

A Critical Examination of the Interview as a Research Method for Qualitative Language-Based Studies

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1. Introduction

Throughout the social sciences including language-based studies, interviews are widely used as data collection instruments. However, researchers vary greatly in their ‘theory of method’ regarding interviews. In this paper, I will discuss several major epistemological positions that differ with respect to the status of the data collected, interview types and procedures, and methods of analyzing interview data. Based on this discussion, I aim to develop a methodological proposal for using interviews in the various language-study based researches.

We live in an ‘interview society.’ The mass media, human service providers and researchers increasingly generate information by interviewing. Briggs (1986) suggested that 90 per cent of all social science investigations use interviews in one way or another. Interviewing is, needless to say, one of the most widely applied techniques for conducting systematic social inquiry by sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and other areas in humanities.

The interactional details of interviews vary; the conversations may take the form of highly structured, standardized, quantitatively oriented survey interview, or may be semi-formal guided conversations, or “free” style informational exchanges. The common interactional structure shared by all variations is the question-answer symmetrical turn-allocation. Typically, the interviewer is entitled to produce the questions, and the interviewees answer them. The interviewers tend to adhere to the topics elaborated only by the interviewer, and the development of their turn in answering may be strongly constrained by the interviewer’s manipulation (Button, 1998). Regardless of the language used, the interview is a communicational framework which perhaps many of us are very much familiar with; it is used frequently in the media (e.g., TV news interview, Heritage & Greatbatch, 1991; Clayman & Heritage, 2002, or call-in radio talk, Hutchby, 1992; 1996), and in various institutional settings

(e.g., medical clinics as in Maynard [1986], counseling as in Peräkylä & Silverman [1989]).

One may think of an interactive framework such as the “interview” to be a very isolated interaction which does not share much in common with ordinary conversations. In fact, the interactional framework of the interview, or partial adaptation of such framework is found in many scenes of our lives. When you ask for the most suitable travel plan at a travel agency, you are engaged in a very similar practice to that of an interviewer. The interview is a socio-culturally significant interactional practice. The speech genre such as the interview is ubiquitous, and people adopt the format of the interview into their interactional framework to take care of the business at hand.

Focusing on the researchers’ use of the interview now, we first realize that how one wants to treat the interview in his/her research is often very diverse. In the following sections, I will now explain the diversity among the researchers’ perspectives in terms of what they think interviews can enable them to obtain, and how they treat the data gathered through interviews. In this paper I will adopt Silverman (1993; 1997)’s categorizations to discuss the issue furthermore. Silverman points out that depending on whether the researcher’s orientation is that of **positivist**, “**emotionalist**,” or **social constructionist**, the interview signifies something very distinct.

2. Positivism and Interview Data

The aim of interviews for positivists is to generate “facts” which hold independently of both the research setting and the researcher (interviewer). That there exist stable, essential facts about the world is a fundamental premise to this approach. It is unknown prior to the interview, but it is indeed actual present “out there” (Mäseide, 1990:4). These facts are elicited through questioning in the interview, and they come in the form of statements about the interviewee’s beliefs (Silverman, 1993:91). Because it is the “facts” that the researchers are after, the obtained knowledge from interview must be reliable and valid (Selltiz et. al., 1964, cited in Silverman, 1993:92). One most effective way of achieving such quality is to practice standard interviews. It is critical for the researcher to follow the standard protocol of the standard interview; the interviewer should ask each question precisely as it is worded, and in the same order that it appears on the schedule. This is all pre-scribed so that the reliability is assured.

For positivists, the most important task in the process of interview is to design the

most “effective” and “unbiased” methods to provide questions and elicit answers, so that the interview could bring out information about the reality (Biemer, et. al., 1991). The responses to the questions in the interviews should be well predicted before; the responses are often supplied with choices as in multiple-choice formats. Methodological problems are more technical, i.e., construction of questions, recording machine, etc., than theoretical or interpretive (Mäseide, 1990:4, Biemer, et. al., 1991).

3. Empirical Criticism of Positivists

Positivist position has been thoroughly criticized over the years in terms of both its illusive feasibility and desirability. In addition to such criticisms, limitation to the positivist’s approach can be illustrated empirically. Houktoop-Streestra (1995; 2000; 2002) for instance examines the standardized survey interview such as telephone survey interviews using an ethnomethodological-conversation analytic approach. She elucidates how survey interviewers use methods to deal with the incompatibility of “interviewing rules” cast on them and the convention of ordinary conversation, and together with the respondents they arrive at accountable answers. For example, Houkoop-Steenstra (2002) demonstrates the variability in “question delivery structure” (Heritage & Greatbatch, 1991; Schegloff, 1980) between the pre-scribed question item and the actual production by the interviewer. The interviewee frequently engages in a repair sequence before the interviewer completes the full form of the prescribed question (Houkoop-Steenstra, 2002:248), which creates a different shape of question delivery. The positivists would find this “deviation” from the script such as this highly problematic.

4. Emotionalism

The second perspective is called “emotionalists” in Silverman (2001). The approach is illustrated in Charmaz (1995, cited in Silverman, 2001):

“We start with the experiencing person and try to share his or her *subjective view*. Our task is objective in the sense that we try to describe it with depth and detail. In doing so, we try to *represent the person’s view fairly* and to *portray it as consistent with his or her meanings*” (54). [emphasis added]

For emotionalists, interviews are about “symbolic interaction.” (Silverman,

1993:94). Citing Denzin, (1970:133), Silverman points out that the emotionalists want to see interview as “an encounter.. [that] represents the coming together of two or more persons for the purpose of focused interaction.’ The role of interviewer in this approach diverges dynamically from that of positivists; whereas interviewer and interviewee are both information emitting “objects” in positivism, they are both treated as “subjects” for the emotionalists. Because they are subjects, a more ‘humanistic’ version of the interviews is preferred. The emotionalists believe that through a deep understanding which the interviewer triggers and the interviewee accepts and engages, the truth comes out from the interviewee and the validity of the analysis is obtained (Silverman, 1993:95).

Emotionalists are concerned that the design of the interview itself, as made by the positivists, is problematic. To resolve this problem, emotionalists believe that interviewers should try to create an open and undistorted communication (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997). They feel that the interviewer must work to obtain rapport with respondents and to avoid manipulating the desired outcome by directing the interviewees’ answers to the directions of the interviewer’s choice.

Emotionalist interviewers aim to access “the subject behind the interviewee.” They realize that the subject is put into the role as an interviewee. The interviewers must make great efforts to invite the interviewee to step out of that role and share their “lived experience.” For instance, interviewers are encouraged to share their subjective views and experiences with the interviewee, so that the interviewees also feel comfortable to share theirs. An emotionally involved interview is seen as an ideal outcome in this approach. Therefore, the interviewers or interviewee are not seen as the “objects” and the interaction between them are not seen as simply the method to deliver ‘facts’, as the Positivists believe.

5. Criticisms of Emotionalism

Silverman criticizes (and I agree to his opinion) the portrayal of what the researchers are supposed to be doing, as shown in the above description which is rather “romanticized” (Silverman, 1993; 1997).

This “humanistic approach” (Reason & Rowan, 1981) has good intentions; however, Silverman (2001) criticizes that the approach neglects three critical dynamic aspects of the interview. First, he suggests that the “open-endedness” of the question designs run the risk of creating an interpretative problem for the interviewee about what is relevant. The little involvement of the interviewer because of its openness

may actually create at times extremely powerful constraints on the answers. Peräkylä and Silverman (1991) report that many sociologists who are most critical of purely structural work (positivistic approach) show a desire to design their interview to “tell it like it is.” Their aim is to reveal the essence of people’s experiences, hence they favor the open-method interview in which the subject of inquiry is no longer passive (Oakley, 1981), and further they may even be put the position to validate (by directly asking for confirmation) the researchers’ analysis (Abrams, 1984; Ball, 1984).

Silverman (1997) points out that even though emotionalists reject positivists’ approach, their perception about “freeing” the subjects from constraints clearly aligns with the positivistic categorizations. For example, the emotionalists encourage the interviewers to allow “violations” of the machine-like standardized exchange, or to become aware of the possible ways that could ‘distort’ interviewees’ responses. Silverman criticizes, and I join his judgment here, that the emotionalists’ assumption that the interviewers can manipulate (or distort) the interviewees’ responses resonates perfectly with that of the positivists.

6. Constructionalists

Both positivism and emotionalism differ from a third view, constructionalism. This view rejects the assumption that both two views take for granted, that is, the pre-existence of “truth” or “real subject” outside the interview. It emphasizes that any (interactional) encounters are the very moments in which the participants newly engender a social world. The radical constructionalists further say that there is no reality “out there” in the social world, which can be obtained from an interview (Miller & Glassner, 1997). What distinguishes constructionalists from emotionalists is the former’s attempt to treat what happens in interviews as a “topic” in its own right, not as some medium that enables the researcher to get the facts. The type of knowledge that constructionalists talk about is the actively created meaning through the interview (Kvale, 1996; Holstein & Gubrium, 1997). A postmodern approach focuses on interrelations in an interview on the social construction of reality (Kvale, 1996). In their view, the ‘errors’ or ‘deviation’ that the positivists and emotionalists would talk about are indeed the very evidence that exhibit basic properties of social interaction (Silverman, 2001).

The radical stance taken by the constructionalists such as Cicourel (1964) are also criticized for its narrow focus on the conversational skills of the participants in the interaction (interview). It has been also said that little attention is given to or the

lack of value to treat interview data as anything informative about any other reality than the interview itself. More “moderate” constructionalists accept the view that it is possible to still find some contextual-free value in the content of the interview data (“what was said”) along with the form and methods by which it was said (“how was said”). As Silverman (2001) suggests, the researchers are advised to find the most comfortable (not to the researchers but according to the research questions) combination of “what” and “how.” How much can we say about the social world that the interview participants create without importing external sources and social knowledge (Schegloff, 1990)? And how much do we, the analysts, automatically bring in such knowledge into our “objective” analysis? These are legitimate questions to consider, and perhaps are very important to have in mind at all times.

A pertinent approach that suits the constructionists’ conceptualization is Garfinkel’s (1967) ethnomethodology. In this approach, what they are concerned with is the basic properties of social interaction, asking “what are the resources and methods with which ordinary members go about making sense of the settings, the people, and the events they encounter?” (Baker, 2002). These questions remain the same, regardless of what kind of interactional occasions are the target of examination. This includes interviews. Baker (2002) demonstrates the constructionalists’ conceptualization “interview-as-local accomplishment” with interview data. Here is an example:

Example (1) Adopted from Baker (2002:198)

- 1 C: you spent a lot of time with some of those (0.2)
2 people
3 yesterday (.) a long time
4 P: you learn patience haha
5 C: boy
6 P: ha well it’s part of the job really (.) because
7 if I wasn’t on the phone to them (.)
8 I’d be on the phone to another customer
9 C: mm
10 P: anyway like I’d be sitting there on the phone anyway
[...]

Through C (the interviewer)’s “fishing” in line 1-2, how Pam thinks during these long calls, describing her motivations and the caller’s motivations and needs, both the interviewer and interviewee together work toward framing the interview to be

the “talk about profession from Pam’s perspective.” In other words the speakers negotiated how each participant of this interaction (interview) is to see the encounter as, and they together agreed to construct the activity as “talk about profession” through interaction.

Example (2) Adopted from Baker (2002:405)

M = Michele H = Hannah (15 yr old Vietnamese Immigrant)

- 1 M: Right OK OK. uhm, and what about your friends, Phon
2 and Ha, did they come here as refugees,
3 or they just moved over?
4 H: N:o, I think they were actually born here. I’m not too
5 sure. I think Phon might have actually moved over here,
6 and so did Ha.
7 But I don’t know-I don’t know much, I just know that
8 they-Ha’s come from Vietnam. Phon’s come from
9 Cambodia. That’s all I know.
10 M: Right. That’s all they’ve ever told you. Yeah yeah.
11 And sometimes it’s hard to ask people more.
12 H: Well I’ve never even really thought about it ((smiles))
13 M: Oh ((laughs)) No, no, I was just interested. Ok, and
14 if you had..

In this example, Baker demonstrates how H’s components that comprise her identity are being offered (“projected”) by the interviewer M several times (e.g., line 1 M assuming that H should know about other immigrant friends, or line 10-11, “H could not ask the question to her friends because it is a delicate matter”) whereas H rejects M’s projections (e.g., line 7 “I don’t know much.” and line 12 “I’ve never thought about it”). This piece illustrates well that the interviewer’s projections in the interview are non-passive.

7. Interviews and Sociolinguistic Awareness

One of the most insightful observations about research interviews have been provided by sociolinguists (Milroy, 1987; Labov, 1967; Churchill, 1978) and discourse analysts who have their orientation in sociolinguistic phenomena (Schiffrin, 1994). They made us recognize the wide range of genres within interviews, and that the variance could have a significant impact on the outcome of the interaction. Because

of their sensitivity to the contextual ingredients such as the participants' social status, gender, age, and cultural norms, the sociolinguists' findings on interviews are highly suggestive of complexity behind interview.

Another notion brought out by sociolinguists is a suggestion for sociological researchers in general; they emphasize that the researchers must have a good cultural knowledge before conducting an interview with the target informants, by conducting what Hymes (1972) and others call the "Ethnography of Communication." (Hymes, 1972; Milroy, 1987; Saville-Troike, 1989). The interviewer (or the researcher who wants to integrate interviews in his/her study) might need to become a "member" of a culture, that is, to be able to understand a range of contexts which provide possible readings of another's actions and words as expressions of particular "motives" or "intentions" (Hymes, 1964; Moerman, 1988). While acquiring the social order of the particular community through conducting ethnography, one will gradually learn the best ways to make an inquiry (Briggs, 1986; Eades, 2003). This point was well illustrated in Briggs' book *Learning How to Ask* (1986), in which Briggs discusses his novice experience in conducting research interviews among Spanish-speakers in northern New Mexico. By focusing on these errors and exploring how they may be avoided, he is able to propose new techniques for designing, implementing, and analyzing interview-based research. Initially, he had neither the appropriate social status nor the communicative skills in the local variety of Spanish that enabled him to ask suitable questions to the informants. What he needed to learn, in order to just "ask," was the culturally appropriate mode of what we in Western societies consider for "making inquiry." In this community, the mode was to watch, to listen, and to participate, but not to "ask." Briggs' case is an extreme one; however, what it provides us is that the researchers' blind choice for their methods to conduct "appropriate" interviews, in the format that the researcher would solely think would see as a communicative event, may not be always successful. When a researcher is interested in diving into a different social world, as I am, what Duranti (1997:103) calls "cultural ecology of interview" as discussed here is a rather crucial caveat to keep in mind.

8. Application

Given the above different views of interview data, a researcher must ask him/herself how to view the interviews as, and based on this conceptualization, how, practically speaking, interviews should be used in the research. Interviewing the

subjects often enables the researchers to elicit the emic, “final vocabulary” to account for what the particular behavior is about (Rorty, 1989). The members’ accounts are important; however, I endorse Duranti’s argument (1988) that they cannot by themselves constitute the only evidence of certain notions or practices. For instance, Duranti (1994) discovers dynamicity within a Samoan village council meetings called *fono*, which the local members all recognize. What Duranti’s direct observation of *fono* discovers is that there is a particular *discussion section* in *fono*, which is treated very differently as a (sub-)speech genre from the other sections of *fono* by the participants. There is no particular label in Samoan language given to this particular stage of *fono*, hence the informants in interviews were not able to tell Duranti of its existence. In sum, Duranti’s (1994) ethnographic observation of *fono* discovered the discussion section through his observations in addition to his inquiries. Duranti strongly emphasizes that the researcher must search for both direct and indirect evidence for certain patterns of behavior (Duranti, 1988:223). In order to pursue this interplay between the two, the combination of the two methods – interview and actual analysis of recorded data – seems to work successfully.

As Holstein and Gubrium (1997) put it, “understanding *how* the meaning-making process unfolds in the interview is as critical as apprehending *what* is substantively asked and conveyed.” (114). I agree to their suggestion here. Thus, in case where an interview is used to elicit certain information (*what*), we must also pay attention to *how* this answer was delivered to the interviewer (the researcher).

9. Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the various conceptualizations of interview data. What the overview in this paper seems to imply is that the different views of interviews are mere reflections of the researchers’ assumptions on what exactly “research” means. Whether researchers believe they are getting the “essential reality” out there or constructing a version of “reality” with the informants seem to be the critical point. I have provided a set of critiques for each conceptualization. Any researcher who wants to do a language-based study adopting interview as a method must make his/her stance in this issue. The decision may differ according to their research questions. What is important, regardless of the design, is to be fully cognizant of the limitations and benefits of interviews, and analyze the elicited information with care.

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