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# Using micro-analysis in interviewer training: 'Continuers' and interviewer positioning

## Abstract

Despite the recent growth of interest in the interactional construction of research interviews and advances made in our understanding of the nature of such encounters, relatively little attention has been paid to the implications of this for interviewer training, with the result that advice on interviewing techniques tends to be very general. Drawing on analyses of a feature of research interviews that is usually treated as analytically insignificant, this paper makes a case for more interactionally sensitive approaches to interviewer training. It focuses on interviewer reciprocity in a database of over 40 research interviews conducted by academics and research students to show how apparently insignificant shifts in receipt tokens can have important implications in terms of the developing talk. The implications of this for researcher training are discussed and the paper makes recommendations for ways in which attention can be drawn to the discursive dimension in interviewing practice.

## Introduction

While it has long been acknowledged that interviews are not merely the product of *what* the participants talk about but also *how* they talk (e.g. Mishler 1986: viii) and that they involve 'meaning making work' (Holstein and Gubrium 1995), the implications of this for interviewer training do not seem to have been fully appreciated. Despite the fact that it is nearly thirty years since Oakley (1981) highlighted problems with standard interview textbooks and their polarisation of

'proper' and 'improper' interviews, 'the strategies to assist novice researchers in developing their interviewing skills have been limited to date' (Uhrenfeldt et al. 2007: 47).

In focusing on an apparently innocuous feature of interviewer talk with a view to revealing something of its complexity and subtlety, this paper addresses itself to what Rapley (2001), following Cicourel, has called the 'artfulness' of interviewing. The term is important because it suggests that successful research interviewing depends on more than the internalisation of basic rules of procedure and the development of core skills, important though these might be: it involves the refinement of sensibility to one's work as an interviewer. With this perspective in mind, what follows rests on the assumption that if novice interviewers can be shown that a superficially insignificant feature of their talk might be interactionally relevant, this will serve to raise their awareness of the need for developing such sensibility. Using 'continuers' as a point of reference, the paper will seek to show that applied conversation analysis can provide both a perspective and a method for use in interviewer training.

In adopting this approach, the article represents an exploration of the training implications of Cicourel's (1964) representation of the interview as situated action and Mishler's (1986) highlighting of the extent to which interviewees construct their accounts in response to the interviewer's signals, however subtle. Hence it focuses on minimal responses not as objects of analysis in themselves but as a means of demonstrating the more general relevance of micro-interactional analysis in interviewer training. It is also related to work in conversation analysis (CA) which has already made an important contribution to our understanding of the interactional

construction of interviews (e.g. ten Have 2004, Roulston 2006) and where much still remains to be done (Wooffitt and Widdicombe 2006).

The paper begins with an introduction to standard advice on directiveness in research interviewing, something which is usually introduced to novice interviewers in terms of leading questions. Drawing on Whyte , it presents a broader picture but one which categorises minimal responses as non-directive. This is followed by a brief overview of research on minimal responses in talk. Following comments on relevant methodological issues, the core of the paper analyses the use of continuers by different interviewers, focusing on aspects of style and **positioning**. The paper concludes with practical recommendations for interviewer training.

## Directiveness in interviews

There is no shortage of excellent introductions to the craft of research interviewing (e.g. Arksey and Knight 1999, Gillham 2005, Kvale 2009), all broadly reflecting a conception of the research interview as a ‘conversation with a purpose’ (Burgess 1984: 102) and therefore, at least to some extent, with an interest in its interactional features. However, the approach to this tends to be rather broad brush, so that minimal responses are ignored, embedded within general advice along the lines that the interviewer ‘offers supportive, encouraging nods, smiles, and verbal expressions’ (deMarrais 2004: 64), or presented as interactionally neutral, as in the claim that ‘a mere nod, or ‘mm’, or just a pause can invite the subject to go on with the description’ (Kvale 2007: 61). This is most clearly brought out in Whyte’s (1984: 99-110) list of degrees of directiveness, beginning with responses which are assumed not to direct the interviewee in any way:

1. ‘Uh-huh,’ nod of head etc.

2. Reflection
3. Probe the informant's last remark
4. Probe an idea in preceding turn
5. Probe an idea introduced earlier
6. Introduction of a new topic

Whyte's choice of 'directiveness' as a key term is probably not accidental, since it is commonly assumed that neutrality is an ideal to which interviewers should aspire:

A general principle underlying the absence of stories and assessments is the need for interviewers to maintain *neutrality* during the interview. They must not, therefore, participate in language behaviour that reveals too much of their own personal circumstances and attitudes.

(Delin 2000: 99. Emphasis in original)

Although this position is by no means universal (see, for example, Kvale's discussion of confrontational interviews and leading questions, 2007: 75-77/88-89), it is nevertheless pervasive. Mallozi (2009: 1046), for example, notes her incredulous response to a colleague's advice that she should interview 'with no expression or reaction' in order 'not to influence' her respondent. She goes on to draw an interesting distinction between the 'relational energy metronome' of repeated response tokens and more emphatic responses, though I shall argue that it is not just local contingencies of the latter sort that might affect the development of talk. In fact, although CA has comprehensively demonstrated the contingent nature of interactional contributions, the only example I have been able to find in introductions to research interviewing which recognises that continuers of the sort identified by Whyte are not necessarily neutral is provided by Seidman, who sees them as a 'benign controlling mechanism' which nevertheless 'run the risk of distorting how the participant responds' (2006: 90). As a preliminary to illustrating the ways in which such distortion might be produced, it is first necessary to examine work that has been done on the interactional significance of such minimal responses.

## Interview research and minimal responses

While it might be thought that the casual dismissal of minimal responses by those involved in interview training is at least understandable if not excusable, analysts of interaction would take a different view. Research on minimal responses in the fields of law (Atkinson 1992) and broadcasting (Heritage and Greatbatch 1991), for example, has shown how their presence or absence can be interpretively consequential. The essential point, as Mazeland and ten Have note, is that such minimal responses ‘seem mainly to serve local organizational purposes’ (1996: 101). As Zimmerman observes in his paper on *yeah* and speaker reciprocity, ‘instances of acknowledgment tokens need to be examined in context’ (1993: 186). They are, to use Jefferson’s term, ‘deployable *devices* with consequences for the shape of the interaction’ (1983: 17, emphasis in the original) and what is analytically relevant is not the application of a particular descriptor but the explication of their use as interactional resources, in this case for participants in specific interviews. Hence Schegloff (1982) is able to show how a listener response in the middle of an extended turn can serve as *either* an assessment, operating on particulars of the current unit, *or* a continuer, which treats it as preliminary to further talk, while Jefferson (1983) demonstrates that *yeah* might indicate a shift from reciprocity to speakership. The essential point is that the determination of whether or not a response is neutral is not a matter for researchers to determine *a priori* but an outcome of specific interactional encounters.

That said, the *terminological* picture is by no means straightforward, as the comments of a leading researcher in the field indicate. Referring to markers of reciprocity, Gardner (1998: 206) was in no doubt as to their interactional significance:

Utterers of such items are making vocal contributions that have some interactional meaning and can influence the course of the subsequent talk ... reciprocity vocalisations can be seen as a set of responses for a participant in a primary listener role at a particular moment in the talk. They provide ways in which conversationalists express their understanding of what another is saying, and as such are an example par excellence of co-construction in action.

The two points made here could not be more indicative of a need to pay close attention to minimal responses: they have the power to influence the development of subsequent talk and they are a classic illustration of the way in which such talk is constructed by the participants involved. However, nearly ten years later the same writer seems to have limited the extent of the relevant category in claiming that *right* is 'different from classic continuers such as *Mm hm* or *Uh huh*, which are neutral beyond asking for more from the other speaker' (Gardner 2007: 36). This relative indeterminacy to some extent reflects differences in how such interactional features have been described. Schegloff (1982) traces the topic back to Fries' identification of 'signals of ... continued attention' (1952: 49) and since then descriptive terms have multiplied: Heinz (2003: 1116) identifies thirteen alternatives and McCarthy (2003: 43) laments 'a lack of shared terminology'.

Although the term 'backchannels' (Yngve 1970) is widely used, more relevant to the analysis here is the narrower term, *continuer*, first proposed by Schegloff (1982) and widely adopted since. It is particularly appropriate because of the qualities it exhibits:

...an understanding that an extended unit of talk is underway by another, and that it is not yet, or may not yet be (even ought not yet be), complete. It takes the stance that the speaker of that extended unit should continue talking

(Schegloff 1982: 81).

This is remarkably close to Whyte's description provided above and seems particularly applicable to interview talk. It is presented in quotation marks in the title

of this paper to reflect its use in the interview literature, where the label is assumed to represent a particular function within the interview, when in fact the only categorical interactional claim that might be made in respect to it is limited to one of one of its verbal instantiations, *uh huh*, and amounts to the fact that this is ‘an exclusively recipient action’ (Goodwin 1986: 215). In what follows I shall try to show that an utterance’s function as a continuer, which serves as part of a recognised and common interview strategy, does not preclude the possibility of its additional function as an assessment, which, other things being equal, would represent an unintentional violation of recommended interview practice.

## Methodology

The approach to analysis in this paper is informed by two considerations: the need to do justice to the co-construction of interview talk and the implications of this, and the recognition that what is proposed in terms of analytical procedure should be accessible to researchers in the field of applied linguistics. For these reasons, it adopts what has been described as an applied CA perspective, using CA concepts and methods for its own ends – what Ten Have describes as employing CA-like practices. While ‘pure CA’ is ‘analytically motivated’, Ten Have argues, applied CA ‘is done in the hope that it can deliver some news about the organization of valued activities, which may help to generate ideas as to how things may be done differently’ (2007: 196).

While CA is not the only approach that can be applied to the analysis of research interviews, whether for the purposes of data analysis or improving technique, or both (see Wooffitt 2005: 168-183 for a comparison of CA with other approaches to interview analysis), it has much in its favour. The following three of the four reasons



for doing CA advanced by Ten Have (2007: 9) are particularly relevant to interviewer training:

- ‘CA operates *closer to the phenomena* than most other approaches’
- ‘CA favours *naturally occurring data*’
- ‘CA’s perspective on human interaction is *organizational and procedural*’

The first is important because it distinguishes a CA approach from analyses that rely on categories, models, repertoires, etc. In working with recordings and transcripts, CA allows direct access to the relevant talk and the ways in which it is constructed. This is not only analytically important but from a training perspective it develops an approach to reading interviews which sees them as objects of interest in themselves rather than merely a source of data. The second point is relevant insofar as it underlines the need to use genuine interviews as objects of analysis, rather than relying on discussions of *in vitro* versions generated in training sessions. However, it is the third characteristic that is potentially the most important, pointing as it does to a focus on how things get done through talk.

Questions about what is being done – what is being accomplished through talk – are fundamental to CA’s approach to analysis, and the notion of recipient design, the ways in which participants design their talk to display sensitivity to co-participant(s), underlies Sacks et al.’s (1974) seminal paper. Associated with this is an analytical orientation which eschews speculation about mental states or motivations that might explain particular contributions and instead relies on evidence to be found in the talk itself. As Schegloff (2007: 8) puts it, in considering a response to a question such as ‘What would someone be doing by talking in this way?’ we should ‘try to ground our answer ... by showing that it is that action which co-participants in the interaction took to be what was getting done, as revealed in/by the response they make to it.’

In the context of research interviewing, this emphasis on action, on how a next speaker interprets the action accomplished by a prior turn, provides an important corrective to an approach to analysis deriving from a focus on the nature of the questions asked. This may be a perfectly understandable orientation given that the questions themselves will have been derived ultimately from the research questions the interviewer seeks to answer, but its analytical consequences can be unfortunate. The ‘reading’ of an interview that sees *mm* or *uh huh* as merely encouraging further talk (or worse still, that omits such minimal responses from the transcript) may fail to recognise that what such responses may ‘do’ in a particular sequential environment is indicate something about the interviewer’s own position, something that prompts a response from the interviewer to that action and which therefore needs to be interpreted as such. If, for example, *uh huh* is heard as an assessment, it thereby makes relevant agreement or disagreement with that assessment, something which will be apparent in the subsequent turn. This points to the necessity of approaching interviews not simply in terms of etic frameworks that map form/function relationships of particular ‘continuers’ but from the perspective of participant orientations.

Since I wish to argue that there is a reasonable expectation that the features identified in this paper would be found in the interviews of members of any academic department where this form of data collection is widely used, audio recordings of research interviews were gathered from staff and students in a single department using convenience sampling, thus replicating a fairly standard situation facing teachers of research methods. The use of audio recordings, of course, denies the analyst access to non-verbal features of interaction, but since video recordings are less frequently used for research interviews because of their intrusive nature, this also represents a realistic

sample in terms of authentic data that might be available. Participants also confirmed that the interviews were conducted face-to-face in private, note-taking was not involved and no reference was made to written question guides or other sources in the interview itself. Pilot interviews prior to formal data collection had focused on identifying core topics and exploring lines of development, and this allowed interviewers to rely on memory rather than notes in the interviews themselves.

Although participants (all names are pseudonyms) provided transcriptions of their interviews, analysis was based on close listening to the recordings themselves, first to develop a sense of individual style and then to identify stretches of talk which seemed particularly interesting with respect to the deployment of minimal responses. Repeated listening to selected passages followed a reading of the interviewer's own transcript and this in turn was followed by transcription of relevant passages using a slightly modified version of Jefferson's system (1985) with standard orthography (see the appendix for a summary of notation used in the extracts). This process revealed a number of interesting aspects involving minimal responses and in the following analysis I highlight some features of interest. In doing so my aim is not to develop a comprehensive account of minimal responses in interviews, but rather to use instances of their deployment as a means of illustrating how they might be used in researcher training.

### Analysis 1: Interviewer styles

In terms of researcher training, the analysis begins *in media res*, since the first step in a CA approach would involve students in transcription work. The necessity for this is convincingly demonstrated by Rapley (2001: 305-306) and once introductory work has been done students can be asked to transcribe an extract from the beginning of

one of their own interviews. Jill and Jo provide a striking illustration of what this can produce. Taking the first 23 seconds of the interviewee's response to their first question produces the following picture:

**Extract 1: Jill**

01 IE: Yeh (.) sure. I actually started in:  
 02 EFL teaching, em (.) after (0.3)  
 03 university I did my TEFL course (0.4)  
 04 and then I worked abroad teaching  
 05 English: (.) in Mexico and in Spain,  
 06 → IR: °.hh°=  
 07 IE: =and when I came back to En:gland, I  
 08 was loo- obviously looking for wo:rk,  
 09 and (0.3) I:: (.) applied for >some  
 10 ESOL< jobs, (0.6) as well as some EFL  
 11 jobs, and I got (.) e:m (0.8) this  
 12 job. Yhhheh!he [heh  
 13 IR: [heheheheh

**Extract 2: Jo**

01 IE: A:::h=Idid, [I fo]u:nd that teachers=  
 02 → IR: [↑mm ]  
 03 IE: =gave children a particular ti:me.  
 04 → IR: Mm [hm  
 05 IE: [e:m:: (0.8) was it after the  
 06 break?=or  
 07 (0.2)  
 08 → IR: Mm hm  
 09 IE: there is a special half an hour  
 10 reading time so th[ere are] some=  
 11 → IR: [Mm hm ]  
 12 IE: =boo:ks (.) e::m available.  
 13 → IR: Mm hm=  
 14 IE: =e:m in the classroom so children  
 15 c-could go and keep (.) their own  
 16 books, [and the] teacher says=  
 17 → IR: [Mm hm ]  
 18 IE: =reading time °is°=  
 19 → IR: =Mm hm=  
 20 IE: =I think it's (.) probably after lunch.  
 21 → IR: Mm ↑hm.

While Jill allows the speaker to continue uninterrupted apart from a very quiet intake of breath (06), Jo produces eight continuers. In the absence of visual evidence, we are unable to say whether Jill was showing non-verbal interest in the speaker, but the general absence of *verbal* continuers in her responses makes the occurrence of individual examples potentially more significant than would be the case in Jo's interviews. It is not the business of CA to compare speakers, but from a training

perspective it is important for interviewers to develop awareness of aspects of their own talk and as a pervasive feature of research interviews continuers offer an excellent means of achieving this.

There is strong evidence of marked cultural differences in terms of the frequency with which backchannels are used (e.g. Heinz 2003, Li 2006, the latter with a useful summary) and this might be a factor here (Jill is from Pakistan and Jo from the UK), but from a research perspective it is of peripheral interest, not least because personal style embraces a range of possibilities. For example, this data set suggests that most interviewers have a distinct preference for a particular continuer: Bill, for example, (see Extract 6) rarely uses *mm* and *uh huh*, but *right* and *yeah* feature prominently in his responses.

More important is the impact that changes in such patterning can have interpretively, as Koole (2003) demonstrates. Taking up Schegloff's observation that such responses might serve as withholding devices, he suggests that 'a minimal response potentially occurs in a position where either a token of detachment or a token of affiliation might have been relevant' (2003: 194). He argues that the replacement of affiliation devices (such as joint answer construction and confirmation) occurring in the first half of interview with minimal responses in the second half makes the latter interpretable as withholding affiliation. Important in Koole's paper is his insistence that single occurrences of minimal responses are not significant: it is the 'context of discourse' (2003: 194) established in the first part of the interview that makes the withholding through the second part significant. Developing sensitivity to aspects of one's talk make it more likely that shifts of this sort will be noticed.

## Analysis 2: Alignment

Advice on interview technique often emphasises the importance of establishing rapport with the interviewee, but this is usually couched in general terms and rarely considers the effects that this might have on the interviewee's contributions. In fact, the data set yields numerous examples of how a change in receipt type, distribution and/or placement can be interpreted by the hearer as a form of alignment, with consequences for the nature of subsequent talk. Extracts 3 and 4 are taken from the same interviewer, Bert, and the first illustrates a combination of change and placement.

### Extract 3: Bert

01 IE: Just occasionally (.) knowing that  
02 I'd understood, and not wanting to  
03 be bothered to reflect that  
04 understanding=  
05 IR: =mm=  
06 IE: =because I had this VE:ry strong (.)  
07 empathy=  
08 IR: =mm=  
09 IE: =with whatever was being discussed,=  
10 IR: =mm  
11 (0.8)  
12 IE: And just wanting to PITCH in and  
13 say why don't you.  
14 → IR: Yeah  
15 (0.3)  
16 → IR: Yeah  
17 (0.4)  
18 → IR: Yeah  
19 (0.5)  
20 IE: Which is: (.) my normal tutorial mode.

Bert tends to use *mm* and *yeah* as response tokens. Up to line 10 he uses *mm* as a neutral continuer, but the switch to *Yeah* (14), repeated twice, after the interviewee describes what she feels like doing, suggests alignment with her and prompts the subsequent elaboration in line 20. **In extract 4, the repetition of *Yeah* prompts a slightly different response.**

### Extract 4: Bert

01 IE: There was this pROblem of what to talk  
02 about [w' some]eone you don't know at=  
03 IR: [Yeah ]

04 IE: =a::ll.  
 05 → IR: Yeah  
 06 (0.4)  
 07 → IR: Y[eah.  
 08 IE: [ >Like it was< rea::lly really  
 09 difficult=  
 10 IR: =Yeah  
 11 (0.3)  
 12 IE: ((Goes on to give example.))

When *Yeah* is introduced at a TRP (05) and repeated after a slight gap (07), it serves to align the interviewer with the speaker, producing an upgrading from the latter and a subsequent example. This is not an isolated example, but a very common sequence in Bert's interviews, in which the interviewee's expansion is also sometimes preceded by confirmation ('right'). A similar feature was noted by Jefferson (1983) in her discussion of the 'misfitting' of *mm*. In her example, topic closings were acknowledged by *yeah*, but when *mm* was introduced following a closing this encouraged the speaker to resume talking, thereby providing an opportunity for the listener to introduce a request. The case here is clearly slightly different since repetition rather than 'misfitting' is involved, but the resumption of talk following a repeated *Yeah* seems similarly noteworthy.

### Analysis 3: Disaffiliation

Sometimes, in their management of response tokens, interviewers can reveal very clearly their assessment of a respondent's position, with potential consequences for how subsequent talk is framed. Extract 5 is part of a discussion of the relative importance, in terms of marking, of different elements in writing such as grammar, structure and content. The extract begins as the interviewee moves onto a new element, language. What is particularly interesting here is the pattern of delayed responses by Ben, eventually prompting a justificatory account by the interviewee.

In the exchanges up to line 32, there are three pauses at TRPs at the end of the interviewee's turns and these increase in length from 0.6 seconds in line 4, to 0.8 in line 17, to 2 seconds in line 31.

**Extract 5: Ben**

01 IE: But the la:nguage is more important  
02 (0.6)  
03 IE: ↓still.  
04 → (0.6)  
05 IR: Right.=  
06 IE: =At this level.  
07 IR: [Yeah.  
08 (0.4)  
09 IR: Ok[ay.  
10 IE: [As I said because it is (.) th- th-  
11 too:l that is going to be transferred  
12 (0.6)  
12 IE: to other  
13 (0.3)  
14 IE: students and to other people, and to  
15 the outside wor:ld an::=that's (.)  
16 what counts.  
17 → (0.8)  
18 IE: R[eally.  
19 IR: [Ri:ght.  
20 IE: So I- we take it for granted. IF=  
21 IR: =Yeah=  
22 IE: =there are grammar mistakes, really  
23 serious ones,  
24 (0.7)  
25 IE: er the- the student is: penalised for  
26 the grammar mistakes more than:  
27 (0.5)  
28 IE: for the  
29 (0.4)  
30 IE: content.  
31 → (2.0)  
32 → IR: ((Slightly doubtfully)) Ri::[ght  
33 IE: [We have  
34 to do tha:t [bec]ause=  
35 IR: [Ye--  
36 IR: =Okay  
37 IE: Simply (.) because it's more  
38 practical.=e:r=  
39 IR: =°y[eah°  
40 IE: [simply because I:'m: looking (.)  
41 for  
42 (0.5)  
43 IE: the:: general benefit  
44 (0.6)  
45 IE: of the public.

In line 5 the interviewer does provide feedback ('Right'), but only after a pause of over half a second, by which time the interviewee is about to add a qualifier ('at



this level'), which prompts overlapping feedback ('yeah'). However, this in its turn is followed by a 0.4 second pause and an 'okay' from the interviewer that is intonationally not marked to indicate a structuring move.

What follows from the interviewee (10) is a restatement of an earlier claim which provides justification for the emphasis placed on language by presenting this in terms of what the student takes beyond the classroom. At the end of this there is another TRP and another silence (0.8 sec). This time the interviewee adds 'Really', intensifying the force of her original claim.

The interviewee now explains the implications of this position for the weighting of marking: grammatical mistakes are penalised more heavily than content mistakes. Her turn contains three unfilled pauses (0.7, 0.5 and 0.4) and the TRP at the end is followed by an extended silence of two seconds (line 31) terminated by doubtful assent from the interviewer ('Ri:ght').

Although we do not have details of the accompanying non-verbal signals, what matters at this point is the interviewee's response: an immediate (in fact, overlapping) justification for her decision, treating the interviewer's response as a challenge. Interestingly, the self repair from 'I' to 'we' in line 20 has already constructed the decision as a shared one and she begins with 'We' (33), explaining that the reasons are practical and that they have no choice (33-4 'We have to do that'). Finally, she upgrades her account to present it as part of a wider moral responsibility: it is for the 'general benefit of the public'. It is also worth noting that this is to some extent prefigured in evidence of increasing emphasis, and perhaps even frustration, reflected in the use of intensifiers (e.g. lines 3, 15-16 and 22-23) and the reference to an earlier claim (line 10).

It is clear from this exchange that the interviewer's responses have elicited from the interviewee the reasons behind her decision to penalise grammar mistakes so severely and as such they serve a useful purpose. However, from the interviewee's perspective, the interviewer has taken up a clearly evaluative position on the relative importance of grammar and content in writing and we cannot know to what extent, if at all, this influences the interviewee's responses later in the interview. From the perspective of interviewing technique, therefore, we are right to highlight the impact of the response tokens in this exchange and to ask whether the additional information could have been elicited more effectively by simply asking the interviewee to explain the thinking behind her decision.

#### Analysis 4: Assessment

While the value of interviewers making their own views clear will depend on the context in which this occurs, unintentional evaluative positioning has the potential to expose important considerations in interview practice. In Extract 6 the interviewee is about to leave her place of work and Bill asks her how she will feel about leaving the person she shares an office with and works most closely with – the first time he has raised the issue of their relationship. When the interviewee says 'she drives me potty' he asks her to elaborate and, following a pause and a prompt from the interviewer, she provides a list of descriptors:

**Extract 6: Bill**

01 IE: I find her disorganised,  
02 IR: ((Very quietly)) Yeah  
03 IE: lazy,  
04 (1.0)  
05 IR: ((Very quietly)) Yeah  
06 IE: selfish,  
09 (2.0)  
10 → IR: Really that(?) Yeah  
11 IE: E:r unapproachable. Really unapproachable.  
12 IR: Really?

Bill's response in line 10 marks a clear shift away from 'Yeah' in his previous two turns and suggests a questioning (or at the very least a check) of the interviewee's prior assessment. It is noticeable that following this the interviewee presents the next item on her list then immediately upgrades this using the intensifier 'really', an assessment which Bill again questions, prompting confirmation from the interviewee. It could be argued that there is a progression from an unmarked response in line 2, via a quiet and delayed acknowledgement token in line 5, to growing doubts about the interviewee's general position. More important than this, however, is the fact that the two later questioning responses effectively construct the earlier responses as unquestioning acceptance of the colleague's disorganisation and laziness. The cumulative effect on the hearer of a list of points might eventually provoke a response, but the presence of such a response may make relevant the absence of responses to earlier points on the list, which is something that interviewers may need to bear in mind.

## Discussion

In considering the relevance of the outcomes of the above analyses, it is essential to clarify at the outset the status of the claims that they warrant. While the features identified above are typical of interviews in my data set and, it is fair to assume, likely to feature widely in qualitative interviews generally, in themselves they are no more than illustrative. Nevertheless, the ways in which they are deployed in interview talk can have important implications for the development of that talk and hence what is made available for subsequent analysis. This does not represent a case for more detailed prescriptions regarding interview behaviour, but rather the opposite: a

reminder that progress depends on the development of craft skills through the sensitive interrogation of one's own work.

By deliberately choosing a feature of interview talk that is traditionally regarded as neutral (or at least minimally intrusive) and demonstrating how even this can influence participant positioning and interview development, I have sought to show that no detail of interview talk should be regarded *a priori* as trivial – an important point for novice researchers to appreciate. On the other hand, this not to suggest that the interviewer should somehow strive to attain 'neutrality', when there are bound to be occasions on which this would be the least productive option (Koole 2003: 196-7, for example, notes that neutrality can militate against establishing the sort of interpersonal relationship important in some interviews); it is rather a matter of developing a sense of the subtleties of interview interaction, a shift to seeing the interview 'not only a resource for social inquiry, but also as an object of analysis in its own right' (Sarangi 2003: 79). As an object of analysis, there seem to be three ways in which the interview can contribute to interviewer training: by refining interview technique, developing awareness, and improving analytical sensitivity.

#### *Refining interview technique*

It is not possible to translate insights generated by micro-analysis directly into skills relevant to the conduct of interviews. However, awareness of the situated nature of interview talk and the powerful influence that interviewer responses can have on the development of subsequent talk can transfer into heightened awareness in the interview itself. Just as importantly, through examining their own talk, interviewers can develop a sense of what might be described as their interview idiolect and they might even decide to change aspects of this. Some months after Jo (see Extract 2) was

exposed to her frequent use of minimal responses, for example, she informed me that she had listened closely to her talk and found this irritating, even distracting, so she had decided to vary the nature of her responses, making greater use of non-verbal responses, with the result that she was now much happier with her approach. **It is worth noting, however, that only a video recording of her current practice would provide the basis for a deeper understanding of this new approach.** The discussion of this feature had been non-evaluative and her judgement was an entirely personal one, but it does reveal how awareness can influence technique.

#### *Developing awareness*

Most participants introduced to this sort of micro-analysis seem to find the exploration of their own talk fascinating (if at first somewhat alarming) and develop an interest in exploring it further. This helps to develop a natural resistance to general prescriptions relating to interview practice and a willingness to treat each interview as a unique event (Cicourel 1964: 80). It also encourages greater attention to careful transcription and recognition of the importance of this, and although many novice researchers balk at the idea of CA-type transcription of complete interviews, the idea of listening closely and transcribing problematic or otherwise ‘interesting’ sections in detail is usually positively received.

#### *Improving analytical sensitivity*

**Although the sort of analysis proposed here calls for a degree of interactional sensitivity that is within the grasp of any competent applied linguist, it does not depend on adherence to any particular analytical tradition. As Rapley (2001: 318) notes, ‘Whatever analytic stance is adopted, you cannot escape from the interactional**

nature of interviews, that the “data” are collaboratively produced.’ The important point is that when talk is seen in terms of situated action, analytical attention is directed away from what the questions *assume* the interviewee will pay attention to and towards what is *actually* being attended to. This in turn develops awareness of how the interviewer’s contributions can help shape interviewee’s responses and influence the development of the talk. This focus on the talk itself rather than just the ‘content’ of the talk, on *action* rather than *intention*, has important analytical implications.

While recognising that all training takes its own form, this section concludes with a brief illustration of how the analysis used in this paper might be incorporated into a session comprising five steps designed to develop effective listenership in research interviews:

1. Establish the importance of listenership. Edge (2002: 44-45) provides a useful exercise which powerfully exposes the effects of good and poor listenership on the development of talk.
2. Identify ways in which interviewers show listenership (Analysis 1)
3. Look for changes in minimal responses and examine how these influence subsequent interviewee turns (Analysis 2), highlighting the way in which interview talk is jointly constructed.
4. Develop the idea of talk as action by exploring what how interviewer talk can ‘do’ alignment or disaffiliation and the consequences of this for the development of the interview (Analysis 3).
5. Broaden out to consider other topics (assessments, upshots, etc.) (Analysis 4)

At the end of this session, novice interviewers are usually able to demonstrate, through their responses to tasks, recognition of the importance of attending to the

speaker rather than, for example, the points the interviewer needs to cover; awareness of how interviewers develop individual styles of listenership; sensitivity to the effects that changes in this can have, in particular on interviewer positioning; and some insight into how minimal responses can form part of broader patterns within the interview. Although this does not guarantee effective listenership in practice, it lays the foundations for this. Each interview is a unique event but it also represents a unique opportunity to discover, through reflection, more about our interviewing technique. Just as musicians consciously reflect on subtle aspects of their technique in the expectation that eventually repeated practice will produce *in situ* responses to the creative demands of the moment, so interviewers should seek to exploit the generatively reflexive power of awareness, sensitivity and practice.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to illustrate the value of micro-analysis to interviewer training, but working towards this has inevitably involved compromises, the most obvious of which is that it has not produced anything approaching an adequate analysis of minimal responses in interviews. However, the examples here have at least indicated a fruitful focus for future analysis and, more importantly, have shown how interviewer positioning is not merely a matter of how questions or probes are constructed.

In terms of data, it has drawn on authentic examples from the field, where audio recording is the norm, but this still represents only part of a much richer and more complex picture embracing the non-verbal dimension. As Drummond and Hopper note (1993: 205), English ‘supplies a small set of vocal acknowledgement tokens; and these often appear in concert with head nods or other actions’. Stivers (2008), for

example, has shown how nodding in response to stories can serve to communicate the listener's stance and how the placement of nods can be significant, and there is every reason to suppose that such non-verbal responses could have important implications for interviewer positioning. Uhrenfeld et al. (2007) make an excellent case for using videorecordings in interviewer training (their framework for video-based guided reflection is particularly interesting), and Jo's decision to use non-verbal rather than verbal responses points to the potential value of this, but until more interviews are conducted in this form examples from the field are likely to be scarce. In the meantime it is likely to be used only in the context of interview role play (e.g. Mounsey et al. 2006).

Although the 'two different cultures' (Van den Berg et al. 2003: 5) of interviews as research instruments and interviews as research topics are less obviously separated than once they were, means by which they can be brought together still need to be delicately negotiated. The manner and extent to which micro-analysis and content analysis should be integrated must always be contingent on research purposes, but it might be argued that there should be no limit to the development of researcher sensitivity. In this respect, there is broader case for the sort of research exemplified in this paper than its value in researcher training. It is incumbent on all who exercise a craft to develop their understanding and skills continuously, and research interviewing is no exception.

## Appendix : Transcription conventions used in the paper

- . falling intonation contour
- , 'continuing' intonation contour
- ! animated tone



?	rising intonation contour
:	lengthening of preceding syllable
-	abrupt cut-off
<u>underlining</u>	emphasis
CAPS	louder than surrounding talk
◦      ◦	quieter than the surrounding talk
>      <	quicker than surrounding talk
┌    └	onset and end of overlapping talk
└    ┌	
=	latched utterances
(1.5)	Silence, timed in seconds and tenths of a second
(.)	Micropause
((    ))	additional information, e.g. non-verbal actions
·hh	inhalation
hh	exhalation
↑	prominent rising intonation
<i>Italics</i>	uttered with laughter in the voice

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