As Michael Moerman once commented: 'Folk beliefs have honourable status but they are not the same intellectual object as a scientific analysis' (Moerman: 1974, 55).

Exercise 3.6

This exercise encourages you to use the 'alternative' version of describing family life.

Imagine that you wish to do an observational study of the family. Now consider the following questions:

1 What are the advantages and disadvantages of obtaining access to the family household?
2 In what ways may families be studied outside the household setting? What methodology might you use and what questions could you ask?
3 What might observation tell you about 'the family' in each of the following settings:
   - law courts
   - doctor–patient consultations
   - television soap-operas?

   (EITHER do a study of ONE of these settings OR write hypothetically about all THREE.)
4 What does it mean to say you are studying 'the family' (i.e. within inverted commas)?

4

Texts

British and American social scientists have never been entirely confident about analysing texts. Perhaps, in (what the French call) the Anglo-Saxon cultures, words seem too ephemeral and insubstantial to be the subject of scientific analysis. It might seem better, then, to leave textual analysis to literary critics and to concentrate on definite social phenomena, like actions and the structures in which they are implicated.

This uncertain, occasionally cavalier, attitude to language is reflected in the way in which so many sociological texts begin with fairly arbitrary definitions of their 'variables'. The classic model is Durkheim's *Suicide* which offers a 'conclusive' definition of the phenomenon in its first few pages and then rushes off to investigate it in these terms. As Atkinson (1978) has pointed out, this method rules out entirely any analysis of the very social processes through which suicide is socially defined – particularly in the context of coroners' own definitional practices.

In most sociology, then, words are important simply as a jumping-off point for the real analysis. Where texts are analysed, they are usually presented as 'official' or 'common-sense' versions of social phenomena, to be undercut by the underlying social phenomena displayed in the sociologist's analysis of social structures. The model is: people *say* X, but we can *show* that Y is the case.

There are four exceptions to this general rule:

Content Analysis

Content analysis is an accepted method of textual investigation, particularly in the field of mass communications. It involves establishing categories and then counting the number of instances when those categories are used in a particular item of text, for instance a newspaper report.

Content analysis pays particular attention to the issue of the *reliability* of its measures – ensuring that different researchers use them in the same way – and to the *validity* of its findings – through precise counts of word use (see Selltiz *et al*: 1964, 335–342). However, its theoretical basis is unclear and its conclusions can often be trite. Because it is a quantitative method, it will not be discussed in detail in this text. However, I will later present a study of political articles (Silverman: 1982) which combines qualitative textual analysis with some simple word-counts.

Ethnography

As we saw in Chapter 3, ethnographers seek to understand the organisation of social action in particular settings. Most ethnographic data are based on observation of what people are saying and doing (and of the territories in which this talk and action takes place). However, in literate societies, written accounts are an important feature of many settings, as Hammersley and Atkinson (1983, 128) point out. Therefore, ethnographers must not neglect the way in which documents, tables and even advertisements and cartoons exemplify certain features of those settings. More recently, as we shall see, what Dingwall (1981) calls ethnomethodological ethnography has provided an analytic framework for the analysis of texts. In the work of Garfinkel (1967) and Zimmerman (1974), for instance, attention has been paid to the common-sense practices involved in assembling and interpreting written records. This work has refused to reduce texts to a secondary status and has made an important contribution to our understanding of everyday bureaucratic practices.

Semiotics

Anglo-Saxon culture, in which these first two approaches have arisen, makes clear-cut disciplinary boundaries. Perhaps this is why, generally speaking, 'words' are allocated to the humanities and 'structures' to the sciences. French culture, on the contrary, creates unities around 'methods' rather than disciplines. We shall shortly see how concepts deriving from the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure provided a vital apparatus for the analysis of texts. The signal contribution of Saussure was to generate a method which showed that 'structures' and 'words' are inseparable.

Ethnomethodology

Following Garfinkel (1967), ethnomethodology attempts to understand 'folk' (*ethno*) methods (*methodology*) for organising the world. It locates these methods in the skills ('artful practices') through which people come to develop an understanding of each other and of social situations. Following an important paper by Sacks (1974), a major focus of ethnomethodology has been on the skills we all use in producing and understanding descriptions – from a remark in a conversation to a newspaper headline. I will, therefore, conclude this chapter by an account of Sacks' concept of 'membership categorisation'.

Ethnographic Analysis

The presence and significance of documentary products provides the ethnographer with a rich vein of analytic topics, as well as a valuable source of information. Such topics include: How are documents written? How are they read? Who writes them? Who reads them? For what purposes? On what occasions? With what outcomes? What is recorded? What is omitted? What is taken for granted? What does the writer seem to take for granted about the reader(s)? What do readers need to know in order to make sense of them? (Hammersley and Atkinson: 1983, 142–143)

Hammersley and Atkinson show the many interesting questions that can be asked about documents. In this section, I will examine some of the answers that ethnographers have given to these questions. This will involve a consideration of different kinds of documents, taken in the following order:

- files
- statistical records
- records of official proceedings
- images.

It should be stressed that this is not a hard-and-fast or an all-embracing list of every kind of document. It is organised in this way purely for ease of presentation. Nonetheless, the discussion that follows tries consistently to pursue the analytic issues involved in dealing with data. Although there are always practical problems which arise in data-analysis and techniques that can offer assistance, methodological problems should never be reduced to merely practical issues and 'recipe' solutions.

For instance, people who generate and use such documents are concerned with how accurately they *represent* reality. Conversely, ethnographers are concerned with the *social organisation* of documents, irrespective of whether they are accurate or inaccurate, true or biased.

Files

Like all documents, files are produced in particular circumstances for particular audiences. Files never speak for themselves. The ethnographer seeks to understand both the format of the file (for instance, the categories used on blank printed sheets) and the processes associated with its completion.

Selection interviews provide a good example of a setting where an interaction is organised, at least in part, by reference to the categories to be found on some document that will later constitute a 'file'. For instance, a large British local government organisation used the following record of job-selection interviews with candidates in their final year at university:

Name
Appearance
Acceptability
Confidence
Effort
Organisation
Motivation

Any other comments
(Silverman and Jones: 1976)

Following Hammersley and Atkinson's set of questions (above), the ethnographer can immediately ask about which items are represented on this list and which are omitted. For instance, the fact that 'appearance' and 'acceptability' are cited and located at the top of the list, while 'ability' is omitted, gives us clues about the culture of the organisation. So: 'successful candidates will be recognised in their preparedness to defer to "common sense" and to the accumulated wisdom of their seniors; to "sell themselves" without implying that a university degree provides any more than a basis for further training' (Silverman and Jones: 1976, 31).

Some of this is seen in the completed file of one (unsuccessful) applicant to whom we gave a fictitious name – see Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: *A Completed Selection Form*

Name: Chadwick
Appearance: Tall, slim, spotty-faced, black hair, dirty grey suit
Acceptability: Non-existent. Rather uncouth
Confidence: Awful. Not at all sure of himself
Effort: High
Organisation: Poor
Motivation: None really that counts
Any other comments: Reject

Source: Silverman and Jones: 1976, 31–32

It is tempting to treat such completed forms as providing the *causes* of selection decisions. However, two important points must be borne in mind before we rush to such a conclusion. First, such forms provide 'good reasons' for any selection decision. This means that we expect the elements of the form to 'fit' the decision recorded. For instance, we would be surprised if the 'reject' decision had been preceded by highly favourable comments about the candidate.

Thus the language of 'acceptability' provides a rhetoric through which selectors define the 'good sense' of their decision-making. It does not *determine* the outcome of the decision. A telling example of this was provided when we played back tapes of selection interviews to selectors several months later without meeting the selectors' request to remind them of their decision. Predictably, on hearing the tapes, selectors often made a different decision than they had made at the time. Nevertheless, when told of their earlier decision, they were able to adjust their comments to take account of it. The 'acceptability' criterion (and its converse 'abrasiveness') thus served more as a means to 'rewrite history' (Garfinkel:1967) than as a determinant of a particular selection decision.

The second point is that the files themselves are not simple 'records' of events but are artfully constructed with a view to how they may be read. For instance, in a study of a promotion panel at the same organisation, I showed how the committee organised their discussion in a way which made their eventual decision appear to be sound. In particular, I identified a three-stage process:

1 Beginning with premises all can accept (e.g. 'facts' everyone can agree upon).
2 Appealing to rules in ways which make sense in the present context.
3 Reaching conclusions demonstrably grounded in the rules as applied to the facts (Silverman: 1975b).

In order to produce 'sound' decisions, committees attend to relevant background circumstances which shape how 'facts' are to be seen. For instance, in the case of one candidate who had not made much progress, the following was said:

Chair: and, um, is no doubt handicapped in, you know, his career development by the fact that that Department suddenly ha, ha
?: yes, yes
Chair: came to an end and he was, had to be pitched forth somewhere

Even when the facts are assembled, they ask themselves further questions about what the facts 'really mean'. For instance:

May: He's been there a long while in this job has he not? Does he do it in exactly the same way as when he started?

Or again:

May: supposing he had people under his control who needed the softer form of encouragement (. . .) assistance rather than pushing and driving; could he handle that sort of situation?
?: Yes, and not only could he, but he has done
May: He has, ah good (adapted from Silverman and Jones: 1976, 157–158)

Gubrium and Buckholdt's (1982) study of a U.S. rehabilitation hospital shows that a concern to assemble credible files may be a common feature of organisational activities. The authors show how hospital staff select, exchange and present information about the degree of physical disability and rehabilitation of patients and potential patients. Like reports of selection interviews, such descriptions are never context-free but are assembled or 'worked up' with reference to some audience: 'staff members work up descriptions of activities . . . using their knowledge of audience relevance in organising what they say and write' (Gubrium and Buckholdt: 1982, ix).

I will briefly illustrate such 'work up' in the context of what the authors call 'third-party description'. This refers to descriptions assembled for insurers and U.S. government agencies rather than for patients or their families.

Exercise 4.1

The following is a completed selector's report using the same form as found in Table 4.1:

Name: Fortescue

Appearance: Tall, thin, straw-coloured hair. Neat and tidy

Acceptability: High. Pleasant, quite mature sensible man

Confidence: Very good. Not conceited but firm, put himself across very well

Effort: Excellent academic record

Organisation: Excellent, both at school and university

Motivation: Keen on administration and very well informed on it. Has had considerable experience. Quite well informed about both Organisation and its functions generally.

Any other comments: Call for interview. First-rate.

1. What conclusions may be drawn from how the selector has completed this form (e.g. what sort of features does he find praiseworthy or not needing comment?)?
2. Does the completed form help us in understanding why certain candidates are selected at this organisation? If so, how? If not, why not?
3. If you were told that this selector came to a different decision when played a tape-recording of the same interview some months later, what would you make of this fact? What sociological questions could be asked now?

Rehabilitation at the hospital was paid for through government funds (via Medicare and Medicaid programmes) and insurance companies. An essential constraint, established by the U.S. Congress in 1972 was a review agency called the Professional Standards Review Organization (PSRO). The PSRO looks at decision-making over patient intake and discharge with a view to limiting costs. For instance, the acceptable average stay for a rehabilitation patient had been calculated at thirty-eight days.

A further constraint on the organisation of patient care was two rules of insurance companies. First, the hospital's charges would not be paid if a patient could not have rehabilitation because of additional medical problems (e.g. pneumonia). Second, if a patient's stay is very short, the insurance company may decide, retrospectively, that the patient should not have been admitted in the first place. These constraints shape how admissions are organised and how patient 'progress' is described.

Admissions staff have to make an initial decision about whether or not a

potential patient is suitable for rehabilitation or needs other services involving chronic or acute care. A rule of thumb when considering whether a patient should be admitted is that the patient should be able to benefit from at least three hours of therapy per day. However, staff recognise that the files they are sent are not conclusive and may 'shade the truth'. For instance, another institution may wish to discharge the patient or the family may have exerted pressure for a transfer to the rehabilitation hospital. Consequently, admissions staff appeal to 'experience' and 'professional discretion' in working out what a potential patient's notes 'really mean'.

Appealing to these kinds of grounds, staff establish a basis for deciding what is 'really' meant by any file. Thus, in sorting out 'facts' from 'fancy', participants use a body of interpretive and rhetorical resources to define what will constitute 'reality' or 'the bottom line'.

Once a patient is admitted, the 'work-up' of descriptions continues. 'Progress notes' are prepared at regular intervals and staff work at making them internally consistent and appropriate to the recommendation (just like selectors). For instance, staff talk about 'the need to make sure that the figures tell the right story' and regularly try out their accounts on colleagues by asking 'how does that sound?'. The institutional interest is to show some sort of progress which will be sufficient to satisfy the funding agencies. Consequently, there is a pressure to identify simple problems where progress can readily be made and to seek patient statements which accord with the therapist's version of progress.

Gubrium and Buckholdt's work shows that hospital files can be treated as the outcome of a series of staff decisions grounded in the contingencies of their work. Similarly, Silverman and Jones reveal how records of selection interviews satisfy organisational conceptions of what is appropriate.

Both studies confirm that qualitative researchers are not primarily concerned with whether files are factually 'true' or 'false'. Instead, they focus on how such files reveal the practical decision-making of employees in the context of the constraints and contingencies of their work.

Statistical Records

Until the 1960s, official statistics, like files, were treated as a more or less accurate *representation* of a stable reality. Of course, this did not mean that their reliability or validity was taken for granted. Particular statistics or measures were often found to be of dubious scientific status. However, it tended to be assumed, in these cases, that such data or measures could always be improved.

The 1960s saw a massive shift of focus among sociologists as documented below:

- Cicourel and Kitsuse (1963) showed how school statistics on educational performance depended upon the organised, practical judgments of school staff.
- Garfinkel (1967) revealed how coroners writing death certificates formulated accounts 'of how death *really*-for-all-practical-purposes happened' (12). As Garfinkel noted, 'really' in these cases, referred, unavoidably, to common-sense understandings in the context of organisational contingencies.
- Sudnow (1968a) showed how hospital 'death' was recognised, attended to and disattended to by hospital staff.
- Sudnow (1968b) revealed that U.S. criminal statistics depended, in part, on a socially organised process of 'plea bargaining' through which defendants were encouraged to plead guilty.

Now, of course, many of these processes had already been recognised by sociologists and demographers. The difference was that such processes were no longer viewed as 'problems' which distorted the validity or reliability of official statistics. Instead, they were now treated in their own right, not as distortions of the phenomena they ostensibly measured but as *constitutive* of those phenomena. In other words, inspired by these studies, many sociologists now treated such phenomena ('death', 'guilt', 'ability') as *arising* within the very record-keeping activity which was supposed passively to record them.

This shift of focus did not mean that demography, based on official statistics, suddenly became worthless. As Hindess (1973) showed, one can pay attention to the social context of statistical production and still make use of statistics for both practical and analytical purposes. So the work that developed out of the insights of the 1960s is properly seen as having taken a divergent but non-competitive path to the continuing studies based on the use of official statistics.

For instance, Prior (1987) follows Garfinkel by looking at how 'deaths' are investigated by coroners. Prior puts it this way:

> men are more likely to have their deaths investigated, and to have their deaths regarded as 'unnatural', than are women. The same is true of the middle class as against the working class, the married as against the unmarried, widowed or single, and the economically active as against the inactive. (368)

However, in the case of decisions to do a post-mortem (autopsy) after 'violent' deaths, Prior finds that the figures go in the other direction: manual workers and the single, widowed or divorced are more likely to have an autopsy than the middle class or married.

Prior suggests that coroners use their 'common-sense knowledge' to treat sudden and violent death as more suspicious among the former groups. Although autopsy is generally more common after a death defined as 'violent', Prior notes that: 'in its search for the origins of death, forensic pathology tends to reserve the scalpel as an investigatory instrument for distinct and specific segments of the population' (371).

The implication is that statistical tables about causes of death are themselves the outcome of a decision-making process which needs to be described. Consequently, for the qualitative researcher, statistics, like files, raise fundamental questions about the processes through which they are produced.

Exercise 4.2

In a discussion of how records are assembled on 'juvenile delinquents' in the U.S. justice system, Cicourel (1968) considers the case of Linda, aged 13. Linda first came to the attention of the police when she reported that she had been kidnapped by four boys. She said that she had been coaxed away from a party by them and admitted that she had told them that she would get drunk and then have sexual intercourse with one of them. After stealing some alcohol, the boys took her to a club where they all got drunk and she had sex with the youngest boy. Although the boys sought to depict Linda as a 'slut', the police viewed Linda as an 'attractive' victim with no prior record. However, some weeks later, acting on information from Linda's parents, the police saw Linda in a drunken state and obtained an admission that she had had sex with ten boys. She was now charged as in danger of leading a 'lewd and immoral life'.

Here are extracts from an interview between Linda (L) and a female Probation Officer (PO) after Linda's arrest:

1 PO: You're not pregnant?
2 L: No
3 PO: Have you used anything to prevent a pregnancy?
4 L: Once X (one of her boyfriends) used one of those things
5 PO: Did you ever feel scared about getting pregnant?
6 L: No, I was always trying to get even with my parents
7 PO: You sort of wanted to get even with them?
8 L: Yes. I always wanted to get even with other people. My
9 mother gets mad at me. I love my father. I know that's
10 what's wrong with me. I talk about this with my parents.
11 I don't know why.

The Probation Officer's report suggests that Linda needs psychotherapy and suggests that she be institutionalised for three to six months' treatment.

1 How does the PO organise her questioning to support her eventual recommendation?
2 Is there any evidence that Linda is colluding with the PO in a particular interpretation of her past behaviour?

Public Records

Public or official records are not limited to statistical tables. A common feature of democracies is a massive documentation of official business covering legal proceedings, certain business meetings and the work of parliaments and parliamentary committees.

Such public records constitute a potential goldmine for sociological investigation. First, they are relevant to important issues – revealing how public and private agencies account for, and legitimate, their activities. Second, they are accessible; the field researcher does not have the problem, so common in observational work, of negotiating access.

Despite the potential of such work, it has been sadly neglected by field researchers. However, an important, relatively new source of studies in this area has been provided by the journal *Discourse and Society*.

I will take just one example: a study of the 1973 Watergate Hearings in the U.S. Congress. Molotch and Boden (1985) show how their work on the text of these hearings arises in the context of a debate about the nature of power. They are not concerned with explicit power battles or with the ability to set agendas. Instead, they are concerned with a 'third face of power': 'the ability to determine the very grounds of the interactions through which agendas are set and outcomes determined . . . the struggle over the linguistic premises upon which the legitimacy of accounts will be judged' (273).

As they show, a problem resolved in all talk is that, while accounts are context-bound, a determinate account has 'somehow' to be achieved (see Garfinkel: 1967). Molotch and Boden apply this insight to the interrogation of President Nixon's counsel (John Dean) by a pro-Nixon Senator (Sen. Gurney). Dean had made public charges about the involvement of the White House in the Watergate 'cover-up'. Gurney's strategy is to define Dean as someone who avoids 'facts' and just relies upon 'impressions'. This is seen in the following extract:

(G = Sen. Gurney; D = John Dean) (Transcription conventions are given in Chapter 6, p. 118)

G: Did you dis*cuss* any aspects of the *Water*gate at that meeting with the President? For example, did you *tell* him anything about (1.4) what *Halde*man *knew* of or what Ehrlichman knew?
D: Well, given the– given the fact that he *told* me I've done a good job I assumed he had been very pleased with what ha– what had been going on
. . .
G: Did you discuss what Magruder knew about Watergate and what involvement *he* had?
D: No, I didn't. I didn't get into any – I did not give him a report at that point in time
G: Did you discuss *cover*-up money *money* that was being raised and paid?
D: No, sir
. . .
G: Well now how can you say that the President knew all about these *things*

from a *simple* observation by him that 'Bob tells me you are doing a good job'?
(Molotch and Boden: 1985, 280, adapted)

As Molotch and Boden show, Gurney's strategy is to insist on literal accounts of 'facts' not 'impressionistic' ones. Throughout this extract, for instance, Gurney demands that Dean state that he actually discussed the cover-up with Nixon. When Dean is unable to do this, Gurney imposes limits on Dean's ability to appeal to a context (Dean's 'assumptions') which might show that Dean's inferences were correct.

However, as Gurney knows, all accounts can be defeated by demonstrating that *at some point*, since they depend upon knowing the context, they are not 'really objective'. Hence: 'Demands for "just the facts", the simple answers, the forced-choice response, preclude the "whole story" that contains another's truth . . . [consequently] Individuals can participate in their own demise through the interactional work they do' (*ibid*, 285).

Exercise 4.3

Here is a further extract from the Watergate Hearings. At this point, Dean is trying to implicate Nixon in the 'cover-up' operation:

D: When I discussed with him (Nixon) the fact that I thought
he ought to be *aware* of the fact I thought I had been
involved in the obstruction of *justice* . . . He told me,
John, you don't have any legal problems to worry about
. . .
G: Did you discuss any *specific* ob– instances of *obstruction*
of justice?
(1.3)
D: Well, I'd– Senator, from– *based* on conversations I'd had
with him– I had worked from–
G: I am talking about *this* meeting.
D: Yes, I understand. I'm answering your *question*. Uh– the–
eh–you c– y– I can *tell* when– when uh I am *talking* with
somebody if they have some conception of what I am
talking about– I had the *impression* that the President
had some *conception* of what I was talking ab[out
G: [But I am not
talking about *impressions*. That is what I am trying to
get *away* from. (0.8) I am talking about specific
instances

1 Using this material, show what strategies Sen. Gurney is using to discredit John Dean's evidence
2 Show how Dean tries to sustain the credibility of what he is saying
3 Why might Dean's appeal to what 'I can tell when I am talking with somebody' be seen as 'a risky strategy' by Molotch and Boden?

Visual Images

Images are another neglected source of data for field research. There are both good and bad reasons for this neglect:

1 In societies where television is central to leisure, there are grounds to believe that, somewhat ironically, we have become lazy with our eyes. Thus what we see is taken for granted and our first thought tends to associate social research with what we can read (texts, statistics) or hear (interviews, conversations).
2 The analysis of images raises complex methodological and theoretical issues. Thus it is difficult, but not impossible, to transcribe images as well as words (see Peräkylä and Silverman: 1991b). Moreover, the theoretical basis for the analysis of images is complex. The two very different traditions of semiotics (see Barthes: 1967) and conversation analysis (see Chapter 6) offer competing ways into such work.
3 It is sometimes argued that attention to the image alone can detract attention from the social processes involved in image-production and image-reception. For instance, Slater (1989) argues that semiotic analysis of advertisements has neglected the way in which such images are shaped by the economic logic and social organisation of the relationship between advertising agencies and their clients. A similar argument lies behind the switch of film analysis in the 1980s away from the semiotics of film and towards understanding the logic of movie-production in terms of such structures as the studio system.

Nonetheless, despite these problems, the analysis of images has provoked much interesting work. This ranges from advertisements (e.g. Barthes, 1972 analysis of a pasta ad), to films (e.g. Silverman's: 1993 analysis of the film *Bad Timing*), to parenting manuals (e.g. Dingwall *et al*: 1991).

Once again, I have space for only one example. This is Emmison's (1983) fine analysis of cartoons about the economy. According to his analysis, it turns out that there are at least three phases in how 'the economy' is represented:

1 Before the 1930s, 'economy' refers only to the classical notion of 'economising' through cutting back unnecessary expenditure.
2 In the 1930s, Keynesian ideas about a national economic structure, able to be modified by government intervention, start to be represented. Thus a contemporary cartoon shows 'Slump' as a half-ghost, half-scarecrow figure, while a jaunty Father Christmas dismisses the slump with a wave of his hand. For the first time, then, 'the economy' becomes embodied (as a sick person) and collective solutions to economic problems are implied (Father Christmas dispensing gifts via government spending).
3 By the 1940s, the economy is understood as a fully collective, embodied being. Often cartoons of that period use animals to represent both the economy and economic policy. One cartoon depicts the economy as a sea-monster. Another shows the Budget as a box of snakes charmed by a finance minister.

As already noted, however, one of the difficulties in working with images is the range of complex theoretical traditions available. One tradition that has been used to considerable effect in this area is concerned with the analysis of sign systems. Following Saussure, it has now been called semiotics.

Semiotics

Stubbs (1981) has criticised the *ad hoc* selection of linguistic units for study. Before this century, however, such an approach was the accepted form of analysis. Linguistics viewed language as an aggregate of units (words), each of which had a separate meaning attached to it. Linguistic research concentrated on historical changes in the meanings of words.

In the early years of this century, Saussure revolutionised this approach. Hawkes (1977) has identified the two crucial aspects of Saussure's reform of linguistic research:

1 His rejection of a substantantive view of language – concerned with the correspondence between individual words and their meanings – in favour of a relational view, stressing the system of relations between words as the source of meaning.
2 His shift away from historical or 'diachronic' analysis towards an analysis of language's present functioning (a 'synchronic' analysis). No matter what recent change a language has undergone, it remains, at any given point in time, a complete system. As Hawkes puts it: 'Each language has a wholly valid existence apart from its history as a system of sounds issuing from the lips of those who speak it now' (1977, 20).

Saussure now makes a distinction between language (*langue*) and speech (*parole*). We need to distinguish the system of language (*langue*) from the actual speech acts (*parole*) that any speaker actually utters. The latter are not determined by language, which solely provides the system of elements in terms of which speech occurs. Saussure uses the analogy of a chess game to explain this. The rules and conventions of chess constitute a language (*langue*) within which actual moves (*parole*) take place. For Saussure, the linguist's primary concern is not to describe *parole* but to establish the elements and their rules of combination which together constitute the linguistic system (*langue*).

Having identified *langue* as the concern of linguistics, Saussure now notes that language is comparable to other social institutions like systems of writing, symbolic rites and deaf-sign systems. All these institutions are systems of signs and can be studied systematically. Saussure calls such a

science of signs semiology (from the Greek *semeion* = 'sign'). Signs have four characteristics:

1 They bring together a concept and an image (e.g. 'horse' and a pictorial image – as in a road sign – or a written English word or a spoken English 'sound-image').

2 Signs are not autonomous entities – they derive their meaning only from the place within an articulated system. What constitutes a linguistic sign is nothing but its difference from other signs (so the colour red is only something which is not green, blue, orange, etc.).

3 The linguistic sign is arbitrary or unmotivated. This, Saussure says, means that the sign 'has no natural connection with the signified' (Saussure: 1974, 69). Different languages simply use different terms for concepts. Indeed they can generate their own concepts – think, for instance, how difficult it is to translate a game into another culture where, because the game is not played there, they lack the relevant terms.

4 Signs can be put together through two main paths. First, there are combinational possibilities (e.g. the order of a religious service or the prefixes and suffixes that can be attached to a noun – for example, 'friend' can become 'boyfriend', 'friendship', 'friendly', etc.). Saussure calls these patterns of combinations *syntagmatic relations*. Second, there are contrastive properties (e.g. choosing one hymn rather than another in a church service; saying 'yes' or 'no'). Here the choice of one term necessarily excludes the other. Saussure calls these mutually exclusive relations *paradigmatic oppositions*.

An example may help to pull these various features of signs together. Think of traffic lights: (1) they bring together concepts ('stop', 'start') with images ('red', 'green'); (2) these images are not autonomous: red is identifiable by the fact that it is not green, and vice versa; (3) they have no natural connection with what they signify: red has simply come to mean 'stop' and green to mean 'start'; finally (4) they express syntagmatic relations (the order in which the traffic lights can change: from red to green and back again but much more complicated in countries where there is also an amber light). They also express paradigmatic oppositions: imagine the chaos created if red and green light up simultaneously!

This, then, is a simplified version of the apparatus provided by Saussure. In order to show how it can be used in the analysis of texts, I will briefly examine Propp's work on narratives and Laclau's analysis of the articulation of political discourses.

Narrative Structures

The organisation of systems of narration, within literature and elsewhere, has been of constant interest to writers influenced by Saussure. I shall briefly discuss V.I. Propp's study *The Morphology of the Folktale*, written in Russia in 1928 (Propp 1968) and its subsequent development by the French sociologist A.J. Greimas (1966).

Exercise 4.4

This is an exercise to help you to use Saussure's abstract concepts. Imagine you are given a menu at a restaurant. The menu reads as follows (for convenience we will leave out the prices):

Tomato soup
Mixed salad

Roast beef
Fried chicken
Grilled plaice

Ice cream (several flavours)
Apple pie

Your task is to work out how you can treat the words on the menu as a set of related signs. Try to use all the concepts above: i.e. *langue*, *parole*, syntagmatic relations and paradigmatic oppositions.

Here are some clues:

1 What can you learn from the *order* in which the courses are set out?
2 What can you learn from the *choices* which are offered for each course?

Propp argues that the fairytale establishes a narrative form which is central to all story-telling. The fairytale is structured not by the nature of the characters that appear in it, but by the function they play in the plot. Despite its great detail and many characters, Propp suggests that 'the number of functions is extremely small' (1968, 20). This allows him to attend to a favourite distinction of structuralists between appearances (massive detail and complexity) and reality (a simple underlying structure repeated in different ways).

Propp suggests that fairytales in many cultures share similar themes, e.g. 'A dragon kidnaps the king's daughter.' These themes can be broken into four elements, each of which can be replaced without altering the basic structure of the story. This is because each element has a certain *function*. This is shown in Table 4.2.

Following this example, we could rewrite 'A dragon kidnaps the king's daughter' as 'A witch makes the chief's wife vanish', while retaining the same function of each element. Thus a function can be filled by many different role-players. This is because the function of a role arises in its significance for the structure of the tale as a whole.

Using a group of 100 tales, Propp isolates thirty-one 'functions' (actions like 'prohibition', 'violation' or, as we have seen above, 'disappearance'). These functions are played out in seven 'spheres of action': the villain, the provider, the helper, the princess and her father, the dispatcher, the hero and the false hero.

Table 4.2: *'A Dragon Kidnaps the King's Daughter'*

Element	Function	Replacement
Dragon	Evil force	Witch
King	Ruler	Chief
Daughter	Loved one	Wife
Kidnap	Disappearance	Vanish

Source: adapted from Culler: 1976, 207–208

These functions and 'spheres of action' constitute an ordered set. Their presence or absence in any particular tale allows their plots to be classified. Thus plots take four forms:

1 Development through struggle and victory.
2 Development through the accomplishment of a difficult task.
3 Development through both 1 and 2.
4 Development through neither.

Although any one character may be involved in any sphere of action, and several characters may be involved in the same sphere, we are dealing with a finite sequence: 'the important thing is to notice the number of spheres of action occurring in the fairytale is infinite: we are dealing with discernible and repeated structures' (Hawkes: 1977, 69).

Writing in 1960, Greimas agrees with Propp about the need to locate narrative form in a finite number of elements disposed in a finite number of ways. However, he modifies Propp's list of each element. This is set out below.

1 Propp's list of seven spheres of action can be reduced into three sets of structural relations: subject versus object (this subsumes 'hero' and 'princess' or 'sought-for person'); sender versus receiver (includes 'father' and 'dispatcher'); and helper versus opponent (includes 'donor', 'helper' and 'villain'). As Hawkes shows, this reveals the simple structure of many love stories, i.e. involving relations between both subjects and objects and receivers and senders.
2 Propp's thirty-one functions may be considerably reduced if one examines how they combine together. For instance, although Propp separates 'prohibition' and 'violation', Greimas shows that a 'violation' presumes a 'prohibition'. Hence they may be combined in one function: 'prohibition versus violation'. Hawkes points out that this allows Greimas to isolate several distinctive structures of the folk narrative. These include: contractual structures (relating to establishing and breaking contracts); performative structures (involving trials and struggles); and disjunctive structures (involving movement, leaving, arriving, etc.).

This summarised presentation of the work of Propp and Greimas has underlined two useful arguments. First, the structuralist method can be an important aid to what C. Wright Mills called 'the sociological imagination'. It reminds us that meaning never resides in a single term (Culler: 1976) and consequently that understanding the articulation of elements is our primary task. Second, more specifically, it shows some aspects of how narrative structure works. When one reflects how much of sociological data (interviews, documents, conversations) takes a narrative form, as indeed do sociological reports themselves, then the analysis of the fairytale stops looking like an odd literary pursuit.

Exercise 4.5

This is part of the life story of a Finnish man attending an alcohol clinic:

> When I was a child, the discipline was very strict. I still remember when my younger brother broke a sugar cup and I was spanked. When my father died, my mother remarried. The new husband did not accept my youngest brother. When I was in the army, my wife was unfaithful to me. After leaving the army, I didn't come home for two days. I started to drink. And I began to use other women sexually. I drank and I brawled, because I was pissed off and because her treacherousness was in my mind.
>
> When I came to the alcohol clinic, it made me think. I abstained for a year. There was some progress but also bad times. I grew up somewhat. When the therapist changed, I was pissed off and gave it all up. (adapted from Perti Alasuutari, *Desire and Craving: Studies in a Cultural Theory of Alcoholism*, University of Tampere, Finland, 1990)

1 Using what you have read about Propp and Greimas, identify the following elements in this story:
   (a) functions (e.g. 'prohibition' or 'violation')
   (b) spheres of action (e.g. the villain, the provider, the helper, the princess and her father, the dispatcher, the hero and the false hero)
   (c) structures (e.g. subject versus object (this includes 'hero' and 'princess' or 'sought-for person'); sender versus receiver (includes 'father' and 'dispatcher'); and helper versus opponent (includes 'donor', 'helper' and 'villain')).
2 What can be said about the *sequence* of actions reported?
3 Having done this analysis, what features would you look for in other life stories?

However, although textual analysis, following Propp and Greimas, seems very attractive, we need to proceed carefully. If we are analysing

how a text works, we should not forget how our own text has its own narrative structure, designed to persuade the reader that, confronted with any given textual fragment, 'we can see that' a favoured reading applies.

This question arose when I examined (Silverman:1982) a collection of papers discussing the future of the British Labour Party (Jacques and Mulhern:1981). Although written before Labour's 1983 election defeat, many of the contributions provided a good instrument for predicting the election outcome in relation to Labour's shrinking social base.

I selected two short papers by little-known trade union leaders which seemed to propose alternative versions of Labour's political past and future. In this discussion, I shall only consider the four-page text by Ken Gill. Gill argues that the post-1950 period has seen a 'picture of advance' for the Labour Party. This advance is indexed by a move towards left-wing policies and left-wing leaders in both unions and the Labour Party.

One immediate critical rejoinder to this argument is that organisational and ideological advances have to be judged in relation to popular support – which, with one or two exceptions, dropped continuously at general elections after 1950. However, this is to remain in a sense *outside* of Gill's text. Such arguments tend to use isolated extracts and summaries as a means of deploying critiques or deconstructions. Outside structuralism, contrasts between texts and 'theory', or texts and 'reality', are the very stuff of academic and practical debates. Inevitably, however, they can result in empty victories in mock battles.

Following a structuralist method, my aim was to avoid interpreting Gill's text in terms of alternative versions of reality but, instead, to enter within it. Such *internal* analysis must seek to establish the realities the text itself sets into play. There was no difficulty in the programme. The problem was to find a method which would allow these realities to be described without appealing to the 'we see that . . . ' strategy.

In order to get a sense of Gill's paper as a whole, I went through the text listing the subjects or agents mentioned. The agents named fell into four broad categories. References to trade unions and to groups defined by class were counted as instances of economic agents. These were distinguished from references to theorists, to political parties or tendencies. This produced Table 4.3.

Table 4.3 was used to support the suggestion that Gill's analysis concentrates on economically defined subjects or subjects defined with reference to other formal institutions. This apparent preference for formal structures was underlined when I counted the 'level' of agent to which Gill refers. Although not all the agents were classifiable in these terms, I discovered a clear preference for agents with an official or high-level position, as shown in Table 4.4.

Tables 4.3 and 4.4 substantiated the impression that Gill has constructed a narrative which tells its tale from the top down. It is largely a tale of economic subjects, organised by existing institutions and their leaders. Moreover, further analysis revealed that Gill's text concentrates on

Table 4.3: *Gill's Agents*

Agent	Number
Economic	16
Theoretical	5
Political	9
None of the above	1
Total	31

Table 4.4: *Agents' Level*

Level of agent	Number
Leader or theorist	14
No rank or lower rank	3
Unclear	14
Total	31

activities relating to policy-making, or occupying particular political positions, like passing resolutions opposing the government. In only five cases did he refer to an agent's action; all these cases related to economic struggles.

These simple tabulations supported my argument that Gill's practice contradicted his theory. While Gill theorises about movements towards socialism and democracy, the structure of his text is consistently élitist. Put another way, the élitist form of his tale runs directly contrary to its democratic message.

Some of this could, of course, be demonstrated by the use of brief extracts from Gill's piece followed by critical exegesis. However, this standard procedure of traditional (political, literary) criticism cannot generate such an analysis so forcefully or economically. Critical exegesis is prone to two damaging limitations: it may appeal to extra-textual realities, while de-emphasising the realities constructed in the text under consideration and/or, it may base its case on isolated fragments of a text supported by a 'persuasive' argument.

At this point, the reader may ask: doesn't your own method bear a striking resemblance to content analysis? If so, doesn't it risk the charges of triviality and of imposing (extra-textual) realities on the data through its methods of classification? In which case, can't your argument against traditional criticism be turned against yourself?

Now, of course, the tabulations I have just presented do share with content analysis one characteristic: both involve counting instances of terms used in a text. However, unlike naive forms of content analysis, the

terms counted are *not* determined by an arbitrary or common-sense version of what may be interesting to count in a text. It is not coincidental that I have counted Gill's agents or 'subjects'. In Western cultures, at least, subjects are intrinsic to narratives: by analysing the construction of subjects, we get to the heart of the work of the text.

Moreover, I have sought to show how Gill's subjects are positioned in relation to particular activities and 'spheres of action'. This follows Propp's analysis of fairytales and Saussure's crucial argument that signs are not autonomous.

This means that signs derive their meaning only from their relations with and differences from other signs. This further implies that the meaning of signs cannot be finally fixed. It is always possible to extend the signifying chain.

Two examples may help to explain this. Colours, as already noted, are constituted by their differences. Hence red is not orange (or any other colour). Now think of the way in which some great artists use palettes which make us rethink the way particular colours stand in relation to others. Although the spectrum of colours is fixed, the *relation* between particular colours can be endlessly rearticulated.

This process is, however, not limited to aesthetics. Think of the symbolic potential of two examples from the 1980s: 'People's Airline' (flying = everybody's right) and, from an attempt by the Greater London Council to gain support for its cheap fares policy, 'Fares Fair' (payment equality). These examples reflect only some of the myriad connections that have been made between these elements: compare 'People's Airline' with 'People's Republic'. The connotations of such articulations and their popular success are entirely dependent on the particular historical and cultural context in which they are deployed. However, they emphasise that Saussure's concept of the sign does allow an understanding of (political, aesthetic) practice consisting of a struggle over the articulation of the relations between elements.

So the only arbitrary aspect of the sign is the relation of signifier to signified. Without some fixing, the sign would not exist. But no sign is totally fixed. Politics is not an expression of the 'hidden' movement of history (or of anything else). It is concerned with the articulation and disarticulation of the ensemble of signs and sign-systems (or discourse).

Let us now follow this up with the example of nationalism. A relational view of language shows how nationalism only gets a meaning in relation to other terms – hence the Nazi success in identifying a relation between nationalism or patriotism and Fascism (e.g. National Socialism). Conversely, as Laclau (1981) has shown, left-wing politicians can make appeals to the apparently indissoluble links between being a patriotic Italian, German, etc. and supporting a party of the Left. Since terms have no fixed meaning derived from their past use, populist politicians will try to incorporate popular signs (such as 'patriotism') into their vocabulary. Think, for instance, of the power of the name of Senator McCarthy's

Exercise 4.6

The following is an extract from a speech made by an English Member of Parliament in the late 1960s. The topic was a Race Relations Bill then going through the British Parliament. The M.P. was Enoch Powell and the speech became (in)famous as the 'Rivers of Blood' speech because Powell concludes his argument against laws on racial discrimination by saying: 'Like the Roman, I see the River Tiber foaming with much blood.' The extract below occurs earlier in the speech:

1 Nothing is more misleading than comparison between the
2 Commonwealth immigrant in Britain and the American Negro.
3 The Negro population of the United States, which was
4 already in existence before the United States became a
5 nation, started literally as slaves and were later given
6 the franchise and other rights of citizenship ( ).
7 The Commonwealth immigrant came to Britain as a full
8 citizen, to a country which knew no discrimination between
9 one citizen and another, and he entered instantly into the
10 possession of the rights of every citizen, from the vote
11 to free treatment under the National Health Service ( ).
12 But while to the immigrant entry to this country was
13 admission to privileges and opportunities eagerly sought,
14 the impact upon the existing population was very
15 different. For reasons which they could not comprehend,
16 and in pursuit of a decision by default, on which they
17 were never consulted, they found themselves made strangers
18 in their own country.
19 They found their wives unable to obtain hospital beds in
20 childbirth, their children unable to obtain school places,
21 their homes and neighbourhoods changed beyond recognition
22 ( ). At work they found that employers hesitated to apply
23 to the immigrant worker the standards of discipline and
24 competence required of the native-born worker; they began
25 to hear, as time went by, more and more voices which told
26 them that they were now the unwanted.
27 On top of this, they now learn that a one-way privilege is
28 to be establish by Act of Parliament: a law, which cannot,
29 and is not intended, to operate to protect them or to
30 redress their grievances, is to be enacted to give the
31 stranger, the disgruntled and the agent-provocateur the
32 power to pillory them for their private actions. (extracted from Kobena Mercer, 'Powellism as a Political Discourse', unpublished Ph.D., Goldsmiths' College, London University, 1990)

1 Identify the subjects that the text constructs (e.g. 'immigrants', 'native-born') and show the relations that are established between them, looking for how Powell uses a version of national identity.
2 On this basis, why was Powell's speech so powerful? (Here is a clue: look at how the term 'stranger', first used in line 17, takes on a different meaning in line 31.)
3 How could the same textual strategies be used to *oppose* his arguments?

red-baiting hearings in the early 1950s: the Un-American Activities Committee.

Membership Categorisation: Description as a Socially Organised Activity

As we saw in Chapter 3, Sacks' work has raised some vital methodological questions for ethnographers and anyone else attempting to construct sociology as an 'observational' discipline. Sacks puts the issue succinctly:

> Suppose you're an anthropologist or sociologist standing somewhere. You see somebody do some action, and you see it to be some activity. How can you go about formulating who is it that did it, for the purposes of your report? Can you use at least what you might take to be the most conservative formulation – his name? Knowing, of course, that any category you choose would have the[se] kinds of systematic problems: how would you go about selecting a given category from the set that would equally well characterise or identify that person at hand? (1992a, 467–468)

The classic statement of this problem is found in Moerman's (1974) self-critical treatment of his attempt to do a standard ethnography upon a Thai tribe. But the message has also been taken by intelligent ethnographers who, like Gubrium (1988), are centrally concerned with the descriptive process.

Sacks shows how you cannot resolve such problems simply 'by taking the best possible notes at the time and making your decisions afterwards' (468). Instead, our aim should be to try to understand when and how members do descriptions, seeking thereby to describe the apparatus through which members' descriptions are properly produced.

Consider this description in which the identities of the parties are concealed:

> The X cried. The Y picked it up.

Why is it that we are likely to hear the X as, say, a baby but not a teacher? Furthermore, given that we hear X as a baby, why are we tempted to hear Y as an adult (possibly as the baby's mother)?

In fact, Sacks looks at the first two sentences of a children's story: 'The baby cried. The mommy picked it up.' Why do we hear the 'mommy' as the mother of this 'baby'? Why do we hear the baby's cries as the 'reason' why the mommy picks him up?

Not only are we likely to hear the story this way, but we hear it as 'a possible description' without having observed the circumstances which it characterises. Sacks asks: 'Is it some kind of magic? One of my tasks is going to be to construct an apparatus for that fact to occur. That is, how we come to hear it in that fashion' (1992b, 236).

No magic lies behind such observations. Instead:

> What one ought to seek is to build an apparatus which will provide for how it is that any activities, which members do in such a way as to be recognisable as such to members, are done, and done recognisably. (*ibid*)

The issue is 'how a human gets built who will produce his activities such that they're graspable in this way' (1992a, 119). On this basis, 'culture' is approached as an 'inference-making machine': a descriptive apparatus, administered and used in specific contexts.

In this concluding section, I shall briefly outline Sacks' attempt to build such an apparatus for 'description'. The aim will be to emphasise the broad sweep of his concerns. This links up this chapter with themes in both Chapters 5 and 6.

For reasons of space, I shall telescope Sacks' account into four related points:

Categories

One only has to read accounts of the 'same' event in two different newspapers to realise the large number of categories that can be used to describe it. For instance, as feminists have pointed out, women, but not men, tend to be identified by their marital status, number of children, hair colour and even chest measurement. Such identifications, while intelligible, carry massive implications for the sense we attach to people and their behaviour. Compare, for example:

A. 'Shapely, blonde, mother of 5'

with:

B. '32-year old teacher'.

Both descriptions may 'accurately' describe different aspects of the same person. But each constitutes very definitely how we are to view that person (for instance, in A, purely in terms of certain physical characteristics).

Collections

Each identity is heard as a category from some collection of categories (what Sacks calls a membership categorisation device – MCD). For instance, in A and B above, we hear 'mother' as a category from the collection 'family', and 'teacher' as located in a collection of 'occupation'. The implication is that to choose one category from an MCD excludes someone being identified with some other category from the same device. So MCDs are organised around what Saussure calls 'paradigmatic oppositions' (see p. 72 above). They generally involve polar oppositions so that to call someone a 'mother' excludes her being seen as a 'father'.

Consistency

Sacks suggests a 'hearing rule' which structures how we hear descriptions. When a speaker uses two or more categories to describe at least two

members of a population and it is possible to hear the categories as belonging to the same collection, we hear them that way. That is why, in the story with which Sacks begins, we hear 'baby' and 'mommy' in relation to the collection 'family'. Furthermore, a related 'consistency rule' (Sacks: 1974, 333) suggests that once one category from a given collection has been used to categorise one population member, then other categories from the same collection may be used on other members of the population.

The import of the consistency rule may be seen in a simple example. If we use an abusive term about someone else, we know that a term from the same collection can be used on us. Hence one of the reasons we may avoid name-calling is to avoid the development of this kind of slanging-match.

Category-Bound Activities

Many kinds of activities are commonsensically associated with certain membership categories. So, by identifying a person's activity (say, 'crying'), we provide for what their social identity is likely to be (in this case, a 'baby'). Moreover, we can establish negative moral assessments of people by describing their behaviour in terms of performing or avoiding activities inappropriate to their social identity. For instance, it may be acceptable for a parent to 'punish' a child, but it will be unacceptable for a child to 'punish' a parent. Notice that, in both cases, 'punish' serves as a powerful picture of an activity which could be described in innumerable ways. Social life, unlike foreign films, does not come with subtitles attached. Consequently, how we define an activity is morally constitutive of it. So if, like other sociologists, Sacks is talking here about norms, unlike them (and members) he is not treating norms as descriptions of the causes of action. Instead, he is concerned with how 'viewers use norms to provide some of the orderliness, and proper orderliness, of the activities they observe' (*ibid*, 39).

In order to put some flesh on these conceptual bones, I will give some examples that Sacks himself uses. Later, I will show how we can use his concepts on a range of textual materials.

Sacks shows the importance of categorisation by using data from his Ph.D. dissertation on calls to a suicide prevention centre. He points out that people may only become suicidal *after* they have reviewed various categories of people and found 'no one to turn to'. For instance, a caller's statement 'I'm nothing' is not to be heard as having a purely psychological reference or as indicating some mental disturbance, but, as Schegloff points out in his 'Editor's Introduction':

> the outcome of a procedure, as announcing 'a finding' by its speaker. [Sacks] asked what that procedure was and how it could arrive at such a finding, in such a fashion that other participants would find understandable and even 'correct'. He took seriously the particular form in which conduct appeared – the participants had said this thing, in this way, and not in some other way. (Sacks: 1992a, xxx)

However, we see our use of a descriptive apparatus in much more mundane situations. For instance, certain things are known about any category, e.g. people of a certain age or gender. If you want to escape such category-bound implications, you can counter by accounting for why the category should not be read in this way here (e.g. 'I'm 48 but . . .'). However, people use sayings like 'boys will be boys' which serve as 'anti-modifier modifiers', asserting that, in the last instance, the category is omni-relevant (45). The precise relevance of a category is also established by categorising the categoriser, e.g. if B categorises C as 'old', you might categorise B in order to decide how *you* would categorise C (*ibid*).

Similarly, categories can usually be read off the activities in which people engage. Thus, as we have seen, to hear a report of someone crying *may* be heard as the activity of a baby. Similarly, a person who properly picks a baby up *may* be hearable as a 'mother'. Moreover, if both baby and mother are mentioned, we will try to hear them as a 'team' – so that, if the mother picks up the baby, we will hear the mother as not any mother but the mother of this baby.

However, people may try to avoid the normally category-bound implications of certain activity-descriptions. For instance, Sacks discusses the American South where, according to some whites, even when blacks engage in activities appropriate to anybody, they are not to be seen as 'anybody', but as 'blacks-*imitating*-whites'.

Sacks also notes the commonplace assumption that members of subcultures resist being categorised by other groups. For instance, he shows how 'hotrodder' may be preferred to 'teenager' by a young person. The logic of this is fully understood by reference to Sacks' account of the apparatus of descriptive categories (membership categorisation devices) and activities (category-bound activities). For, when adults refer to 'teenagers', they give themselves access to the known category-bound activities in which teenagers may engage. By preferring an alternative term ('hotrodders') with category-bound activities known only to the 'in-group', young people assert ownership of the descriptive apparatus (1992a, Fall 1965, Lecture 7).

Moreover, Sacks notes, this attention to descriptive categories occurs even in those many situations where we are talking to strangers and there is no apparent battle over which category to use. He mentions the case of people telling interviewers doing surveys that they watch less television than they actually do. Sacks comments: 'It's interesting in that they're controlling an impression of themselves for somebody who couldn't matter less' (1992a, 580). Sacks argues that this happens because we can be held responsible not only for our descriptions but for the *inferences* that can be drawn from them, i.e. the sort of person who would say such a thing about themselves or others.

However, descriptions are not just assembled for ourselves but are recipient-designed for others. We help others infer certain things from our descriptions by indicating if the hearer should seek to use them to find

some person already known to them. So using descriptions like 'Joe', 'Tom' or 'Harry' allows hearers to search for someone already known.

These Type 1 descriptions are different from Type 2 descriptions (like 'a guy' or 'someone') where we signal that the description should *not* be used by the recipient to find out who is being referred to. Moreover, Sacks argues that the usual rule is: use Type 1 if you can, but correct or repair into Type 2 if Type 1 is inappropriate (1992a, 445).

Using MCD Analysis

I now want to show you how analysis of descriptions, using Sacks' concepts, can be a relatively simple and illuminating activity. To do so, I will use examples from a newspaper headline, a lonely hearts advertisement and two conversations.

The Headline

FATHER AND DAUGHTER IN SNOW ORDEAL

This headline appeared in the inside pages of a recent copy of the London *Times*. I want to examine how we can understand the sense it makes using MCD analysis. In doing so, we will see the skill involved in constructing headlines which encourage us to read the story beneath. The analysis of the headline is set out in schematic form in Table 4.5.

The Lonely Hearts Advertisement

> Active attractive cheerful blonde widow graduate no ties many interests. Seeks mutually fulfilling life with fit considerate educated 60 year old. Details please to Box 123. (*The Times*, 30.1.93)

Like the headline, this advertisement was chosen at random in order to show how MCD analysis can fruitfully analyse *any* material of this kind. Let us begin by focussing upon the category 'widow'. Now I take it that, while successful newspaper headlines make you want to read the story, the success of a lonely hearts advertisement is judged by the number of appropriate responses that it elicits. If we look at 'widow' in this light, it may evoke a series of contrasting category-bound activities as follows:

Type 1: miserable (dressed in black); given up on life
Type 2: freed from monogamy, light-hearted and ready for multiple relationships ('the merry widow').

Note how this advertisement attends to both these types of category-bound activities. Type 1 is rejected primarily by the use of the adjective 'cheerful', although 'blonde' also neatly contrasts with the black of mourning. Moreover, this is not a description of someone who has given up on life. This widow is 'active' and has 'many interests'. On the other hand,

Table 4.5: *'Father and Daughter in Snow Ordeal'*

Concept	Explanation	Headline
Category	Any person can be labelled in many 'correct' ways	Persons later described as 'supermarket manager' and 'student'
Membership categorization device (MCD)	Categories are seen as grouped together in collections	MCD = 'Family'
Economy rule	A single category *may* be sufficient to describe a person	Single categories are used here
Consistency rule	If one person is identified from a collection, then a next person *may* be identified from the same collection	'Daughter' is from same MCD as 'father'
Duplicative organisation	When categories can be heard as a 'team' hear them that way	'Daughter' is the daughter of *this* 'father'
Category-bound activities	Activities may be heard as 'tied' to certain categories	'Snow ordeal' is *not* heard as tied to 'father–daughter' categories; this is why the story is newsworthy
Standardised relational pairs (SRPs)	Pairs of categories are linked together in standardised routine ways	'Father' and 'daughter' assumed to be linked together through 'caring' and 'support'; how could 'snow ordeal' have happened?

we are specifically not encouraged to assume that this is a 'merry widow'. She is, after all, an intelligent person ('graduate') who seeks one person for a 'mutually fulfilling life'.

Note throughout how the consistency rule applies. She is 'active' and seeks someone who is 'fit'. She is a graduate and seeks someone who is educated. However, the subtleties of the descriptive apparatus particularly stand out in what the advertisement does *not* say as follows:

- we are not told the age of the 'widow' (although the consistency rule might imply that she is close to 60 like the man she seeks, this is not necessarily so)
- we are not told the gender of the person she is seeking.

How can the reader resolve these puzzles? First, the advertiser uses the term 'active' to describe herself. Now we may assume that someone, say, in their twenties is 'active'. To state that you are active is thus hearable as what we have seen Sacks calls a category-modifier. Consequently, we can assume that this is at least a middle-aged person. Second, since the advertiser describes herself in the context of a previous heterosexual

Exercise 4.7

This exercise allows you to use MCD analysis on a newspaper headline:

Engagement was broken – Temperamental young man gassed himself

Using what you have learned from MCD analysis, why might we assume:

1 that the engagement was for marriage (not dinner)
2 that the young man was engaged (not someone else)
3 that the engaged parties were engaged to each other (and not to others)
4 that the broken engagement was the young man's (not another's)
5 that the gassing was a suicide (not an accident, and not less than terminal)
6 that first the engagement was broken and then the young man gassed himself (not the reverse)
7 that the second happened *because* of the first (not independently of it)
8 that it happened because of desperation arising from the 'loss' assisted by the 'temperamental' aspect of the young man's behaviour (rather than from, say, religious ecstasy or moral outrage)?

Now consider the following:

1 Why might the headline make us want to read the story?
2 Invent *two* equally 'accurate' headlines of the 'same' events which make the story less newsworthy.

(The headline and the questions about it are taken from Eglin and Hester: 1992.)

relationship ('widow'), we may assume that, without contrary evidence and following the consistency rule, she is seeking a man here.

Two Conversations

Sacks provides us with a method for analysing texts that fully attends to how all of us are concerned with fine-tuning our descriptions. So, as social scientists, we cannot describe and classify without attending to how members describe and classify. As Sacks puts it:

> All the sociology we read is unanalytic, in the sense that they simply put some category in. They make sense to us in doing that, but they're doing that simply as another Member. They haven't described the phenomena they're seeking to describe – or that they ought to be seeking to describe. What they need to do is to give us some procedure for choosing that category which is used to present some piece of information. And that brings us back to the question, are there

Exercise 4.8

Here is another lonely hearts advertisement, chosen from the same newspaper:

> Good looking (so I am told!) Englishman, 35, tall, professional, seeks very attractive lady, preferably nonsmoker, to wine, dine and make her smile. Age unimportant. Photo appreciated. Please reply to Box 789.

1 Analyse this advertisement using the following concepts:

Categories
MCDs
The economy rule
The consistency rule
Category-bound activities
Standardised relational pairs

2 What does this advertisement *imply* about the advertiser or the 'lady' sought even though it does not tell us these things directly?

> procedures that Members have for selecting categories? One of my aims is to show that there are. (1992a, 41–42)

As we have seen, Sacks argues that any number of descriptive labels may adequately describe a person or an activity. Choosing any particular label (or 'membership categorisation device') carries with it many implications. For instance, it implies:

- the sort of activities in which a person so described may engage (e.g. friendship is associated with the activity of 'giving support'; thus 'giving support' may be heard as a 'category-bound activity' linked to such persons as 'friends')
- the kind of role-partners associated with the description (e.g. 'friend/friend' or 'child/parent' both of which constitute 'standardised relational pairs')
- the collection of categories from which other persons may appropriately be named (e.g. 'friendship' or 'family').

Below you will find two brief examples of talk. These show how we can make further use of these concepts. The first example is a question asked by a counsellor (C) during an HIV-test interview in a U.S. gay men's clinic. Numbers in brackets indicate pauses in seconds and underlined words are emphasised:

> C: when was the last time that you had what you may consider er (1.0) er being (1.0) not *too safe* er encounter (0.7) with another er (1.8) person?

Presumably, this question might have been conveyed as follows:

> *C: when did you last have unsafe sex with a man?

What does the counsellor gain by her 'expressive caution'? We can seek an answer by noting three features of her descriptions:

1 They may be heard as 'non-judgmental': she says 'what you may consider', thus abstaining from her own judgments and implying that her client does indeed consider such matters.
2 They avoid making a charge against her client: she says 'not too safe' rather than 'unsafe' which might imply that she thought her client was the sort of person who *might* engage in clearly 'unsafe' activities.
3 They avoid specifying the precise nature of the activity described: by saying 'encounter', the counsellor leaves it to her client to define the nature of the act.
4 They avoid the counsellor defining what type or gender of people with whom the client has 'encounters'. By using the term 'person', no category-bound activities are implied (other than, perhaps, that her client does not have 'encounters' with animals!).

We can also observe multiple hesitations before the counsellor produces her descriptions. One such hesitation is also found in the final extract below, which is drawn from the film *Bad Timing*. Further discussion of both the text and the images in this film can be found in Silverman (1993), while McHoul (1987) offers a discussion of how we can use Sacks' methods on fictional texts like novels and films.

(1, 2 and 3 list the speakers)

1: Husband?
2: no
1: relation?
2: no
1: er boyfriend?
3: ( )
1: look what connection do you have with her?
2: you could say I'm a friend

The first speaker (1) is seeking to elicit 2's description of his relationship with a woman. Each description that he offers implies a particular set of role-partners associated with certain obligations and activities, appropriate to standardised relational pairs (SRPs). For instance, husbands can be expected to have greater obligations than relations. In addition, certain SRPs, like husband–wife or relation–relation, can be heard as engaged in stable, routinised activities based on fairly clear-cut obligations. This is less true of other SRPs, such as boyfriend–girlfriend, where the expected obligations are less stable and associated with more 'delicate' activities such as 'wooing:being wooed' which, in a potentially unstable way, constitute the material and sexual status of the relationship.

Now note two features of this conversation:

- 1 hesitates ('er') before producing the MCD which can be heard as the most delicate description of 2's relationship
- 2 chooses an MCD ('friendship') which avoids the delicate implications of 'boyfriend' by bracketing any issues of sexual involvement i.e. one can have 'friends' of either sex. Unlike any of the three MCDs offered by 1, all of which imply specific obligations and activities, 'friendship' is much vaguer and ill-defined.

Conclusion

I hope that, by the end of this chapter, the reader is not feeling punch-drunk! We have indeed covered an enormous amount of ground.

The wide scope of the chapter arose for two reasons. First, I am convinced that qualitative sociologists make too little of the potentialities of texts as rich data. Second, I am also convinced that there are several powerful ways of analysing such data.

In examining ways, we have rapidly moved between several complex and apparently different theories – all the way from semiotics to ethnomethodology. However, if the reader has grasped at least one useful way of thinking about textual analysis, then I will have achieved my purpose.

Let me also add that I will return to some of these concepts in the next two chapters. In Chapter 6, we will see the other side of Sacks' work – on the sequential organisation of conversation. Moreover, immediately, in Chapter 5, I will show how his analysis of description can be applied to understanding interview data.