



# “You have ruined this entire experiment...shall we stop talking now?” Orientations to the experimental setting as an interactional resource



Nicci MacLeod\*, Tim Grant

Centre for Forensic Linguistics, Aston University, Aston Triangle, Birmingham B4 7ET, United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT

One limitation widely noted in sociolinguistics is the tension presented by the 'observer's paradox' (Labov, 1972), i.e. the notion that everyday language is susceptible to contamination by observation (Stubbs, 1983: 224). The observer's paradox has been perceived to present significant challenges to traditional sociolinguistic researchers seeking to explore the processes at work during ordinary interaction. More recently, scholars have begun to argue that in fact the presence of a recording device, rather than being a mere constraint on spoken interaction, is in itself an interactional resource explicitly oriented to by participants (Speer and Hutchby 2003; Gordon 2012). Drawing on a collection of transcripts collected in experimental conditions as part of a wider project exploring the relationship between language and identity, this paper seeks to explore how these orientations manifest themselves in the context of Instant Messaging (IM) conversations. We show different orientations to the experimental setting, and different understandings of the role of the researcher – represented in this case by the IM chat archive – as both a topic of discussion and as a participant themselves.

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## 1. Introduction

While the ability to record spontaneous language use is an undisputed necessity for studying it, the presence of a recording device has traditionally been viewed as a limitation on scholarly attempts to investigate 'naturally-occurring' interaction, and as inhibiting participants' production of 'naturalistic' speech. Language produced entirely independently of the researcher has long been contrasted favourably with researcher-generated data (see Potter, 2004), owing to the myriad problems perceived to arise from researcher influence. Contrastingly, more recent scholarship (some of which is discussed below) has demonstrated that in studies of spoken language the audio recorder can actually serve as an interactional resource for speakers; that it can itself fulfil the role of a participant of sorts; and that it can be used to construct and maintain distinctive identities.

The concept of the 'observer's paradox' was introduced by Labov (1972), who suggests that the influence of sociolinguistic fieldworkers should be kept to a minimum in order to capture 'natural' language use, and that the very presence of a researcher or recording equipment fundamentally alters interaction. It is widely acknowledged that the effects of the observer's paradox

cannot be entirely eliminated, but attempts to mitigate them are standard practice among sociolinguistic researchers.

Yet there are firm grounds for arguing that there is no such thing as truly 'natural' language use at all. Bell (1984, 2001), for example, suggests that shifts in style occur primarily as a result of the speaker's audience, which is rather at odds with the suggestion that there is something called 'natural speech'. For Bell, it is who can (or may be able to) hear us that has a greater effect on how we speak than any other factor, rendering the very notion of an individual's language patterns ever being 'uncontaminated' by the observation process a rather ludicrous suggestion (see Wertheim, 2006).

## 2. Background

Perhaps the earliest attempt to turn the notion of the observer's paradox on its head and focus on the effects of the recording device on speech as an academic object of interest was Wilson (1987). Inspired by the observation that sociolinguists were going to great lengths to minimise the effects of observational procedures and yet no evidence existed for the relative success of these attempts, Wilson set out to focus on what might be 'sociolinguistically interesting' about speech styles that are themselves created by methodological processes. He observed that participants regularly made reference to the recording device and treated the researcher as an audience. This is echoed by Schilling-Estes

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [n.macleod1@aston.ac.uk](mailto:n.macleod1@aston.ac.uk) (N. MacLeod), [t.d.grant@aston.ac.uk](mailto:t.d.grant@aston.ac.uk) (T. Grant).

(1998), who remarked that valuable insights can be gained through investigating what she terms ‘performance speech’.

More recently, the question of what constitutes ‘naturally occurring’ data has garnered substantial debate, perhaps most notably in a 2002 issue of the journal *Discourse Studies*, where scholars from a range of disciplines discussed the nature of the ‘natural’/ ‘contrived’ distinction (Lynch, 2002; Potter, 2002; Speer, 2002a, 2002b; Tenhave, 2002). Speer (2002a) problematizes the distinction, arguing that from a discursive perspective it makes very little sense to map it on to particular methods of data collection, as is standard practice within Conversation Analysis and Discursive Psychology. Rather, she argues, it would be interesting to focus on participants’ own orientations, to examine how they “attend to the fact of their being involved in a social science investigation, looking at moments where they treat the setting as somehow non-natural, or attend to the occasion as a contrived one...and consider what such orientations tell us about the impact of the research context” (2002a: 518).

With this in mind, Speer and Hutchby (2003) propose an alternative approach to the issue of authenticity by conceptualising orientations to the presence of recording equipment as analytical objects in their own right. Drawing data from interviews and conversations where participants were, in general, fully aware that their interactions were being recorded, they demonstrate ways in which this knowledge comes to be treated discursively, and how ‘being recorded’ is used as a resource for managing ongoing talk. It could be said that such an approach shifts the perspective of the recording process from the analyst to the participant, and in so doing allows for exploration of how participants exploit it in order to facilitate a range of activities.

Subverting the observer’s paradox, Wertheim (2006) adopts Bell’s (1984, 2001) concept of audience design to account for the fieldworker’s role in observed interactions. Noting that the presence of herself as a language investigator almost invariably resulted in self-aware ‘performance’ styles of speech from her participants, Wertheim interprets the phenomenon with reference to both the speaker’s assessment of her social role, and to her participant role in the speech event under scrutiny. Her analyses lead her to adjust Bell’s (1984) hierarchy of audience roles, since the end listener of recorded interaction is at once *ratified* and *unknown* – criteria not fulfilled by any of the roles in Bell’s framework. As Wertheim asserts, rather than labelling the speech patterns of a participant who knows they are being recorded as ‘unnatural’, we might instead want to consider the possibility that they are “trying to grapple with a participant role they have never dealt with before, that of the unknown eavesdropper who is nonetheless ratified” (2006: 721).

From an ethnographic perspective Monahan and Fisher (2010) seek to further the arguments for focusing on participants’ ‘performances’, arguing that they have the potential to “reveal profound truths about social and/ or cultural phenomena” (p. 358). They argue that as agents, participants need to make sense of and arguably influence researchers, and that responses to researchers are important data in and of themselves. Performances from participants, they claim, “are valuable treasures of meaning, abundantly wrapped in multiple layers of interest, assumption and concern; they are alluring conceits overflowing with interpretive possibility” (2010: 371).

Drawing on Goffman’s notions of ‘frame’ and ‘footing’, Gordon (2012) shows how participants in spoken interaction orient to the recorder variously as an object and as a person(s), within a literal or non-literal (‘playful’) frame. Within the literal frame she shows that participants variously orient to the recorder as a burden, as a data collector, and as a stand-in for the researcher, while within a non-literal frame she points to examples of participants staging performances for the recorder as if it were an audience for them to

entertain. These varying orientations to the observation process highlight its position as a resource for participants, rather than merely an intrusive limitation on the ‘naturalness’ of the data elicited.

Most recently, Goodman and Speer (2016) strongly argue for a viewpoint which does not consider researcher-generated and naturally occurring data to be discrete ‘types’ of data, reiterating Griffin’s (2007) suggestion that the concept of *any* talk being ‘natural’ is problematic, given that *all* talk is mediated by the context in which it occurs. The presence of the researcher allows for the accomplishment of a wide array of interactional tasks, centrally the management of particular identities, and this is evidenced by Goodman & Speer’s analyses.

In summary, the research discussed here demonstrates that the re-examination of the presence of the observer – less as a paradox and more as an object of study in itself – has proven itself to be a worthwhile endeavour in the study of spoken interaction. Less well explored is the role of the researcher in the context of text-facilitated computer-mediated communication, specifically under the experimental conditions described above. This article represents an endeavour to address that gap.

### 3. Data and method

Instant Messaging (IM) is a type of computer-mediated communication “involving two parties and done in real time (synchronously)” (Baron, 2013). Communication is facilitated through written exchanges, and, like many other types of Computer Mediated Communication, IM combines qualities typically associated with writing – such as lack of a visual context and paralinguistic cues, physical absence of interlocutors – with properties of spoken language, such as immediacy, informality, reduced planning and editing, and rapid feedback (Georgakopoulou, 2011). IM has thus been described as a ‘hybrid’ register (Tagliamonte and Denis, 2008). Since IM is primarily used for one-to-one dialogue, it can be argued that it is usually a private means of communication (as compared, say, to posts in public fora such as Twitter and other social media), and the effects of a third observing party on the interaction have therefore unsurprisingly received no scholarly attention up until now. While IM conversations are textually produced and messages remain on the screen for some time, they are often only archived if a user specifically sets up their IM client to do so. Thus, while an awareness of the possibility that their contributions are being recorded may be part of the normative practices of the medium, participants are unlikely to frame their ‘talk’ for an indeterminate future audience in the same way as one would through, for example, formal writing.

Our data<sup>1</sup> are drawn from a study<sup>2</sup> which set out to examine the relationship between language and online identity, and to investigate the linguistic criteria that are sufficient and necessary for one individual to assume the identity of another (see Grant and MacLeod, 2016 for more on the wider project). Along with policing partners we were aiming to contribute to a better understanding of the processes at work during identity assumption tasks by online undercover police officers, particularly within the context of sexual grooming investigations, in order to inform the training we currently deliver to them. We designed a series of experiments aimed at systematically investigating how adept individuals are at spotting the substitution of one interlocutor with another, what linguistic criteria individuals emulate when engaged in

<sup>1</sup> The data are available via Open Access and can be found at the following link: <https://dx.doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-852099>

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