

# Challenging formulations in police interrogations and job interviews: A comparative study



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## Abstract

In this article we compare the role of formulations in the construction of narratives in two institutional settings: police interrogations and job interviews. The data, 20 police interrogations (22 h) and 20 job interviews (14 h), are analyzed from a conversation analytic perspective (e.g. Heritage and Clayman, 2010). Formulations have been studied in various institutional settings, as this special issue also demonstrates, but comparative studies are still rare (but see Drew, 2003; Sliedrecht, 2013). This study shows how the interactional and sequential embedding of one kind of formulation, the *challenging formulations* (ChallFs), differs depending on the setting, and that its function is directly related to the institutional tasks of the police officer (to find the truth) and the recruiter (to assess the applicant). In these two settings formulations are part of the process in which the professional, together with the layperson, transforms the layperson's story to fit the institutional requirements. The sequential analysis of ChallFs in two different settings illustrates how a comparative research design reveals specific interactional patterns that are related to the institutional setting in which they are used. Consequently, these findings are relevant for the conversational practice of the respective professionals working in those settings.

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## 1. Formulations and comparative conversation analysis

In this paper we follow the definition of Heritage and Watson (1979:129), who describe formulations as utterances that interlocutors use to “[...] characterize states of affairs already described or negotiated (in whole or in part) in the preceding talk.” With formulations, interlocutors summarize the *gist* or *up-shot* of (a part of) the conversation thus far (Heritage & Watson, 1979:129). Over a decade ago, Drew (2003) argued that comparative research of interactional phenomena such as formulations gives insight into the specific characteristics of institutional interactions. Based on an explorative study of formulations in news interviews, psychotherapy and radio call in shows, Drew (2003) shows that the sequential context and function of formulations differs depending on the setting in which they occur. Arminen (2009), too, suggests that “comparisons between different types of institutional interaction can allow us to see the particularities of institutional practices” (p. 59).

Formulations have rarely been studied using a comparative research design.<sup>2</sup> Weiste and Peräkylä (2013) did a comparative conversation analytic study of formulations in psychoanalysis and cognitive psychotherapy. They conclude

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<sup>2</sup> By comparative we mean that a generic interactional phenomenon is studied in different settings and then compared within one research project (for example: hypothetical questions, Speer, 2012).

that a comparative CA-study can identify specific interactional patterns that are accomplished in different therapeutic settings. Sliedrecht (2013) conducted a conversation-analytic study in which she compared formulations in three institutional settings (police interrogations, job interviews and journalistic interviews). In addition, she compared the empirical findings of formulations in these settings with communication advice for professionals (respectively police officers, recruiters and journalists). Sliedrecht's (2013) study shows that and how recommendations about 'summaries/summarizing'<sup>3</sup> can be formulated in more detail so that they are more sensitive and more tailored to the specific interactional context in which the summaries function (see Peräkylä and Vehviläinen, 2003).

A comparative study of formulations in different institutional settings contributes to the fundamental theory of conversation analysis and to applied conversation analysis. Weiste and Peräkylä (2013), and also Speer (2012), point out that there can be similar interactional tasks and/or practices in rather different (non)institutional settings. Since interactional phenomena are generally studied in just one setting, Speer (2012:353) refers to the limitations of what she calls *setting determinism*: "which assumes that it must be the specifics of the setting that generate, and help to account for, the pattern/s or phenomena observed". Therefore, she underlines the statement by Drew (2003) and Arminen (2009) that comparative research is necessary to gain more insight into the extent to which certain practices (formulations, hypothetical questions) are unique or setting specific.

This study is a comparative analysis of formulations in two settings: police interrogations and job interviews. Both settings can be characterized as institutional in the sense that (1) turns are pre-allocated, consisting mainly of question-answer sequences, and (2) at least one of the participants is a representative of the institution (the police officer represents 'the police'; the recruiter represents the organization or company that has a vacancy) and (3) the participants make these institutional roles relevant while they are *doing* a police interrogation or a job interview. At the same time, due to specific institutional tasks, these two settings differ from one another. For example, while one of the main goals of an interrogation is to find the truth (truth-finding), a job interview is held to select the best candidate for the available position (assessing). By comparing formulations in police interrogations and in job interviews, we are able to gain insight into the specific characteristics of these two settings, to compare results about formulations as a phenomenon and to demonstrate that conversation analytical findings are relevant for the conversational practice of the respective professionals working in those settings.

## 2. Formulations in police interrogations and job interviews

Formulations have been studied in various institutional domains such as news interviews (Heritage, 1985) and health settings (Hak and de Boer, 1996; Stommel and Van der Houwen, 2013), mediation (Phillips, 1999), but they have not been studied extensively in the two settings that we discuss in this paper. Below, we provide an overview of previous studies of formulations in police interrogations (Section 2.1) and in job interviews (Section 2.2).

### 2.1. Formulations in police interrogations

Studies of police interrogations have revealed that formulations play an important role in accomplishing several institutional tasks. First, they play a part in the transformation of an oral, everyday story of the suspect to a judicial document: formulations of police officers convert the suspect's 'everyday' story into an institutional version of events (see for example Heydon, 2005; Stokoe and Edwards, 2008). In police interrogations, police officers eliminate those elements that clarify the suspect's behavior and emphasize those aspects which make the suspects actions criminal (Heydon, 2005:138; Stokoe and Edwards, 2008:89). A similar use of formulations has been described in a study of Judge Judy's handling of small claim court cases in her show (Van der Houwen, 2005, 2009). Here the judge's 'legal formulations' transform the 'everyday' story of litigants to one with legal implications.

Second, researchers who have studied Dutch police interrogations (e.g. Komter, 2003; Van Charldorp, 2011; Sliedrecht and Van Charldorp, 2011) have shown that formulations play a crucial role in the transition from talk in the interrogation to the text as written down in the police record (Sliedrecht and Van Charldorp, 2011).<sup>4</sup> With formulations the interrogators *anticipate* the recording in writing: the interrogators give their interpretation of the suspect's words and record it after confirmation by the suspect (Van Charldorp, 2011; Komter, 2006; Sliedrecht and Van Charldorp, 2011). Hence, interrogators summarize the suspect's words in order to make them 'recordable' (Komter, 2002/2003). In addition, interrogators use formulations *after* typing to regulate the sequential organization of the interview; after the short typing break, the interrogator continues the interrogation with a formulation (Van Charldorp, 2011; Komter, 2002/2003).

<sup>3</sup> In handbooks/works providing communication advice, the practice that can be best compared with the conversation-analytic phenomenon of *formulating/formulations* is the practice of *summarizing/summaries*.

<sup>4</sup> Dutch police interrogations are generally not recorded and instead a police record is written up by the police officers in situ. These police records become part of the case file which judges rely on in court. The police officer types up the police record while interrogating.

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