What are the influences that govern how people view their worlds? What are the embedded values and practices that underpin the ways people think and act? Discourses We Live By approaches these questions through narrative research, in a process that uses words, images, activities or artefacts to ask people – either individually or collectively within social groupings – to examine, discuss, portray or otherwise make public their place in the world, their sense of belonging to (and identity within) the physical and cultural space they inhabit.

This book is a rich and multi-faceted collection of twenty-eight chapters that use varied lenses to examine the discourses that shape people's lives. The contributors are themselves from many backgrounds – different academic disciplines within the humanities and social sciences, diverse professional practices and a range of countries and cultures. They represent a broad spectrum of age, status and outlook, and variously apply their research methods – but share a common interest in people, their lives, thoughts and actions. Gathering such eclectic experiences as those of student-teachers in Kenya, a released prisoner in Denmark, academics in Colombia, a group of migrants learning English, and gambling addiction support-workers in Italy, alongside more mainstream educational themes, the book presents a fascinating array of insights.

Discourses We Live By will be essential reading for adult educators and practitioners, those involved with educational and professional practice, narrative researchers, and many sociologists. It will appeal to all who want to know how narratives shape the way we live and the way we talk about our lives.

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher's website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com.

Cover Image by Tom Perkins, CC-BY 4.0. Cover Design by Anna Gatti.
17. Examining a Kazakh Student’s Biographical Narrative and the Discourses She Lives By

Rob Evans

Rob Evans offers excerpts from the story of a Kazakh girl who is trying to straddle two cultures but feels disloyal when criticizing her family’s actions. He uses Conversation Analysis (close listening and transcriptional devices) to catch and demonstrate nuanced meanings and sets these processes in a strong theoretical and methodological framework.

The starting point of this chapter was a question about the conceptual frameworks that bound people’s thoughts and actions and how these matter to a global society. In connection with biographical research, this meant asking about the relationship between the real-life narratives that researchers collect and the commonly held discourses we live by. Do our narratives merely reflect these discourses, or do they shape our acceptance of them? Do our stories transform understandings and potentially change our — and others’ — ways of living?

This chapter will take a ‘low-inference’ approach (following Seale, 1999) using an extract from an unstructured interview narrative to question the discourses evident within the narrative, one closely heard and transcribed, read and examined. To do this, an approach to talk-in-interaction derived from Conversation Analysis (Silverman, 1998) is followed. Briefly, Conversation Analysis (CA) is a method of close analysis of talk, based on detailed and accessible transcripts on which
added symbols record the conversational structures not heard as words, as shown below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>xx:</td>
<td>Word-lengthening, drawl</td>
<td>Xx=xx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(.)</td>
<td>Pauses (audible breaks in flow of speech)</td>
<td>(1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hh</td>
<td>Out-breaths/laughter</td>
<td>.hh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“xxx”</td>
<td>Quiet speech</td>
<td>+xxx++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(xxx)</td>
<td>Indistinct speech</td>
<td>XXX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ESp)</td>
<td>Embedded speech = speech of others</td>
<td>Pro / MO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this chapter I employ a talk-in-interaction approach to the analysis of stretches of conversational discourse that is able to synthesize, on the one hand, the attention of CA practice to the close detail of the work done by people in interaction and, on the other, the elements of interdiscursivity arising from the fact that close interpersonal interaction is simultaneously unfolded within, not just one, but a whole set of overlapping and intersecting communicative contexts. This approach to interview talk enables us to ask questions about contrasting discourses emerging in narratives; to consider, too, the origins of dominant discourses, their irruption into narratives, their unfolding, the weight they exert on interaction and daily life choices, their application to lives and to our research. To this end, although I draw from a series of discursive-narrative biographical interviews with young adults in university education, for reasons of space I will consider only parts of one of these interviews. The interview with a Kazakh student, I hope to show, presents talk-in-interaction which will help to address the above questions.

Aylin

Aylin (the student chose this interestingly ‘un-Kazakh’ name herself) is in her early twenties. She had recently completed her Bachelor’s degree in international management at a German university where I interviewed her. She was born in Moscow of Kazakh parents, a construction engineer and a philologist who both studied in Russia. She speaks Kazakh and Russian, and moved from Moscow to Astana at
the age of nine, the first in her family to live in the Kazakh capital. The interview ranged across Aylin’s childhood memories of life in Moscow, the trees, parks, and colours of Astana. In Moscow she lived close to Red Square and attended a ‘very good school’ (School No. 1131). She recalled her parents’ fear after an encounter once, before her ninth birthday, with Russian skinheads (*britogolovye*) armed with sticks. She connected this memory with the removal of all her family’s Kazakh acquaintances back to Kazakhstan at around the same time. Astana and her schooldays were characterized by her early assumption of responsibility in the home, practically managing the household (her elder sister was ‘more interested in clothes and things’) and looking after her younger brother while her busy parents worked. She changed schools seven times in this period. The interview, it transpired, was taking place at a crucial moment in her life, as she was about to return home to Kazakhstan, where her future would be decided. Her wish was to continue her studies with an MA in another German city. The wish of her family, she said, was that she should remain in Kazakhstan to marry. This is what Aylin said:

Extract One: I’m Going Back to Kazakhstan

1. I’m going back to Kazakhstan (.) I don’t really want
2. to but I guess I have to (.) because (1) uhhm (1) my parents want me to go back and g- =and it’s time and
3. 4. I’m allowed only to marry a Kazakh guy=maybe I can find one here but it’s hh
4. 5. hh
5. 6. 7. ..............................I KNOW
6. 7. Sometimes the guys (1.0) it’s not like hhh I hhh
7. 8. can marry them

Extract 1: I’m going back to Kazakhstan

The discomfort Aylin feels in broaching this subject seems to jump off the inadequate printed page. This short extract already shows evidence of serious discomfort (1–2), dis-preferred topics and strong hedging (2, 3, 4–5), and the reluctance to put items of her narrative into words. Strong loss of agency is hearable here and this is partly mitigated by transferring agency to others (parents) and force of circumstances (it is time).
The ‘modality’ of much of the language (i.e., the relative significance of necessity — ‘have to’; desire, reluctance or will — ‘want to’; possibility or ability, freedom or restriction — ‘can’, ‘allowed to’; and intention / decision / obedience — ‘am going back’) is striking and seems to demonstrate the many-layered-ness, the ambivalence and the liquidity of Aylin’s short account. There is prosaic telling (we can term it ‘naked saying’ of things), and there is an enormous pregnancy of word-choice. The verb ‘want’ is used contiguously, for example, to express diametrically opposed notions; undesired submission against the imposition of force (ll. 1–3). In this context, the othered-discourse of the parents breaks into Aylin’s talk and ‘want me to get married’ is repaired to ‘I’m allowed only to’ (for repair, see Gülich & Mondada, 2008, pp. 61–65). Her loss of agency shifts from ‘I’ to ‘they’ to an accepted fact, and the repeated, known, unquestioned social discourse of her background moves to occupy the foreground of her narrative.

**Stripped Text, Language Resources**

To present this ‘complaint’, I have used an unadorned stripped form of text (no punctuation, no sentence structure, no intentional ‘correction’ of language). Aylin uses English, which she speaks very well. She refused implicitly to speak Russian, though I do well enough. I make no attempt to convey pronunciation, yet there is some attempt to communicate obvious features of pitch, speed, loudness and quietness, breathing and laughter, hesitation and silence. The discussion of the transcript is focused on description of what is ‘there’ (what was heard there and then transcribed) and on features such as modality, repair/hedging, prosody, and voice (embedded speech).

As I have pointed out elsewhere (Evans, 2016, pp. 229–30), the plurilingual conduct of research relationships can guarantee linguistic detail that can render the ethnographic description denser in meaning. Contrasting or shared language is clearly part of the complexity of the interdiscursivity that the interview establishes. However, speaking the language of the dominant cultural discourse, English, sets in motion, too, ‘self-authoring’ in the foreign code (Auer, 1998; Duszak, 2002), as well as code-switching, which remains inaccessible to the listener and must, as Pavlenko points out, be taken into account when evaluating narrative contents and intentions (Pavlenko, 2007, pp. 171–75).
Regarding the making and use of transcripts, Atkinson and Heritage showed long ago that they are ‘research activities’ (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984, cited in Silverman, 1997a, p. 27). Thus, the decision to opt for a particular level of detail in the reproduction of the spoken interview, or the omission of detail, represents the fundamental level of analysis chosen (Gülich & Mondada, 2008, pp. 21–22, 30–34; Ochs, 1979). Likewise, the analysis of timing, volume, intonation, stress, and prosody, which are understood to be essential products and producers of interaction and co-construction of meaning (Szczepek Reed, 2011; Günthner, 1997).

Aylin also gave me two photographs. The first shows a pair of adults with a baby on a sunny day. The adults are young, late twenties or early thirties perhaps, around 1994. They are dressed formally, smartly: the man (thin, looking seriously into the camera) in a double-breasted suit, shirt and tie; the woman, slim, elegant in a black top and skirt, smart short hair, serious gaze; the child, round in a thick layer of covers, a white ball with a small round face. Behind the couple showing off their child — St Basil’s Cathedral, Red Square, Moscow — definitely the place to be photographed, still, in post-Soviet Russia. The other photo is of Aylin at a McDonalds birthday party, it seems: a child, open-mouthed, mesmerized by something going on out of frame. Where, in this sparse mixture of narrated events, a jumble of bare facts and geography, is discourse located? How can we pinpoint, recognize, follow, question it; understand how it is working?

Starting from a Blank Space with Michel Foucault

Since the much-cited ‘linguistic turn’, discourse has passed through many forms in qualitative research focused on language or language-near interaction. As with so many other concepts, discourse is often used in a very loose fashion and can describe anything from a limited exchange of utterances between speakers — as in classroom discourse (Maybin, 1994); service exchanges and customer-salesperson talk (Drew & Heritage, 1992); specific professional / academic / discipline ‘codes’ (medical, legal discourse, etc.); or the overarching chains or sequences of language (semitic sequences, language in all conceivable forms, codes, linguistic, visual, symbols, practices) that in relation to one another (interdiscursivity) offer or impose conceptual frameworks — to the ‘big
packages’ (Sacks, 1992b, pp. 354–59) of cultural and political narratives, which is the understanding of discourse adopted in this chapter.

Interdiscursivity in interaction (co-constructing meaning and sharing language) and relational employment or appropriation of discourses in biographical narratives (Mason, 2004; Mishler, 2006) can be seen as enacting the tension between structure and agency that resides in the culturally constituted social practices that massively determine individual and collective interaction. The agency of the individual always has more, or less, access to accumulated layers of experience that represent more resources of experience than can be ‘used’ at any one time, yet they go to create a kind of intuitive sense of an own biography, that is self-referential and remains ‘porous’, transforming and being transformed in ongoing interactions, given that it arises precisely from interdiscursive interaction. The individual’s potential to respond to, and to shape, discourse can be seen as drawing on biographical resources, ‘biographicity’ in Alheit’s words (Alheit, 2006, p. 5). The narrative of the young adult presented in this chapter is evidence of the porosity between ubiquitous discourses of discipline, of love, of family, of learning, ambition, obedience, resignation, but equally within a melting of scenes, geographies, zones of comfort and zones of menace, and so on.

To begin to focus on what is discourse, then, it may help to turn first to Foucault, the Foucault of The Archaeology of Knowledge (1969), who took stock of what he had achieved in the ‘sixties with the clinic and madness and turned to ask how knowledge, how the history of thought and ideas can be conceived. His attempt, full of precautions, ‘hobbling’ and ‘feeling its way’ (Foucault, 1969, p. 28) provides a usefully uncertain starting point for considering the notion of discourse.

Discussing the history of ideas and thought and knowledge and the sciences, Foucault says he is attempting to speak from an ‘espace blanc’, that is, a ‘blank space’ (Foucault, 1969, p. 29). His first job is to accomplish a ‘travail negatif’, a bit of negative work, to free himself and his analysis from all notions that tend to anchor, immovably fix, ideas in solid continuities. Mentalities, the spirit, tradition, custom — all are assigned a ‘communauté de sens’ (a community of sense), a symphony of resemblances, mirrorings and repetitions that lend them overwhelming authority (1969, p. 33). To sweep away these anchored certainties, he writes:
We have to question these ready-made syntheses, these bundles of ideas that one commonly assumes without any examination at all, these connections that are recognized as given before the game starts; it is necessary to debunk these obscure forms and forces with which we habitually tie together the discourses used by people [...]. (Foucault, 1969, p. 34) (Author’s translation)

If we can manage to view our work from this blank space Foucault urges us to occupy, we have to see how we can ‘feel the pulse’, ‘catch a glimpse’ of the discourse that is, true, ‘always there’. We must catch it, Foucault argues, where it irrupts, repeatedly, in acts, in decisions, in, for us most urgently, a story, a statement, an aside, an admission, an accusation, in the middle of an interview moment. Thus, he says, we must:

Be ready to catch each moment of discourse in the moment of its irruption; in the very moment of its appearance, and in that dispersion in time that allows it to be repeated, known, forgotten, transformed, effaced down to the last traces, gone, far from all view [...]. (Foucault, 1969, p. 39, author’s translation)

We turn now to Aylin again.

Extract Two: I Don’t Know How to Explain That

Extract two is dominated throughout by Aylin’s repeated work of self-repair, that is, her starting, stopping, re-starting, correcting and her changes of direction in telling her story. There are many possible reasons for this. The narrative itself is difficult. She may believe it is difficult to understand. She may think the interviewer will condemn or reject the things she is telling, the people she is talking about, her thoughts, her decisions. She cannot tell her story without exposing her parents, her family, to criticism from a person she knows, but who has no knowledge of them — or of her, in fact. Thus, there are many examples of self-repair and hedging, as she seeks a path between ‘tellability’ (Sacks, 1992b, p. 16), comprehension, truth, respect and coherence (Linde, 1993).

Aylin’s knowledge / understandings / forgettings / reasonings are recorded on the right of the extracts as epistemic language. These record epistemic claims as well as claims to ignorance. Both may be understood as statements about agency or its loss. Prosodic devices here (e.g.,
A yeah quite conservative (3.0) yeah (.) so ( .) I ACTually they SAY:: I find find some
Kazakh boy in Kazakhstan I could move
ANYWHERE hhhh but if he has to be a
Kazakh guy (2.0) ja ( .) but ( .) they want they
want us to keep the traditions so that we
don't forget our la::nguage and yeah I think
that's why (3.0) because they think that=now
HERE I started forgetting our traditions and
uhm I don't practice our language and uhm I'm
becoming more:: uhm ( .)
RE: european
A: ja they
want (2.0) they want me to stay like like uhm
ohh (4.0) like a a ( .) uhh=how to say that
hahh a good Kazakh GIRL hehehe I don't know
how to say that and
RE: what would you say
in Russian or in Kazakh or
A: I don't know how to
explain that how to express myself they just
wANT me to remain that uhh (5.0) they want
me TO BE A GOOD EXAMPLE OF A
KAZAKH GIRL ja ( .) ja ( .) that's what I
mean who learn the traditions=the
language=who will take care o:fhuhmm
hh parents hh of her husband ya↓
RE: I understand
A: maybe I just forgot how it is there
uhm (.) I don't know ( .) I=just WANT to
do
what my parents want me to do I WANT to
stay here
RE: why?
A: but if they're against I don't want oo to
disobey oo ( .) because it's hard to ( .) to
(R: I understand
Yeah)
A: be against them ohh everybody will say oh
she's a BAD GIRL

Extract 2: I don't know how to explain that

louder speech, ll. 4, 9, 16, 23–24) can serve a number of purposes. In these cases, they seem to be moments in which Aylin imposes her own position, signals her stance or standpoint. This is a kind of ‘breakout’, surrounded as these bursts of energy or emotion are by difficulties in finding words and a discomfited wrestling with possible clarifications.
The prosodic device serves to bolster her position, but also functions spatially, in an acutely interactive fashion: she underlines her immediate physical presence, and her utterance is agentive (first person) and knowledgeable, if also often desperate (ll. 17, 21).

It seems plausible that Aylin’s claims that she is unable to explain the family discourses around marriageability and ethnic exclusivity (ll–15–17, 20–24) are, in part, other-oriented. She hesitates to share the words of her family with an outsider of different age, gender, ethnic origin, experience and knowledge. Likewise, her unease when explaining the traditional duties of the daughter-in-law (ll. 26–27) are framed in hedges, delivered breathlessly and at a rush. Much of the distress in Aylin’s narrative is thus evidently lived as distress with the narrative and difficulty with the listener.

Finally, the irruption of the discourse of her extended family, of the distant, threateningly foreign and discernibly hostile world of her past — she speaks of traditions, of having forgotten them, of the family wanting her to stay as she was before — is heard as embodied fatality, lived and expressed as necessity and inevitability (ll.35–36) and spoken in an almost awed quietness of voice. The horror of being, of being found to be, disobedient, is spoken with hearable difficulty. Aylin, it seems, is reluctant to express an alternative to what she says she is facing. The different layers of experience contained in this short extract permeate each other and this biographical porosity is reflected in the complexity of the diverse discursive strands of the narrative and their incomplete meanings as heard.

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

Ontological and Epistemological First Things

Right from the start, the question of what count as ‘facts’ (i.e., the ontological view of research undertakings) needs to be clarified. If the biographical interview is seen as a key to open some kind of door
into the thinking of subjects and thereby release a flood of thoughts
and utterances about things and feelings, times and events, etc., then
the data analysis will be occupied with sifting and separating out what
was simply ‘said’. The researcher may step back and present the words,
the things said. She or he may interpret them in his or her own words.
‘Objective’ facts — a curriculum vitae, a birth certificate, an army record,
a medal, a prize, a wedding photo — may be employed to justify a
distanced interpretation of the said (Fuchs-Heinritz, 2000, pp. 265–67;

Alternatively, the data are seen as constituted in the interview
process jointly and as a process. The talk is not analysed as ‘facts’ or
‘examples’, rather the speech as interaction. The construction of dialogic
talk in the interview is analysed. The interview is then no longer a
‘realist’ instrument for looking at the grittiness of something ‘out there’,
but at the narrative construction of biographical experience, a learning
biography.

Seen in this way, the research interview accesses stories or narratives
through which people describe their world (Silverman, 2000). This
approach sees talk as evidence of the joint generation by interviewer
and interviewees of plausible accounts of the world. The interview is
employed less as a ‘collection’ containing the objective data that the
realist view commonly assumes to be ‘out there’, than as a sensitive
space, in which the linguistic repertoires or methods which people draw
upon in constructing accounts in interactive encounters can unfold

The epistemological aspect of this change of perspective means that
the interactive features of the data are highlighted. We cannot know in
any final way what people are thinking, what Aylin is thinking, but we
can follow how interviewees are positioned and position themselves in
discoursal fashion in the course of the continually changing contexts
of the interview. For around and beyond the immediate action of the talk,
the narration, the conversation, there is a context of relations, exerting
their influence on the conjoint work of the interaction.

If my research question, or one of them, here is — why does Aylin
speak of ‘obedience’? What does this mean for her? — I am assuming
that (such) discourses (‘obedience’) are involved in the make-up (are
core components) of social life and that they are somehow knowable
through research; it is possible to generate (local) knowledge about, and evidence of them. The language of the talk allows us to hear Aylin’s distress in narrating a difficult story.

The above research question poses questions about the influence of discourse on learning biographies as well as the influence of a learning biography on discourse practices. Evidence of such influence is sought in the practical accomplishment — within the interactive setting of the research interview — of narrative discourses of self and learning. This qualitative research draws out a number of significant features from the interactional talk in the context of the research interview. Various aspects of the talk of respondents are examined:

• the employment of coherent narratives;
• the construction of learning biographies;
• the organization of discourses of learning both within and in opposition to dominant discourses;
• the employment of own and others’ discourse in meaning-making and in doing;
• the employment of membership-category information to ground discoursal self in talk, i.e., membership of community, family, ethnic belonging, professional practice, identification with, and recognition of, other values, notions, and so on (Baker, 1997; Lepper, 2000).

If the ‘real world’ to which my explanations will frequently refer is a ‘reference to the organized activities of everyday life’ and the phenomena that I will be participating in and investigating in the course of my research can be seen as ‘an ongoing accomplishment of the concerted activities of daily life’ the accomplishment of which are ‘ordinary, artful’ and known and used by members of society (Garfinkel, 1967,p.vii), then it follows that my research methodology must serve the purposes of this theoretical approach to ‘reality’. To be more exact, the methods arising from the research perspective I adopt must be able to generate ontologically stable data around the research questions I formulate. There should, then, be a theoretical and methodological fit between the overarching model of social experience I am advancing — social interaction is accomplished in artful, common-sense fashion, involving
accounts that combine particulars of the social and cultural practices of individuals as well as their diffusely interactional practices (Silverman, 1997b, p. 114) — and the methods of data collection and data analysis I have opted to use.

To reduce this to a ‘really useful’ way of seeing our interest in practice in specific settings, I recall Harvey Sacks’ famous ‘this-and-that’, which he applied to the work of the Chicago school of ethnography of the 1930s. The relevance of the works of the Chicago sociologists, he suggests, ‘is that they do contain a lot of information about this and that. And this-and-that is what the world is made up of’ (Sacks, 1992a, p. 27).

To approach ‘this-and-that’, I can draw upon a series of ‘ontological components’ as proposed by Jennifer Mason (1996, pp. 11–12) that may form the aspects of social reality that a piece of research sets out to explain; the following are directly relevant:

- interactions, situations, social relations;
- social or cultural practices;
- stories, narratives, biographies;
- identity, self;
- understandings.

These research components broadly represent practices and are all facets of ‘doing being ordinary’ (Sacks, 1992b, pp. 215–21). All of these data sources can be taken as sources of ‘naturally occurring talk’; none of them are a simple ‘window’ onto the world (Seale, 1998, p. 215), none the mere ‘registration’ of realities ignoring the context and the history of their coming about that Bourdieu criticizes (Bourdieu, 1980, pp. 87–88).

Creation of Discoursal Meaning and Self in Interaction

Deborah Tannen (Tannen, 1993a), in her work on ‘frames’ and ‘framing devices’ — in which she draws in part on the work of Erving Goffman on frame analysis — contributes a further insight into the structure of autobiographical talk when she writes of ‘structures of expectation’ and their role in ‘verbalization in the telling of oral narratives’ (Tannen, 1993b, p. 15). These structures of
expectation — tacitly understood meanings in spoken interaction about what is meant — establish a common-sense basis of understanding, characterized, to use Goffman’s definition, by ‘normatively residual ambiguity’ (Goffman, 1981, p. 11). Tannen herself is stressing here the play of commonly held cultural ‘structures of expectation’ in individual interaction (Tannen, 1993a, p. 16). Ambiguity, however, and incompleteness characterize the life history and biographical narrative. The individual is understood to have access to a range of discourses. This range may seem endless, yet Foucault points out that:

The field of discursive events [...] is always the finite and currently limited sum of mere linguistic sequences that have been formulated; they can be innumerable; they can, by their sheer mass, surpass any possibility of being recorded, memorized or read: they constitute nevertheless a finite entity. (Foucault, 1969, pp. 41–42, author translation)

This enormous resource is available to us in the lives and words of others, in temporally and spatially structured reservoirs of own and other experience. At the same time, life stories are essentially occupied with the necessity to synchronize disparate levels of experienced time and practices (Alheit, 1983, p. 189). The cyclical, routine, repeated character of the everyday offers security and provides sets of ‘frames’ for communication and interpretation. Linde also points out how other peoples’ stories (related in reported speech, embedded and ‘layered’ in the telling) become ‘own’ stories through a process of appropriation or conversion (Linde, 1993, p. 35). The discontinuous and unfinished state of the oral narrative is embodied therefore in the discourse(s) employed by the narrator. Goffman’s concept of ‘embedding’ describes this aspect of the speaker’s ‘self’. Embedding makes it possible to ‘enact’ numerous voices over space and time in interactive frames such as the narrative interview (Goffman, 1981, p. 4). For the development of ‘own’ discourses within an emergent learning biography, the ‘enacted’ words of others — ‘embedded speech’ — are central for contextualizing own discourse, and they can serve as a powerful (and fateful) way of grounding own positions within larger discourse.
In this last extract, in which we hear about Aylin’s family conflict that has ended with her submission to the pressure exerted upon her from her distant yet patently powerfully vocal family, events are put in some order (ll. 22–30), the climax of the account is reached, and Aylin’s new evaluation of her position results in her resolution (for now) of the
conflict (ll. 31–32). Aylin is at pains to explain herself, yet the epistemic markers in the transcript point to continuing unease in taking up a firm position (‘I was hoping I don’t know I think that I wanted to...’ ll. 20–21). Uncertain modality (‘maybe’, ‘wanted to TRY’ ll. 20–21) and non-agentic knowledge claims characterize her position in Germany (‘HERE’, l.19). Her freedom of choice and her ability to decide things in Germany are redefined and subordinated to the ‘whole family’ and its claims.

It is interesting how Aylin foregrounds the crisis by accounting for her sense of self-doubt, suggesting youth and silliness as a possible reason for her underestimation of the gravity of her ‘transgression’. The hedging and cautious use of epistemic verbs suggest also, no doubt, that this ‘silliness’ is an afterthought. For she emphasizes very clearly that she most definitely tried to find another way for herself (l. 21). Having foregrounded her narrative in this way, she is able to fend off, to some extent, criticism of her return to obedience, should it be offered. To reinforce this, the resolution of the conflict or ‘evaluation’ is offered before the climax of the crisis, or ‘complicating action’ (for these categories, see Labov, 1999). The outcome precedes the cause and shapes the point of the narrative as it is to be understood by the ‘other’ (‘I don’t want to experience that again’, ll. 23–24). Further, as can be seen, this resolution is added again as Aylin’s frame for the whole crisis (l. 34). This may mean that Aylin submits, returns to the fold of obedience. Just as much, however, it demonstrates how the force of the past, breaking into Aylin’s present, is able to exert a strong structuring rectification, and in the process, it produces an obviously ambivalent transformation of her understanding of her position, but a transformation certainly.

There is submission in her words. There is also resistance and greater clarity about things. And some suggestion of a different Aylin (‘I found that out can’t do that so it’s really hard=ESPECIALLY BECAUSE I’M A GIRL’, ll. 34–6).

The Structured and Structuring Force of Discourse, Habitus and Practice

Bourdieu, in Le Sens pratique (Bourdieu, 1980) goes to some lengths to spell out the difficult but necessary — and uneasy — relationship between the shaping forces of structure and agency, or habitus and
practice, as he calls them. He proposes a ‘system of structured and structuring dispositions that is constituted in practice and which is always oriented towards functions of practice’. (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 87)

Bourdieu argues that habitus — which I understand in a simple way to be sets of discourses about life, behaviour, self, opinion, etc., coagulated into seemingly fixed and socially definable practices — is made up of ‘systems of durable and transposable dispositions which are structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures’, and which for all their structured-ness and massive shaping force on behaviours and feelings, plans and dreams, play out in time and space in an apparently orchestrated fashion ‘without being the product of the organizing action of the conductor of the orchestra’ (Bourdieu, 1980, pp. 88–89).

The parameters within which biographical resources, for example, are slowly, incrementally gathered and used, re-used, often not used (because unusable at any given time and only ‘usable’ in retrospect) and stories, narratives of their use or possible meaning are developed and communicated, are limiting and limited, but limitless, too. Regarding the languaged forms of discursive interaction, Foucault makes the important point — which is useful, here, to throw a light on the many-layered workings of biographical ‘background knowledge’ and the structuring force of ‘unlived life’ (Alheit, 2006, p. 5) — that an utterance (languaged interaction) ‘is always a [discoursal] event that neither language nor meaning can ever totally encompass and exhaust’ (Foucault, 1969, p. 43).

On the shaping and shaped-ness of discourse, Fairclough, too, writes that ‘On the one hand, discourse is shaped and constrained by social structure in the widest sense and at all levels […] On the other hand, discourse is socially constitutive’. Discourse, he continues, ‘is a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning’ (Fairclough, 1992, p. 64).

Vying Contexts
and the Co-Construction of Discourse

Context, therefore, is centrally important here and Fairclough’s framework for analysing discourse offers a degree of useful complexity because it distinguishes between various contexts of
‘discoursal action’. Fairclough proposes the following hierarchy: actual discourses / types of discourse / orders of discourse (Fairclough, 1989, p. 29). This hierarchy can be useful with the kind of talk encountered in Aylin’s story. The immediate experience of the interview context for those involved is acutely interactive. The interaction includes the time, the physical space and the participants’ relationship to this space and to each other (organizationally, socially) within the space, as well as the joint accomplishment of meaning in interactive talk. Further, the interview is embedded in a much larger interactive context, including the institutional character of the research interview and its organization, and sequences of interaction between researcher and respondents over longer time periods. Such interpersonal contexts may involve questions of access and familiarity, as well as linguistic, idiomatic, local, political or ideological discourses of communication, which are expected, accepted, unconsciously employed, or imposed. The ‘long sequences’ of personal experience that are narrated create, in their turn, the context at this level. These long sequences of experience-in-talk develop and are tested, are tried, rejected, repaired, and begun again and make up the work of meaning-making for which the interview provides a framework. Finally, we have the larger context of social discourses, the social context in which the participants and the institutions involved interpret their roles and positions (see, for the hierarchy of discourse, Fairclough, 1989, pp. 26–27).

Some Ending Words

So, to briefly return to Aylin, to where she was left in her distress and her dilemma, the aim was to try and start from a kind of methodological scratch once again. A line in T. S. Eliot’s poem The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock (1917) seems to aptly capture Aylin’s — and the researcher’s — situation. In this poem, after listing all the endless, disparate, desperate things, seen, done, heard, felt, after all this ‘and so much more?’ the speaker resigns: ‘It is impossible to say just what I mean!’ (Eliot, 1954, p. 15). The job facing me as I approach Aylin’s story, her language (choices), her own grasp of the many significances of the discourses she is tapping into, with her story of a possible arranged marriage, discussed in an interview in an emotional space between a
post-industrial university city in eastern Germany and an extended family in Kazakhstan, and ‘so much more!’, demand that I recognize that it is impossible to say all I, all she, means. And that is, of course, still a glaring understatement of the situation. But we start from this point, and we pick ourselves up and always start all over again.

Bourdieu, as so often, provides encouragement:

Embodied life history, rendered natural and thus forgotten because natural, habitus is the active presence of the entire past of which it is itself the product: from this it confers on practices their relative independence in relation to the external determination of the immediate present. This autonomy is that of the enacted and active past which — working like accumulated capital — produces the stuff of history from history and thus assures permanence in change which makes the individual agent a world in the world... (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 94, author’s italics and translation)

And that is Aylin.

The coda of the story, of disobedience paid for with accusations and tears, shame and fear of rejection, has since metamorphosed into the lead-in to a new narrative, yet to be attempted. An email arrived from a German metropolitan university with the words ‘still not married’ and an emoticon. 😊

References


