

*Telling Tales  
of the Unexpected*



*The Organization of Factual Discourse*  
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## **Chapter one**

# Descriptions as actions

### **Introduction**

Within some areas of sociology and social psychology there is an increasing recognition of the dynamic and constructive properties of language use, in both its spoken and written forms. This has led to some radical reformulations of the use of accounts as research resources, and, more significantly, precipitated a burgeoning of empirical projects which make language-use itself the subject of analytic work. This is one such project: a study of spoken accounts of personal encounters with a range of paranormal experiences. My first objective in this chapter, then, is to sketch very briefly some of the arguments and empirical developments which have precipitated this intellectual realignment, and which subsequently inform my analysis of specific descriptive practices which occur in people's accounts and recollections of their encounters. In the second half of this chapter I provide a brief discussion of the history of parapsychology, the scientific study of paranormal experiences. I suggest that the analysis of language use in the social sciences has implications for parapsychological research projects, especially the study of paranormal events which occur spontaneously in everyday life. In particular, I will argue that a focus on the language through which experiences are described offers an alternative analytic focus to those conventionally pursued in parapsychological studies of spontaneous experiences.

### **The dynamics of description**

Traditionally, social scientific research has used people's accounts, descriptions, explanations, and so on, as resources in the investigation of events and states of affairs which were deemed to be independent of those accounts and descriptions. Such projects were informed by the largely common-sense assumption that descriptions, and the language skills of which descriptive practices are a component, can be treated as a largely passive medium for the transmission of information about a world 'out there', or in the case of psychological projects, about a domain of inner mental events. In the last thirty years, however, there has been a sustained critical attack on the assumption that language somehow corresponds to, or can be taken as 'standing for' states of affairs in the world. A combination of the philosophical work of Austin (1962) and Wittgenstein (1953), the sociological recommendations of Garfinkel (1967) and the empirical analyses of Sacks (lecture notes 1964-1972) have focused analytic attention on the organisation and properties of ordinary language itself. We now understand ordinary language, both spoken and written, to have a dynamic and pragmatic character: that is, social actions are accomplished through discourse. Moreover, everyday language is seen as constitutive of social life, rather than a detached commentary upon it. To illustrate the argument that describing is not a referential activity, but a social activity, we will discuss, firstly, Gilbert and Mulkey's (1984) examination of the role of accounts in sociological methodology.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, we will examine some materials taken from recordings of talk in telephone and courtroom interaction.

In 1979 Gilbert and Mulkey (1984) set about collecting interviews with over thirty biochemists who were working in what was then a controversial field known as bioenergetics. In addition to taped interviews, they also collected textual materials relevant to the scientific dispute: published papers, letters between protagonists in the debate, and so on. Their initial intention was to produce from these materials a sociological version of 'what was really going on': they wanted to peel back the overtly rational and scientific appearance of the debate to locate the social forces operating to manage knowledge production in this specific area. This is a standard sociological procedure, and it is important to note that this endeavour has much in common with the parapsychological investigation of spontaneous cases. In both projects the investigators set out to find out really happened in specific events or state of affairs; this is achieved by examining various reports and accounts of those events, and in both kinds of research there is the assumption that the analysts' task is enhanced in proportion to the range and quantity of data to hand.

Early in their research, however, Gilbert and Mulkey faced methodological problems: in their data there were conflicting and contradictory accounts of the scientists' dispute. This variability in the accounts was not confined to contributions between the main protagonists in the debate: at times, individual scientists seemed to contradict themselves in the space of the same account. They realised that this variability in accounts was not a feature peculiar to their research, but was a pervasive feature of research which relied upon descriptions of actions and events. They noted that the traditional sociological response to this dilemma was to place trust in the analysts' ability to sort out the useful and 'accurate' accounts from the 'biased' commentaries which merely reflected individual self-interest. However, they rejected this option: they argued that it fostered a dependence on the (largely unexplicated) criteria by which the analyst came to decide which reports and versions were more accurate or more representative than others. And simply stating the criteria by which they decided which of the various versions were more accurate would lead to yet another problem: what were the reasons for elevating the analytic importance of these criteria above others?

Rather than try to forge one definitive version of 'what really happened', Gilbert and Mulkey addressed an alternative empirical issue: they began to examine the way that the scientists' discourse was organised to portray the world in certain ways, and tried to describe the functions served by these organised discourse practices. They did not assume that the scientists they talked to, and the scientific texts they examined, were designed deliberately to create a specific impression; while this may be true in some cases, it was not the object of their inquiry. Rather, they were interested in the descriptive practices by which scientists characterised events and actions so as to

portray them in specific ways. They were interested in the resources whereby, for example, a scientist's work could be described so that it made available the inference that his<sup>2</sup> work was motivated by self-interest, rather than a more legitimate concern with the objective pursuit of knowledge. They observed that such a rhetorical construction was used to undermine the validity of a scientist's empirical results or commitment to a controversial theoretical position.

Gilbert and Mulkey thus rejected the traditional sociological commitment to obtaining one definitive version of a state of affairs. Instead of treating accounts as a conduit through which events in the world become available for analytic study, they recommended the sustained analysis of the dynamic and functional quality of discourse.

Gilbert and Mulkey were working in a sociological study of scientific knowledge, yet their examination of accounts has important implications for any area of sociological research in which the analyst tries to use accounts to construct a definitive or precise picture of what happened. They illustrated that variability in accounts is not merely a problem which can be overcome by relying on the analyst's expertise, or addressed through the use of improved research methodologies. They showed that such variability is endemic because accounts are designed to address a variety of functions. This is a point to which we shall return in our discussion of parapsychology's investigation of spontaneous paranormal incidents.

The issue of variability in accounts forces us to reconsider the relationship between descriptions and the states of affairs in the world to which those descriptions are purported to refer. It seems somehow common-sense to assume that the very properties of a state of affairs in the world somehow constrain which words or combination of words we can use when describing it. It follows from this assumption that there is only a limited number of referential items that we can use when referring to something: that is, when we have exhausted the properties of the object to which we are referring, then we can say no more. However, these assumptions rest on an incorrect understanding of the relationship between words and the worlds they describe.

The first point to consider is that no descriptive utterance can exhaust the particulars of the state of affairs to which it refers. The description of any event can be extended indefinitely. For example, with regards to the formulation of location, or 'place', Schegloff has written:

Were I now to formulate where my notes are, it would be correct to say that they are: right in front of me, next to the telephone, on the desk, in my office, in the office, in Room 213, in Lewisohn Hall, on campus, at school, at Columbia, in Morningside Heights, on the upper West Side, in Manhattan, in New York City, in New York State, in the North east, on the Eastern seaboard, in the United States, etc. Each of these terms could in some sense be correct....were its relevance provided for. (Schegloff 1972b: 81)



The point is that any description or reference is produced from a potentially inexhaustible list of possible utterances, each of which is 'logically' correct or 'true' by any test of correspondence. It is important to remember that this is not a philosophical problem: it is a practical problem that people address every time they describe something. For example, in the following extract the speaker is reporting an encounter with a paranormal entity; note the variety of ways in which that entity is be described.

(1) VA 1 100

1	[1]	a man (.) pushed passed me	
2			(1)
3	[2]	he was spirit it (w-)	
4			or whatever you
5		want	to call it
6	[3]	ur(r)h a great force	
7			came rushing down
8			(.3)
9			the stairs (.) against
me3			

The point at which a description is ended is therefore a practical closure; (Atkinson and Drew, 1979; Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage 1978; 1984). Moreover, by producing one descriptive utterance from a range of potentially usable items speakers 'bracket in' or index certain particulars of the referent of the description, and, at the same time, 'bracket out' other aspects of the referent. Thus, any description is a selection which brings to the recipient's attention specific particulars of the state of affairs being described.

This is demonstrated in the following data, taken from the transcript of a rape trial.<sup>4</sup> In these extracts the counsel for the defence ('C') is cross-examining the prosecution's main witness ('W'), the victim of the alleged rape (from Drew, forthcoming). Insofar as a courtroom case is an environment in which versions of events may be contested or undermined, these materials have a special relevance to the analysis of accounts of events which are as extraordinary as paranormal phenomena.

Note that both parties produce what might be termed competing versions of ostensibly the same event. The point I wish to make is that the sense of each event being reported is occasioned by the way in which the description of it is constructed.

(3)

C: [referring to a club where the defendant and  
the victim met]  
it's where uh (.) uh (.3) gi:rls and fella:s  
meet isn't it?  
(.9)

W: People go: there.

(4)

C: An during the eve:ning: (.6) didn't mistuh ((name)) come over tuh sit with you  
(.8)

W Sat at our table.

In (3) 'where girls and fellas meet' is countered by 'people go there', and in (4) 'sat at our table' contrasts with 'sit with you'. These versions are not necessarily incompatible; they are not, in any logical sense, mutually exclusive. The significance of these utterances rests in the way that the speakers have designed them to describe events which present a certain set of inferable properties. From the inspection of these materials the overhearing jury can come to those conclusions each party to the cross-examination wishes them to arrive at.

For example, in extract (3), the counsel builds a question through a description of one specific feature of the club in which the defendant and the witness met on the night of the alleged attack. The counsel refers to the patrons of the club as 'fellas' and 'girls' rather than, say, 'men or women' or 'local people'. Furthermore, he describes the club as place where males and females meet, rather than 'go for a drink', 'go dancing', and so on. Thus his characterisation carefully invokes the sense of young people out in the evening to make contact with members of the opposite sex; and from this the inference can be drawn that people go to the club with a view to meet others for primarily sexual purposes. Building this question in this way thus provides for inferences which work to undermine aspects of the witness's account which are crucial if her version of events are to be believed; for example, that in no way could it be suggested that she was encouraging any sexual relations between herself and her alleged attacker. Her reply, 'People go there', reformulates the 'function' of the club to escape the inference that it is a place in which males and females come together for sexual purposes. This is achieved primarily through the way she refers to the patrons as 'people': whereas a sexual division is emphasised and exploited by the counsel, she provides a gender neutral classification.

In (4) the question 'didn't he come over to sit with you' implies that the witness was sufficiently familiar with the defendant that they might sit together in a club. From this

the jury members might reasonably infer that the witness was in fact friendly with the defendant, and possibly, not unaware of the nature of his interest in her. This information also could be damaging to her testimony. By recasting the counsel's version of events, however, the witness makes it inferable that the defendant's behaviour was not prompted by any special relationship with her in particular, but was due to a familiarity with that group of people of which she was only one member. Thus, the counsel's description is constructed to implicate a friendship between the defendant and the witness. The witness's description is designed to reinforce further the implication that she was not in any way encouraging the man who was alleged subsequently to have attacked her.

These brief exchanges indicate that descriptions may be constructed to provide material which furnishes inferences sensitive to the speaker's context and circumstances; as such, they display an orientation to distinctly interpersonal issues. These points can be illustrated further through a brief consideration of the following data, taken from a telephone conversation in which one participant (B) is trying to obtain a lift from the other (A) when he goes to Syracuse. However, A can't go unless he has somewhere to stay. At the start of the extract A has just finished explaining that the person he had intended to stay with is now going away.

(2) (Trip to Syracuse:2)

1           A  
           So tha: -:t  
 2           B  
           -k-khhh  
 3           A   Yihknow I really don't have a place tuh sta:y.  
 4           B   hhOh:::::h  
 5           (.2)  
 6           B   `hhh So yih not g'nna go up this weeken?  
 7           (.2)  
 8           A  
           Nu::h I don't think so.  
 9           B  
           How about the following weekend.  
 10          (.8)  
 11          A   `hh Dat's the vacation isn't it?  
 12          B  
           `hhhhh Oh:. `hh ALright so:- no ha:ssle, (.)

13

s -o

14

A

-Ye:h

15

B

Yihkno:w::

16

( ) `hhh

17

B

So we'll make it fer another ti:me then.5

A has explained that he is unable to make a trip on a date which had been previously arranged. As an alternative, B proposes another date - 'How about the following weekend.' (line 9). After the pause A refers to the revised proposal for the trip: 'Dat's the vacation isn't it?'. We may note firstly, that in this utterance A has re-described the occasion which I had suggested as the revised date for the trip. He has substituted 'next weekend' with 'vacation'.

A reference or description thus involves a process of selection, although such a process may not be one that is consciously recognised by the speaker, nor available for consideration through introspection. However, given that any actual description is composed from the available options, we can begin to investigate the tacit reasoning which informs the way in which it is designed.

With regard to the 'weekend/vacation' extract we can begin to explore this issue by looking to see how the speakers themselves treat this exchange. Immediately after the utterance 'Dat's the vacation isn't it?' B says 'Oh:. `hh ALright so:- no hassle,' and 'So we'll make it fer another ti:me then.' That is, she treats A's utterance as somehow indicating that he won't be able to make the trip on the date B had suggested earlier. Clearly, this is not the only interpretation which A's utterance could support. For example, B could have interpreted A as mentioning that the following weekend was a vacation as a way of clarifying that this is the weekend to which B was referring. What has happened, then, is that B has analysed A's utterance and drawn certain inferences from it: that A can not go on the trip on the date originally proposed. And, insofar as A makes no attempt to correct B - that is, demonstrate that the inferences she drew were on this occasion incorrect ones - there appears to be evidence that his utterances was indeed designed to allow B to come to see that he could not make the trip.

How does 'Dat's the vacation isn't it?' come to do this work? In substituting 'weekend' with 'vacation' A draws attention to features of that occasion which are glossed over or not emphasised by 'weekend'. These are that this suggested date for the trip, being also a vacation or national holiday, cannot be treated as any weekend. In this sense highlighting these two days as a vacation makes relevant not only that fact, but also makes relevant for that moment of the conversation certain inferences from the word vacation. For example, that people routinely have events arranged for holiday periods.

So, by using 'vacation' A provides a set of materials from which B can infer that his selection of terms was designed to indicate why he would not be able to go on the trip at that time.

Thus, by redescribing the proposed occasion for the planned trip the speaker was able to achieve specific interactional tasks. He registered his inability to attend the trip on the date suggested by the co-participant. He did not have to state explicitly that he could not attend. The design of his utterance, and in particular, the selection of one specific item, accomplished this by permitting the recipient to analyse his utterance to locate its significance. Furthermore, as it does not perform an overt rejection, it constitutes an oblique but interactionally sensitive way of marking his unavailability.

There is a further point in connection with this extract. I have suggested that the sense of the word 'vacation' is tied to the specific actions being performed with it. This illustrates a fundamental reflexive property of natural language resources. As Garfinkel and Sacks put it, whatever is said in talk provides further materials by which the sense of what is being said may be decided, so that

...the talk itself, in that it becomes a part of the self-same occasion of interaction, becomes another contingency of that interaction. It extends and elaborates indefinitely the circumstances it glosses and in this way it contributes to its own accountably sensible character. (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970: 344-5)

These analytic observations suggest that what people say - the materials they use and the way in which they are used - may form the basis for co-interactants' inferential work. From an inspection of precisely these types of natural language materials co-participants develop an understanding of the ongoing trajectory of their interaction. (This point will be discussed in more detail in chapter four.)

It is worth reiterating some of the important aspects of the activity of describing as it occurs in occasions of face-to-face interaction. First, examination of both the courtroom materials and the exchanges from the telephone conversation reveal that descriptions were produced not merely to report something, but to do something. In the case of the 'trip to Syracuse' data the use of 'vacation' to refer to a period of time previously characterised as 'next weekend' allowed the speaker to indicate an inability to provide a friend with transport. And in the courtroom material the witness's descriptions were designed to undermine the assumption that she was possibly receptive to the sexual advances of the man who was alleged to have attacked her. These descriptions, then, were assembled with a view to what the speakers were doing with them: their design reflected immediate interactional and pragmatic concerns.

A second point is that these descriptions are versions of the events to which they refer. Claiming that a description is a version does not imply that the producer of the description is somehow deceitful, or is deliberately emphasising certain aspects of the event over others. As we saw with the extract from Schegloff's research on formulating 'place', the list of words and combinations of words that could be legitimately used to refer to something is indefinitely extendable. To use courtroom parlance, the 'whole truth' which witnesses are required to produce in the witness box is literally unattainable.

These considerations are very pertinent to parapsychological investigations of spontaneous paranormal experiences in that researchers rely heavily on people's accounts and descriptions of what actually happened. Of course parapsychologists have been aware of this from the very start of serious research, and in the following section I provide a short outline of the history of parapsychological research and discuss some of the methodological strategies which have been devised as a response to the researcher's reliance on people's accounts. It will become clear, however, that the various strategies which have been developed have not addressed the dynamic and constructive features of language use.

I want also to trace some critical arguments about the progress of parapsychology which have come from within the discipline. These arguments are relevant to the present research because they conclude that people's accounts themselves are the proper subject matter of parapsychological research. This argument is to be welcomed, and I want to suggest that a study of accounts of paranormal events which is informed by recent developments in our understanding of language use is thus not only an interesting sociological project, but would constitute a radical departure in parapsychological research.

### **A brief history of parapsychology**

The study of the paranormal was stimulated by two events: the growing popular interest in spiritualism and the possibility of some form of continued existence after death; also, the increasing awareness of the occurrence of a wide variety of anomalous mental experiences, such as precognition and telepathy. (For a more complete history of the study of psychical phenomena, see Gauld, 1968; Haynes, 1982; Mauskopf and McVaugh, 1980; Nicol, 1982.)

Spiritualism began in the 1840's in the United States when two young sisters in New York became the apparent focus for a series of strange rappings and knockings. The girls quickly became celebrities. When they visited other cities the noises appeared to follow them, and they were able to engage in conversations with the dead through the knocks and raps produced by their spirits. In the wake of their popularity and their travels, many other individuals claimed to communicate with the spirits of the dead, and

this ability came to be known as mediumship. The popularity and fame of spiritualism grew, spreading across the United States and eventually to Europe. Although spiritualism developed into a religious movement which even today still boasts a considerable number of churches, its primary significance is that it popularised, and gave a secular credence to, the possibility that people could, in some form, survive death.

At approximately the same time, within certain intellectual circles, there was a growing awareness of what came to be known as spontaneous psychic experiences. It was felt that, given sufficiently rigorous investigation, events of this kind could furnish insights about the nature of the universe, and the human beings who populated it. Many of the founder members of the Society for Psychical Research were motivated by such 'quasi-metaphysical' interests (Blackmore 1988a; 1988b).

The first society specifically concerned with the study of psychic events was the Cambridge University Society for Psychical Research. The Oxford equivalent, the Oxford Phantasmological Society, was established in 1875 (Nicol, 1982). Both organisations were eclipsed, however, by the founding of the Society for Psychical Research in 1882. The Society was heavily influenced by Cambridge academics, especially those of Trinity College. The first President, Henry Sidgwick, was a Fellow of Trinity, as were other notable members, such as Edmund Gurney and F.W.H. Myers. Despite the link with such a prestigious university, however, initial research in Britain was conducted largely by private individuals who possessed sufficient personal resources to fund their activities.

The first major initiative by the Society looked at reports of spontaneous experiences to see if these could furnish some proof of the existence of psychical phenomena. The authors of 'The Phantasms of the Living' (Gurney et al, 1886) were not concerned solely with apparitions; they wrote in their introduction that their study was designed to deal with all types of cases where it appeared that the mind of one human being had influenced another without the apparent use of the ordinary five senses. Although apparitional cases were investigated they were significant only insofar as the authors believed that they indicated that telepathically-induced images could be created either as objective physical manifestations, or as mental images in the mind of the recipient.

The investigation involved collecting reports of spontaneous events; the information thus gathered was used to come to a conclusion about what had happened, and the veracity of the claimed experience. The investigators, then, were dependant upon the testimony provided by principal witnesses. This reliance on human testimony was a matter of some concern to the authors as they considered that this was an inherently weak source of evidence, primarily due to effects of 'unconscious exaggeration' from

'unskilled reporters' who were often 'emotionally implicated' in the phenomena they claimed to have observed (West, 1948: 265). So concerned were the authors of 'Phantasms' that they devoted a lengthy discussion to the types of problems their investigations had to address (Gurney et al, 1885, Vol 1: 114-172). Gurney and his co-investigators tried to overcome these problems by gathering as much information about an incident as possible: they would solicit additional corroborative statements from other individuals who were present at the time of the event, or who were involved in the experience, and they would conduct several interviews with the primary witnesses to check the consistency of the story. In this their research displays a very natural assumption: that the larger the collection of reports and accounts the greater the chance of establishing the facts of the incident and dispensing with the misperceptions and lies and so on, which they felt were endemic features of human testimony.

Not all the early research focused on the possibility of psychic links between humans. For example many researchers were interested in the extent to which people could detect future events: Besterman (1932-1933) studied pre-cognitive dreams; Saltmarsh (1934) analysed unsolicited reports of precognition which were sent to the offices of the Society for Psychical Research by members of the public. Here again though, it is clear that the investigator's only access to the actual paranormal event - the precognitive dream - came through descriptions presented in written or verbal reports.

The initial stages of what later came to be known as parapsychology thus reflected two concerns: to establish the phenomena as a proper subject for academic inquiry; and to develop a distinctly scientific approach to the study of these phenomena.

The American Society for Psychical Research (A.S.P.R.) was founded in Boston in 1885. Like its British counterpart, the members were originally interested in spiritualism, but soon came to direct more of their energies towards establishing a scientific approach to the phenomena (Palfreman, 1979). Unlike their British colleagues, however, the American researchers enjoyed the assistance, albeit limited, of university departments. Furthermore, there was a greater interest in the use of statistics to assess the validity of experimental studies. In 1912 at Stanford University, J.F. Coover tried to find out if human behaviour could be influenced through the exercise of will-power. Although he produced no positive results, his work was important in that it was conducted with strictly controlled procedures. Some years later at Harvard, L.T. Troland devised an experiment to test for the ability of subjects to influence mentally the operation of an electrical circuit. This too was a landmark, for it was the first research to employ a machine specifically designed to test for psychic phenomena (McVaugh and Mauskopf, 1976).

It is clear that the early investigators on both sides of the Atlantic were keen to adopt the methodological protocol of the physical sciences: collating evidence, testing hypotheses and attempting to verify first-hand reports of experiences. In their attempts



to infuse the study of psychic phenomena with scientific rigour, these researchers charted the path for future studies, in particular, those conducted within the auspices of universities. For example, much of the early research in Britain established techniques and approaches which were later to be refined by J.B. Rhine in the United States. Tyrrell (1938) pioneered a card-guessing methodology during the 1920's; Olliver (1932) experimentally distinguished between telepathy and clairvoyance. These developments either pre-dated, or were contemporary with, Rhine's paradigmatic influence on psychical research.

In both the United States and Europe, then, there was a movement towards adopting standard procedures and methodological techniques in the study of psychical phenomena. Thus, in 1927, when J.B. Rhine was appointed to the psychology department at Duke University, North Carolina, there were sufficient preconditions for the establishment of a thoroughly scientific approach to the understanding of anomalous mental events.

Rhine's work is of central importance in the history of the study of the paranormal insofar as it had a paradigmatic influence on future research. He devised replicable experiments and produced a standard terminology, employing for the first time the title 'parapsychology'. The subjects for his experiments were ordinary individuals, not self-confessed mediums or 'psychic stars'; and his experimental results were analysed with sophisticated statistical techniques, and furnished numerous significant results. He tested to see if psychic abilities were effected by variables such as distance, or drug-induced altered states of consciousness, thereby raising a variety of issues which subsequently became the focus for further research. He supervised research students who later continued working in other university departments, and he founded the Journal of Parapsychology, which quickly became the pre-eminent forum for the publication of empirical and theoretical papers (Rhine, 1934; 1937; 1948a; 1954).

The consequence of Rhine's efforts was that the investigation of paranormal phenomena became synonymous with laboratory-based experimental studies. The reports of spontaneous experiences which had prompted the founding fathers of psychical research were considered to provide, at best, only anecdotal evidence, and this was considered to be insufficient for a scientific discipline. Accounts of personal experiences, however, were not ignored altogether. In an editorial in the Journal of Parapsychology Rhine argued that information from reports of spontaneous cases could be useful to experimental parapsychologists (Rhine, 1948b). Voicing an opinion he shared with his wife, Louisa, he claimed that laboratory research had produced sufficient evidence to prove the existence of psi, the parapsychological faculty which was thought to underpin a variety of psychic phenomena. Consequently, there was little to be gained from further attempts to display the existence of psi; further research should primarily explore the dimensions of the phenomena. The Rhines felt that the

base environment for these experiences were not the laboratory, but everyday life. Thus, the reports that people made of their experiences could provide clues about the ways that the phenomena worked; these insights could then be used by experimental parapsychologists to refine their laboratory techniques. Largely due to the popular success of J.B. Rhine's earlier books, the Parapsychology Laboratory in which he and his wife worked had received approximately 14,000 unsolicited reports of spontaneous experiences. The task of analysing this material fell to Louisa Rhine.

She began with the assumption that it would be impossible to verify all the accounts which had been submitted to the Laboratory. There were too many, and a large number of the reported events had happened several years before the start of her research. Besides which, it was felt that the problems encountered by earlier researchers in their attempts to verify accounts proved that such procedures, however meticulous, could not furnish sufficiently hard evidence.

She considered the massive number of reports collected by the Laboratory presented a way by which she could avoid the reporting effects which had beleaguered earlier workers. She argued that these reporting effects were idiosyncratic, and influenced by the individual's psychology and the circumstances in which the account was made. She was convinced that laboratory research had revealed objective and stable phenomena; she reasoned, therefore, that over a large number of cases the reporting effects would not cause consistent distorting influences. Consistencies in the accounts, however, would reflect robust aspects of the phenomena and the way they occurred in a natural environment. Isolating these features from the large array of reports would reveal further information about the nature of the experiences, and also could be used as the basis for further statistical work to determine the relationship between discrete features of the experiences.

She classified each written account into one of a series of collections. In some cases she would produce a typed version of an incident based on her reading of the original letter or account sent to the Laboratory. This allowed her to distil the essential and interesting aspect of the experience into a more condensed form. While this certainly eased the process of classifying such a large number of cases, it raises two issues: by what criteria did she code accounts into categories, and extract the 'essential' aspects? Also, when re-writing versions of people's letters and reports, to what extent did she translate the account, or alter various parts of it? Her own review of her work (L.E. Rhine, 1981) provides no information about the way these operations were performed. It would seem that her work was informed by the assumption that the significant features of the experience were self-evident, and that it was an unproblematic task for the analyst to identify them.

Within recent years some parapsychologists have become interested in the phenomenology of paranormal experiences (Alvarado, 1984; Schlitz, 1983). This was

stimulated in part by a recognition of the importance of Louisa Rhine's sustained analysis of the ways that psi forces manifested in consciousness, and by a resurgence of interest in developing lines of parapsychological research which were not laboratory based. (An example of this trend is Dow's 1987b plea for a more 'active' approach to the study of psychic phenomena.) However, the use of the word 'phenomenology' bears little resemblance to the sophisticated philosophical and sociological analyses which share this title. Parapsychologists use the concept simply refer to the primary features of an experience as the individual perceives it. (A similar concern informs phenomenological studies in other areas of anomaly research: Evans' (1984; 1987) research on entity encounters; Hufford's (1982) study of 'Old Hag' attacks; Schwarz's (1977) study of Men-in-Black appearances, and Uriando's (1980) work on UFO sightings.) For the purpose of this discussion we will consider the phenomenological approach in relation to work on out of body experiences, or OBEs.

Early research noted several phenomenological characteristics of the OBE: the sensation of floating and soaring, being able to see the physical body while separated from it, observing a cord linking the astral body to the physical, and the sensation of shock upon re-entering the physical body (Muldoon and Carrington, 1951). Based on differences in the characteristics of the experiences, Crookall (1961; 1964) suggested a distinction between 'natural' and 'enforced' OBEs. Natural OBEs occur gradually, and mental and perceptual awareness is heightened; enforced OBEs occur suddenly, and cognitive facilities are not qualitatively increased, but in many cases actually diminish. Crookall's analysis is based upon people's descriptions of their perceptions and thoughts during the experience, and upon their accounts of the circumstances leading up to the onset of the phenomenon.

Alvarado (1984) failed to find any evidence to support Crookall's distinction between two primary forms of the OBE. Blackmore (1982) has suggested that a distinction between spontaneous and induced OBEs might be more useful; for example, there may be a qualitative difference between OBEs induced by meditation and those which occur as a result of a sudden accident.

A more radical departure from traditional parapsychological analysis of the OBE is revealed in Blackmore's attitude to those aspect of the experience by virtue of which it came to be regarded as a distinctly paranormal experience. Despite the evidence from studies by Muldoon and Carrington (1951), Crookall (1961; 1964) and Morris et al (1978), she is not convinced that there are two components to the self, one of which is separable from the physical body. Neither is she sympathetic to arguments that the experience itself is merely the phenomenological expression of a period of heightened consciousness which facilitates extra-sensory perception. Aligning herself with more

psychological theories of the OBE6 she attempts to devise an explanation which focuses on underlying cognitive and neurophysiological processes. In contrast to many psychological theories, however, she tries to incorporate and account for the details of the individuals' reported experience (Blackmore, 1982; 1983; 1984).

During the 1940s and 1950s parapsychology seemed to thrive. In 1957 the Parapsychological Association was formed, and in 1969 it was allowed to affiliate with the American Association for the Advancement of Science, although earlier applications to affiliate had been rejected (Collins and Pinch, 1979). And, in the late 1960's there were a renewal of interest in the paranormal (Truzzi 1971; 1974a; 1974b). This was partly sparked by the emergence of a 'hippy' culture, alternative lifestyles and an interest in Eastern mysticism; it was also boosted as a result of the publicity given to psychic 'stars' such as Uri Geller and Mathew Manning.

Despite these events, however, professional parapsychology has had significant problems in the last two decades. Universities are now reluctant to have parapsychology laboratories officially affiliated to them. The laboratory established by Rhine, for example, is now an independent research unit - the Foundation for Research into the Nature of Man - and has no formal links with the university at North Carolina. (The exception to this trend is the recent appointment of a Professor of Parapsychology at the University of Edinburgh. This Chair, however, is partly funded by private money bequeathed in the will of the writer, Arthur Koestler.) Despite the evidence accrued from a massive number of experimental studies, orthodox scientists are reluctant to accept the claim that psychic events exist and that parapsychology is a 'proper' science. Indeed, its critics have become particularly strident, vocal and well-organised in their denunciation of knowledge claims produced by parapsychologists (Collins and Pinch, 1979; Pinch and Collins, 1984; see the journal *The Skeptical Inquirer*, published by the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal). Moreover, and perhaps more damaging, some of the most impressive evidence for psychic abilities has been found to be fraudulent (Markwick, 1978; 1985; Nicol, 1985; Rogo, 1985; see also the exchange between Blackmore, 1987, and Sargent, 1987).

In a recent historical study, Mauskopf and McVaugh (1980) conclude that the prospect for parapsychology is bleak. Support for this comes from a recent exchange in the journal *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* between two professional parapsychologists and a committed sceptical psychologist (Alcock, 1987; Rao and Palmer, 1987). This exchange suggests that the critical debate between the two camps has become stagnant: the parapsychologists make cautious and measured claims for the existence of minute extra-sensory influences detected by increasingly sophisticated experimental studies; the sceptic elevates parapsychology's (implicit) claim to be a revolutionary science and finds no evidence to support it. Sociologists of science who have analysed this debate have noted that the terms in which it has been conducted rarely seem to develop (Pinch, 1987). It appears that science alone is incapable of arbitrating upon the

existence or non-existence of paranormal phenomena (Collins and Pinch, 1982).

It is not only sociologists and sceptics who have noted that parapsychology has made little progress in its attempt to become an accepted member of the scientific community. Susan Blackmore is one of the United Kingdoms' leading parapsychologists, and in a series of papers she has argued that parapsychology has failed to establish its subject, and has made no significant contribution towards an understanding of human nature. To rectify this, she suggests that it must discard many of its fundamental assumptions. In particular, she focuses on the concept of 'psi' - the mental ability which is claimed to be present in all forms of psychic phenomena (Blackmore 1985; 1988a; 1988b). She argues that the search for evidence of psi has led the discipline down a blind alley, especially as this has obscured interest in those events which initially stimulated psychical research: spontaneous experiences of anomalous phenomena. Blackmore suggests that these experiences are the proper subject for parapsychological investigation, not the nebulous concept of psi.

Blackmore argues that the basis of the problem is that psi has always been defined negatively: that is, in terms of what it is not. Consequently, as orthodox science continues to provide 'rational' explanations of an increasing number of phenomena which were hitherto considered to be manifestations of psychic phenomena, the brief of the discipline actually diminishes. Furthermore, as psi becomes increasingly elusive, there occurs a corresponding urgency in the parapsychologists' attempts to find it, and thereby furnish their study with a legitimate subject matter. However, this has led to a great emphasis upon the development of particularly sophisticated laboratory based techniques, as a consequence of which parapsychology has not developed the range of empirical or theoretical innovations necessary to maintain its momentum as an emergent and radical science. Thus Blackmore considers that, over the past century, parapsychology has failed to generate any novel lines of inquiry. Using Lakatos' phrase there have been no 'progressive problem shifts' within the subject.

As a response to this dilemma she argues for a new parapsychology which is not hide-bound to the concept of psi, but which takes as its starting point the fact that people consistently report and describe anomalous experiences. She has no doubt that these experiences occur; the issue is to explain why they occur and take the form they do. It is this observation that has led her to recommend that greater analytic attention be paid to the accounts of these occurrences. As Blackmore herself has stated:

The phenomena [of parapsychology] are essentially accounts of people's experiences. (Blackmore 1988b: 56)

Blackmore's concern to develop new lines of parapsychological inquiry has informed her recent work on Near-Death-Experiences, or NDEs. A typical NDE scenario may be: during an important operation a patient 'dies', that is, she becomes clinically dead. While theatre staff try to resuscitate the patient, she undergoes a variety of experiences: the sensation of leaving the body, meeting deceased relatives and friends, and travelling through a tunnel towards a brilliant white light. Just before reaching the source of the light, however, the attempts of the theatre staff to resuscitate the patient are successful, and the patient 'regains unconsciousness' under anaesthetic.

For many the NDE has a profound mystical and spiritual importance; indeed, many of those who have had this experience have subsequently developed an active spiritual life. However, Blackmore accounts for the phenomenological features of the experience in terms of cognitive processes. For example, the 'tunnel experience' is a common feature of NDEs. Blackmore claims that we can account for this by tracing the neurological pathways through which electrical impulses are transmitted through the brain in times of physiological crises, such as the initial stages of death. Thus the sensation of travelling through a tunnel is merely the individuals' experience of the 'winding down' of cortical function prior to the cessation of all activity. As she eloquently phrases it, near-death experiences are 'visions from a dying brain' (Blackmore 1988c).<sup>7</sup>

A first point to make about her ideas is that, however interesting her explanation might be, it is hard to see how it represents an alternative parapsychological explanation. It seems that Blackmore is arguing that in the case of the NDE, the phenomenological features of that experience are simply the epi-phenomenon of cognitive processes which occur as the individual nears death. Thus the dimensions of the experience of interest to a parapsychologist, such as those features which appear to indicate some form of continued existence after death, are explained away by reference to the organisation of neural pathways which conduct electrical impulses in the head. Thus, although Blackmore argues for a renewed interest in people's accounts, it seems that this is motivated simply to elicit consistent features of those experiences which can then be explained in terms of determinant cognitive events.

From the review of the development of psychical research, it is clear that the action orientation of language use has not been addressed in parapsychological research projects. Hitherto, parapsychologists have relied on what might be termed a more common-sense approach to the relationship between language and the world, treating it as a channel through which salient aspects of experiences and events can be recovered. This observation is not intended as a criticism. Given that the realignment in our understanding of language use emerged only in the last twenty years, and has gravitated around specifically sociological issues, it is not surprising that parapsychologists have not addressed them. However, what we now understand about language, and the way it is inextricably tied to social actions, has important implications for future parapsychological research, and it is worth considering them carefully.

Whether or not we accept the argument that the analysis of discourse is a necessary prelude to, if not a replacement for, traditional forms of analysis, Gilbert and Mulkey's (1984) research suggests that an attempt to discover 'what really happened' through the analysis of reports and accounts may be plagued with methodological difficulties, many of which are relevant also to the parapsychological research on spontaneous cases. For example, we noted earlier that a procedure adopted by Louisa Rhine involved categorising the reports of experiences that she was studying; occasionally she would type her own versions of specific reports to emphasise the salient aspects. It is not clear, however, what criteria were used to decide which were the salient factors; nor is it clear by what criteria she decided upon the categorisation scheme by which accounts were classified. This unexplicated reliance on the analyst's competence is a central feature of traditional sociological studies of science, and was one of the contributing reasons behind Gilbert and Mulkey's re-orientation of their own research project.

In the light of these problem, it might be useful to reconsider the appropriate focus of parapsychological research efforts. The study of accounts of spontaneous events presents one feasible option. We have already seen that Blackmore has argued that the proper subject matter of parapsychology are peoples' accounts. Although her reasons for arriving at this conclusion are markedly different to the arguments presented here, it is still an interesting and possibly significant convergence.

Furthermore, in the examination of the empirical materials earlier in this chapter, we began to see the range of analytic issues which can be explored if we focus on the active and dynamic character of language use. Quite simply, we can ask how do people describe their paranormal experiences, and what objectives are such descriptions designed to achieve? Obviously we may anticipate that people will be engaging in persuasive work: but how, with what resources?

## **Conclusions**

Parapsychological studies of a spontaneous paranormal experiences are motivated primarily to discover the facts of the incidents; they are committed to finding out 'what really happened'. The discussion so far has, at the very least, raised a series of problems with such a project, both in terms of its methodology and the adequacy of the assumptions about language such a project relies on. It is not necessary, however, to abandon a concern with factual statements about anomalous phenomena. Rather, we need to shift the focus of our attention: we need to ask, how are accounts designed so as to portray the factual status of the experiences so reported? This and related themes will inform the empirical chapters of this book. At this stage, however, is

important to provide some illustration of the sorts of dividends that accrue from a focus on the social dynamics of language. In the next chapter we will discuss three studies which in different ways, enhance our understanding of the organisation of factual discourse.

## **Notes**

1 A lengthier discussion of Gilbert and Mulkey's (1984) study appears in chapter three

2 'He' is used advisedly here, as all the scientists working in the dispute were male

3 The transcription symbols used in the data extracts are explained in the appendix.

4 These and related extracts receive a more detailed consideration in Drew's (1990) analysis of competing strategies in courtroom cross-examination.

5 These materials are examined in Drew's (1984) paper on reportings in invitation sequences.

6 For a review of these see Rogo (1982).

7 This review is necessarily inchoate, and many imaginative parts of her explanation have been overlooked; a more comprehensive outline of her ideas can be found in Blackmore (1988c).



## On the analysis of factual accounts: three case studies

### Introduction

We noted at the end of the last chapter that an approach to language use which is informed by an appreciation of the multiple ways in which the world can be described, and which also emphasises the pragmatic character of descriptions, forces us to reconsider the way we view factual accounts. If any description is just one of a variety of ways of describing something, we cannot rely on descriptive accounts generally to gain access to the state of affairs to which they purportedly refer. Therefore we need at least to reassess the status of accounts as research resources. In response to the methodological dilemmas posed by this position, we may wish to reject the role of accounts in the research process altogether. There is, however, an alternative. In the last chapter I emphasised that there has been a remarkable burgeoning of academic research on what might be called the action orientation of language use, and some of the dynamic characteristics of the activity of describing were illustrated by reference to some empirical examples taken from occasions of verbal interaction. These considerations suggest that we may investigate accounts to see how the factual status of the events being reported is constructed in the organisation of the account. That is, if we accept that accounts and descriptions do things, we may investigate the ways in which their own status as factual accounts is accomplished.

This shift in our understanding of language use, and the methodological implications which follow from these, require us to focus on the following question: how should accounts be studied? What exactly can we do with them that is analytically rigorous and which has clear empirical pay-offs for our understanding of human conduct? In this chapter I want to sketch the dimensions of this empirical programme. To do this, we will examine three studies: Smith's (1978) examination of an account of a young girl's apparent decline into mental illness; Potter and Edwards (1990) analysis of dispute about what really occurred in a specific meeting between the Chancellor of the Exchequer and ten political journalists, and Widdicombe and Wooffitt's (1989) analysis of the way in which a member of the punk subculture makes a complaint about the way that she is treated in one aspect of her every day experience. These three studies raise some diverse empirical

concerns which are relevant to the analysis of accounts of anomalous experiences, but also address some methodological issues. By examining them in some detail, then, not only do we obtain some idea of how to proceed empirically, but we also begin to see some of the methods whereby the factual status of the events reported on in the account are accomplished through the design and organisation of the account.

**Smith: 'K is mentally ill'**

Smith subtitles her paper 'the anatomy of a factual account'; a phrase which neatly captures the essential concern of this chapter, and indeed, of the book. The account she examines was collected by one of Smith's students for a class exercise. The students obtained accounts from people who knew others who were mentally ill. The text which Smith analyses was written by a student from the interviewee's account. In this case, the interviewee was a young woman who was a personal acquaintance of 'K', the girl who's mental breakdown is documented during the interview with Smith's student.

When the account was initially read out in the class, Smith reports that she heard it simply as a description of events and behaviours which indicated that 'K' was indeed suffering from an increasingly serious set of psychological problems. When she received the written version of the account however, Smith found that it could be read in a very different way - as a series of 'cutting out' procedures whereby the behaviour of 'K' was defined as 'not normal'. This led Smith to formulate an entirely new analytic interest in the account: how was it organised to make it *recognisable* as an account of a young woman's decline into mental illness? How was the warrant for this interpretation provided for in the organisation of the account?

Smith stresses that social actors interpret their worlds, and come to an understanding about their dealings with others, by virtue of their own practical reasoning skills. She claims that such an understanding is not random, nor determined by individual idiosyncrasies and psychological predispositions; rather, it is informed by culturally available sets of knowledge, or 'what everybody knows'. In this she is making a distinctly ethnomethodological claim: that social actors are not propelled either by psychological or internal drives, not constrained by overarching cultural events. Rather, they are sense making agents, and their interpretative practices are informed by sets of knowledge about the world held in common with other people. Indeed, the fact that intersubjective understanding appears to be a routine feature of our day-to-day dealings with other people is an indication that the interpretative resources we use to make sense of other people's behaviour are, in most respects, isomorphous with the

sense making resources which underpin the way other people understand our behaviour.

These considerations underpin Smith's analysis in the following way. She suggests that there is a culturally available set of assumptions about mental illness. She argues that these assumptions inform not only the way in which the account is put together, but also in the interpretative practices that she, as a reader or recipient of the account, relies on to understand the account as an account of mental illness. Smith's empirical aim in her analysis of the account, then, is to show how this common-sense or 'lay' schema informs the way in which the account is designed to facilitate the inference or 'realisation' that it is a description of mental illness. For Smith, what really happened - whether K was mentally ill or not - is indistinguishable from the practical reasoning resources through which K's mental illness (or sanity, or whatever) is produced as an 'obvious' or 'accountable' feature of the world. (See also Garfinkel, 1967).

Smith's analysis begins with that part of the student's report in which it begins to be written as the story of Angela, K's friend. Angela claims that her

recognition that there might be something wrong was very gradual, and I was actually the last of her close friends who was openly willing to admit that she was becoming mentally ill. (Smith, 1978: 28.)

Smith's interest in this statement lies in the way that it provides a set of instructions to the reader. It establishes right at the start of the account that K was becoming mentally ill. Thus, this is an interpretative frame through which the reader/hearer may come to see the abnormality of K's behaviours which are subsequently listed. Furthermore, it states that K's developing illness was noted not only by Angela, but also by other people. Thus, K's illness is established as a fact, which is gradually 'realised', and 'accepted' by her friends. It is established, then, as something 'out there in the world' to which people react and respond, and not something which is, for example, merely an explanatory hypothesis to account for some unusual behaviour.

Smith also focuses on the way in which Angela, the producer of the account, characterises herself as a friend of K. 'Friends' are usually positively predisposed to those with whom they are

friendly. We would not expect a 'friend' gladly to come to the conclusion that a friend was becoming mentally ill, or without a certain reluctance. Because Angela portrays herself as a friend, we infer that the report of K's illness is, at least, not the product of malicious misreporting. We can also infer that Angela's gradual realisation of K's illness is a result of her having to confront and come to terms with this characteristic of her friend. It is thereby established as a fact about K, and not merely, for example, the way that Angela interprets K's behaviour.

By using the word 'friend' to characterise her relationship to K, Angela also begins to warrant the authority of her account. That is, a friend is conventionally reluctant to see negative traits, but is in sufficiently frequent and close contact to be in a position to discern behavioural irregularities. There are other ways, however, in which this warranting can be done. Smith focuses on instances in which there are descriptions of Angela's behaviour followed by a characterisation of K's behaviour in the same setting. She argues that the descriptions of Angela's behaviour present a 'rule' or norm by which the reader/hearer can come to see K's behaviour as abnormal. For example, Angela reports

We would go to the beach or the pool on a hot day, and I would sort of dip in and just lie in the sun, while K insisted that she had to swim 30 lengths. (Smith, 1978: 28-29.)

In this example, Angela's 'dipping' in the water and 'just laying in the sun' provide a norm: this furnishes a version of what people usually do at a swimming pool on hot days. By reference to this characterisation of 'normal' behaviour, however, K's insistence on swimming thirty lengths is recognisable as the behaviour of someone who is, at least, a compulsive swimmer. That this may be strange behaviour is further reinforced by the work done by the word 'insisted': instead of characterising her swimming as, say 'swimming thirty lengths', K is portrayed so that the reader/hearer senses that this is something she is compelled to do. And any compulsive behaviour directed towards something as leisurely and inconsequential as swimming on a hot day warrants the inference that there is something not quite right with K.

Additionally, Angela cites exactly how many lengths K would swim: it is not that she swam a lot more than Angela, but that she consistently swam that amount of lengths. Using a numerical evaluation further enforces the sense that K's activity was compulsive, in the same way that people alleged to be suffering from neuroses develop what might seem to others as habitual preoccupation with trivial activities.

Furthermore, the use of such precise detail permits Angela to indicate that she had attended a sufficient amount of such poolside sessions to have been able to discern this consistent feature of K's behaviour, thus further warranting the competence of her reporting.

One 'common sense' notion about 'facts', as opposed to personal judgement, or subjective interpretation, is that they are, or should be, the same for everyone: they exist independently of the realm of human affairs. In light of this common sense understanding of facts (a conception which is enshrined in the natural sciences, mathematics and formal logic) it is interesting to note the way in which Angela's account gradually increases the number of people who, in addition to her, come to 'realise' that K is mentally ill. So, early on in the account, it is Angela alone who is concerned at aspects of K's behaviour. Subsequently, however a person called Trudi is introduced into the account, and she too comes to share Angela's opinions. Then Angela describes an incident which leads her mother to accept that K was behaving strangely. By the end of the account, Angela, Trudi, Angela's mother, another friend called Betty and an additional friend of the family are all characters who have been used in the account to affirm that K's 'problem' was not, say, a peculiar interpretation of events arising from Angela's idiosyncratic perception of the world, but an objective fact which prevailed upon a variety of people.

The main part of Smith's analysis concerns the various contrast structures which appear in the account. Her analysis of this device focuses on the way in which they establish the appropriate norms of behaviour from which K's subsequently described actions can be seen to deviate. So, for example 'dipping in the water' establishes a guide or norm by which K's insistence on swimming thirty lengths is recognisably not normal.

However, the way in which Smith relies upon this characterisation of contrast structures seems to be the main weak point of her analysis. First, it is not clear that just by removing the 'instructions' or norms provided in the first part that K's behaviour would seem less strange. In the swimming pool example, as we have seen, the sense of the strangeness of this activity rest at least in part upon the work done by characterising K as *insisting* that she swam thirty lengths. Equally, K's obsessiveness is reinforced by the use of precise numbers in the description of the

behaviour.

There is a more general methodological point to be derived from the analysis of contrast structures. Smith states that she uses the term 'contrast structure' very loosely as she is employing it to identify what seem to be typical procedures. Thus

Other items which are not constructed as contrast structures at the level of individual items, can be shown to be contrastive with reference to larger segments of the account (Smith, 1978: 40.)

I think that such an imprecise conception of this device can be unhelpful. A contrast structure may be composed of two adjacent items, as in the description of the behaviours of Angela and K at the pool. But Smith seems here to be saying that a statement or item need not necessarily be seen to contrast with any adjacent statement, because there is always another part of the account to which it is contrastive. As it now is expanded to include any statement or individual description which can be found to be contrastive to any other part of the account, we lose sight of the boundaries of the device. In the context of Smith's overall analytic achievements, this primarily methodological point has little importance. It does suggest, however, the need to be rigorous in the way that we identify devices and resources in the organisation of accounts.

By way of a summary of Smith's analysis we can make the following points. First, her empirical work is illuminating in that it uncovers some devices whereby the account is done as an account of 'mental illness'. In particular she focuses on contrast structures, and the way in which the first part of such devices provide an interpretative framework which guides the reader's/hearer's understanding of the second. However, she discusses other features. For example, we observed that the first statement of the account proper was examined to reveal the way that it established at the outset that K was ill. Furthermore, we saw how the account provided by Angela was warranted as the authoritative version. This was done in the way that Angela established that she was a 'friend' of K. The issue of the identity of Angela as a 'friend,' rather than any other way in which she could have been characterised, is not a feature of the account to which Smith devotes any special analytic attention. Nonetheless, her discussion is useful in that it permits us to see that the way that an individual is described may be crucial to how we understand the episode of the account for which that identity has been selected as salient or appropriate. The issue of the way that people are described emerges again in the discussion of the

Widdicombe and Wooffitt paper.

A second important point is that the kind of devices that Smith identifies are employed to build the facticity of the the account. Its status as a factual account is inextricably tied to the linguistic practices through which that facticity is accomplished. Smith also reveals how the factual status of mental illness is artfully produced through Angela's description. Her analysis thus suggests a dissolution of the distinction between events or states of affairs in the world, and descriptions of those states of affairs. The very existence of such events, and their characteristics, are the product of the way in which they are described. Furthermore, these descriptions are themselves informed by the pragmatic tasks for which they are designed.

Finally, and related to this last point, it may be argued the analysis of an account of mental illness may be interesting, but it pales into insignificance when compared to the import of mental illness itself. That is, the events which happened to K, her decline into 'mental illness', and, we may suspect, her subsequent treatment, are crucial here, not someone's recollection of her behaviour. However, Smith's analysis shows why an attention to accounts of the world are absolutely relevant. The type of account she analyses is exactly the kind of material that may be used as the basis to assess K's competence and mental stability. To show how that account is organised, and to reveal its factual status as a consequence of common sense reasoning practices, is to provide an insight to real life events which themselves may have significant consequences for a person's life. Smith also illuminates the organised practical reasoning, embedded in the account, which provides the basis from which episodes of behaviour can be seen as evidence of mental illness. Her analysis thus explicates some tacit criteria of 'mentally ill' behaviour as they are employed in Angela's account. In doing this she makes a distinctly sociological contribution to a phenomenon largely understood primarily in terms of interpersonal relations and cognitive or neurophysiological processes.

### **The Chancellor's memory**

A concern to focus on accounts which themselves may have real life consequences informs Potter and Edwards' (1990) study. Their analysis concerns materials, both written and spoken, which were generated in a dispute about 'what was actually said' in a meeting between Nigel Lawson, then Chancellor of the Exchequer (the government's chief finance minister) and

ten political journalists from Sunday newspapers. The meeting, in November, 1988, was officially 'off the record'. Such unofficial meetings are a routine feature of the relationship between government and journalists, allowing ministers to 'float' ideas and proposed policies to gauge public reaction.

The meeting in November concerned the government's policies for pension schemes for senior citizens. The Sunday following the briefing, all the journalists who attended the meeting published stories claiming that the government was planning to introduce radical revisions in pension schemes. In particular, they reported that benefits, which at that time were received by all senior citizens, were to be targeted on those most in need. This targeting was to be conducted through a process of income assessment or 'means testing'. As a consequence of such a scheme some senior citizens would receive increased pensions, while others would receive nothing at all.

When they were announced in the newspaper these proposals met with fierce condemnation, both from members of the opposition parties and from the Chancellor's colleagues in his own party. At the height of the furore, the Chancellor made statements claiming that he had not said that the government was going to introduce a revised system of payments based on means testing. Indeed, he claimed that the journalists had conspired together and concocted a 'farrago of invention' whose accounts 'have no relation whatever' to what he said (Hansard,<sup>1</sup> November 22, 24, and 26; reported in Potter and Edwards, 1990: 411). In the following days the journalists produced articles to defend their version of the meeting with the Chancellor, and there were several other articles which generally examined the issue of which of the two sides was most believable in their claims. Thus, the issue of the pensioners' payments was somewhat ignored in preference to the debate to determine which of the parties to the dispute were more accurate in their recollection of what was actually said at the meeting.

Potter and Edwards focus on one feature of this subsequent debate: the way in which 'consensus' about a version of what happened could be used, firstly, to warrant the authority of the journalists' accounts of the meeting, and, secondly, used as evidence of collusion between the journalists to fabricate the story. Before we examine their analysis, there are some methodological issues raised by their research.

Potter and Edward's analysis of the warranting procedures to establish the facticity of competing versions was not solely motivated by an interest in these materials (although they do deserve careful examination). Rather they wanted to make some critical points concerning a tradition of social psychological research which is generally known as attribution theory (see



Heider, 1958; Jones and Davis, 1965; Hilton and Slugoski, 1986; Kelley, 1967). Attribution theory research is broadly concerned to isolate the processes through which people come to make judgements and form conclusions about other people. Research in this tradition has been primarily experimental. A typical experimental procedure might involve subjects being presented with written stories or vignettes which provide specific sets of statements and information. The subject then has to make inferences from the materials contained in the vignettes.

Potter and Edwards argue that

For attribution theorists, language - both the given vignettes and the expressed inferences made by the subjects - is treated as mere description, The vignettes used as the 'stimulus materials' are taken as straightforward stand-ins for the world. (1990:407.)

For Potter and Edwards, however, description is itself a form of social activity, and not just a decontextualised representation of cognitive events and processes. Thus, for them, the methodology of attribution studies is problematic because it ignores the action orientation of language: it is not able to take account of the way that descriptions are designed to do things. Their analytic concerns therefore coincide with those of Smith, and have much in common with the analytic focus which underpinned the examination of empirical materials in the previous chapter.

There is a related point. For attribution theorists, consensus information has a crucial bearing on the *kinds* of attributions people may make in real life. Potter and Edwards, however, wish to add a further dimension to our understanding of consensus by exploring the ways in which it is a usable resource to warrant accounts. Their analysis is an examination of 'the way consensus may be constructed to warrant a case, and how it may be subsequently undermined through being recast as collusion (Potter and Edwards, 1990: 412). They cite the following three statements as invoking consensus to warrant the factual status of the journalists' accounts. (The first two are taken from statements made by members of parliament, and are recorded in Hansard; the third comes from a newspaper article.)

(1)

'How on earth did the Chancellor, as a former journalist, manage to mislead so many journalists at once about his intentions?'

(2)

'As all the Sunday newspapers carried virtually the same story, is the Chancellor saying that every journalist who came to the briefing - he has not denied that there was one - misunderstood what he said?'

(3)

'The reporters, it seemed, had unanimously got it wrong. Could so many messengers really be so much in error? It seems doubtful.'

To gain a sense of the analytic approach adopted by Potter and Edwards it is useful to cite in detail their examination of these extracts.

In the sequence of events, Extracts 1 to 3 follow Lawson's claim that the reporters were wrong. That is, he has questioned the factual status of the reports. Using the idea of witnesses corroborating versions, we take the rhetorical force of these accounts to be something like this: it is reasonable to imagine that some of the journalists might be misled in a briefing of this kind but not that they all should. If a number of observers report the same thing, that encourage us to treat the status of that thing as factual. The consensuality of the reports' accounts is offered at the basis for scepticism about the Chancellors'.

Furthermore

the passages do not merely state that the consensus is present, but provide the basis for a rhetorical appeal to the reader to construct it herself. For example, the extracts work on the quality or adequacy of the consensus and its unanimity.[] The large size of the consensus is worked up using the description 'so many' journalists, which pick out the number of journalists as exceptionable or notable.(Potter and Edwards, 1990: 412.)

Potter and Edwards go on to examine the Chancellor's subsequent statements after the articles in the Sunday newspapers. They claim that the resources he employs to warrant his version of the briefing again rests on consensus. The following extract comes from a statement made by the Chancellor in the House of Commons. Remember that the Chancellor was, at this time, in the delicate position of

trying to defuse a potentially embarrassing debate about the issue of means testing by claiming that he had been grossly misrepresented by the journalists. In this extract he has just claimed that the journalists' stories bore no relation to what he actually said, when there is an interruption by a member from an opposition party,

Opposition MP: They [the journalists] will have their shorthand notes

Chancellor: Oh yes they will have their shorthand notes and they will know it, and they will know they went behind afterwards and they thought that there was not a good enough story and so they produced that.' (Hansard, November 7; cited in Potter and Edwards, 1990:416.)

This statement allows the Chancellor to furnish the basis of the following inference: the unanimity of the journalists' account of the briefing was due to their *collusion* with each other to fabricate this story. Moreover, it provides a reason why the journalists acted in this way: what the Chancellor actually said was not sufficiently interesting to use as the basis for a story.

There is one further interesting empirical observation. They examine the following extract taken from a newspaper article by one of the journalists who had been present at the now contested briefing. In it he describes his recollection of the meeting. Potter and Edwards claim that this description warrants the writer's claim that he (and his colleagues) had made an accurate report of Chancellor's comments.

Mr Lawson (the Chancellor) sat in an armchair in one corner, next to a window looking over the garden of No. 11 Downing Street. The Press Secretary, Mr. John Gieve, hovered by the door. The rest of us, notebooks in our laps, perched on chairs and sofas in a circle around the Chancellor. It was 10.15 on the morning of Friday 4 November....(Cited in Potter and Edwards, 1990: 419.)

Clearly, describing the scene of a disputed meeting in such precise detail serves as a warrant of the authority of the journalist's account. The reader is given the impression of clear recollection of the events; this implies that it is unlikely that the journalist would then have forgotten what the Chancellor went on to say. Thus the journalist's reported recollection is another device which authorizes a particular version.

A related point is that the journalist's description of this scene is a recollection of its characteristics from memory. Yet we see that this description is designed to facilitate the inference that his recall is accurate, and his version therefore trustworthy. The description of the memory is therefore being used to perform specific functions. This observation is relevant also to many of Smith's analytic remarks (although, again, they are not addressed explicitly): Angela's description of her recollection of specific activities and behaviours were designed to emphasise the 'fact' of K's illness.

Cognitive psychologists have studied extensively the human memory processes through which information is coded, stored and then retrieved. While it is acknowledged in the literature that social factors may effect, for example, what items of information are memorised, and the ways in which they may be subsequently recalled, this psychological approach presupposes that, essentially, our memories are cognitive events in our heads. In the journalist's recollection of the disputed meeting, however, we can see that his memory of what was happening was constrained by what that recollection was meant to do. The very dimensions of his recollection were constructed in and through the pragmatic work addressed in the account itself. This invites a critical reappraisal of the assumption that there is an underlying sphere of cognitive and mental events that exist independently of social processes. These issues will be addressed in detail in chapter five and in the concluding chapter.

As a summary of Potter and Edwards' paper we can reintroduce their two main analytic goals. They are interested in examining how discourse is organised to warrant a factual case, and how factual discourse is organised to accomplish specific activities. These issues were explored in their analysis of the use of 'consensus' in the dispute between the Chancellor and the journalists. Their empirical concerns clearly reflect those which informed Smith's analysis. Both studies explored the organisation of accounts, and focused on specific language resources through which events were characterised to warrant the factual status of those descriptions: so, where Smith concentrated upon contrast structures, Potter and Edwards focused on consensus. In the next section we will look at an analysis which reveals a further resource: the description of a person's social identity.

### **Warranting a complaint**

Widdicombe and Wooffitt's study (1989) examines the way in which a 'social identity' can be invoked in the course of a

specific communicative activity to provide for a certain set of inferable properties about the person and the events so described. They examine an extract from an interview with a female punk in which she expresses a negative assessment: a complaint in which being a punk is described as entailing significant disadvantages. They argue that the way the speaker designs these utterances addresses a very sensitive issue. She is formulating a complaint to illustrate a feature of her life as a member of a subcultural group; in this instance, punk. It is possible, however, that negative 'common knowledge' about this group may be invoked to account for the behaviour of those people about whom the speaker is complaining. That is, what is known generally about the group is always potentially available as a set of resources by which to interpret the activities of any specific member. For example, the conspicuous mode of dress, the grubby, unwashed appearance and the reputation for violence - some of the stereotypical features of the subculture - may be invoked to legitimate and rationalise the reactions that the speaker has encountered, and thereby to undermine the legitimacy of the complaint. Thus, she is faced with a problem: to justify her complaints and design her descriptions so that the basis for her complaints is seen as warranted, while at the same time deflecting the type of response we may characterise as 'Well what do you expect looking like that?'. The object of their analysis is to furnish a technical appreciation of the way in which the speaker orients to and negotiates this problem.

As they focus on a relatively short extract, their data will be presented in full.

1 I: What's it like to be a punk ?  
2 S: It can be quite difficult  
3 'cos when you go into a pub  
4 or something  
5 you get (.) sort of (.)  
6 in some pubs they say "Get out"  
7 'cos of the way you look

(Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1989: 6.)

Widdicombe and Wooffitt examine three features of this extract: the activity the speaker describes to illustrate her negative assessment, the reactions of other people and the reasons for their reaction.

In the utterance 'cos when you go into a pub or something' the

speaker illustrates an activity which she then goes on to claim she was prevented from doing. Widdicombe and Wooffitt point out that activities can be described so as to make relevant a specific category or classification of the people who do them. To illustrate this they use the example of the activity of 'going to a psychology lecture', which indexes the identity of 'psychology student'. This is not to say that this is the only way of referring to people who might go to such lectures; they merely emphasise that the formulation of the activity 'going to a psychology lecture' makes this identity, as opposed to 'university student' or 'first year undergraduate', relevant for the particulars of the talk in which such a formulation may be introduced.

The activity of 'going to a pub' however, does not furnish so strong a set of inferences about the category of people engaged in it. Apart from certain specific inferences, for example, that the people actually going into the pub are above the legal drinking age, or look old enough to pretend that they are, there is otherwise little that can be gleaned about the identity of the people so described. Therefore, it may be termed an 'anybody's activity': the sort of thing any ordinary person might do.

There is a related issue: this activity could be described in a number of different ways. For example, 'having a few beers', 'going drinking' or 'going out on the piss'. These formulations furnish a different set of inferences from 'going to the pub'. Whereas the other examples hint more towards revelry - a 'night out' - the formulation presented by the speaker is a particularly routine description. It orients instead to the conventional or institutional character of 'going to the pub' as something that a large number of people do routinely every night of the week.

A final point is that going to a pub entails a variety of social activities. With the exception of the solitary drinker, people usually go to pubs with friends, or to meet friends, play various games, talk to other people, and so on. In the speaker's description of this activity there is no hint of the 'social' character of going to pubs. That is, she has built this description to exclude any reference to this activity as being that of a group of people. What the speaker is orienting to in this formulation is the possibility that a recipient may infer, quite reasonably, that it is likely that her friends share her interests, taste in clothes and music and values, and so on: in short, that they too may be members of the same subculture. Furthermore, it may be argued that a group of punks going into or drinking in pubs could be viewed as threatening, alarming, and so on. The way in which she builds her description therefore displays her tacit awareness that a

slightly amended formulation of the same activity - one which suggested the activity of a number of individuals - could furnish very different sets of inferences about events; and that these could in turn be cited as the (legitimate) basis for the reactions about which the speaker is complaining.

Widdicombe and Wooffitt then examine the way the girl describes the reactions of other people. She says 'you get (.) sort of (.) in some pubs they say "Get out"'. In this utterance the speaker actually formulates a version of the words used on those occasions when she has been barred from pubs. Furthermore, her utterance is designed so that these words may be heard as reported speech. Thus, she creates the impression of reporting the words which were actually said to her. 'Get out' is an imperative order. It formulates in the harshest possible terms what could otherwise be described as a request to leave. In this way the speaker provides for the severity of the others' reactions: it is not merely that she was barred, but that the manner in which this happened was positively vehement.

Widdicombe and Wooffitt propose that the speaker is building a contrast between her activity and the response it receives. We observed earlier that the speaker has designed her descriptions of her activity to provide for its routine and mundane character, and that by virtue of this pragmatic work she has occasioned the relevance of her own 'ordinary' identity. Yet in describing the reactions of other people she uses such resources as reported speech to formulate a general and extreme response. These utterances are designed to reveal an asymmetry between the response of other people, and the activity which prompted that response.

In the utterance ''cos of the way you look' the speaker formulates a reason for the reactions of other people, and thereby attributes to these other people the reasoning procedures which inform their actions. By doing this the speaker implicitly ascribes a theory of social behaviour to these other people: namely, that they assume that people who dress in a certain way, be it 'punk', 'gothic', or 'heavy rock', are likely to cause trouble, warrant suspicion and deserve contempt. The way in which the speaker addresses this issue is a further resource to heighten the contrastive effects of the prior two utterances. First, the speaker portrays the others' extreme and negative reactions as being based not on firm evidence, such as, for example, personal experience, or common and accepted 'knowledge', but on a very

superficial feature - the way in which she dresses. Second, the way in which she describes her appearance renders its more startling features as unimportant; instead she portrays it as just another appearance, as just another 'look'. By implying that her appearance is not in any way radically different from other modes of dress, she undermines the possibility that her appearance may be legitimately used as the basis for negative and damaging inferences about her. Finally, by constructing her appearance as a routine matter - just another way of dressing among many others - and by formulating others' reactions as being based upon superficial features, the speaker in the target data makes available the inference that such theories of action are inherently weak and unreliable. One implication of this is that others' behaviour is seen as motivated not by reason, but by less worthy factors, such as blind prejudice.

The primary feature of Widdicombe and Wooffitt's analysis is the way in which the speaker occasions an ordinary identity so as to underline the legitimacy of her complaint. Occasioning her identity as an 'ordinary person' is one of a variety of culturally available resources at the speaker's disposal. One implication of this research is that, whereas identities as aspects of 'the self' have traditionally been considered to be relatively static properties of individuals, we can now begin to examine them as characteristics which are 'achieved' and made salient in day to day activities.

### **Conclusions**

The three studies we have considered have several common themes. Each identifies some resources which people can use to warrant, display, legitimise and construct the accuracy or facticity of their accounts. Furthermore, each study has significant methodological implications for alternative approaches to that subject area. Smith's paper fashions a distinctly sociological and empirical perspective on mental illness; Potter and Edwards' analysis takes issue with aspects of attribution theory, and Widdicombe and Wooffitt question the social psychological assumption that identities and 'selves' are discrete mental or cognitive schemata. Together, then, these studies provide a guide to the type of analysis that we can pursue in the examination of accounts of paranormal experiences: we can study them to uncover the way that the factual status of those accounts is achieved, to find out how they are organised, and to see what inferential business is addressed through the organisation they display.

There are two approaches to the analysis of language use which, to a varying degree, have a common intellectual background in ethnomethodology: conversation analysis (for example, Atkinson and Heritage, 1984) and discourse analysis,



(for example, Gilbert and Mulkey, 1984). Prior to any empirical analysis it is therefore necessary to examine these two approaches in more detail.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Hansard is the official report of all speeches and debates in the House of Commons.

## Chapter three

# Some methodological issues

### Introduction

There are two contemporary analytic approaches which focus on the dynamic and organised properties of language use: conversation analysis (CA), and discourse analysis (DA).<sup>1</sup> Both of these offer a methodology for the analysis of spoken accounts of paranormal experiences. In this chapter I will examine both these approaches. Drawing on conversation analytic research and principles, however I will argue that there are problems with with discourse analytic programme, and that the empirical work should be informed by conversation analysis. It is not immediately obvious, however, that CA is an appropriate methodology for the examination of accounts produced by one speaker, because it takes as its subject matter talk-in-interaction (Schegloff, 1987b: 101), of which conversation is taken to be primordial site. The recordings of accounts of paranormal experiences contain very few instances of interaction *per se*: they consist largely of narratives produced by one speaker in a single turn; with a few exceptions, these data exhibit a minimal amount of contribution or intervention from the interviewer. It is therefore necessary to argue that, given the kind of data to be examined, CA does offer the appropriate analytic and methodological procedures. Before we discuss these issues, however, we need to be clear about the character of both conversation analysis and discourse analysis.

### Conversation Analysis

Over the past twenty years CA has emerged as one of the primary methodologies in the analysis of spoken interaction produced in natural settings. There are a number of introductions to, and overviews of, this research tradition.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, we need only provide a brief discussion of this mode of analysis.

Conversation analysis was initiated by the pioneering work of Harvey Sacks and his colleagues, Gail Jefferson and Emmanuel Schegloff. It sets out to describe the organisation of sequences of naturally occurring talk. It focuses on the actions which are accomplished through the design of utterances, and it examines how these actions are produced with respect to the sequences of exchanges in which those actions are performed. So, conversation analysis can be distinguished from linguistic and speech act theory-inspired approaches to the study of talk in terms of the emphasis placed upon the importance of the immediate sequential context

in which an utterance is produced. Whereas speech act theory tends to focus on single utterances, removed from the actual environment in which they occurred, conversation analysis begins with the assumption that utterances must, in the first instance, be contextually understood by reference to their placement in a sequence of utterances.

We can illustrate this if we consider some of the issues which first led Sacks to the study of conversational interaction. He had been working on recordings of telephone calls to the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center. In most cases, if the Center's personnel gave their names at the beginning of the conversation, the callers would give their names in reply. However, in one call the caller (B) seemed to be having trouble with the agent's name.

(1) Sacks Lecture 1, Fall 1964, p.1

A: this is Mr. Smith, may I help you  
B: I can't hear you  
A: This is Mr Smith  
B: Smith

Sacks noted that for the rest of the conversation the caller remained reluctant to disclose his identity. The Center's personnel frequently experienced difficulties in getting callers to identify themselves, so this was not a unique occurrence. Consequently, Sacks began to investigate where in the course of the exchanges it became clear that the caller would not give their name.<sup>3</sup>

With this question, Sacks began to examine utterances as objects or products used by participants to get things done in the course of their interactions with others. Thus, an utterance as simple as 'I can't hear you' may be investigated to reveal how it was being strategically employed to achieve a specific task in the course of the conversation. Sacks' subsequent analysis reveals that by doing 'not hearing', the caller is able to establish a sequential trajectory in the conversation in which it becomes inappropriate for the agent to request the caller's name. So, in this case, doing 'not hearing' is one way of accomplishing 'not giving a name'.

A central feature of conversation analytic work from the beginning of Sacks' innovative investigations is a focus on the turn-by-turn unfolding of conversation. This focus is not informed by any theoretical presuppositions about the 'nature'

of conversation, or the best way to study it. Rather, it reflects the ways that participants themselves use the turn-by-turn development of the conversation as a resource to display and maintain its orderliness. The following extract comes from an exchange between a mother and her son about a Parent Teachers Association meeting.

(4)

Mother: Do you know who's going to that meeting?

Russ: Who.

Mother: I don't know.

Russ: Oh:: Prob'ly Missiz McOwen ('n detsa) en prob'ly Missiz Cadry and some of the teachers and the counsellors.

(From Schegloff, 1988.)

The following summary is taken from Schegloff's (1988) analysis of this extract. Mother's question 'Do you know who's going to that meeting?' can be interpreted in two ways: as a genuine *request* for information about who is attending the meeting, or as a *pre-announcement* of some news concerning the people who will be attending the meeting. In the examination of this exchange, the analyst can identify which of these interpretations Russ makes by looking at the next turn after Mother's question. He returns the floor to his mother with a question, thereby displaying that he treats her utterance as a pre-announcement. Mother's next turn displays that on this occasion Russ's subsequent turn was inappropriate.

This extract illustrates an important point, one emphasised in previous chapters, but which is worth reiterating. Note that the way that Russ responds to his mother depends upon seeing which of the *actions* his mother's prior turn is performing: a request or a pre-announcement. The appropriateness of Russ's next turn, and the orderliness of this sequence, is inextricably tied to his tacit reasoning as to which of these tasks was performed by his mother's prior utterance.

Thus, the design of an utterance will delimit the range of relevant possible next turns. In 'next turn' positions speakers display their understanding of, and reasoning about, the moment-by-moment progress of the conversation. As the design of a turn will be informed by a participant's tacit reasoning about the immediately prior turn, these interpretative concerns are dealt with publicly. This provides an important methodological resource in the analysis of conversation. As Sacks et al state:

while understandings of other turns' talk are displayed to co-participants, they are available as well to professional analysts who are thereby afforded a proof criterion (and search procedure) for the analysis of what a turns' talk is occupied with. Since it is the parties' understandings of prior turns' talk that is relevant to their construction of next turns, it is their understandings that are wanted for analysis. The display of those understandings in the talk of subsequent turns afforded both a resource for the analysis of prior turns and a proof procedure for professional analysis of prior turns - resources intrinsic to the data themselves. (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974: 729; original emphasis.)

This does not mean that the analyst's task is solely to provide a translation of the analyses inherent in the manner in which a turn will be produced; nor that such a task inevitably provides access to the 'true' or 'intentional' operations through which utterances are designed. It means simply that conversation analysts have a major resource in their investigations which is unavailable to analysts who study textual materials, such as historical documents, literary texts and, by implication, accounts of events produced in a speaker's single extended turn.

The goal of conversation analysis is to describe systematic sequences or structures of interaction. However, it is important to stress that these systematic properties are not the products of cognitive processes which determine and propel conversational interaction. Insofar as these systematic features emerge in sequences of turns in talk, we may say they are socially organised, and culturally available, communicative competencies: they are resources for, and the vehicles of, *social action*. We can emphasise this point if we consider the case of adjacency pairs (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973). These are sequences of two utterances that are:

- (1) adjacent,
  - (2) produced by different speakers,
  - (3) ordered as a first part and a second part, and
  - (4) typed, so that the first part requires a particular second part (or range of second parts).
- (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973: 396-7)

There are some important points which need to be stated clearly. First, the structural properties of paired actions do not entail that these are necessarily produced as succeeding actions which occur next to each other. It is not a statement of empirical invariance. Neither is the concept used to capture some empirical generalisation, for example, that in a set number of instances second parts immediately follow first parts. Rather the concept is important in that it underlines the *normative* character of paired actions. That is, the production of a first part proposes that a relevant second part is expectable: a second part is made conditionally relevant by the production of a first part (Schegloff, 1972). By virtue of a *common* orientation to the relevance of paired actions, speakers have the basis for inferences about the actions of co-participants. Let us take the example of question/answer pairs

(1)

A: Is there something bothering you?  
(1.0)  
A: Yes or no?  
(1.5)  
A: Eh?  
B: No.

(2)

Child: Have to cut the:se Mummy  
(1.3)  
Child: Won't we Mummy  
(1.5)  
Child: Won't we  
Mother: Yes

(From Atkinson and Drew, 1979:52.)

In both of these cases the recipients do not produce an answer after a question. However, the questioners do not merely repeat the question, but provide truncated versions of the question. This action is not informed by an assumption that the recipient failed to hear the question: by saying 'yes or no' and 'won't we Mummy' the questioners indicate the assumption that the recipients did hear the original question, and their persistent reformulations of the original question indicate that an answer is relevant and expected.

The orientation to the normative requirement that appropriate second parts follow first parts, or in this case, that questions make answers relevant, provides a basis by which the disappointed questioners can make sense of any deviation from the rule. Thus, the recipients' silence is interpretable as

'withholding an answer' - a state of affairs indicated by the questioners' increasingly insistent reformulations of the question.

Conversation analytic research has focused primarily on 'ordinary' conversation, such as face-to-face and telephone interaction, and thus has not directly attended to issues relating to the context in which the talk occurs, or the overriding goals or motives of the speakers, except where these 'contexts' or 'motives' may be oriented to by speakers, and may inform the trajectory of conversational sequences. The data to be studied here are accounts of paranormal experiences which are produced in the course of informal interviews. Insofar as these interviews were pre-arranged, and the objective behind them was to solicit accounts of precisely these types of experiences, these data cannot be treated as naturally-occurring materials in the same way as talk which occurs spontaneously in everyday interaction. This does not by itself invalidate the applicability of conversation analytic forms of investigation for the purposes of this research. In recent years there has been a move to study talk which occurs in institutional settings; for example, in courtroom interaction (Atkinson and Drew, 1979), in news interviews (Greatbatch, 1983; 1988), in political speeches (Atkinson, 1984a: 1984b), in doctor-patient interaction (Heath, 1984; 1986) and in the organisation of sales interaction (Pinch and Clark, 1986). These studies show that the distinctive character of talk in specific situations is a consequence of the ways in which speakers adapt procedures which are recurrent features of everyday talk to the specific particulars of the circumstances. Thus, talk in naturally-occurring situations has a foundational or 'bed-rock' status in relation to language use in specific settings.

### **Discourse analysis**

The term 'discourse analysis' is used to refer to a wide range of analytic techniques and empirical and theoretical research. In this chapter I will use it to refer only to the form of analysis developed in sociology by Gilbert and Mulkay (1984), and extended to social psychology by Potter and Wetherell (1987). Although DA seeks to analyse all forms of discourse, written and spoken, it has been used to deal with recorded materials produced from informal interviews, and is thus clearly relevant to the concerns of this project. Unlike CA, DA is a relatively new development, and while there have been debates which deal with specific aspects of the discourse

analytic programme,<sup>4</sup> there has been little attempt to assess its broader significance as a methodological development. In this section, then, we will initially look at the development of DA, plotting its rise as a response to methodological problems which emerged in the sociological study of science. Although a plea for an emphasis upon the study of discourse was made in Mulkey et al's (1982) paper, a more comprehensive exegesis was presented in Gilbert and Mulkey (1984), and it is this text that we will concentrate upon.

Gilbert and Mulkey study one dispute in the area of biochemistry known as oxidative phosphorylation, which was concerned with the mechanisms by which chemical and other kinds of energy are stored within cell structures. Their initial objective was to provide a sociological description of the nature of the debate. To this end they collected taped interviews with the various biochemists involved in the dispute, read the relevant research papers and obtained informal communications between the participants, such as letters and notes. Their preliminary analysis of this material presented them with a problem: within their data there were a variety of different versions of the debate, each of which was plausible and convincing. Furthermore, they noted that any one feature of the debate, such as the significance of a series of experimental studies, could be described and accounted for in a number of different ways.

Gilbert and Mulkey realised that the variability they observed in scientists' discourse was not peculiar to their project, but is a constituent feature of any research which relies upon the use of accounts of behaviour as an investigative resource. The recognition that variability was an inherent feature of their data posed a serious problem: in the analytic enterprise of furnishing a single, definitive account of any specific state of affairs, how should the analyst account for and deal with the diverse range of versions available in the data?

They illustrate the customary procedures used by sociologists to negotiate these difficulties:

- (1) obtain statements by interview or by observation in a natural setting;
- (2) look for broad similarities between the statements;
- (3) if similarities are found, these are taken at face value; that is, as accurate reflections of what is 'really' happening;
- (4) construct a generalised version of participants' accounts and present these as an analytic conclusion.

While they identify this procedure with regard to one specific study, they claim that this formula may be applicable to many



other areas of sociological research.

Based on their recognition of the variability of discourse, Gilbert and Mulkey identify a number of crucial problems in this traditional approach. Firstly, they cite Halliday (1978) to indicate that all discourse is inextricably bound up in the context of its production. They claim, therefore, that ostensible similarities between different accounts cannot be taken to indicate consistent features about the world. These may be due to the overriding similarities in the circumstances in which the discourse is produced. They argue that

Without detailed examination of the linguistic exchanges between researcher and participant, and without some kind of informed understanding of the social generation of participants' accounts of action, it is not possible to use these accounts to provide sociologically valuable information about the actions in which analysts...are interested. (Gilbert and Mulkey, 1984: 7.)

They examine the role played by the researcher when confronted by a variety of accounts of ostensibly the 'same' event or circumstances. In particular, they address the argument that, on account of her expertise, the analyst can attend to the valuable information while locating and dispensing with the irrelevant material. They argue that this position rests on the assumption that any social event has one 'true' meaning. They indicate, however, that social activities are the 'repositories' of multiple meanings, by which they mean that the 'same' circumstances can be described in a variety of ways to emphasise different features. Which particular formulation is invoked as a warrantable version at any one time will not only depend upon the context in which the account is produced, but also the interactional tasks attended to in the course of producing that account. There can be no privilege for the analyst's decision as to what constitutes an objective or accurate version of the world simply because any state of affairs can sustain a range of descriptions, the warrant for any one of which rests in the circumstances of its production.

In recognition of these problems Gilbert and Mulkey advocate, as an alternative, the study of participants' discourse to reveal the interpretative practices, embodied in discourse, by which accounts of beliefs and actions are organised in 'contextually appropriate ways' (1984: 14). They do not attend to one set of statements about the world as if any one form of discourse can furnish more relevant or accurate material.

Instead, they seek to explicate the systematic properties of language use through which scientists construct their accounts in a range of formal and informal environments.

They note that their arguments have broader implications for sociological research. They observe that hitherto sociologists have displayed a commitment to provide one definitive account of that feature of the social world being studied, and thus consequently, they are obliged to make inferences about participants' actions from discourse about those actions. (We may note, parenthetically, that this was true also of parapsychologists confronted with accounts of paranormal experiences.) Gilbert and Mulkay argue that the analysis of participants' discourse ensures that the analyst is liberated from a dependence upon one specific set of interpretative practices. That is, instead of trying to reconstruct 'what actually happened' from accounts, the object of study becomes the ways that accounts are organised through certain sets of interpretative practices to construct a version of 'what actually happened'. Furthermore, insofar as no form of discourse can be considered to be superior to any other for the purpose of analysis, they are obliged to consider all forms of discourse, and all varieties of versions of events contained within that data. Thus, they claim to be able to remain 'closer to their data' (1984: 14). Most importantly, they argue that the study of discourse is necessarily prior to, if not a replacement for, traditional forms of analysis:

Given that participants' use of language can never be taken as literally descriptive, it seems methodologically essential that we pay more attention...to the systematic ways in which our subjects fashion their discourse. Traditional questions...will continue to remain unanswered, and unanswerable, until we improve our understanding of how social actors construct the data which constitute the raw material for our own interpretative efforts. (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984: 15.)

Having provided a critique of traditional approaches in the sociological study of science, they go on to present examples of the analyses furnished by a DA perspective. For example, G&M identify the scientists' use of two linguistic repertoires, or interpretative registers: the empiricist and contingent repertoires. They analyse how these registers are systematically employed by scientists to produce asymmetrical accounts of error and correct belief which are appropriate to varying contexts.

It is not necessary to examine the empirical analyses conducted by Gilbert and Mulkay; the purpose of this review is merely to indicate that the mode of analysis they devised

echoes the analytic issues addressed in the present research. A further link is that DA was generated from a consideration of methodological difficulties which also obtrude in the ways in which parapsychologists have hitherto relied upon accounts of anomalous experiences.

Their work makes three important contributions. Firstly, it draws attention to and articulates profoundly important methodological problems which beset sociological research in which the analyst relies upon accounts, descriptions and reports of the area of social life under study. Critics of have noted somewhat dismissively that variability in discourse should come as no surprise (for example, Abell, 1983). One reviewer has gone as far to belittle Gilbert and Mulkay's contribution by implying it amounts to little more than the observation that 'some scientists write their scientific papers in impersonal terms but in interviews talk about science personally' (Halfpenny, 1988: 177). These observations fail to appreciate the way in which Gilbert and Mulkay identify confounding issues which arise from the nature of language use, and fashion an analytic approach by which to deal with them. Secondly, DA generates a whole new range of issues for analytic inspection, and provides the basis of an empirical methodology by which such questions can be addressed. Thirdly, in drawing attention to the essentially reflexive and constructive character of discourse, it raises questions about the forms of language use in which analytic or sociological claims are made. Developing this last point, Mulkay (1985), has gone on to devise new forms of sociological analysis. In these the constitutive nature of discourse, especially the analyst's discourse in the construction of an academic text, is exploited as a resource to reveal more clearly the discursive processes through which participants provide for the sense of, and thereby fashion, their social activities. (See also Woolgar, 1988)

The most sustained development of Gilbert and Mulkay's approach has been within social psychology, particularly Potter and Wetherell's (1987) attempt to explore the implications of the variable and constructive aspects of language use for traditional methodologies and theories. Their programme stems from the acceptance of the following points:

- (1) language is used variably;
- (2) language is constructed and constructive;
- (3) any one state of affairs can be described in a number of ways, therefore

- (4) there will be variation in accounts;
- (5) there is no foolproof way to deal with variation and sift through accounts so as to locate the best and most informative reports,
- (6) consequently, the purpose of analysis should be to study the ways that language is used flexibly and constructively.

While these points reiterate aspects of Gilbert and Mulkay's arguments, they are significant because Potter and Wetherell discuss them in relation to, and emphasise the implications for, many areas of orthodox social psychology. In successive chapters they deal with specific areas of research, exposing the methodological deficiencies of each area and drawing out the implications of these problems. They also provide illustrative examples of the ways in which their version of DA avoids these difficulties, while still furnishing analyses relevant to traditional social psychological concerns. As an example we can note their discussion of the concept of social representations (Moscovici, 1981). It is claimed that social representations are mental entities, made up from concepts and images, which in each case have an identifiable structure. The theory argues that social representations provide the means by which people are able to understand and evaluate their social worlds. To understand thoughts, attitudes and attributions, then, it is necessary to grasp the social representations from which these other social psychological phenomena emerge. The theory also draws a powerful link between varying social collectivities and different forms of social representations, insofar as it is claimed they mark the boundary of any social group. The all-embracing character of the theory promises a theoretical underpinning to a diverse area of issues in the subject. At the same time, it avoids coarse cognitive reductionism: that is, the level at which the theory works is intended to be irreducibly *social* psychological.

Potter and Wetherell make a number of important criticisms of this theory, employing the concept of linguistic repertoire developed in Gilbert and Mulkay (1984). They argue that the theory of social representations has been hindered by its attachment to a notion of the social group as a fixed entity which can be identified insofar as the members all subscribe to the same social representations. Research usually begins by looking at the social representations of homogenous groups. This procedure hinges upon the assumption, however, that common representations can be seen to indicate the limit of a group. As they state 'There is a vicious circle of identifying representations through groups, and assuming groups define representations' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 143). The authors also cite the predominantly ethnomethodological

argument that group membership is an occasioned phenomenon: the way in which a speaker may align with or reject membership of groups and categories may be related to the specific social and interactional context in which group membership becomes salient (Garfinkel, 1967; Sacks, 1979; Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1989). Thus, a claim to be a member of a specific group may not be taken to indicate a series of fixed and determinate statuses. This is clearly problematic for a theory which is informed by the notion that social groups are static entities. Potter and Wetherell also claim that the theory implicitly relies on the idea that social representations are, inherently, mental entities to which the analyst can obtain access through participants' discourse. This obscures the essential indexicality and variability of the language through which people talk about their group affiliations.

As an alternative, Potter and Wetherell suggest that the notion of linguistic repertoire overcomes the problems they identify with the theory of social representations. For example, by emphasising the ways that different people use language variably, in accordance with discrete contexts and specific interactional tasks, the analyst does not have to endorse a circular argument about the relations between groups and representations, nor subscribe to the view that social phenomena must be informed, at some level, by an underlying cognitive reality. (A detailed discussion of the discourse analytic critique of, and alternative to, social representation theory can be found in Litton and Potter, 1985.)

Potter and Wetherell's discourse analysis is in most respects the same as the variety espoused in Gilbert and Mulkay (1984), although there are some interesting differences. Their version addresses a wide variety of issues in social psychology, whereas Gilbert and Mulkay remain in one specific area of sociology. Unlike Gilbert and Mulkay, Potter and Wetherell explicitly acknowledge the ethnomethodological influences on their work. Furthermore, they draw extensively on conversation analytic studies of naturally occurring talk, rather than studies inspired directly by Garfinkel's (1967) writings. For example, their chapter on accounts uses Atkinson and Drew's (1979) research on courtroom interaction; and their critique of social psychological attempts to study categorisation is informed directly by material from Sacks' early lectures.

Unlike Gilbert and Mulkay, Potter and Wetherell try to

describe the process of 'doing' discourse analysis. While they are moderately successful when dealing with the more mundane aspects of the process - for example, identifying research questions, collecting material and transcribing tape recorded interviews - their attempt to articulate the analytic processes which occur when they confront any actual data is, by their own admission, less satisfactory. The authors point explicitly to their inability to provide a coherent account of what they do. To compensate they invoke comparisons between the skills involved in riding a bike and analysing data. Both sets of skills are, in Ryle's (1949) terms, 'knowledge how' rather than 'knowledge that'. They go on to emphasise the inductive search for recurrent patterns in the data, looking for broad similarities, not only in the ways that people use language to discuss any specific topic, but also in terms of the functions for which any stretch of discourse has been designed.

Finally, Potter and Wetherell provide a brief discussion of reflexivity, an issue which has become centrally important to the form of DA pursued in Mulkay's subsequent research (Mulkay, 1985). They acknowledge that their arguments about the constructive nature of language use apply also to their own writings, including the discourse through which such observations are made. This does not disqualify or undermine the status of their work as they claim that

It is possible to acknowledge that one's own language is constructing a version of the world, while proceeding with analysing texts and their implications for people's social and political lives. In this respect, discourse analysts are simply more honest than other researchers, recognizing their own work is not immune from the social psychological processes being studied. Most of the time, therefore, the most practical way of dealing with this issue is simply to get on with it, and not to get either paralysed by or caught up in the infinite regresses possible. (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 182.)

In this passage the authors present a practical resolution to methodological dilemmas which arise from the reflexive character of language use. Although any academic text can be examined to see how it constructs one version of the world, it is permissible and practical to suspend, or 'bracket off' that possibility when attempting to provide an analysis of a state of affairs. Consequently, the analyst can legitimately deploy the rhetoric of more 'positivist' domains of social science research in the manner through which any 'findings' are presented.<sup>5</sup>

To summarise, then, the objective of discourse analysis is to

examine the functional use of language in a range of forms, and in a variety of contexts. It seems entirely suited as a technique by which to study spoken accounts of paranormal experiences. However, in the following section we will examine some problems with this mode of analysis, and thereby clarify the character of the analyses to be developed in subsequent chapters.

### **Discourse analysis: a critical appreciation**

In this section we will take a critical look at some aspects of DA, developing points raised primarily in Gilbert and Mulkey's text, but which are also applicable to subsequent developments. We begin by considering some issues arising from the concept of the linguistic repertoire, and its use as an analytic tool.

We may start with Gilbert and Mulkey's observation that discourse is variable. That is, in their research they recognised that they were being provided with different accounts of the same thing, by the same or different people, often by the same people within the space of a single interview. At the root of this observation is a series of philosophical issues which are highly germane to their overall project. These concern the ways that words obtain their meaning.

Garfinkel (1967) lists a variety of philosophers who emphasise the indexical nature of some classes of words: that is, that they obtain their meaning from the circumstances in which they are used. More recently, Barnes and Law (1976) argued that all words and utterances can be treated as indexical, and derive their sense from situations in which they are used. Clearly, then, the meaning of a word cannot be derived from some set of criterial features which inhere in the nature of the object or state of affairs in the world to which the word refers (Wittgenstein 1953; Pitkin 1972; Waismann 1965). What Gilbert and Mulkey have observed, then, is one consequence of the fact that descriptions and referential utterances are not determined by the properties of the features to which they refer. Rather, utterances are composed of selections available to the speaker. Any description or reference is produced from a potentially inexhaustible list of possible utterances. As the literal correctness of an item cannot be cited as the warrant for its use, insofar as any number of items may be equally warranted, what principles inform a speaker's actual selections from this range of possibilities?

Gilbert and Mulkey attend to this issue by highlighting the context-dependence of accounts. In varying contexts, speakers may produce varying accounts. In their research, they found that scientists employed an empiricist repertoire in formal contexts, and a contingent repertoire in informal contexts. The emphasis on repertoires or linguistic registers requires comment. According to Potter and Wetherell, a repertoire is:

constituted through a limited range of terms used in particular stylistic and grammatical constructions. Often a repertoire will be organised around specific metaphors and figures of speech (tropes)... (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 149.)

Discourse analysts are interested in the way that speakers use language functionally: to achieve certain ends in the course of interaction. In the interviews conducted by Gilbert and Mulkey, for example, the scientists were attempting to depict their work as being guided by their adherence to the correct procedure of scientific activity; they described alternative, contradictory work in terms of contingent, personal or social factors. These were depicted as having prevented other scientists from reaching the same conclusions. That is, in constructing a persuasive account of the superiority of their work in the course of face-to-face interaction with the interviewers, they employed two repertoires by which to characterise asymmetrically the specific state of affairs being described.

We have noted previously that no state of affairs constrains the referential items which may be used to describe it; also, that speakers have a range of descriptive items from which to choose in constructing a description. Gilbert and Mulkey's emphasis upon the importance of linguistic registers offers a way to understand the procedures by which a specific series of selections is made: items are selected in accord with the linguistic repertoire being used, and the broader tasks which are negotiated through that repertoire. Thus, a scientist may select specific utterances to refer to another scientist's work to imply that he is not sufficiently objective, but motivated by personal interests. To understand the procedures of word selection, then, it is necessary to analyse the activity the speaker is engaging in through the use of a specific linguistic repertoire.

Such repertoires may be invoked over large sequences of talk. By implication, then, the actions being accomplished are located at a general level of the discourse. It is this point however, that is problematic, because conversation analysis has revealed that the activities accomplished in talk are



located at a sequential and interactional order of detail for which the notion of linguistic repertoire cannot provide an account. This feature of talk can be illustrated by reference to materials introduced in chapter one.

(5) (Trip to Syracuse:2)

1 C So tha: -:t  
2 I -k-khhh  
3 C Yihknow I really don't have a place tuh sta:y.  
4 I hhOh:::..h  
5 (.2)  
6 I hhh So yih not g'nna go up this weeken?  
7 (.2)  
8 C Nu::h I don't think so.  
9 I How about the following weekend.  
10 (.8)  
11 C hh Dat's the vacation isn't it?  
12 I hhhhh Oh:. hh ALright so:- no ha:ssle, (.)  
13 s -o  
14 C -Ye:h,  
15 I Yihkno:w::  
16 ( ) Hhhh  
17 I So we'll make it fer another ti:me then.

A brief analysis of this extract illustrated three important points. Firstly, in substituting 'vacation' for 'weekend' the speaker displays his inability to comply with the co-participant's suggestion, but makes this inferable from his utterance, rather than stating it explicitly. Secondly, this indicates that the selection of items from which to fashion an utterance is ordered at the most elementary level - single word selection. Thirdly, the reasoning which informs the composition and use of the utterance exhibits a sensitivity to the sequential environment in which it occurs.

Gilbert and Mulkey invoke the concept of the linguistic repertoire to allow them to focus on the functional character of language use. This ensures, however, that the level at which they locate and analyse these functions in the scientists' reports is far too gross to take account of precisely these three delicate features of the moment-by-moment, practical accomplishment of talk. They can not provide either an account for, or an analysis of, the ways that speakers themselves resolve the problem of selection. Indeed, the mantle of the linguistic repertoire occludes from the range of issues to be investigated the fine-grained orderly

production of talk. This is paradoxical in light of their claim that the 'detailed examination of linguistic exchanges', and an 'informed understanding of the social generation of participants' accounts' (1984: 7) should be a prelude to, if not a replacement for, traditional sociological forms of analysis.

One of Gilbert and Mulkey's primary contributions is their emphasis upon the ways in which interpretative resources are embodied in accounts. Through analysis of these socially-organised resources they reveal the manner in which scientists provide for the character of their actions and beliefs. In their critique of traditional sociological studies they draw attention to the ways in which researchers have an unexplicated reliance upon precisely these features of language use. However, conversation analytic studies indicate that Gilbert and Mulkey's formulation of these issues falls short of providing a detailed account of the character of these 'interpretative practices', and how these may be utilised as interactional resources.

Extract (1) illustrated that speakers' resources in the business of talk are intimately related to the sequences in which they are produced. That is, the word 'vacation' obtained much of its sense, and inferential power, from the speaker's use of it in an utterance which was immediately after a proposal for the date of an excursion. The speaker was relying on the interpretative practices which were embodied, and thereby made available, through the structure of adjacency pairs, and this specific type of adjacency pairing in particular. That is, one set of resources to which participants can resort in coming to an understanding of the sense of an utterance are the structural and organisational properties of the way that it is produced. Speakers rely on resources which inhere in the trajectory of prior sequences. We may regard these resources as being locally occasioned: that is, furnished by the precise character of the preceding interaction.

The point is this: Gilbert and Mulkey correctly emphasise the importance of interpretative resources in the ways that participants provide for, and recognise, the sense of an utterance, or series of utterances, produced by co-participants. They do not emphasise, however, that precise interpretations made by speakers may be informed by inferences which are available by virtue of the participant's analysis of the structural aspects and sequential trajectory of the prior interaction. This entails a further implication: that the resources which are available to participants to furnish a recognisable sense for any specific utterance or stretch of talk are *occasioned* phenomena: that is, produced locally, and

tied to the specific trajectory of the talk. To illustrate what is meant by occasioned interactional resources we can examine the ways that participants in conversation employ social identities, and assumptions deriving from category membership.

The application and negotiation of category membership is a 'real life' concern for interactants, as Drew reveals in his (1987) analysis of 'po-faced' receipts of teases. He shows that these types of humorous remarks tend to occur after a sequence in which a speaker has been engaging in a stretch of talk that is recognisably overdone, or exaggerated. A tease, then, acts as a form of social control of minor conversational transgressions. Of more interest, however, are the procedures by which interactants construct the teases. He shows that the teaser focuses on category memberships which are inferable from the speaker's prior stretch of over-elaborated talk, and subtly amends them to provide a 'tease implicated deviant identity' (Drew, 1987: 246). By producing a po-faced responses, recipients of teases display a recognition of the deviant identity ascribed to them, and produce responses which are essentially defensive, and designed to re-affirm a non-deviant identity.

When teasing, speakers are using as a resource commonly available knowledge about category membership, and the way any membership can be used as the basis for inferences about the people to whom the category applies. This set of common-sense knowledge is highly organised (Sacks, 1972) and has been shown to be a resource for interactants in a variety of circumstances: in police interrogations (Watson, 1983; Wowk, 1984); in the assessment of 'deviant' identities (Smith, 1978; Watson and Weinberg, 1982); in courtroom interaction (Drew 1978; 1990); in the ways that members themselves monitor and control the membership of certain social groups (Sacks, 1979; Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1990); as a resource employed by sales people (Schenkein, 1978c) and as a resource in the reporting of extraordinary events (Jefferson, 1984a ). Each of these studies explicates the way that speakers rely on socially-organised, culturally-available means by which to provide for the locally-occasioned character of either their identity, or the identity of someone else.

The empirical focus of discourse analysis is the explication of functions achieved through accounts, texts, and so on, and thus it tends to gloss the detailed procedures by which specific identities can be negotiated and used by interactants

for practical ends. For example, Gilbert and Mulkay's interview material comes from scientists talking about their research, and the research of their colleagues. In their analysis of these materials Gilbert and Mulkay attend only to the their interviewees' identities as 'scientists'. That is, because it is 'scientists' who are talking (rather than 'employees', 'loyal-but-reluctant colleagues', 'rigorously empirical scientists' or simply people talking about their jobs to a sociologist) it transpires that the talk is 'scientists' talk. Analysing a stretch of talk by reference to only one category, however, obscures the ways that category memberships can be fluid, and occasioned to attend to the fine-grained features of interaction. More seriously, an examination of discourse which was founded on the assumption that the materials being analysed were 'scientists' talk could furnish empirically incorrect analyses. This could occur, not only in the way that the actual details of the talk had been adumbrated under the gross categorisation accorded to the respective statuses, but also in the way that the analyst's expectations of what is actually occurring in the talk may be influenced by knowledge relating to scientists and their activities, or any other pre-analytic variable the analyst might impute to the data. That is, the use of broad categories to define the character of an interaction, prior to any detailed empirical analysis, may in fact distort the very features of the data in which the analyst is interested.

Finally, I want to look briefly at how notions of 'context' may inform analytic considerations. To illustrate these points it is necessary to discuss the ways in which previous sociological research has treated this issue.

In traditional sociolinguistic studies, the analyst employs the context of the talk as a resource to analyse exchanges. An example is Becker et al's (1961) ethnographic study of medical students. To understand the argot of the medical students Becker observed the occasions in which the students used words and phrases of in which he was interested. From the contexts of their use, Becker tried to identify the meaning of the word and its relationship to the student's peception of her activity. This method, however, led Becker to make some questionable interpretations, on one occasion ascribing a meaning to a word which the students themselves subsequently rejected.

Atkinson and Drew (1979) set out to indicate the order of problem which emerges if common-sensically available devices - members' abilities - are used as unexplicated resources for analytic purposes, especially with regard to ethnographic research. They note, firstly, that an ethnographer's description of any scene can be indefinitely extended; any

closure is therefore a practical achievement. Merely being present at a scene to observe the circumstances in which a word is used, then, does not immediately ensure that the observer has an objective, or even better informed, perspective on the events being studied. Furthermore, and as discourse analysts have been keen to point out, language is a constructive medium: any description, then, is constitutive of that to which it refers. This is not only a problem for the ethnographer in compiling a description of some event; it obtrudes when using participants' descriptions to gain a better access to the meaning or use of the utterances in which the analyst is interested. Even if an ethnographer can argue for the validity of the description of the circumstances in which an utterance occurs, it is still necessary to warrant the claim the participants themselves were orienting to these features as being the relevant aspects of the context.

Schegloff (1987a) has elaborated this point. He argues that most social science research which deals with discourse has emphasised that differences in such discourses are essentially the products of the context in which they occur. Thus, for example, in hospitals, talk will be analysed as representative of, and inextricably tied to, the statuses and roles commonly found in these institutions: doctor-patient, doctor-nurse, or nurse-patient discourse. In a courtroom we will find lawyer-witness speech patterns. The same applies in classrooms, boardrooms, therapy counselling sessions, and so on. Now while it is clearly possible for a sociologist to assemble a description of the context, it is not clear that this will help clarify the discourse in that circumstance. We have already seen that any state of affairs in the world can legitimately be described in a massive variety of ways. Thus, to use a description as a sociological tool in analysis is to elevate *one possible* description above all others.

While Gilbert and Mulkay are in no way guilty of the same errors, their research does not attend to the ways in which context is a relevant issue, only for the analyst, *but also for the participants during interaction*. Conversation analytic research, however, seeks to explicate the participants' orientation to features of the circumstances, and reveal how these orientations inform the production of utterances, and are thereby displayed as being relevant for practical reasons. One important corollary of this emphasis is that the actual trajectory of the prior talk is itself a contingency of the interaction, and may be oriented to as an immediate context by which the relevance of an utterance may be displayed. For

example, the relevant aspects of an interaction may be embarrassment, a question, an excuse, a repair, an instruction, and so on. Moreover, such relevancies may be fluid, and variable between specific utterances, or even within single turns, and reflect not 'macro' or institutional features, but the specific path of the interaction. These features of the way that speakers orient to context are examined primarily through conversation analytic studies.

During interaction speakers orient to features of the environment, whether physical, social, or the sequential trajectory of their talk. Insofar as they are being produced for the benefit of co-interactants, utterances will be designed to display these occasioned relevancies. They are available also, therefore, for the overhearing analyst. A more useful understanding of the 'context' of any utterance, then, is to see how speakers exhibit in their talk their understanding of the context, and display the manner in which it is relevant for their talk. In Schegloff's words:

a notion like "context" will have to remain substantively contentless, and uncommitted to any prespecified referent and be instead "programmatically relevant" [that is] relevant in principle, but with a sense always to-be-discovered rather than given-to-be-applied. (Schegloff, 1987b: 112)

There are, then, a number of features of naturally occurring talk which are overlooked in a discourse analytic research programme. Firstly, the orderly features of utterance design which occur in the fine-grained detail of interaction, including single word selection procedures, are obscured by an emphasis upon the explication of broad linguistic repertoires which inform stretches of talk. Secondly, conversation analysts have indicated that structural and sequential features of discourse are themselves resources available to participants, either to understand another's talk, or to furnish a sense for their own utterances. These features of the 'interpretive practices' and 'organisation' of talk do not receive detailed attention in discourse analysis. Thirdly, research has revealed that category membership and occasioned social identities are resources by which participants can assemble their activities in interaction. Finally, the results from participants' analyses of the relevancies to which their talk is related will inform the production of utterances, and the interpretation of other's utterances. Insofar as these analyses are displayed primarily for the benefit of co-participants, they are thereby made available for analytic inspection. Thus, the 'relevant' features of the context of any talk will be those to which speakers themselves display a sensitivity.

In this section I have delineated the features of language use which are of analytic interest in this research by comparing the broad features of discourse analysis with some objectives of, and insights from, conversation analytic studies. By this comparison we have been able to detail the range of issues which may be explored in subsequent chapters, and to account for the use of a conversation analytic framework. Lest this review of discourse analysis seem overly critical, however, by way of a conclusion to this section I want to discuss briefly the complementary features of discourse and conversation analysis, and also point to the primary contributions from the former.

I take it that both forms of analysis share a common objective in examining the ways in which people use natural language resources to furnish the sense of their activities, and of their social worlds. Indeed, it is only by virtue of the underlying similarities between the two approaches that we have been able to use one to illuminate the finer details of the other. However, whereas conversation analysts have largely neglected to tackle the implications of their approach to language for more traditional areas of sociology, the critical arguments from discourse analysis have had important consequences. (We may note, parenthetically, that the discussion of parapsychological research in chapter one was informed by, and reflected, arguments used to emphasise the importance of discourse analysis.) This is particularly true of Potter and Wetherell's impact on social psychology. Prior to their work, the study of discourse in social psychology was concerned largely with drawing links between actual utterances and the underlying cognitive dispositions they were taken to index. Furthermore, the methodological problems which beset the sociological study of science applied also to a range of important issues in social psychology. By providing the same type of critical arguments, focusing on the constructive and variable dimensions of language, and particularly informed by an ethnomethodological position, Potter and Wetherell have been able to draw attention to the deficiencies in traditional social psychological methodology, the implications of which are only beginning to become apparent to social psychology. At this stage it is not clear what the ultimate impact this body of sustained criticism will be. However, in a time when the discipline is heavily informed by a distinctly 'cognitive' and experimental philosophy, Potter and Wetherell's overriding achievement is to have indicated the need for psychologists to attend to, and account for, the complexity of human behaviour as it naturally occurs. And by making this point in relation

to the study of language use they have begun to draw closer the links between sociology and social psychology.

Discourse analysts have indicated, and investigated, the constructed and constructive features of language use. Furthermore, by looking at specific areas - for example, the sociological study of science and scientists, or topics within social psychology - they have examined the implications of these aspects for our understanding of the broader relationship between social reality and discourse. Of particular importance in this respect is the argument that discourse is functional, not only at the level of detailed interactions, but also in terms of wider social practices and beliefs. Thus, discourse analysis has been used to tackle 'traditional' sociological and social psychological problems, such as civil disturbance (Potter and Reicher 1987), racism (Billig 1985; Potter and Wetherell 1988), gender and employment (Wetherell et al, 1987) and youth identity and subcultural group membership (Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1989; 1990) in a way that is informative, but which resists methodological and theoretical problems which beset previous attempts to deal with these issues.

Whereas conversation analysis primarily developed from the lectures and publications of Harvey Sacks, discourse analysis is able to boast a more eclectic pedigree, drawing on observations and insights from a variety of related disciplines: sociolinguistics, semiotics, structuralism, speech act theory and literary criticism. We have already noted the way that Potter and Wetherell's analysis of social categorisation draws on work from Sacks (1979), and their discussion of 'accounts' borrows analytic observations from Atkinson and Drew (1979). Thus, while the goals of discourse analysis are considerably broader than those pursued in the study of naturally-occurring conversational materials, results from conversation analyses may be employed as a resource in the pursuit of specifically discourse analytic goals.

Both conversation and discourse analysts have been concerned with the reflexive character of language use. It is only in the latter domain, however, that the implications of this have been thoroughly explored. In particular Mulkay (1985) and Ashmore (1989) confront reflexivity and its implications for sociological investigations. In doing so they devise innovative forms of analysis which take reflexivity as a resource for, rather than an obstacle to, empirical research. (See also, Ashmore, Mulkay and Pinch, 1989; Mulkay, Ashmore and Pinch, 1988; Woolgar, 1988.)

### **Conversation analysis and monologue talk**



The data to be investigated in this thesis are accounts of personal paranormal experiences, in the production of which speakers engage in long uninterrupted stretches of talk. Such accounts are monologic, rather than overtly dialogic, as in ordinary conversation where two or more parties produce regular turn exchanges. Within discourse analysis, this type of data would be treated as a text, as is any other form of discourse, spoken or written. Consequently, it has been the discourse analysts who have hitherto examined long stretches of talk, although this is not all that they have used as data. In this research we are adopting a conversation analytic mode of investigation. There is a problem, however, in the attempt to employ a 'conversation analytic mentality' (Schenkein, 1978b: 1ff.) to the study of one-speaker talk. By virtue of the 'proof-procedure' furnished by the turn taking system, conversation analysts have a major resource in their investigations which is unavailable to

analysts of isolated sentences or other "text" materials that cannot be analysed without hypothesizing or speculating about the possible ways in which utterances, sentences or texts might be interpreted. (Heritage and Atkinson, 1984: 9)

With regard to the analysis of accounts of paranormal experiences, we might ask: can we legitimately claim to provide a distinctly conversation analytic investigation of materials which are essentially monologic in character; and if this is possible, what alternative resources are available to the analyst to compensate for the absence of the 'proof procedure' afforded by the analyses of each others' talk provided by interactants themselves?

Firstly, we may note that conversation analysts have argued that conversational interaction has a foundational or 'bedrock' status compared to any other domain. Consequently, the investigation of interaction in specific institutional settings seeks to analyse the distinctive adaptation of culturally-available sets of procedures for 'doing' talk. Indeed, it is through the manipulation of such procedures that talk in institutional settings obtains its distinct character. An illustration of this is Greatbatch's (1983; 1988) analyses of the manner in which the institutional character of interview talk is interactionally produced and sustained on a turn-by-turn basis. (See also Atkinson and Drew, 1979; for a more extended discussion, see Schegloff, 1987a.) Thus, when speakers are engaged in non-conversational interaction, such as producing accounts of paranormal experiences, the sets of

methodic procedures by which their talk is produced are of the same order as those displayed for analytic inspection in conversational material. That is, there is no qualitative difference between long stretches of uninterrupted talk, and talk which is constituted through a turn-taking system. Although it may be more difficult to explicate the 'rules, techniques, procedures, methods, maxims' (Sacks 1984: 413) which inhere in the detail of long stretches of talk, it is not a task beset with *intractable* problems.

A related point is that the accounts treated as data in this research were produced in a variety of informal interview situations. It may be objected therefore that it is unwise to proceed as if this material provided *naturally-occurring* data. The objection would be, then, that the context, to some degree, crucially influences the character of the talk subsequently produced. We have already argued, however, that the most suitable perspective on the issue of the context in which talk occurs is to see how the features of any such environment are oriented to, and thereby displayed as being relevant at that moment, by the speakers themselves. Thus, when making accounts of their anomalous experiences, the speakers will, through the design of sequences of utterances, display those features of the context which they have analysed to be significant to their immediate concerns. By treating utterances as context-shaping, as well as being sensitive to any local, occasioned feature of the environment in which an account occurred, we may reject the argument that it is necessary, or indeed possible, to isolate any formulation of the context as, in principle, the definitive root, basis or cause of features of the speaker's subsequent account.

Adopting this position also draws links with an argument put forward by Potter and Mulkay (1985). They claim that a discourse analytic perspective does not regard interviews as a method by which the analyst can extract a definitive version of the state of affairs being reported on. Rather, they regard interviews as useful in that they generate the interviewee's interpretative work, which can then be the subject of analysis. The same argument is applicable to people's accounts of their paranormal experiences. By virtue of the interview situation the speaker is presented with the opportunity to display, through the production of the subsequent account, the various descriptive practices which are of analytic interest.

The third important objection to the application of a conversation analytic mentality to the study of one speaker talk is that, because CA attends to the interactional activities negotiated through talk, it is of little use to sets of data which do not have such an interactional dimension (that is, two or more participating parties). A consideration

of the primary objection to this argument is important insofar it touches upon some of the issues with which the analytic chapters of this thesis will be concerned.

While the speakers are producing their accounts, they are doing so in the presence of someone else, namely, the interviewer/researcher. And as the purpose of the meeting is to allow the speakers to recount the experiences they have had, the accounts are produced for the benefit of this recipient. Also, speakers are relying on resources which are, in an important respect, culturally-available, and which are sensitive to specifically moral and inferential activities negotiated through talk. Thus, when producing accounts, their descriptions will display the speakers' sensitivity to, and reasoning about, the interactional consequences of the utterances so produced, although there may be no recipient actively participating in the interaction. These utterances, therefore, may then be investigated to reveal the various design features employed in their construction.

Thus, there are no in-principle obstacles to a conversation analytic study of monologic, multi-unit turn accounts. Furthermore, we may conclude this section by sketching some of the analytic resources which can assist the researcher in the study of one speaker interaction when access to the proof criterion afforded in interaction between two or more active parties is not available.

In this respect, one avenue to be explored are those occasions in which speakers provide clear self-interruptions of their talk. In the manner in which they proceed - having either changed the trajectory of the account, or 'repaired' a problem with the prior word or utterance(s) - they display an analysis of the on-going accomplishment of their talk. In this, the analyst is afforded not so much a proof criterion, but a foothold in the explication of the speaker's methodic construction of the experience. (This point will be illustrated in chapter four.)

Although the interviewer may be largely inactive throughout the interview, insofar as the speaker is not interrupted by questions about the account, occasionally the interviewer may produce minimal, non-vocal signs of interest or encouragement: for example, 'mm hm', and 'yeah'. This class of utterances has been shown to have orderly properties (Jefferson, 1984b; Schegloff, 1981). Their occurrence, then, may be of analytic interest in that they are displays of the recipient's

orientation to a specific aspect of the speaker's account. That is, minimal continuers may indicate that the speaker is dealing with, or premonitors the speaker's dealings with, issues which are in some ways sensitive to the business at hand - talking about personal encounters with anomalies.

Finally, we may look to see if speakers produce two or more different descriptions of the same events in the course of their accounts. If there are such multiple versions, these alternatives can be analysed to reveal their distinctive design features, thereby providing insight as to the character of the interactional business for which they have been designed. (This resource is a central feature of the analysis in chapter seven.)

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has dealt with two approaches to the study of naturally occurring talk which may be employed in the analysis of accounts of paranormal experiences. While there are underlying themes common to both conversation analysis and discourse analysis, for the purpose of the present research we will adopt the analytic mentality of the former. This is not to deny the relevance of discourse analysis, both in sociology and social psychology, and I have tried to illustrate the significant critical and empirical contributions it has made. Through an examination of the main features of discourse analysis, however, we were able to delineate certain dimensions of language use which require a conversation analytic approach: for example, the procedures by which specific words, and combinations of words, are selected in the composition of descriptive utterances; and the use of occasioned social identities as interactional resources. Finally, I have argued that monologic data, such as spoken accounts of paranormal experiences, are legitimate material for conversation analytic research. Thus, we may proceed to an investigation of inferential activities negotiated in accounts of anomalous experiences.

## **Notes**

1 Many types of analytic work are represented by the term 'discourse analysis'. I will explain later to which variety I am referring here.

2 See, for example, Atkinson and Drew, 1979; Atkinson and Heritage, 1984; Button and Lee, 1987; Button, Drew and Heritage, 1986; Drew, forthcoming; Heritage, 1984; 1989; Levinson, 1983, chapter 6; Nofsinger, 1991; Psathas, 1979; Psathas and Frankel, 1991; Schenkein, 1978a; Sudnow, 1972;

Wooffitt, 1990; Wootton, 1989.

3 Schegloff (1989) provides an illuminating description of the origins of conversation analysis.

4 For example, see the contributions of Gilbert and Mulkay, Gilbert, and Abell, in Gilbert and Abell, 1983.

5 For alternative resolutions to these methodological quandaries, see Ashmore, 1989, and Woolgar, 1988.

## Chapter four

# A single case analysis

### Introduction

In this chapter I want to examine in detail one short piece of data, an extract from an interview in which the interviewee provided a number of accounts of personal paranormal experiences. However, as the majority of conversation analytic work investigates a conversational phenomenon, or variants thereof, that occurs in a variety of interactional circumstances, it is important to be clear why we will focus exclusively on one piece of data.

The analysis of single cases has been a long-standing feature of conversation analytic work. In his early lectures Sacks often illustrated analytic observations by examining in detail one fragment of conversational data. As he stated in one of his lectures:

The idea is to take singular sequences of conversation and tear them apart in such a way as to find rules, techniques, procedures, methods, maxims (a collection of terms that more or less relate to each other and that I use somewhat interchangeably) that can be used to generate the orderly features we find in the conversation we examine. The point is, then, to come back to the singular things we observe in a singular sequences, with some rules that handle those singular features, and also, necessarily, handle lots of other events. (Sacks, 1984b:413.)

The object of single cases analyses, then, is to reveal the forms of conversational organisation which intersect in management of a specific sequence of interaction. For example, Schegloff's (1984) analysis of a misunderstanding in a radio interview hinges around the way in which the structural resources provided by the immediate linguistic context furnish for one participant an ambiguous interpretation of the talk. In a more recent paper he examines an instance of a mechanism for the production and recognition of bad news (Schegloff, 1988). Drew's (1989) examination of some of the organisational procedures through

which a display of non-recognition of another person is a further example of the same type of analysis. Of particular note in this respect is Whalen et al's (1988) examination of a telephone call to a Dallas Fire Department. They reveal the conversational basis for the breakdown of the call, as a consequence of which a medical team was not dispatched in time to save a life.

A dividend of single cases analysis is that it generates a range of issues for subsequent investigation. With regard to the target data to be investigated in this chapter, revealing some of the resources employed by the speaker will provide a general insight as to the range of interactional tasks and issues which are relevant to the production of these utterances at this specific time. These concerns will subsequently inform further analysis over a larger data corpus. In this sense, I am using a single case analysis as a form of pilot study to generate other areas for empirical research.

## Data

The target extract for this exercise comes from the following account. This was produced during a taped interview with a woman who is a professional medium, who, largely by virtue of her work, claims to have had a considerable number of paranormal experiences. The speaker provides this report approximately twenty minutes into the interview. Immediately beforehand she had been trying to differentiate between forms of mediumistic powers, drawing a distinction between 'mere' psychic powers and 'true' clairvoyant abilities. She furnishes this specific account as an example of the type of experience which may occur to those with clairvoyant powers.

>it's very interesting< because hh (.5) something like this happened to me hhh a few years ago (.) when I was living in edinborough (.) every time I walked into the sitting room, (.3) er:m. (.7) right by the window (.3) and the same place always I heard a lovely (.3) s:ound like de|de|dede|dedede|dededah just a happy (.) little tu:ne (.5) a:nd >of course< I tore apart ma window I tore apart the window frame I >did Everything< to find

out what the hell's causing that cos nobody else ever  
 heard it hhh (.2) >y'know< (.) there could >be ten  
 people in the room nobody'd hear it but me< (.7) er:m:  
 and I wanted to know what was the: (.) material cause of  
 this hh well: (.4) I never could figure it out and it  
 didn't (.) upset me in fact it was quite a lovely little  
 happy sound un:d so I just let it go (1.7) one night  
 however a friend was with me (.) and we're just watching  
 the tele (.3) and she was also very psychic a:nd urm  
 (1.3) its- (.) th-the s:ound started the litt(le)  
 musical (s) tu- s::ound started again (.3) and uhm: (.)  
 >she said what's THaght I said oh (.) have you heard it  
 it< ah (s) >oh |that's wonderful you're the first person  
 who's ever heard it besides me< hh ((coughs)) she was  
 frightened by it (.) got up and ran out of the room (.7)  
 and so I sat at the table an' I got very angry cos I  
 thought I don't wanta fright- I don't want this to  
frighten her (.) doesn't frighten me (.) anyway in my  
 mind I (1) denied this could be a spirit (.7) cause  
 ((clears throat)) an' in my mind I shouted I said well  
 hh y'know you're just trying to frighten m- us end ehm:  
 if you're really real (.) if you're really a spirit bang  
 hard (.) >'n it went< ((bangs on desk)) I thou(ght)  
 o::h you're real huhh |hahh an I ran outa the room (.7)  
 hhh so: about two or three days later (.3) ahr (.) I  
 went to: a seance (1.3) the medium came to me almost  
 immediately and >she sed< oh: by the way (.2) she  
 >didn't know me< she jus:t came straight to me however  
 'nd she said ehm (.) you know that ehm musical (.) sound  
 you've been hearing in your |living room 'n I dy(eu) h  
 huhh hah I said ye:ah hh hhh and she said ehm (.7) that  
 was Da:ve a ma:n who passed over quite long time ago

In this chapter I will be concerned with the following  
 section which is taken from the early part of the account.

(1) EM A 286

- 1 every time I walked into
- 2 the sitting room, (.3) er:m. (.7)
- 3 right by the window (.3)



4 and the same place always  
5 I heard a lovely (.3) s:ound  
6 like de|de|dede|dedede|dededah  
7 just a happy (.) little tu:ne (.5)  
8 a:nd >of course<  
9 I tore apart ma window  
10 I tore apart the window frame  
11 I >did Everything<  
12 to find out what the hell's causing that  
13 cos nobody else ever heard it hhh (.2)  
14 >y'know< (.)  
15 there could >be ten people in the room  
16 nobody'd hear it but me< (.7)  
17 er:m: and I wanted to know what was  
18 the: (.) material cause of this

I am specifically interested in lines 5 to 18. This section has been chosen because it is particularly rich source of events for analytic investigation. For example, there is a description of a paranormal phenomena (lines 5 to 8); also, the speaker describes her reaction to the phenomenon (lines 8 to 12). It is also likely that this sequence contains materials which would of interest to researchers from other fields. The description of the event will clearly be of interest to the parapsychologist, and a psychologist may be interested by the description of the speaker's reaction. The analytic approach of researchers from these disciplines would be very different to that adopted here. Thus, not only can the analysis illuminate the methodic procedures by which this sequences of utterances is constructed, but it can also reveal significant differences between approaches which focus on what the talk is about, and an interest in the way that the talk is put together.

### **Analysis**

For the purpose of analysis I will deal with this section in four parts.

[a] Initial description of the phenomenon

5 I heard a lovely (.3) s:ound  
6 like de|de|dede|dedede|dededah  
7 just a happy (.) little tu:ne (.5)

In this sequence the speaker introduces the first reference to the phenomenon. She has already spoken about aspects of it; for example, she has remarked that its occurrence was confined to one physical spot. By virtue of the fact that she has reported soome consistent feature of the phenomenon which could only be gleaned from a consideration of a variety of such encounters, it is evident that she is not making a first reference to a *specific* encounter.

A notable character of this description is the structure. there are three separate components: 'a lovely sound', a sung exemplification and 'just a happy little tune. This reference to the noise has been constructed as a list of three qualities. Three partedness in the construction of lists has been found to be a recurrent practice in ordinary conversational materials (Jefferson, 1991). For example:

(2)

1 while you've been talking tuh me,  
2 I mended,  
3 two nightshirts,  
4 a pillowcase?  
5 enna pair'v pants.

(3)

1 That was a vicious school there-  
2 it was about  
3 forty percent Negro,  
4 'bout twenny percent Japenese,  
5 the rest were rich Jews. heh hah

(Jefferson, 1991: 63.)

The phenomenon is common in a variety of forms of discourse and suggests that three-partedness may be a culturally available resource for list construction. Moreover, speakers who begin a list are rarely interrupted prior to the completion of the third item, even when the speaker pauses while trying to recall from memory a final component. This implies that parties to a conversation orient to lists as complete only upon the provision of the third item, suggesting a normative constraint operating to structure lists production.

In ordinary conversation three part lists can be used to indicate a general quality common to the items in the list. In (2) above, the speaker provides a summary of the items she has mended. By virtue of their placement in a list, the reference to these items is hearable as the speaker indicating 'look how much I've done'. Furthermore, listing these items display to the recipient their occasioned co-class membership: that is, the way that they are used conveys the *general* class of objects to which the speaker's activity has been directed - mending household linen. This feature of listing is often employed as a resource in political speeches. for example:

(4) Tebbit, U. K General Election, 1983.

- 1 Labour will
- 2 spend and spend
- 3 borrow and borrow
- 4 and tax and tax

(Atkinson, 1984a: 60.)

In the extract above the speaker is not concerned with spending, borrowing and taxing as separate features of the Labour Party's policies; by listing these three features he is able to convey the general point that their economic

policy is inherently flawed.

In the utterance 'I heard a lovely (.3) s:ound like de|de|dede|dedede|dededah just a happy (.) little tu:ne' it is apparent that the speaker is using her own 'lay' knowledge of the practices of listing to furnish a description which is recognizably complete. Also, this reference is designed so that the qualities she indexes will not be heard as specific particulars, but are hearable as pointing to general features of the noise.

Analysis of the qualities she indexes in the description allows an insight as to the range of interactional concerns for which this sequence is organised. All three components of the description portray positive attributes of the phenomenon. The use of items such as 'tune', 'lovely' and 'happy' ensure that other characteristics of the events are not referenced. For example, the sudden manifestation of a noise, the source of which is unidentified, is not a routine occurrence in most peoples living rooms; yet in these utterances the speaker does not allude to any element of mystery or puzzlement. She makes no storyable feature of the *appearance* of the noise, despite it being the kind of event which would in most cases merit some comment.

We may note a number of issues raised by the preceding considerations. In this account, as in all the data, the speaker is reporting her memory of the events. Moreover, in the process of telling the story, she is recasting herself as innocent of the cause of the sound. That is, she is trying to capture and portray the sequence of events as they unfolded at the time. However, by virtue of her own knowledge of the subsequent denouement of these episode we may note that this report is, inevitably, a reconstruction. However, this reconstruction is not the outcome of declining cognitive facilities and distortions which have occurred over time, reporting effects, and so on; rather, it is the product of pragmatic work. To expand upon this point, and to provide an analytic leverage for the target data, we need to consider some of the broader issues related to reporting extraordinary events.

The data in chapter one indicated that when people engage in talk they are presenting materials - what they say, and how it is said - which may be used as the focus of and basis for interpretative work by the recipient. From an inspection of precisely these materials co-interactants can arrive at

judgements and conclusions concerning the speaker's character, and the nature and topic of their utterances. Conversation analytic research has revealed that these moral and inferential concerns inform not only the recipient's analysis of prior turns, but also the way in which speakers initially design utterances which are to be analysed by co-interactants. Speakers fashion their utterances to circumscribe the character and range of inferences which may be drawn from them. These constructive and inferential activities occur in myriad occasions of everyday social interaction.

Jefferson's (1984a) study of reports of events such as shootings, hijackings, accidents and so on, reveals some of the linguistic practices which are sensitive precisely to these interpersonal and evaluative concerns. Witnesses to these extraordinary events often employ a format identified as 'At first I thought...but then I realized'. A well-known example is the way that witnesses to the shooting of J.F. Kennedy reported a loud bang, which they first thought to be gunfire, but which they then realized was gunfire. The following example comes from Sacks' (1984) initial identification of the phenomenon

I was walking up towards the front of the airplane and I saw by the cabin, the stewardess standing facing the cabin, and a fellow standing with a gun in her back. *And my first thought was he's showing her the gun, and then I realized that couldn't be, and then it turned out he was hi-jacking the plane.* (Sacks, 1984: 419; emphasis added.)

Jefferson's analysis begins with the observation that in the first part of the device speakers proffer their incorrect conclusions from an initial assessment of the events they observed. In many cases, these incorrect first thoughts are themselves quite strange; for example, in the extract cited above, the speaker reports that his first thought was that the man was showing the stewardess the gun. Inspection of the details of his report, however, suggests that had the speaker truly drawn this conclusion then his reasoning processes must have been informed by gross naivety or a staggeringly optimistic view of human nature. That is, he appears to be reporting that he found nothing strange about a man with a

gun on an aeroplane and that he assumed, that by placing the gun in the stewardess' back, the man was showing it to her.

Jefferson argues that however extraordinary these formulations are, they are not so strange in comparison to what the 'reality' turned out to be. In the extract cited above, for instance, it transpires that the speaker was involved in a hijacking; compared to this, someone *showing* a stewardess a gun is not so dramatic. Jefferson's subsequent analysis reveals that what speakers are doing with the first part of the 'At first I thought...' device is to present, as their normal first assumption, an innocuous reading of the state of affairs on which they are reporting. Through their 'first thought' formulations they display that they did not immediately assume that anything untoward was happening. Moreover, the composition of these descriptions reveals that they have attempted to assemble an unexceptional version of the events to which they were witness. They are presenting themselves as having had the kind of initial assumptions about the event that any *normal* person may have. In doing so, they are providing materials, an inspection of which may lead a recipient to infer the normality of their reasoning processes about the world.

Having a recipient come to see that one's reasoning and assumptions about the world are quite ordinary is clearly an important concern for people who are reporting extraordinary experiences such as shootings and hijackings. The extraordinary character of these events, however, rest partly in their statistical rarity. Although most people may never encounter incidents of this kind, it is conventionally known that they do happen. Furthermore, there are explanations available for why they happen, whether these concern political motivation for the actions of people, or, in the case of transport accidents, scientific explanations for technological malfunctions.

The strangeness of paranormal events, however, derives from the fact that they present an implicit challenge to scientific declarations about the world and, moreover, undermine common-sense knowledge of what sorts of things are possible. As we saw in chapter one, the incidence of anomalous experiences may be higher than hitherto imagined. This fact alone, however, has little bearing on the culturally-available knowledge and assumptions associated with experiences of this kind. Thus, claims of the paranormal may be investigated with a view to explicating the ways in which these wider conventions are oriented to, and negotiated

by speakers through their pragmatic work. Furthermore, following the line established by Jefferson's analysis, we may focus on the ways in which fine-grained moral and evaluative concerns are mediated through the specifics of accounts. With this in mind, we may return to the speaker's initial description of the noise to explicate the interactional tasks for which it has been designed.

Individuals who report every strange event as being an indication of the manifestation of some paranormal agency might be taken as, at best, gullible or worse, slightly unbalanced. 'Ordinary' people do not interpret every stimuli in their environment as the product of non-normal, non-material causes. Even when those stimuli are not part of the regular and routine features of daily life they are not immediately accorded and supernatural status. In lines 5 to 7 the speaker builds her description of the phenomenon by selecting items which refer to one of its features - its pleasing, tuneful, almost playful quality. Thereby, the speaker omits material from which it may be inferred that she thought the noise had any mysterious connotations. That is, she is giving the type of description which would be produced by any normal person in these circumstances. Thus she claims for herself the membership of the category 'ordinary people' (Sacks, 1984), and in so doing exhibits a sensitivity to the evaluation of her story a recipient might make; a sensitivity which is itself informed by an appreciation of the conventions associated with experiences of this kind.

[b] Speaker's investigation of the noise

8        a:nd >of course<  
9        I tore apart ma window  
10       I tore apart the window frame  
11       I >did Everything<  
12       to find out what the hell's causing that

In this section the speaker outlines some of her reactions subsequent to the occasions upon which she heard the noise. Two related observations can be made. First, that these actions are depicted as a response to the noise; second, that

this response is a search. Before moving to a detailed consideration of the way in which this response is constructed, we may note the work done by the utterance 'and of course'.

In the description of her response the speaker makes it clear that at the time she did not know the cause of the noise. Her search for the cause, however, is not portrayed as an unmotivated inquiry. By prefacing the description of her response with 'and of course' the speaker displays her orientation to the normatively prescribed character of her actions. It is not that she 'just happened' to conduct a search, or that this course of action seemed appropriate. Rather, she displays the recognition that this is the expected way to react in circumstances like these. This not only elevates 'searching for a cause' to the status of a normative requirement, but also permits her to affiliate with this conventions by demonstrating that her behaviour was in accord with that of other 'ordinary people'.

The search is also described in three parts. The first two deal with the type and extent of the search. We have previously noted the way that three-part lists convey general features which are common to the discrete items so listed, but which would not be immediately available from a separate consideration of these items. In this list the speaker makes use of other resources to emphasise further the overall or general character of her search.

We have already observed that, when listing, speakers orient to the list as complete only upon the provision of the third item. For example, where speakers are clearly having difficulty in locating third parts, co-interactants may volunteer candidate third parts (Jefferson, 1991: 66). Another resolution to the problem of accountable list completion is the use of 'generalised list completers' (Jefferson, 1991: 66). Where an appropriate third part does not come easily to mind, speakers may use utterances such as '...and everything', '...and all that'. '...and things' after the first two items as a way of completing the list in three. For example:

(5)

- 1       And they had a concession
- 2       stand like at a fair



3        where you can buy  
4        coke  
5        and popcorn  
6        and that type of thing

(Jefferson, 1991: 66.)

With respect to our target data we can observe that the third part of the sequence in lines 8 to 12 is not only a generalized list completer, but also displays the properties of an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986). Other such formulations are: brand new, forever, nobody, always, never, and so on. These formulations serve to maximize the object, quality or state of affairs to which they refer. Research into the use of these formulations in ordinary conversation has revealed that speakers use them to influence the judgements or conclusions of co-interactants, especially when speakers may have grounds to suspect that their accounts will receive an unsympathetic hearing. This is illustrated in the following extract, which comes from a call to a suicide prevention centre in the United States.

(6) 'D' is the member of the centre's staff, 'C' is the caller.

1    D    Do you have a gun at home?  
2        (.6)  
3    C    A forty fi:ve,  
4    D    You do have a forty fi:ve.  
5    C    Mm hm, it's loaded.  
6    D    What is it doing there, hh Whose is it.  
7    C    It's sitting there.  
8    D    Is it you:rs?  
9        (1.0)  
10   D    It's Dave's.  
11   C    It's your husband's hu:h?=  
12   C    =I know how to shoot it,

- 13 (.4)  
14 D He isn't a police office:r,  
15 C No:.  
16 D He just ha:s one.  
17 C Mm hm, It-u-Everyone doe:s don't they?

(Pomerantz, 1986: 225.)

A gun is the type of possession for which an explanation may be sought. Indeed, the member of staff tries to find a reason for the caller's possession of a gun by inquiring whether her husband was a police officer. In this extract the speaker describes the practice of keeping a gun by using the extreme case formulation 'Everyone doe:s', thereby proposing that this is normal and non-accountable, and something for which she does not have to offer a mitigating explanation.

In the target data the speaker is describing her search for the cause of the noise, and she employs various resources to provide for the thoroughness of her endeavours. The use of 'tore apart' twice implies, at least, urgency. Also, the use of a three-part list to portray the general extensiveness of her search. Furthermore, the speaker's use of an extreme case formulation as a generalised list completer further enhances her attempts to persuade the recipient of the extent and the meticulousness of her efforts.

In routine conversation reference actions and events can be prefaced by formulations of intention or expectation. For example: 'I wanted to arrive on time', or 'I tried to arrive on time'. When people use prefaces such as these it is noticeable that the intended action usually does not occur, as in utterances like 'I tried to arrive on time, but the train was late. People do not routinely construct sentences such as 'I tried to arrive on time, and I did' unless they are specifically emphasising the virtue of effort, or some peculiar feature of the circumstances relevant to the occasion of the talk. There is, then, a way of describing intended actions which premonitors the failure of those actions and events to occur.

In lines 13 to 15 the speaker chooses to describe her search for the source of the sound. In doing so she details particulars of her effort to locate the cause: that is, she 'tore apart' the window and frame. Presumably, however, the

object causing the noise is of more importance than her attempts to locate it. That is, there is a hierarchy of relevance: if she had discovered the source of the noise, paranormal or otherwise, this discovery would diminish the significance of her search. Consequently, her efforts to locate the cause acquire a reportable status only insofar as they are unsuccessful. Thus, the report of the search signals its failure.

Further evidence that the speaker's attempts to find the source of the noise were thwarted comes from the following section, taken from a later part of the extract. (This will be examined in detail in a subsequent section.)

(7)

17 er:m: and I wanted to know what was  
18 the: (.) material cause of this

Here, the use of 'and I wanted to know..' plainly orients to the speaker's lack of success in her efforts.

In the way that the search is described the speaker makes available materials, an assessment of which indicates the normality of her thoughts and actions regarding the noise: that she acted like any ordinary person might and looked for the cause of the sound, and that this search was extensive and conducted with urgency. Her 'competence' as an ordinary person is further reinforced in her description of *where* she looked: in and around the physical vicinity of the noise. Insofar as she 'tore apart' the window she directs the search, and the recipient's attention, to physical and material objects. Thus she makes it inferable that she did not immediately assume the noise was anything but a normal, as opposed to paranormal, sound, and one which could, therefore, be traced to its natural *physical* origin.

We may note finally that the speaker provides an explicit reason for her response: to find out the cause of the noise (line 12).

In these five lines, then, there are a variety of resources being employed to attend to a number of inferential issues, and it is useful to provide to a brief summary of the work being accomplished.

1 The noise stimulates a response.

2 The response is a search, thus implying that the speaker did not at that time know of the source of the sound.

3 The speaker portrays her search as one which is motivated by an orientation to normative expectations associated with the way people *should* act in these circumstances, thereby displaying her affiliations to these conventions.

4 The search is directed towards physical objects, thus demonstrating that she acted like any ordinary person and assumed that there was a material cause for the phenomenon.

5 The manner in which the search is formulated indicates its thoroughness.

6 The search is formulated to display that it failed.

So far the speaker has not addressed the paranormality of the noise. She has provided sufficient material, however, from which a recipient may infer that the source of the noise is not usual. Her description reveals that she has conducted an extensive search in physical locations, despite which the source has not been discovered. Therefore, 'normal' procedures for locating 'normal' nuisances have not been successful. The recipient is provided with sufficient material to infer that the sound has non-material, and possibly paranormal, causes.

[c] Building the paranormality of the phenomenon

13       cos nobody else ever heard it hhh (.2)

14       >y'know< (.)

15       there could >be ten people in the room

16       nobody'd hear it but me< (.7)

So far the speaker may be said to have provided only indications as to the paranormal qualities of the noise. I will argue that in this section she presents materials which are designed to generate more forcefully the conclusion that the sound is far from normal. This is achieved through reference to those occasions when other people were present during the manifestation of the phenomenon.

In these lines the speaker focuses on the exclusivity of the noise. This in itself is insufficient to suggest that it has paranormal qualities: she may have been the only one in the room when the noise started; she may have been the only person to use the room; she may have been the sole occupant of the house, and so on. The speaker's exclusive perception of the phenomenon is made explicable by reference to any one of these possibilities. In these lines, however, the speaker makes a stronger case for the anomalous quality of the sound by constructing an example of an occasion when others were present during the manifestation of the phenomenon. This example may be termed a 'hypothetical'. It is prefaced by the utterance 'there could be', and does not refer to any specific instances. Instead, it is used to extract recurrent features from actual situations and distil them into an illustrative example of the kind of thing which generally happened. Using this hypothetical example the speaker is able to claim that she could hear the sound when others, co-present with her, could not. This suggests that she was 'hearing things' or that the sound has some quality so that it is directed specifically to her, or that she has some special facility for hearing noises of this kind. Any interpretation will permit the recipient to come to see that the sound has some element of mystery.

The use of a hypothetical illustration instead of, for example, reference to actual events, has a number of interactional consequences. It permits the speaker to distil regularly occurring features of events and bring them together in a form which may not strictly represent the occasions of their occurrence in 'real life. Furthermore, as these events are recognizably designed to be a general version of the type of thing which happened, any claims contained within this utterance are not available for direct examination. Had the speaker formulated the example in the following manner 'One night there were ten people in the room

when...' she would have been citing one specific event. The details of this could then be subject to investigation: when did this happen, at what time of day, who were the people present on this occasion? With a hypothetical example, no such direct interrogation of the details is possible.

It is worth noting that these materials not only strengthen the interpretation that the noise was not normal, but that in the way that the example has been organised the speaker has also made available certain properties of the phenomenon. For example, that it occurred in the presence of other people, but that they could not hear it. These substantiate the inferences made available by the features of the noise provided in the earlier part of the account: for example, that it always manifested in a certain part of one specific room, and that the cause was elusive. So we can see the specific dimensions of the phenomenon are being constructed in the speaker's description of her experiences. Insofar as these descriptions are designed to address and moral and inferential business generated in the course of making a face-to-face report, the actual features of the phenomenon are mediated through the various pragmatic tasks accomplished by the speaker.

[d] Substantiating the 'normality' of the noise

17 er:m: and I wanted to know what was  
18 the: (.) material cause of this

The analysis has so far pointed to some of the ways by which the speaker has incrementally furnished material to support a paranormal interpretation of the noise. In this section, however, the speaker appears to be engaging in contradictory work: having constructed prior utterances to provide for a paranormal interpretation, she then describes her activities as being motivated by a desire to locate the *material* cause. This paradoxical situation has a systematic basis, the explication of which reveals the character of the speaker's detailed analysis of her own prior talk.

In single speaker, multi-unit turns there are occasions in which speakers display an analysis of their own prior talk, and, in their next utterances, make some correction, amendment, or elaboration of that talk. For example:

(8) HS 17

1 S ah came home from work at lunchtime  
2 (1)  
3 an' I walked into the sitting room door  
4 (.)  
5 in through the sitting room door

In this extract the speaker makes a clear 'slip of the tongue' in that she claims she walked *into* the sitting room door. Her subsequent utterance shows that she recognizes this mistake and she makes the necessary correction.

In the next extract the speaker's analyses are more sophisticated insofar as the utterances to which he attends are not in any logical sense incorrect.

(9) ND 22:155 (This extract comes from an account of a series of poltergeist disturbances.)

1 S I said do you want some more tea  
2 >oh yeah ah said< oh:: dear the pot's  
3 empty I'll have to go and make some more  
4 so ah grabbed the pot and the kitchen  
5 was on the floor above an' ah (.)  
6 went up (.9) flew up the stairs  
7 in all this sunlight an' (.)  
8 lovely place it was (.2)  
9 anyway I got to the kitchen door  
10 an' as ah hh  
11 I had the teapot in my hand like this  
12 and I walked through the  
13 kitchen door (.5) hhh  
14 as I was going through the doorway hh  
15 (.7)

16 I was just (.) jammed against  
17 the doorpost

The first repair by the speaker concerns his description of the way in which he went up the stairs. His initial formulation is 'went up' which he then embroiders as 'flew up' (line 6). Furthermore, initially he describes his movement into the kitchen as 'I walked through the kitchen door' (lines 12 and 13), and then as 'as I was going through the doorway' (line 14). In this second version the speaker has amended the tense in which the utterance is constructed, moving from 'walked through' to 'going through', and also the way in which the actual location of the incident is described, substituting 'kitchen door' with 'doorway'.

We need not investigate the interactional business addressed by these specific examples. What is important is that they illustrate that speakers may assess their own prior talk and, in various ways, re-fashion it, thereby displaying some of the immediate practical concerns to which they are orienting in the course of building and re-building parts of their accounts.

In the target data it is possible that the speaker has analysed her own prior utterances and arrived at the conclusion that she has furnished too strong a case for the paranormal cause hypothesis, and that, for the purpose of the account at this stages, this needed to be rectified. The nature of the utterances in lines 17 and 18, then, can be seen as an attempt to accomplish this through the nomination of a material hypothesis reason for her search. The speaker's pragmatic work stems originally from her own prior talk - the hypothetical example in which the paranormal cause hypothesis is most strongly outlined, What is not clear, however, is the reason why the speaker produced the hypothetical example in the first place.

When discussing the ways in which members report their experiences, Sacks wrote:

You could figure that, having severe restrictions on your chances to have experiences, which turn on, for example, something, in some fashion important, happening to cross your path, that having happened, well, then you are home free. Once you got it you could do with it as



you pleased. No. You have to form it up as the thing that it ordinarily is, and then mesh your experience with that.

That is to say, the rights to have an experience by virtue of, say encountering something like an accident, are only the rights to have seen 'another accident', and to have perhaps felt for it, but not, for example, to have seen God in it. You cannot have a nervous breakdown because you happened to see an automobile accident. You cannot make more of it than anybody would make of it. (Sacks, 1984: 426-7.)

To describe something as it normally would be described is to display a competence to describe, and to assert a validity for the description provided. (We have already seen the importance of the constraints associated with describing extraordinary events in Jefferson's work on 'normalizing' devices.) Sacks' point is that there are 'correct', or normatively prescribed ways to construct descriptions. However, we may develop this argument: it may be stated that, where a description of an event or a state of affairs is produced, and further information is then reported and appears, loosely, as a form of response to the items mentioned in the previous utterance, then those two utterances should be described consistently. For example: 'I saw a terrible car crash and I was really upset by it', or 'It was a beautiful morning and it made me feel very happy' are consistent in that the description of the response to, or consequence of, the first part, is designed to correspond with the descriptive work done in that first part. To tie in with Sacks, then, we might say that there is a limit to what one is entitled to do with a description once an earlier part of it has been *characterised in a certain way*. Or, more formally, it may be a maxim that, in building descriptive sequences which contain some statement which is hearable as a result of or response to the previous part of those sequences, those sequences of utterances are to be designed to display their consistency.

With this in mind, we may reconsider some of the earlier parts of the target data.

5 I heard a lovely (.3) s:ound

6        like de|de|dede|dedede|dededah  
7        just a happy (.) little tu:ne (.5)  
8        a:nd >of course<  
9        I tore apart ma window  
10       I tore apart the window frame  
11       I >did Everything<  
12       to find out what the hell's causing that

We have seen in previous sections that the speaker does considerable work to construct a specific description of the noise, and then does further work to build a version of her reaction. In lines 5 to 11 there is a report of a state of affairs and then a report of one of the consequences of it. Furthermore, the speaker focuses on the pleasant, happy qualities of the sound: it is no more than just a 'little tune', for example. However, in describing her search for the cause she emphasises the urgency and extensiveness of her endeavours. There might appear to be an inconsistency, then, between the design of the description of the noise, and the design of the search for the cause of it. That is, the way she has reported her response to the noise is inconsistent with the way she characterized the initial stimulus to which her search was a response.

There is some evidence from the trajectory of the target data that suggests that this inconsistency is a matter of practical concern for the speaker. In line 12 she provides a reason for her search: to find out the cause. In line 13, however, she embroiders this reason by providing the hypothetical example, thereby making a stronger case for her response. The additional material provided in the hypothetical example reveals that the nature of the noise - its character as something which is selectively perceived - is now elevated to the forefront of the account at the expense of its tuneful and musical qualities. The speaker introduces material about the phenomenon which makes the urgency of her reaction quite explicable. Thus the deficiency to which this reparative work was addressed lay in the discrepancy between the description of the noise and her reaction to it.

Focusing on the mysterious quality of the sound provides a warrant for the form of description used to characterize the search for the cause of the sound. Doing this reparative work, however, itself produces a further problem for the speaker: re-orienting the story from the trajectory

initiated in the repair of its problematic aspects back to that established prior to the corrective work. To do this the speaker furnishes the utterance in lines 17 and 18. By re-emphasising the material-cause hypothesis this utterance meshes with the concerns of the speaker prior to the hypothetical example: to build a description of her early encounters which reveal that she entertained normal assumptions about the nature of the phenomenon.

By way of a summary to this section we can re-instate the problem with which we began: that the speaker engages in apparently contradictory business of emphasising the material-cause hypothesis immediately after having built an elaborate example of the appearances of the noise which points strongly to a paranormal-cause hypothesis. I have argued that a maxim connected with the construction of descriptions is that, where the sequences of utterances deal with a state of affairs and a consequence of, or response to those states, there should be a consistency between the terms employed to refer to both parts of the description. It is not suggested that this is a 'rule' of speaking; the data presented here indicate that it is not an unyielding constraint upon the construction of descriptive remarks. However, it is a constraint to the extent that the breach of this maxim becomes an accountable matter for the speaker(s) concerned. In the target data we can see that the speaker orients to this maxim in the manner in which she repairs a breach of it. The initial attempt to address the perceived inadequacy of her account subsequently 'sidetracked' the trajectory of her narrative, and this then became a problem to be resolved. This was accomplished through the utterance analysed in this section. Thus, the problem and the solution are inextricably tied with the speaker's analysis of the moment-by-moment production of her account, and the conventions associated with descriptive consistency.

## **Conclusions**

Through this analysis I have explicated some of the resources which the speaker employs to build this sequence of utterances, and it is useful to summarise these. Firstly, the speaker orients to normative conventions associated with listing practices to accomplish descriptions which convey specific inferable properties. So, for example, in constructing a description of her initial impressions of the phenomenon, she uses a three-part list to emphasise the way

in which she first perceived it during its early manifestations. Similarly, in her report of the search she combines the same listing practices with an extreme case formulation to convey the urgency of her search.

Throughout this sequence the speaker displays a concern to portray herself as having behaved like any normal person during her initial encounters with the phenomenon and her response to it. That is, listing and formulating practices are employed to display her occasional social identity as a 'normal', 'ordinary' person. Thus, another set of resources used by the speaker are tacit, common-sense understandings about the organised ways in which inferences about people are drawn on the basis of the category membership.

Finally, through the explication of the speaker's analyses of her own prior talk we have gained a preliminary insight to one convention which informs a specific class of descriptive practices. Moreover, we have observed the ways in which the speaker implicitly attends to, and does reparative work for, a breach of this maxim in the course of her account.

The speaker is attending to specific particular tasks which are generated in the course of the account of her experience: building inferences about herself, providing the character of the noise, occasioning a social identity, and so on. These tasks are addressed against a background of, and informed by, wider culturally-available knowledge. It was argued earlier that the conventions associated with paranormal experiences assure the speaker of an inauspicious environment in which to report a personal experience of this type. That is, the speaker's practical reasoning about the possibility that her account may receive an unsympathetic hearing informs the construction of the sections examined in this chapter.

This raises an interesting issue which may be illustrated by reference to some ethnographic detail. The account from which this extract was taken was provided by a woman who is a professional medium: she earns money by communicating with the dead on behalf of the living. According to the information she provided in the interview, her life is populated by numerous encounters with a range of elementals, demonic and angelic forces, and spirits of various kinds. For her, then, these events are utterly *normal*. By virtue of the fact of her clairvoyant abilities, these experiences are

a routine and unexceptional feature of her daily life. She realizes, however, that other people would regard these as anomalous experiences.

In the interview the speaker emphasizes that these experiences are a recurrent and normal feature of her life and work. Thus, we might reasonably expect that her description of specific incidents would reflect the fact that she treats them, or claims to treat them, as ordinary events. Yet close inspection of the details of this section of her account reveals that she displays a sensitivity to norms and conventions regarding paranormal experiences which she would reject as having no relevance to her. Thus, there is a discrepancy between what she would say is normal and acceptable to her, and what sorts of issues and concerns actually *inform* the descriptions she makes. It appears that, despite claiming that for her these experiences are normal, she orients to the wider, socially-organized conventions regarding the inauspiciousness of reporting paranormal experiences, and the cultural conventions which are associated with paranormal experiences.

In earlier chapters we discussed some of the critical arguments made against the way that traditional sociological or ethnographic research treats accounts of events as in some way mirroring those events. In the light of the discrepant relationship between the speaker's articulated beliefs and attitudes, and the practical reasoning which informs these specific utterances, some observations are relevant.

Ryle (1949: 28ff.) provided a distinction between two types of knowledge: 'knowledge that', which refers to the kind of information which can be acquired through conscious learning, and 'knowledge how', which refers to tacit and common-sense skills. In this analysis we have explicated some of the 'knowledge how' on which the speaker has relied to construct this section of her account. We may note that this knowledge is inextricably tied to the interactional environment in which the account was made, and also reflects the speaker's reasoning about the wider conventions associated with the type of experience she is claiming to have had. Thus, it is clear that what is relevant in this extract are not the broader classifications and categories to which the speaker may consciously assign herself, or the

attitudes and beliefs to which she explicitly orients, but her reading of the practical moment-by-moment-production of the account.

Two themes have run through the analytic sections presented above, and by way of a conclusion to this chapter I want to discuss briefly how these may inform subsequent analysis. First, the speaker is engaged in the business of reporting an experience which actually happened: she is making factual claims about an event which was external to her. The analysis revealed however, that the speaker is orienting to the possibility that her account may receive an unsympathetic hearing: that the recipient may try to locate a normal explanation for the experience, thus undermining the claimed objectivity of the phenomenon.

In ordinary conversation there are circumstances in which an account may receive an unsympathetic hearing, and thus speakers use various resources to display the 'out-there-ness' of the phenomenon or event they report (Pomerantz, 1986; Potter and Wetherell, 1988; Smith, 1978; Woolgar, 1980). One area for further investigation, then, are the procedures by which speakers provide for the external and factual character of the event they are reporting.

The particulars of the account reported in the target data are the speaker's memories of those events, and we noted that these are necessarily reconstructions. This is not to say that the speaker is lying, or subject to declining memory facilities. Rather it implies that descriptions of memories, like the descriptions of the phenomenon and the speaker's subsequent reactions to it, are composed with a view to pragmatic circumstances at the time. The relationship between memory formulations and the dynamic and constructive character of talk-in-interaction will be explored further in the next chapter.



## Chapter five

# Beginnings

### Introduction

In this last empirical chapter I want to examine some features of the ways in which speakers begin to describe their experiences; or in those cases where speakers have more than one experiences to report, the ways in which they begin each discrete episode. I focus on a three part sequence in which speakers describe when their experience occurred and which, broadly, is used to provide a setting for the experience. Specifically, I want to analyse some instances in which the organisation of this setting sequence is the vehicle for some particularly fine-grained pragmatic work. In this, the chapter pursues analytic themes established in the earlier chapters. But there is another virtue of analysing the ways that speakers formulate when their experiences happened, in that it clarifies an empirical distinction between the present research and parapsychological investigations of spontaneous cases, and indeed, other serious anomaly research.

A cursory glance at the report of any parapsychological investigation of spontaneous cases will reveal that the researcher has established, or has tried to establish as accurately as possible, when exactly the experience(s) occurred. Reports routinely state the year, month, day of the week and time of day when the phenomena occurred. Discovering when exactly the events happened is therefore a standard research practice. Furthermore, in the investigation of many types of psychic events such details are crucial. For example, the authenticity of a claim to have experienced some form of precognitive knowledge rests



upon the experient gaining the knowledge before the event foretold in the precognition. Similarly, researchers investigating a UFO sighting will try to establish precisely when the object was sighted. With this information they can then check to see if the sighting can be accounted for in terms of unusual meteorological conditions, aeroplane lights, the trajectory of orbiting satellites, star position in the sky, and other natural phenomena which could be mistaken for a UFO.

In verbal accounts of personal experiences, however, speakers rarely display a commitment to precise dates and times. For example, the following extract comes from an interview with a person who claimed to have had a number of paranormal experiences. She has just finished discussing a particular type of clairvoyant experience, and in this extract she begins to mention a specific incident to illustrate certain claims.

(1) EM B 10 1-12

1 S I mean >just thin(k) th-  
2 eh I mean ah-<  
3 a simple example which everybody's  
4 had something similar to hhhh  
5 I was living in uhm  
6 (.)  
7 inglan years ago  
8 (.)  
9 and all of a sudden I was sitting  
10 in bed on night  
11 (.)  
12 getting ready to go to sleep

In this extract the speaker's formulation of when her experience happened is very vague: 'I was living in uhm (.) inglan years ago'. Note that the speaker refers to two

features of when it happened: where she was living at the time, and how many years before the occasion of the telling. Both of these features of when the experience occurred are formulated in *relational* terms, in that the referent is identified in terms of its relation to an aspect of the speaker's personal biography (Pomerantz, 1987). The first relational term is 'living in inglan' (England), and the second is the claim that it happened 'years ago'. Both of these terms provides only vague characterisations of when the experience occurred. This information would not be helpful, for example, to a parapsychologist investigating a spontaneous case; indeed, it might be dismissed as an irrelevance.<sup>1</sup>

But let us consider this formulation in more detail. At any one moment it would be possible to characterise a person's life in terms of a variety of such life stages. With regards to extract (1) and the formulation 'I was living in uhm (.) inglan years ago' we can therefore ask why is *this* characterisation of *this* feature of a personal biography relevant for the speaker at *this* moment in the account? We can begin to address these questions if we take note of the experience for which the formulation 'living in uhm (.) inglan years ago' was designed as a setting.

(1) EM B 10 1-42

1 S I mean >just thin(k) th-  
2 eh I mean ah-<  
3 a simple example which everybody's  
4 had something similar to hhhh  
5 I was living in uhm  
6 (.)  
7 inglan years ago  
8 (.)  
9 and all of a sudden I was sitting  
10 in bed on night  
11 (.)  
12 getting ready to go to sleep

13 and I decided to write to a friend  
14 I hadn't seen for four years (.)  
15 in Massachusetts (.) a:nd  
16 I found myself congratulating her  
17 on (.) the engagement of her oldest  
18 daughter (.3) I said congratulations  
19 Marion's getti- Marion's gotten  
20 engaged (.5) ar:hm and  
21 I sent the letter (.7) and eh (.)  
22 er: ah I I felt totally (r) (.)  
23 right in doing so (.5)  
24 ah mean i(t) it was just as  
25 normal to me to know that  
26 her daughter had just gotten  
27 engaged as to know that I've got  
28 five fingers on my ring ha:nd  
29 hhhh an' eh hh she wrote back  
30 to me hhh in total chaos  
31 saying (.) how the Hell did  
32 |you know she started the letter  
33 huhh |hah hh she said  
34 I received your letter at nine  
35 o'clock in the morning (.)  
36 and you were congratulating me  
37 on (.) Marion's getting engage:d:  
38 and I said what the HELL is  
39 she talking about hhh  
40 at twelve o'clock that morning (.)  
41 she walked in and announced  
42 her engagement

The speaker describes a precognitive experience in which she knew of an engagement before any one else, with the exception of the two people who got engaged. It was mentioned earlier that the authenticity of a claim to have had a precognition rests upon acquisition of information about a state of affairs *before* that state of affairs came to pass. In this extract the speaker addresses this condition by revealing that she knew of the engagement before anyone else. But there is another factor which influences the validity of precognitive claims: *could* the experient have acquired the information through the

operation of the customary five senses? If the relevant information could have been obtained in this way, even perhaps subliminally, there is a warrant to question the likelihood that paranormal processes of information transmission had occurred. The design of the formulation 'I was living in uhm (.) inglan' displays the speaker's orientation precisely to this issue. The precognitive knowledge concerns a family in Massachussetts, in the United States. The likelihood that the speaker was able to discover internal family secrets is minimised by the information that at the time she was resident in *England*: 'living in inglan' is designed to substantiate the implicit claim that her knowledge of the engagement was paranormally acquired.

The relevance of this characterisation thus lies in the work it is designed to do; and, furthermore, insofar as it is designed with a view to what the experience turned out to be, it displays the same kind of 'meshing' work that was observed in the analysis of the 'X when Y' device examined in chapter five. In this case, then, the design of the 'when' formulation is an interactional resource: it is part of the cultural set of communicative competencies with which people are equipped to talk about their experiences. It is this inferential dimension of such formulations that can be overlooked if we engage in an exercise of substituting ostensibly 'vague' references to when the experience happened with some official or non-relational version; and it is this feature that we shall explore in the rest of this chapter.

### **Some properties of the organisation of beginnings**

In this section I want to focus on some systematic structural features of the setting work people do at the start of their accounts.

(2) WS AA

((Tape starts))

1 S 'cos it's difficult to tell what  
2 the ( ) hh  
3 I ye-ah  
4 S -some people come along think it's paranormal  
5 (and some others) (.4) (can't remember it)  
6 >y'know< -hh  
7 I -yeah well what would you count  
8 as paranormal  
9 (.)  
10 S HHhhh  
11 (2)  
12 S o:hh hhhh  
13 (2)  
14 S well ah suppose (.4) anything that (.2) hasn't  
15 got a recognised scientific explanation is a hh  
16 I ah ha  
17 S (.sort of<) broad (a)s -( ) -thing i c'n (p  
-ut)  
18 I -well cn- -w- w-  
-give  
19 me an example  
20 S hh examples (.2) ehm:  
21 (1.2)  
22 S out of body experiences ur::H:: (.3) telepathy (.5)  
23  
: 4  
(1.5)  
25 S ( ) clairvoyance  
26 (.)  
27 I -yeah  
28 S -clairaudience  
29 (.3)  
30 I have you had experiences li -ke that  
31 S -  
s: hh well  
32 HHhh ehm (2.3) I've I (.) had an out of  
33 body experience(but) that was when I was very  
34 sma:ll=well (.) (  
say very small gosh  
35 (what) I was thirteen (>not as<) small as all that  
36 hhh ehm  
37 (1.2)

38 S that was: ehm (.) I was very I was (mos) exhausted  
39 because I'd been awake for about twenty four hours  
40 on a school trip

The relevant section of this extract begins at line 30. The speaker has been listing the kinds of experiences which she would classify as paranormal. At this point the interviewer asks if the speaker has had any of these experiences. The speaker then identifies one kind of experience which she had just referred to as being paranormal: ' s:

hh well HHhh ehm (2.3) I've I (.) had an out of body experience'. Then there is a formulation of when this experience occurred: 'that was when I was very sma:ll' (lines 33 and 34). She then immediately provides what appears<sup>2</sup> to be a qualification: 'well (.) ('

say very small gosh (what) I was thirteen (>not as<) small as all that' (lines 34 to 35). After this additional setting work there is a pause and she then begins to describe that she was on a school trip, and had been awake for an abnormally long period of time, circumstances which are immediately relevant to the phenomenon she subsequently experienced.

We can describe the 'when' formulation sequence in lines 32 to 35 in the following way. First there is a reference to the phenomenon: 'I've I (.) had an out of body experience'; then there is the first setting: 'that was when I was very sma:ll'; finally, the speaker produces a second setting: 'I was thirteen (>not as<) small as all that'. This reference/setting/setting sequence is not found only in this extract but is present also in S1's utterances from the following extract.

(3) SM (I = interviewer.)

((Tape starts))

1 S1 takes half an hour,

2 (.)  
 3 how much tape have you got left  
 4 I (ai- is) that's one and a half hours there  
 5 (.3)  
 6 S2 -(what am I doing)  
 7 S1 -ah a l r i g h t I'll try to (fit in)=  
 8 S2 =>huhh huhh ha< h -h  
 9 S1 -I can't re-  
 10 I can't remember all -of it-  
 11 I -c - >c'd (we)<  
 12 turn this down.  
 13 (1)  
 14 S2 turn it off  
 15 (.4)  
 16 S2 let's switch the li:ghts -off  
 17 S1 -(ah) can't  
 18 remember -all of it (.) very well -but it would've  
 19 S2 -huh ha ha HHhh heh -(s:ession)  
 20 S1 happened  
 21 (.5)  
 22 i(t)s at least four years ago=it could  
 23 be fi:ve  
 24 I uhn  
 25 (.6)  
 26 S1 >anyway< we- w- (.3) they they're all  
 27 (.)  
 28 trinidadians asians (from the >middle east<)  
 29 there was (.) friends of Jan

To make this clearer the utterances of the other two participants have been removed.

S1 (ah) can't remember all of it (.)	<b>[ref.]</b>
very well	
but it would've happened	
(.5)	
i(t)s at least four years ago	<b>[setting 1]</b>
=it could be fi:ve	<b>[setting 2]</b>

Here the reference is achieved not through any specific naming of the experience, but through a more oblique 'it' which 'happened'.

Both setting components address the number of years which

have elapsed since the experience. In the following extracts there are other oblique references to the experiences, but the two setting components are used to furnish two different characterisations of when the experiences occurred.

(4) RP A

((Tape starts))

1 S Basically the experience [ref.]  
2 (.5)  
3 I had was (puh-) occurred when  
4 I was twelve years old. [set. 1]  
5 (1.2)  
6 it was  
7 (.6)  
8 the day before my father died [set. 2]  
9 and I didn't realise that I had  
10 a paranormal experience until  
11 I suppose a couple of days  
12 afterwards

(5) YB

((Tape starts))

1 I well then (.) if you'd care tuh (.) tell me  
2 what happened  
3 (.6)  
4 S well all I know is:: >I< well  
5 I'm not sure o' me a:ge  
6 when I (.) i(t)- happened [ref.]  
7 because >ah<\* all I know is  
8 I w- (.2) was at school [set. 1]  
9 so it musta bin after  
10 five years of age 'cos [set. 2]  
11 we didn't start 'fore five

(6) WS 64

1 she's done one or two  
2 things like that  
3 ( )  
4 ehm one of the things [ref.]  
5 that she does or used to do  
6 when I was sort of



7 (.5)  
 8 in my teens [set. 1]  
 9 (wz) when I was going out [set. 2]  
 10 (.8)  
 11 y'know out at night

Finally, there is an example of this sequence which occurs in an interview from Hufford's (1982) analysis of Old Hag experiences. As in the case of many of the extracts we have examined so far, it occurs at the start of the interview.

H: John, you told me about an experience that happened to you, repeatedly I take it, as a child. Would you give the details?  
 J: It wasn't exactly as a child. [ref.]  
 I was a teenager at the time, you know. [set. 1]  
 Well, fifteen, sixteen years of age. [set. 2]  
 And this happened in...<sup>3</sup>  
 (Hufford, 1982: 32.)

The three discrete parts of this setting sequence fall into two types: the first part is a reference to the actual experience, either done by naming the phenomenon or experience, or more usually, through an oblique reference, for example, to an 'it' that 'happened'. The two setting components constitute the second the type. In the subsequent sections we will examine both aspects of the setting sequence. Firstly, then, we will consider the reference to the experience, especially in relation to Smith's (1978) study of an account of a young woman's decline into mental illness, and Woolgar's (1980) study of the text of a scientist's acceptance speech for a Nobel Prize.

### **Producing a reference to the experience**

In this section we will look at the kinds of work which is

done through the speaker's reference to the experience or event in the first part of the setting sequence, immediately prior to the when formulation. In the following data the speakers do not name the experience of phenomenon, but provide oblique references.

(7) RP A 1-3

1 S Basically the experience  
2 (.5)  
3 I had was

(8) YB 4-5

4 S well all I know is:: >I< well I'm not sure o' me  
5 a:ge when I (.) i(t)- happened

(9) EM A 286 1-4

1 S >it's very interesting< because hh  
2 (.5)  
3 something like this happened to me hhh  
4 a few years ago

(10) DM

((Tape starts))

1 S certain amount of what I've had  
2 experience ( ) experiences but I haven't 'ad out  
3 of body experiences or anything of th -at sort  
4 I -well s() sort  
5 of experiences have you had  
6 (1.2)  
7 S Ehrm hhhh  
8 (1.2)  
9 I suppose  
10 (1.5)  
11 the one that sticks in me mind (.) most

We can begin to examine these materials through a consideration of Smith's (1978) analysis of a report which charts the apparent decline towards mental illness of a young woman, 'K'.<sup>4</sup> Her analysis emphasised the significance of the opening sequence of

that account, in which the person telling the story, K's friend, states that she was one of the last to come to realise that anything was wrong.

I was actually the last of her close friends who was openly willing to admit that she was becoming mentally ill. (Smith, 1978: 28.)

Smith argues that such a statement at the beginning of the account establishes an interpretative frame through which the reader may come to see the abnormality of the woman's actions which are subsequently described in the report. The power of this information to act as an interpretative resource in part lies upon its status as a *factual* statement. This status is achieved in the way that it reveals that the girl's developing illness was noted not only by her friend, but also by other people. Thus, 'mental illness' is established as a fact, which is gradually 'realised', and 'accepted' by her friends. It is thereby established as a quality K, independent of the perceptions, personal motivation and judgements of those who encountered her behaviour.

Smith's analytic concerns were later developed by Woolgar (1980) in his examination of part of a scientist's Nobel Prize lecture address. Woolgar was primarily concerned to develop arguments concerned with methodological issues in the sociological study of scientific knowledge. He focuses on the rhetorical practices through which the lecture is constructed so that it is recognisable as an account of a specific scientific *discovery*. He discusses the opening part of the lecture: 'The trail which ultimately led to the first pulsar...' (Woolgar, 1980:253).

Like Smith, Woolgar argues that the textual opening is crucial in that it establishes at the outset an interpretative frame for the reader. So, in the scientist's Nobel lecture, reporting the discovery of the first pulsar ensures that the reader/hearer can interpret all subsequent events and descriptions in terms of their relevance to this (now-established) established fact.

There is another point. Woolgar argues that the opening sequence of this text establishes the objectivity of the specific physical phenomenon. This is achieved through the description of a trail which leads ultimately to the discovery of the pulsar. This metaphorical description of the process of research and discovery has much in common with other phrases which are available to characterise scientific research and the acquisition of knowledge: 'the road to truth', 'the path of discovery', and so on. They each imply *motion* towards a goal or target. Woolgar argues that this feature of the speech warrants the reader/hearer's understanding of the objective existence of the pulsar. He states:

We would suppose that an entity of our own creation might be fairly readily at hand at the time when it was first noticed as existing. But "the first pulsar" is to be understood as having a pre-existence, a quality of *out-there-ness* which required that it be *approached*. (Woolgar, 1980: 256; original emphasis.)

The analyses of openings to textual accounts and statements provided by Smith and Woolgar are useful in that they analytic themes which can be explored also in the accounts of paranormal experiences, particularly the way in which the very first items may be designed to establish the objectivity of the phenomenon. I want to approach this

issue by examining two aspects of the beginning of anomaly accounts: the way that speakers portray the absence of their own agency and involvement in the experience; and the way that the speakers do not name the phenomenon they have encountered.

[a] Diminishing personal agency

Woolgar argues that the independence and objectivity of the pulsar is constituted through the description of a trail which leads to its discovery. Similarly, Smith argues that the friend's claim that she was the last to admit that K was mentally ill portrays and warrants the factual status of the illness. In both cases then, the text is organised to emphasise the author's agency in the states of affairs they are describing. So, Woolgar's Nobel Prize-winning scientist was following a trail, and Smith's interviewee portrays herself as coming to terms with her friend's mental ill health. But if we examine the references which have appeared in extracts (1), (2), (3), (4), (5) and (10) however, references to the experiences or phenomenon do not portray any sense of the speaker's action or agency.

- (1) [an] example which everybody's had something similar to
- (2) I've I (.) had an out of body experience
- (3) I can't remember all of it (ah) can't remember all of it (.) very well but it would've happened
- (4) Basically the experience (.5) I had
- (5) not sure o' me a:ge when I (.) i(t)- happened

(12) the one that sticks in me mind

There are primarily two ways in which speakers produce a reference to the experience: in terms of an 'it' that 'happened', and as something which the speaker 'had'. 'It happened' formulations are particularly interesting as, logically, any non-human state of affairs can be referenced by 'it', and any series of events which is not occurring right now can be described as something which 'happened'. Technically, then 'it happened' could be used refer to any past state of affairs or events. However, it is useful to consider what kinds of events are conventionally described in terms of an 'it' which 'happened'. So, 'it happened in...' seems an appropriate beginning of answers to questions like, 'when did the Titanic sink?', 'when did Krakatoa explode?' and 'when did a meteorite hit the Tunguska region of Siberia?'. But there are a class of events and happenings which do not lend themselves comfortably to this formulation. For example, it would appear peculiar to provide the answer 'it happened in 1986' to the question 'when did you get married?' or 'when was your daughter born?' or 'when did you plant that tree?'. There appears to be a tacit convention underpinning the kind of events which can be reported as an 'it' that 'happened'. And it is possible to imagine this convention being exploited, for example, in a deliberate attempt to appear perverse or humorous.<sup>5</sup>

The salient difference between events such as the Titanic sinking and planting a tree is human agency. The former is the kind of event that 'happens to' people, whereas the latter is the product of 'intention' 'planning' and 'decision making'. By formulating their paranormal experiences as an 'it' that 'happened' speakers in the anomaly accounts are thus trading on conventions which

inform the way that we refer to events the occurrence of which were not contingent upon human agency and involvement. In this, they portray the events and phenomena they experienced as the kind which happen to people, and thereby as existing independently of the speaker's agency, actions and intentions.

Similar considerations may be relevant to those references to the experience which trade on possessive formulations, such as for 'Basically the experience (.5) I *had*...'. There are a variety of circumstances that can be described in terms of 'I had', and there are certain events which seem not to yield to such description. For example, 'I went for a walk' seems normal, whereas there is something unusual about 'I had a walk'. And consider statements which characterise a change in an individual's attitudes or opinions in terms of 'hearts' and 'minds', as in 'I changed my mind' and 'I had a change of heart'. These are perfectly routine statements. However, 'I had a change of mind' seems strange, and 'I changed my heart' appears positively bizarre. The strangeness of these latter formulations may in part revolve around the common-sense properties of the objects being so changed, 'hearts' and 'minds'. The mind is conventionally thought of as the intentional, rational and cognizing self; in short, the manifestation and site of individual agency. However, a different set of properties are ascribed to the heart; it is portrayed as subject to whim, desire, emotion, and other forces not under the control of the agent. Thus a change in the former signals 'decisions' and 'rational thought', whereas a change of heart portrays an individual being swept along by forces over which there can be no control.

As in the case of 'it happened' the use of 'I had' seems orient to a conventional quality which is being exploited by the speakers. Events which require little human agency, or which are thrust upon, or just occur to the individual, are appropriately described in terms of 'I had'. Events which require individual action, however, can appear to resist such formulation. Speakers trade off this convention to portray the phenomenon they have experienced in the same way that people conventionally report events over which people had little control. This establishes at the outset of the account the out-there-ness of the phenomena. This in turn minimises their own active involvement in the occurrence of the phenomenon: it happened to them, and they were merely passive witnesses to the experience.

[b] 'Not naming' the phenomenon

In both Smith and Woolgar's data the state of affairs or object which is being reported is named in the opening to the account. So Smith focuses the sentence 'I was actually the last of her close friends who was openly willing to admit that she was becoming mentally ill' (Smith, 1978: 28). And in the text of the Nobel Prize speech Woolgar observes that the first sentence is 'The trail which ultimately led to the first pulsar...' (Woolgar, 1980: 253). Thus we have 'mental illness' and 'first pulsar' referred to explicitly. We have previously noted that the openings of anomaly accounts also contain a reference to the experience. However, in most cases, this is an oblique reference, and the actual phenomenon is not named. So, for example, from extract (1) the speaker refers to her precognitive experience as she is about to describe as 'a simple example which everybody's had something similar to' (lines 3 and 4), and the speaker in extract (4) refers only to 'the one that sticks in me mind' (line 11). And it is



not correct to explain 'not naming' in terms of the speaker's lack of knowledge about the appropriate term for their experience, as it is possible to describe the phenomenon in non-technical or lay terms. For example, the speaker in extract (1) could have referred to her experience as being one of 'knowing something before it happened'. To understand the practice of 'not naming' we have to consider the work it does.

In the account studied by Smith, the opening sequence reveals that Angela is the last of *K's friends* to admit *K's* illness. This in turn warrants the application of the label 'mentally ill' in that it implies that its appropriateness had been sanctioned by people other than the producer of the account.<sup>6</sup> The text that Woolgar examines is not organised to display that the existence of the 'first pulsar' is sanctioned by other people, but this is hardly surprising, as it is a speech to accept a Nobel Prize, the highest public award the scientific community can bestow. The receipt of such an award is a clear indication that the rest of the scientific community accepts the existence of the pulsar.

In both cases the claim that a certain state of affairs exists, whether it be 'mental illness' or 'a pulsar', explicitly or implicitly is revealed to have been authorised and sanctioned by other people. However, this resource is largely unavailable to people who report paranormal experiences. Firstly, it is unlikely that their own experience was also witnessed by a group of others who accept that a paranormal event occurred. Secondly, there is no conventional acceptance of the existence of such things

as paranormal experiences: they are dismissed by the orthodox scientific community, and 'common-sense' suggests that paranormal agencies and forces simply do not exist. In short, a claim to have had a paranormal experience is always contestable

There is a related point. Being able to name a state of affairs or an object implies having knowledge about them. For example, in Smith's data, K's friend uses the term 'mental illness', thereby warranting the inference that she knows what kinds of behaviours are signs of mental deterioration. However, naming an item not only displays appropriate and relevant knowledge: it also suggests a commitment to the in-principle existence of the object or state of affairs so named. That is, by using the term mental illness, K's friend tacitly displays an *acceptance* that mental illness actually exists.

However, by virtue of the prevailing scepticism, speakers claiming to have had a anomalous experiences cannot be seen too readily to accept the existence of the phenomenon they believe they have encountered. Naming the phenomenon at the start of the account could be taken as a sign of a speaker's knowledge of and interest in the phenomenon. This in turn could support the inference that the experience was a product of a perceptual set resulting from accumulated knowledge, or simply a manifestation of a wish-fulfilment to have direct contact with the phenomenon. Furthermore, there is no credible authority which can sanction the existence of these experiences. Thus in these accounts naming a phenomenon, and thereby displaying a personal commitment to its existence, becomes an act of personal faith, rather than the application of a term the use of which is validated by independent groups and agencies. Evidence of such personal commitment can invite sceptical responses about the personal credibility of a speaker and the experience they claim

to have had.<sup>7</sup>

The oblique references thus display the speakers' sensitivity to the kinds of 'personal commitments' that may be attributed to them on the basis of their use of phrases and labels from the literature on anomalous phenomena, and the kinds of negative assumptions that would be warranted by such attributions.<sup>8</sup>

### **The two-partedness of setting sequences**

In this section we will examine the second and third parts of the introductory sequence in which speakers formulate when their experiences happened. These will be referred to as the first and second setting components.

It was noted earlier that in some data speakers only produce one setting component. This raises questions about the accuracy of characterising the setting sequence as a two part organisation: an alternative explanation would be that there is a one part sequence, but, on some occasions speakers elaborate or develop the setting they produce. However, if it was the case that speakers produced a second setting in an *ad hoc* way, for example, as a simple elaboration or amendment to an earlier setting formulation, we would not expect to find any recurrent and systematic relationships between these two components. In the subsequent analysis I hope to show that the relationship between the first and second setting components does display robust organisational features. Moreover, it will reveal that these organisational resources are exploited by speakers to address inferential and pragmatic work, particularly in the design of second settings.

Firstly, then, we will examine the way that second setting components may be designed to produce a setting which is relevant to the experience which the speaker is about to report. We will then examine some instances in which speakers design second setting components to minimise potentially negative inferences available from the first setting component

[a] Settings as premonitoring the experience

In the following extracts there are examples of second setting components designed to provide a setting which premonitors characteristics of the subsequent experience.

(13) ES

((Tape starts))

1 S do you want tea, or coffee?  
2 (1.5)  
3 I art recording now  
4 S (ch)OH::=huhh huhh  
huhn hh -hnn  
5 I -yeah:  
6 S RIght  
7 (.3)  
8 ur:m::  
9 (1.2)  
10 S I was about  
11 (.8)  
12 nine years old  
13 (1)  
14 a::nd  
15 (1)  
16 my first experience was  
17 (1.5)  
18 (ch)hmm ((clears throat))  
19 (1)  
20 I used to have piano lessons  
21 (.6)  
22 a::nd  
23 (.8)  
24 I was walking along the road  
25 and normally I take  
26 (.6)  
27 a certain road

(Goes on to report that she took a new route.)

In this extract the first setting is 'I was about (.8) nine years old' (lines 10 to 12), and the second is 'I used to have piano lessons' (line 20). The speaker's subsequent experience was a form of precognition: she experienced a foreboding about using her usual route to her piano lesson. It subsequently transpired that, at the time that she would have been walking down that road, a tree fell. Thus her sense of foreboding ensured that she wasn't in the vicinity of a potentially harmful occurrence.

Her second setting formulation 'I used to have piano lessons' displays evidence of design in that it meshes with the subsequent experience. That is, there are a variety of ways that she could have formulated her state of affairs at the time that she experienced her sense of foreboding. That the speaker was walking to have a piano lesson becomes reportable in the light of the danger she may have faced had she taken her usual route. Furthermore, the at the time of the experience, that she used to have piano lessons would have had no special significance over any other life stage in terms of which she could characterise: for example, 'at junior school', 'a girl guide', 'living in Leicester', and so on. Her second setting displays its relevance in the light of the subsequent experience.

There is a further point. In chapter five we observed the way that speakers used the 'I was just doing X...when Y' to warrant being in the same place as the occurrence of an anomaly. In extract (13) the speaker's second setting

addresses the same kind of work. Thus, the fact that she used to have piano lessons warrants her (implied) intention to use a route on which, it transpires, she may have faced physical harm.

The following two extracts provide further instances of the use of a second component to provide a setting which is intimately tied to the character of the experience the speaker is about to relate.

(14) RP A

((Tape starts))

1 S Basically the experience  
2 (.5)  
3 I had was (puh-) occurred when  
4 I was twelve years old.  
5 (1.2)  
6 it was  
7 (.6)  
8 the day before my father died  
9 and I didn't realise that I had  
10 a paranormal experience until  
11 I suppose a couple of days  
12 afterwards

In extract (14) the first setting is in terms of his chronological age 'I was twelve years old'. The second component provides a formulation of the day before the unanticipated death of the speaker's father. The speaker goes on to describe how one day he had a jocular conversation with friends about what it would be like to lose one or both parents unexpectedly. The next day he discovered that his father had died after a heart attack. The speaker is therefore presenting the conversation with friends as the evidence of unconscious precognitive knowledge of his father's death. However, the day on which that conversation occurred could be formulated in a number of ways. Its formulation as 'the day before my

father died' displays clear evidence of its design in the light of the speaker's subsequent realisation that the conversation may have heralded some form of precognitive knowledge.

The design of this setting addresses two other kinds of inferential work. First, it provides the recipient with information to anticipate at least certain aspects of the story, namely, that it concerns the death of the speaker's father. Furthermore, the formulation of the second setting as 'the day before my father died' substantiates the claimed paranormality of the experience. It allows the speaker to invert the chronological sequence of the events in the design of the narrative so as to display that the event which his conversation seemed to herald happened the day before that event.

[b] Defensively designed second setting components

In the following extract the second component is designed to defuse or mitigate the likelihood of sceptical or negative inferences being drawn from an examination of the first setting component.

(15) WS AA 30-40

30 I have you had experiences li -ke that  
31 S - s:  
hh well  
32 HHhh ehm (2.3) I've I (.) had an out of  
33 body experience (but) that was when I was very  
34 sma:ll=well (.) (  
say very small gosh  
35 (what) I was thirteen (>not as<) small as all that  
36 hhh ehm  
37 (1.2)  
38 S that was: ehm (.) I was very I was (mos) exhausted  
39 because I'd been awake for about twenty four hours

Let us consider the two setting components. These are 'I was very sma:ll' and 'I was thirteen'. 'Very small' and 'thirteen' are both accurate or logically correct ways of describing the speaker at the time of the experience. But the range of inferences about the speaker which are made available by these two settings are not equivalent. So, 'very small' could be taken as the basis to infer that the speaker was at an early stage in her mental development, and that she did not possess adult competencies and knowledge of what adults understand to be perfectly normal occurrences. Such a set of inferences could be exploited to furnish a 'normal', non-paranormal explanation for the speaker's claimed experience. That is, the speaker's first setting component invites the conclusion that the claimed experience was in fact the product of a child's flight of fantasy, or a natural experience imbued by a child with a 'spooky' or supernatural character and significance. Additionally, it characterises the experience as having happened in the speaker's childhood or at least 'some time ago'. This in turn invites speculation as to how much the speaker accurately recalls from an experience which occurred when she was 'very small'. 'Thirteen', however, portrays the speaker as a 'young girl' or 'youth', rather than as a small child. Furthermore, this characterisation is less susceptible to sceptical assessments based on the length of time that has elapsed between the experience and the occasion of providing an account of it. Thus, by comparison to 'very small', 'thirteen' does not provide the kind of material which could be used to undermine the veracity of the experience. The second setting component is thus defensively designed.

But explicitly providing defensively designed



characterisations could itself be cited as the basis or suspicion of scepticism about the claimed veracity of an experience, in that such work could itself invite the retort 'if the story is true, why is it that the speaker has to persuade us of its veracity?' However, the organisation of this sequence addresses exactly this likelihood.

32 I (.) had an out of  
33 body experience (but) that was when I was very  
34 sma:ll=well (.) (  
say very small gosh  
35 (what) I was thirteen (>not as<) small as all that

'Well' is produced immediately after, or 'latched onto', the end of the first setting component. Introduced in this way 'well' here acts as conditional marker, portraying the speaker as 'reassessing' some feature of her prior utterance. The sense of reassessment is underlined when the speaker says '(

say very small'. This reintroduces the first version, but in such a way as to mark the the speaker's emergent disagreement with it. The exclamatory 'gosh' characterises the speaker's 'coming to realise' the inappropriateness of the first setting. Finally, the speaker explicitly reformulates how old she was with 'I was thirteen' and '(>not as<) small as all that'. Note then that she is not seen to be making an overt substitution of one formulation for another, an action which might be taken as a sign of conscious or deliberate self-presentation, but is demonstrably engaged in 'self-correction'.

The extract from Hufford's (1982) study displays many of the organisational features in extract (15).

H: John, you told me about an experience that happened to you, repeatedly I take it, as a child. Would you give the details?

J: It wasn't exactly as a child.  
I was a teenager at the time, you know.  
Well, fifteen, sixteen years of age.  
And this happened in...  
(Goes on to name the town in which the experiences occurred.)  
(Hufford, 1982: 32.)

The two setting components are 'I was a teenager' and 'fifteen, sixteen years of age'. The first component provides a characterisation of the speaker which could be warrant a sceptical appreciation of the claimed experience. That is, 'teenagers' is a category which conventionally implies at best, exuberance, or worse, rebelliousness and immature behaviour. The second component however, characterises the speaker in terms of his chronological age. This formulation of when the experience happened, by comparison to the first, provides little basis for a sceptical appreciation of the reliability of the speaker at the time. And, as in the extract (15), the second component is prefaced by 'well', thereby characterising it as a 'clarification' or 'correction' of the first setting formulation, rather than as an overt attempt to persuade or influence the recipient.

(16) WS 64

1 she's done one or two  
2 things like that  
3 ( )  
4 ehm one of the things  
5 that she does or used to do  
6 when I was sort of  
7 (.5)  
8 in my teens  
9 (wz) when I was going out  
10 (.8)  
11 y'know out at night

In extract (16) the speaker states that the experience occurred 'when I was sort of (.5) in my teens', thereby identifying herself as a teenager. Her second setting component is 'when I was going out (.8) y'know out at night'. 'Teens' refers to the stage of a person's life between the ages of thirteen to nineteen. The second component here is used by the speaker to identify a specific period within that boundary. 'Going out...at night' furnishes the inference of courtship, boyfriends/girlfriends, and so on; these activities are characteristics of older teenagers. Indeed, having a social life which is focused around evening entertainment is a feature of adult life. Furthermore, note that the speaker initially produces the formulation 'when I was going out', to which she then adds, 'y'know out at *night*'. There are a variety of ways of describing the activities to which the speaker is referring: 'going out with my friends', or 'going out in the evening'. Again, while these may be logically equivalent to 'going out at night', they are not inferentially equivalent. Going out in the evening or with friends, firstly, does not identify which period of the 'teen' years the speaker is referring to: anyone between the age of thirteen and nineteen can go out with friends; and on some occasions even young people may go out in the evening. Moreover, 'evening' conventionally refers to a specific period of the night; for example, the hours between seven and eleven or twelve. 'Night', however, refers to a longer span of time. Characterising activities as occurring 'at night' therefore makes the implicit claim that they were the kind of activities the duration of which extended beyond the period of the night conventionally described as the evening. This in turn furnishes the

inference that they were the kinds of activities people engage in during 'the evening' *and afterwards also*. Thus, by embroidering the second setting component with 'at night' the speaker makes a stronger claim for her adult status at the time of the experiences she is about to report.

In this section we have seen how second setting component have been used to defuse negative inferences potentially available from a recipient's inspection of the first setting component. In extract (15) and the section from Hufford (1982), speakers produce first settings which focus around the notion of 'teenager'. The inferences from the negative connotations of this term are amended through second settings which emphasise the chronological age or maturity of the speaker. In extract (19) the speakers first setting is 'I was: (1) nine, >eh< eight or nine.' and the second is 'it was >when I was a kid'.

(17) YC

((Tape starts))

1 I right,  
2 (1)  
3 I what happened?  
4 (.5)  
5 S hh  
6 what happened,  
7 I yeah  
8 S er::m  
9 (.6)  
10 must a' been (.) when (.) I was:  
11 (1)  
12 nine, >eh< eight or nine.  
13 (1.2)  
14 a::nd it was >when I was a kid  
15 (.7)  
16 a::nd I was  
17 (.5)  
18 ah went to bed

Being 'eight or nine' could be used as the basis to propose that the speaker was simply imagining things, or misperceiving perfectly normal events, and so on. Thus, it is a setting which could warrant a sceptical hearing of the speaker's experience. The second setting, however, is formulated in terms of the speaker's life stage at the time: a 'kid'. Initially, 'kid' does not seem to be designed to minimise the likelihood of a sceptical reaction. However, some ethnographic considerations will help.

The speaker in extract (17) is from the north west of England, and this may be relevant to understanding the use of 'kid' in this context. The meaning and use of the term 'kid' varies between regions of the UK. For example, in parts of the west of England, 'kid' or 'kiddies' can be used without any derogatory connotations to refer not only to children, but also to young men in their mid twenties. The criterion for this use is simply that the speaker is older than the person or group being referred to. Similarly, in parts of the north west 'kid' may be used to denote kinship relations. So, 'our kid' is used to refer to a brother.<sup>9</sup> Again, the appropriateness of the term is not determined by the age of the person being so described. That is, it is not that case that after a certain age the term 'our kid' is no longer used: its use is appropriate when the user is older than the person to whom the user is referring.<sup>10</sup>

These considerations are relevant to the design of the second setting component 'it was >when I was a kid'. We may speculate that the speaker not using 'kid' to characterise

a stage in his life; rather its use here trades upon its culturally specific use as a way of referring to someone who is simply younger, regardless of actual age. The construction of the second setting component allows the speaker to portray himself at the time of the experience simply as 'younger' than he is at the time of describing it. It is this property of 'kid' which permits it to be used to minimise the likelihood of a sceptical reception to his story.

### **Conclusions**

In the introduction to this chapter I observed that in parapsychological studies of spontaneous events, and other serious investigations of anomalies, emphasis is placed on locating precisely when and where the experiences happened. So, whereas a relational term like 'it happened a few years ago' might be provided by an experient when reporting an event, a researcher will require a characterisation of its occurrence in terms of its feature as part of an 'official' record, such as a calendar. What motivates this substitution is the assumption that relational characterisations are somehow less precise than formulations which portray the 'facts' of an incident in terms of 'objective' or 'official' record.

The analysis of such formulations, however, has revealed that they are not simply an insubstantial and random gloss of the salient details. As in the case of the 'X...when Y' device examined in chapter five, we can regard the setting sequence as a cultural resource which can be exploited when people make reports of a potentially incriminating kind. The organisation and design of the discrete components are the vehicles for a variety of inferential tasks. So, the design of the reference to the experience establishes at the very outset of the account the externality and objectivity of the phenomenon the speaker claims to have

encountered. Additionally, not naming the phenomenon in the opening reference suggests the speakers' sensitivity to the kinds of 'personal commitments' that may be attributed to them on the basis of their use of appropriate classifications, and the kinds of negative assumptions that would be warranted by such attributions. An entirely different set of inferential tasks are accomplished through the two-parts of the setting sequence. Speakers use the second part of the sequence to provide a setting which is premonitory of salient features of the experience. Furthermore, the second setting component is used to address the likelihood of a recipient's sceptical response to the story based on inferences which could be drawn from an inspection of the first setting component.

These formulations, therefore, should not be treated as a 'problem', the solution to which is a recharacterisation in terms of, say, official records. Such a methodological step merely elevates the professional researcher's analytic criteria over those practical concerns which tacitly informed the design of the account. And an important step in reorienting research to an awareness of the experiential features of anomalous events might be to take seriously the communicative resources, methods and practices through which the details of individual experiences are constructed.

## Notes

1 I have actually talked to (respected) parapsychologists and anomaly researchers who indeed viewed these aspects of accounts as at best superfluous given their investigative goals, or worse, a positive hindrance to research, and which somehow had to be circumnavigated in the pursuit of the 'really important' information.

2 There is an extended discussion of this sequence later.

3 At this point the speaker goes on to name the town in which the experiences occurred; it is important to note that he does not go on to provide a further setting component.

4 This paper is examined in detail in chapter two.

5 I can imagine several traditional (as opposed to alternative) British comedians beginning a routine of wife-related 'jokes' with a statement of the type: 'It happened in 1947: we got married.'



6 By this I mean that the organisation of that sequence makes this inference available. It is irrelevant as to whether or not Angela's account is a true reflection of the attitudes and beliefs of people who knew K.

7 It is not only lay members of the public who might face such a sceptical reaction: many professional parapsychologists have received a similar response. Perhaps the most infamous instance concerns one of the two scientists from the Stanford Research Institute who did a series of experimental tests with Uri Geller. It was discovered that one of the scientists was interested in certain types of esoteric and mystical philosophies. In a subsequent review of the SRI tests in the journal *New Scientist* these personal interests were cited as the warrant to doubt the legitimacy of the scientist's laboratory procedure, and, thereby, the validity of significant experimental results achieved with Geller (Hanlon, 1974: 182).

8 In extract (2). however, there is an instance of the speaker naming her experience by using the appropriate label from the parapsychological research literature: 'out of body experience'. But there are contingencies in prior trajectory of this exchange which account for the speaker stating the name of her experience.

(2) WS AA

((Tape starts))

1 S 'cos it's difficult to tell what  
2 the ( ) hh  
3 I ye-ah  
4 S -some people come along think it's paranormal  
5 (and some others) (.4) (can't remember it)  
6 >y'know< -hh  
7 I -yeah well what would you count

8 as paranormal  
9 (.)  
10 S HHhhh  
11 (2)  
12 S o:hh hhhh  
13 (2)  
14 S well ah suppose (.4) anything that (.2) hasn't  
15 got a recognised scientific explanation is a hh  
16 I ah ha  
17 S (.sort of<) broad (a)s -( ) -thing i c'n (p  
-ut)  
18 I -well cn- -w- w-  
-give  
19 me an example  
20 S hh examples (.2) ehm:  
21 (1.2)  
22 S out of body experiences ur::H:: (.3) telepathy (.5)  
23 :  
4 (1.5)  
25 S ( ) clairvoyance  
26 (.)  
27 I -yeah  
28 S -clairaudience  
29 (.3)  
30 I have you had experiences li -ke that  
31 S - s:  
hh well  
32 HHhh ehm (2.3) I've I (.) had an out of  
33 body experience(but) that was when I was very  
34 sma:ll=well (.) (  
say very small gosh  
35 (what) I was thirteen (>not as<) small as all that  
36 hhh ehm  
37 (1.2)  
38 S that was: ehm (.) I was very I was (mos) exhausted  
39 because I'd been awake for about twenty four hours  
40 on a school trip

The relevant section of this extract begins at line 30. The speaker has been listing the kinds of experiences which she would classify as paranormal. At this point the interviewer asks if the speaker has had any of these experiences. The speaker then identifies one kind of experience which she had just referred to as being paranormal: ' s:

hh well HHhh ehm (2.3) I've I (.) had an out of body experience. Prior to this the speaker had cited out-of-body

experiences as a specifically paranormal phenomena. She is then asked if she has had an experience of this kind. Her admission that she has indeed had an OBE makes a report of this experience relevant. The report of this experience, and the use of its technical term, are both occasioned in the course of the opening conversation.

9 I have used 'bother' and 'men' here simply because I have not heard it used to refer to a sister or women, although a suspect it probably is.

10 I have a suspicion that it can be used also to refer to older brothers. Unfortunately, at the time of writing this, I have no Mancunians to hand to clarify the matter.

Chapter six

## 'I was just doing X...when Y': a device for describing recollections of extraordinary events

### Introduction

Accounts of paranormal experiences are narrated recollections of dramatic personal experiences. In the following extracts the speakers reach the part of their narrative when they recall their first encounter with the anomaly they are reporting.

(1) ND 22:159 The speaker is describing one of a series of violent encounters with a poltergeist. This particular episode occurred while he was going to the kitchen to make some tea.

1            anyway I got to the kitchen door  
2            an as ah hh  
3            I had the teapot in my hand like this  
4            and I walked through the kitchen door  
5            (5.) hhh  
6            as I was going through the doorway  
7            (.7)  
8            I was just (.) jammed against  
9            the doorpost (.) like this  
10          with the teapot sti(h)ll stu(h)ck  
11          out in front of me

(2) EM B 88 The speaker is recounting an out-of-body experience which occurred while she was waiting at a subway station.

1            I had ear plugs in my ears  
2            'cz I couldn't stand all the noise  
3            I had (.) dark glasses on  
4            >because I didn't want  
5            to see anybody<  
6            an' I was standing right there  
7            on the platform (.7) waiting  
8            for this damned train to come (.)  
9            all of a sudden  
10          (2.3)  
11          I (.) began to feel as total  
12          totally (.) absolutely (.)  
13          insubstantial that is  
14          I had no bodily feeling whatsoever

In both cases the speakers formulate a recollection of what they were doing *just before* the onset of their first

experience with the phenomenon. In extract (1) the speaker claims that he encountered an invisible presence which forcibly pressed him against a door frame. He describes this as happening 'as I was going through the doorway' (line 6). In extract (2) the speaker is reporting the onset of what transpires to be an out-of-body experience. Immediately before this she describes herself as 'standing right there on the platform' (lines 6 to 7).

A preliminary observation is that both speakers employ the same two-part format by which to introduce into the account the first experience of their respective phenomenon. This format can be identified as 'I was just doing X...when Y', where the 'X' component is used to describe the speakers' activities at the time, and the 'Y' component reports the speaker's first awareness of the phenomenon. So, in (1) the speaker claims that 'as I was going through the doorway' ('I was just doing X...') he was 'just (.) jammed against the doorpost' ('...when Y').

The activities introduced in the first part of the format, 'going through' and 'standing', are the speakers' mundane circumstances prior to the onset of the experience. Intuitively, they seem like the type of routine or everyday activities which are not normally memorable or notable. However, an examination of entirely different types of data reveal that speakers regularly report the mundane circumstances prior to non-ordinary events. For example, the following extract comes from a telephone conversation between two sisters, Emma and Lottie. Lottie has just returned from holiday during which she visited her friend and her friend's new husband, Dwight.

(3) NB:IV:10:R:20-21:Standard Orthography

1 L Yeah you just got to be care We:ll see:  
2 hh |Dwight only has (.2) u-one ga:ll  
3 bladder?  
4 (.7)  
5 E  
- \*hm,  
L  
-He ha|d e-and then |he has to be  
7 careful what he eats he can't eat anything  
8 greasy you -know?  
9 E -  
- \_\_\_\_\_hm: ,

0 L  
 Go:d what a ma:n he was out there this:  
 11 morning and he (.) They have these  
 12 great big o:live trees a:ll over  
 13 you kn -ow hhh  
 14 E -Mm: hm  
 15 L th An:d the |wind was so ba:d that  
 16 the the th- (.) the branches were  
 17 hitting the hou:se and (.) God (.3)  
 18 \*uh:: I got up abou:t (.)  
 19 |well it was about ei:ght o'clock,  
 20 E M m -:hm:  
 21 L hh -and HERE HE'S UP THERE s:awing tho:se  
 22 o:ff you know?

Early in this account of Dwight's activities Lottie says 'Go:d what a ma:n' (line 10). She then goes on to tell a story to illustrate some of his exceptional qualities, culminating in her description of his early morning tree-shearing prowess (lines 21 and 22). What is interesting is that this story is presented as an account of an unusual event - a man with physical problems getting up early in the morning to shear the branches of a tree. Before producing a description of Dwight's unusual behaviour, however, she provides a report of her activity at the time: 'I got up abou:t (.) |well it was about ei:ght o'clock,' (lines 18 and 19).

There are a number of similarities between extract (3) and extracts (1) and (2). The event which Lottie is reporting - getting up early to remove offending branches from a tree - is produced as one which is unusual and out-of-the-ordinary. Also, she prefaces her first reference to Dwight's extraordinary behaviour with a description of her circumstances at the time she witnessed this event - she had just 'got up in the morning'. Furthermore, Lottie packages her first perception of Dwight's unusual behaviour as an 'I was just doing X...when Y'.

We can see a pattern beginning to emerge: the 'X when Y' device seems to occur where people are reporting unusual experiences. Further evidence of this pattern comes from McGuiniss' (1983) analysis of Captain Jeffrey MacDonald, an American Army doctor whose wife and two young children were murdered in their homes in February, 1970. MacDonald told the police that a group of drug-crazed hippies broke into his house and began to assault him, knocking him unconscious. He claimed that when he regained consciousness he discovered the mutilated remains of his wife and children, and alerted the military authorities.

From an early stage in their subsequent investigations the

civil police suspected that MacDonald himself had committed the murders. At that time, however, they had no strong evidence to incriminate him and thus he was allowed to go free. The following passage is taken from a taped interview with MacDonald in which he is describing to McGuinness the occasion on which he first learned that the police had named him as the prime suspect in their investigation - clearly, a dramatic moment. This happened during a mealtime in the Officer's Mess at his army camp.

I was standing in line getting food, [X] and I had just gotten through the cash register area and was beginning to sit down, [Y] when they had a news bulletin that Captain Jeffrey MacDonald, the Green Beret officer from Fort Bragg who six weeks earlier had claimed that his wife and children were brutally beaten and stabbed by four hippies, was himself named chief suspect.

And I remember the truly - I don't mean to use cliches, but I don't know how else to explain it - the room was spinning again. (McGuinness 1983: 168.)

This recollection of mundane circumstances is significant in that it was not solicited directly by the interviewer, but was produced spontaneously by the speaker in the course of his account. This is not unusual: in the accounts of paranormal phenomena the speakers had not been asked to recall what they were doing precisely at the time of the experience. The following extract provides a further striking example of the way in which these recollections are produced spontaneously in verbal accounts of traumatic events. It appeared in a newspaper story by a war correspondent who witnessed the death of one of his colleagues, and was dictated by telephone to the newspaper.

They were just relaxing when another car-load of journalists arrived. It was a Dutch crew: Cornel Lagrouw, a cameraman...with his wife Annelise....We all knew each other so it was fun to see them.

[X] We were just taking pictures of the guerillas,  
[Y] when all of a sudden gunfire rang out...  
(S. Wallace, 'The Guardian', 21 March, 1989:24.)

As final evidence that these observations are not restricted to accounts of paranormal events, it is useful to consider psychological studies of the extent to which people can recall the details of their circumstances prior to traumatic

experiences. For example, in recollections of either hearing about, or witnessing, political assassinations. In 1899 F. W. Colegrove asked subjects to try to recall when they first heard the news that President Lincoln had been assassinated, an event which happened thirty-three years before the study (Colegrove 1982; originally published 1899). His respondents were able to provide detailed information of their routine circumstances at the time. He illustrated the responses he received with the following reports.

'I was standing by the stove getting dinner; my husband came in and told me'

'I was setting out a rose bush by the door. My husband came in the yard and told me.

(Colegrove 1982 [1899]: 42.)

These results suggested that these individuals were able to recall perfectly well that moment from over thirty years before when they first heard of the President's murder.<sup>1</sup> Colegrove concluded that there is a psychological facility by which such recollections can be formed. He attributed the ability to form such recollections to the abiding and durable quality of vivid experiences. The sheer novelty or drama of an event therefore ensured that the mundane, routine and trivial features of the speaker's environment at the time were stored in memory.

Within contemporary cognitive psychology there continues to be an interest in the character and cause of memories of uneventful circumstances at the time of dramatic experiences. One psychological explanation will be considered shortly, but it is first necessary to state briefly why work in cognitive psychology need be addressed at all.

My interest in 'X the Y' memory formulations focuses on two related issues: their character as socially-organized devices, and the interactional concerns which inform their design and use in the production of spoken reports of paranormal experiences. Colegrove's research, albeit dated, suggests strongly that the features of this device can occur in contexts other than verbal recollections of the paranormal. This in turn could be taken as evidence for the operation of a psychological process by which memories of this type are recorded, stored and produced. If it is the case that the details produced in the 'X then Y' device occurs as the product of psychological, cognitive or neurophysiological operations, the scope for sociological investigation becomes limited. Conversational rememberings of the type displayed in the 'X then Y' format can be accounted for by reference to



determining cognitive facilities. Furthermore, it could stand as evidence that the social and interactional circumstances in which this device is used are of little consequence when compared to the underlying processes which govern the form, content and use of this device. In short, the appearance of this device might be regarded as no more than the epiphenomenon of determinant cognitive events. An assessment of psychological analyses of these recollections therefore is a necessary preliminary to an attempt to furnish a sociological account.

In the following sections Brown and Kulik's (1977) neurophysiological explanation will be discussed. Their work is important in two respects. Firstly, it provides a particularly strong case for the operation of distinctly cognitive procedures: the type of memory they study is regarded as being largely exempt from the distortions and reconstructions which occur in other types of memory recollections. Secondly, a critical examination of their position permits the introduction of a number of analytic issues which will be explored in later sections of this chapter.

#### **Psychology and the recollection of dramatic events**

Brown and Kulik (1977) begin by noting that their own personal recollections of the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963 were qualitatively different from other types of memory. They have

a primary 'live' quality that is almost perceptual. Indeed, it is very much *like a photograph that indiscriminately preserves the scene* in which each of us found himself when the flashbulb was fired. (Brown and Kulik, 1977: 74; emphasis added.)

Hence, Brown and Kulik call these 'flashbulb' memories, and claim that they occur not only in the recollection of receiving dramatic news, but in any case where the individual has a particularly unusual experience. They argue that when a dramatic experience originally happens the individual recognizes the novelty or import of the event. This recognition not only occurs at a conscious level, but occurs also at an unconscious or cognitive level. For example, a traumatic experience may result in a novel pattern or neuronal stimulation and firing. Processes within the reticular cortical system assess this novel experience to determine if it has any biological or emotional significance for the

individual. If it is decided that this is the case a neural mechanism is triggered which automatically registers and records, not only the stimulus event, but also *any other* information which is being processed at the same time, such as routine everyday activities. Almost inadvertently, these cognitive processes record the mundane information processing which the brain is doing all the time. This accounts for the ability of people to recall their seemingly inconsequential behaviour and activities at the time of extraordinary experiences.

Although Brown and Kulik's theory is based upon a study of primarily written reports of memories, it has implications for those recollections which are produced spontaneously in talk. If the operation of 'flashbulb' processes ensure that the details of extraordinary experiences and the surrounding circumstances are recorded at the time, when the speaker comes to recall these events verbally there is a stored memory which can be accessed and 'read off'. So, for example, in the MacDonald extract, at the appropriate point in the account, the speaker is merely articulating images and associations which are stored in the brain.

There are, however, a number of objections to Brown and Kulik's explanation. For example, some events become noticeable or traumatic only in retrospect. Consider the following extract.

(4) EM B 10

1 I mean a simple example which  
2 everybody's had something similar  
3 to hhhh I was living in uhm (.)  
4 inglan years ago:  
5 and all of a sudden  
6 X I was sitting in bed one night (.)  
7 getting ready to go to sleep  
8 Y and I decided to write to a friend  
9 I hadn't seen for four years (.)  
10 in Massachusetts (.) a:nd  
11 I found myself congratulating her  
12 on (.) the engagement of her oldest  
13 daughter (.3) I said congratulations  
14 Marion's getti- Marion's gotten  
15 engaged (.5) ar:hm and  
16 I sent the letter (.7) and eh (.)  
17 er: ah I I felt totally (r) (.)  
18 right in doing so (.5)  
19 ah mean i(t) it was just as  
20 normal to me to know that  
21 her daughter had just gotten

22 engaged as to know that I've got  
23 five fingers on my ring ha:nd  
24 hhhh an' eh hh she wrote back  
25 to me hhh in total chaos  
26 saying (.) how the Hell did  
27 |you know she started the letter  
28 huhh |hah hh she said  
29 I received your letter at nine  
30 o'clock in the morning (.)  
31 and you were congratulating me  
32 on (.) Marion's getting engage:d:  
33 and I said what the HEll is  
34 she talking about hhh  
35 at twelve o'clock that morning (.)  
36 she walked in and announced  
37 her engagement

In this extract the speaker reports on an impulse to write to a distant friend to congratulate her on the engagement of her daughter. The report of this impulse is constructed in the 'X...when Y' format. So, the activity she describes prior to her decision to write the letter is uneventful and routine: she was 'sitting in bed one night (.) getting ready to go to sleep' (lines 6 and 7). Later the speaker goes on to report that her friend's return letter revealed that, at the time the speaker was celebrating the engagement, no-one knew anything about it, including the speaker's friend, Marion's mother. The daughter announced the engagement *after* the speaker's letter had arrived. Thus, the impulse to write was based on a precognition of an impending event.<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, then, there was nothing dramatic about her decision to write the letter which could have triggered the cognitive processes proposed by Brown and Kulik.

There is a further problem with the Brown and Kulik explanation, and this concerns the relationship between the activity used in constructing a description of the circumstances of the experience, and the nature of the phenomenon or event being reported. In extract (1) the speaker's experience consisted of being pressed against the frame of a door by an invisible agency. His description of the mundane things he was doing prior to this is 'as I was going through the doorway (line 14). There is a 'fit' between the activity selected and the type of experience he had. This occurs also in the following extract.

(5) EL 4:29 Prior to his death the speaker's husband had been

a pilot in the R.A.F. He had a military funeral service which was held in an aeroplane hanger.

1 S an' I went in there (.) er:m  
2 w- with my mother in law and uhm: (.4)  
3 friends that were with me  
4 (1.3)  
5 hhh (.)  
6 and I was just looking at the coffin  
7 and there was David standing there (.3)  
8 he was in Blues  
9 (1)  
10 hh he wasn't wearing his hat  
11 his hat was on the coffin  
12 and he was there

Here, the speaker saw an apparition of her recently deceased husband standing next to his coffin at the funeral. Her formulation of what she was doing prior to seeing the apparition is 'I was just looking at the coffin' (line 6). In this extract, as in extract (1), there is a relationship between the speaker's recollection of the experience and the circumstances they describe at the time. This is even more strikingly illustrated in extract (3). The speaker provides a description of her circumstances which reveal what time of day it was when she observed the extraordinary behaviour of her friend's husband: 'I got up abou:t (.) |well it was about ei:ght o'clock,' (lines 18 and 19). What made this behaviour so extraordinary, however, is that despite Dwight's health problems, he was up and active *so early* in the morning. By introducing this information into her description of the circumstances at the time the speaker is able to provide material from an inspection of which the recipient can come to see *what* was so out-of-the-ordinary. Indeed, the provision of the speaker's circumstances furnishes a warrant for her description of this behaviour as unusual and therefore notable.

There is, then, a contingent relevance between the activities indexed in the first part of the format and the paranormal or unusual event referred to in the second. The activities reported in the first part are not coincidentally related to the subsequent experience, as we might expect if they are recollections composed of events *randomly* recorded by cognitive processes at the time. That is, it is not that they are mentionable because they were happening, and then something extraordinary happened; rather, the descriptions of these activities are designed to elevate features of the speakers' experiences made relevant by the subsequent event. They attain a reportable status *by virtue* of what the event turned out to be.

The concept of 'flashbulb' memories, and the cognitive explanation, has been criticised from within the psychological community. Ulric Neisser, for example, proposes an alternative account for the organisation of flashbulb memories. Rejecting the idea that there is a cognitive or neurophysiological basis for them, he argues:

they seem to be like narrative conventions....News reporters and novelists, mythmakers and autobiographers have a fairly consistent idea of how events should be described, of what readers and listeners want to know. Everyone in our culture is at least roughly aware of these conventions. In effect, we have a *schemata* for the arrival of important news... (Neisser, 1982: 47; original emphasis.)

Neisser is arguing, then, that when people make reports about dramatic personal experiences, they rely on culturally-available conventions which inform the ways that accounts are produced. This argument has two immediate implications. On a positive note it suggests that investigation of the 'I was just doing X...when Y' format does not have to answer to the 'facts' of cognitive procedure which are deemed to govern its organization. This is not to claim that such cognitive procedures are unimportant, or that they do not exist. Neisser has indicated merely that there is a social dimension to them, a feature obscured by emphasis upon cognition and neurophysiology. However, I think he implies too strongly that the use of this class of memory formulation results from exposure to culturally-available procedures informing the 'arrival of important news'. He seems to be suggesting that the production of this device in accounts of extraordinary experiences is a form of *ritual* activity, and that they are produced this way simply because this is the way that members of the culture have learned to present information of this kind. Criticisms which applied to the Brown and Kulik explanation are therefore also pertinent to this position: for example, it is difficult to account for the descriptive 'meshing' between the two parts of the format.

In this chapter we consider an alternative account which focuses on the 'X when Y' format as an environment in which distinctly *interactional* concerns are mediated. Focusing particularly on the 'X' component of the device, we will examine the ways in which speakers use the format to accomplish specific tasks in their accounts. Analysing the

functions mediated through the device permits us to retain Neisser's insight to their character as cultural resources, while at the same time providing an empirical basis from which to explore the fine detail of their organization.

### **State formulations and the mundane environment of paranormal experiences**

In the following extracts there are further examples of descriptions of mundane activities prior to a reference to the initial encounter with an anomalous phenomenon.

(6) REW 52 The speaker is reporting one in a series of apparitions.

1           so I I think I remember I 'ad a dish  
2           in hand I was out in the kitchen  
3           it was different like (.) y' know (.)  
4           to this sort've flat (.5)  
5           an' it ws' like a (.) big entrance hall (.7)  
6           with one (.) door (.5) and then it came  
7           straight the way through  
8           there was a door there and a  
9           door there (.5) a door there  
10          an (.5) it was a kitchen  
11          (1)  
12          and I was right by this unit part  
13          (1.5)  
14          an'  
15          (.)  
16 **X** I were lookin' out that way  
17 **Y** an' it seemed to be like a figure  
18          (.)  
19          coming through the |hall (.7)  
20          all I could see was the ah (a-)  
21          the top part

(7) EL 5:39 The speaker had her husband's funeral service video recorded for relative who were unable to attend the ceremony.

1           I also wanted it video'd for my  
2           children: who were  
3           (1.7)  
4           two and four at the time  
5           they didn't come to the funeral  
6           (2.4)  
7           and so perhaps a week later  
8           (1.3)  
9           >must've bin about< a week afterwards  
10          h I:: (.5) put the recording on  
11          and as watching it

12 I was obviously extremely upset  
13 (.8)  
14 X and I was sat on a chair  
15 (.)  
16 uhnd  
17 (.5)  
18 Y when I looked down David was (.)  
19 kneeling at the side of me

The first point to make is that in describing the circumstances surrounding their first initial perception of the phenomenon, speakers provide information which attends to more than one issue. It is possible to use the first part of the 'X when Y' format to refer either to an activity or a place: for example, in extract (6) the speaker produces the description 'I was sat on a chair', thus reporting her activity (sitting) and her location (on a chair). Instead of trying to characterise these descriptions in terms of one overriding feature, then, it is more useful to refer to the 'X' part of the format as a *state formulation*.

The activities reported in state formulations seem on first inspection to be routine, bland or commonplace. These descriptions, however, do not merely reflect the state of affairs at the time: these formulations are designed to achieve this character. It is observable that the state formulations portray a minimal character of the activity to which they refer. So, in extracts (6) and (7) the speakers report that they were 'looking out' and 'sat on a chair'. With these formulations the speakers gloss only the broad character of their actions at the time.

We have already noted that there is a contingent relationship between what the experience turned out to be and what the speaker was doing just before it happened; this itself points to the constructed character of state formulations. Close examination of some extracts provide further evidence of design. So, in extract (5), the speaker reports on the first in what transpired to be a series of experiences involving the apparition of her recently deceased husband, which occurred during the funeral service held for him in an R.A.F. hanger. Her state formulation is 'I was just looking at the coffin' (line 6). This description excludes reference to a large array of potentially reportable features of her environment. She does not mention where the coffin was placed in relation to her, or in relation to the aeroplanes which had been specially decorated in honour of her husband; nor does she indicate her

position in relation either to the coffin, or to other people with her at the time; moreover, she makes no reference to her emotional state. Indeed, given the range of features which she legitimately could have selected in building her state formulation, the activity of 'just looking' achieves a conspicuous blandness.

According to the Brown and Kulik hypothesis the brain records, and thereby makes available for subsequent recall, the mundane details of the circumstances at the time of extraordinary experiences. Yet in this single extract the speaker provides as mundane a description as possible of her activity. That is, she constructs a mundane state formulation *in spite of* the emotive and traumatic circumstances at the time.

### **State formulations as 'gists' and 'upshots'**

In some data the speakers use material that they have furnished in previous stretches of their accounts to construct their state formulations, thereby providing a summary of what they had said. This phenomenon is similar to that identified by Heritage and Watson (1979). They explored the ways in which participants in news interviews formulated versions of other people's prior talk, and the interactional tasks accomplished through such formulations. They identified two methods used by participants to construct utterances which draw on aspects of immediately prior talk: as 'gists', or summaries, or as 'upshots' or consequences. Their analysis reveals that these devices allow speakers to constitute reflexively the character of the preceding talk. Gists and upshots are used in three main ways: they are used to preserve, transform or delete aspects of the prior talk. These three operations are illustrated in the following extract. This is taken from a face-to-face interview with a winner of a 'Slimmer of the Year' competition, which was broadcast on the radio.

(IE = interviewee; IR = interviewer.)

1 IE You have a shell that for so long  
2 protects you but sometimes  
3 things creep through the shell  
4 and then you become really aware  
5 of how awful you feel. I never  
6 ever felt my age or looked my age  
7 I was always older - people took me  
8 for older. And when I was at college  
9 I think I looked a matronly fifty.  
10 And I was completely alone one weekend  
11 and I got to this stage where I  
12 almost jumped in the river.  
13 I just felt life wasn't worth it any  
14 more - it hadn't anything to offer



15 and if this was living  
16 I'd had enough.  
17 IR You really were prepared to commit  
18 suicide because you were  
19 a big fatty  
20 IE Yes because I - I just didn't  
21 see anything in life that I had  
22 to look forward to...

(Heritage and Watson 1979: 132.)

The interviewer's phrase 'a big fatty' preserves the essential aspects of the interviewee's prior utterances - her weight problem. At the same time, the way in which this issue is portrayed transforms it: 'a big fatty' does not invoke the seriousness of the problem. Indeed, the the interviewer's recharacterisation of the problem in these terms deletes the more depressing consequences of obesity which the interviewee discusses. The examination of gists or upshots can therefore reveal the tacit practical reasoning processes which informed their design.

In the following data the speaker provides an account of a religious or mystical experience. In the first part of the extract he provides a lengthy description of some of the thoughts which were occupying him prior to the experience. These concerned his reflections on personal faith which results from a direct personal encounter with a mystical presence. Thus he explicitly draws attention to the character of some of his activities at the time, and insofar as these concern his thoughts about direct encounters with the numinous, they are hardly ordinary preoccupations. Yet in building a gist of this prior talk he deletes the more evocative aspects of his prior talk and constructs the more mundane state formulation 'I were just thinkin'' (line 21)

(8) DM 7

1 un' I was thinkin' about religion  
2 un' eh (.5) I was thinkin' well (.4)  
3 ( ) on the lines of it (.3)  
4 I(t)- i- it must be very easy  
5 to be Saint Paul because yuh get yer  
6 blindin' light on the road to Damascus  
7 sort u(v) thing un' eh hh (.6)  
9 you've no problems (so you) you:: know  
10 as far as you're concerned

11       you measure all things  
12       according to that experience  
13       the experience was exterior  
14       to yourself an' so therefore  
15       (1.3)  
16       you viewed it (.7) as a star:t  
17       (.5)  
18       (>yu know<) >yeah<  
19   X    I were just thinkin'  
20       (.3) er:m  
21   Y    and then suddenly I was aware of  
22       (.7)  
23       almost (.) the sensation was  
24       almost as if a veil was lifted

In the following data there are examples of state formulations constructed as upshots to present only the most unexceptional versions of those circumstances. The first comes from an interview with a person who had a UFO experience. It is reproduced at length because, from the start of the interview, the speaker produces a detailed account of his psychological state and personal circumstances around the time of the sighting. Note how an upshot of these traumatic events and experiences is adduced in his subsequent state formulation (lines 132 to 133).

(9) RIW 1:7 (S = speaker; I = interviewer.)

1   S    I was (at) art school at the ti:me  
2       (.3)  
3   I    you were in art school yeah (.3) mm  
4       (.5)  
5   S    er do you want the psychological frame of mind  
6       I was in at that time  
7   I    yes: that would be (.) very er (.) helpful  
8       (.2)  
9   S    er:m: (.2) undergoing  
10       (1)  
11       sort of fus- frustrations for being in  
12       an art school because (.4) therefore  
13       you have to create a::nd (.5)  
14       if there's a sort of policy  
15       at the art school is (.3)  
16       of a specific (.4) policy which  
17       is at that time hard line abstractionism  
18       and hh any figurative work

19 was very much frowned upon  
20 I -  
hm 1  
S -I felt (.4) that there was sort of  
22 like a policy to tow (.3) and in this  
23 climate of (.5) of: >  
rt uv  
24 creative (.3) miasma above my head  
25 that I couldn't (.) break out  
26 so there was a whole group of us  
27 that w(uh) (.) very frustrated  
28 with the art school  
29 (.2)  
30 I mm hm  
31 S  
cause  
t wasn't really wanted (.)  
32 in th- in ((city)) itself  
33 (.)  
34 I m -m hm  
35 S -it was er er a >  
rt uv  
a s-  
36 an afterthought (.2) stuck onto the marshlands  
37 of of literally the ((city))  
38 I -mm hm  
39 S -( ) hundred feet into the marshland (.)  
40 stuck a w(a)- art sc- at school there (.5)  
41 a::nd (.7) >you know< i(t) it was  
42 a very unviable feeling that th-  
43 the ar(t) th- th- th- this little  
44 twee toytown of a place (.4) really wasn't (.6)  
45 didn't want these aliens huhh h  
46 to put it a better way  
47 I -  
8  
S-w(in)- sort of artists creative people  
49 so (.3) ehm erm erm  
50 (1)  
51 so there was (>some<) certain people  
52 who felt that I had affiliated with (.)  
53 and we joined together one evening (.4)  
54 er er (.) and and my girlfriend  
55 had just had an abortion  
56 (1)  
57 and I'd just (.) a cruder sort of  
58 psoriasis (.2) sort of episode

59 at the time which wa:s  
60 (1.5)  
61 aggravating the whole frame of mind  
62 and so: (.3) I think psy-  
63 psychologically I was psychosomatically  
64 (1.4)  
65 exhibiting symptoms of stress  
66 anyway -so  
67 I -mm hm  
68 (.3)  
69 S and and to try to create  
70 on top of all that I think was er  
71 ehm is too much to ask for so (.3)  
72 we: I think just wo- burst out of  
73 the place we went (.7) wandering across  
74 right across the (.) the water lake  
75 the water meadows  
76 (.2)  
77 I mm hm  
78 S a:nd  
79 (1.3)  
80 wandered out to the hill: (.3)  
81 on: a (.3) S:unday evening hh (.)  
82 all the time (.) I was aware of the  
83 th- th- th- th- the school called  
84 ( ) school which is like a  
85 sort of (.) the: public school (.)  
86 I -mm  
87 S -of the south (.) really  
88 very privileged people all playing cricket  
89 and we wandered past them and we saw (.3)  
90 the whole (.) crass class system hh and  
91 it was all we saw it all in perspective  
92 it was like (.3) a very (.) m::editative  
93 clear perspective type walk where we  
94 could s:ee the: >th- th- th-<  
95 the class structure as as its  
96 as its very  
97 (1)  
98 obvious  
99 I mm -hm  
100 S - and we were (.7) dishevelled  
101 diskempt unkempt (.7) people all  
102 wandering round three of us  
103 wandered past them up the hill (.3)  
104 called on (.) a friend called Dave who was (.5)  
105 over ( ) area (.) north (.4)  
106  
ndered  
.5) right up up to  
107 the other side of er:m: (.3) Saint

108 (2)  
109 erm (.5) I didn't go there on Saturday  
110 by the way I said I was going to go there (.7)  
111 erm: I >can't remember the name<  
112 but it was S:aint Mary's (.)  
113 quite sort of hallowed ground (.3)  
114 for some people because there's a (.4)  
115 circular  
116 (1.4)  
117 maze like thing on top which  
118 you can wander through  
119 I it's an ancient (.) place is it  
120 S it is an ancient pla -ce  
121 I -yeah I see  
122 S it's been refurrowed all these years  
123 yuh know  
124 I oh yes  
125 S follow it (.) f- in a sort of spiral  
126 s- shape -on top of it  
127 I -mm  
128 (.3)  
129 S but there was another (.) brow  
130 another hill which we went up to  
131 (.4)  
132 X and we were contemplating our state of mind  
133 at about two o'clock in the morning  
134 (.)  
135 I mm hm  
136 S three of us (.4) looked out across the  
137 north (charkum)

(continues to give account of sighting<sup>3</sup>)

The speaker raises a number of issues which are sources of personal anxiety: his relationship to his art school (lines 11 to 28); his relationship to the city in which he lived by virtue of his identity as an art student (lines 31 to 46); his girlfriend's abortion and his medical problems (lines 54 to 65), and his attitude towards the class system as exemplified by a nearby public school (lines 83 to 98). The speaker has gone to considerable length to provide material which indicates that, *at the very least*, he was unsettled. Yet his state formulation summarizes this prior talk by focusing only on the act of *contemplation*, thereby discarding the more graphic and emotive aspects of his account.

(10) EL 1:6 The speaker is describing the circumstances in which she first encountered the 'presence' or spirit of her recently deceased husband. She has just been informed of his death by two representatives from the R.A.F.

1 a::n:deh (.) they drove me (.)  
2 to (.) Angelsey  
3 (1.5)  
4 a:nd  
5 (.5)  
6 X we were all sat round (.) ehm in a room  
7 (.6)  
8 and I know >thut< (.3)  
9 I know it sounds silly but  
10 Y I knew that David was there  
11 he was behi:nd me hh

(11) EL 5:39 The speaker here is describing how she had her husband's funeral service video recorded for relatives who were unable to attend the ceremony.<sup>4</sup>

1 I also wanted it video'd for  
2 my children: who were  
3 (1.7)  
4 two and four at the time  
5 and they didn't come to the funeral  
6 (2.4)  
7 so perhaps a wee:k later

8 (1.3)  
 9 >must've bin about< a week afterwards  
 10 h I:: (.5) put the recording on  
 11 and was: (.5) watching it  
 12 I was obviously extremely upset  
 13 (.8)  
 14 **X** and I was sat on a chair  
 15 (.)  
 16 uhn:d  
 17 (.5)  
 18 **Y** when I looked down David was (.)  
 19 kneeling at the side of me

(12) YB 3:13 At the time of the experience the speaker was suffering from a severe bout of pneumonia from which, it later transpired, his doctor had not expected him to recover.

1 so:: anyway (.5) when you're  
 2 in bed that length o' time  
 3 you don't sleep regular hours  
 4 like (.3) when you normally  
 5 go to bed at night yu' know  
 6 if you've been up all day  
 7 you go to bed you go to sleep (.)  
 8 hhhh an' you wake up in the morning  
 9 (.)  
 10 **X** an' ah musta bin do:zin' there or somethin'  
 11 **Y** un u(h)r: suddenly this: light  
 12 a very small light  
 13 (.)  
 14 must've started playing s:i:lly devils

In extracts (10) to (12) the speakers produce innocuous upshots from materials they had previously introduced into their account. In (10) the speaker has been reporting how she was met by Air Force officials who informed her of her husband's accident, and then driven to a nearby R. A. F. camp. In the light of the emotive events which she had just experienced, and to which she had just referred, the state formulation 'we were all sat round (.) ehm in a room' (line 6) is conspicuously routine. Similarly in (11) the upshot of the speaker's prior talk about the video recording of her husband's funeral is 'I was sat on a chair' (line 14). It is noticeable that prior to this the speaker had already formulated one upshot of her previous utterances: 'I:: (.5) put the recording on and was: (.5) watching it' (lines 10 and 11). Instead of moving at this point to her first reference to

that manifestation of her husband's apparition, she furnishes a mundane state formulation. Finally, in (12) the state formulation 'ah musta bin do:zin' there or somethin'' (line 10) is adduced as an upshot of disrupted sleep patterns resulting from a severe illness. In each of these cases the speakers actively design their state formulations as upshots of materials they had provided earlier. In doing so they gloss over or discard those features of their prior talk which are non-ordinary, emotive or traumatic to furnish only the routine character of their circumstances at the time.

One feature of the inauspiciousness of reporting anomalous events is that, due to the prevailing scepticism, there is always the possibility that recipients may try to formulate explanations of the reported experience so as to recast them as ordinary. (This is quite often a strategy which sceptical 'experts' employ when they appear in television documentaries about the paranormal.) All manner of personal characteristics can be inspected to 'reveal' what it is about a person that makes them believe they have had the experience they claim. Thus simply reporting an experience of this kind may be sufficient to warrant the ascription of unfavourable attributes to the individual concerned

In extracts (8) to (12) the speakers provide not only an account of their experience, but also a vast array of information about themselves. From an inspection of precisely these materials a hearer may be equipped to formulate alternative versions of the claimed experiences. For example, in (8) the speaker explicitly reports that he had been thinking that religious conversion through an encounter with a numinous presence provides the experient with a degree of certainty for belief in God. His subsequent experience, however, was exactly that type of revelatory mystical encounter. On the basis of his own prior talk it would be entirely feasible for a hearer to draw the inference that the actual experience was a form of self-fulfilling prophecy: the phenomenon was the product of the speaker's implicit wish to have an objective and external verification of his faith. A similar explanation could be produced for the experience of the speaker in extract (9): it was a manifestation of his anxiety and stress. In extracts (10) and (11) the speaker's perception of her husband's apparition can be 'explained' by reference to the shock resulting from sudden bereavement. Her first experience of his presence occurred directly after being informed of his accident; the later event happened while she was watching a video of the funeral service. In this account she explicitly mentions that she was distressed. Finally, in (12) the speaker states that his experience happened during a period of serious illness. From this it is possible to infer that this was the product of an illness-related delirium, and



not an external phenomenon. In each case then, the speaker has furnished materials which could be cited as the warrant to dismiss the claim to have experienced something supernatural.

The provision of the state formulation, however, allows the speaker to do pragmatic work to minimize this possibility. Firstly, by describing the routine circumstances speakers ensure that the first reference to the actual phenomena is not introduced directly after the speaker's prior talk. Thus the material which could support a damaging conclusion about the speakers' credibility is not allowed to stand as an immediate sequential context for the first explicit reference in the account to the speaker's first report of their awareness that something strange was happening. Secondly, in these extracts the speakers have reformulated their own talk so as to provide for the routine character of their circumstances. By emphasising the everyday features of their circumstances at the time they delete or transform precisely those materials from which a sceptical interpretation could be drawn. Finally, in ordinary conversation formulations can be challenged. Recipients can disagree with the assessment that their co-participants make, and these disagreements can be aired in the turn taking system through which every day talk in interaction is managed. However, in the production of lengthy accounts, the turn taking system is temporarily abandoned, and the speaker has free reign to speak until she has finished. Thus there is no next turn in which the accuracy or validity of a gist or an upshot can be questioned. Consequently, those state formulations which are constructed so as to re-characterise the preceding talk are, for all *practical* purposes, definitive readings of the speaker's own prior talk.

We can begin to see that state formulations display delicate design features, and that they are organised with respect to pragmatic and inferential tasks. In subsequent sections I want to focus on pragmatic resources which are made available by the *two-partedness* of the 'X' when Y' device. But first it is necessary to illustrate some aspects of the relationship between the two parts.

### **The sequential implicativeness of state formulations**

Jefferson (1984b) analyses conversational materials to reveal the way in which speakers use 'mm hm' as a minimal token of encouragement to propose that a current speaker should continue talking. In the following data co-participants display their recognition of that the provision of the 'X' component implicates the provision of a 'Y' component by

interjecting a minimal token of continuation or encouragement, 'mm hm', after the first part of the format.<sup>5</sup>

(13) RF 21 The speaker is reporting an experience which happened while she was working late one night.

1 S and ur: I've got a pi:le  
2 (.4)  
3 of er envelopes to file  
4 (.5)  
5 and I was down X  
6 (1)  
7 right down  
8 (.5)  
9 bending down.  
10 I hm  
H\_Z\_H\_\_\_\_\_h\_ã\_011  
Sand I thought this other lass Y  
12 there were only two of us  
13 working over ristine  
4 (.5)  
15 hhh an' I thought  
16 (1)  
17 this this  
18 (.7)  
19 uh a peculiar sensation  
20 that she wanted to come by

(14) RIW 1:7 132-137

132 and we were contemplating our state of mind X  
133 at about two o'clock in the morning  
134 (.)  
135 I mm hm  
136 S three of us (.4) looked out across the Y  
137 north (charkum)

(15) NB:IV:10:R:20-21:Standard Orthography

15 L th An:d the |wind was so ba:d that  
16 the the th- (.) the branches were  
17 hitting the ho:se and (.) God (.3)  
18 \*uh:: I got up abou:t (.) X  
19 |well it was about ei:ght o'clock,  
20 E M m -:hm:  
21 L hh -and HERE HE'S UP THERE s:awing tho:se Y  
22 o:ff you know?

Furthermore, speakers design the 'X when Y format to implicate the *contingency* of one event upon another. When constructing routine state formulations speakers have choice between verb

tenses. They can employ an 'active' present tense, as in 'walking, 'looking' and 'standing', or they can use a 'passive' past tense, as in 'walked', 'looked' and 'stood'. The former tense preserves the active, on-going quality of the action being described, a character which is lost when a passive tense is used to refer to an activity. In the following data speakers display a preference for the use of one tense over another.

(16) ND 22:162 1-6

1 I had the teapot in my hand like this  
2 and I walked through the kitchen door  
3 (.)  
4 **X** hhh as I was going through the doorway  
5 (.7)  
6 **Y** I was just (.) jammed  
7 against the doorpost

(17) EM A 10:86 The speaker is reporting an experience which happened while she was on a public demonstration.

1 but my experience was  
2 I got to a certain point in  
3 the (.3) circle s:circle and the chant  
4 **X** we kept going round slowly  
5 in a circle without stopping  
6 **Y** hh all of a sudden

In extract (16) the speaker formulates the activity 'walked through' which is then displaced by 'was going through'. In (17) the speaker replaces 'I got to a certain point in the s:circle' with 'we kept going round'. In both extracts the speakers provide two consecutive utterances which address ostensibly with the same issue - their activity at the time; and in both instances the information in the first version is repackaged in the second. The reformulated versions, however, employ active past tenses, whereas the first versions are constructed through passive tenses.

The following extract comes from Hufford's (1982) investigation of 'Old Hag' phenomena; note that the speaker produces two versions of his initial perceptions of the onset of the experience.

I'd come back from a lab of some sort, I had so many I'm not sure which one it was, and now i crashed....That was

approximately four o'clock in the afternoon, I was really  
dad tired. I was really dead tired, I fell into a very  
deep sleep that day....I remember, you know, it was a  
really deep sleep.

[1] But what woke me up was the door slamming. "OK." I  
thought, "It's my roommate," you know, my roommate came  
into the room....[2] I was laying on my back, just kind  
of looking up. And the door slammed and I kinda opened my  
eyes. I was awake. Everything was light in my room.  
(Hufford, 1982: 58; original emphasis.)

Here the speaker begins to describe his experience: 'But what  
woke me up...' to 'my roommate came into the room'. He then  
pauses (indicated by the consecutive full stops), after which  
he repeats this information, but now presented in the 'X when  
Y' format: 'I was laying on my back, just kind of looking up.  
And the door slammed...' Note that the speaker uses active  
rather than passive tense selections: 'laying' and 'looking'.

Routinely, active past tense are not employed unless the  
speaker wants to draw attention to some other event which  
occurred while the activity described by the verb was itself  
taking place. An active past tense clearly displays that the  
activity described in this way is contingent upon some other,  
as yet unstated occurrence. In the next section we will see  
how this feature of the design of state formulations may be  
pragmatically exploited.

### **Normalizing the paranormal**

In an earlier chapter we examined an extract to show how the  
speaker's descriptions of her response to manifestations of an  
anomalous noise were designed to reveal her to have had normal  
reactions to a strange event. The sequential implicativeness  
of the two parts of the format can also be exploited by  
speakers to attend to similar normalizing work. In the  
following extract the speaker produces a state formulation,  
but then, instead of making an explicit reference to a  
paranormal event, she refers to apparently normal happenings.

(18) EM B 10

1 S I mean a simple example which  
2 everybody's had something similar  
3 to hhhh I was living in uhm (.)  
4 inglan years ago:  
5 and all of a sudden  
6 X I was sitting in bed one night (.)  
7 getting ready to go to sleep  
8 Y and I decided to write to a friend  
9 I hadn't seen for four years (.)

10 in Massachusetts (.) a:nd  
11 I found myself congratulating her  
12 on (.) the engagement of her oldest  
13 daughter (.3) I said congratulations  
14 Marion's getti- Marion's gotten  
15 engaged

We have seen that, so far, the second part of the 'X when Y' device is used to refer to something paranormal or extraordinary; yet, deciding to 'write to a friend' is hardly the same class of event as, for example, seeing an apparition of a recently deceased spouse. This extract seems to provide a counter-example to the pattern established throughout this chapter. It transpires, however, that the speaker had had a premonition of the engagement, in that knowledge of her friend's daughter was acquired before an engagement had been announced.

In the following data there are further examples of the way that the second part of the device can be used to report something seemingly inconsequential. And, as in extract (18), it subsequently transpires that there is something anomalous about the events reported.

(19) EM B 1:21

1 another experience is uhm: (.7)  
2 I had read Jonathon Livingstone Seag'l (.)  
3 and all of a sudden  
4 my friend Jenny in Boston  
5 Massachusetts came to mind  
6 I >sa- I must< get this (.) h  
7 book to her she'd lo:ve  
8 thi:s boo:k and for some  
9 reason I couldn't get her  
10 out of my mind I hate writing  
11 letters I hate (.) particularly  
12 sending anything in the mail  
13 packaged overseas 'cos you gotta  
14 (s-) p(ep)- tape it so we:ll  
15 an' hh I bumble the practical  
16 things I hate all that stuff  
17 h but anyway I managed to  
18 get down the post office  
19 I got the book I I wrapped  
20 it up properly I got all the  
21 sta:mps and to me that was a

22 gr:ea:t effort h (.3)  
23 X and just as I was giving  
24 it to the man at the post office  
25 he knew me (.5)  
26 Y he said oh by the wa:y er  
27 we have package from<sup>6</sup> you from America

(20) RF 21

1 S and ur: I've got a pi:le  
2 (.4)  
3 of er envelopes to file  
4 (.5)  
5 and I was down X  
6 (1)  
7 right down  
8 (.5)  
9 bending down.  
10 I  
hm  H\_Z\_H h\_ã\_011  
S and I thought this other lass  
Y  
12 there were only two of us  
13 working over  
ristine  
4  
(.5)  
15 hhh an' I thought  
16 (1)  
17 this this  
18 (.7)  
19 uh a peculiar sensation  
20 that she wanted to come by

(21) AV 1 4:39

1 my husband and I  
2 had a shoe repair shop  
3 and we lived above it (.5)  
4 the kitchen was downstairs (.)  
5 and we (.3) had a room (.)  
6 at the back also (.4)  
7 on one occasion  
8 X I opened the kitchen door  
9 that led to the hall  
10 (.)  
11 and the doorway into the shop  
12 (.7)  
13 Y an' I saw a man in a white  
14 coat go up stairs

In each of these cases there is a normal event reported in the 'Y' component of the device. The speaker then goes on to reveal that there was a mystery in each of these normal circumstances. In (19) the package the speaker received turns out to be from her friend in Boston, and contains a pendant related to the book she was posting. In (20) the 'other lass' that the speaker thought wanted to come past turned out, at the time of the experience, to be on the other side of the building. Furthermore, the other person had exactly the same experience at the same time as the speaker. And in (21) the speaker reports seeing a man in a white coat go up the stairs. She thought originally that her husband had allowed a customer to use the toilet facilities in the flat, but he later denied having let anyone through the shop entrance.

In these 'Y' components the speakers produce the type of description which resembles a 'first thought' formulation of their reaction to the event. This portrays their assumption at the time that the events they were observing were normal. A recipient can infer, however, that the routine events represented by these 'first thought' descriptions are not all they seem to be: the sequential organisation of the device invites analysis of the event or state of affairs in the '...when Y' component. From this a recipient can arrive at the conclusion that the events so described must have some feature, not yet reported explicitly, which accounts for inclusion as 'when Y' components: namely, some extraordinary character which is so far veiled, or merely hinted at.

Jefferson's (1984a) analysis of the 'At first I thought...but then I realised...' device revealed that it allowed *speakers* to mark explicitly that their first thoughts were incorrect. In the device examined here, however, speakers introduce their first thoughts so as to invite the *recipient* to find that these are in some way inaccurate. By exploiting the organisational features of the device the speakers are relieved of the sensitive task of claiming explicitly that the events being reported are paranormal, while at the same time allowing the recipient to inspect their description to come to precisely that conclusion.<sup>7</sup>

### **Contrasting the normal with the paranormal**

It is not only though the design of state formulations that speakers can provide for the sense of their own normality: similar inferential tasks can be addressed by exploiting the contrast between the two parts of the 'X then Y' device. In the examples we have seen so far, the two parts of the format

permit speakers to describe first the 'normal' and then the 'paranormal'. From extracts (1), (5) and (8) respectively:

6 X as I was going through the kitchen door  
7 (.7)

8 Y I was just (.) jammed against  
9 the doorpost

4 X and I was looking at the coffin  
5 Y and there was David standing there

19 X I were just thinkin'  
20 (.3) er:m  
21 Y and then suddenly I was aware of  
22 (.7)  
23 almost (.) the sensation was  
24 almost as if a veil was lifted

The use of contrast pairs has been investigated in a variety of occasions of natural language use. For example, they occur regularly in political speeches (Atkinson 1984a; Heritage and Greatbatch, 1986), in market pitchers' selling techniques (Pinch and Clark, 1986), and in an account of mental illness (Smith, 1978). These studies have shown the various ways in which the contrast structure is employed as a persuasive device. In political speeches, for example, it is found that these devices are often followed by audience applause; in selling techniques, the contrast device is use to highlight the quality and value of the goods on offer.

In the data we have considered so far the speakers use the two parts of the 'X then Y' device to describe an ordinary activity which is interrupted by something truly extraordinary. The juxtaposition of these images furnishes the basis for inferential work by which the character of each component is affirmed in relation to the other. Thus the everyday character of the state formulation is inferentially available by virtue of the contrast to what happened next, while the strangeness of the phenomenon is made inferentially available through its juxtaposition to the everyday and routine.

So far I have argued that the mundane environment for extraordinary experiences is actively constructed by speakers in their state formulations. In these section we have begun to see that these utterances may be, at least in part, designed with a view to moral and inferential considerations generated in the course of making a verbal report of an anomalous experience, and by wider cultural conventions associated with claims of this type. In the next section we will see how speakers attend to these issues by exploiting organisational resources made available by the 'I as just doing X...when Y' device.



### Insertions in the 'I was just doing X...then Y' device

In this section we will consider materials in which speakers begin the first part of the 'X when Y' device, but do not then move directly to the second part. Instead, either they extend their state formulation, or introduce new material, before completing the device with a reference to the paranormal phenomenon, or what turns out to be an anomalous event. So, these are occasions in which speakers disrupt the device by *inserting* material between the 'X' and 'Y' components.

In the following data the speakers insert information which attends to four broad interactional goals relevant to making a report of a paranormal experience:

- [a] to constitute the 'paranormal' character of the event
- [b] to highlight that their circumstance at the time allowed them to perceive the phenomenon clearly;
- [c] to provide an account or warrant for their being in the 'right place' at the 'right time' to observe the event, and
- [d] to demonstrate their alertness in circumstances which might otherwise be taken to imply a loss of sentience.

#### [a] Constituting the paranormality of the event

In the following two extracts the speakers insert material which deals with another person who was present at the time of the experience.

(22) EM A 286 The speaker has been trying to differentiate between forms of mediumistic powers, drawing a distinction between 'mere' psychic abilities and 'true' clairvoyance. To illustrate her argument she is reporting her experience of a recurrent noise, which only she had been able to hear.

- 1           one night however a friend was with me (.)  
2   **X**    and we're just sitting watching the tele  
3           (.3)  
4   **ins.** and she was also very psychic  
5           a:nd urm  
6           (1.3)  
7   **Y**    its (.) th-the s:ound started  
8           the litt(le)m musical (s) tu-  
9           s::ound started again (.3) and uhm: (.)  
10          >she said what's THaght<  
11          >I said OH (.) have you heard it< (.)  
12          ah(s) >oh that's wonderful  
13          you're the first person who's

14 heard it besides me<

(23) RF 21

1 S and ur: I've got a pi:le  
2 (.4)  
3 of er envelopes to file  
4 (.5)  
5 X and I was down  
6 (1)  
7 right down  
8 (.5)  
9 bending down.  
10 I  
hm 1  
S and I thought this other lass  
12 **ins.** there were only two of us  
13 working over  
ristine  
4  
(.5)  
15 Y hhh an' I thought  
16 (1)  
17 this this  
18 (.7)  
19 uh a peculiar sensation  
20 that she wanted to come by

In (22) the speaker inserts the information 'and she was also very psychic' (line 4). The identification of the friend as psychic provides an understanding of how she was able to hear the noise: a recipient can search this description to find that her perception was due to the friend's special abilities. After reporting the friend's reaction the speaker makes it explicit that she to can hear the sound. By aligning herself with her psychic friend, she makes available the inference that she could hear it by virtue of her clairvoyant powers.

The paranormal character of the episode hinges upon the friend's perception of the sound, and the implication that she was able to do so on account of psychic powers, the kind of which are also possessed by the speaker. Up until the time of the event, however, there would have been no warrant to describe the friend in terms of this one special characteristic. Indeed, it is a somewhat peculiar description to use when referring to someone who has been described immediately before as doing something as ordinary as 'watching the tele'. By introducing the friend's psychic powers into the account prior to any reference to the noise in the second part of the format, the speaker is able to provide materials from an analysis of which a recipient can come to the conclusion

that the noise was paranormal.

Similarly, in (23) the speaker begins the second part of the 'X then Y' sequence but then interrupts herself to remark that there was one other person working late that night. This information substantiates the paranormality of the speaker's sensations, insofar as it is subsequently revealed that the sensation that someone was behind her occurred while the other person was in another part of the building. Equally, the speaker would not at that time of the experience have identified the significance of there being only one other person working in the building at that time.

[b] Warranting the observation of phenomena

Through these insertions speakers address the possibility that the veracity of their accounts may be questioned by an inquiry as to whether they were adequately positioned to have obtained a clear view of the phenomenon.

(24) HS 17

1           ah came home from work at lunchtime  
2           (1)  
3           an' I walked into the sitting room door  
4           (.)  
5    **X**    in through the sitting room door  
6           (1.5)  
7           an::  
8    **ins.** right in front of me (.)  
9           was a sort of alcove (.)  
10          and a chimney breast (.)  
11          like this (.7)  
12    **Y**    and a photograph of our wedding  
13          (1)  
14          came off the top shelf (.2)  
15          floated down to the ground  
16          hh completely came apart  
17          But didn't break

(25) ND 7:49 The speakers are describing one in a series of poltergeist experiences which were centred in the attic in their house.

1 S1    and then the disturbances started  
2           (2.4)  
3           the first thing we  
4           (1.3)

5 really noticed was: (.5)  
6 one night  
7 (1.3)  
8 in (.7)  
9 I would think September  
10 S2 yeah September -seventy six=  
11 S1 -September  
12 S2 =it would be  
13 S2 yeah that's right  
14 (1.5)  
15 X we were laid (.7) in the front bedroom  
16 ins. which was below the front attics  
17 (1.5)  
18 Y and we heard a noise (.5)  
19 like someone throwing gravel across  
20 a piece of (.) hollow hardboard

Through insertions the speakers are able to reveal that they were in optimum positions from which to see or hear the phenomenon. In extract (24) the speaker describes her position in relation to the site of the subsequent paranormal event. This information comes between the state formulation and the description of the anomalous behaviour of the photograph. In extract (25) the speaker inserts material to reveal that the bedroom was directly beneath the attic, the source of the disturbance he is about to report.

The following account comes from Hufford's (1982) research on the 'Old Hag' experience.

One night, everything was dark as usual and I heard footsteps on the stairs. This didn't surprise me at all----I wasn't amazed at anything. The footsteps came up the stairs. I looked around the corner, my bed was more or less in the corner and I could look out and see the stairway, and I saw a figure coming up the stairs and turned [sic] at the top of the stairway. (Hufford, 1982: 33.)

In this passage the speaker displays a self-interruption: after beginning to report on the sound of footsteps and his reaction to them, he then describes his location in relation to the physical layout of the house. Through this he is able to state that from his position at the time he had clear view of the area where the figure first became visible. As in the previous two cases of inserted materials, there would have been no warrant to make such an observation *at that time*; it is only by virtue of the occurrence of the figure that his position became significant.

The speaker in the next extract deals with the same order of

problem, but her inserted material shows a special sensitivity to the specific circumstances at the time of the experience.

(26) AN 17:31 The speaker is reporting one of a series of apparitional experiences. In this incident she first encountered the glow, reflected on the wall opposite, emanating from an apparitional manifestation on the wall directly above the spot where she lay.

1 but this particule(h) (er)  
2 it was- when ah had me he-  
3 u- (.) b- bedhead (.) at that end  
4 so the m- window (.) was  
5 behind me (we:r) so hh  
6 **X** an' (.) as I (.)  
7 was laid in bed (.7)  
8 yuh know (.) sort uv propped up (.4)  
9 >an ah thou(hh)ght< (.)  
10 **ins.** and it was dark (.) yuh know  
11 i(t) sws er: I hadn't me curtains  
12 drawn or anything  
13 **Y** hhh and (.) I saw this glo:w: (.3)  
14 on the (ws) got rea:lly (.3)  
15 glow (.3) on the wall up above<sup>8</sup>

The insertion in this extract seems, on first inspection, to work against the speaker. By making an explicit reference to the poor level of illumination 'and it was dark (.) yuh know i(t) sws er: I hadn't me curtains drawn or anything' (lines 10 to 12), she appears to raise the possibility that she could not see accurately, and thus may have misidentified something perfectly natural. Analysis reveals, however, that this insertion displays a particularly subtle design. The speaker initially claimed that she perceived a glow on the wall in front of her. Her subsequent inspection of the source of the glow revealed it to be an apparitional figure above her bed. Furnishing the information that the room was dark thus ensures that the recipient has material from which to infer that the speaker would have had little difficulty in seeing a light source reflected on a wall. The additional information that the curtains were shut addresses the possibility that the light source was merely a reflection from street lights, or the headlights of a passing car. Thus, as in previous insertions, this material attends to issues which could be used to support the claim that the speaker was mistaken about her experience, thereby undermining the validity of the account.

[c] Providing the warrant to have observed the phenomenon  
Claiming to have had a paranormal experience ensures that the witness is in a sensitive position, not only because of the extraordinary nature of such events, but also because they are rare. Being in the right place at the right time to observe such a phenomenon is itself a remarkably fortunate coincidence. The simple fact of such coincidence, however, can be used as the warrant to doubt the veracity of accounts of supernatural experiences. For example, it may be argued that that the sheer coincidence that someone should happen to be in the same place as the manifestation of a supernatural agency may be more economically accounted for by assuming that the experient was mistaken, or even that the story was entirely fabricated.<sup>9</sup> In the next two extracts the speakers were alone in the early hours of the morning at the time of their experiences; these circumstances make them particularly susceptible to this suggestion. Their insertions do not attend to issues unconnected to the sequence they disrupt, but instead embroider materials already used in the construction of their state formulation.

(27) YA The speaker in this extract is a policeman. He is reporting an incident which occurred while he was on duty in the early hours of the morning, driving through a local village to check a local school.)

1           it was:: (.) it was not a stop check  
2           on a night y'know  
3           yuh jus' drove past it  
4           we'd 'ad a lot of thieves (.)  
5           yu know a couple of years ago  
6           so (yus) (.) y' know (.)  
7           look for any strange vehicles really  
8           (1.3)  
9       **X**   un' driving fairly slowly  
10    **ins.** having checked the school (.3)  
11           on the other side of the road  
12           (1)  
13           er:m:  
14           (1)  
15    **Y**   un something caught me eye

(28) AV 1 100 The speaker has been providing the background for her experiences, which happened while she was working as a cleaner. She has just stated that she worked very early in the morning.

1           I got there very early  
2           in the morning simply because  
3           my mother was ill at the time

4 with cancer h  
 5 and I used tuh have to  
 6 nurse her so I (.3) got  
 7 there early to do the work (.5)  
 8 X hh as I went up (.) on of the staircases  
 9 ins. with all my cleaning equipment (.3) um::  
 10 (1)  
 11 Y a man (.) pushed passed me  
 12 (1) he was spirit it w-  
 13 or whatever you want to call it

In both cases the speakers use an 'occasioned' social identity - their work identities - as a resource by which to account for being in a specific place at the time that the phenomenon occurred. In (27) the speaker's state formulation is 'n' driving fairly slowly' (line 9); by inserting that he had checked the school he provides material which can be inspected to reveal why he was driving slowly just at the time that his attention was attracted by something which transpired to an anomalous phenomenon. Furthermore, checking a school late at night is the legitimate business of a policeman on a routine patrol. Thus he invokes responsibilities attached to his 'official', or occupational identity to sanction and warrant his activities and circumstances at the time of witnessing an anomalous event. In (28) the speaker's insertion embellishes her description of her state formulation by describing items that she was carrying immediately prior to the onset of the experience: 'with all my cleaning equipment'. The implements to which she refers in this description are the 'tools' of the cleaner's trade. By invoking her occupational identity as a cleaner she warrants being in the building at that time in the morning.

[d] Displaying sentience

Finally, we will look at data from previous sections of this chapter. In these the speakers' state formulations reveal that they were in bed at the time of the reported events. the inserted material defuses the inference that the experiences were results of drowsiness, or event entirely dreamt, and therefore not the product of external and objective phenomena.

(29) AN 17:31

1 but this particule(h) (er)  
 2 it was- when ah had me he-  
 3 u- (.) b- bedhead (.) at that end  
 4 so the m- window (.) was

5 behind me (we:r) so hh  
6 X an' (.) as I (.)  
7 was laid in bed (.7)  
8 ins. yuh know (.) sort uv propped up (.4)  
9 >an ah thou(hh)ght< (.)  
10 and it was dark (.) yuh know  
11 i(t) sws er: I hadn't me curtains  
12 drawn or anything  
13 Y hhh and (.) I saw this glo:w: (.3)  
14 on the (ws) got rea:lly (.3)  
15 glow (.3) on the wall up above

(30) EM B 10

1 I mean a simple example which  
2 everybody's had something similar  
3 to hhhh I was living in uhm (.)  
4 inglan years ago:  
5 and all of a sudden  
6 X I was sitting in bed one night (.)  
7 getting ready to go to sleep  
8 Y and I decided to write to a friend  
9 I hadn't seen for four years (.)  
10 in Massachusetts (.) a:nd  
11 I found myself congratulating her  
12 on (.) the engagement of her oldest  
13 daughter

In these extracts the speakers construct state formulations in terms of their position in bed: 'an' (.) as I (.) ws laid in bed' (extract 29, lines 6 to 7), and 'I was sittin' in bed one night (extract 30, line 6). Both speakers then provide additional information: 'yuh know (.) sort uv propped up' (extract 29, line 8) and 'getting ready to go to sleep' (extract 30, line 7). This material is designed to reveal that the speakers were awake: for example, 'getting ready to go to sleep' orients to a stage of activity prior to sleep; also, 'propped up' in bed is the type of position in which one might read, but it is less likely to be a position in which one might sleep.

### Conclusions

This paper has examined examples of one class of memory formulation, examples of which which were produced spontaneously in accounts of paranormal experiences. These formulations are constructed as a two part device, here identified as 'I was just doing X...when Y'. Through this device speakers provide a description of the routine circumstances of the environment at the time of their experiences, and also a reference to their first awareness of the actual phenomenon. I have argued that the fine detail of



these descriptions is not determined by a list of features which are stored within various cognitive processes, and thereby available to the speaker to be 'read off' at the appropriate place in the account. The analysis has tried to show that the routine, mundane character of the speakers' environment is constructed through speakers descriptions, and not merely reflected in them. Descriptive items are selected to provide for the everyday circumstances of extraordinary events. Also, the contingent relevance between the character of the paranormal episode and the state formulation demonstrates that speakers perform analytic work so as to build descriptions of their activities which mesh with descriptions of what the experience transpired to be. Moreover, in those instances in which speakers use state formulations to furnish gists or upshots of their own prior talk, they portray the most routine aspects of their environment, and thereby transform or delete exceptional or storyable materials.

The structural features of this device furnishes a range of resources, some of which we have examined in this chapter. Through these resources the speakers attend to local interactional issues which are relevant to making reports of paranormal experiences. The device was used to do normalizing work of the type first identified by Sacks (1984) and then developed by Jefferson (1984a). This was achieved both in the ways in which speakers constructed their 'normal' environment, but also in the way that the two-partedness of the device was used to highlight the contrast between the normal and paranormal. Furthermore, speakers exploited the two part structure by disrupting it. Analysis of these inserted materials revealed their design as items to defuse possible arguments which may have been adduced to undermine either the veracity of the account, or the reliability of the speaker. In short, the device is used for pragmatic work which is sensitive precisely to the possibility that the account might receive an unsympathetic or sceptical hearing.

We have seen that aspects of this format were first noted by psychologists studying recollections of political assassinations, although in these studies it was cited as evidence of the operation of cognitive facilities. Furthermore, we have seen contemporary examples of the use of this device in reports of extraordinary events other than encounters with paranormal phenomena. This suggests that the 'X...when Y' device is a constituent feature of the culturally-available communicative resources through which, in

the course of telling accounts of paranormal experiences, and other types of extraordinary events, people engage in a range of fine-grained and orderly activities. This elaborates, and in part accounts for, Neisser's (1982) observation that memory recollections of this type have a 'schematic' quality, and also display the character of 'conventional' items.

Finally, I want to make some remarks concerning the relationship between inner mental states, such as cognitively stored memory representations, and the social organisation of talk through which speakers produce conversational remembering. The analysis presented here indicates that such recollections may not be determined by the sorts of mental representations to which speakers have access. Even having some form of visual representation of an event does not, in any automatic sense, pre-establish the ways that the memory of it may be described. These recollections are a construction, the design of which is sensitive to inferential business generated by the activity of making a report of an extraordinary experience. In each case the very character of the memory is circumscribed by the interactional activities in the service of which it is being used. Therefore, the way in which these memories are organised may be answerable, not so much to cognitive procedures and mechanisms, but to the broader organisation of naturally occurring talk. These analytic observations suggest that what the behavioural sciences have hitherto taken to be essentially psychological phenomena may yet yield to forms of investigation which emerge from the study of the social organisation of everyday interaction.

## Notes

1 See also Pillemer's (1984) study of flashbulb recollections of hearing about the attempted assassination of President Reagan.

2 There is evidence to suggest that the speaker's formulation of her activity is done *in spite of* her subsequent knowledge that it transpired to be of consequence: in line 5 she begins to preface her reference her decision to write with 'all of a sudden', which seems to indicate strongly that the speaker had classified the impulse as significant in the light of later events.

3 The utterance 'and we were contemplating our state of mind at about (.2) two o'clock in the morning' does not lead directly to a description of the sighting. The speaker does appear to start a report of his first awareness of the phenomenon in that he identifies the area of land above which the UFOs were sighted. This area is significant for another

series of sightings, and the speaker then makes reference to this; consequently he fails to complete the second part of the device. Despite the absence of a fully developed example of the format, however, the description in lines 132 to 133 can be treated as a legitimate state formulation.

4 This extract has appeared earlier in this chapter. To avoid referring back to its original extract number, and to facilitate (hopefully) a more flowing text, I have decided to give it the appropriate consecutive number. This numbering practice will be adopted in other chapters where specific fragments are used more than once.

5 Parenthetically, it is worth noting that these minimal continuers were produced by three different participants. I am responsible for the one in extract (18); a UFO investigator sent me the taped interview from which extract (19) is taken, and Emma is responsible for the third.

6 I take this as a slip-of-the-tongue, and assume that what she intended to say was 'for you'.

7 Of course, this is not to imply that the recipient will necessarily believe that the event was 'really' paranormal. Using this device in this way merely allows the speaker to guide inference making procedures so that recipients can come to see that the event described in the second part does have some element of mystery attached to it.

8 This extract is particularly interesting insofar as the speaker provides two separate interruptions to insert material. In lines 8 and 9 she remarks that she was 'propped up', and then appears to begin a reference to her first awareness of the phenomenon ('>an ah thohhught<...'). Before going on to complete this reference, however, in lines 11 to 13 she discusses how dark it was in the room. We will return to the first set of inserted materials in a later section.

9 Collins and Pinch (1979: 245) note that this line of reasoning and argument - referred to as 'Occam's Razor' - has often been used by sceptical critics to explain statistically significant experimental results in parapsychology.

## Chapter seven

# Voices: Some inferential properties of reported speech

### Introduction

In this chapter we examine sequences in which speakers use reported talk in their accounts of paranormal experiences: words that they said, words that other people said, or reported dialogue between themselves and other people. In the following extract, for example, the speaker reports what her friend said, and then what she said, on the appearance of a mysterious noise.

(1) EM A 295

1           one night however a  
2           friend was with me (.)  
3           and we're just sitting  
4           watching the tele  
5           (.3)  
6           and she was also very psychic  
7           a:nd urm  
8           (1.3)  
9           its- (.) th-the s:ound started  
10          the litt(le) musical (s) tu-  
11          s::ound started again  
12          (.3)  
13          and uhm: (.)  
14          >she said  
15          what's THaght<  
16          >I said  
17          oh (.) have you  
18          heard it it<  
19          ah (s)  
20          >oh |that's wonderful

Before moving to a consideration of some of the inferential tasks addressed through the use of reported speech it is important to note that some of the data used in this chapter come from David Hufford's book *The terror that comes in the night: an experience-centered study of supernatural assault traditions* (1982). This is a study of 'Old Hag' experiences. These usually occur to people in supine positions, resting or in hypnopompic or hypnogogic states. A typical scenario may be: the experient hears footsteps approaching, and is then physically paralysed by a sensation of great weight or force. During the period of paralysis they may hear a voice saying things such as 'You know who I am', or 'You knew I would come'. The experience may be accompanied by visual perception of an entity. After a period of time the speaker regains

movement in one part of the body; the entity disappears, if it was visible, and shortly after the experient regains full mobility.

There are two reasons for using materials from Hufford's book. First, within the corpus collected specifically for this project there is a limited number of instances of reported speech. Preliminary investigation of these suggested a number of analytically interesting issues worthy of further study. For a comprehensive analysis, however, more data were needed, and in this respect Hufford's book is particularly useful. In the course of his research he collected a number of interviews which are reproduced extensively in his text. Furthermore, he states that he performed hardly any of the editing or 'cleaning up' operations which often accompany the use of transcripts of studies of paranormal experiences. Thus, although his transcriptions are not done to conversation analytic conventions, they are faithful to the naturally occurring organisations and ungrammatical 'messiness' which inhere in spontaneously produced every day talk. Secondly, his interviews were collected during the 1970's from people in Canada and the United States. Therefore, we may be especially confident of analytic observations drawn from materials collected from the United Kingdom and the United States. Moreover, by using data recorded on both sides of the Atlantic, we move towards a practice which is becoming common in conversation analysis.

For the purpose of analysis and ease of identification, sequences of reported talk will be distinguished by speech markers employed in fictional writing. So, for example:

```
14      >she said
15      "what's THaght"<
16      >I said
17      "oh (.) have you
18      heard it it"<
19      ah (s)
20      >"oh |that's wonderful"
```

Extracts cited from Hufford's book will be marked by the prefix 'HD'; the numbers after this will refer to the page in his text from which the extract is taken. For the purpose of analysis only, the extracts taken from his book have been presented in the format I have adopted for presentation of data, and do not appear like this in the original text. The punctuation of these extracts has not been changed, and do not

indicate any characteristics of speech delivery, as they do in the CA transcription conventions.

### **Preliminary observations**

In this section I want to illustrate the range of inferential activities mediated through the use of utterances which have been designed so that they are heard as reported speech.

(2) AN 1:4 The speaker is describing the first of a series of apparitions which appeared in her bedroom.

1 she stood there  
2 at the side of the bed  
3 (1.3)  
4 she had hand like this (.)  
5 and she was looking down  
6 at me like that  
7 (1)  
8 and ah looked ah wo-  
9 my eyes were open  
10 'nd I looked at her  
11 (.5)  
12 then ah jumped up  
13 ah sat up in hh  
14 (.3)  
15 ( )  
16 I just said  
17 (.7)  
18 "however did you get in"  
19 (.5)  
20 just like that

Firstly, the speaker is able to register her reaction: her surprise at being disturbed by the figure. That she asks the figure how it gained entry to her home implies that she assumed that it had overcome obstacles such as locked doors and bolted windows. This in turn shows that the speaker made 'normal' first assumptions about the nature of the intruder: that it was a human being, and not a paranormal entity for which locked doors would present no obstacle. The reported utterance also provides information about the appearance of the figure. So, for the speaker to have assumed it was a human being, it must have been particularly vivid, life-like and three-dimensional. This works to defuse the possible suggestion that the speaker's experience was the product of misperception; for example, mistaking the shadows of a dimly-lit bedroom for an apparitional visitor.

In extract (2) the speaker characterises her own utterance to establish some features of her reaction, her assumptions and the character of the apparition itself. In the following

extract the speaker reports speech which is attributed to someone else.

(3) HD 223 The speaker has just finished recounting an experience which occurred to her husband while he was living in a particular hut in the Samoan Islands.

1           And, well, what is  
2           even more fascinating  
3           about the story is,  
4           that he's telling  
5           the experience to other  
6           people and they said  
7           "Oh, that wasn't too  
8           strange an experience,"  
9           because they had heard  
10          it before from this  
11          particular hut.

In this account the utterance "Oh, that wasn't too strange an experience" (lines 7 and 8) is attributed to those people to whom her husband related the story. Presumably then, the speaker here is reporting the comments that her husband claimed had been said to him when he confronted other people about his encounter. From this extract alone we cannot know if the husband actually used reported talk in his account to his wife. We can note, however, that if the husband had used it in his account, then the speaker here has retained it in this subsequent retelling; and if reported talk was not used in earlier versions related by the husband to the speaker, then she has embellished the account in this manner.

The reported talk in this account serves to confirm the objectivity of her husband's experience: if others have heard similar reports from people staying in the same place, the husband's account is, in part, substantiated. This information is particularly useful to the speaker in her attempt to provide a convincing account. The confirmatory response of the original recipients, however, is a *collective* response, distilled from numerous reactions to the telling of the story. The speaker herself designates it as such by describing the utterance as one that '*they* said' (line 6). It is unlikely that the '*they*' to which she refers all said the same thing in these exact words. Yet the way they are produced in the account makes them hearable as words which were spoken at the time. Thus, not only then can we note that the speaker's choice of what words to report provides for the

veridicality of her husband's experiences, but that, in relating his account, she has 'worked up' her knowledge of the collective or general response to the account so as to *portray* it as talk which will be heard as something that happened at the time of the event. In the following extract the speaker uses reported speech to relay remarks which in fact could not have been said in this way.

(4) EM B 2:17 The speaker has just described an impulse to write to a friend to offer congratulations on the engagement of her friend's daughter.

1 she wrote back  
2 to me hhh in  
3 total chaos  
4 saying (.)  
5 "how the Hell did  
6 |you know"  
7 she started the letter  
8 huhh |hah hh she said  
9 "I received your letter  
10 at nine o'clock in the  
11 morning (.) and you were  
12 congratulating me on (.)  
13 Marion's getting engage:d:  
14 and I said what the HELL  
15 is she talking about hhh  
16 at twelve o'clock that  
17 morning (.) she walked in  
18 and announced her engagement"

The speaker's knowledge of Marion's engagement transpires to be precognitive insofar as, at the time of the impulse to write the letter, no one knew that there was to be an engagement. The revelation that the speaker's impulse was motivated by paranormally acquired information is introduced into the account as another's voice. It is not merely that the letter confirms the speaker's knowledge as somehow mysterious, but that this confirmation is reproduced as if the friend was saying the words which the speaker is claiming were written in the letter.

Finally in this section I want to note that the design of another person's reported speech can reveal a conspicuous 'fit' with the nature of the experience being reported.

(5) HD 177 The speaker is one of three young women who each experienced a series of phenomena in the house they shared. In this account the speaker is reporting an evening when she and a housemate came home and disturbed the other housemate while she was having a traumatic dream related to the experiences.



1       Joan and I walked into  
2       the house and Ruth's  
3       in the living room, um.  
4       asleep. And we awaken her  
5       when we go in,  
6       and she starts  
7       crying and bawling,  
8       "Oh my God! I'm  
9       so glad you all woke  
10      me up! I've been trying  
11      to wake up and get out  
12      of this room for so long  
13      and I haven't been able to."

In this case, the speaker's housemate may indeed have said something similar to the talk reported in the account; intuitively, though, it is unlikely to have been produced in precisely the way it appears here. This utterance suggests that the speaker has reformulated Ruth's response to the dream to emphasise the severity of the experience.

There are two points to be drawn from these preliminary remarks. First, reported talk can be used to address a range of issues regarding the credibility of the account into which reported speech have been introduced. Secondly, speakers may formulate information so that it can be heard as reported talk when in fact it is unlikely, or, in some cases, impossible, that the words so reported were actually said in that way. So, it is not merely the case that words were said at the time which may at a later stage be incorporated usefully - that is, for interactional purposes - into subsequent recountings of those events. Consequently, it is more useful to begin with the assumption that the speakers are designing certain utterances to be heard as *if* they were said at the time. Therefore, it is not accurate to refer solely in terms of reported speech; instead, we will refer to 'active voices' in the accounts.

In subsequent sections we will examine the use of voices in accounts to deal with issues which broadly concern the 'objectivity' or 'facticity' of experiences, and the substantiation of the 'paranormality' of reported phenomena.

### **Sustaining the objectivity of the phenomena**

One powerful argument which can be made about a claim to have encountered an anomalous phenomenon is that the experient was

mistaken, and that what she might claims to have seen was not *actually* what she saw. One variant of this sceptical position is to assert that the phenomenon was in some way the product of the experient's own imagination. In this section we will look at three ways in which speakers can undermine this claim. We will consider how active voices can be used to demonstrate that the phenomenon was observable by others; to reveal that the consequences or effects of the phenomenon were observable by others, and to confirm that an event or an experience was in fact anomalous.

[a] Demonstrating the observability of the phenomenon

In the following account the speaker reports what a member of her family said in response to the manifestation of a paranormal phenomenon. (It is noticeable that speaker describes the reported utterance as the 'kind of thing' which was being said at the time, thereby displaying her own understanding that these words may never actually have been spoken in the way that she reproduces them.)

(6) HD 208 The speaker is describing mysterious noises which plague the family home.

1 My brother-in-law  
2 used to get very, very  
3 upset and start  
4 cussing at this noise  
5 kind of thing.  
6 And just scream  
7 "now get the Hell  
8 out of here and  
9 leave us alone  
10 for a while,"  
11 kind of thing

In this extract the active voice displays that someone other than the speaker could hear the phenomenon. This demonstrates that the noise was not the product of the speaker's imagination, but was objectively available to (at least) one other present during the disturbances. (In this respect, also see extract 1.) Also, reporting a piece of talk as if it was said at the time presents an opportunity to describe *how* the words were said. In this utterance the speaker gives two descriptions of the way in which the words were delivered. The first refers to the general reactions: her brother-in-law 'used to get very, very upset and start cussing' (lines 3 to 5). When the speaker describes the words which she presents as an active voice, however, she uses the word 'scream' (line 6). 'Cussing' implies a mild form of bad language; 'scream', on the other hand, projects an more extreme form of behaviour. By upgrading the severity of her brother-in-law's response in

this way she provides inferences about the character of the phenomenon: that it was the type of event which could provoke an extreme response of this kind. Furthermore, this description of someone else's reaction to the phenomenon works to confirm the drama of the experiences. Furthermore, the way in which she portrays the active voice suggests recurrent manifestations of the phenomenon: 'leave us alone *for a while*' (lines 9 and 10). Thus, in that he makes a plea for it to cease, the brother-in-law's remarks are designed to be heard as directed to consistent features of the phenomenon. Finally, the speaker portrays a further character of the noise by reporting her brother-in-law's remarks as being addressed to the phenomenon. This suggests that the noise exhibited a discernible pattern, which in turn implies a controlling agency. The speaker thus provides for the understanding that is not that the noises were random, but occurred only in certain places and at certain times. Imputing a regular pattern and a discriminating agent serves to negate the charge that the family could have been merely over-reacting to rare but perfectly natural noises which occasionally occur in houses. This is further corroborated in the way that her utterance is designed to portray brother-in-law making a demand of the noise to cease disturbing the family. Such a request is only explicable if the experiencers had evidence of some displayed intention to cause disruption.

Hearing a mysterious noise is not the most dramatic of possible anomalous experiences: there are no physical objects or traces which can be observed, and thus the experiencers have little to which they can refer to demonstrate the severity of the experience and the effects it had. However, the utterance "now get the Hell out of here and leave us alone for a while," simultaneously provides information which warrants the inference that the phenomenon was 'out there' in the world, and also portrays the drama of the experiences.

In the following extract the dramatic nature of the experience is furnished by the speaker's preliminary description.

(8) AV II 10:85 The speaker is describing one of a series of encounters with a malevolent spirit.

1           tha:t night:  
2           (1.5)  
3           I don't know what  
4           time it was:  
5           (1.3)

6 my: husband (.) and I  
7 both woke up: (.7)  
8 with the mo:st (.)  
9 dreadful (.5)  
10 feeling of  
11 (1.7)  
12 hhh 11  
eing (nyrie)  
13 smothered (.3) but the  
14 powerful smell h and  
15 a blackness (.3) that ws  
16 that was (.2) blacker than  
17 black I can' describe it  
18 like (.) anything else (.)  
19 hh it was the most  
20 penetrating (.3) type of  
21 blackness hh  
22 and there was this  
23 (1.7)  
24 what I assumed to be th-  
25 the shape of a man (.)  
26 in a cloak  
27 (2)  
28 it was the most  
29 (.3)  
30 formidable  
31 (1.2)  
32 sight  
33 (1)  
34 my husband said  
35 "my God what is it"  
36 (.)  
37 an' I just said  
38 "now keep quiet and  
39 say the Lord's prayer"

Here the speaker invokes the urgency of the encounter by dealing with three features of the experience: the smell (lines 13 and 14); the 'blackness' (lines 15 to 21) and the description of the figure itself (lines 28 to 32). Immediately after this elaborate and evocative descriptive work, she introduces her husband's utterance 'my God what is it' (line 35). This establishes that he could see the figure, and also corroborates the description provided by the speaker. That is the severity of the husband's verbal reaction confirms that the thing in the room, and the associated sensations, were as powerful and alarming as the speaker had reported. This confirms the speaker's reliability as an accurate reporter of the event.

Immediately following the husband's utterance the speaker

reports what she said at that time. We will discuss the use of reported stretches of dialogue in more detail during a later section; we can note as a preliminary observation, however, that this sequence enables the speaker to characterise herself. First of all, by contrast to the shock registered in the husband's response, her subsequent utterance - now just 'keep quiet and say the Lord's prayer' (lines 38 and 39) - is controlled and calming. Furthermore, she displays that she knows what to do in circumstances such as these, and that this involves religious incantations. In reporting these utterances she establishes a contrast between her husband's reactions and her own, and thus emphasises her competence to deal with these events.

Finally, in the following data the speaker initially reports what the other person did upon experiencing the phenomenon: scream (line 9). Then she introduces dialogue which reveals that her colleague had had the same experience (lines 14 and 15).

(8) RF 3:28 The speaker has just described her experience of a presence behind her which she initially assume to be a work colleague. She discovered subsequently that there was no-one standing behind her to account for the sensation.

1 the next thing  
2 (.)  
3 I heard her say  
4 "ah shan't be  
5 a minute Mary"  
6 (2)  
7 so ah sai- uh I went to  
8 the end and she >(cch)< (.)  
9 and she screamed (.)  
10 and she went (.) to the end  
11 of her (.) block and I went to  
12 the end of my block hhh  
13 sh (s)  
14 "I thought you were  
15 standing behind me"  
16 >ah said  
17 "|well I've just had  
18 that sensation"<

In these data speakers incorporate active voices to confirm that there was something present in the world which could be observed by other people present at the time. Also, employing

a formulation of another person's reaction corroborates the accuracy of the speaker's description of the phenomenon. Furthermore, the use of other voices provides an environment which speakers can exploit to present materials from which favourable assessments of their behaviour at the time may be drawn: for example, that they acted calmly or rationally.

[b] Displaying the observability of the effects of the phenomenon

In the following data the speaker use active voices to establish that the effects of the phenomenon were noticeable by other people.

(9) HD 93 The speaker has just had an 'Old Hag' experience.

1 I was still sleeping in  
2 bed with my brother  
3 because we only had  
4 one bed for the two of us.  
5 And he told me one time  
6 that I was breathing  
7 very heavily. And in fact  
8 one time he said  
9 "What's the matter with you?"  
10 and when I looked over to him  
11 and moved my head, everything  
12 went, you know. And then  
13 my eyes were wide open.  
14 And I said,  
15 "Well I just had a bad dream  
16 or something."  
17 And he says,  
18 "What's the matter,"  
19 you know. And like I  
20 really didn't know  
21 what to say to him.  
22 He said,  
23 "You were breathing really  
24 heavy and just staring  
25 straight out into space,"

In this data the brother's comments refer to the speaker's strange behaviour (lines 9, 18 and 23 to 25). Prior to this extract the speaker had been describing an 'Old Hag encounter, which involved a physical sensation of being paralysed by an oppressive force. Here the brother's remarks are reported as being provoked by the observation of some of the consequences of the phenomenon which were displayed by the speaker during his experience. This reveals that the experience, regardless of its phenomenological characteristics, was accompanied by correlating physical and physiological events which were

sufficiently severe to arouse the concern of the speaker's brother, and to warrant his subsequent inquiries. We may note also that the speaker initially produces a paraphrase of his brother's utterance: 'And he told me one time that I was breathing very heavily' (lines 5 to 7). Immediately after this, however, he reproduces the same material, but now presented as an active voice. This suggests that the speaker is orienting a preference to introduce this material by the use of an active voice.

A further feature of this extract is that the brother is presented as being unaware of the causes of the effects which are being noted. This 'innocence' is repeated in the following two cases.

(10) ND 31:216 The speakers are reporting a series of poltergeist disturbances which they alone experienced, despite living in a shared house. So severe were the experiences that the speaker and his partner decide to leave the house.

1 S1 when we left the house  
2 we (re) talking to  
3 the lad who lived  
4 on the ground floor  
5 (.6)  
6 and he also had bought  
7 a house and he was gonna  
8 leave wasn't he  
9 (.2)  
10 S2 ah  
11 1 S1 and he said  
12 (1.2)  
13 "somehow the atmosphere  
14 in this house has  
15 changed"

(11) HD 199 The speaker has been experiencing a number of disturbances in her home. In this account she is reporting upon a meeting with two strangers in a bar.

1 So I went over and  
2 st down and introduced  
3 myself, and she said -  
4 the girl, there was a  
5 girl and a guy -  
6 She said  
7 "I don't know why,"

8 she says,  
9 "I feel something  
10 really weird from you.  
11 Like I know you're  
12 really upset about  
13 something. And you know  
14 I'm just wondering if  
15 it has anything to do  
16 with witchcraft or  
17 anything like this?"

In extract (10) the speaker reports the utterance made by a co-tenant: 'somehow the atmosphere in this house has changed' (lines 13 to 15). The co-tenant's innocence is displayed in that he is portrayed as not knowing specifically the way in which the atmosphere has changed: that is, because of the presence of the poltergeist. By reporting this utterance the speaker allows the co-tenant to reveal himself to be sensitive to subtle changes in the ambiance of the building; this not only confirms the events being reported, but also delicately evokes images of a haunted house.

At this stage in the account the speakers have described a number of specific incidents caused by the poltergeist. Sufficient information has been provided to warrant the inference that the root of the deteriorating atmosphere was the presence of the spirit in the attic. Thus the recipient arrives at the conclusion that the other voice is reporting contact, albeit unknowingly, with the effects of the anomaly. This relieves the speaker of the task of making it explicit that the phenomenon was present in the world to be sensed by others.

In extract (11) the speaker reports a lengthy series of utterances from a stranger. In the main part of this series the stranger reports that her 'feelings' lead her to wonder if the speaker is associated with any witchcraft (lines 9 to 17). The speaker's experiences, although particularly unusual, are not correctly described as witchcraft. In failing to identify the 'true' cause of the feelings associated with the speaker, the active voice is portrayed as being innocent of them. Insofar as this knowledge about the speaker is described as coming from someone to whom she has never spoken, it is itself indicative of a paranormal event: communication of information by extrasensory channels. Whereas in previous extracts the speakers report other voices commenting upon events which would not immediately sustain a paranormal interpretation - changes in the atmosphere of a house - in this case the other voice corroborates the nature of the speaker's experience while at the same time constituting a further example of the occurrence of anomalies.



[c] Using voices to confirm the paranormality of the event  
In extracts (8) to (10) speakers use an active voice to confirm that the effects of the phenomenon were observable to others, without a direct reference to paranormal agencies or causes. What is significant about (11) is that the other voice indicates that occult activities might be the cause of the effects which had been observed: that is, it furnishes an *explicit* reference to supernatural events. In the following extract the speaker uses an active voice to refer directly to the phenomenon which she had encountered, and in so doing confirms it as a paranormal experience: an encounter with a spirit.

(12) EM A 5:385 The speaker has just described an encounter with a spirit which occurred while she was in a state of meditation.

1 a week or two later  
2 I was at a seance  
3 (2)  
4 and the medium h  
5 s ws' a different medium  
6 came to me  
7 (.)  
8 and she said: ehm  
9 (1.3)  
10 she came to me late  
11 in the seance  
12 actually not immediately  
13 uhm sh- she came to me  
14 and she said  
15 "there's  
16 (.2)  
17 I just want to tell you"  
18 she said  
19 "there's ehm (.)  
20 you have and Irish  
21 gypsy gui:de

Finally, in the following account the speaker's experience is confirmed as paranormal by a friend.

(13) HD 186 The speaker is reporting an experience she had while staying with a friend. The morning after the night of the experience the questioned her friend about the history of the house.

1 she says  
2 "Did you feel something?"  
3 "Damn *right* I felt something!"  
4 I said,  
5 "There's a ghost up there."  
6 She says,  
7 "Yeah, we know.  
8 We didn't want to tell you  
9 because we didn't want to  
10 unnecessarily frighten you."

(Original emphasis)

In this extract the other voice is used to confirm that the speaker's assumptions about the nature of her experience were correct. Through the construction of the account in this way she portrays herself as arriving at a conclusion about the experience independent of any prior knowledge. It is only later that her assumptions about the experience are proved to be correct.

#### **Using voices to premonitor a 'mystery'**

In this section we will consider the way speakers use voices to provide information from an assessment of which a recipient can arrive at the conclusion that the phenomenon being reported is actually anomalous. This is most clearly illustrated in extracts (16) and (17); these come from an interview with a couple who were plagued by poltergeist disturbances. In the first extract the speaker is describing an occasion on which they first noticed that something appeared to be moving around in the attic above their bedroom. In the second he described their attempt to make a tape recording of the noise of something moving around.

(14) ND 13:91

1 The noise (.)  
2 was disturbing hh (.)  
3 Terry got out of bed  
4 un I said  
5 "it must be running  
6 between the rafters"  
7 (2.4)  
8 and it wasn't it was  
9 going diagonally across  
10 the room

(15) ND 24:175 9-25

9           on and on  
10          it would go  
11          (1.5)  
12          we tape recorded it  
13          and said  
14          "right we think  
15          we've got enough"  
16          (.2)  
17          switched the  
18          tape re(h)co(h)rde(h) o(h)ff  
19          (.7)  
20          following day we  
21          rewound it to play  
22          (.)  
23          over breakfast  
24          (.3)  
25          nuthing

In both extracts the active voice is used to report routine normal assumptions about the origin and character of the disturbances. In (14) the speaker reports that 'it must be running between the rafter' (lines 5 and 6). This invokes the image of the activities of a small animal, such as a rat, as the cause of the noises. This assumption is disappointed in the following utterance, however, when it is revealed that the noise of the movement did not follow the pattern of the rafters, but actually crossed over them. The speaker had previously described the construction of the ceiling, emphasising the sturdiness of the materials used, in particular the size of the rafters. An animal small enough to enter the space between the ceiling and the attic floor would have also been too small to negotiate the rafters. Thus, the recipient is presented with a normal hypothesis as the cause of the sounds, which is then shown to be false by the behaviour of the phenomenon. In extract (15) the speaker reports the joint decision 'we think we've got enough (lines 14 and 15) as an active voice. This reveals the speaker to have made normal assumptions about the character of the sounds: namely, that if they could hear them, then a tape recorder would also be able to detect them. However, it transpires that the noise did not register on the tape, and thus another element of mystery is woven into the account.

In these cases an active voice is used to present information which implies the *normal* cause or character of the phenomenon. An appreciation of the mystery of the event is cultivated in the manner in which these assumptions are then revealed to be

incorrect.

In the next data the speaker provides a more elaborate construction: an active voice is used to describe the expected outcome of the speaker's illness, during the period of which he experienced his encounter with an image of his deceased father.

(16) YB 2:10 The speaker is reporting what the doctor had told his mother earlier in the evening of the experience.

1           one day the doctor come  
2           'e said  
3           "well there's nothing more I can  
4           do (.) 'e:s: (.) y'know (.)  
5           you must prepare yourself  
6           for the worst 'e:s not  
7           gonna make it through the  
8           night in my opinion"  
9           'e said  
10          "'cos people become at  
11          their lowest ebb (.)  
12          during the early hours  
13          of the morning I don't  
14          think he'll make it"  
15          an 'e: says (.)  
16          "y'know (.)  
17          all you can do is hope"

In this account the speaker uses an expert's voice to permit the recipient to come to realise the significance of the subsequent experience. In this, the image of the speaker's father appeared and requested that his son 'let go' of life, succumb to the disease and pass over into the spirit world. The speaker screamed his refusal, the apparition disappeared and, eventually, he recovered.

The recovery is implicitly portrayed as remarkable in two respects. First, expert medical opinion - the active voice - proclaim the speaker's imminent demise; second, it is intimately related to his refusal to go to the 'other side' with his father's spirit. Thus, the encounter with the image is portrayed as being in some way responsible for the speaker's recovery 'against all odds'. Not only is this recovery unusual, but because it was due in part to the speaker's interaction with a supernatural agency, it acquires its extraordinary status.

Further 'scene setting' work is accomplished through an active voice in the following extract; this comes from the same poltergeist case as extracts (14) and (15).

(17) ND 4:28 In addition to their own rooms the speakers rented the attic rooms which were the source of the disturbances.

1 S1 we asked the landlady's  
2 permission (.) to restore  
3 the windows  
4 (.2)  
5 S2 yeah  
6 (.)  
7 S1 and she said  
8 (.7)  
9 "don't put glass in  
10 (.7)  
11 I want you to put  
12 plastic in"  
13 (1.3)  
14 this went against the  
15 grain for us but  
16 (1)  
17 fuh fifty pee a week

Here the speaker sets a mystery by emphasising the landlady's request regarding the windows: he produces her voice making this request. He draws further attention to it by remarking that 'it went against the grain' (of the speaker's preference for interior design), and by providing a reason for why they complied - the small amount of extra rent to occupy the attic rooms. At this stage there is no account for the landlady's unusual demand and the recipient is provided with a puzzle without a solution. By virtue of the nature of the account - a story of a haunting - the recipient can, at least, make tentative speculations that the mystery is somehow tied to the phenomenon.

It later transpires that the landlady was fully aware of the nature of the disturbances which occurred in the attic, and, furthermore, it is implied that she knew that the windows may be severely damaged if the attic rooms were renovated. One of the speaker's first experiences of the phenomenon was indeed a violent attack on the windows, the repair of which had only been recently completed. Thus the recipient is presented with a puzzle - why should the landlady make such an odd request? - which is subsequently resolved by the information that the poltergeist had a peculiar penchant for violent attacks on modernised windows.

In this section we have looked at some ways that speakers can use active voices to hint at the paranormality of events without making this an overt focus of their talk. In the following section we will look more generally at a set of resources through which speakers explicitly point to the anomalous character of their experiences.

### **Reported dialogue**

Earlier in this chapter we considered an extract in which the speaker reported a brief stretch of dialogue between herself and her husband which occurred at the time of their encounter with a particularly unpleasant hostile apparition.

(18) AV II 10:85:34-39

34 my husband said  
35 "my God what is it"  
36 (.)  
37 an' I just said  
38 "now keep quiet and  
39 say the Lord's prayer"

The primary feature of this sequence is that there are two active voices in the account, that of the speaker's husband and her own, the reported interaction of which permits her to display both the reliability of her initial description of the experience, and that the figure so described was indeed external to them both and present in the bedroom.

Reported dialogue thus offers a set of resources which can be exploited by speakers in subsequent retellings. Some of the structural and organisational features of these resources are illustrated in the following extract, which is taken from the conclusion of an account of a series of mysterious noises which had been disturbing the speaker in her home. Until this point in the account the speaker had not explicitly claimed that she knew that the noises were caused by a paranormal agency. Indeed, in chapter four we saw how she had described her earlier reactions to the noise so as to facilitate the impression that she initially assumed that a perfectly natural explanation could be found. In this excerpt, however, she goes on to provide information which clearly substantiates the paranormality of the experiences.

(19) EM A 307 The speaker is describing events which happened shortly after the manifestation of the noise.

1 so: about two or three  
2 days later (.3) ahr (.)  
3 I went to: a seance

4 (1.3)  
 5 the medium came to  
 6 me |almost immediately  
 7 and >she sed<  
 8 "|oh: (.) by the way"  
 9 (.2)  
 10 she >didn't know me<  
 11 she jus:t (.) came  
 12 straight to me however  
 13 'nd she said ehm (.)  
 14 "you know that ehm musical (.)  
 15 sound you've been hearing  
 16 in your |living room"  
 17 'n I dy(eu) h huhh hah  
 18 I just said  
 19 "ye:ah hh"  
 20 hhh and she said ehm  
 21 (.7)  
 22 "that was Da:ve (.)  
 23 a ma:n (.) who passed  
 24 over quite a lo:ng time ago"

Of interest here are the following three sections: the medium's initial utterance and the remarks leading up to it (lines 5 to 16); the speaker's subsequent turn (lines 17 to 19). and the medium's final utterance (lines 22 to 24).

[a] The medium's initial utterance

5 the medium came to  
 6 me |almost immediately  
 7 and >she sed<  
 8 "|oh: (.) by the way"  
 9 (.2)  
 10 she >didn't know me<  
 11 she jus:t (.) came  
 12 straight to me however  
 13 'nd she said ehm (.)  
 14 "you know that ehm musical (.)  
 15 sound you've been hearing  
 16 in your |living room"

The medium's utterance here is designed to be heard as mysterious, and this is achieved partly through the

description of the circumstances in which it was delivered. Firstly, the medium is reported as moving towards the speaker 'almost immediately (line 6), thus implying that the motivation for such an approach was at least urgent. The speaker then begins to report the medium's first remarks '"oh (.) by the way"' (line 8).<sup>1</sup> Instead of completing this utterance, however, the speaker interrupts her report of the medium's talk to introduce information regarding the relationship between them, and she makes it plain that they did not know each other. The speaker's next utterance reiterates the directness of the medium's approach (lines 11 to 12). This sets up a puzzle: why did the medium approach the speaker with such urgency, especially as they were not acquainted?

By describing the circumstances in which the medium approached her, the speaker has made it clear that she is going to report what the medium said. The way that these circumstances have been described, however, already provides information about the forthcoming utterance. That is, it is not customary to dwell upon, and elaborate, the circumstances surrounding the provision of an utterance which deals with routine, everyday matters. The warrant for reporting the urgency of the medium's approach, and the explicit reference to any relationship between the speaker and the medium, is a direct consequence of the information subsequently imparted to the speaker. That is, these features of the circumstances merit a reportable status only by virtue of what happened next. By introducing this information the speaker generates an expectation about the unusual character of the information the medium wants to reveal.

The medium's actual utterance substantiates the mystery which has been introduced by the scene setting work of the speaker's prior descriptions. The reference to the phenomenon which the speaker had been experiencing has an unequivocal character which itself borders on the extraordinary. This is provided for by two features of the medium's remarks. The medium is depicted as referring directly to the phenomenon: she is not portrayed as if she was unsure whether the speaker had had any encounters with strange noises, nor does she qualify her knowledge of the phenomenon. The phrase 'you know' establishes that there is some knowledge common to them both; it is not designed to depict the medium establishing the speaker's recognition, but rather to allow her to display her affiliation with the speaker in their knowledge of these experiences. Also, the speaker has designed the medium's description of the phenomenon to be remarkably similar to earlier version provided by the speaker herself. Indeed, the reference to the 'musical sound' in the living room is almost exactly the same as an earlier reference. Thus the upshot of



this utterance is that the medium is seen to be intimately familiar with the specific details of the speaker's experience.

The way that this sequence has been constructed provides the grounds for the recipient to draw the inference that the medium's remarks, are, to a degree, a revelation to the speaker. Despite not knowing her, she has approached the speaker directly and displayed her detailed knowledge about her experiences, Again, a puzzle is posed: how did she know ?

[b] The speaker's subsequent turn

17       'n I dy(eu) h huhh hah  
18       I just said  
19       "ye:ah hh"

In this section the speaker reports her rather surprised reactions to the medium's remarks, through which she accomplishes three tasks. The first feature of note is the way this reaction proposes the correctness of the medium's information. The speaker utters 'n I dy (e)' which is hearable as the beginning of 'I just (said)'; instead of going on to report her experience, however, she self-interrupts and laughs briefly. Although we cannot be certain, it would seem that this laugh is designed to be heard as a feature of the telling of the account, rather than as an indication of a humorous event at the time of the exchange being reported. Also, we can note that the provision of laughter in this place is not an idiosyncratic feature of this extract: in the following extract the speaker reports her mother's question 'why we you crying in the car', which reveals that her other know of an event which at that time the speaker had not mentioned to anybody.

(20) WS 5:58

1       and sh:(h)e: sai(h)  
2       "well (.) why were  
3       you crying in the car"  
4       (.7)  
5       an' I said  
6       "|what" hehh h

In this extract the speaker produces a slight breathy laugh (line 6) as part of her response to her mother's knowledge that she had been upset. We may interpret this laugh as

encapsulating the speaker's surprise that her mother knew she had been crying. That is, it displays the speaker's response to receiving accurate information about events from someone who, logically, should have no knowledge of them. It displays the speaker's recognition that the mother's remarks correctly referred to an actual event. (Presumably, had the speaker received wildly inaccurate information, her report of her response at the time would include some remark to indicate that she did not know what her mother was talking about.)

With reference to the utterance in lines 17 to 19, the speaker's display of laughter orients to, and displays, her 'surprise' at the accuracy of the information she received.

We have previously noted that speakers orchestrate their descriptions to warrant the conclusion that they acted like any normal person might in the circumstances. This occurs in extract (19): the speaker has received dramatic news, and is responding as anyone might in that position. The warrant for the legitimacy of her startled reaction is that the medium knew of events about which she should have had no prior information. Furthermore, it is noticeable that the speaker's response does not explicitly confirm the accuracy of the other voice's utterance; alternatively, her 'ye:ah' (line 19) acknowledges that she is aware of the events to which the medium has referred, while at the same time returning the floor to the other voice. This provides the warrant for the speaker to report the medium's subsequent turn.

[c] The medium's final turn

20        hhh and she said ehm  
21        (.7)  
22        "that was Da:ve (.)  
23        a ma:n (.) who passed  
24        over quite a lo:ng time ago"

In this section the speaker uses the other voice to confirm that the cause of the experience was a spirit agency. The most notable advantage of using another voice to do this is that the speaker is relieved of the task of providing the information which substantiates her (hitherto implicit) claim that the events she experienced were something genuinely mysterious. Furthermore, the speaker depicts an occasion in which important information is revealed to her by another: that is, she portrays herself as the passive recipient of news, the incredible nature of which she is entirely innocent. Hence, her startled reaction is entirely appropriate. Displaying an innocent and passive reciprocity towards information which confirms the anomalous character of her experiences substantiates her attempt to depict herself as

behaving normally when confronted with an extraordinary situation.

The three part sequence can be summarised as follows: in the first part, the other voice presents information which is designed to be heard as a *revelation* to the speaker at that time. The second part details the speaker's *response* to this news. The final part of the sequence finds the speaker portrayed as a recipient to further information which provides the denouement of the mystery established by the first part (and, indeed, to the mystery around which the whole account has been based), and is therefore a *resolution*. This pattern is present also in the next extracts.

(21) EM A 5:385 The speaker has just described an encounter with what she assumed to be a spirit guide which occurred while she was in a state of meditation.

1 a week or two later  
2 I was at a seance  
3 (2)  
4 and the medium h  
5 s ws' a different medium  
6 came to me  
7 (.)  
8 and she said: ehm  
9 (1.3)  
10 she came to me late  
11 in the seance  
12 actually not immediately  
13 uhm sh- she came to me  
14 and she said  
15 "there's  
16 (.2)  
17 I just want to tell you"  
18 she said  
19 "there's ehm (.)  
20 you have and Irish  
21 gypsy gui:de  
22 and I jUMPed up which  
23 is inappropriate behaviour  
24 at a sea(h)a(h)nce un shouted  
25 ">OH I'VE SEEN< Her"  
26 (.7)  
27 un then I sat down and shut up  
28 and realised that she had  
29 come to me first and

30 this medium was confirming  
31 my experience

(22) WS 5:58 The speaker in this extract is partially deaf. She had just been to a specialist who had assessed the possibility of an operation to clear blockages in her inner ear. Unfortunately, the outcome of this meeting was disappointing. Directly after the meeting the speaker went to see her mother, and during the drive she became very upset. Not wishing to distress her mother, however, she decided not to mention the doctor's pessimistic verdict, but instead described only the routine features of the examination.

1 and sh:(h)e: h sai(h)d  
2 "well  
3 (.)  
4 why were you crying  
5 in the car  
6 (.7)  
7 an' I said  
8 "|what" hehh hh  
9 un e(h)r  
10 (.)  
11 she said she'd  
12 (.5)  
13 at the time that  
14 I'd been in the car  
15 park  
16 (.3)  
17 she'd had ah  
18 (.)  
19 an image um she said  
20 a picture but ( a  
21  
21 (.)  
22 meaning yu(h) know like  
23 an image  
24 hh of me sitting  
25 in the car  
26 (.3)  
27 crying

In both extracts the speakers construct this part of their account round the same three-part sequence: another's voice is used to present information which, at that time, is a revelation to the speakers. Their response is designed to be heard as a surprised reaction to the receipt of this news: in extract (21) the speaker claims she 'jumped up', an activity she herself describes as inappropriate (lines 22 to 24); in (22) the speaker exclaims 'what' and also provides a short breathy laugh, similar to that produced by the speaker in

extract (19).

Unlike the speaker in extract (19), however, these speakers do not employ an active voice to provide the resolution to the puzzle established in the first part of the device. In (21) the speaker reports that she came to appreciate more fully the nature of her experience through the medium's remarks; and in (22) the speaker paraphrases what her mother said. This indicates that the third part of the sequence need not necessarily be constructed with an active voice. It would appear that the primary function of this part is to be a vehicle for the resolution of the puzzle previously established.

In extracts (19), (21) and (22) the speakers use the third part of the sequence to introduce information which is particularly significant to the account. So, for example, in (19) the third part is used to reveal that the noise was caused by a paranormal agency, and so on. In each of these third parts the speakers are thus dealing with 'sensitive' material. Again, in (19), we have seen the speaker substantiate the paranormality of the experience: had she not legitimised the introduction of this information through the first two parts of the sequence it may have appeared that this was a clumsy and conspicuous effort to confirm that aspect of her account. Likewise, it is to the advantage of the speaker in extract (22) that she clarifies that her mother's knowledge of her distress was telepathically-acquired, but to do so without the warrant provided by her mother's startling knowledge of the incident would decrease the validity of her claim. In each case the speakers design these sequences to allow them to deal with information which is of crucial significance to the resolution of the account, or the description of a particular episode, but which could, in different circumstances, provide the basis for unfavourable inferences about either the speaker, or the validity of the experience they claim to have had.

There is one more way that speakers can exploit this three part sequence.

(23) ND 31:216 The speakers are reporting a discussion with someone who shared their house at the time of their experiences with poltergeist phenomena.

1 S1 when we left the house  
2 we (re) talking to

3 the lad who lived  
4 on the ground floor  
5 (.6)  
6 and he also had bought  
7 a house and he was gonna  
8 leave wasn't he  
9 (.2)  
10 S2 ah  
11 1 S1 and he said  
12 (1.2)  
13 "somehow the atmosphere  
14 in this house has  
15 changed"  
16 "u<sup>o</sup>:h really Gavin"  
17 ah said  
18 "when would you reckon  
19 |that happened"  
20 (.4)  
21 "oh about September"  
22 'e said

(24) EL 9:75 Shortly after the death of her husband, the speaker, accompanied by a neighbour, attended her children's school Christmas play.

1 when I came out  
2 and I was driving  
3 my neighbour home  
4 she said to me  
5 "I hope you won't  
6 be upset"  
7 (.5)  
8 but I think David  
9 was there"  
10 and I said  
11 "what made you (.3)  
12 think that he was there"  
13 (.7)  
14 and she said  
15 "because I felt him  
16 on my shoulder"

In both cases the first utterance is produced by someone who had no knowledge of the speaker's experiences, but is designed to be heard as a hesitant reference to the phenomena. So, for example, in (24), the utterance 'I think David was there' (lines 8 and 9) points to someone other than the speaker having direct contact with the spirit of the speaker's husband.

These utterances do not refer explicitly to the respective

phenomena. The other voice is not used to provide immediate confirmation of the experience; for example, by displaying a detailed knowledge of the circumstances of the experience. Instead, these utterances *hint* at the underlying phenomenon. In both cases, however, these remarks are not employed for this task; alternatively, speakers respond by asking a question which seeks confirmation that the other voice's remarks do indeed refer to their own experiences: in (23) 'u<sub>o</sub>:h really Basil...when would you reckon |that happened' (lines 16 to 19); and in (24) 'what made you think that he was there' (lines 11 and 12). In both cases the speaker had, prior to the report of these exchanges, previously described their experience of the relevant phenomena. Thus, the recipient has been informed that, at the time of the exchange, the speaker themselves knew what the other person is referring to. Despite this knowledge, however, their responses to the revelatory material are distinctly cautious and guarded. This has two interactional consequences. First, reporting this type of response permits speakers to display themselves as actively withholding confirmation of the phenomenon to which the other voice's innocent remarks refer.<sup>2</sup> That is, they reveal their decision not to exploit a legitimate opportunity to proclaim their own experience of the same phenomenon, and thereby confirm its independent existence. They display 'caution' about claiming explicitly that they have encountered something anomalous. Such a cautious approach would, routinely, be taken as indicating a hesitancy to accept or endorse a paranormal interpretation of the events raised by the other voice. By drawing the recipient's attention to this reluctance they exhibit that they acted as any 'normal' person might, and withheld their commitment to a supernatural explanation, or in the case of extract (23) a denouement, of the mystery referred to by the other voice. Second, they can supply the warrant to reproduce the other voice's further utterances, which in both cases deliver stronger evidence of the objectively-available and paranormal character of the phenomenon.

### **Conclusions**

In these data we have explicated some of the organised procedures by which utterances containing reported speech have been designed to display the objective and paranormal character of the experiences being reported. This has been accomplished in various ways: by revealing that other people were able to observe the phenomenon; by displaying that the effects of the experience were sufficiently enduring to be observed and remarked upon by others; by furnishing information which hints at, and thereby allows the recipient

to infer, some underlying mystery in the events being reported, and by presenting other voices as confirming the abnormality of the phenomenon.

By way of a conclusion to this chapter I want to discuss some issues concerning the speakers' use of stretches of reported dialogue between themselves and somebody else. This resource is interesting on two counts: conversation analytic research has focused precisely on materials generated through interaction between two or more parties, and thus should be able to help illuminate some of the events occurring in these data. Moreover, these considerations touch upon an issue which is of primary importance in sociology - the notion of intersubjectivity.

Alfred Schutz's writings on intersubjectivity are particularly useful. He asks the question: how can intersubjective understanding occur? For example, with regard to common knowledge of a physical object in the world, one person's perception of the object will be different to any other's simply because each act of perceiving will necessarily happen in different physical locations, thereby assuring varying perspectives on the object. Furthermore, the personal inclinations and motivation for looking at the object will vary between the two percipients. In what sense, then, can we talk of 'common knowledge' of the 'same' states of affairs? However, Schutz and Luckmann (1967) argue that this dilemma always remains abstract or theoretical because of the operation of two 'idealizations' or sets of commonly-available assumptions and procedures, by which these problems are *practically* negotiated.

First, the idealization of the *interchangeability of standpoints*. If I were there, where he is now, then I would experience things in the same perspective, distance, and reach as he does. And, if he were here where I am now, he would experience things from the same perspective as I.

Second, the idealization of *congruence of relevance systems*. He and I learn to accept as given that the variance in apprehension and explication which results from differences between my and his autobiographical situations are irrelevant for my and his, our, present practical goals. This, I and he, we, can act and understand each other as if we experienced in an identical way, and explicated the Objects and their properties lying actually or potentially in our reach. (Schutz and Luckmann, 1967: 60; original emphasis.)

Together, these two idealizations combine to form the general basis of the reciprocity of perspectives.





28       it was the most  
29       (.3)  
30       formidable  
31       (1.2)  
32       sight  
33       (1)  
34       my husband said  
35       "my God what is it"  
36       (.)  
37       an' I just said  
38       "now keep quiet and  
39       say the Lord's prayer"

We have already noted that this reported exchange reveals than someone other than the speaker also saw the phenomenon. What gives these utterances their power as an inference building sequence is the manner in which the idealization of the interchangeability of standpoints is affirmed, while the idealization of the congruence of relevance systems is disconfirmed.

The voices utterances are designed to reveal that, despite differing spatial locations, both parties saw the same thing. The husband's comment makes a direct and alarmed reference to the figure. The speaker's reported utterance obliquely confirms her husband's perception by orienting not to his question, but to the consequences of the apparition's presence for what they, as experients, should do. Thus, although she does not refer explicitly to the phenomenon, her utterance becomes meaningful by virtue of its appeal to assumption that both parties are witnessing the 'same' event.

In the discussion of conversation analysis in chapter three we observed that a fundamental resource for the analyst is the way that participants construct utterances in the light if their analyses of prior turns. Next turns display the results of this analysis, and thereby the producer of an utterance can make an assessment of the way that it has been interpreted. As a consequence of the public exhibition of the interpretative practices on which participants rely in their talk, intersubjective understanding - a combined orientation to 'what's going on here and now' - is procedurally accomplished in the course of the conversation.

These considerations are relevant to the analysis of stretches of reported dialogue in the following way: describing such exchanges portrays the 'publically displayed' reasoning practices which informed the dialogue at the time it was said. So, in extract (25), the speaker reports two very different reactions to the apparition: her husband's started exclamation, and her measured and cautious response. Thus, she

relies on two distinct 'relevance systems': for her husband, the figure provokes fear; she, however, displays her knowledge of and competence to deal with phenomena of this kind by reporting her essentially practical response. The upshot of exhibiting these diverse relevances is that the speaker provides a contrast - her measured reactions against her husband's more explosive outburst - which portray the calm and authoritative manner in which the speaker dealt with the apparition.

A combination of a Schutzian and conversation analytic appreciation can therefore illuminate the processes by which sequences of reported speech are constructed, and through which they can become powerful inferential devices. Schutz's idealizations may be exploited as *resources* in the design of talk which happened at the time, and are not merely a series of incorrigible propositions upon which participants rely to sustain intersubjective understanding. Moreover, the way that a sequence of exchanges will reveal the practical analytic tasks performed *in situ* by participants at the time may be further exploited in the pursuit of fine-grained inferential business.

## Notes

1 I hear the utterance 'oh (.) by the way' as designed to be heard as something the medium said to the speaker, rather than a digression instituted by the speaker in the course of telling the account. It isn't clear on the transcript, but the actual tape recording strongly supports this interpretation.

2 In the case of the speaker in extract (24) this seems particularly apparent. It later transpires that she had had the same experience as her friend at exactly the same time. intuitively, then, a more likely reaction would have been something like 'Really? So did I!'.

3 See also Pollner's (1987) extended discussion of mundane reasoning.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I want firstly to review the primary findings of the four empirical chapters. Then I will discuss some connections between the work presented here and some recent movements within psychology and sociolinguistics. Finally, I will sketch some of the implications of my analytic approach for parapsychological research.

The object of the analysis has been to describe the tacit communicative skills and practices which people use in their accounts to warrant their implicit claim that the experiences being described actually happened, and were not, say, the product of misperception, wish-fulfilment or psychological aberration. It is important to remember that the analysis was not concerned to discover how often these devices occurred; rather, the objective was to explicate the organisation of these devices, and to reveal the sorts of activities that may be accomplished through them. Equally, it is important to state that I was not concerned to gauge the 'success' or 'failure' of the use of these devices to achieve specific ends. Rather I was concerned merely to explicate the kinds of resources that they made available, and how some of these resources could be exploited by speakers. The analysis of such resources is not equivalent to, nor contingent upon, the analysis of their success.

In chapter four we examined a short descriptive sequence from one account. This analysis was informed by Jefferson's (1984a) and Sacks' (1984) remarks on the 'normalising' work which can be accomplished through utterance design. I argued that the speaker's description of her first experiences of a series of anomalous noises was designed to portray her 'normality', and especially to warrant the inference that she reacted to the

onset of these noises as any 'ordinary' person might do. It was clear that the description of the phenomenon was not simply a neutral report of some of its characteristics. Rather, I argued that by designing her utterances to attend to these inferential issues, and by fashioning her descriptive remarks to emphasise certain characteristics, the speaker was inevitably engaged in the business of constructing the phenomenon which she was reporting. The speaker was engaged in the moment-by-moment interactional construction of the phenomenon itself.

In chapter five I examined a device identified as 'I was just doing X....when Y'. Through this format speakers introduce into their account their first awareness of the onset of the specific experience or phenomenon. Through the design of the 'I was just doing X...' component speakers provide a description of their mundane states of affairs at the time. In contrast to an account drawn from cognitive psychology, which suggests that people can recall mundane and unmemorable circumstances *because they were disrupted by extraordinary events*, I argued that speakers design their state formulations to *portray* the mundanity of their circumstances at the time. I showed also how state formulations could be designed to furnish the gist or upshot of the speaker's own prior remarks. This allowed speakers to fashion a routine version of events and happenings which they themselves had described as being traumatic, exotic, and so on, information which could warrant the inference that the claimed experience was a product of the speaker's psychological condition, rather than a real phenomenon independent of the speaker. The 'normal' environment portrayed in the state formulation was also used to highlight the contrast between the normal and paranormal.

Furthermore, speakers exploited the two part structure by disrupting it. Materials inserted between the 'X' and 'Y' components were designed to defuse sceptical responses about the veracity of the account, or the reliability of the speaker.

In chapter six I described how utterances containing reported speech can be designed to display the objective and paranormal character of the experiences being reported. This was achieved by using reported talk to indicate that people other than the speaker had observed the phenomenon; by displaying that the effects of the experience were powerful enough to be noted by other people; by furnishing information which alluded to, and which thereby allowed the recipient to infer, some underlying mystery in the events being reported, and by using reported speech to confirm that the experience was indeed paranormal. Some of the organisational features of these resources were examined.

Finally, in chapter seven, we examined some features of a three part sequence through which speakers begin to describe specific episodes. In the first part we observed that speakers made an oblique reference to the experience or phenomenon about which they are making a report. Drawing on previous studies it was argued that the design of this reference portrayed the speaker's 'innocence', or lack of knowledge about, and 'accidental' experience of, the specific phenomenon. In the second and third parts of this three-part sequence speakers formulated a version of when their experiences happened, and thereby provided a narrative setting for their account. We examined the last two parts to identify some of the pragmatic work which was addressed through the design of these setting components, and also to explicate the kinds of organised resources being used.

In the analysis of the 'X then Y' device in chapter five I emphasised that the 'X' components, the state formulations, are versions of people's memories of their experiences. However, I argued that the nature of these versions are not determined by 'knowledge' or 'memories' stored by cognitive procedures which were activated at the time of the experience. Following Neisser, (1982) I argued that the design of mundane state formulations is informed by a cultural convention for reporting extraordinary experiences.

Within recent years there has been a burgeoning of research which explores the discursive and social dimensions of remembering and forgetting, and it is useful to situate the present work within this trend.

### **Language and memory**

In an recent overview, Middleton and Edwards (1990b) identify several major themes in studies of social aspects of remembering. They discuss, firstly, research on collective remembering; these studies focus on the 'social and relational dynamic of remembering together' (Middleton and Edwards, 1990: 7). A second theme is research on the social practice of commemoration, in which an individual or an event becomes the focus of intentional celebration, and is ascribed some historical or cultural significance. An example of this is Schwartz's (1990) study of the reconstruction of the character of Abraham Lincoln and his national importance in the United States. Middleton and Edwards note also that research on the social context of individual memory is an emergent trend, especially the ways that rituals, ceremonies or catechisms provide frameworks in which children and adults learn what to remember, and learn the social and symbolic importance of the

act of remembering. Analysis of the rhetorical organisation of remembering and forgetting, however, provides a framework in which to assess the broader ideological functions mediated through everyday discussion and arguments. Billig's (1990) study of conversations about the Royal Family, for example, focuses on ideological positions which inform the ways that certain issues and themes are remembered or left unarticulated. The interest in social or political functions served by collective representations of the past is pursued in the study of social and institutional dimensions of remembering. Perhaps the most recent example of the way that political functions can be served by the wholesale rewriting of history is the Chinese government's attempts to dispel the belief that large numbers of innocent people were killed in the Tiannenmen Square demonstrations.

Finally, Middleton and Edwards discuss research which emphasises that remembering and forgetting are social actions embodied in, and constituted through, the dynamics of everyday social and communicative practices. This approach is informed by discourse analysis, and 'orientates us to take people's accounts of the past as pragmatically variable versions that are constructed with regard to particular communicative circumstances' (Middleton and Edwards, 1990: 11). For example, Edwards and Potter's (1990) study of John Dean's testimony to the senate committee investigating the 'Watergate' scandal is an informative analysis of the contextualised and pragmatic work embedded in memory formulations.

I think that the analysis of the 'X then Y' device, particularly the examination of the design of state formulations, has much in common with this work, in that it emphasises the significance of socially-organised communicative practices, rather than some inner world of cognitive processes (see also Drew, 1989). It tackled a class



of memory formulations which are conversational instances of what are known as 'flashbulb memories'. Within cognitive psychology these are considered to be largely exempt from the distorting processes which are a normal feature of memory storage, retention and retrieval. However, the analysis revealed these formulations to be variants of a socially-organised device through which speakers attend to local, interactional tasks. That is, features of these memories, which have hitherto been seen as evidence of the operation of determinant cognitive processes, were shown to be constructed and constructive. This analysis, then, calls into question the assumption that discourse is a neutral medium through which inner cognitive states can, on occasion, become 'visible'. Furthermore, by focusing on the organised and interactional character of naturally-occurring conversational recollections, we were able to delineate some of the inherently cultural practices by which flashbulb memories were accomplished.

### **Language and social identity**

Throughout this research I have focused on the ways in which speakers describe aspects of their experience to occasion the relevance of specific social identities. In chapter four, for example, the speaker described her reactions to the onset of a series of anomalous noises so as to make relevant for the circumstances she describes, her membership of the class of 'ordinary people'.

(1) EM A 286

1           every time I walked into  
2           the sitting room (.3) er:m. (.7)  
3           right by the window (.3)  
4           and the same place always  
5           I heard a lovely (.3) s:ound  
6           like de|de|dede|dedede|dededah

7       just a happy (.) little tu:ne (.5)  
8       a:nd >of course<  
9       I tore apart ma window  
10      I tore apart the window frame  
11      I >did Everything<  
12      to find out what the hell's causing that

So, she claims she searches for the cause of the noise. This is a perfectly reasonable reaction to the sudden appearance of weird noises; indeed, it is easy to imagine that the occurrence of such an anomaly which did not precipitate a search for a cause would itself be a reportable matter. The search itself is described to portray the normality of the speaker's thoughts and actions in these circumstances: that she conducted her search with urgency ('I tore apart'; lines 9 and 10), and that it was exhaustive (I did >Everything<; line 11). As 'ordinary' people do not immediately come to the conclusion that every odd event is the product of supernatural forces, her identity as an 'ordinary' person is warranted also in the way she reveals that she looked for physical cause of the noise.

In the analysis of the 'X then Y' device we noted that speakers can occasion a social identity to warrant being in the same place and at the same time as the manifestation of a supernatural agency, a coincidence which itself could be cited to undermine the authority and reliability of the speaker. In one extract the speaker describes his actions to make relevant his *occupational* identity as a police officer.

(2) AY

1       it was:: (.) it was not a stop check  
2       on a night y'know  
3       yuh jus' drove past it  
4       we'd 'ad a lot of thieves (.)  
5       yu know a couple of years ago  
6       so ( \_\_\_\_\_yus (.) y' know (.)  
7       look for any strange vehicles really  
8       (1.3)

9 un' driving fairly slowly  
10 having checked the school (.3)  
11 on the other side of the road  
12 (1)  
13 er:m:  
14 (1)  
15 un something caught me eye

By revealing that he 'checked the school' (line 10) the speaker invokes the duties of his occupational identity to sanction 'driving slowly' just before he first noticed what turned out to be the manifestation of an anomalous phenomenon.

In these and other cases throughout the empirical chapters, we see 'identity' being used as a pragmatic resource. Speakers describe their actions to make inferable certain knowledge about them, knowledge which supports or to confirms the veracity of the experiences being claimed. The very identity of the speakers, their 'characteristics', 'dispositions', 'psychological traits', 'beliefs' and 'assumptions' are provided for, and inhere in, the pragmatic tasks for which these features have been made salient. Furthermore, these features are occasioned and mediated through socially-organised communicative practices.

This work shares concerns of earlier studies. For example, Drew (1987) examined the interactional management of teasing. He noted that the people being teased routinely provided a 'po-faced' or serious response to the tease, even on those occasions when they laughed, and thereby displayed their realisation that a joke had been made, and not a serious comment which required a similar return. Drew's analysis reveals that the design of the tease ascribes a mildly deviant identity to the teased party, or proposes that the teased party's behaviour is marginally out of the ordinary. In each

case then a 'tease-implicated deviant identity' (Drew 1987: 246) is ascribed by the tease. Furthermore, he shows that the basis for the ascription of this deviant identity rests in the materials provided by the teased parties themselves in their immediately prior utterances. In po-faced or serious responses, then, the speakers re-assert the validity of their remarks prior to the tease, and thereby actively counter the implication of the deviant identity established through the construction of the tease.

As a further example we can cite Wowk's (1984) examination of an account given by a man accused of murdering a woman. Wowk shows how, in describing the woman's activities, the offender constructs her identity as a 'slut' or 'tramp'. The man claims that his victim "propositioned me", and "asked if I would like to get laid", furthermore "she called me a prick a no good sonofabitch and threw what was left of a bottle of beer at me". In constructing this identity the offender is attributing some blame to the victim, thereby presenting himself as less blameworthy. Similarly, Wetherell and Potter (1989) analyse self-discourse in relation to the ways that potentially culpable actions can be mitigated. For example, they show that violent acts by the police can be mitigated in accounts by reference to their identity as 'only human'.

These observations, and this mode of analysis, have some important implications for traditional social psychological conceptions of the self. Whereas identities as aspects of 'the self' have been considered primarily to be relatively static properties of *individuals*, this analysis has focused personal identity as something which is discursively achieved. By this I mean that these identities are features which people can occasion as relevant in their day-to-day dealings with each other. Detailed inspection of the data has revealed some of the ways in which specific identities are made relevant, and

used by individuals to attend to broadly interpersonal issues arising from the likelihood that their claims will receive a sceptical response. We are, then, liberated from the assumption that the individual is a sufficiently static entity to permit measurement and experimentation, furthermore, this approach establishes as a field for study the analysis of the ways in which identities are contingent upon the dynamic and pragmatic character of everyday communication.

By addressing the issue of identity as a fluid and dynamic communicative resource, we forge connections with methodological and empirical issues in other social sciences. So, within sociolinguistics, some researchers have begun to argue that it is no longer appropriate to study 'social identity' as something which is fixed and independent of language, and which is merely expressed through a discrete and bounded range of communicative resources. In a critical analysis of the descriptivism espoused by linguistics and sociolinguistics, Tannen (1990) asks us to consider

the notion of speakers expressing a social identity. It is common currency among sociolinguists, but...do people really 'have' such fixed and monolithic social identities? Furthermore, is it correct to see language use as expressing an identity which is separate from and prior to language? To put the point a little less obscurely, is it not the case that the way I use language is partly *constitutive* of my social identity? To paraphrase Harold Garfinkel, social actors are not sociolinguistic 'dopes'. The way in which they construct and negotiate identities needs to be examined in some depth before we can say much about the relation of language to identity (Cameron, 1990: 86; original emphasis.)

Equally, in psychology and social psychology there is an increasing dissatisfaction with empiricist models of the self

and identity, and a growing rejection of the view that the self is a mental entity or cognitive schemata; these approaches are deemed to be neither tenable nor politically desirable (Gergen, 1987). In particular, the 'social constructionist' movement within psychology (Gergen, 1985) explores the ways in which identities are constructed in discourse and texts. This approach also examines in the ways that identity formation can be the site of political and ideological struggle. Kitzinger, for example, explores the liberal discourse which underpins the contemporary construction of lesbian identity, and argues that this identity is a form of regulation and social control (Kitzinger, 1987; 1989).<sup>1</sup>

These reformulations of the way that self and identity are conceived owes much to interpretations of Wittgenstein's (1953) work: he pointed out that the vocabulary of the mind (and self) is defined by observations of symptoms and not of mental phenomena in themselves. His philosophy emphasises that language is a part of an on-going social process: the uses of, and constraints over, the language of the mind and self are social derivatives which arise in human practice and are not immanent in the world waiting to be discovered (Coulter, 1979; Harre, 1989).

Within sociology the term 'social construction' has for many years been used to describe a variety of sociological research. It gained currency through Berger and Luckmann's (1967) analysis of everyday life in terms of the relationship between objective and subjective reality. More recently, it has come to be associated with the sociological study of knowledge, and particularly of scientific knowledge. Subsequently there have been studies of the social construction of institutionalised research into the paranormal (Collins and Pinch, 1979; 1982), the social construction of

marginal and rejected 'pseudo-sciences' more generally (Wallis, 1979), collections of articles concerning the social construction of technology (Bijker, Hughes, and Pinch, 1987), and studies of the social construction of the mind (Coulter, 1979).

It is this tradition of research on which I will draw to make some concluding comments. In particular, I want to consider some implications of the present research for parapsychological studies.

### **Language and the construction of experience**

In this research I have pursued broadly ethnomethodological lines of inquiry in the empirical analyses of actual accounts. The core assumption of this approach is that:

members' accounts, of every sort, in all logical modes, with all their uses, and for every method for their assembly are *constituent features of the settings they make observable*. Members know, require, count on, and make use of this reflexivity to produce, accomplish, recognise, or demonstrate rational-adequacy-for-all-practical-purposes of their procedures.... (Garfinkel 1967: 8; emphasis added.)

In their broadest sense, Garfinkel's insight attends to the relationship between language and the world, whether the world in question is one of social relationships, beliefs, patterns of normatively appropriate behaviour, attitudes, social institutions, social structures, and so on. What the world is - how it is conceived and the phenomena that populate it are - are the organised products of members' concerted practical activities to *realise* that world and those features. This realisation occurs in and through discourse. What have hitherto been taken to be the proper phenomena for the social

sciences, then, are inextricably tied to the reflexive and constitutive processes of language use, and the 'lay' procedures of practical reasoning, which, in every circumstance, inform that use, and are embedded in its products: 'descriptions', 'references', 'accounts', 'judgements', 'declarations', 'claims', 'explanations', and so forth. Any phenomenon can be investigated as a realised product of locally-occasioned practical activities, and the analyst may therefore attend to the orderly practices whereby that realisation is accomplished. Thus, the social scientist is permitted to analyse the 'molecular and sub-molecular levels of social structure' (Heritage 1984: 311) to explicate how the world-as-it-is-known comes to be known and recognised as *the* world.

The analytic themes addressed in the empirical chapters thus connect with Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingstone's (1981) study of scientists' 'discovery' of a pulsar; Pollner's (1987) research on the incorrigibility of mundane reasoning about a world 'out there'; Pollner and McDonald-Wikler's (1985) study of the practices whereby a family constitute the 'normality' of a severely retarded child; Pomerantz's (1986) investigation of some devices which reveal the basis for complaints to be independent of the complainant; Potter and Wetherell's (1988) remarks on the construction of an 'external' warrant for racists' comments, and Smith's (1978) explication of the procedures used in the construction of a factual account of mental illness. Broadly, it is a contribution to the study of the way that 'facticity' and 'objectively-available' features of members' experiences are constituted through and sedimented in language-use.

The reflexive and constitutive features of language use, however, are not 'sociological issues' - that is, products of the academic discipline of sociology, and, thereby, limited to



the research conducted within this domain. While their investigation may be unique to areas of sociological discourse,<sup>2</sup> they are constituent aspects of all *social* activities: quite simply, occasions in which people employ natural language resources to produce descriptions. This has profound implications for parapsychological research which employs people's accounts of their paranormal experiences as an investigative resource. For example, in the investigation of spontaneous cases, what the parapsychologist or anomaly researcher knows about the experience - what the actual phenomenon was, what the experience consisted of, and so on - can be investigated only as a consequence of experient's use of natural language abilities to describe the experience. In each and every case, then, the phenomenon - a ghost, an apparition, a mystical encounter, a precognition, a UFO sighting, an out-of-body experience, a near-death experience - is unavoidably the product of the organised communicative practices which are sedimented in its description. The accounts themselves are constitutive of the phenomena to which they refer.

It may be objected that, while the investigation of such issues may be legitimately pursued as sociological projects, such concerns have no place in parapsychology, as they would amount to 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater'. That is, such projects would have no application to parapsychology's fundamental quest - the investigation of psi. However, the pursuit of psi has done no favours for the study of the paranormal. Despite numerous significant experimental results, the majority of orthodox scientists are not convinced that psi exists, and parapsychology is peripheralised in the scientific community. It enjoys a limited representation in university

psychology departments: the Chair in Parapsychology at Edinburgh University is the sole senior academic appointment in the United Kingdom. Moreover, there are no sources of official or governmental support for parapsychological research, and there is only one research award available to fund post-graduate studies.<sup>3</sup> In a very real sense, then, parapsychology is a 'rejected' science (Allison, 1979).

This may be regarded as a somewhat paradoxical state of affairs. The events parapsychologists claim to study are, potentially, of fundamental significance, with important implications for a wide variety of other disciplines. This point is accepted even by its critics (Alcock, 1987). Furthermore, the range of experiences and phenomena it takes as its subject matter are, firstly, of intrinsic interest, and, secondly, according to the available evidence, not uncommon events. Yet despite all this, parapsychologists are still having to argue for the legitimacy of their researches, and seek recognition from their peers for the validity of their subject. The search for psi has hardly precipitated the revolution in our understanding of human nature envisaged by the founding fathers of the discipline. Indeed, in the light of the lack of empirical and theoretical development, one can sympathise with those parapsychologists who call for new ideas to develop alternative empirical questions.

In chapter one I discussed Blackmore's (1988a; 1988b) appeals for a 'new' parapsychology based on the study of experiences which occur spontaneously in everyday life, and noted that she explicitly pointed to the importance of accounts of experiences in such a project. While the sociological study of accounts exemplified in this thesis has obvious connections to the type of projects she envisaged, there are some important differences, and these need to be clarified.

Her 'new' parapsychology involves locating the recurrent features of experiences and explaining these phenomenological forms by reference to underlying and determinant cognitive processes. The experience of (what are believed by the experiencers to be) paranormal phenomena are accounted for by the analyst in terms of non-paranormal explanatory frameworks. As such, it is difficult to see what is 'new' about her work: she is merely providing 'rational' explanations for claimed anomalous experiences. It is curious, then, that a parapsychologist who has so articulately championed the need for novel lines of inquiry in parapsychology fails to establish one. This is not to slight her work, however, but to point out that even those who are critical of parapsychology's achievements may be trapped by the 'scientistic' ethos which has pervaded the discipline since J.B. Rhine established it as a laboratory-based enterprise.

The project and mode of analysis which has been pursued in the present research<sup>4</sup> promises a more radical empirical agenda in that it is not committed to provide an arbitration on the ontological or factual status of the phenomena for which people's accounts stand as reports. Rather, it seeks to explicate the communicative practices by which the factual character of those phenomena, and the nature of people's experiences of them, are pragmatically constructed in language.

## Notes

1 See also Parker's (1989) analysis of the relevance to social psychology of the writings of Michel Foucault.

2 Although this may be changing. See, for example, Suchman (1987) and Luff, Gilbert and Frohlich (1990) for discussion of the importance of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis in the field of human-computer interaction.

3 The Perrot-Warrwick Studentship, which is awarded approximately once every two years.

4 Although these projects are discussed here in relation to verbal accounts, I can see no reason in principle why similar concerns could not inform the investigation of written reports, historical documents - in short, a variety of textual materials.

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## Appendix

# Data collection and transcription

### Data Sources

The data used in this thesis were collected from three sources. I placed an advert on University of York college and departmental notice boards. Adverts were also placed in local daily evening newspapers in York and Bristol in 1987. These cities were chosen primarily because of my familiarity with their geography. They were further suited for two other reasons: they presented populations drawn from different parts of the country, and from very different cities: York is small provincial city whereas Bristol is a large and developing commercial and business centre. The adverts ran for three days in mid-January in York, and for three days in mid-March in Bristol.

The York advert produced sixteen replies, the Bristol advert produced twenty-four. Ten of the York respondents were contacted by telephone and an interview was arranged. Of the Bristol respondents eleven were contacted by telephone and ten were happy to talk to me. During the initial telephone contact with both sets of respondents I asked permission to tape record the subsequent interview, and none refused.

Owing to teaching commitments it was not possible to try to collect interviews from all the respondents. The criteria by which I selected which of the replies were to be 'targeted' was the availability of preliminary telephone contact. The opportunity of preliminary telephone contact was especially important in Bristol: organising interviews by mail with people who were scattered over such a large area would have taken more time than I had available.

The York interviews were conducted either in the Sociology Department or in the interviewees' homes. In Bristol, all the interviews were conducted in the interviewees' homes.

Owing to my teaching duties I had access to a number of first-year sociology students. Two first-year students came forward to be interviewed.

Prior to beginning this research I had been involved with local and national UFO research groups. Through my contact with the British UFO Research Association, I was given the name of an experienced amateur UFO investigator, who kindly sent me copies of taped interviews with witnesses to three UFO cases he was currently investigating. During the period of data collection I developed the habit of carrying a small pocket-sized tape recorder and several blank tapes. By virtue of these accessories I was able to obtain three spontaneous interviews with friends and chance meetings. Jonathon Potter also sent me a tape with two recorded accounts and the relevant transcripts.

In total I conducted twenty-seven recorded interviews, and was sent five more, thus making a total of thirty-two separate interviews.

The interviews I conducted were informal, and I had no set questions or routines. My objective was to make the interview as 'conversational' as possible. Therefore, once the tape recorder was running my opening remark would merely provide the speaker with the floor to say whatever she or he wanted.

During the interviews I did not make any remarks until the speaker had clearly finished talking about the experience, or had stated that they had finished. This was in order to allow the speaker to tell the story spontaneously without

interruptions. Upon subsequent inspection of the tapes it transpired that I had been making 'minimal continuers' - 'mm hm', 'uh huh', 'yeah' - during the interviews, and these were transcribed.

Some of the interviewees produced a large number of personal experiences, and these interviews regularly extended over both sides of ninety-minute tapes. The majority of interviewees, however, had only one account, or a small number of direct experiences.

### **Transcription**

The transcription symbols used here are common to conversation analytic research, and were developed by Gail Jefferson. The following symbols are used in the data.

(.5)                    The number in brackets indicates a time gap in tenths                    of a second.

(.)                    A dot enclosed in a bracket indicates pause in the talk less than two tenths of a second.

hh                    A dot before an 'h' indicates speaker in-breath. The more h's, the longer the inbreath.

hh                    An 'h' indicates an out-breath. The more 'h's the longer the breath.

(( ))                    A description enclosed in a double bracket indicates a non-verbal activity. For example ((banging sound))

-                    A dash indicates the sharp cut-off of the prior word or sound.

:                    Colons indicate that the speaker has stretched the preceding sound or letter. The more colons the greater the extent of the stretching.

( )                    Empty parentheses indicate the presence of an





A more detailed description of these transcription symbols can be found in Atkinson and Heritage (1984: ix-xvi).

To preserve anonymity, the names of persons and places have been changed (or deleted) in the transcripts.