

Politeness universals in an interview

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1 Introduction

The pragmatic and socio-relational aspects of information exchange, which are at the basis of Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, result in discernible strategies constituting various types of interviews. The identification and recurrence of these strategies contributes to our knowledge about the individual genres and enables their recognition also in indirect contexts. This exercise illustrates 1) the existence of these universal strategies in interviews; and 2) their identifiability and crossover reflected in the use of direct quotations in newspaper articles which make reference to interviews.

The polysemy of the term **interview** in the title highlights the fact that this word covers a rather broad and varied area of human interaction, as illustrated by the following dictionary definitions, and also by the number of the corresponding Czech equivalents, such as "pohovor", "rozhovor", "konzultace", and "výslech":

interview

- 1 an oral examination of an applicant for employment, a college place, etc.
- 2 a conversation between a reporter etc. and a person of public interest, used as a basis of a broadcast or publication.
- 3 a meeting of persons face to face, esp. for consultation.
- 4 a session of formal questioning by the police (*Oxford Compendium* 1995)

The major features which seem to differentiate and determine these sub-genres are the purpose of interaction, and the social relationship between the interactants. Since Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory focuses on these factors and because it predicts a direct correlation between the amount of face work the speakers perform and the particular situational variables, namely **power**, **social distance** and **the gravity of imposition**, the theory provides a viable framework for analysing different types of interviews.

The type of interview to be discussed in this exercise is listed as the second definition above, i.e. a conversation between the reporter and a person of public interest. The aim is to illustrate how the above-mentioned variables determine the strategies adopted by the participants and their reflex in the linguistic forms employed, and how this mutually conditioned 'strategy – form' relation may span to more indirect contexts and be put to use as a device for a specific strategy on its own, as will be illustrated by the use of direct quotations in news reports.

Sociolinguistics is interested in the differential use of pragmatic resources such as hinting, hedging, by different categories of speakers in different situations. Accordingly, the data on which the following observations are based consist of two groups: (a) printed interviews or interviews which appear in electronic media, and (b) news reports which make reference to live interviews, e.g. press conferences etc., both printed and electronic. The first group includes interviews of two types: interviews with politicians on the one hand and interviews with artists or pop-stars on the other hand. The sample of newspaper articles includes newsreports on doping, mainly in skiing and cycling. For the current purposes other factors, excepting the interactants and the topic, are disregarded (e.g. the type of interview based on the editorial policy, length, truthfulness to the actual spoken data - none provides any kind of transcription in the proper sense, the intended readership, etc.).

Section 2 illustrates the differential use of questions in the two types of interviews, and is followed by one analysis of inferred questions to answers presented in the form of direct quotations, and the use of quotations as a specific strategy on the part of the journalist in Section 3.

2 The structure of questions in interviews

The differential use of the linguistic resources in interviews can be illustrated by looking at questions, i.e. the first members of adjacency pairs of which an interview prototypically consists. Two types of interviews, which involve different sociological variables, are used, namely interviews with politicians and interviews with artists. The type of interview, i.e. the participants and the topic, determines the strategy of conducting the interview by the interviewer (on-record ↔ off-record), which results in a corresponding linguistic form of questions.

In what might be called a “serious” interview, with the interviewee being a politician or some officer responsible to the public, a journalist uses an on-record strategy through asking direct questions. The structure of the interview is, in consequence, clear-cut, the questions are direct, prevalingly interrogative in form. Other forms that appear are tag questions (*it hasn't worked, has it?*), and imperatives of explicit performative verbs (*Tell me about the sort of problems that ...*). The following two excerpts illustrate the point.

EX 1

<http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2003/20030317_seven_war/int_rose.htm>

Four Corners interviews General Sir Michael Rose, Former Director UK Special Services on 9 March, 2003. General Rose also commanded the United Nations Protection Force in the former Yugoslavia in the mid 1990s.

Four Corners (FC): *The first question, the fundamental one is: should Australia and Britain be involved in this war?*

Rose: I think we've got to be involved and it's just a question of the strategy you employ. And I'm not convinced that the current strategy we're employing is the best one.

FC: *Why not?*

Rose: I think we've got our priorities in the wrong order... (answer totalling 198 words)

FC: *Why do you think that set of priorities has been laid in stone?*

FC: *Are you glad you are not in command at the moment? ...*

FC: *Would you find it impossible to carry out those sort of orders? ...*

FC: *Do you think that in that position you might even be forced to resign? ...*

FC: *Is this an immoral way?...*

FC: *What are your worst fears?*

FC: *Tony Blair has always said as we get closer to conflict we will turn round the population, they will come on-board. It hasn't worked, has it?*

FC: *The problems politically of course, if there are heavy casualties. Tell me about the sort of problems that you think in terms that heavy casualties will create back home. ...*

EX 2

<http://www.african-geopolitics.org/show.aspx?ArticleId=3050>

Interview with Olusegun Obasanjo, the President of Nigeria

African Geopolitics (AG) - *President Obasanjo, let's begin this interview by getting directly into what we can call the Nigerian paradox. Africa's most populous country, with 120 million people, by rights its most powerful nation, for many years has been poorly governed. What are the reasons for this ?*

Olusegun Obasanjo - Nigeria in the last decade and a half failed to manage its resources for improvements in the quality of life of its people. (answer totalling 142 words)

AG - *Do you feel people were justified in feeling disgust with government officials?*

AG- What measures are you taking to turn Nigeria around? Do you expect the program of reform that you have instituted to be widely accepted by your countrymen and to have the desired effect?

AG- *You are aiming to bring growth to Nigeria; are Nigerians ready?*

AG- *What concrete measure are you taking to eliminate corruption?*

AG- *You mentioned the assumption of the national debt by the new regime. Isn't this a crippling burden? ...*

Both these examples have a distinct question-answer structure, the strategy of the interviewer is patently going on-record, asking badly without a redressive action (for a more detailed discussion, see below).

By contrast, interviews with artists display different strategies. The reason is twofold: the purpose is different because, typically, the person interrogated is not responsible to the public in the way politicians are, and her negative face to the effect that bad news may be brought about the interactant is not threatened; the interview thus mainly enhances the positive face of the interviewee and the journalist as well. Because the motives are different (the interviewer wants to be seen as someone who has close and friendly relations with the artist), the interviewer's strategies in conducting the interview are less face-threatening, *ie* more off-record. This can be observed in example 3, which is a part of an interview with a famous actress by a renown critic.

EX 3

<<http://film.guardian.co.uk/interview/interviewpages/0,,1577158,00.html>>

Geoff Andrew interviewing Catherine Deneuve

...Geoff Andrew: *It's funny because my next question was going to be: do you have a secret to your acting? I've interviewed many actors over the years and it's true, it's very difficult for actors to describe what they do because it's so intuitive. You've mentioned that these diaries were written as company in places where you were by yourself. The first clip we showed was of Repulsion, which was shot here in London, and it's about someone who is very lonely. In the clip we showed, there are no words, just you walking around the flat.*

Catherine Deneuve: Yes, I remember when I read the script, thinking that if only my lines were in the script, it would be a very, very thin script, because I speak very, very little in Repulsion.

GA: *But what's great about that scene and the scene from Belle de Jour is that your acting is very understated. And I think that if there is a secret to your acting, it is that you tend to underplay.*

CD: Yes, but sometimes, I think, too much. Directors have to push me because I never start [high] and then need to be pushed down; I have to be pushed up. Not all the time, but often. ... But until I met Jacques Demy I was not sure if I was going to carry on being an actress.

GA: *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg was really the film that lifted your career to an amazing extent.*

CD: But even if the film had been different, meeting with him as a director and seeing the way he worked and the relationship we developed before, during and after the shoot, that became something really important in my life. It made me see film in a different way.

GA: *It wasn't until Demoiselles de Rochefort that you got to act with your sister. So that must have been a very special film. ...*

GA: *The thing I like about it is that it has such vitality and energy. And you looked like you were having fun. ...*

GA: *So we go from him being very demanding to Luis Buñuel, who I always have the impression...*

GA: *That's the thing - you always expect him to be very rigorous and precise, and slightly difficult because of his deafness. ...*

GA: *You've worked with other experimental film-makers. I've already mentioned Ruiz - and we're showing Genealogies of a Crime here, which is a very bizarre film...*

CD: Very bizarre. But that's what I like about film - it can be bizarre, classic, normal, romantic. Cinema is to me the most versatile thing. ...

The different purpose of the interview and the relative equality of both interactants is reflected in the fact that over a half of the forty-six turns on the interviewer's side are not interrogative in form, but can be viewed as a kind of comments which elicit other comments. The first members of an adjacency pair tend to be lengthy, comparable in size to the second member of the pair. The signals typing the first member of an adjacency pair as a question are varied and indirect, and include various epistemic markers (e.g. *So that must have been a very special film; And you looked like you were having fun; which suggests that you like to be told*), unfinished sentences (continual tone indicated by "..."), or the use of evaluative expressions (*which is a bizarre film*).

These interviews represent a deviation from the norm of journalistic talk (or, *conversalization*; Fairclough 1995). This strategy derives from the mutual relationship of the interactants and allows the interviewer to show his rapport through engaging in what resembles small talk exchanges with the interviewee and what takes the interview away from the typical question/answer structure into a more conversation-like type of discourse. This strategy fulfils important discursive and social functions (constructing identity, thereby increasing the popularity of the interviewee and building rapport between interviewer, interviewee and the public). It was also found that the more interlocutors use small talk, the more popular the interviewee tends to be (Alba-Juez 2006).

This direct comparison of the strategies (forms) indicates that the interviewers use derive from the sociological variables in relation to the purpose of the interview. The following short analysis sets out to illustrate these universal strategies of questions/answer pairs and what enables their identification in one type of direct quotations. It will be shown that direct quotations themselves are used as a politeness strategy on the part of the writer.

3 The pragmatic use of quotations referring to interviews

What follows is a pragmatic analysis and an illustration of how our knowledge of the above observed universal principles can be relied on in an indirect environment, i.e. the use of interviewees' turns in direct quotations by journalists.

Gricean ideas about information quantity and relevance help us deal with problems of utterance interpretation. This approach presents us with a view of discourse as a text whose contexts allow the interpretation of speaker meaning in utterance (as different from the literal meaning). Our ability to understand the non-natural meaning is explained by the cooperative principle (subsuming four maxims). Developed further (Brown&Levinson 1987), the general cooperative principle can be used to not only explain the speaker meaning, but also some universal notions about the strategies people use in communication. Summing up, the maxims are the clues to the interpretation of non-natural meaning (inferences), politeness theory (and the strategies it identifies), on the other hand, describes the motivation behind the usage.

One of the characteristics of newswriting is a frequent use of quotations (both direct and indirect). Their analysis brings together various sets of issues. First, the use of direct quotes allows us to (partially) interpret the utterances as if in the real context of their delivery. The second possible way of analysis is to examine their function in the discourse context of a newspaper article. It will be observed that there is certain correlation between the form (direct quote) and its content, and that the use of the quote is a distinct strategy on the part of the writer.

The data for this particular analysis are drawn from an on-line news article on the doping scandal in the Winter Olympics, containing direct quotations, which are the focus of the analysis. Three excerpts are taken from this article, in which the author uses two interviews to

put the facts together. The following examples are discussed: 1. corresponds to line 14, 2. to line 18 and 3. to line 26 in the entire article (see the appendix).

1. "I don't understand this result. I've been skiing for 10 years in World Cups and I've been through 25 controls, and there's never been a problem," Muehlegg said Sunday in a Spanish radio interview.

2. He also was asked what his levels were. "I think that's a secret," he said.

3. When asked if Danilova and Lazutina were drug-free, Scott replied: "No comment."

The three examples differ in that in the case of 1., the question leading to the comment is not explicitly mentioned in the article. It can, however, be assumed that it was some kind of a relatively neutral question, such as *Would you like to comment on ...*, *What do you think about ...?*, *What do you have to say about ...?* Such a conclusion (inference) can be derived from looking at the other two examples and from the context. The other two initiating questions were: for 2. *What were your levels?* and for 3. *Were Danilova and Lazutina drug-free?* Before proceeding to analyze the answers, let us consider the role of these questions in the context of their utterance.

Even though the question preceding 1. is assumed to have been "neutral", it still represents a face threatening act (FTA). Questions in general are considered as threatening H's negative face because "S does not intend to avoid impeding H's freedom of action ..." (Brown&Levinson 1999: 324). Questions predicate some future act A of H, *ie* the answer. They also threaten H's positive face, by bringing of bad news about H (S is willing to cause distress) or raising of dangerously emotional topics (doping in our case). This is also true about the interviews by journalists with politicians, cf. above.

In the context of an interview by a journalist several factors must be borne in mind. First, both parties differ in the vulnerability of face, therefore the strategies they use differ diametrically. A journalist, in general, is less vulnerable in that most of the time he is protecting his positive side only, his self-image as somebody who is objective, witty and seeking the truth. His position allows him to perform FTAs (questions) on record, and baldly, without redress. He, however, does not try to save his positive face to be appreciated by the other interactant (the interviewee) but by the audience. This unequal position is facilitated by the fact that the interviewee had agreed to participate in the interview. (Again, the mere proposal to somebody to be interviewed is a FTA, threatening H's negative face.)

This situation contains a sociological variable of the relative power, H and S are in an asymmetric relation. A journalist may have other strategies available, but bald-on-record has the essential payoff of clarity, non-manipulativeness and efficiency (ibid: 331). He can afford this strategy because given his status, his face is not jeopardized. On the part of the interviewer, the following wants seem to dominate: (a) the want to communicate the content of FTA x; and (b) the want to be efficient and urgent. The (c) want to maintain H's face seems to be superfluous and is compensated for by the setting (the interviewee had agreed to be in that situation). Under this setting "any rational agent will tend to choose the same genus of strategy under the same conditions." (ibid: 329; cf. the interviews with artists, where the (c) want seems to be dominant).

All these factors and explicit questions in examples 2. and 3. allow us to generalize and infer the nature of the question in 1. To sum up, the questions in this type of interview are generally FTAs, threatening H's both negative and positive face, usually on-record, and baldly, without redress (cf. the same strategy used in the interviews with politicians above). It can be concluded that in inferring the nature of the questions, the writer and the reader rely on

their intertextual character, i.e. they are based on the knowledge of previous discourses (interviews)..

Now, let us consider the answers. In 1. the answer by Muehlegg, both his face wants having been threatened, he cooperates in the sense that he tries to maintain his face in interaction. To defend his positive face, he has to opt for an off-record strategy (the meaning of what he says is to some degree negotiable, he does not claim that he did not use the drug). In the framework of an interview, this is where Grice's maxims come into play. In this case he violates the maxim of quantity and relevance (he speaks about the previous years, not about the case in question). His answer can also be seen as flouting the manner in being incomplete (cf. quantity) and over-generalizing (*there's never been a problem*). The same strategy is chosen in 2., in which the skier flouts the maxim of relevance, quantity and manner.

3. *When asked if Danilova and Lazutina were drug-free, Scott replied: "No comment."*

Scott's positive and negative faces have been threatened. Her strategy in this situation is going off-record. Even though her intent could be unambiguously interpreted as S's having no desire to communicate her opinion, in the whole context of the interview, it can be interpreted also as "I think they were not but I cannot say it out loud now and here because I don't want to be held responsible for claiming this." In connection to the preceding question, this reply is a violation of the maxim of manner (is ambiguous) and also quantity. The flouting of the maxims, combined with H's assumption that S is being cooperative, leads to the implicature. S, in this case, gives no direct answer but relies on implicatures on the side of the hearers. In this respect this case differs from the two preceding ones in that it is not issued only to avoid a direct answer, but rather to imply the answer.

The off-record pay-offs are made use of in answers by S to avoid the accountability for his/her action. It is doubtful that, by going off-record, S in 1. and 2. can avoid responsibility for the potentially face-damaging interpretation. On the contrary, his indirectness (flouting of maxims) leads eventually to an implication, though not intended by him, but inferred, which is different from the answer in 3. This difference can be also demonstrated by an attempt to incorporate the last answer in an indirect quotation, which would require the use of an explicit performative verb (*want, dare, ...?*), resulting in the loss of the intended implicature. The meaning of such answers used as direct quotations can be described as negotiable and thus requiring the form, *ie* direct quotation.

Quotations perform multiple functions, e.g. they are supposed to add topicality, trustworthiness, reliability, dynamics, or liveliness. In Bakhtin's sense, a text with quotations is polyphonic (includes other voices). It is also intertextual, *ie* depends on the writer's and (reader's) knowledge of previous discourses; this characteristic was already observed above in the reader's ability to understand a specific question/answer relation even when a question was not explicitly mentioned. A text containing quotations is also dialogic: 'the dynamism and tension of criticism comes from the engagement of the writer with the quotations since (s)he may or may not agree with them' (Wales 1989: 388).

Taking politeness theory, relevance and maxims into account, a more specific function of the writer's 'engagement' with quotations stands out – that of the journalist's avoiding the interpretation of statements, providing the wording and context (background knowledge). The dialogicality (tension and dynamism) thus arises between the source of the quotation and the ultimate reader, the journalist functioning as the mediator and exercising his criticism through the choice and positioning of quotations in the article.

It was shown that in quotations from interviews where the interviewer's strategy is on-record the answers to direct questions were rather indirect and their interpretation relied heavily on the context. In such cases, the writer opts to go off-record using the quotation. Undoubtedly, he influences the eventual understanding by positioning the quotation in a particular place in the discourse of his article but using the quotation he avoids his responsibility for doing so.

4 Conclusion

Contrasting two types of interviews illustrates a correlation of the mutual relationship of the interactants and the purpose of the interview with the strategies used by the interviewer and reflected in the linguistic form of the questions asked. The knowledge of the strategy-form relation can be exploited in making reference to interviews through direct quotations in newspaper articles. In interviews which are carried out using the on-record strategy, answers that violate the maxims are found difficult to be represented in indirect quotations and the final inference of the meaning is left to the readers via the technique of using a quotation. The specific function of recording this type of FTAs *verbatim* represents an off-record strategy on the side of the writer/journalist.

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APPENDIX

<<http://cbc.ca/olympics/news/muehlegg020224>>

Muehlegg, Lazutina stripped of gold medals

Three athletes test positive, Russians to appeal ban

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CBC SPORTS ONLINE - A drug scandal has rocked the world of cross-country skiing on the final day of competition in Salt Lake City Just hours before the Closing Ceremonies, International Olympic Committee (IOC) director general Francois Carrard announced Johann Muehlegg and Larissa Lazutina had tested positive for the drug darbepoetin and were each stripped of a gold medal. Muehlegg failed an out-of-competition test on Thursday -- two days before winning gold in the 50km. He will lose that medal, but be allowed to keep the gold medals he won in 30km freestyle and 10km pursuit.

1. Like Muehlegg, Lazutina will have to return one of the three medals she won at the Games.

2. Earlier Sunday, Lazutina appeared to have earned a place in the record books just hours before the announcement, with a sixth career Olympic gold in the women's 30km classical race.
3. Lazutina will have to return the medal to the IOC, but is allowed to keep her two silvers.
4. Lazutina's Russian cross-country teammate, Olga Danilova, also tested positive for darbepoetin, but she will be allowed keep the gold and silver she won at the at the Games.
5. Russian Olympic chiefs said they will appeal the ban against Lazutina to the Court of Arbitration for Sport, which is based in Lausanne, Switzerland.
6. "We know that she is innocent and we are prepared to fight this doping conviction in court," said Viktor Mamatov, Russia's chef de mission.
7. According to Carrard, all three athletes have been sent home from the Games and will not participate in the Closing Ceremonies.
8. While not on the IOC's list of banned substances, darbepoetin is commonly used for the treatment of anaemia. It stimulates the production of red blood cells, which help carry oxygen.
9. "The substance is not listed on the banned list because it is so new," said Arne Ljunqvist, chairman of the International Olympic Committee's medical commission. "This is a strong statement to those who say we are far behind. We are on their heels."
10. Earlier Jordi Segura, a member of the IOC's medical committee, explained that the recently-developed drug is similar to the banned substance erythropoietin (EPO), but more powerful. He went on to say "most people" erroneously believe darbepoetin can not be detected in laboratories.
11. As a result of Muehlegg's disqualification, Russia's Mikhail Ivanov wins the gold in the men's 50km classical, with silver going to Andrus Veerpalu of Estonia and bronze to Odd-Bjoern Hjelmeset of Norway.
12. Just before the race, Muehlegg failed -- then passed -- a blood test.
13. He was tested for high levels of hemoglobin, an oxygen-carrying molecule found in red blood cells.
14. **"I don't understand this result. I've been skiing for 10 years in World Cups and I've been through 25 controls, and there's never been a problem," Muehlegg said Sunday in a Spanish radio interview.**
15. Cross-country skiers have to give blood before races to measure the level of red blood cells. If they are above a certain level the skier is not allowed to compete on health grounds.
16. Muehlegg's levels were above the limit for the first test, but beneath the threshold for a second test administered five minutes later.
17. Muehlegg said he thought a change in his diet three days before the race might have altered his blood levels.
18. He also was asked what his levels were. **"I think that's a secret," he said.**
19. Muehlegg's race-day blood test was similar to the one failed by Lazutina prior to women's 4x5-km relay.
20. Lazutina was disqualified from the event, and because there wasn't enough time to replace her, the Russian team withdrew.
21. In the women's 30km classical the gold goes to Italy's Gabriella Paruzzi, with compatriot Stefania Belmondo taking silver and Bente Skari of Norway winning the bronze.
22. Interestingly, the drug crackdown comes just days after Canadian cross-country bronze medallist Beckie Scott lashed out against the World Anti-Doping Agency and its chief Dick Pound.
23. In an interview with CBC Radio, Scott laughed off Pound's assertion that the dearth of positive drug tests at the Salt Lake Games was proof that the problem of drugs in sport was improving.
24. "Honestly, I think the whole country ski community laughed out loud when we heard [Pound's comments] because we're just like, you've got to be kidding, " Scott told CBC.
25. Scott won a bronze medal in 2x5-km pursuit. Danilova won the gold, Lazutina captured the silver.
26. When asked if Danilova and Lazutina were drug-free, Scott replied: **"No comment."**