

# TALKING IDENTITY: UNDERSTANDING CORNWALL'S ORAL CULTURE THROUGH GROUP DIALOGUE

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Interdisciplinary work, so much discussed these days, is not about confronting already constituted disciplines (none of which, in fact, is willing to let itself go). To do something interdisciplinary it's not enough to choose a 'subject' (a theme) and gather around it two or three sciences. Interdisciplinarity consists in creating a new object that belongs to no one.

Roland Barthes, *Jeunes Chercheurs*

## INTRODUCTION

The Cornish Audio Visual Archive (CAVA) is developing against a background of changing perceptions in oral history. For instance, interdisciplinary approaches can set in motion a view of the archive as not solely a collection of reminiscences about the past but also as a means to understand those present-day social and cultural processes underway in Cornwall that have immediate relevance to its people, such as the maintenance of cultural identity, accent change, and the impact of increasingly heterogeneous communities. On a practical note there is perhaps an even more basic issue in relation to the collection of data, with traditional assumptions about the neutrality of the interviewer now being challenged by a variety of new approaches. This paper is an interdisciplinary consideration of these debates within the context of Cornish Studies. In the first section we draw on the disciplines of oral history, anthropology, and sociolinguistics to provide a framework for

analysing the creative potential of group dialogue. It will be suggested that this particular approach offers an opportunity for communities to create their own cultural narratives free of the external control of an interviewer. These conceptual ideas are then related to a case study of a recording made by residents of a Cornish village. Historical events are recounted from living memory and interpreted through a discussion of the underlying themes of communal conflict and consensus. This approach also lends itself well to a consideration of the behaviour and attitudes of group participants in relation to contemporary issues. By addressing such a broad range of topics and perspectives this article seeks to establish a powerful interpretative framework for current and future Cornish study within CAVA.

### **REASSESSING THE INTERVIEW PROCESS**

The way in which an interview should be conducted is a basic and contested issue for oral historians. For many orthodox practitioners the purpose of a recording is simply to offer a personal insight into a specific historical event. This reflects the established view of oral history as simply a device whereby eyewitness accounts are combined alongside written sources to provide fresh insight into a debate on a particular historical topic or event. In these circumstances the interviewer should adopt a detached role, merely asking a few questions and allowing the interviewee to provide the facts. Carolynne Kieffer, an American sociologist, concluded in 1993 that 'the oral history interview is not meant to be a dialogue. It is rather a narrative description—typically, but not necessarily, chronological—of individual and group experiences in a particular time and place. The interviewer is present only to direct the course of this description when and if necessary'.<sup>1</sup> Prominent oral historians in Britain have expressed a similar view. A typical example can be seen in the following comments by Robert Perks, curator for oral history at the British Library's National Sound Archive:

Do not ask too many questions or try to impress by using long words, your aim is to get them to talk, not to talk yourself. Do not interrupt answers: always wait for a pause. Make sure they can tell you what they think matters most; and never cut them off in mid flow. It is important that you listen intently and maintain good eye contact. Respond positively and regularly by making appropriate non-verbal signs of encouragement. Body language like nodding and smiling is much better than 'ers' and 'ums' and 'reallys'. It is vital to be relaxed, unhurried and sympathetic. Do not contradict: be tolerant of prejudices.

Try to avoid revealing your own opinions as it can influence what you are told.<sup>2</sup>

However, there are indications that a reappraisal of interview technique is now starting to take place. Locally, this can be seen in the work of Treve Crago at the Institute of Cornish Studies. Whilst accepting that a conventional approach is more likely to result in a 'clear good quality recording' and is certainly preferable for new students of the discipline, his personal style of interviewing tends to ignore many of the 'golden rules'. Using examples taken from his own research, Crago pointed to the benefits of a proactive approach. He concluded that 'it is unavoidable that the interviewer is going to have to speak at some point'.<sup>3</sup> This echoes the experience of Alessandro Portelli who believes that a sound recording is actually generated or 'co-created' between two individuals and it is inevitable that even the mere presence of the interviewer will have an impact on proceedings. Portelli concluded that the 'fiction of non-interference' actually turns the recorded 'dialogue into two monologues; informants supply a monologue of brute facts, while historians and anthropologists will supply later—from the safety of their desks—a monologue of sophisticated ideas that the informant never hears about'.<sup>4</sup> The logic of this statement is that only by directly engaging with the interviewee can we supply an ethical and democratic context for recording and then interpreting personal testimonies. In these circumstances the concept of a silent role for the interviewer is not really possible:

There is no oral history before the encounter of two different subjects, one with a story to tell and the other with a story to reconstruct. We tend to forget, however, that the first person who speaks in an oral history interview is usually not the interviewee, but the interviewer. In a very concrete sense, the source's narrative can be seen always as a response to the historian's initial questions: 'When were you born?' 'Tell me about your life?' 'Who was the union secretary at that time?'. By opening the conversation, the interviewer defines the roles and establishes the basis of narrative authority. In fact, although an oral autobiographical narrative may look on the surface very much like any other autobiographical *text*, it constitutes a very different autobiographical *act*, because the basis of authority is different. Autobiography (especially if written for publication) begins with a person's decision to write about herself or himself, but in the interview, the

initiative is taken by the interviewer, from whom the legitimacy to speak is ostensibly derived.<sup>5</sup>

While arguing that historical testimony will always be interpreted through the prism of the interviewer's presence, Portelli implies that there can never be an un-reconstructed interviewee. As a result scholars are now starting to explore the dialogic interaction that takes place in a recorded interview. A good example of this can be seen in Louise Ryan's narrative work on the experiences of female emigration from Ireland to Britain in the 1930s. Locating herself within the interview process Ryan compared and contrasted her own story with that of the interviewees. At one level she could clearly relate to their experiences since there were obvious similarities in terms of gender, nationality, and the fact that she was also an economic migrant who had moved away to London in search of employment. This common bond was recognized by the interviewees and one member of the group even admitted that she could only tell her story to 'another Irish person'. Yet there were important differences in terms of age, education, and occupation. These personal factors were compounded by the wider socio-economic changes that have taken place since the inter-war period. Ryan's subjective attitudes to being Irish were shaped by her personal experiences in the 1990s 'of a prosperous, lively, energetic, optimistic and dynamic Celtic tiger'. The economic and cultural renaissance of Ryan's Ireland was in stark contrast to the testimonies of the ten elderly Irish women that she interviewed; they remembered 'not just the economic problems but also the social attitudes, the strict conventions and lack of hope of the bleak 1930s'.<sup>6</sup> For them, this was an image that had been frozen in time. These 'interpersonal dynamics' lay at the heart of Ryan's study and it provides us with a useful comparative case study of what might be described as the interpretative revisionist approach to the role of the interviewer.

The enormous importance and significance of Ryan's 'common bond' with her interviewees for the data she obtained is really only hinted at within this revisionist approach. What does it mean to share a cultural background with your interviewees and what are the implications for your study? Methodological discussion within anthropology considers this very issue and provides a theoretical and conceptual framework for the notion of the 'indigenous fieldworker'. The central task of anthropological fieldwork is ethnography which is the work of describing a culture. Branslaw Malinowski states that good ethnography should grasp 'the native's point of view'.<sup>7</sup> 'Classic' anthropology is still practised in societies foreign to the fieldworker

where the culture under scrutiny stands in contrast to that of the observer and hence is more easily observable. However, if the fieldworker is also 'the native' then a set of fascinating practical and theoretical questions arise. There must be a deeper understanding of the process by which the indigenous fieldworker makes sense of their data. Being *of* the culture and *observing* it at the same time demands a compartmentalization of the mind and a set of strategies to cope with the 'closeness'. Reflection on the ethnography gained and experiences from the field are but two areas requiring a process of 'disassociation' on one or more levels. For CAVA at the Institute of Cornish Studies these are important considerations for Cornish fieldworkers making oral history recordings with the people of Cornwall where Cornish culture and history are the objects of study. These ideas present both a challenge and an opportunity for exploration as the archive develops its research potential as a major academic resource.

The use of 'auto-ethnography', the study of the self as well as the other, has become more acceptable to the extent that anthropologists sometimes use their own experiences as ethnography. Nelson Graburn sounds a note of caution and states that autobiographical ethnography is only of any value to the ethnography of other people if these others are of the same social background (nationality, ethnicity, class, gender and so forth) as the author. The issue here is one of cultural similarity and difference and its relationship to information gathered from informants. In line with the former, the ethnography of the 'Us' is advantageous to the observer 'in that the objects of his academic gaze are likely to feel no threat from one of their own, and that he knows their subculture so well he can use his research instruments with great care and sensitivity.'<sup>8</sup> Another practical advantage comes with easy access to informants and the social networks that informants participate in. The re-positioning of anthropology with respect to its 'objects' of study that Graburn talks of is discussed by Clifford in the light of the many restrictions placed on anthropological fieldwork by indigenous governments at national and local level. For instance, an outsider studying native American cultures may be required to testify in support of land claim litigation if research is permitted to continue. Clifford comments that these historical pressures on what can and cannot be said about a people means that:

Anthropology no longer speaks with automatic authority for others defined as unable to speak for themselves ('primitive', 'pre-literate', 'without history'). Other groups can less easily be distanced in special, almost always past or passing, times —represented as if they were not involved in the present

world systems that implicate ethnographers along with the peoples they study. 'Cultures' do not hold still for their portraits. Attempts to make them do so always involve simplification and exclusion, selection of a temporal focus, the construction of a particular self-other relationship, and the imposition or negotiation of a power relationship.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, an ideological shift brought about by the dismantling of colonialism has led to a view of communities of interest in the context of the present as well as the past. This revisionist approach is absolutely germane to the work of CAVA and provides a framework for research currently underway at the Institute of Cornish Studies whereby the past has a relevance for present and future issues such as housing in Cornwall, accent change, kinship structures and cultural identity.

The foregoing discussion of the role and identity of the fieldworker provides an apposite framework for our analysis of recent experimental work by CAVA. While discussing the oral history interview Portelli suggests that in some circumstances 'a critical, challenging, even a (respectfully) antagonistic interviewer may induce the narrator to open up and reveal less easily accessible layers of personal knowledge, belief and experience'.<sup>10</sup> Yet an alternative option is to go even further by replacing the central position of the interviewer through the medium of group dialogue. The way in which a narrative is shaped in a recorded interview is determined by the controlling influence of the researcher. Regardless of 'old' or 'new' approaches to oral history it is still this individual who identifies and establishes the subject for discussion. This particularly applies to the responses given to specific questions: replies are influenced by the words, style, and outlook of the interviewer. Indeed, it is this person who effectively dictates the agenda during a recording session. This means that an issue or event of minor importance to the narrator (for example, politics) might be elevated in a recorded discussion over other more important topics to the narrator (such as religion). The real identity of an individual or a community only emerges when the narrator is able to control the narrative. In these circumstances part of the work of CAVA should be directed at providing alternative opportunities for groups to simply engage in natural conversation about Cornish culture. Free of the control of the interviewer, three or four individuals can discuss a range of subjects on an informal basis. The story that is created is not imposed or limited by an outside influence (i.e. the interviewer) since the group itself generates the momentum. Even the formal nature of the session is likely to be reduced since groups are less likely to be aware of the presence of recording equipment.

These issues have been given much attention within the study of sociolinguistics—the interaction between language and society. The work of William Labov represented a watershed for this area of enquiry and his methodological contribution in the form of the ‘Observer’s Paradox’ made possible the study of language in its social context. He states that ‘the aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed: yet we can only obtain these data by systematic observation’.<sup>11</sup> Elements of systematic observation include the presence of recording equipment and the presence of the interviewer. The way people talk when they are not being observed, or as Labov puts it, ‘that vehicle of communication in which they argue with their wives, joke with their friends, and deceive their enemies’, is referred to by sociolinguists as the ‘vernacular’. The vernacular is a type of speech which is of special interest to linguists. Unlike more formal styles of speech (for example interview-style or reading aloud) its definitive quality is that minimum attention is given to it on the part of the speaker. Observation of the vernacular provides the most systematic data with which to analyse linguistic structure. Other, more formal, styles give rise to irregular phonological and grammatical patterns, with a great deal of ‘hypercorrection’. Since the conventional interview is public speech—monitored and controlled in response to the presence of an outside observer—techniques must be used to lift the subject and interviewer out of the constraints of the one-to-one confrontation. One of several techniques suggested is to use the normal interaction of the peer group to control speech. Labov’s methodologically groundbreaking work in South-Central Harlem involved the study of local non-standard adolescent speech.<sup>12</sup> Data was collected from peer-group interaction through long-term participant observation and, as a result, the negative effects of formal observation was kept to a minimum. This discussion shows us that methodological and theoretical re-working, in the context of a re-assessment of the dialogic process through which data is acquired, is not exclusive to oral history.

Another way in which ideas from language studies can illuminate the interviewer–interviewee relationship for oral history is the theory of *accommodation* as proposed by Howard Giles and Peggie Smith.<sup>13</sup> The ‘controlling influence’ of the interviewer finds a parallel in this theory which seeks to formulate the way in which speakers often try to accommodate to the expectations that others have of them when they speak. Accommodation is one way of explaining how individuals and groups can relate to each other. An individual can try to induce another to judge him or her more favourably—to gain social approval—by reducing differences between the two and this is called

*convergence* behaviour. As an alternative, if a speaker desires to be judged less favourably the shift in behaviour is away from the other's behaviour—this is *divergence* behaviour. A good example of convergence occurs when a speaker tries to adopt features of the accent of a listener or that used within another social group. Giles and Nikolas Coupland explain accommodation as a 'multiply-organised and contextually complex set of alternatives, regularly available to communicators in face-to-face talk. It can function to index and achieve solidarity with or dissociation from a conversational partner, reciprocally and dynamically.'<sup>14</sup> Robert Le Page highlights this definition in the direction of the way in which accommodation can create the speaker's identity: 'we do not necessarily adapt to the style of the interlocutor [conversational participant], but rather to the image we have of ourselves in relation to our interlocutor.'<sup>15</sup> Thus speaking is not only for the purpose of involving others socially, but it is also a personal act in that it helps create and project an identity in a particular set of circumstances. Identity becomes the central concern when we consider two different types of convergence—upward convergence and the more rare downward convergence. The former takes place as people with more broadly based social networks meet people with a higher social status. This is the mechanism that underpins most accent change which is the move towards accent standardization. Here people abandon their regional speech variants to fall in line with the more prestigious standard variety of spoken English. Downward convergence occurs when a higher-status person accommodates to a lower-status person. There is obvious potential here for the application of this framework to the oral history interview situation. Below, we illustrate the phenomenon of downward convergence in action in the context of group dialogue.

**CONFORMITY AND CONFRONTATION:  
THE CONVERSATIONAL DYNAMICS OF IDENTITY**

Over the past four years CAVA has been conducting a series of experiments in the field of group dialogic studies. Empirical evidence for this article is drawn from a group recording carried out in a community building in one of the Clay Country villages of Mid-Cornwall. A free-style approach was adopted whereby members of the local community had the opportunity to create and articulate their own cultural narratives without the outside control of an interviewer. As a result the recorded discussion covered a broad range of topics that simply emerged during the course of their extended conversation. There were three core participants in the discussion (Courtney Grose, Frederick Thomas, and John Retallick) with occasional contributions



from a fourth person (Peter Hamilton). Significantly, there was no formal 'interviewer' on this occasion, with another member of the community acting as the facilitator of the event.<sup>16</sup>

Before considering the recording, however, it should be pointed out that the concept of group dialogue is problematic for many oral historians. After all, the presence of more than one narrator can be confusing for somebody listening to a sound recording after the event, while a single person might also dominate the narrative in a group setting and prevent other individuals from making a meaningful contribution. Moreover, the creation of a shared narrative can make it difficult for those oral historians who wish to focus on a standard life story approach to reconstructing the past. In these circumstances it is perhaps not surprising that relatively little discussion has been given to the potential of group dialogic studies. Those oral historians who have considered the subject tend to hold mixed views. A good example is Paul Thompson, a leading figure in the development of oral history in Britain, who wrote in 1978 that 'sometimes a group, for example in a public bar, may be the only way into a hidden world of a common work experience of sabotage or theft, or the secret devices of poachers in the countryside'.<sup>17</sup> Yet in a more recent article written in association with Hugo Slim, Olivia Bennett, and Nigel Cross, he adopted a distinctly critical attitude:

Groups can bring out the best and the worst in people. Sometimes, by taking the focus off individuals, they make them less inhibited, but the opposite can occur just as easily. A group may subtly pressurise people towards a socially acceptable testimony or a mythical representation of the past or of a current issue which everyone feels is 'safe' to share and which may be in some sense idealised. Communal histories gathered in this way can involve a powerful process of myth construction or fabrication which misrepresents the real complexity of the community. At worst, this can develop into a persistent false consciousness which can only tolerate the good things, and remembers 'how united we all were', or which exaggerates the totality of suffering and recalls 'how bad everything was'. The voices of the less confident, the poorer and the powerless, are less likely to be heard, and so the variety of experience and the clashes and conflicts within a community may well remain hidden.<sup>18</sup>

This quote from Thompson *et al.* provides a framework for analysing the dynamics of the Clay village recording. It raises a number of issues

relating to both social and ethnic representations of community life that can usefully be investigated in a Cornish context. In the first place there is some evidence from the recording to support Thompson's view that a group setting can lead to a nostalgic reconstruction of the past. Thomas, for example, presents an idyllic story about his childhood. He recounts that 'we was all happy. They never had kiddies there if they didn't love 'em, you know. I can't remember my mum or dad . . . putting a heavy hand on [any] of the kids'. Similarly, Retallick suggests that 'you haven't got the togetherness or friendship or whatever you like to call it in the villages today as what you had back then'. This sweeping statement is then endorsed by the other two characters despite contradictory evidence elsewhere in the same recording, notably in relation to the bitter divisions caused by the 1913 clay strike. The natural desire to conform in a domestic conversational setting can be put forward as an explanation. This can clearly be seen in relation to their discussion of illiteracy in Cornwall before the Second World War, with Grose's initial use of a closed question effectively preventing any meaningful discussion:

CG: Well, course in the old days, boy, you had the dust beat out your ass with a stick if they couldn't do it and therefore nobody couldn't do it. I can't remember going to school with anybody that couldn't read and write, can you?

JR: No.

CG: Some weren't all that good scholars but they could all read and write . . . and do simple sums.

JR: If they weren't all that good at spelling they could read and they could write.

Yet on reflection the illiteracy discussion can also be seen as undermining Thompson's arguments on group dialogue. Grose's reference to the harsh disciplinarian approach shown towards young people is in stark contrast to the personal memories of Thomas. Although 'a socially acceptable testimony' is imposed in this particular instance, it suggests that the presence of other narrators means that it is quite likely for conflicting perspectives to emerge during the course of a recording. After all, a nostalgic account is equally possible in a conventional interview. As with any primary source it is the task of the scholar to probe beneath the surface and in this case the existence of multiple voices at least enables the possibility of different perspectives. Thus, at one stage Thomas recounts that when he went to school in the St Austell area in the second decade of the twentieth century he never saw any children 'hungry or poorly clothed'. Though clearly not

wishing to totally contradict Thomas's position, Grose then offers a useful corrective by pointing out that conditions would have been different in the impoverished mining communities of West Cornwall. It is a reminder that the flow of a conversation can easily change according to the circumstances and characters involved.

Indeed, a careful analysis of the recording points to underlying tensions beneath the surface. Contrary to the official view outlined earlier one might argue that researchers can gain a surprisingly unique insight into the 'real complexity of the community' through a consideration of group dialogue. This is perhaps most evident in relation to the group's reconstruction of the events surrounding the 1913 clay strike. Grose and Retallick were not even born until several years after the strike took place but in both cases they were able to recount stories passed on by their fathers and other individuals living at the time. Grose's family had been traditionally employed in a pit management role with the clay industry, while Retallick's father was one of the pickets in 1913. These contrasting roots of cultural memory resulted in significantly different narratives from the period. For Retallick the emphasis was on the violent confrontations between the police and the strikers. He recounted stories based on specific clashes linked to the physical injuries sustained by his father. Grose, however, focused on the outside interference of flying pickets in those village communities that still wished to carry on working during the strike. Not surprisingly, these two approaches led to confrontation during the course of the discussion. In the following extract Grose attempts to build up the case against industrial action only to be swiftly undermined by Retallick's one-line interruption:

- CG: I think that most of the pits in the Bugle area wanted to work on. Didn't want to come out. But, of course, flying pickets, the idea that it's peaceful persuasion is all bull shit really . . . Then it got like a stand-off between the men in the district, when the flying pickets was coming and wanted everybody to go out because unless its solid 'tin' effective and the local fellas wanted to say, 'Look, here in Bugle most of us want to work and we're going to work and that's the end of that'. Well, then it come to strife between 'em and then, of course, the pickets said that we want to stop the pumping engines . . .
- JR: Father was one of the pickets.
- CG: Yeah [silence].

The example demonstrates how sudden changes in style and language reveal issues of symbolic importance. Grose attempts to

regain the dominant role in the discussion by recounting another anti-strike story. In this case a local clay pit was owned by a German firm that was already paying its workforce a higher wage than the figure demanded by the strikers. A group of flying pickets arrived at the works only to be confronted by the 'Cap'n', the traditional symbol of local authority in the industry, and he quickly defuses the situation. Using humour and language for effect Grose adds that 'Cap'n said, "Oh, get away on with 'e, . . . they baint gonna follow your crowd. They're getting more than that now [laughter]."' Once again Grose is 'fighting the battles' of an age before his own lifetime. Retallick responds in a similar fashion by pointing to an incident in which the pickets had placed nails on the road from Roche to Nanpean in order to puncture the bicycle tyres of the police. The action results in a brief and humorous victory over the forces of authority as the police are forced to carry their own bicycles rather than leaving them for the pickets. It is significant that this symbolic exchange of stories took place nearly ninety years after the actual event. Such a vibrant reconstruction of the past in the context of the present suggests that further study is required in order to investigate the wider cultural implications of the strike in the decades that followed. What can be established is that recorded dialogue between two or more narrators of a similar age can reveal the underlying tensions in a society more effectively than a conventional interview.

Interestingly, the one individual that was alive at the time was relatively silent on the subject. Thomas was a young child in 1913 and might have been expected to make a contribution to the discussion, particularly since his father became a trade union secretary in the industry. Louisa Passerini's pioneering oral narrative work incorporates a variety of perspectives drawn from psychoanalysis in order to explore 'the un-said, the implicit, the imaginary'. Focusing on the experiences of working-class men and women in Fascist Italy she concluded that silence could be evidence of 'a profound wound in daily experience'.<sup>19</sup> Entire life stories were recalled without a single reference to the period from the rise of Mussolini to the events of the Second World War. It is quite possible that Thomas's silence might be a similar example. At a later date he was interviewed separately on the events of 1913 and on that occasion presented an alternative narrative covering the hardships experienced by local working-class families as a result of the strike. Rather than a heroic struggle against the forces of authority and capital, Thomas perceived the strike in terms of the disillusionment of workers forced to return to the pits in order to provide food for their families. His moving statement that 'it went on so long that people got [silence] hungry' contrasts strongly with his

public narrative less than two years earlier of an idyllic childhood. By investigating this complex exchange of words and silences we can obtain a broader picture of the cultural dynamics of a community. Peter Burke points out the need for ‘an awareness of linguistic conventions and variations’ on the part of historians. Not only does language study offer ‘a means to the better understanding of oral and written sources’, it offers an alternative approach to the history of communal culture and everyday life.<sup>20</sup> On the subject of silence, we must also make reference here to the fact that the ‘interviewer’ is, for almost the entire duration of this Clay Country recording, completely silent. From our extended methodological discussion in the previous section we can see that the controlling influence of the interviewer is overcome by almost dispensing with him/her altogether.

Much of the discussion of the recording concerns the extent to which group dialogue is a medium which *expresses*, or by contrast, *suppresses* the complexity of community life. Thompson describes the latter process as hiding ‘the clashes and conflicts within a community’ in favour of socially acceptable testimony or at worst a ‘persistent false consciousness . . . [which] remembers “how united we all were”’. The interpretation of excerpts of the recording so far has shown both processes in action. Conflict is evident with reference to the Clay strike and, powerfully, through the use of silence within group dialogue. We now turn to Thompson’s contention that group dialogue can enforce ‘communal histories’ whereby ‘the voices of the less confident, the poorer and the powerless are less likely to be heard’. One group participant (Hamilton) stands apart from the others in the sense that he is a relatively recent resident of the village. A tension of a different kind is illustrated by the following exchange where the group attempt to define a typical Cornishman:

CG: If he’s like no other bugger you met you know he’s a Cornishman.

PH: I heard one story that if you find a hole there’s always a Cornishman at the bottom of it.

[silence]

CG: Well . . . that’s a *mining* ’ole.

The break in flow of the conversation here and the correction imposed by Grose serves to effectively distance Hamilton from the power centre of the group foregrounding his status as in-migrant to the village. Another example from the recording sees Hamilton using language to reposition himself towards the centre of the group using ‘accommodation’ behaviour, more specifically ‘downward convergence’ as outlined

above. The topic of discussion is the pattern of changing tenure over the years in a particular part of the village.

CG: Yeah, 'e live up beside Freddie Thomas . . . yeah . . . they got two daughters.

PH: Roger Wells used to live across there and then he went up Trescoth.

While Hamilton's contribution to the group reconstruction of housing patterns from memory is confined to the very recent past, the grammatical construction of his utterance betrays a desire to be seen as belonging to the dense social fabric represented by the other members of the group. The use of 'went up Trescoth' shows the lack of the preposition 'to' which is a feature of the Cornish dialect and is one which survives today in the speech of young people. In line with our earlier description of accommodation this represents a personal act in that it serves to create and project an identity. It can also be thought of as code-switching where the adaptation that takes place is to an image the speaker has of himself in relation to his interlocutor/s. What makes this example of accommodation so interesting is that, technically speaking, it demonstrates downward convergence. This is so because the accent/dialect profile of the speaker in question is closer to the standard form of spoken English than the Cornish variety spoken by the other members. By using the grammatical form 'up Trescoth', the speaker is consciously substituting a non-standard form for the more standard 'up to Trescoth'. Relatively unusual though the adoption of regional features may be, the context of the conversational setting exerts an exceptionally strong, positive identity around Cornishness. A more convincing analysis of the type of accommodation behaviour we see here, then, is perhaps to view it as not downward but upward convergence toward the local prestige variety of English. Lesley Milroy considers the set of dialect and accent features associated with regional varieties of English to be *vernacular norms* which are 'perceived as symbolising values of solidarity and reciprocity rather than status, and are not publicly codified or recognised'.<sup>21</sup> This statement finds an echo in Peter Trudgill's formulation of *covert prestige* and its role in regional norm-maintenance against a tide of linguistic change.<sup>22</sup> These theories help us to understand why regional accents and dialects survive at all.

A model of human interaction from the discipline of sociology developed by Mark Granovetter—*social networks*—can provide a useful framework for understanding the social structure of communities and for illuminating the type of dialogue dynamics we have discussed here.<sup>23</sup> The type of network that underpins the group dialogue of the



relative strength of network tie to understand linguistic change within a community over time.<sup>25</sup> Figure 1 shows a visual representation of a notional network. If the particular language situation of our group dialogue were to be represented as a network, Hamilton represents a relatively weak tie (see dashed lines on Figure 1 below) and the other members of the group represent the relatively strong ties within dense networks (represented by solid lines). Weak ties are crucial in that they diffuse innovative accent forms to close-knit groups over time (as shown by the diagram). While linguistic change is not the focus of the present discussion and, while the time frames are different, these ideas allow us to see that Hamilton's accommodation behaviour, in the context of the recording, goes against the accepted linguistic function of weak ties i.e. displaying conformity rather than innovation.

The foregoing discussion has highlighted some aspects of community conformity and conflict to arise from the Clay Country group dialogue recording. The preparation of this article has brought into focus the need for us, as researchers in the field of narrative studies, to develop a notion of *sensitivity*. For instance, an understanding of shared consciousness based on community (Retallick's 'sense of togetherness'), Cornishness, and other cultural pivots requires sensitivity to meet the challenge of increasingly heterogeneous local communities undergoing rapid social change. In group dialogic studies this concern is of particular importance in relation to the final stages of interpretation and presentation. Community narrative might remove the fieldworker from the initial collection of data but sensitivity is still required in dealing with the analysis of data and the subsequent issues that arise. We must therefore remember Portelli's earlier warning of turning a recorded 'dialogue into two monologues'. The role of the researcher in group dialogue needs further study since, as was mentioned earlier, narrators can create a 'monologue of brute facts' only for the scholar, possibly now totally removed from the recording session, to apply 'a monologue of sophisticated ideas that the informant[s] never hear about'. One might add that we need sensitivity in our methodological approach to all oral history interviews. The first section exemplifies the considerable value and importance of an exploration of the interview–subject relationship for future research within CAVA. These considerations lead us to believe that sensitivity is a multi-dimensional concept requiring further investigation.

## CONCLUSION

We began this analysis of Cornwall's oral culture by highlighting the potential of CAVA as a means to understand those present-day social



and cultural processes underway in Cornwall that have immediate relevance to its people. Oral history should not just be concerned with the recording of nostalgic and cosy reminiscences about the past. Indeed, the real aim of CAVA is the creation of a unique resource that can reveal the complexities of the past, present, and future. Our work here is set firmly in the revisionist paradigm where, as Clifford puts it: 'Cultures do not hold still for their portraits'. An interdisciplinary approach is central to a revisionist agenda and our analysis of group dialogue has taken us to a closer understanding of two major areas of enquiry: issues of conformity or conflict with implications for cultural identity and methodological issues related to the fieldworker-subject relationship. By exploring the conversational dynamics of identity scholars can obtain further insight into underlying issues of both historical and contemporary significance. In terms of methodology we have drawn on debates within oral history, anthropology, and sociolinguistics to discuss the overarching theme of the influence that the presence of the fieldworker/interviewer brings to interactions with subjects/informants. Notable amongst these debates are interviewee-as-narrator, the indigenous fieldworker, the Observer's Paradox and accommodation theory. On the face of it this presents a useful comparison of approaches but the challenge ahead, initiated here, is to go further and to fuse them into a really meaningful framework for future research with which to understand both Cornwall's oral culture and matters of contemporary social and cultural importance.

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