Re-Examining Alignment in a “Failed” L2 Autobiographic Research Interview

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Abstract
Contributing to a “social studies of interview studies,” this article addresses the treatment of “failed” autobiographic interviews. Taking a discursive constructionist approach, the author re-examines a problematic second language (L2) English interview with an immigrant man from Cambodia. Analysis focuses on the interactional management of (mis)alignment and how it contributed to the shape and outcome of the activity. By turning away from failure to accomplishment, and attending to the ways in which interviewee and interviewer use their differential linguistic and cultural expertise as topic and resource, the multi-layered activity takes on a new light that allows recognition of what was understood, shared, and ultimately achieved. The application of these insights for interview practice and analysis are discussed.

Keywords
autobiographic interviewing, research practice, research problems, discursive constructionist approach, L2 research

Introduction
Amid the growing body of qualitative inquiry on second language (L2) and multi-lingual identities and trajectories, the autobiographic interview remains a predominant instrument for collecting and generating data. Often fueled by emancipatory and other critical perspectives, researchers seeking to make audible the authentic voices of groups and individuals have found interviews an immediate and compelling resource for eliciting sociolinguistic accounts of life-as-experienced (e.g., Benson & Nunan, 2005; Block, 2006; Menard-Warwick, 2009; Miller, 2003; Norton, 2000).

Although the qualitative methods literature offers guiding principles and procedures for conducting interviews and managing interview data (e.g., Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Seidman, 2013), the research interview has increasingly come under scrutiny as a much-used yet frequently under-theorized methodology. Various criticisms include (a) the failure of researchers to engage with the ideological and theoretical underpinnings of interviewing, including the nature of knowledge, language, and communication (e.g., Briggs, 2007; Roulston, 2010a, 2010b; Talmy, 2010); (b) the contested status of interviews as (un)naturalistic data (e.g., Mishler, 1986; Potter & Hepburn, 2005; Speer, 2005); (c) the lack of recognition of interviewing as a social practice and interaction, not just a research instrument (e.g., Potter & Hepburn, 2005; Roulston, 2010b, 2013; Talmy & Richards, 2011); (d) the failure to locate interview activities and interactants in specific contexts (e.g., sociolinguistic, institutional, temporal, sequential; Blommaert, 2001; Briggs, 1986; De Fina, 2009; Mishler, 1986; Prior, 2011); and (e) the widespread deletion of the interviewer in data analysis and representation (e.g., Potter & Hepburn, 2005, 2012; Rapley, 2012; Talmy & Richards, 2011).

In line with these criticisms, Atkinson and Delamont (2006) argue that “too many authors are complicit in the general culture of the ‘interview society,’ and are too ready to celebrate narratives and biographical accounts, rather than subjecting them to systematic analysis” (p. 164). Thus to promote dialogue on methodological matters and to encourage systematic analysis of autobiographic interviews, in this article I attend to a related but no less important issue for researchers: the treatment (or rather, prevalent non-treatment) of “failed” interviews (Roulston, 2010a, 2013)—that is, interviews that are deemed unproductive because interviewee or interviewer performance hindered successful data elicitation and collection.

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Theorizing “Failure”

In autobiographic research, the presence of a questioner (i.e., the “interviewer”), a respondent (i.e., the “interviewee”), and a recording device ordinarily works to layer the institutional veneer of interview over a setting. If interactants successfully carry out an extended question–answer exchange, then the researcher’s presumption of the activity as interview is confirmed. However, trouble may arise when the activity-as-achieved fails to align with the activity-as-assumed. Due to any number of reasons (e.g., asymmetric power relations, topic selection, activity format, environment, language choice, psychophysical state), participants may resist and even subvert conventionally expected interviewer–interviewee roles and normative behavior.

Frequently, problematic interviews are written off as failures and the data excluded from further consideration. Because readers may never learn of materials not included in a published research study, the illusion of interviewing as a relatively uncomplicated means of data collection is perpetuated. Moreover, as the exigencies of scholarly research and publishing necessitate efficient data collection, selection, and analysis, and timely dissemination of findings, unsuccessful interviews offer little apparent practical value and may even serve as unwelcome reminders of our scholarly disappointments and methodological shortcomings.

In my own narrative-based research with immigrants and L2 users of English, I have found interview data a rich and informative resource for studying emic understandings and representations, identity construction, sociolinguistic trajectories, and discursive practices. Once rapport is established, participants are usually willing to talk at length about various topics and concerns, both interviewer- and interviewee-initiated. However, on occasion, I found that the interview, or at least portions of it, was resisted or reconfigured by participants in ways that were unexpected and even uncomfortable. Like many other researchers unable to elicit the target material, I set those interviews aside and turned my attention to the successfully collected data.

Reflecting on Interview Trouble

An exception to the pervasive dismissal of problematic interviews is Charles Briggs’s (1986) often-cited sociological study of his interview failures with Spanish-speaking Mexicanos in New Mexico. As Briggs details through an in-depth examination of the research process and context, the interview is unavoidably shaped by interactants’ (i.e., interviewee and interviewer) own communicative patterns and dynamic understandings of the activity and its goals:

One of the major findings that emerged from an analysis of my own communicative blunders is that the communicative structure of the entire interview affects the meaning of each utterance. (pp. 102-103, italics in original)

By directly attending to the problematic aspects of the research process, and treating each interview as a “unique social interaction that involves a negotiation of social roles and frames of reference between strangers” (p. 24), Briggs offers a much-needed counter to uncritical interview practices and data analyses prevalent in qualitative research (see also Briggs, 2007).

Similarly, Kathryn Roulston (2010a, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2013) has written extensively on interviewing and researcher reflexivity. Drawing on the work of Briggs (1986), as well as constructionist and conversation analytic perspectives, Roulston contends that reviewing problematic interviews is a productive exercise and encourages novice and seasoned researchers to cultivate a more mindful and process-oriented approach:

In cases where interviews seem to have “failed”—I use this term with reservations since “failed” interviews provide fruitful grounds for asking methodological questions, which are rarely the kinds of questions initially posed—students might ask themselves how they might evaluate the “quality” of the interviews that they have conducted and the study as a whole. (Roulston, 2010a, p. 200)

Modeling this approach, Roulston et al. (2008) demonstrate how research methods courses can facilitate professional development by creating authentic opportunities for students to apply their interviewing skills and reflect on practice. This study brings attention to some of the technical and methodological problems novice researchers face in the interview process (e.g., failed probes, planning, reporting). Roulston (2013), returning to a set of three research interviews conducted in a medical training program, explores the management of trouble and identity. Locating instances of failed interviewee responses, Roulston’s interaction and categorization analysis reveals how interviewees and interviewers actively oriented to and managed their “varied roles and relationships” (p. 14). Also highlighting research trouble and identity is Nairn, Munro, and Smith’s (2005) re-analysis of a failed interview with high school students in New Zealand. Prompted by difficulty in eliciting extended talk, these researchers found that “silence, laughter and other acts of resistance” (p. 229) were used by their interviewees to both index and manage discomfort with the interviewer and the interview setting.

The preceding studies notwithstanding, the enduring popularity of autobiographic interviewing and the paucity
of “social studies of interview studies” (Rapley, 2012, p. 552) underscore the urgent need for more attention to this research practice. Moreover, at the time of this writing, I am unaware of any L2 researchers who have re-analyzed interview failures.

Two Approaches

Researchers’ assessments of the success or failure of an interview are inextricably bound up with their theory of interviewing, whether expressed or tacitly held. One potential (and often default) means for the researcher to resolve problems as they arise is to maintain the definition of the activity-as-assumed (i.e., “interview”) and treat incongruences with the activity-as-accomplished as failed actions, thereby arriving at a negative assessment of the interview and the interviewees as uncomfortable, uncooperative, or even hostile.

An obvious practical advantage of this typical treatment of interview trouble is that it allows the researcher to focus on the successfully collected data rather than becoming encumbered with solving procedural difficulties. However, from an informed methodological perspective, it neglects to address what contributed to the troubles and misalignments in the first place. In cases where interviewers and interviewees do not share linguistic and cultural expertise and co-membership in the categories recruited for study (as is common in L2 research), the risk of operating under competing assumptions, norms, and values is particularly high. As a result, interview trouble may not simply be due to uncooperative participants or problematic content but may stem from a more fundamental failure of interactants to achieve intersubjectivity (Schegloff, 1992) or mutual understanding of the activity and the procedures for participating in it.

An alternative treatment of interviews, one informing the present study, takes a discursive constructionist approach drawing on the methods and findings of conversation analysis (e.g., Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008; Schegloff, 2007), discursive psychology (e.g., Potter & Hepburn, 2008), and related talk-in-interaction scholarship (e.g., Buttny, 2004; Roulston, 2013). Based on recorded interaction rather than researcher memory or intuition, this data-driven approach examines the accomplishments (i.e., the turn-by-turn action sequence) to reveal and re-specify the activity as it is locally understood and built up by those engaged in it. A focus on publicly displayed understandings and contingent actions allows a reflexive and contextually embedded inspection of the interview process that is unavailable in thematic or content-based approaches.

In the following worked example of one of my early failed L2 interviews, I engage this time with the data not simply through the lens of “failure” but as co-constructed micro-moments embedded in a larger interactional sequence. Specifically, by examining the processes of (mis)alignment, I seek to uncover how our individual understandings of the activity contributed to and managed (i.e., displayed, oriented to, resolved) our (mis)alignment and, in turn, ultimately resulted in my decision to exclude this material from further analytical treatment.

Study Background

The focal episode comes from a larger corpus of active interviews (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) with adult working-class immigrants from Southeast Asia living in the United States and Canada. The goal of the project was to investigate how these individuals made sense of their experiences with language learning, language use, and social participation. In all cases, participants were acquainted with me before the interviews and were aware of my background and interests in L2 learning, teaching, and research.

This particular interview centers on Jack, a former refugee from Cambodia who arrived in the United States as a teenager in the 1980s and graduated from high school in the Midwest. At the time of our Hawai‘i interviews, he was in his 40s, divorced, and living alone. Jack worked at a number of blue-collar jobs on the U.S. mainland before settling in Hawai‘i, where he found employment in a factory with co-workers who spoke English, Pidgin (Hawai‘i Creole), and several other languages. His multi-lingual repertoire included Khmer/Cambodian (his L1), English, and some Pidgin. His conversational English, although displaying marked L2 phonology and morphosyntax, was sufficient for him to carry out his daily activities. However, I observed that in group interactions, particularly those involving unfamiliar people, settings, and topics, Jack occasionally displayed some difficulty in comprehension or hearing. A frequent strategy he employed when faced with communicative breakdowns was to steer the conversation, often abruptly, toward topics familiar to him (e.g., music, food, shopping, travel).

Re-Examining the Interview

The following analysis centers on my second recorded meeting with Jack. This particular interaction was selected because it remained a “curious” episode (see Maynard, 2003) in that although it was a pre-arranged meeting for the purpose of interview we were unsuccessful in establishing a shared interview frame. I will first provide some background on this episode and the interaction leading up to it. I will then turn to an analysis of the sequence as it unfolds.
On this occasion, I am visiting Jack’s apartment to interview him and his Cambodian friend, Bona, who is scheduled to join us shortly. We begin with small talk about the traffic, the weather, and our families. With his permission, I turn on the audio recorder but turn it off when he gets up to vacuum and clean in preparation for Bona’s arrival. After Jack returns to the living room, we both sit on the floor around a small table drinking tea and discussing our weekend plans. While he continues to straighten up a few items, he initiates a topic shift by inquiring about the kinds of questions I will ask Bona. I reply that I am interested also in Bona’s immigration experiences and perspectives on living in the United States. Jack then abruptly announces that he, too, has many more interesting stories and asks why I do not ask him for more.

Doing and Not Doing Interview: “Do You Have Any Interesting Stories for Me?”

Based on our previous interview in this same setting, our present pre-arranged meeting for the purpose of interview, the invitation of Bona as a co-participant, and the visible presence of an audio recorder, it is reasonable to assume that Jack and I share an understanding of this communicative event as interview. Although an audio record of the moments immediately preceding this segment is unavailable, there is evidence that we both orient to interview-related activities. My explicit request to record our interaction and Jack’s subsequent permission mark our talk not as casual conversation but as part of the institutional activity of “going on record.” Jack’s inquiry about the types of questions I will ask Bona indicates his understanding that question–answer sequences, the sine qua non of interviews, are relevant and expectable. Finally, his disjunctive topic shift and assertion that he has more stories is hearable as a story preface (Sacks, 1992) that (a) makes relevant that he has told stories to me on a previous occasion (in our first interview), (b) invites me to solicit his stories, (c) projects a bid for an extended turn at talk, and (d) allows us to align as storyteller and story recipient. Aligning with Jack’s request, and interested in collecting more data, I turn on the audio recorder and ask him about his stories (Excerpt 1a). However, despite my elicitation attempts, I am met with apparent resistance.

Excerpt 1a (M: Researcher, J: Jack)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Transcript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>M: So do you have any interesting stories for me::?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>(1.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>J: What stories.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even without an audio record of the interaction leading up to this segment, the fact that I turn on the recorder at this specific juncture, topically and sequentially in line 1 latch my story solicitation (by means of the discourse marker “so”) onto Jack’s preceding talk, and produce an explicit request for “interesting stories,” together demonstrate my recognition that Jack is a potential storyteller with relevant and tellworthy material. Nevertheless, despite our seemingly shared topicalization of interview-related activities such as storytelling and question–answer sequences, Jack’s non-aligning actions are indeed surprising as well as serious impediments to carrying out the institutional activity of interview.

We can only speculate on the reasons for Jack’s non-alignment. Perhaps he sought to delay the formal interview until his friend arrived to allow him to have another recipient and co-teller. At the time, I heard his question produced with what could be glossed as a “mock jealous” tone. If audio data were available to confirm this, then it might suggest that he desired to be the focal interview participant (as before), not a co-participant or secondary respondent. Perhaps he was just teasing me with more stories to see how I would react. It is also possible that self-selecting himself as a person with stories, but choosing to withhold or delay their production, enabled him to exert more control over the interview context—similar to how he would sometimes suddenly shift topics and speakership to manage his ordinary conversations. Of course, any such notions of intentionality or state of mind remain mere conjecture. However, by focusing on the interaction as it unfolds we can empirically examine how interactants, themselves, demonstrate their understandings in situ.
Managing (Mis)alignment: “What Stories”

Excerpt 1b

01 M: So do you have any interesting stories for me::?
02 (1.5)
03 J: What stories.
04 (0.8)
05 M: About:::t, (1.0) your life.
06 (2.7) ((J noisily digs through his CDs and DVDs))
07 Your happiest experience?
08 (3.4)
09 Your funniest experience?
10 (1.3)
11 Your craziest experience?
12 (12.0)
13 ((J turns on TV, searches for something, turns on the TV, and
then inserts a karaoke disc into the DVD player))
14 (33.0)
15 ((American game show plays on the TV))
16 (21.0)
17 ((audio shifts to upbeat Cambodian instrumental music))
18 (40.0)
19 J: You can read English in there. ((nods head toward TV screen))
20 (27.0) ((Cambodian music continues))
21 ((music stops))
22 (0.8)
23 M: ((directs gaze to bookshelf and book on Angkor Wat))
24 Is it /ŋkor/ (.)/ŋkor/?
25 [((music starts again))
26 (3.3)
27 J: */ŋkor/* "(yeah)"*/ŋkor/*((looking at the television))
28 (0.5)
29 M: /an/?
30 (2.7)
31 J: See, (.>)see you can read this.<
32 (1.6)
33 (4.0)

In my first turn in this recorded segment, I orient to the activity as interview by formally initiating our interaction with a question soliciting a newsworthy story from Jack. In terms of conditional relevance, my question is predicated upon Jack’s initial claim that he has more stories to share. The form of my question, produced with a playful sound stretch, invites Jack to respond with a type-conforming “yes” or “no” response (Raymond, 2003). Because a confirmation and storytelling sequence is expectable, Jack’s nonconforming response, produced as a repair request (“What stories.”) with a flat, non-affiliative stance, signals trouble at the opening of this sequence.

Typically, the third position is what Schegloff (1992) refers to as “the last systematically provided opportunity to catch” and repair “trouble in the socially shared grasp of the talk and the other conduct in the interaction” (p. 1301,
italics in original). Thus, my self-repairs in lines 5 to 11 employing an escalating three-part list (happiest, funniest, craziest) of extreme case formulations (Pomerantz, 1986) reveal my work to resolve the interactional trouble by again seeking to establish a shared orientation to our activity as interview while drawing on an interview strategy of eliciting personal narratives through emotionally charged prompts (e.g., Labov, 1972). Despite providing Jack with several response slots (2, 6, 8, 10, 12) to produce a story, this strategy proves unsuccessful. He then inserts a karaoke disk into the DVD player and, after the music plays for 40 s, he directs my attention to the TV screen (20: “You can read English in there”).

As evidenced by our misalignment at the outset of this recorded sequence, Jack and I appear to be pursuing competing agendas. For my part, by not aligning with Jack’s focus on the music video, I am treating it as irrelevant to the activity of interview. When the music stops, thereby affording a transition relevant place, I initiate a new question sequence (25). Turning my attention to a book on Angkor Wat (Cambodia’s world-famous temple and tourist site), I ask Jack for the correct pronunciation. Although he responds by softly repeating and confirming the requested pronunciation of the first syllable of “Angkor” (28), his stressed repetition of “see” (32), produced while maintaining his gaze on the video, once more solicits my attention to the TV screen. Faced again with Jack’s disalignment, I abandon the Angkor topic sequence.

Although there are a number of observations that can be made regarding this sequence, I consider here three specific resources (deixis, linguistic expertise, artifacts) that Jack and I employ in the service of our individual goals. The first, deixis, refers to the use of contextually interpreted referentials or indexicals (e.g., this, that, here, there). As deictic markers (verbal and gestural) require a shared point of reference to be understood, they serve as important devices for establishing joint attention, resolving ambiguity, and achieving intersubjectivity. Ignoring my clarification request on the pronunciation of “an” (30), in line 32 Jack repeats his directive (“see”) and reformulates his previous utterance, emphatically shifting the spatial deictic reference from “You can read English in there” (20) to a demonstrative: “See, (.) > see (.) you can read this.<” (32). Demonstratives are robust resources for eliciting attentional focus (Diesel, 2006) as they require that the recipient attend even more closely to the speaker-side perceptual field in order for this, the focal object, to be understood. Thus, unsuccessful in his initial efforts to establish a shared perspective on something “in there” (i.e., the TV screen), Jack intensifies his commitment to establish joint attention and alignment toward his activity by employing a more proximal referent through the demonstrative “this” (i.e., the English subtitles). As this shows, even attending to seemingly minor linguistic resources makes visible Jack’s actions as agentive and goal-directed rather than simply uncooperative.

Another key aspect of this interaction is our mutual orientation to language skills. This is made visible in lines 20 and 32, where Jack instructs me to read the English (my L1) subtitles on the screen. Making relevant my English expertise and Khmer non-expertise, his utterance also displays his understanding that I have not yet aligned my gaze with his activity (otherwise the fact that the subtitles are in English would be obvious). Similarly, I orient to Jack’s Khmer expertise by soliciting a linguistic response on a point of pronunciation (25, 30). Because my question concerns Angkor Wat, it advances this and related topics for discussion that are tied to Jack’s cultural and linguistic knowledge. In this way, both of us are making use of our differential sociolinguistic skills and knowledge as both topical and epistemic resources to steer the ongoing activity toward our individual agendas.

Goodwin (1994), in an elegant analysis of embodied practices in archaeological fieldwork and courtroom settings, explicates how interactants make use of environmental objects (e.g., tools, graphic representations) in their spatial fields to shape knowledge and perception. As Goodwin notes, the use of artifacts to drive interaction is not limited to professional settings but is a pervasive feature of all social life. In the present interaction, Jack and I both use artifacts in the local environment to solicit joint attention and shared spatial orientation. Of the various semiotic tools at his disposal (e.g., CDs, DVDs, TV, cell phone, photographs, books), Jack selects both video and audio to steer the activity. To construct an interview frame (Goffman, 1974) by making visible the institutional goal of data collection, I have placed an audio recorder on the table and a notepad and pen next to me. I also turn my attention to a nearby book on Cambodia to occasion talk related to Jack’s linguistic and cultural knowledge and expertise.

**Negotiating the Activity: “You Know Cambodian Now”**

Analysis of our parallel action sequences reveals that despite our turn-taking and use of various resources including question-answer sequences, deictic reference, language expertise, and artifacts, we have failed to achieve visual-spatial alignment (i.e., gaze, proxemics) or a shared understanding of the activity at hand. Describing similar difficulties, Briggs (1986) emphasizes that participants’ orientations to the interview must be taken into consideration:
If the category of "interview" is not shared by the respondent or if the latter does not utilize this frame in defining such interactions, then he or she may apply norms of interaction and canons of interpretation that differ from those of the interviewer. In other words, the data obtained in interviews are affected by societal differences in the interactional goals of the participants. Even though fieldworkers may define the situation as a focus on the explicit transmission of data, respondents may see the process as entertainment, pedagogy, obtaining cash income, protecting her or his neighbors from outside scrutiny, and so forth. (pp. 48-49)

If, as my actions indicate, my goal is the "explicit transmission of data" in the service of interview, what goals do Jack's actions suggest? Does he see the process, in Briggs's words, as entertainment, pedagogy, or something else? This becomes clearer as the activity unfolds and our conflict escalates.

**Excerpt 2**

36 J: 'Kay?
37 (0.9)
38 You know— you know Cambodian now.
39 (1.5)
40 M: I don't know Cambodian.
41 (0.6)
42 J: No— the word on the bottom.
43 (0.7)
44 M: I don't know the meaning.
45 (0.5)
46 J: See it— ((pointing to the Romanized subtitles))
47 That mean the same thing.
48 (1.0)
49 M: I don't know f the mean(h)ing f ((laughing))
50 J: What mean mean? ((serious tone))
51 (1.0)
52 If you know how to say it correct then I can tell (you).
53 ((J points to the screen))

Despite my ongoing efforts to elicit an extended turn from Jack, he repeatedly counters by directing my attention to the video. When I fail to provide a response following his confirmation check (36: "kay?") and almost 1-s pause, he then makes explicit the projected outcome of his work: "You know— you know Cambodian now" (38). My baldly produced dispreferred response (Schegloff, 2007), "I don't know Cambodian" (40), negates Jack's epistemic claim and again resists aligning with his activity. I then narrow my challenge³ (mitigating it with laughter) from "know" to "mean" (44, 49), now making relevant a distinction between recognition and contextualized understanding.

Following my rejection of Jack's claim that I can know Cambodian based on Romanized subtitles, he continues to direct my attention to the TV screen (e.g., 42: "No— the word on the bottom"). In this way, Jack orients to our misalignment by repairing "Cambodian" to "the word" (or words), thus dissolving my objection that I can "know Cambodian" from the video. As our tension escalates, he then challenges my failure to align my gaze to "see" (46) the object of his attention. Then, mirroring my previous semantic challenge related to "know," and rejecting my playful stance, he produces a repair request for me to clarify what I mean by "mean" (50).

Jack's utterance in line 52, following my failure to respond to his clarification request, is perhaps the most salient in terms of shutting down this challenge sequence and revealing his interactional goal: "if you know how to say it correct then I can tell you." This displays his recognition that his role in our interaction (whatever it may or may not be) is to provide information, but he is placing...
conditions on the process. Embedded in his statement is also the implication that he is the one to determine the correctness of my utterance, thereby agentively highlighting his linguistic expertise and my non-expertise.

**Doing Language Learning: “Khmao Mean Black”**

A core ethnomethodological stance of the discursive constructionist approach taken here is that contexts and identities are not fixed or pre-existing but are collaboratively assembled and maintained within and by means of interaction. In my brief analysis of the preceding excerpts, I have discussed how my initial attempt at eliciting stories of Jack’s experiences was resisted and transformed by him into a triadic interaction (me, Jack, and the music video) centering on Khmer language and with Jack as the expert and director of the interaction. As the sequence progresses, there is further evidence showing how our differential linguistic expertise becomes a resource for organizing our talk around a particular point of vocabulary from the video.

**Excerpt 3**

54 J: Mean *khmao* mean black=*khmao*
55 (1.0)
56 Mean *khmao* bla[ck. ] =
57 M: [ *khmao?*]
58 J: =She said - (0.5) she *khmao* but her heart good.
59 (0.4)
60 M: Oh.
61 (0.5)
62 J: She said she black but [her heart ( )
63 M: [Oh (. ) her skin’s black?
64 J: Her skin [black] but heart- (. ) heart (. ) light.
65 M: [Oh ]
66 (0.5)
67 M: Oh
68 (0.3)
69 M: (((reading the subtitles)) *mouk pi* (0.8) *chit mun?*
70 (0.4)
71 J: *Cheat mun* (. ) mean uh (0.7) lost life.
72 (1.0)
73 M: Lost life?
74 (0.3)
75 J: Yeah like (0.4) long- like- (0.6) before you die right you born
76 again righ[t? ] mean lost life=
77 M: =Oh LAST LIFE.
78 (0.3)
79 M: “Yeah”
80 (3.0)
81 J: She say but she- ( . ) she- *khmao* but she can do anything.
82 M: Oh.
83 J: Yeah.
84 (1.2)
85 "(see that)"
86 M: (((Reading the subtitles)) *bong kung deung heuy*, (1.6)
87 (1.5)
88 chet *khmao* = [BLACK ]
89 J: [“Yeah”(0.5) yeah
90 (lines omitted)
In this sequence, Jack introduces into our talk the Khmer word *khmao* [black], using a formulaic repetition drill (54, 56, 58, 172) common in explicit L2 vocabulary and pronunciation instruction (Nation & Newton, 2009). When I fail to take up his lexical repetition, he repeats it again (56), prompting me to produce the item (57). He also offers a response that addresses my previous complaints about not understanding “the meaning” as he provides both the Khmer model as well as its English translation followed by a summary of its contextual usage by the singer in the video. I take up his listen and repeat format by following the pattern that he has established: I listen to the singer, read the subtitles, repeat, and wait for his response. In lines 60, 63, 65, 67, 77, 78, 83, my “Oh”-receipts (Heritage, 1984) function as acknowledgment tokens that continue our turn-taking and display a change in my linguistic knowledge that further confirms my “novice learner” status.

From line 69, touched off by my repetition of “*mouk pi* (. . . *chit mun* [come-from-*life-past; that is, because of your past life] from the song, the lexical focus temporarily shifts to “*cheat mun* [past life]. Jack again acts as language expert by repairing my misproduction of “*chit mun*” to “*cheat mun*” and, after a brief word search, he provides the translation as “lost life” (71). The repair sequence in lines 73 to 80 resolves my recognition problem with Jack’s translation. In lines 75 to 76, Jack responds to my repair initiator (“Lost life?”) with a paraphrase treating this as a commonsense concept (“before you die right you born again right?”) and repeats “lost life” in line 76. I then carry out a self-initiated other-repair in line 78, signaling through the token “Oh” a sudden shift in understanding followed by an emphatic production of *LAST LIFE* as a candidate translation. Although Jack does give a minimal and softly produced confirmation in line 80 (“*Yeah*”), he does not repair his previous utterance but produces a gloss of the singer’s use of *khmao* as the song continues. In lines 88 to 89, I repeat the singer’s words (*bong kung deung heuy* (1.6) *chet khmao*; [you shall realize how this “blackhearted” girl . . . ]) and loudly produce “BLACK” to indicate my recognition of the target vocabulary item, *khmao*, from the lyrics. Jack initially produces a soft “*yeah*” (90) but then repeats it in a slightly louder voice (“yeah”), confirming my displayed understanding of the meaning of *khmao*.

By giving only minimal acknowledgment of my other-repair of “lost life” to “last life,” by returning the focus to *khmao*, and by confirming my production of the target item and its meaning, Jack reaffirms his role as expert/teacher and mine as novice/student. As the interaction around the music video continues, other words are explained, but *khmao* is sustained as the lexical target across the turns.
Giving further evidence that Jack is orienting to this activity as a language lesson are his explicit instructions: “say khmao you say khmao too.” (172) and “Say khmao mean black skin (.) I can teach (.) the rest later” (188). Together, we have at last achieved intersubjectivity by jointly producing the activity of language learning.

**Interviewee Failures or Interviewer Failures?**

A re-examination of this research episode illustrates that the interview, like all social activity, although built up by conventionalized norms or rules, is not pre-determined but is brought about by the sequentially organized orientations and collaborative actions of interactants. Initially, I focused on the failure of the interviewee to align with and co-produce the activity of interview. However, a more careful inspection of this sequence allows me to see how we both actively oriented to our misalignment and sought to resolve it. Although we initially struggled to arrive at a procedurally shared understanding of our activity, we eventually succeeded in co-producing a Khmer vocabulary lesson.

Nevertheless, a thorough, self-reflective analysis must also attend to researcher-side contributions, a component often absent from an analysis of the interview trajectory (Rapley, 2012). As qualitative research is interdisciplinary as well as “a highly individual human enterprise” (Brodsky, 2008, p. 766), the researcher functions as a “human instrument” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 39) and an “interpretive bricoleur” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 4) that produces and filters data for analysis. In sorting complex phenomena, what Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2013, p. 12) refer to as “data condensation,” the researcher is tasked with making decisions about what and how much material to include and how to examine it. By initially interpreting this particular data segment as a failed interview and excluding it from further consideration, I missed an opportunity to “critically observe [my] practice and analyze interaction methodologically” (Roulston, 2012, p. 61).

As I have discussed, reinterpreting this episode as a vocabulary lesson rather than failed interview indeed sheds light on the productive and goal-oriented work of research participants; yet, I have essentially traded one interpretive frame for another. I will now consider how my orientation to this episode as a failed interview and then as a language lesson prevented me from recognizing the presence of storytelling.

**Doing Storytelling: “Do You Have Any Interesting Stories for Me?”**

At the beginning of our audio-recorded interaction, I invoked an interview frame by soliciting stories from Jack and reserving an extended turn for him to tell them. Following his repair initiation (“What stories?”) and my intensified story pursuit, a conditionally relevant response from Jack was still not forthcoming. This was particularly puzzling given that immediately prior to me turning on the recorder, he explicitly told me he had more stories. His subsequent work to steer the activity toward watching the music video can be characterized as resisting or disaligning with my interactional goals (i.e., to carry out an interview, to learn about his life experiences) in favor of proceeding with his own (e.g., to teach me Khmer, to exert agency in response to linguistic and other asymmetries in the interview). What I did not discover until later, after noticing Jack’s extensive collection of Khmer karaoke DVDs and CDs, and joining him in various events, is that he is a musician and performs often at community festivals and other gatherings. Thus, I failed to recognize that Jack was introducing me to his love for Khmer music and singing.

This information now orients me to the importance of the music video in enabling Jack to produce a relevant response to my story request—although not a response necessarily compatible with the interview frame that I recognized or expected. In his response slots (Excerpt 1b: 2-4, 6, 8, 10, 12-19) following my reformulated story prompts, instead of producing a verbal reply, Jack searches for and inserts a music video into the DVD player. How might this be a relevant response? First, the song is a story. It is about a young Khmer woman who challenges a young man’s teasing about her “black skin,” “black heart,” and low social standing by emphasizing her many virtues. As the song plays, Jack translates and narrates a story composed of characters, represented dialogue, temporal organization, and assessments:

- She said (.) she khmao but her heart good.
- She said she black but her heart (.) Her skin black but, her heart-heart light.
- She say but she- she khmao but she can do anything.
- She say if she black but she black look pretty.
- She never do bad to anybody else.
- She (.) she say “khmao like me?” “Black like me?”
- She say “black like me. Don’t worry. Don’t worry nothing.”
- He say “You black. I’m black too.”
Although Jack’s explanation of the video makes relevant the salience of khmao as a marker of Khmer ethnic identity, personal character, and social status, I failed to grasp this at the time of the recording. It was only after participating in community events with Cambodian immigrants that khmao became meaningful as a cultural resource. Through his explanation of “cheat mun” as “last life,” Jack was also introducing me to the concepts of karmic action and rebirth, beliefs central to his own strongly held philosophical views—and necessary for understanding the worldview and personal history that both shaped and were shaped by his autobiographic talk. I also recognize that Jack’s language lesson forced me to empathetically share his experience by transposing me into the role of L2 learner, the category under which he was recruited.

By holding to my preconceptions of interview and storytelling, and viewing Jack’s interaction against those interpretive frames, I initially viewed his talk and actions as resisting the activity of interview. However, prompted by the khmao language lesson, and taking seriously Briggs’s (1986) caution that the norms of interaction cannot be assumed to be shared by the conversational participants, I become able to recognize that Jack was indeed providing a story—and in particular, one that was also about himself.

Further examination of the recorded interaction shows how Jack uses the video to topicalize aspects of his life and culture:

**Excerpt 4**

135 J: ((pointing to the video)) See how they catch fish 'there'.
137 (1.0)
138 M: That’s how you catch fish?
139 (1.5)
140 J: Yeah.
141 (1.9)
142 M: Did you do that?
143 J: Yeah yeah (.)(these are) ( )

Here he points out men fishing with nets, a cultural activity tied to his childhood—again, part of his autobiographic experience solicited by my question at the beginning of the recorded sequence. Later, in a scene in the video, Jack points out a Khmer translator he knows, using that as an opportunity to introduce me to his hometown and its people:

**Excerpt 5**

149 J: THAT GUY from, (0.6) ( ) translator (0.7) in X City.5
150 (2.0)
151 This guy. ((pointing to the screen))

Jack’s work to draw my attention to specific terms and concepts in our interaction bears closer consideration. In Khmer storytelling, speakers order narrative clauses in terms of topic-comment structure rather than chronological order (Longmire, 1995), which potentially creates confusion for a recipient expecting a linear approach. Thus, Khmer narratives first highlight the topic and then provide new information about it. Moreover, speakers usually begin with the end of a story and then work back to explain how events brought that end about (Longmire, 1995). A prominent feature of adult–child language socialization in Khmer is that storytelling "begins with joint attention to an object or person in the environment" (Longmire, 1998, p. 102), frequently through deictic reference, and is then followed by a comment. Although I did not recognize it as aligning with the activity of interview, this is precisely the type of scaffolding that Jack employs in our expert–novice interaction.

Despite my initial perceptions to the contrary, it appears that Jack did indeed orient to storytelling, and he was using the music video to educate me about his culture, his language, his music, his beliefs, and his life. The storyteller and story components were there. Missing, however, was a recipient sensitive to the potential forms and activities of the telling.

**Reflecting Back/Moving Forward**

In this article, I returned to a research "failure" to gain a better understanding of interview, interaction, and (mis)
alignment. A re-analysis of the data confirms that my initial orientation to the interaction in terms of what it was not (e.g., not interview, not productive) prevented me from seeing what it was (e.g., a dynamic interaction, the sharing of cultural and linguistic expertise). By shifting attention away from failure to accomplishment, the activity takes on a new dimension that allows an analysis that recognizes what was achieved, shared, and understood.

However, as I discovered, merely trading failure for accomplishment was not enough to enable me explicate other unrecognized aspects of our interaction. It was only by interrogating the interviewer’s privileged status as data collector, selector, and analyst—prompted largely by the language lesson and re-informed by ethnographic information—that I was able to see how Jack brought language learning and autobiographic storytelling together to produce a locally relevant response. By initially clinging to my expectations surrounding interview and storytelling, and by taking a binary view of the activity as interview—not interview and interview-language lesson, I failed to appreciate that activities are not always separate or linear; they may also be multi-layered and multi-directional.

What does this mean for a theory of interview and interview interaction? It means that we must take seriously our obligation to treat interviews and other talk not just as data but also as interaction between social members engaged in the local negotiation and construction of specific activities and goals. Moreover, it requires a conscious reconceptualization of interviewing as a process of “data generation” (Briggs, 1986; Rapley, 2012; Roulston, 2013) rather than “data collection” or “data mining” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

In terms of improving methodological procedures, a close examination of our successes and failures across all stages of an interview project allows us as researchers to become more self-aware and critical of our taken-for-granted practices. Of course, this does not require that we subject the entire interview to a micro-analytic lens. Even granted practices. Of course, this does not require that we become more self-aware and critical of our taken-for-granted practices. Of course, this does not require that we

Secondary analysis has been shown to offer a wide range of benefits (as well as challenges) for qualitative research and practice (e.g., Roulston, 2013; van den Berg, 2005; van den Berg, Wetherell, & Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2003).

Considering the interview as a jointly constructed activity forces us to dismantle the assumption that roles and procedural norms are pre-determined or unchallenged. It also affords a means to examine seemingly unproductive interviews as accomplishments rather than failures, allowing us to see how activities are agentively and collaboratively assembled and managed by interactants using all their communicative resources. It is my desire that such a perspective will encourage researchers to tackle the “messy” and “failed” parts of our research anew, rather than brushing them aside, to better inform the quality of our fieldwork and analyses.

Appendix

Transcription Conventions Adapted from Jefferson (2004)

(0.5) Timed pause (in seconds)
( ) Untimed micro-pause
£ £ Laughter or laughing voice
(() ) Additional explanations or descriptions
- Abrupt cutoff
: Sound prolongation
( ) Unclear fragment/best guess
- Stopping or falling tone
, Continuing contour
? Rising inflection

Underline Speaker emphasis
= Latched utterances
[ ] Overlapping talk
CAPS Louder speech
* * Softer speech
italics Khmer words
// Focal pronunciation in IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet)

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Notes
1. Participant names are pseudonyms.
2. This song is a popular duet titled Khmao Euy Khmao [Hey! Dark-skinned Girl].
3. Although challenges and other dispreferred actions are non-aligning in that they are activity and stance resisting (e.g., here resisting Jack’s activity and epistemic claims), they can be effective strategies in active interviewing as they may provoke respondents to offer more detailed and extended accounts (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).
4. Light skin is often associated with beauty and positive qualities; dark skin, although a sign of Khmer ethnic “purity,” is often associated with being a peasant, unattractive, and unpleasant. Bona and Jack both made reference to Bona’s light skin from his part-Chinese heritage.
5. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this (see also Roulston, 2013, on interview categories). In a later interview, Jack mentions that when he first came to the United States he was placed in a mainstream classroom where he had to learn English one word at a time.
6. City name removed to preserve participant anonymity.
7. Nevertheless, Block (2008) is critical of what he terms “‘over-mining’ the data” (p. 46), arguing that one can lose sight of larger meso- and macro-level “surface” constructs.

References


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