

Interaction and the Standardized Survey Interview

The Living Questionnaire

This is the first study of its kind to investigate in detail the interaction between interviewers and respondents in standardized social survey interviews. Applying the techniques of conversation analysis, Hanneke Houtkoop-Steenstra reveals how certain rules of normal conversation fail to apply in interviews based on a standard questionnaire, and offers original empirical evidence to show what really happens. Her book demonstrates that interview results can only be understood as products of the contingencies of the interview situation, and not, as is usually assumed, the unmediated expressions of respondents' real opinions. Her conclusions have important implications for anyone interested in effective survey compilation and interpretation. The book is highly accessible, setting out the basic tools of conversation analysis simply and clearly, and suggesting ways of improving questionnaire design wherever possible. Its approach breaks new ground and will be of great interest to students and researchers of survey methodology.

Hanneke Houtkoop-Steenstra is lecturer in pragmalinguistics in the Dutch department of Utrecht University. She is author of *Establishing Agreement: An Analysis of Proposal-Acceptance Sequences* (1987) and co-editor with Harry Van den Berg and Margaret Wetherell of *Analysing Racist Discourse: Multidisciplinary Approaches*, a forthcoming book from Cambridge University Press.

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The Living Questionnaire

Hanneke Houtkoop-Steenstra



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Preface

I have researched conversation since I graduated from the Department of General Linguistics at the University of Amsterdam. For the first seven years I studied everyday telephone conversations, and I then became interested in what I referred to as “interviewing techniques” in doctor–patient interaction. What did the textbooks say about how medical doctors should interact with their patients, and how did these interviewing techniques work out in real interactions? The advice these books provided was mainly based on psychological and socio-psychological theories of human interaction, and the real interactions often were not as successful as the textbooks predicted.

Being interested in interaction, and especially in the relationship between “how it should be done” and “how it is actually done,” I chose the standardized survey interview as a uniquely interesting research object. A considerable amount of what we know about the social world comes from survey research that finds its way into books, articles, and the mass media. This survey research occasionally provides some general information about the questionnaire, the sample interviewed, and the statistical analysis, but it does not explain what actually happens in the interviews. In fact, the reader and/or user of survey research results is made to believe that interviewers read the questions exactly as they are scripted and respondents behave exactly as they are supposed to behave.

In order to learn what is going on in this part of the survey research procedure, we need to examine questionnaires and analyze recorded interviews. The questionnaires inform the analyst about what interviewers and respondents are supposed to do, whereas the actual interviews demonstrate what they are really doing. When a Dutch survey research organization permitted me to listen to their interviewers doing computer-assisted telephone survey interviews, I was surprised by what I heard. Respondents requested question clarification, interviewers asked questions respondents had previously answered, respondents answered “yes” or “no” although they seemed unsure of what the question meant, and

interviewers asked questions that seemed irrelevant, not only to me, but to the respondent as well.

The research organization gave me the tape recordings of a number of these interviews and allowed me to use them for conversation analysis. My husband, a researcher in the sociology of education, provided me with the questionnaire that formed the basis of these interviews. I have studied several sets of these transcribed, tape-recorded, standardized survey interviews, and parts of these studies have been reported in various published papers. In this book I have tried to bring my published and new work together in a more coherent perspective.

This book brings the results of my research to the attention of those who, in one way or another, are interested in what happens in survey interviews. Students of survey methodology may want to know how questionnaires are enacted in real-life interviews and why interview participants may depart from the script and/or the rules of standardized interviewing. Though this book is not written as an instruction manual, survey methodologists and questionnaire designers may find it useful to learn how the principles of everyday conversation affect what happens in the survey interview. While some insights can be used to improve questionnaires, other insights show the in-principle restrictions of survey methodology.

Pragmalinguists, conversation analysts, and discourse analysts may be interested in the survey interview as a form of talk in its own right, to be compared with other forms of institutional talk (e.g., police interrogation, medical interviewing) and everyday conversation. Also, while linguistics tends to make a distinction between written language on the one hand and spoken language on the other, survey interviews constitute an intersection of the two forms of language, which linguists might find interesting.

Chapter 1 briefly mentions the methodological issues involved in the survey interview. The reader will be referred to other publications that discuss these issues in more detail.

The survey interview will be examined as a form of talk. Interview talk heavily relies on the practices and principles of ordinary conversation. These practices and principles are best understood through conversation analysis. Chapter 2 presents the current state of scholarship regarding how people organize and constitute mundane conversation. This chapter also forms the main theoretical framework for the analyses that are presented throughout the book.

The purpose of chapter 3 is to provide a description of the participation roles involved in the survey interview. I argue that the survey interview is a form of talk embedded in a broader framework of institutional or organ-

izational activities. The scripted questions that constitute the basis of the talk and the pre-coded form used to record the respondents' answers are organizational requirements that have consequences for the various interactional roles the interviewer may take. The function of particular stretches of talk depends partly on the speaker's current interactional role. This insight has a special relevance for the methodology of interaction-coding studies.

Chapter 4 discusses how interviewers attempt to satisfy conflicting interactional requirements. The rules of the standard survey interview require that interviewers never deviate from the questionnaire; however, this inflexibility can result in a situation that is at odds with ordinary conversation. For example, asking the same question twice or not taking into account what the respondent has already said is a typical occurrence in standardized survey interviews. I show how such unconversational activities may lead to misunderstanding on the part of the respondent, and I also focus on the ways in which interviewers deal with these interactional problems.

Chapter 5 is devoted to problems that arise from poorly scripted questions. Sometimes questions are structured in such a way that they may result in respondents interrupting the interviewer and providing premature answers, which may in turn lead to interviewers omitting part of the scripted question and/or the response options. One possible effect of the pre-emptive answer is that the responses that are provided may be unformatted, which calls for the interviewers to probe for a formatted answer. Another possible effect is that serious problems in the sampling procedure may occur when interviewers omit part of the scripted questions during the introductory phase of the interview.

Chapter 6 discusses what interviewers do when respondents provide answers that do not match the pre-coded response options, as is especially common in the case of field-coded questions, where the respondents are not presented with the response categories. This chapter also discusses the fact that respondents are frequently asked to categorize their life experiences in technical terms. These technical terms, however, often do not match the respondents' ways of categorizing their world.

Chapter 7 presents a study of how interviewers build rapport with their respondents when the topic of the interview is a sensitive issue, such as respondents' serious lack of competence in literacy and numeracy. The study shows that building rapport often results in the interviewers revising neutrally formulated multiple-choice scripted questions as leading yes-no questions.

Chapter 8 is devoted to the analysis of interviews with learning-disabled persons living in sheltered homes. These persons were interviewed

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using a well-established Quality of Life questionnaire. I discuss how the interviewers revise the scripted multiple-choice questions upon discovering that the respondent has difficulty understanding the questions. The ultimate effect of this revision practice is that the respondents all end up with very high, though disputable, scores. This chapter is co-authored with Charles Antaki of Loughborough University, UK and Mark Rapley of Murdoch University, Australia.

The final chapter presents the methodological implications of these studies.

Acknowledgments

I carried out the main part of the work documented here while I was a research fellow with the Department of Social Research Methodology at the Free University in Amsterdam. I am especially grateful to the head of the department, Hans van der Zouwen, for his conviction that conversation analysis can benefit the study of survey interviews. I also worked on a portion of this research while at the Utrecht Institute of Linguistics at Utrecht University. I want to thank both departments for providing me with the opportunity to do this work.

I also thank Jürgen Streeck and Robert Hopper of the Speech Communication Department of the University of Texas at Austin for their support and hospitality during my stay in Austin in 1991. Sadly, Robert Hopper is no longer with us. Though his spirit lives on in our hearts and in the tremendous contributions he has made to scholarship, he will be sorely missed.

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Glossary of transcript symbols

[]	A single left-hand bracket indicates the point of overlap onset. A single right-hand bracket indicates the point at which an utterance (-part) terminates vis-a-vis another. For example: A. I don't remem[ber]. B. [No.]
=	The brackets are also used when something happens during the talk, for example when a phone rings: A. I[don't remember] [((phone rings))]
(0.0)	Equal signs, one at the end of one line and one at the beginning of the next, indicate no "gap" between the two lines.
(.)	Numbers in parentheses indicate elapsed time in silence by tenths of seconds. For example, (1.3) is one and three-tenths seconds.
(.)	A dot in parentheses indicates a tiny gap within or between utterances. It is probably no more than two-tenths of a second.
word	Underscoring indicates some form of stress, via pitch and/or amplitude.
wo::rd	Colons indicate prolongation of the immediately prior sound. The length of the colon row indicates the length of the prolongation.
.,?	Punctuation marks are used to indicate intonation.
↓↑	An arrow indicates a marked falling or rising intonation of the syllable that follows, for example, "word↓ing" and "word↑ing."
WORD	Upper case indicates especially loud sounds relative to the surrounding talk of the same speaker.
°word°	Talk between degree signs is relatively quieter than the surrounding talk of the same speaker.
wo-	A dash indicates that a word or phrase is cut off.

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- >word< Right/left carats bracketing an utterance or utterance-part indicate speeding up.
- <word> Left/right carats indicate slowing down.
- .hhh A dot-prefixed row of “h’s” indicates an inbreath.
- (h) A parenthesized “h” indicates plosiveness, associated with laughter, for example, “Yea(h)heah.”
- () Empty parentheses indicate the transcriber’s inability to hear what was said. The length of the parenthesized space indicates the length of the untranscribed talk.
- (word) Parenthesized words are doubtful transcriptions.
- ((cough)) Doubled parentheses contain transcriber’s descriptions rather than transcriptions.
- (...) Ellipses within parentheses indicates that some lines have been omitted.
- # The number sign indicates the sound of the interviewer working on the keyboard.