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## **“It is impossible to say just what I mean”. Telling what we live by in discursive-biographical narratives.**

The aim of this conference is to examine the conceptual frameworks that bound people's thoughts and actions and consider how these matter to a global society. We wish to ask if the real life narratives that researchers collect transform understandings and shape acceptance of commonly held discourses.

This paper, taking up the suggestions of the conference organisers, will take a 'grounded' approach, moving from the horizontal to the vertical, e.g. taking an extract from an unstructured interview narrative to question the discourses evident - not within any "text" - but within the narrative, as closely heard as possible; to ask questions about contrasting discourses emerging in narratives; to consider, too, the nature of specific, dominant discourses, their origins, their efficacy, and their application to lives and our research. To this end, discursive-narrative biographical interviews with young adults who are currently in university education, international students from Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Belarus and Brazil were taken into consideration. For the purposes of this very limited discussion, it will be necessary and, I believe, sufficient to examine only one short extract of one of these interviews. Closely-heard talk in interaction will be examined to question (a) what evidence of discursive work is encountered in the interview interaction; (b) how the emergence/unfolding/communication/sharing of discourse in interview talk may be identified and described; (c) the relationship between discourse and biographical self or 'biographicity' (Alheit, 2006).

This is what Aylin said:

I'm going back to Kazakhstan (.) I don't really want to but I guess I have to (.) because (1) uhmm (1) my parents want me to go back and g- =and it's time and I'm allowed only to marry a Kazakh guy=maybe I can find one here but it's (HHHH)

(HHH)

I KNOW

SOMETIMES the guys (1) it's not like (HHH) I (HHH) can marry them

The obvious discomfort Aylin feels in broaching this subject jumps off the inadequate printed page.

First, the transcript and the questions already imposing themselves here: what language, what other languages, timing, volume, intonation, stress, prosody and the inadequate methods for reproducing them, and why, the option for stripped syntax (but still written language for spoken words, *langage for parole*) the option for a phrasal depiction rather than a stanzaic form, the lack of all but basic mark-up, and so on (Ochs, 1979).

- What do we have: beyond the words, or behind them? A couple of photographs. A voice, a cv, a life thus so far. A childhood, school, universities, family life, Kazakhstan, study abroad. Obedience. Match-making. Elders. Tradition. Constraint. Shame. Acquiescence, resignation. Escape. So much for the immediate details sticking to the actual individual.
- Stepping back a little, we have the family in 'modern' Kazakhstan, professionalization of women, neoliberal versus patriarchal sexism, the Nation, Abroad, the question of 'culture', politics, freedom, independence, self-emancipation.
- Stepping back still more, we have: the whole history of Soviet Kazakhstan, the whole history of post-Soviet life. The Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup>

Where, in this understanding of things, can discourse be located, recognized, followed, questioned, understood?

### **Discourse, Structure and Agency**

Since the much-cited 'linguistic turn', discourse has passed through many forms in qualitative research focused on language or language-near interaction. As with so many other concepts, discourse is often used in a very loose fashion and can describe anything from a limited exchange of utterance between speakers (as in classroom discourse), service exchanges (customer-salesperson talk, flight operators/pilot communication), specific professional/academic/discipline “codes” (medical, legal discourse, etc.) or the overarching chains or sequences of language (semiotic sequences, language in all conceivable forms, codes, linguistic, visual, symbols, practices) that in relation to one another (interdiscursivity) offer or impose what the Call for this conference sees as conceptual frameworks, the “big

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<sup>1</sup> I am particularly indebted at all levels of analysis of this Kazakh student’s biographical narrative to my colleague Ms Batima Mambetalina who is currently completing a biographical study of the family in Kazakhstan and with whom I have had many stimulating discussions. I have profited enormously from her generosity in sharing with me her fascinating interview transcripts which are exceptionally rich in detail and wonderful examples of what can be heard and communicated if the temptation to revise and ‘correct’ is resisted.

packages” (Sacks, 1992b) of cultural and political narratives, which is the understanding of discourse adopted in this paper.

To begin to focus on what is discourse, I will turn first to Foucault, the Foucault of the archeology of knowledge, who took stock of what he had achieved in the sixties with the Clinic and the Prison and turned to ask how knowledge, how the history of thought and ideas can be conceived. His attempt, full of precautions, “hobbling” and “feeling its way” (Foucault, 1969) provides a usefully uncertain starting point for considering the notion of discourse.

I recognize from the start in the notion of discourse and discursal power the tension between structure and agency that resides in the culturally constituted social practices that massively determine individual and collective interaction. It is therefore of assistance to employ open-ended notions of life history narrative that emphasise the relational character of discourse (Mishler, 2006, Mason, 2004). The agency of the individual, in this approach, always has more or less access to accumulated layers of experience that represent more resources of experience than can be ‘used’ at any one time, yet they go to create a kind of intuitive sense of an own biography, that is self-referential and remains ‘porous’, transforming and being transformed in ongoing interactions, given that it arises from interdiscursive interaction. The individual’s potential to respond to, and to shape, discourse can be seen as drawing on biographical resources (Alheit, 2006).

The narrative of the young adult presented in this paper lives, too, from this porosity between ubiquitous discourses of discipline, of love, of family, of learning, ambition, obedience, resignation and so on. This paper will attempt to show what we may discover about the discourses as well as about our attempts as researchers to identify, describe and communicate what we believe to have understood.

### **Starting from a blank space with Michel Foucault**

Talking about the history of ideas and thought and knowledge and the sciences, Foucault says he is attempting to speak from an “espace blanc” (Foucault, 1969). His first job is to accomplish a “travail negatif” to free himself and his analysis from all notions that tend to anchor, immovably fix, ideas in solid continuities. Mentalities, the spirit, tradition, custom – all are assigned a “communauté de sens”, a symphony of resemblances, mirrorings and repetitions that lend them overwhelming authority (1969). To sweep away these anchored certainties, he writes:

Il faut remettre en question ces synthèses toutes faites, ces groupements que d'ordinaire on admet avant tout examen, ces liens dont la validité est reconnue d'entrée de jeu ; il faut débusquer ces formes et ces forces obscures par lesquelles on a l'habitude de lier entre eux les discours des hommes ... (Foucault, 1969).

If we can manage to view our work from this blank space Foucault urges us to occupy, we have to see how we can 'feel the pulse', 'catch a glimpse' of the discourse that is, true, "always there" (Formenti, Canterbury, 2008). We must catch it, Foucault argues, where it erupts, repeatedly, in acts, in decisions, in, for us most urgently, a story, a statement, an aside, an admission, an accusation, in the middle of an interview moment. Thus we must, he says, Se tenir prêt à accueillir chaque moment du discours dans son irruption d'événement ; dans cette ponctualité où il apparaît, et dans cette dispersion temporelle qui lui permet d'être répété, su, oublié, transformé, effacé jusque dans ses moindres traces, enfoui, bien loin de tout regard ... (Foucault, 1969)

To approach Aylin's biographical narrative and attempt to unravel and comprehend the hardly understood, tacitly understood, seemingly understood discursive textures in her account, and to encompass the traces – forgotten, transformed, known, repeated, effaced – of the discourses so obviously at work, we must 'fix' the tools we intend to use.

### **Ontological and epistemological first things**

Right from the start, the question of what count as 'facts' (i.e. the ontological view of research undertakings) needs to be clarified. If the biographical interview is seen as a key to open some kind of door into the thinking of subjects and thereby release a flood of thoughts and utterances about things and feelings, times and events, etc., then the data analysis will be occupied with sifting and separating out what was 'said'. The researcher may step back and present the words, the things said. She/he may interpret them in their own words. 'Objective' facts – a curriculum vitae, a birth certificate, an army record, a medal, a prize, a wedding photo – may be employed to justify a distanced interpretation of the said (Fischer and Goblirsch, 2006).

Alternatively, the data are seen as constituted in the interview process jointly and as a process. Not the talk as 'facts' or 'examples' is analysed, but the *speech as interaction*. The *construction* of dialogic talk in the interview is analysed. The interview is no longer a 'realist' instrument for looking at the grittiness of something 'out there', but at the *narrative construction of biographical experience, a learning biography*. The epistemological aspect of this change of perspective means that the *interactive features of the data* are highlighted. We

cannot know in any final way what people are thinking, but we can follow how interviewees are positioned and position themselves in *discoursal* fashion in the course of the continually changing contexts of the interview.

Thus, the focus of this kind of research is *learning discourse* and *discourses of identity*. If my research question, or one of them, here is - Why does Aylin speak of 'obedience'? What does this mean for her? – I am assuming that (such) discourses ('obedience') are involved in the make-up (are core components) of social life and that they are somehow knowable through research; it is possible to generate knowledge about, and evidence of them. The research question poses questions about the influence of discourse on learning biographies as well as the influence of a learning biography on discourse practices. Evidence of such influence is sought in the practical accomplishment within the interactive setting of the research interview of narrative discourses of self and learning. This qualitative research draws out a number of significant features from the interactional talk in the context of the research interview.

Various aspects of the talk of respondents is examined:

- The employment of coherent narratives
- The construction of learning biographies
- The organisation of discourses of learning both within and in opposition to dominant discourses
- The employment of own and others' discourse in meaning-making and in doing
- The employment of membership category information to ground discorsal self in talk (i.e. membership of community, family, ethnic belonging, professional practice, identification with, and recognition of, other values, notions, aspirations, and so on)

If I take the view that the "real world" to which my explanations will conceivably frequently refer is a "reference to the organized activities of everyday life" and that the phenomena that I will be participating in and investigating in the course of my research can be seen as "an ongoing accomplishment of the concerted activities of daily life" the accomplishment of which are "ordinary, artful" and known and used by the members of society (Garfinkel, 1967), then it follows that my research methodology must serve the purposes of this theoretical approach to 'reality'. To be more exact, the methods arising from the research perspective I adopt must be able to generate data around the research questions I formulate. There should, then, be a theoretical and methodological fit between the overarching model of social experience I am advancing – orderly social interaction is accomplished in artful, common-sense fashion, involving accounts which combine particulars of the social and

cultural practices of individuals as well as their diffusely interactional practices (Silverman, 1997) – and the methods of data collection and data analysis I have opted to use.

Garfinkel writes, for example, that the sociologist's study is about learning how people "make practical actions, practical circumstances, common sense knowledge of social structure, and practical sociological reason analysable; and of discovering the formal properties of commonplace, practical common sense actions, 'from within' actual settings, as ongoing accomplishments of those settings" (Garfinkel, 1967). To reduce this to a really useful way of seeing our interest in practice in specific settings, I recall Harvey Sacks' famous "this-and-that" which he applied to the work of the Chicago school of ethnography of the 1930s. The relevance of the works of the Chicago sociologists, he suggests, "is that they do contain a lot of information about this and that. And this-and-that is what the world is made up of" (Sacks, 1992a).

To approach 'this and that' I can draw upon a series of 'ontological components' as proposed by Jennifer Mason which may form the aspects of social reality that a piece of research sets out to explain, I can pick out the following as being directly relevant:

- interactions, situations, social relations
- social or cultural practices
- stories, narratives, biographies
- identity, self
- understandings (Mason, 1996).

These research components broadly represent practices and are all facets of "doing being ordinary" (Sacks, 1992b). What, then, represents or might represent knowledge or evidence of these components of social reality? A number of possible data sources might suggest themselves, among which institutional encounters, family or other conversations, and of course interviews of various kinds. All of these data sources can be thought of as sources of 'naturally occurring talk'. Of course, with each of these sources there is always a strong temptation to take what is said, what is reported, or what is believed and thought by respondents / informants / participants as 'natural', authentic social facts which can be duly 'processed' as data. Such an epistemological standpoint likes to see the interview (and all interaction) as a 'window' onto the world (Seale, 1998). This is tantamount to reducing knowledge to mere 'registration' of realities already constituted outside of any graspable notion of their history of coming about (Bourdieu, 1980).

## Creation of discursal self in interaction

In her work on 'frames' and 'framing devices', Deborah Tannen (Tannen, 1993a), drawing heavily on concepts developed by Erving Goffman (Goffman, 1959, Goffman, 1981) contributes a further insight into the structure of autobiographical talk when she talks of "structures of expectation" and their role in "verbalization in the telling of oral narratives" (Tannen, 1993b). These structures of expectation – tacitly understood meanings in spoken interaction about *what* is meant, not *with* what is said – establish a common-sense basis of understanding characterised – to use Goffman's definition – by "normatively residual ambiguity" (Goffman, 1981). Tannen is stressing here the play of commonly held cultural "schemas of knowledge" in individual interaction (Tannen, 1993b). Ambiguity, however, and incompleteness characterise the life history and biographical narrative. The individual is seen to have access to a range of discourses. This range may seem endless, yet Foucault points out that

The field of discursive events ... is always the finite and currently limited sum of mere linguistic sequences that have been formulated; they can be innumerable; they can, by their sheer mass, surpass any possibility of being recorded, memorised or read: they constitute nevertheless a finite entity (Foucault, 1969).<sup>2</sup>

The enormous resource available to us in the lives and words of others, in temporally and spatially structured reservoirs of own and other experience. Life stories are essentially occupied with the necessity to synchronise disparate levels of experienced time and practices: firstly, the dimension of events and experiences which usually have a routine, daily, everyday frame, and secondly, those which operate on the life-time scale/horizon, which "links long past events with past experiences, past with present experience and ultimately present with conceivable future events"<sup>3</sup> (Alheit, 1983). The cyclical, routine, repeated character of the everyday offers security and provides sets of "frames" for communication and interpretation. Linde also points out how other peoples' stories (related in reported speech, embedded and 'layered' in the telling) become 'own' stories through a process of appropriation or conversion (Linde, 1993). The discontinuous and unfinished state of the oral narrative is embodied therefore in the discourse(s) employed by the autobiographical narrator. Goffman's

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<sup>2</sup> [« Le champ des événements discursifs en revanche est l'ensemble toujours fini et actuellement limité se seules séquences linguistiques qui ont été formulées ; elles peuvent bien être innombrables, elles peuvent bien, par leur masse, dépasser tout capacité d'enregistrement, de mémoire ou de lecture : elles constituent cependant un ensemble fini »]

<sup>3</sup> ["...der vorvergangene mit vergangenen Ereignissen, vergangene mit gegenwärtigen und schließlich gegenwärtige mit zukünftig denkbaren verbindet"]

concept of 'embedding' describes this aspect of the speaker's 'self'. Embedding makes it possible to 'enact' numerous voices over space and time in interactive frames, including that of the oral narrative and narrative interview (Goffman, 1981). For the development of 'own' discourses within an emergent learning biography, the 'converted' and 'enacted' words of others or a non-current 'self' 'embedded speech' – are central for contextualising own discourse, and they can serve as a powerful (and fateful) way of grounding own positions within larger discourse.

### **Discourses of learning and knowledge**

Michael Stubbs, who in the 80s and 90s made an important contribution to the use of large electronic corpora in discourse analysis (Stubbs, 1996) points out the “balance in the discourse of the conversation-interview between the 'rehearsed' (i.e. non-spontaneous) discourse and its 'utterance-by-utterance' local management” in order to take account of and conform to the demands of social interaction. This discourse, constituting “shared knowledge”, is taken for granted (Stubbs, 1983). Viewed in its constitutive linguistic elements – lexical and grammatical choices, semantic habits – this acquired and 'taken-for-granted knowledge' appears as “massive repetition and consistency in discourse” (Stubbs, 1996).

Knowledge acquisition, then, mediated through language in social interaction, is framed in constitutive systems of discourse, shared language uses, both consciously and routinely (i.e. unconsciously) used (Stubbs, 1996). Language use is always simultaneously constitutive of social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge and belief, or, viewed as a “discursive 'event' (i.e. any instance of discourse) can be seen as simultaneously languaged interaction, discursive practice, and social practice (see for a similar notion Fairclough, 1992). The interactive aspect of language use underlines the collaborative, dialogic nature of learning and discourses. Thus the taking on of others' voices in talk as an induction into particular cultural practices, as Janet Maybin has shown children doing (Cameron et al., 1994) is important as an example of the role of language in the acquisition of authoritative voice.

Language does not merely reflect reality, however. It actively changes reality. Weedon, for example, points out that common sense attaches importance to experience and authority in order to give legitimacy to individual discourses. The degree of acceptability an assumption enjoys in society depends on the voice of an 'expert' or “by the assumed integrity of the experience of the individual who voices it” (Weedon, 1987) and the authoritative 'voice' of institutions, disciplines, traditions, 'mentalities', the 'way things are'.



## **The structured and structuring force of discourse, habitus and practice**

Bourdieu, in *Le Sens pratique* (Bourdieu, 1980) goes to some lengths to spell out the difficult but necessary – and uneasy – relationship between the shaping forces of structure and agency, or habitus and practice, as he calls them. He proposes a “system of structured and structuring dispositions that is constituted in practice and which is always oriented towards functions of practice”<sup>4</sup> (Bourdieu, 1980). *Habitus* – which I understand in a simple way to be sets of discourses about life, behavior, self, opinion, etc, coagulated into seemingly fixed and socially definable practices – Bourdieu argues is made up of “systems of durable and transposable dispositions which are structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures”<sup>5</sup>, and which for all their structuredness and massive shaping force on behaviours and feelings, plans and dreams, play out in time and space in an apparently orchestrated fashion “without being the product of the organizing action of the conductor of the orchestra”<sup>6</sup> (Bourdieu, 1980). The parameters within which biographical resources, for example, are slowly, incrementally gathered and used, re-used, often not used (because unusable at any given time and only ‘usable’ in retrospect) and stories, narratives of their use or possible meaning are developed and communicated, are limiting and limited, but limitless, too. Regarding the languaged forms of discursive interaction, Foucault makes the important point – useful here to throw a light on the workings of ‘biographical porosity’ (Alheit, 2006) and the structuring force of habitus – that an utterance (languaged interaction) “is always a [discoursal] event that neither language nor meaning can ever totally encompass and exhaust”<sup>7</sup> (Foucault, 1969).

On the shaping and shaped-ness of discourse, Fairclough, too, writes:

On the one hand, discourse is shaped and constrained by social structure in the widest sense and at all levels ... On the other hand, discourse is socially constitutive (Fairclough, 1992).

Discourse, he goes on, “contributes first of all to the construction of ... ‘social identities’ and ‘subject positions’ for social ‘subjects’ and types of ‘self’”. Discourse “helps” in the construction of social relationships, and “contributes” to forming “systems of knowledge and

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<sup>4</sup> [« le système de dispositions structurées et structurantes qui se constitue dans la pratique et qui est toujours orienté vers des fonctions pratiques » - author’s translation in text]

<sup>5</sup> [« systèmes de dispositions durables et transposables, structures structurées prédisposées à fonctionner comme structures structurantes »]

<sup>6</sup> [« collectivement orchestrées sans être le produit de l’action organisatrice d’un chef d’orchestre »]

<sup>7</sup> [« un énoncé est toujours un événement que ni la langue ni le sens ne peuvent tout à fait épuiser »]

belief'. He stresses the interdependence of the 'social' which exists and the 'discourse' which is spoken, thought, and practiced (Fairclough, 1992).

### **The emergent nature of discourse**

Tannen and Wallat's emphasis on the "emergent nature of discourse" (Tannen and Wallat, 1993) suggests that dialogic, collaborative acquisition of meaning and construction of discursive identity take place within the 'frames' and 'knowledge schemas' operating in speech, whereby the 'knowledge schema' is understood as "participants' expectations about people, objects, events and settings in the world" which are subject to continual revision in interaction (Tannen and Wallat, 1993). The "multiple knowledge schemas" or perception structures in use about the object of discussion, setting, time, etc., can be analysed in the 'surface' linguistic forms of the autobiographical narrative, as long as the 'inexhaustibility' of meaning in any discursive language interaction is accepted from the outset (Foucault, 1969).

Context, therefore, is centrally important here and Fairclough's coherent framework for discourse analysis offers a degree of useful complexity because it distinguishes between various contexts of 'discursal action'. He proposes an hierarchical order of discourse: *actual discourses / types of discourse / orders of discourse* (Fairclough, 1989) which may serve us as a basic scaffolding for an approach to biographical interview data. At the level of the interview itself the context is acutely interactive, and encompasses the physical setting and the joint accomplishment of understanding in interactive talk. At a further remove, the interview is embedded in a wider interactive context, including the institutional character of the research interview and its organization, 'longer' sequences of interaction between researcher and respondents (involving questions of access and familiarity, the particular linguistic, idiomatic, local, political or ideological discourses of communication assumed, involved, imposed, etc) and, put simply, the 'long sequences' of experience narrated in the interview and which have evaluative and interpretive significance within the interactive construction of understanding - i.e. Fairclough's stages of interpretation and explanation, in which the "relationships between transitory social events ... and more durable social structures" are developed (Fairclough, 1989). Finally, we have the larger context of social discourses, the social context in which the participants and the institutions involved interpret their roles and positions.

### **Discourse as a "practical, social and cultural, phenomenon"**

A final perspective originating in discourse analysis is proposed by Van Dijk, who sees discourse as a "practical, social and cultural phenomenon". He goes on: "language users

engaging in discourse accomplish social acts and participate in social interaction, typically so in conversation and other forms of dialogue. Such interaction is in turn embedded in various social and cultural contexts (Van Dijk, 1997).

Van Dijk sees connections between diverse interactional contexts via a hierarchy of functions:

“... the study of discourse as action may focus on the interactive details of talk (or text) itself, but also take a broader perspective, and show the social, political and cultural functions of discourse within institutions, groups, or society and culture at large”

Seen in this fashion, the more detailed micro-actions of complex social practices are *social* acts in their own right: “they are acts *by which* the higher level social practices are being accomplished” (Van Dijk, 1997).

Summing up, the most important elements of this research perspective can be summarized as follows:

- Coherent life stories are the site in which ‘biographized’ experience is constructed and (re-)worked discursively to produce shared meaning in interaction and a sense of self.
- Discourses constitute and are constituted by those using them. The acquisition of authoritative discourses has a potentially socially empowering yet ambiguous effect on those acquiring such discourse practices. Through language a particular identity or identities can be constructed, through which conformity with or rejection of mainstream norms and values may be expressed.
- It is in the turns and sequences of talk-as-interaction that shared and opposed meanings are constructed. The reflexive research interview is understood as the site of both the local accomplishment of meaning as well as of those heteroglossic and interdiscursive practices that are consistently drawn upon to make meaning interpersonally and socially.

### **Some ending words**

So, to briefly return to Aylin, where she was left at the outset. Let it be said, first, that a full discussion of her biographical narrative will be undertaken in a second step, not here. The task here was to clear away some old ballast of explanations that explain little and assume much. The aim was to try and start from scratch once again. The title of the paper is taken from T. S. Eliot’s poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1917). In this poem, after listing all the endless, disparate, desperate things, seen, done, heard, felt, after all this “and so much more?” the speaker resigns: “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” (Eliot, 1954). The job facing me as I approach Aylin’s story, her language (choices), her own grasp of the many significances of the discourses she is tapping into with her story of a possible arranged marriage, discussed in an interview in an emotional space between a post-industrial university

city in Eastern Germany and an extended family in Kazakzstan, and “so much more!”, demand that I recognise that it is impossible to say all I, all she means. And that is, of course, a crass understatement of the situation. But we start from this point, and we pick ourselves up and always start all over again.

Bourdieu provides encouragement:

Histoire incorporée, faite nature, et par là oubliée en tant que telle, l'habitus est la présence agissante de toute le passé dont il est le produit :partant, il est ce qui confère aux pratiques leur indépendance relative par rapport aux déterminations extérieures du présent immédiat. Cette autonomie est celle du passé agi et agissant qui, fonctionnant comme capital accumulé, produit de l'histoire à partir de l'histoire et assure ainsi la permanence dans le changement *qui fait l'agent individuel comme monde dans le monde*. (Bourdieu, 1980 my italics). And that is Aylin.

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