, especially when the questions project answers that offer short descriptions of facts; compare lines 10, 32, 39 and 58 in (4).

Excerpt (4) (LC/j)

- 6 A: hhh hoe oud ben je
how old are you?
7 0,3
8 B: * zeventien
seventeen
9 0,4
10 A: → ze:ventien
(...)
seventeen
(...)
27 A: wat voor school?
what kind of school?
28 0,4
29 B: e::h effe kijke ze zit op de:: (°nah)
u::h let's see, she's still going to (nah)
30 B: * lagere school zit ze nog, vijfde klas.
elementary school, fifth grade.
31 0,4
32 A: → °vijfde klas lagere school.

⁷ The ways in which these items function in our corpus have been analyzed elsewhere in a more extensive fashion (c.f. Mazeland, 1989, 1992). A separate paper (Mazeland, 1990) presents a parallel analysis based on a small corpus of medical consultations.

- fifth grade elementary school.
33 (.)
34 A: hh en je va:der,
and your father,
35 A: waar wer:kt die?
where's does he work?
36 (.)
37 B: * (th) [RAbo]bank,
(th) [RAbo]bank,
38 (.)
39 A: → (°de) [Rabo]bank
(...)
(the) [Rabo]bank
(...)
54 A: heeft ie daarvoor gelee:rd
did he do a training for that?
55 0,4
56 B: * nee.
no.
57 0,6
58 A: → NEe:,
no,

Such *repeats* seem to function especially to create an interactional shared factual record, so to speak, useable as background in subsequent interactional episodes. Apart from that, repeats do not display any operation on the answers; they just *fix* them. In other words, while being interactionally active, they are cognitively passive or neutral⁸.

When the informant packs his answers in longer *Discourse Units*, repeating these answers is not a viable option. In such cases, interviewers tend to use *formulations*, which offer a summarizing interpretation of the locally relevant tenor of the just provided inform

⁸ It may be the case, in this fragment as well as on other occasions where *repeats* are produced, that the interviewer writes down the answers he repeats. I just adds to the fact that, in so doing, he constitutes himself on those moments as being just a (neutral) recording device.

tion (cf. Garfinkel & Sacks 1970; Heritage & Watson, 1979, 1980; Heritage 1985). In interviews organized on a *turn-by-turn* basis, *formulations* are also used, not so much to summarize the preceding answer, which is already rather short, but to provide an interpretation of it, that is, to help establish a shared sense of what the answer really means, as will become clear in our following discussion. The relationships of formulations to the preceding answers can be quite complex, as becomes clear from the following list of aspects (cf. Heritage 1985: 101 a.f.):

- the formulation preserves the theme of the preceding utterance(s); the recipient refrains from introducing a new topic;
- the formulation selects specific elements from the preceding utterance(s) by re-referring to them; the information contained in those elements can now be formulated in a more general fashion, and can be inferentially elaborated and enriched;
- the formulation is submitted to the informant, who has the intellectual copyright of the information so formulated; the formulation presents a candidate reading of his or her previous utterances.

Formulations are sequentially implicative: the informant has the right to decide on their adequacy. Heritage & Watson (1979, 1980) therefore consider formulations as first-pair-parts of an adjacency pair *Formulation/Decision*. As a first part of that pair type, they project the continuation of the current topic over at least two subsequent turns, the present formulation and the expectable decision.

Heritage (1985), in his analysis of news interviews, broadcast on radio and television, distinguished three types of formulation use. Similar types are found in research interviews, although their distribution is different from that in news interviews. The first type concerns relatively neutral and precise summaries of what has been said; Heritage (1985: 104) calls these *prompts*. In a second type, the formulation also presents a rather precise summary of the informant's position, but in a way that is based on a more extensive inferential process. Heritage (1985: 106 etc.) calls these *cooperative recycles*: the tenor of the preceding utterances is expanded in a way that probably is agreeable to the informant; the recipient just assists the

speaker in making his or her point utterly clear. The third type involves a more provocative use of formulations, when a far reaching upshot of the preceding is formulated that is bound to be denied by the informant. In this way the limits of his or her position are tested. Heritage (1985: 108 etc.) calls this type *non-cooperative*; the informant is not so much assisted as tested, forced by the interviewer to take a clear stand on issues or aspects selected by him or her. These types differ not just in the content of the relations taken towards the preceding utterances, but also in their subsequent sequential effects. Formulations of the first and second type tend to engender positive decisions, agreements, which they clearly project (Heritage & Watson, 1980). But in so doing they also have a sequence terminating effect. When the parties agree on a formulation, no further talk on that topic is needed, so a next topic can be initiated which is often done by the interviewer just after the agreement taken. A non-cooperative formulation, on the other hand, very often leads to a negative decision, a disagreement, which will be explained and elaborated in more or less extensive fashion. So the third type generally has a sequence extending and topic elaborating effect⁹.

Although they could function to stimulate the more extensive provision of information, non-cooperative formulations are rarely used by interviewers in research interviews, in contrast to, for instance, cross examinations in judicial settings (Atkinson & Drew 1979; Drew, 1985) or critically toned news interviews (Heritage 1985). As an interactional genre, research interviews seem to share the preference for agreement that is also generally found in ordinary conversations (Sacks, 1987; Pomerantz, 1978, 1984). This may be related to the fact that informants in research interviews do not have an intrinsic interest in the interview, so interviewers are under a constant pressure to keep them motivated to continue their participation, which an open disagreement might endanger. On the other hand, a research informant does not have to save a public face, as is the case with a politician being interviewed on television

⁹ This is a general property of *dispreferred* alternatives: they are to be accounted for, which involves further interactional work. Cf. Sacks (1987); also: Levinson (1983: 334-5), Heritage (1984 a: 265-80) and Heritage (1988).

before an *overhearing audience* (Heritage, 1985). The previously mentioned distribution of types of formulations, then, fits with the tendency, earlier noted, for recipient reactions by interviewers to be rather neutral, displaying just a registration of the information provided.

Cooperative formulations and prompts, then, are well-designed objects to operate as a neutral representation of information provided by the informant. Below we summarize our analyses of formulations' properties which supports these functions:

- their placement following one or more informing units by the informant;
- the use of particles that mark the formulation as a conclusion, in Dutch especially *dus* (so, consequently);
- the embedding of the formulation itself in matrix-sentences that announce an interpretation (*so concretely that would mean that ...*), or in an explanation announcing construction like (*and that is ...*);
- the use of *verba dicendi* like *say*, and verbs describing propositional attitudes like *feel*, or *think*, relating to the previous speaker by using a personal pronoun;
- the repetition of words used in the preceding utterance(s) or the locally unambiguous reference to those words by *pro-terms*, etc.

Formulations use a *request for confirmation* format: by submitting an assertion concerning some utterance(s) to its/their original speaker, who is an expert on its/their meaning, a decision on their adequacy is invited. Interviewers present these as candidate readings of the materials produced before, as quasi-objective, correctable processings of those materials.

In this way, interviewers' use of formulations not only contributes to the neutralizing, registering properties of the interview as a specific kind of locally organized speech exchange system, it also provides a locally produced anticipation or preview of what is to follow, a generalizing processing of information in which the particulars discussed serve as exemplars of types, processes, etc.

Consider the next extract (5), in which the interviewer formulates the reasons his informant might have for joining a project of separate garbage collection as an *environment motive* (line 878).

Excerpt (5) (NJK/32)

- 867 A: e:hm:- (°ng) (0,4) °wat-
u:hm:- (ng) what-
- 868 A: wat zijn de redenen om 'r aan mee te doen.
what are the reasons to participate
- 869 (.)
- 870 A: °voor u,
for you,
- 871 1,3
- 872 B: nou jah:., (w)wille allemaal ons steentje
well yes, we all want
- 873 B: wel bijdrage, natuurlijk h=
to do our share, of course, isn't it?
- 874 B: = (°anders) 't gaat verkee:rd,
otherwise things go wrong,
- 875 0,5
- 876 A: °jah.
yes.
- 877 0,5
- 878 A: → dat zijn die milieu [dinge]:,
that are those environment things
- 879 B: [hh [ja:h, °dh[at e:h
yes, that u:h
- 880 A: [°jah,
yes,
- 881 0,3
- 882 B: dat spreekt me [wel aan: ja,
that appeals to me yes,
- 883 A: [°jah,
yes,

In one of the research reports from the project of which this interview was a part, a quotation is given that is partially composed from the utterances in lines 872-4. The quote serves to illustrate the position of that part of the population that is called *the environment conscious ones*.

The category that was used in the interview situation to formulate the information provided by the informant, is the same as the category used later in the analysis to typify the position of its speaker. The interviewer, then, is in his formulation already doing some processing work anticipating the later analysis. During the interview itself, the life world information is already cut in pieces that fit the conceptual scheme that will be used later, when the interview is over.

5. Discussion

In a recent contribution, Suchman and Jordan (1990) have analyzed some examples of standardized survey interviews as interactional events. They argue for a kind of loosening up of the strictly standardized format of the survey interview, to allow for local negotiations concerning the meaning of questions and answers and the best formulation of the latter. Qualitative interviewers have tried to do just that, but, as our analyses show, such negotiations cannot solve the basic problems of the interview situation, what we have called the *essential tensions*. While Suchman and Jordan argue for a measured transfer of control from the designers of interview schedules to the participants in the interview situation, we would say that while such a transfer may change the shape of the process, it does not change its basic features.

These features involve, on the one hand, a tension between the frames of relevance of the life world and the research project, in terms of, among other things, the different importance of details and the use of concepts, and, on the other, the practical need for the parties to manage their local interactions in a viable way. More research is needed to describe the strategies and mechanisms that are involved in this management. Our research has focussed on some exemplary aspects, i.e. the negotiations concerning detailing and the use of repeats and formulations.

These analyses will have to be deepened and extended to cover other aspects as well¹⁰. They will have to deal in any case with what seems to be a basic constraint in the open research interview as such, the *preference for agreement* (Sacks, 1987). The open interview

¹⁰ This discussion is based in part on ongoing research by the authors.

format shares this preference with ordinary conversation, in relative contrast to some other kinds of speech exchange systems like interrogations or debates. It seems that interviewers have such a feature in mind, when they argue for interviews to be *like conversations*. In other ways, however, the research interview is markedly different from conversations, as the previous analyses have shown.

It may well be the case that the combination in one format of features which are conversational with some that are not, contribute to the awkwardness many semi-structured interviews seem to have. Participants are under pressure to cover over their difference of perspective, as when informants shape their expressions as answers which are at least in formal agreement with the suggestions contained in preceding questions, while the interviewers proffer displays of at least formal acceptance of those expressions.

The semi-structured interview, then, may be in and for itself a *problematic convergence* of interactional features, (Cf. Jefferson & Lee, 1981; Ten Have, 1989). It is designed as an asymmetrical information-gathering encounter, in the sense that one party questions while the other answers. But in the ways in which the interviewee — in contrast to what his or her survey colleague is supposed to do¹¹ — adapts his or her questioning to the recipient and the flow of the interaction, and in accepting the answers gives a demonstration of understanding, a more symmetrical format, designed for the sharing of life-worldly informations and interests, is suggested. In their situated interactions with one another, interviewers and informants devise more or less elaborate and noticeable ways of dealing with these tensions which we think are essential to the format.

6. Implications

As is amply elaborated in the body of the paper, we tend to see the tensions between the different worlds and associated interests of the researchers and the researched as 'essential'. This means the

¹¹ But see Houtkoop-Steenstra's (1990, 1995) studies of survey interviews, demonstrating the many ways in which such interviewers actually adapt their phrases and receipts to the interviewee.

we think such tensions are to a certain extent inevitable. Interviews, even qualitative and *open* ones, are a practical compromise between in principle incompatible forms of life, i.e. on the one hand 'experiencing' and 'telling', and on the other 'analyzing' and 'categorizing'. The question for this section, then, is how we can use our findings to suggest ways in which interviews could be designed, conducted and analyzed in a way that takes these tensions into account and that is different from established practice.

Informants are in the business of remembering, expressing and narrating their own personal experiences, while researchers are interested in using those expressions and narratives as data to be summarized, categorized, in short analyzed in terms of a research question which should make sense in some scientific debate. In short, informants and researchers tend to have different agendas. The extent to which this difference is a problem for the researcher will depend on the actual agenda he or she is pursuing. Consequently, researchers use rather different strategies to deal with the essential tensions of the interview format.

Interviews may be analyzed with diverse kinds of questions in mind. As our paper demonstrates, interviews can even be analyzed from a perspective that is more or less completely at odds with the 'original' purposes of the interview. For our particular purposes, the *tensions* were not a problem at all, but an interesting phenomenon¹². While ordinarily only informants are considered as research subjects, for us both interviewers and respondents were cast in that role. Since most interviews are not done in order to study interviews, this may seem to be a marginal case. We do recommend, however, the analytic mentality displayed in it.

A more popular strategy of avoiding the tensions, however, widely recommended in the literature, is to try to minimize the interactional demonstrations of the analytic interests and personal evaluations by the interviewer. For instance, in interviews in which the research is focussed on the actual telling of a story, the interview may be designed to leave out any conceptualizing suggestions by using a vague opening statement setting the theme in everyday terms. Fur-

¹² C.f. Silverman (1985: 156-76) on different uses of interview materials, depending on different theoretical and methodological frameworks.

thermore, the interviewer may be asked to restrict his or her questioning and reactions to the *emic*¹³, i.e. non-analytic, terminological, previously used by the informant. From a conversation analytic perspective, one would suggest that such restrictions, being 'unnatural' for the interviewer may be difficult to apply in actual practice. Furthermore, the informant may not expect the interviewer to speak from any other position than his or her own, i.e. that of an interested outsider. An informant may even make an effort to speak the interviewer's 'language', as he/she sees it, rather than his or her own, and expect the interviewer to display his or her understanding in that same 'language', not just repeating the informant's words.

The literature on interviewing especially urges interviewers to act in a 'neutral' fashion by refraining from evaluative comments and restricting reactions to minimal responses. Acting on this advice, however, may work to elicit more elaborate answers and more strongly dramatized stories, than would have been produced if the interview had acted otherwise (c.f. Rombouts, 1984). Even the type and intonation of minimal responses will be taken as indications of interviewer interest and evaluation, and will, for that reason, influence the way answers are elaborated and stories told (c.f. Mazeland, 1990, 1991). Interview statements are interactional products, inevitably.

Another way in which the tensions can be managed to a certain extent, is to phase the interview in terms of varying interviewer control of the conversation. We observed, for example, that it is common practice to start interviews with a series of factual questions. This leads to what we have called a *Turn-by-Turn* format. We suggested that answer repeats in such an environment serve to fix the facts as interactionally established. Such a format, then, presupposes a factual world which can be unproblematically become known to a non-participant.

When such a phase is finished, the alternative *DU*-format can be initiated explicitly, explaining its intent as was done in extract (1). In such a format, a difference of 'world' and even categories of

¹³ The concept of *emic* stems from anthropology and refers to native terminology and categorizations, in contrast to *etic* which refers to the cognitive and linguistic apparatus which an outsider, like a researcher, tends to use when considering a native culture.

understanding worlds, is often recognized. Here, the interviewer's interactional influence tends to be more subtle. Researchers can opt for a restriction of interviewer pre- and post-structuring by avoiding *etic* terminology in questions and answer-receipts, in order to get the story on tape in the most natural way possible. In that case, it is only after the interview, that they try to make sense of what was said in terms of their research questions. Alternatively, researchers can invite explicit negotiations about the meanings of previous statements, within the interview context itself. That would involve the interviewer in an explanation of his or her interests and basic concepts, and engage the informant as a sort of research assistant. Again, a phase differentiation is possible. One can first ask the informant to give an extended answer or tell a story, without bothering the process of remembering and telling with analytic clarification, and then start a discussion of its meaning in *emic* or even *etic* terms. This way of working would overtly recognize the interview as a situated, collaboratively achieved re-constitution of the part of the informant's world in which the interviewer is interested.

Research on structured survey-interviews has demonstrated that many respondents give an 'instance' when a 'category' is asked for. In many cases, it is only after the interviewer has provided some exemplary 'candidate answers', that the respondents are able to give an answer at all, often in line with, or in contrast to, the example given (c.f. Houtkoop, 1990, 1995). A similar phenomenon was found in our research on semi-structured interviews (c.f. our discussion of extract (3) above, note 6, and Mazeland, 1992). When the interviewer does not have an extensive pre-knowledge of the topic under discussion, it is probably inevitable that questions are formatted as categorical ones. This observation should not be taken, however, as suggesting that informants do not use categories themselves. In fact, a case could be made that the interesting phenomenon is how *emic* categories are used as part of native practice, turning the interview into an occasion to have such practices demonstrated on tape. The problem, then, is how to get a faithful demonstration of *native* usage, rather than a *translation* exercise.

A number of writers have stressed the *moral* character of interviews (Locker, 1981; Baruch, 1981; Silverman, 1985). This relates specifically to the fact that an interview inevitably is a meeting of two strangers, a

confrontation of two worlds. The interviewee, who is invited to speak is under pressure to not just express his or her life experiences a viewpoints, but also to *account* for these, to demonstrate their rationality. Locker (1981) stresses, for instance, that the mothers he interviewed were strongly motivated to convince him that their decisions regarding the health and illness of their family members were reasonable, given the circumstances. And Baruch (1981) reports a marked difference in first and second interviews with parents of handicapped children. Moral accounting and complaining about medical personnel was much more frequent in the first interview, as a conversation with a stranger, than during the second one, when the researcher was already an acquaintance of sorts. Interviews, then, offer useful material for the study of 'accounting practices'.

The crux of our argument regards the analysis of interview 'data'. We think that interview statements should always and explicitly be seen as actions-in-contexts. This fundamental fact should be basic to the analysis. The statements can be seen as part of an overall stance that the interviewee is trying to bring across. But one should also take the details of the local interactional context — the 'sequential environment' — into account. It is in response to that environment, which is continuously rebuilt during the interview, that interview statements have been designed and should be analyzed.

As a practical consequence, we think that for an interview to be used as more than a source of overall, easily summarized facts and knowledge, it should be taped and analyzed in a detailed fashion. Statements from interviews should always be quoted 'in sequence' with both preceding questions and following elaborations and receipts — the full natural unit. Furthermore, knowledge of sequential structures and membership categorization devices — in short, Conversation Analysis — should be applied to interview material of various kinds in order to yield generalized procedural insights into interview formats and to stimulate attention to interactional details among interview researchers.

Interviews are used to constitute sociological objects, such as 'medical systems', 'youth cultures' or 'environmental consciousness'. A reflexive sociology should investigate how this is done. We recommend the analytic mentality displayed in this chapter as a starting point for such an enterprise.

Ilja Maso and Fred Wester (eds.)

The Deliberate Dialogue

Qualitative Perspectives on the Interview



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