NEWS INTERVIEWS: A PRAGMALINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

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News Interviews: A Pragmalinguistic Analysis

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A PRAGMALINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

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TRANSCRIPTION NOTATIONS AND ABBREVIATIONS

,	tone unit boundary realised by a very brief pause (less than 0.2 sec), by lengthening of the preceding syllable, and/or by a marked step in pitch contour
.	brief pause (between ca. 0.2 and 0.5 sec)
..	pause (between ca. 0.6 and 1.0 sec)
[1.6]	pause longer than 1.0 sec
* ... *	simultaneous talk by two different speakers
[2 syll]	incomprehensible word(s) of approximately 2 syllables
< ... >	doubtful readings
:	lengthening of preceding sound
(laughs)	contextual remarks on paralinguistic features
++	end sign for paralinguistic features
(...)	material not relevant to the point under discussion, left out for brevity
CAPITALS	stress; i.e. syllable highlighted through pitch prominence and loudness (only indicated where relevant)
⁄ ; ＼ ; ⁄＼	rising/falling/rising-falling intonation contour (only indicated where relevant)
bold face	indication of the element under discussion
(I A 1)	reference mark for the individual interviews; it indicates that the excerpt thus marked is an attested example; unmarked data has been invented to illustrate an argument
*	ungrammatical sentence
•	impolite utterance
AAA	interviewer
>AAA	turn continuation of AAA, after an interruption or overlap
BBB, CCC	interviewee(s)
CP	Cooperative Principle (Grice 1975)
DOU	duration of utterance
DOU[A]	duration of utterance of AAA
DOU[B]	duration of utterance of BBB
FTA	Face Threatening Act (Brown & Levinson 1978)
p	probability coefficient
PM	BBC Radio 4 programme: "5 PM"

PP	Politeness Principle (Leech 1983)
r	correlation coefficient
RTL	reaction time latency
RTL[A]	reaction time latency of AAA
RTL[B]	reaction time latency of BBB
SSS	studio commentator
TO	BBC Radio 4 programme: "Today"
TRP	transition relevance point
WO	BBC Radio 4 programme: "The World at One"
WW	BBC Radio 4 programme: "The World this Weekend"

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Aim and Scope

Semantics answers the question 'What does X mean'; and is concerned with the inherent meaning of a linguistic unit (e.g. a word, a phrase or a sentence) without considering its realisation in a specific utterance made in a particular linguistic and non-linguistic context. Pragmatics, on the other hand, answers the question 'What did you mean by X', i.e. it tries to establish the meaning of a linguistic unit in a specific context uttered by a given speaker and addressed to a specific addressee or to specific addressees (cf. Leech 1983: 6).

Rules are not adequate to describe the meaning of X as used in a particular instance. As opposed to syntax and semantics, pragmatics is not rule-governed but principle-controlled. This assumption has several far-reaching consequences. The two most important ones read in Leech's (1983: 5) terms as follows:

1. "The rules of grammar are fundamentally conventional; the principles of general pragmatics are fundamentally non-conventional, *ie* motivated in terms of conversational goals.

2. In general, grammar is describable in terms of discrete and determinate categories; pragmatics is describable in terms of continuous and indeterminate values."

Thus pragmatics endeavours to establish a set of principles which are adhered to in ordinary conversation. However, it is never simply a choice between applying or not applying a certain principle. It is rather a matter of degree. One principle may apply, but only at a very low level, where another principle is dominant. In a different situation the priorities may easily be reversed. How are we then to justify the principles of our set? Their justification can only lie in the plausibility of the explanations offered by them. If they help to explain otherwise puzzling verbal behaviour in a plausible way, they have gone a

long way towards justifying themselves; until, of course, some other principle offers a more plausible explanation.

In recent years, there has been an ever growing interest in the study of pragmatics, even though a consensus about the exact nature of the field and how it is to be delimited does not seem to have been reached, and it is unlikely that such a consensus can be attained in the near future. As a recent case in point, the International Pragmatics Conference in Viareggio in September 1985 highlighted the diversity and multidisciplinarity of the field without being able to find the desired coherence embracing all the different approaches.

In spite of the numerous publications in pragmatics, there is a surprising lacuna of work combining more theoretical approaches, such as for instance Grice's principles of conversational inference, and empirical investigations of actual language as it is used. In an attempt to bridge this gap, two possible approaches may be mentioned. The first one would be to test one or two theoretical concepts against a wide variety of language data. Thus one might study the application of Grice's principles of conversational inference in everyday conversation between participants of equal or unequal status; in court-room interchanges; in class-room language; in phone-in programmes on the radio; and so on, ad infinitum. This procedure would safeguard the analyst from premature conclusions about the relative importance of individual theoretical concepts. What seems to be a paramount principle in one context may turn out to be relatively unimportant in other contexts. But at the same time the analyst could, and would have to, restrict himself or herself to relatively few well chosen concepts.

The other approach would be to select one specific context of language use and try to single out as many of the relevant pragmatic principles as possible. In this study, the second approach has been chosen. It takes the 'activity type' (cf. Levinson 1979) of news interviews as its basis of investigation. News interviews are subject to many restrictions. The number of the participants, their roles and even their respective contributions are specified in advance. As it is designed for a wider audience, it is also very formal, even though it is (one assumes) in most cases spontaneous speech. The aims and procedures of news interviews are likewise fairly clearly definable. Hang (1976) also restricts his analysis to one single text type because:

> Bevor nicht durch vergleichende Analysen erwiesen
> ist, dass keine relevanten Unterschiede zwischen
> Rundfunk- und Fernsehinterviews bestehen, erfordert
> meiner Meinung nach ein sauberes methodisches Ar-
> beiten die getrennte Untersuchung beider Textsorten.
> (Hang 1976: 61)

The limitation to such a restricted type of speech has obvi-
ous advantages and disadvantages. The results cannot be ex-
pected to be directly transferable to any other activity type.
On the other hand, the restriction to a rather formal, sometimes
even stereotypical, activity type clearly limits the number of
relevant factors which might influence the linguistic realisation.
If, for instance, interviews conducted in a face-to-face situation
are to be compared with telephone interviews, we can ascribe
the linguistic features that differ significantly from one type to
the other with a fair amount of certainty to precisely this non-
linguistic difference. It can be assumed that the other features,
e.g. the purpose of the conversation, the relative status of the
participants, the amount of preparation etc., are identical or at
least very similar. A comparison of other types of conversations
would have to reckon with a much higher number of influencing
factors, the exact number and nature of which are bound to be
very hard to pin-point. If two very similar conversations are
to be compared, the one in a face-to-face situation, the other
taking place on the telephone, for instance making an appoint-
ment with the dentist, one might believe at first sight that the
small number of features likely to vary would be the same.
However, on closer reflection, a number of factors present
themselves which might influence the linguistic behaviour and
which are not directly connected with the difference between
the face-to-face as opposed to the telephone situation. The per-
son making the appointment might feel hurried in the face-to-
face situation because he/she can see other people waiting to be
attended to, something which cannot normally be detected on
the telephone. Or he/she might be impatient because of having
had to wait for some time, whereas telephones tend to be an-
swered more or less immediately. Or, on the other hand, the
person on the telephone might feel hurried, thinking of the
phone bill (especially if worrying about the imminent dentist's
bill at the same time). Thus the influencing factors may be so
varied and numerous as to escape any attempt at a systematic
description. In interviews, on the other hand, there are so

many restrictions that it is more feasible to locate the relevant
influencing factors if two sets of interviews are compared, e.g.
interviews conducted over a telephone line and interviews con-
ducted in a face-to-face situation.

Thus news interviews show communicative behaviour in la-
boratory conditions where as many influencing factors as possi-
ble are kept stable so that the influence of one specific factor
at a time can be tested.

The overall aims of this study must therefore be twofold.
One of its aims is descriptive; it wants to describe as many lin-
guistically relevant aspects of news interviews as possible. The
other aim is more theoretical in nature. It endeavours to test
some of the relevant pragmatic concepts by applying them to my
data, and in the process it will become necessary to suggest
various modifications of the available methodology. Thus no at-
tempt is made to establish a revolutionary new theory of prag-
matics. It is hoped that this study will prove useful in its com-
bination of a number of different theoretical concepts, and
above all in the application of the latter to language data pro-
duced in a well defined situation for a particular audience, by
participants whose respective roles are defined by the context
of the activity type.

In this first chapter, I give a general description of the ac-
tivity type of news interviews. For example, how is it to be
distinguished from other kinds of radio programmes; and how is
it to be distinguished from other types of interviews, i.e. job
interviews, cross examinations in courts, doctor-patient consul-
tations, police interrogations etc.

After these mostly pre-theoretical considerations, four diffe-
rent approaches to the study of language use will be presented
and discussed from the point of view of their usefulness for a
description of the activity type of news interviews.

Chapter 2 tries to single out some of the factors that influ-
ence the length of the turns of interviewers and interviewees
respectively. It appears that the average duration of the utter-
ances made by the interviewee correlates with the average du-
ration of the utterances made by the interviewer, i.e. if an in-
terviewer usually asks rather long questions, he/she will
usually get rather long answers, the interviewee's utterances
being on an average between four and six times longer than the
interviewer's utterances. It might be expected that the channel
of communication between the two participants would also influ-
ence the duration of the utterances. And it might also be ex-

pected that interviewees would behave differently on the tele-
phone or over a studio line in the absence of any visual cues
from the interviewer. My results, however, will show that this
is not the case.

Chapter 3 analyses the overall structure of news interviews.
Whereas chapters 2 and 3 are largely, albeit not exclusively,
descriptive, chapters 4 to 6 are more clearly devoted to theo-
retical considerations. Chapter 4 shows how the principles of
conversational inference as established by Grice (1975), Leech
(1983), and others, can be applied to actual language as used
in news interviews. It turns out that most of the principles as
formulated by Grice and Leech play only a minor role. Goff-
man's (1967) notion of 'face', as revised by Brown and Levinson
(1978), on the other hand, proves to be particularly relevant in
news interviews. Many aspects of interviews can be shown to be
directly influenced by the participants' consideration of each
other's face-wants. On this basis, 13 ways are established in
which an interviewer can threaten an interviewee's face.

Chapters 5 and 6 are devoted to questions and answers re-
spectively. Chapter 5 considers the syntactic constructions in
which questions are formed and, more particularly, the various
devices that reduce the potentially face-threatening force of
questions. Chapter 6 analyses the vagueness of answers. It
shows how interviewees are often inexplicit in their answers,
and how they avoid committing themselves. This can be seen,
among other elements, in the use of parenthetical verbs and
particles like *well, now,* and *well now*.

1.2   The Corpus

The main corpus of this study consists of 111 news interviews
lasting a total of 7 hours 3 minutes 5 seconds. They were all
produced and broadcast by BBC Radio 4 as part of their daily
news programmes. The main part of the corpus (78 interviews)
was recorded during January and February 1984. 15 interviews
were recorded in December 1982, and 18 during July and Au-
gust 1984. 52 interviews were part of the morning programme
"Today" (daily programme from 6.30 am to 8.50 am); 42 were
part of the lunch-time programme "The World at One: News"
(daily programme from 1.0 pm to 1.40 pm); 14 of the weekly
"The World this Weekend" (on Sundays from 1.0 pm to 1.40
pm); and 3 of the early evening programme "5 PM" (daily pro-
gramme from 5.0 pm to 5.50 pm). In the programme "Today"

there are always two presenters, whereas the other three pro-
grammes are presented by one journalist only. The following ta-
ble shows the distribution of the interviews of my corpus over

Date of Recording	TO	WO	WW	PM	Total
Dec 1982	12	3	-	-	15
Jan/Feb 1984	40	26	9	3	78
Jul/Aug 1984	-	13	5	-	18
Total	52	42	14	3	111

Table 1: Number of interviews

the four programmes and the three recording periods. The av-
erage duration of an interview is 3 min 49 sec. The longest in-
terview lasts 7 min 40 sec and the shortest 1 min 10 sec. The
great majority of interviews, however, last between 2 and 5
min.

1.3 Problems of Definition

> The news interview is a functionally specialized form
> of social interaction produced for an overhearing au-
> dience and restricted by institutionalized conventions.
> (Heritage 1985: 112)

The restriction to *news* interviews excludes a wide range of in-
terviews on two different levels. First of all, it is a restriction
to interviews broadcast to a wider public and therefore it ex-
cludes job interviews, doctor-patient consultations, police inter-
rogations and the like. On another level, all interviews are ex-
cluded that are not part of a news programme. This latter
restriction carries both a restriction as to the length of the in-
terviews - they are usually rather short - and a restriction as
to the possible topic. Interviews which are only interested in
the personality of the interviewee, such as, for instance, inter-
views with people from show business, are excluded.

In the main body of this study, I want to explore some of the constraints involved in this particular activity type. Thus attention has to be paid to the danger of including some of these constraints, even intuitively obvious ones, in the definition itself. For example, one might define interviews as displaying various features, one being that it consists of a sequence of questions and answers. Or one might define it in some other way and then conclude from the available evidence that interviews are usually realised in terms of questions and answers. The former solution is clearly undesirable because it makes some pretheoretical claims about the linguistic structure of news interviews. Furthermore, any claims as to the question-answer structure of interviews would be rendered vacuous if this question-answer structure were already part of the definition. A definition has to be restricted to non-linguistic factors such as the *medium* in which it is realised; the *participants*, both active and passive, the *topic-coherence* and some aspects of the *form*.

1.3.1 *Medium*

As I pointed out in the introduction, I only take radio news interviews into consideration. Hence, the medium and part of the situation are given in advance. Any type of conversation broadcast on radio involves a two dyadic situation. There are the active participants, whose verbal contributions are recorded and broadcast, and then there is the large and anonymous audience of listeners tuned in to the relevant station at that particular moment. Only occasionally is the audience allowed to participate actively in phone-in programmes (cf. Leitner 1983). Thus every contribution made by the participants is at the same time addressed to the communication partners and to the passive audience of listeners. The communicative medium in the studio varies. In the interviews of my corpus, three types can be distinguished.

1. Interviewer and interviewee are both in the studio and the interview is conducted in a face-to-face situation.

2. Interviewer and interviewee are in two different studios or the interviewee is in a mobile radio car; the interview is not conducted in a face-to-face situation.

3. The interviewee speaks over the telephone; again the
    two participants are not in a face-to-face situation.

There are always clear indications as to the type to which indi-
vidual interviews belong.

(1) AAA   (...) and thousands of pensioners are going to
          Westminster today to lobby against it [the reduction
          of concessionary rates] . prominent among them will
          be that veteran campaigner Mr Jack Jones who's with
          us now (III A 2)

(2) AAA   (...) well Professor Denvon is in our Cambridge
          studio now good morning Professor (IV A 3)

(3) AAA   (...) well hopefully sitting in our , radio car in
          Whitehall is the Home Secretary himself . Mr Brittan
          , good morning Home Secretary (IV B 1)

(4) AAA   Sir Peter Scott(...) he's on the line now Sir Peter
          good morning (III B 3)

In the case of interviews conducted over the telephone, an ex-
plicit indication of the situation is sometimes missing because
the markedly different sound quality of the voices already
makes it clear to the audience that they are listening to a tele-
phone interview and not to an interview recorded in a face-to-

	TO	WO	WW	PM	Total
face-to-face	30	30	12	2	74
remote	13	1	-	-	14
telephone	9	11	2	1	23

Table 2: Number of interviews according to the communicative
situation

face situation. Table 2 shows the number of interviews of my
corpus carried out in the different communication channels, as
found in the four different programmes.

1.3.2 *Participants*

As has already been pointed out, there is always a two dyadic
system involved in radio interviews. There are the two active
participants, who talk and who respond to some extent at least
to what the other participant says. Their utterances are always
directed at both their communication partners and the audience
listening to the programme. They alternate as speaker and ad-
dressee, whereas the audience is invariably restricted to the
role of addressees. It is the role of the interviewer to elicit
information of some kind from the interviewee. Heritage (1985:
96-101) shows that in natural conversation answers are often
acknowledged by the questioner with a 'third turn receipt ob-
ject' like *oh really, mm hm, did she*, or *how exciting*. In news
interviews,   however,   these   objects   are   entirely   absent.
"Through the avoidance of the third-turn receipt objects char-
acteristic of question-answer sequences in natural conversation,
questioners decline the role of report recipient while maintaining
the role of report elicitor" (Heritage 1985: 100).

   Goffman (1981: 226) points out that the term 'speaker' is
used in several senses. He therefore makes a distinction be-
tween 'animator', 'author' and 'principal'. 'Animator' stands for
the person whose articulatory organs produce an utterance;
'author' is the person who puts it together or composes it; and
the 'principal' is the person or party to whose position, stand
and belief it attests. In everyday conversation all three
usually come together in one individual. In many situations,
however, this is not the case. An actor is only an animator for
lines someone else has written. A lawyer in a court room is
both author and animator of his utterances, but his client is
the principal. News readers and interviewers on radio or TV
are characteristically not the principals of their utterances;
they speak on behalf of wider principals such as the station,
the audience or the nation at large, whether they read their
own script and thus act both as author and animator, or wheth-
er they read someone else's script.

   Useful as this distinction is, there are some shortcomings in
the case of interviewers and interviewees. Even though the in-
terviewer basically speaks on behalf of the station or the audi-
ence, he/she can adopt different positions according to what in-
terviewee he/she is dealing with. Interviewers often confront
their interviewees with opposing views, thus talking for the
principal of the interviewee's critics or political opponents (cf.
chapter 5, "The Force of Questions").