Third Chapter

CLEAN LANGUAGE INTERVIEWING: MAKING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH INTERVIEWS VERIFIABLE

James Lawley

BECOMING A TEACHER: THE DANCE BETWEEN TACIT AND EXPLICIT KNOWLEDGE

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Chapter authors:
Vlastimil Švec (Chapter 6, 10, 11, Conclusion); James Lawley (Chapter 2, 3); Jan Nehyba (Chapter 4, 5, 7, 9); Petr Svojanovský (Chapter 4, 5, 7); Radim Šíp (Introduction, Chapter 1); Eva Minaříková (Chapter 6, 8, Summary); Blanka Pravdová (Chapter 8); Barbora Šimůnková (Chapter 9); Jan Slavík (Introduction)

Reviewers:
doc. PhDr. Vladimír Chrz, Ph.D., Institute of Psychology, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic; prof. PhDr. Bronislava Kasáčová, Ph.D., Faculty of Education, Matej Bel University Banská Bystrica

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> Interview research in social science has been fraught with a taken-for-granted assumption that interviews straightforwardly provide a resource in relation to participants' experiences, attitudes, beliefs, identities and orientations toward a wide range of social and cultural phenomena. This, in turn, has proliferated uncritical adoption of the interview in various empirical studies and researchers have been overly reliant on a simplistic notion, 'you ask, they answer, and then you will know'.
>
> (Cho, 2014, pp.42-43)

Particularly relevant to Cho's critique above is the role played by the wording of questions in the interview process. Despite considerable evidence from a variety of sources of the potential for unintended interviewer influence (discussed below), little has been written about the potential influence of the researcher's own naturally occurring metaphors (Tosey, 2015) or the effects of presupposition and framing. This is a surprising omission given that questions are the *sine qua non* for conducting interviews, and interviews are probably the most common technique for collecting data in qualitative research (King, 2004).

This chapter examines how an interviewer's use of linguistic structures, such as metaphor, presupposition and framing, can unintentionally influence the content of an interviewee's answers, and how that may compromise the authenticity and trustworthiness of the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These concerns are addressed by a description of the Clean Language interview method, and a method for checking the validity of research interviews. Finally, there is a discussion of the relevance of Clean Language interviewing to tacit knowledge research.

3.1 Interviewee biases

A number of *interviewee* biases that can influence the question-response process have been documented by Podsakoff and his colleagues (2003). For example: the *consistency effect* is the tendency to answer in ways that are consistent with the questions; *acquiescence bias* is the tendency not to challenge an assumption implicit in a question; and the *friendliness effect* is the tendency to answer how an interviewee thinks the researcher wants them to answer. In all three cases the interviewee may

(unconsciously) look for cues from the interviewer about how to answer. In this way the interviewee and researcher can unintentionally increase the chances of *priming,* where the exposure to a stimulus influences a later response. Unconscious priming effects can affect word choice long after the words have been consciously forgotten (Tulving et al., 1982).

3.2 Interviewer priming

Text books on interview technique refer to the need to minimise interviewer bias, however, other than the 'open/closed' question distinction there is little about the potential effect of linguistic structures on interviewees. More concerning is that several leading books and papers on qualitative research give examples of interviews replete with interviewer-introduced metaphors, and questions which could 'lead the witness'—without any warning commentary. Below are just two of the dozens of examples I have gathered. The first extract is from a published paper on interview technique (Englander, 2012, pp.31-33 with metaphors underlined):

> Interviewer: *How has this memory affected your life? What kind of impact has it had on your life?*
> Interviewee: *My dad's girlfriend's apartment or my grandmother? Both?*
> Interviewer: *The first memory. How has this impacted, what impact has it had on your life?*
> Interviewee: *… it definitely has a very large impact…*

The author of the paper raises some important points about descriptive phenomenological research interviews but does not mention that the interviewer's use of the metaphor impact three times in quick succession may have a priming effect. If there is a possibility that the interviewee's description "it definitely has a very large impact" has been influenced by the interviewer's use of that metaphor three times in the previous two questions, the veracity of any analysis or conclusions drawn from that statement could be compromised.

Another paper, published by the UK's National Institute for Health Research (Lacey & Luff, 2009, p.45) gives sample transcripts of interviews to be analysed. One transcript is of an interview with a secondary school teacher about her experience of returning to work 14 months after a heart attack. The transcript contains the following three questions, asked one after another (metaphors underlined):

> Q: *Was it hard to go back then?*
> Q: *Do you think it's changed your outlook about the future?*
> Q: *So your outlook is different?*

In order to understand these questions, the interviewee must make sense of the metaphors *hard to go back* and *changed outlook,* neither of which had appeared in the transcript previously. Unless the questions are rejected outright, the syntax presupposes that *going back* is *hard* and that her *outlook* is *changed/different*. While the paper explains how to analyse such transcripts, and notes the potential for inquirer biases during the interpretation phase, at no time is the authenticity of the interviewee data called into question. Given the tendency for consistency, acquiescence, friendliness and priming effects to influence the interviewee to answer within the frames presupposed by the questions, concern about the authenticity of the answers would have been justified. Whether this particular interviewee would have given similar or different answers to questions without such framing will remain forever unknown, but doubt remains.

Tosey (2011) gives a different kind of example from a published paper which examines the nature of personal transformations experienced by mature students. The metaphor of an *edge* (e.g. "edge of knowing") is mentioned no fewer than one hundred and four times in the paper, and yet not once does this metaphor appear in the interviewee data cited. It requires a very detailed read of the paper to notice that *edge* is likely to be the author's metaphor and not the interviewee's.

3.3 Why are interviewer-introduced metaphors so important?

Research by Loftus and Palmer (1974) found that the way in which questions were worded altered subjects' memories of events they had witnessed. One experiment showed that changing a single word in a question could change the speed estimations made by observers of a video-recorded accident by up to 27%. More recently, and using very different methods, Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011) changed a single metaphor in a crime report, crime as a *virus* or crime as a *beast*, and discovered that this was enough to *systemically* influence the way people reasoned about crime. They concluded, 'even the subtlest instantiation of a metaphor (via a single word) can have a powerful influence [and *furthermore*] the influence of the metaphorical framing effect is covert: people do not recognize metaphors as influential'. 'People' in the context of this chapter includes both interviewer and interviewee.

Loftus (1975) also showed that questions which falsely presupposed that an object or event existed in a film, e.g. 'Did the woman who was pushing the carriage cross into the road?' *doubled* the likelihood that the subject would later report having seen that event, compared to if they had been asked 'Did you see a woman pushing a carriage?' and *more than tripled* the likelihood compared to the control group who were not subject to either of the presupposition-laden questions.

3.4 Clean Language

If the inclusion of metaphors and presupposed ways of thinking are unintended and mostly unconscious (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), is it possible to mitigate the potential to produce data 'contaminated' by the interviewer's linguistic structures? Counselling psychologist David Grove (1989) found a way to keep his metaphors and constructs out of his therapeutic interviews with severely traumatised clients. Grove called his approach Clean Language. Over the last 20 years Clean Language has migrated out of therapy and into the world of business (Doyle, Tosey & Walker, 2010; Martin 1999; Martin & Sullivan, 2007), education (Gröppel-Wegener, 2015; McCracken, 2016; Nixon & Walker 2009; Nixon, 2013), and qualitative research (detailed below).

By paying careful attention to the language they use, researchers can minimise undesired influence and unintended bias during all stages of research—design, data gathering, analysis and reporting (Van Helsdingen & Lawley, 2012). In particular, Clean Language can refine interviewing by minimising the introduction of researchers' metaphors and constructs (Tosey et al., 2014). This is not to suggest that the interviewer who uses Clean Language is not influential. Clean Language aims to minimise the co-construction of the content while at the same time recognising that the interviewer plays a significant role in the co-construction of the process through directing the interviewee's attention to certain aspects of his or her experience (Tosey, 2015).

Owen (1996) was the first to see the value of phenomenological interviewers adopting Grove's questions and since then the technique has been employed in research as varied as:

- Iranian students' metaphors for their teachers (Akbari, 2013)
- Narratives of people who are living with the diagnosis of dementia (Calderwood, 2011)
- A Dutch case study on the role of knowledge in flood protection (Janssen et al., 2014)
- How older workers in the fire and rescue service deal with work-life balance issues as they plan for, approach and transition through retirement (Pickerden, 2013)
- Experiences of members of the Ulster Defence Regiment in Belfast, Northern Ireland (Snoddon, 2005)

3.5 Need for a 'cleanness' rating

> Researchers must demonstrate the quality of their work in ways that are commensurate with their assumptions about their use of interviews.
>
> (Roulston, 2010, p.199)

Even if an interviewer *plans* to closely follow Clean Language protocol, this addresses only half the problem. Given the tendency for interviewer metaphors and constructs to enter the interview *unplanned*, how do we know what actually happens? Current quantitative research papers describe measures that ensure the *analysis* of interview data is robust, but very little is written about applying validity criteria to the interview process itself.

To verify whether interviewers using Clean Language remain faithful to their method, the author has devised a 'cleanness rating' (Lawley, 2010; Lawley & Linder-Pelz, 2016). Every question or statement by the interviewer is allocated to one of five categories:

- *Classically clean*—drawn from the standard Clean Language question set (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000) or repeating only the interviewee's words.[89]
- *Contextually clean*—only introduces 'neutral' words based on the context of the research or logic inherent in the interviewee's information.
- *Mildly leading*—introduces words with the potential to lead but with no discernible effect on the interviewee's answers.
- *Strongly leading*—introduces words, especially metaphors, presuppositions, frames or opinions that could cast doubt on the authorship of interviewee answers.
- *Other*—comments outside of the interview content, e.g., about the process of the interview or answering a practical question from the interviewee.

The results of the line-by-line analysis are tabulated and used to arrive at a summary assessment of the 'cleanness' of each interview. While the goal may be to remain 100% 'clean' in an interview, there are other factors which can make this almost impossible. However, to see what happens in practice the author combined the results from the ratings of 15 interviews (875 interviewer questions/statements) conducted by three interviewers experienced in the use of Clean Language during three separate published research projects. Table 1 shows that *on average*, five (out of 58) of the interviewers' questions or comments were assessed as 'mildly leading' and just one was classified as 'strongly leading'.

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[89] 85% of questions in six Work-Life Balance interviews made use of the following classic Clean Language questions, (Tosey, Lawley & Meese, 2014):

And what kind of ...?	*And where/whereabouts is …*
And is there anything else about …	*And how do you know …*
And that's … like what?	*And when … what happens to …?*
And is there a relationship between … and …	
And is … the same or different as …	
And then what happens?	*And what happens next?*
And where did … come from?	*And what happens just before …*

Note: '…' indicates the interviewee's words.

Table 1
Average cleanness ratings for 15 interviews using Clean Language

Classification of Interviewer questions/statements	Average number of questions/statements per interview	
Classically clean	35	60 %
Contextually clean	15	25 %
Mildly leading	5	9 %
Strongly leading	1	2 %
Other	2	4 %
TOTALS	58	100 %

When there are only one or two strongly leading questions in an interview, it is possible to exclude a portion of the interviewee's answers from the analysis while retaining the majority of the data. As the number of leading questions and statements increases, the fidelity and value of the interview data becomes more and more debatable.

A systematic study of the cleanness of Clean Language interviews compared to traditional interviews is forthcoming. In the meantime, even a cursory review of 'model' interview samples (in text books and academic papers on qualitative research techniques) provides evidence for the hypothesis that traditional interviews are more likely to introduce content and lead by presupposition. Given that, 'the goal of any qualitative research interview is … to see the research topic from the perspective of the interviewee, and to understand how and why they come to have this particular perspective' (King, 2004), the widespread use of unintended leading questions and the imposition of content casts doubts on the validity of results obtained from such interviews.

3.6 Other features of Clean Language interviewing

In addition to the mechanics of minimising the introduction of interviewer metaphors and presupposition, proponents of the Clean Language method maintain that it has two additional features. It is ideal for researching interviewees' metaphors and mental models; and it has the potential to gather *in-depth* data more effectively than traditional methods.

3.6.1 Researching metaphors and mental models

The claim that Clean Language is particularly useful for researching autogenic metaphors and mental models is supported by a number of studies (Cairns-Lee, 2015; Linder-Pelz & Lawley, 2015; Tosey, et. al., 2014).

Tosey (2015, p.203) was impressed by Clean Language's 'potential for research due to its systematic and rigorous way of exploring, and maintaining fidelity to, a person's own inner world'. Since the adherence to Clean Language *prevents* interviewers from introducing their metaphors into the conversation, the data analyst and end user can be assured that all quoted metaphors are generated by the interviewee.

3.6.2 Gather in-depth data

Because a Clean Language interview is centred entirely on the interviewee's descriptions, using only his or her lexicon, the interviewee is more likely to become self-reflective and enquiring of the workings of his or her subjective experience. A study of the metaphors of managers on their perceptions of their 'work-life balance' showed a much richer description of their experience than the conventional 'balance' metaphor might suggest (Tosey et al., 2014):

- *Two halves of a circle.*
- *Going up a mountain dodging boulders.*
- *A split and a switch.*
- *Juggling and a spinning top.*
- *Riding on the crest of a wave.*
- *Physical and mental separation.*
- *A deal with a bit of flex on both sides.*

These metaphors were accompanied by rich and detailed descriptions, both verbal and visual (drawn). Interestingly, four of the six managers could recall their personal metaphors in an informal follow-up *three years* later. (W. Sullivan, personal communication, 2 July 2013).

In another study, Lloyd (2011) compared the number of 'meaning units' provided by the interviewee in interviews using Clean Language and in interviews using a traditional interview technique. Lloyd found the average number of meaning units from a Clean Language question was close to five, while an equivalent traditional-style interview produced fewer than two meaning units per question. While the author acknowledges a number of possible flaws in the data analysis, it does suggest a useful direction for future research**.**

3.7 Tacit knowledge research

Tacit knowledge is by definition hard to access and difficult to articulate. This poses real challenges for an interviewer. Clean Language can assist in this endeavour in several ways. First, it is difficult for an interviewee to access tacit knowledge even under the best circumstances, and the addition of an interviewer's unintended constructs is liable to complicate the situation. Second, almost any attempt by an interviewee to express tacit knowledge will require the use of metaphor (see Chapter 2 on Embodied Metaphor). Third, in struggling to access and articulate their experience, interviewees

may unconsciously look to the interviewer for suggestions and hints, which, if provided, would compromise the authenticity of the account. For these reasons, the use of Clean Language interviewing has the capacity to provide high-quality and verifiable data for qualitative research projects—such as those involving tacit knowledge.

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