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## Chapter 5 - Conclusions

Finally, in chapter five, we draw some conclusions from our case study and summarise the recommendations based on our analysis of the data. The middle section of this chapter discusses the limitations of our two chosen methods as well as ways in which two different analytical perspectives can co-exist and complement each other in one research study. At the end of the chapter we reflect on the partnership between us, applied linguists, and our client, the Centre for Global Education York.

In summary, the case study we describe in this book was designed to answer the following two research questions.

*Research question one: What themes occur in the interviews with York's Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic residents on the topics identified by our client (i.e. reasons, values and barriers)?*

Thematic analysis was used to answer the above question. The analysis showed that the main reasons for immigrating to the UK, presented by the participants in the interviews conducted by the community project workers, were: to study, work or join family. A small number of participants had arrived in York as children; accompanying parents who came to York for work, or as refugees. The participants' account of their values used words such as: respect, family, friends, loyalty, honesty, generosity, difference, education, faith and community. When asked about barriers in their lives the participants mentioned: being accepted by their spouse's family, being mixed race in the 80s, difference, lack of confidence, gender discrimination in the workplace, poverty, divorce, prejudice in their own community, getting an education, missing 'home', racism, settling down, language, limitations on travel, and perfectionism.

*Research question two: How do the interviewers' contributions shape the interaction with the interviewees?*

Using conversation analysis to analyse the interview data demonstrated how the interviewers' contributions had an interactional effect on the interviewees' talk. Examples included: offering words as examples of possible answers, abandoning questions, closing topics by producing formulations that are hard to disagree with, repetition to elicit answers, and restating previously mentioned topics.

The two analyses presented in our study provide an example of how one might critically examine the same dataset, depending on the aims of the research and the researchers'/clients' beliefs about the nature of communication and the construction of meaning. Two possible readings of our interview data were presented in chapter four of this book:

1. a report of the themes mentioned by the project participants during the interviews, as in the thematic analysis;
2. a display of interactional contributions made by the interview participants, as in the conversation analysis.

Indeed, there are always a number of ways in which a researcher can look at their data. As researchers, the choices we make depend on a variety of factors, including: what we want to find out (the aims of the research), and our beliefs about, for example, knowledge, meaning and communication. We hope that this book has demonstrated how interview data can be understood and used in several different ways, including to, for example, provide insight into:

- another person's experience (a belief we described as neo-positivist);
- another person's *real* (hidden) experience (a belief we described as romantic);

- how people tell their stories in ways that meet their immediate, or longer term, needs in specific situations (constructionist);
- how accepted roles and the responsibilities associated with them (such as the 'interviewer' being in control with an expectation to ask questions, change topics and decide when the interview is finished) constrain how people behave and what they say, and how these constraints may, to a certain extent, be resisted and thereby changed (transformative).

Two possible readings of our interview data are as a basis for:

- a report of the themes mentioned by the project participants during the interviews, as in the thematic analysis (a neo-positivist/romantic approach);
- a display of interactional contributions made by the interview participants, as in the conversation analysis (a constructionist approach with some elements of a transformative approach).

## Recommendations

An outcome of the conversation analysis that was conducted to address research question two was a set of recommendations for community workers who want to use interviews as part of their projects. It is important to acknowledge that these are recommendations for possible noticings that are based on our analysis of the data, collected in one context, and are not, therefore, presented as prescriptions for the management of all interviews. Instead, they are representative of a type of sensitivity (to the interactional effects of questions, answers and responses to answers) that interviewers can aim to develop; sensitivity that is deployed both 'online', as the interview is taking place and 'offline' when the interviewer analyses/uses their data.

Recommendation 1: if an interviewer notices that they have made a specific contribution, such as offering a word that narrowed the range of choices that the interviewee was presented with, they can consider following it up with a more general contribution such as 'is there something else you want to say?' or 'do you have some more comments about this topic?'.

Recommendation 2: if an interviewer notices that an interviewee problematises their question, an interviewer can consider replying with 'yes' or 'anything' followed by a pause. This way an interviewer can avoid adding more information to the original question and focus on confirming that the interviewee has satisfied themselves that they have an understanding of the question.

Recommendation 3: if an interviewer notices that their response to an interviewee's answer was overtly judgmental or seemed to change the direction of the answer, they can try repeating the original question. This, of course, could result in the interviewee repeating their answer or changing it. However, this technique may provide an opportunity for the interviewee to add to their answer. An additional suggestion here could be for an interviewer to consider asking the interviewee to summarise their answer.

Recommendation 4: if an interviewer notices that the interviewee has not responded within five seconds of the question, let the silence be. Longer pauses allow time for the interviewee to think of answers. This can potentially lead to more detailed and interesting answers.

Recommendation 5: if an interviewer feels an answer from the interviewee is insufficient, consider asking them if they want to add more by saying '*is there something else you want to say about this topic?*' and accept that there is the possibility of no further response.

Having made these recommendations, however, we cannot be sure that telling them to an interviewer will make any difference to the way in which they conduct an interview. Much more research is needed into the role of training/experience in increasing sensitivity to the interactional consequences of questioning, and on the degree to which this sensitivity is useful while questioning. Having said this, Richards (2011:99) appears optimistic, suggesting that applied conversation analysis (and 'other' approaches to interview analysis) can be used, 'for the purposes of data analysis or improving technique, or both' and that in 'developing sensitivity to aspects of one's talk makes it more likely that shifts of this sort [in, for example, the type of minimal responses used] will be noticed'. As Richards says, there is no 'case for more detailed prescriptions regarding interview behaviour, but rather the opposite: a reminder that progress depends on the development of craft skills through the sensitive interrogation of one's own work' (2011: 107). It is very important to acknowledge this, that the recommendations suggested here are not prescriptions for all interviews but suggestions for how they might be managed. As Richards says, it is through careful reflection on our own interviewing skills that researchers can try to develop their craft; a process of development that is self-generated, not instructed, and which is acutely aware of the benefits and limitations of our choices.

## Limitations

In the next section of this chapter, we explore the advantages and disadvantages of our two methods: thematic analysis and conversation analysis.

### Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis of spoken data has both advantages and disadvantages. An advantage of thematic analysis is 'the sensitivity to recurrent motifs salient in participants' stories', and therefore, the ability to highlight what is important to interviewees that may not have been reflected previously (Pavlenko, 2007:166). Kitzinger (2011) outlines two further advantages of thematic analysis, both of which were apparent in this study. Firstly, thematic analysis is useful to systematise information and feedback for the researcher/organisation that is collecting the data. Secondly, this type of analysis can be used to summarise key recurrent themes in the data in a way that might be useful for the researcher/organisation to report back to their funders. More specifically, on that point, the results of the thematic analysis, 'take a form that is readily accessible to the educated general public, and results can be relatively quickly produced' (Kitzinger, 2011:100). In the case of this study, the advantages of the thematic analysis were two-fold. Firstly, the results of the thematic analysis were able to help the client to gain some (new) understanding of participants' experiences (accessibility). Secondly, the thematic analysis provided a (systematic) resource which represented the full range of participants' reasons for migration, values and barriers. This was an advantage for both the client and, as a preliminary analytical step, for us as applied linguists, interested as we are in the ways in which interlocutors use language, and what effects different linguistic features have on the interaction.

On the other hand, the disadvantage of thematic analysis is that it can be seen as a simplistic approach to understanding what people say; its findings representing only a very superficial representation of the reality of participants' experiences. The rationale for the thematic categories, the relationship between the categories, and the matching of the examples to the categories is not always made clear by the researcher. Where there is a justification for the thematic categories, this is often on the basis of perceived repetition in the data; meaning that potentially important topics which are less frequently mentioned or (perhaps because they are so 'obvious' or taboo) not mentioned at all, are lost in the analysis (Talmy, 2010). Furthermore, the results of a thematic analysis are in danger of being very closely aligned to the pre-existing beliefs of the interviewer, given the difficulty of avoiding the tendency to see what we expect to see. And finally, the pressure on interviewees to conform to what they think

the expectations of the interviewer are may mean that the themes that emerge from the analysis do not represent the beliefs/experiences of the interviewee, but those they judge to be acceptable to the interviewer. Neo-positivist and romantic beliefs about the value of interview data may be seriously undermined by these disadvantages of thematic analysis.

### Conversation analysis

Perhaps the main advantage of conversation analysis is that it allows for a fine-grained observation of the data, which makes it possible to identify features of talk that otherwise might be overlooked. Analysts aim to show the intricate ways in which speakers and listeners mutually organise their talk, and what these ways tell us about socially preferred patterns of interaction, including: turn-taking, opening and closing an interaction, introducing and changing topics, managing misunderstanding, introducing bad news, agreeing and disagreeing, eliciting a response by asking a question, and so on. Conversation analysts argue that this focus on the conversational activities found in an extract of talk is the only justifiable analytical focus and researchers should avoid imposing their own assumptions, including what they believe to be 'contextual factors' on the data (Schegloff, 1991). Drew and Heritage (1992), however, remind us that interviews are institutionally framed, meaning that they happen at a pre-arranged time and place, with a hidden pre-organised agenda in mind dictated by the interviewers. The interview's metadata, for example phrases such as 'the first question I'm going to ask you...', 'now let's move on to the next question' sets the dynamics of the interviewer-interviewee relationship, giving the interviewers more power in the interview context. It is legitimate, they argue, for interviewers to be aware of the contributions they make to the interview data, and for those contributions to be inspected as part of the formal data analysis.

Some possible drawbacks of conversation analysts' focus on the delicate machinery of interaction have been highlighted by, for example, critical linguists (see Wetherell, 1998). Critics of conversation analysis have said that the sole focus on the conversational activities found in extracts of talk blind analysts to the ideological aspects of language, and to text production as social practice. Debates between conversation analytic- and critically-oriented analysts inevitably focus on the different emphases of their approach (see, in particular, the exchanges between Billig (1999a, 1999b) and Schegloff (1999b, 1999c)). But these differences should not be overplayed; Billig reminds us that he,

share[s] Schegloff's unease about studies which pronounce on the nature of discourses, without getting down to the business of studying what is actually uttered or written. (Billig, 1999a, p. 544)

In this study, our client's requirement for a thematic analysis of the data meant that our knowledge of the context provided a useful and interesting backdrop to the conversation analysis. This is not to say that either the thematic analysis or the conversation analysis could not have stood alone – they both could; the former would have satisfied our client and the latter might have interested other linguists/conversation analysts. But the backdrop provided by the thematic analysis paved the way (for our client) to a less familiar way of analysing data and may have helped to demonstrate to them why our answers to research question one are, necessarily, very provisional. Furthermore, given that the themes were identified in advance by our client, the selection of extracts from our data for transcription was easier to justify to a non-specialist audience; potentially increasing the interest in, and uptake of, the recommendations generated by our conversation analysis.

As far as the reporting of our study in this book, we have attempted to pay attention to a framework first developed by Potter and Hepburn (2012) for adding credibility to interview research (see also Silverman 2017), aiming to:

- improve the transparency of the interview set-up in which our data was collected

- attend fully to the actions of the interviewers
- connect our analytic observations to specific elements of the interviews
- improving analysis of our data by showing how the interviews (and the analysis of the interview data) are permeated by the interviewers', and our own, assumptions about interviews and their participants, as well as the interviewer's project-based needs (to satisfy funders, for example and our own research agendas)
- show how interviewees respond to the various activities and categories offered by the interviewer
- show how the interviewers can make some responses to their questions seem relevant or interesting or remain silent and have the opposite effect
- avoid assuming that people communicate in ways that are related to 'who they really are', but recognise that how our behaviour is perceived depends on who is perceiving (and where and when).

## **Bringing neo-positivist/romantic, constructionist and transformative perspectives together**

The 'two different cultures' of interviews as research instruments for finding out what participants think/know, and interviews as research topics/co-constructions (Van den Berg *et al.* 2003:5), are not necessarily as far apart as they may seem, or, indeed, as we may have presented them in chapter one of this book. At least in applied linguistics, both thematic analysis and conversation analysis may, depending on the aims of the research project, have a useful part to play, depending on the needs of our client and the importance of a pragmatic approach to meeting these needs. We would not want to use 'pragmatism' as a reason for not thinking very carefully about our choices, however. Indeed, we hope that in this book we were able to demonstrate the importance of paying attention to the theories of interviewing when conducting qualitative applied linguistics studies, as suggested by Talmy (2010: 143),

there is considerable need for heightened reflexivity about the interview methods that applied linguistics researchers use in their studies, on the role of the interviewer in occasioning interview answers, on the subject 'behind' the interviewee, on the status ascribed to interview data, and on how those data are analyzed and represented, regardless of whether one opts to conceive of interviews as research instrument, or research interviews as participation in social practices.

Given that the work of applied linguists is based on solving real-world, language-related problems, it seems likely that we will come across a variety of perspectives on language and communication, as well as on 'reality', knowledge, and society. These perspectives will, inevitably, result in a range of different ideas about how to do research, what the research findings mean, and how they can/should be used. As the case study reported here shows, our client approached the aims and uses of the interviews from a 'romantic' perspective, whereas as applied linguistics, we were more closely aligned with constructionist ideas about interview data. Based on our experiences during this study, we tentatively suggest that applied linguists engage in an open dialogue with clients, with caution, but without abandoning their own theoretical beliefs. Our position may differ from the experience of other researchers. Mazeland and ten Have (1996), for example, describe how they had to, reluctantly, leave their 'comfortable' position of what they describe as 'ethnomethodological indifference', in order to engage in debate with interviewers who were not linguists. Perhaps this is a difference between applied linguists and researchers in other disciplines, including linguistics. Given that the applied linguist's job is to focus on recognising real-world problems in which there are language-related issues and/or to respond to the identification of a problem by a potential client (Hall *et al.* 2017), we are used to the idea of collaboration and negotiation with different perspectives, and do not see these processes as obstructive of our research, but as an essential and interesting part of it.

The nature and scope of the problem we explored during this study turned out to be somewhat different than the problem that was initially identified by our client, the Centre for Global Education York. Some of the answers/solutions we offered to the client were to the problem that they had identified, and others were solutions to a problem that they had not realised existed (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997). This was a very sensitive issue and careful communication with the client, rather than compromise, was needed. Taking our client's worlds seriously, not as versions of a world, but as different worlds that exist in parallel with our own, is something we have tried to achieve in this study. Recognition of different 'realities' is a relatively new challenge in applied linguistics, but one which we very much need to face. Different ontological commitments can have a very important impact on the beliefs and behaviour, not only of researchers, but of the participants in our research and the clients we serve (Hall and Wicaksono, 2020). Failure to acknowledge and explore our different conceptualisations can result in misunderstanding, even conflict, and ineffective or inappropriate recommendations or policy advice. On the other hand, working with our clients to understand the ontological assumptions that underpin each others' ideologies can help us to negotiate, for example, project aims and desired outcomes. Furthermore, trying to understand what we and others recognise as, for example, 'interview', 'value', 'treasure', 'theme', 'summary' and so on, can help to avoid assuming that we agree on what these things are, and what counts as an example of them. Finally, critical examination of our ontologies of ideas such as a 'local' and 'home' (which may be so familiar to us that we have forgotten that they are 'only' ideas) could help in efforts by applied linguists to expose and contest the social injustices faced by many migrants to York and around the world (Wicaksono and Hall, 2020).

The testing and evaluation of the solutions we proposed in the recommendations section of this study is, of course, the responsibility of the clients, who are the ones with access to the site of the problem initially identified. At this stage in the research, it is our client's decision whether to continue to involve us, given that participation in solution-testing was not initially agreed. We are currently working on negotiating the next steps in our project with them.

## **Our final reflections**

In the final section of our book we ask ourselves a question 'so what?'. It is a question that provides an end to our study; a chance to summarise what we have learned and reflect on the significance of this learning. It also helps us to think about what we might have done differently and what we could do next.

We have learned that interviews look so familiar that they have almost become invisible as a cultural construct. Their framing and constraining effects, on relationships and identities/personal histories, are so familiar to us as to be un-remarkable. It is the job of applied linguists to point out that interviews are an opportunity for a story to be projected or constrained/rejected; a site of creative struggle, of innovation and destruction. We should demonstrate the delicate mechanisms through which this struggle takes place, including the effects of repetition, silence, overlap and the many other features we described in chapter four of this book.

In accordance with Rapley (2019) we have attempted to show that when using interviews as research instruments, equal attention and analytic consideration needs to be applied to,

pre- and post- interview talk, to moments of sampling, recruitment and consent, to the preparation of and adjustments to interview guides, and most importantly, to recover the different times, spaces and places, of the 'desk work' for doing analysis on interviews' (Rapley 2019: 282).

We have learned that the clients of applied linguists, and the participants on our research, may have very different ideas about the aims of research and the meaning/use of data. These differences are interesting, and need to form part of the research process as we work out what we all mean by familiar concepts/acts such as 'question', 'home', 'value' and so on. Not taking the time to work out how we conceptualise these aspects of 'common sense' is a missed opportunity for collaboration and depletes the value of the research findings.

We have learned that it is possible to do research on interviews that treat the interaction both as content (a neo-positivist or romantic conceptualisation of the interview) and discourse (a constructionist or transformative approach). And that these approaches do conflict with each other conceptually, but, very importantly, that this conflict can provide a good way in to an ontologically-aware type of public engagement that is typical of applied linguistics.

We have learned that people are not just 'themselves' (a neo-positivist/romantic assumption), and don't only exist in relation to each other (a constructionist assumption), but that they also 'intra-act' (Barad, 2007) with material things, including inorganic objects (such as a recording device, a car), technologies (such as a transcription code, music) and non-human organisms (such as pets and plants).

We have learned that what seemed like binary categories: one versus another, interviewer versus interviewee, content versus discourse, academic versus public are actually fluid, dynamic concepts that are continually emerging in interaction as a result of what people think 'is', what they think they know, and what they believe is fair (see Toohey, 2019). Instead of defending our territory (be that a place, a familiar generalisation, a research method, or an institution), we could open up ourselves, and our clients and research participants, to the infinite undoing of endings/conclusions and therefore the possibility of new histories. We could acknowledge the transformative power of 'just' observing. And we could point to our interconnectedness and therefore the importance of our obligations to each other.

We have also discovered that York has 'hidden' diversity, in a variety of respects, and that improving awareness of difference is probably a way of becoming comfortable with difference, rather than feeling threatened by it, or threatened by other peoples' fear of it. On the other hand, the opportunity to tell our 'own' story is often welcomed and the aspects of our story that we may like to stress are those that we think differ from other stories. There is always a tension between wanting to be 'ourselves' and wanting to be part of something else. Story-telling is one way of constantly negotiating that tension, against the constantly changing backdrop of the city, as it exists in 'reality' and in our minds.

What we could have done differently and what we could do next are the same thing. We could have built in an evaluation phase in to the research. On the other hand, when we set off on this project, we didn't anticipate that a series of recommendations for community project interviews would be an outcome of our research. It was probably an error of planning not to assume that something would come out of our study that would need testing with the help of our client. So, next, we would like to design a new study that looks at the effectiveness of awareness-raising activities for interviewers, and that also works with 'hidden' individuals and groups to collaborate on ways of them telling their stories.

## **Final note (of caution)**

We are writing the last chapter of this book during the isolating experience of 'lock down', when the opportunity to tell our stories is limited by the need to stay at home. New ways of creating our identities online are already available and we look forward to exploring how these, in addition to the more familiar face-to-face activities, can be used to un-hide the worlds of those who may previously have been hidden.



However, we are also writing against a backdrop of political unrest in Belarus, where there is a popular protest against the President, who has been in power since 1994. These protests began with a blogger, Syarhei Tsikhanouski, who started travelling around Belarus, collecting stories from people that were unheard of on state TV. Tsikhanouski, and other opposition candidates, have gained strong support from the people who were watching their stories on the internet. However, those stories were unpopular with the current government, who in due course jailed the blogger, his team and other opposition candidates. Throughout this book we have focused on the positive aspects of storytelling and how telling stories can help to 'unhide' 'hidden' (aspects of) peoples' lives. However, as the example of the Belarusian blogger shows, stories can also be suppressed and story-tellers silenced. Unfortunately, some people are prepared to go a long way to stop other people from telling their stories. Fortunately, there are other people who are prepared to go an even longer way to continue telling their stories. We are listening.