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**Sensitizing Questions:  
A Method to Facilitate Analyzing the Meaning of an Utterance**

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# **Sensitizing Questions: A Method to Facilitate Analyzing the Meaning of an Utterance**

## **Abstract**

Much social science research entails interpreting the meaning of utterances, that is, phrases spoken, written or gestured. But how should researchers interpret the meaning of such utterances? A recent surge of research, informed by dialogism, emphasizes the contextual, social and unfinished nature of meaning. The present article operationalizes dialogism theory into six 'sensitizing questions' which can guide analysis. The questions are: (1) What is the context? (2) What is the speaker doing? (3) Who is being addressed? (4) Who is doing the talking? (5) What future is constituted? (6) What are the responses? Each question (and 16 sub-questions) is illustrated by analyzing the potential meanings of a single utterance. The article is a contribution to the development of new forms of 'method' for interpretative qualitative research. These methods aid the 'human instrument' to become a sensitive, theoretically-informed, and accountable analyst.

**Keywords:** Meaning, dialogism, dialogue, Bakhtin, interpretation

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## **Sensitizing Questions: A Method to Facilitate Analyzing the Meaning of an Utterance**

There has been a 'turn to dialogue' (Linell, 2009; Holquist, 2009; Gillespie, 2010), with the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986) inspiring a broad range of scholarship (Shotter & Billig, 1998; Hermans, 2001a; Marková, 2003). This approach has developed a sophisticated understanding of human dialogue as contextual, temporal and relational. Despite significant theoretical progress, methods for researching dialogue are less advanced (Salgado, Cunha & Bento, 2013), with some arguing that creating a 'dialogical method' runs counter to the core assumptions that meaning is contextual and unfinished (Grossen, 2010). This article proposes a method for the analysis of dialogue that is built on and compatible with the theoretical assumptions of dialogism. The proposed method makes a distinctive contribution because it is not a procedure, rather, it entails operationalizing theory through the posing of 'sensitizing questions' which facilitate (but do not finalize) the process of interpretation.

### **Dialogism and Meaning**

Dialogism draws upon a broad range of scholars, most notably Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986), but also Mead (1922), Wittgenstein (1953) and Rommetveit (1974). Dialogism has a range of distinctive assumptions (see Linell, 2009), most notably: an emphasis on the constitutive power of social interaction that also acknowledges the importance of situation-transcending phenomena (such as discourses, institutions, relationships and identities), and also an emphasis on the historicity of human action that also acknowledges human agency.

In the present article we focus on the implications of dialogism for interpreting the meaning of an utterance. We build upon our previous work on intersubjectivity (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010a), to propose a method for analyzing the situated and intersubjective nature of meaning. Our approach conceptualizes meaning as

'dialogical' because the meaning of an utterance is inextricably part of situated dialogue (Linell, 2009). That is to say meaning is not found *within* an utterance, in either its logical structure or the dictionary definition of its component words, rather it is found in the *relation* between the utterance and the broad context, including the participants. Meaning is always for someone, it could be for a participant within the situation, or for an outsider, such as a researcher, interpreting the situation. An utterance is defined as any communicative act (spoken, written or gestured) which is both a response and an initiation (Linell, Gustavsson, & Juvonen, 1988). Utterances are deeply dialogical because they are responsive and contestable, but also because they are both embodied and socially situated, both unique and comprised of generic gestures (Haye & Larraín, 2011). There are three aspects of a dialogical conceptualization of meaning which we want to foreground.

First, meaning is contextual in the sense that utterances need a social context to become meaningful (Shotter & Billig, 1998). In contrast to Saussure (1916) who emphasized the role of language structure (*langue*) as a source of meaning, dialogism emphasizes the messy lived reality of language-in-context (*parole*). It is only in the context of people having aims, a partially shared history and culture, and certain interests in the world that utterances become meaningful.

Second, meaning is temporal in the sense that each utterance is crafted out of pre-existing elements (Bakhtin, 1986) as both a response to something and something that can be responded to in the future (Mead, 1922). Interlocutors struggle to bend the significance of second-hand words to their will (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293). Thus meaning comes not only from what interlocutors are doing, but also from what has previously been done with the given words and what will be done with them in the future.

Third, meaning is addressive in the sense that it always implies an audience (Bakhtin, 1986). While speakers are differentiated by power relations, institutional roles, access to material and symbolic resources, knowledge, personal history and so on (Linell, 2009), dialogue only succeeds because interlocutors are able to address these differences. Speakers try to speak from the standpoint of their

audience, and audiences try to listen from the standpoint of the speaker (Rommetveit, 1974). Thus meaning is always 'for someone.'

Qualitative researchers have drawn fruitfully on dialogism to inform their analyses of psychological processes (Valsiner, 2002), human development (Josephs, 2003), narratives (Wertsch, 2008), selfhood (Hermans, 2001a; Saukko, 2002), social representations (Marková, 2003), resistance (Bell et al, forthcoming), and reflective thought (Larrain & Haye, 2012). The concept of dialogue has been used to understand what happens in interviews (Denzin, 2001), focus groups (Marková et al. 2007), and written documents (Gillespie et al., 2007). The approach has also been used to understand relationship between researcher and research participants (Bocagni, 2011). In such cases, dialogism offers insightful theoretical tools, helping to reveal the contextual and argumentative nature of mind and meaning. However, none of these studies have been very systematic about the move from theory to a method of empirical research.

## **Dialogism and Method**

Bakhtin was a literary critic, not a social scientist. As his ideas have moved into social science, and informed empirical research, there has been increasing demand to clarify the way in which his ideas inform research for both transparency and training purposes. There have been several attempts to formalize a method, such as coding frames for analyzing dominance (Linell, Gustavsson & Juvonen 1988), direct and indirect quotations (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010a) and mapping out positions, especially within the dialogical self tradition (Hermans, 2001b; Raggatt, 2002; Cunha, Salgado & Goncalves, 2011). Are such attempts at formalization consistent with the basic assumptions of dialogism?

Grossen (2010) has argued that the aim of developing a methodology of dialogism contradicts the assumptions of dialogism, and thus is not only undesirable but also impossible. First, if dialogical theories claim that utterances are necessarily multivoiced and have multiple meanings, providing 'an analysis' closes down that multiplicity, giving ultimate authority to the analyst's voice or an established method.

As Grossen puts it: “there is an unavoidable tension between accounting for the complexity of an interaction and using methodological tools which necessarily ‘monologise’ this complexity” (2010, p. 1). Second, acknowledging the importance of context often requires analysts to go beyond the empirically evident data to speculate about the larger context. This, however, is often at odds with the methodological requirements of accountability and rigor, as it becomes difficult to justify selective focus on certain details in one’s interpretation. Finally, turning to methodological practices, Grossen notes that ‘analysis’ (i.e. ‘breaking down’ text by ‘coding’) typically isolates a piece of discourse from the chain of discourse within which it is embedded. Breaking text down into manageable pieces makes invisible the temporal co-construction of meaning over the course of an interaction, which is a key assumption of dialogism.

If ‘method’ is taken to mean a set of procedures, designed to simplify data according to a pre-existing analytic grid, or to produce a ‘finding’ that any other researcher would also have produced, then Grossen (2010) is no doubt right. ‘Method’ is not compatible with dialogism, if ‘method’ means ‘inflexible procedure’, and ‘method of analysis’ is not compatible with dialogism if ‘analysis’ means ‘breaking down into component parts’. However, the methods used in interpretative traditions of human and social sciences have a different character. The ambition of ethnographic studies to achieve thick description, for example, is not achieved through the mechanical application of a procedure, but through the application of rich and context-specific cultural knowledge to pick out important clues and interpret the complex human significance of a particular utterance or action (Geertz, 1973). In such studies, the scientist is the research instrument (Clarke, 1975). Stocks of cultural knowledge are needed to be able to understand dialogues in their context. Theoretical knowledge provides important lenses. Rich experience of engaging with data constitutes a sensitive observer (Flyvbjerg, 2001). But can we hone that human instrument? How might we educate ourselves and others to be better interpreters of dialogicality? Can we make the interpretative process more transparent, rather than simply hoping that twenty years of experience will constitute a good and sensitive analyst?

## Facilitating Interpretation: Sensitizing Questions

We propose 'sensitizing questions' as a method to facilitate the process of interpretation. Sensitizing questions are akin to strategies, tools, or 'tricks of the trade' (Becker, 2008) which can be used to hone the researcher as human instrument. These questions are not a procedure, rather, they are attempts to operationalize theory, turning theory into prompts for interpretation.

Sensitizing questions are similar to tools. Like tools, these questions are not guaranteed to produce a worthwhile outcome. Tools provide opportunities for acting in relation to an object, and thus different people using the same tool can produce quite different outcomes. Like tools, each question performs a different task. There is no 'best' tool, nor is there a definitive set of tools, and one hopes that the toolbox will be extended with new and powerful tools in the future. Finally, like tools, a questions' value is dependent on a skilled user who makes a judgment about which question to employ, in attempting the leap to new insight. The master tool-user knows both the potentials and limits of each tool.

It might be argued that treating interpretation as a 'method' is a mistake, with the interpretative process being idiosyncratic, not open to scrutiny, and interpretations unverifiable (O'Dell et al., 2012). However, we would argue that interpretations are more or less verifiable in relation to context. Situated dialogue entails a thick web of particular details which provide an empirical constraint, prohibiting arbitrary interpretation. Any interpretation of dialogue needs to stand up to scrutiny and make sense to one or more interpretative communities, such as involved participants and/or researchers. Knowing as much about the context as possible is crucial: as the researcher becomes aware of the density of the inter-relations of an utterance's meaning with the context of what has come before, who is present, and what comes next, the task of distinguishing between a plausible and implausible interpretation becomes an empirical, not a mystical one (Stenvoll & Svensson, 2011). To return to the tool metaphor: sensitizing questions 'construct' interpretations in the same way that a carpenter's tools might 'construct' a table. But just like the carpenter was constrained by the available materials, and thus could not have constructed



'anything,' so, the analyst is equally constrained by the contextual specifics of their empirical material.

## **Sensitizing Questions**

We now turn to our six sensitizing questions, which are intended to aid the analysis of what an utterance means. They are designed to draw the analyst's attention to interesting bits of data and open up potentially productive lines of inquiry. Each question is presented using theory and often refined with sub-questions. The questions could be asked of any utterance occurring in a range of data, whether written, spoken or gestured, whether captured in a transcript, video or observation. We illustrate each question using the same apparently simple statement 'I have to go to work.' This is a decontextualized utterance, and our illustrations will situate it in a range of contexts, so as to demonstrate the importance of context. The reason for pointing each sensitizing question at the same utterance is to make maximally transparent the differences between the questions.

### **(1) What is the Context?**

The context of an utterance or action refers to the whole situation within which it occurs, including, both the setting (framed by institutions, culture and history) and the participants (their behavior, goals and expectations). The importance of context was vividly articulated by Rommetveit (1983) in his analysis of a fictional Mr Smith mowing his lawn in Scarsdale. Is he getting fit? Is he obeying his wife? Is he escaping from his wife? Or, is he trying to annoy his neighbors? The meaning of mowing to the participants in the scenario is not self-evident and depends upon the context. Let us now consider what participants in the scenario might say about Mr Smith's mowing. Imagine Mrs Smith, inside the house, receiving a phone call from a critical friend enquiring whether the "lazy" Mr Smith is out of bed yet. Mrs Smith replies, somewhat indignantly: "Yes, he's working in the garden." Then a second phone call is from Mr Smith's colleague, wondering if Mr Smith is in the office or whether he is free to go fishing. Mrs Smith responds: "No, he's not working, he's in the garden." Is Mrs Smith lying? Is her husband working or not? In the context of Mr

Smith being lazy, mowing the lawn is understood as work. In the context of being free to go fishing, mowing the lawn is not work. Given these two different contexts Mrs Smith is not being contradictory, but contextually appropriate.

While context is often emphasized in social research (Garfinkel, 1984; Jovchelovitch, 2007; Linell, 2009), the fact that people move between contexts is often neglected (Dreier, 2009; Gillespie & Martin, 2013). People move between many contexts, including, home, work, lunch, therapy, holiday, shopping, relaxing, and so on. This mobility can create a collision of contexts, where people get caught between differing demands, requiring creative and adaptive responses (Aveling & Gillespie, 2008). Thus, to unpack issues of context, we need to ask not only, *what is the context*, but also the more refined sub-question, (1.1) *are there overlapping contexts?*

**Illustration:** To illustrate these questions we introduce the Smithson family. Imagine a first context in which Mr Smithson is lazy, never helping out with the housework, while Mrs Smithson is an efficient breadwinner and household-manager. The family is having breakfast, and Mrs Smithson leaves, saying “I have to go to work.” Given this partially shared context, the wife’s utterance could thus be interpreted as: you should do some tidying up. But, as Rommetveit (1974) demonstrated, changing the context, even slightly, can change the meaning. Imagine a second context in which Mr Smithson is diligent, and struggling to provide breakfast for the six children. The children are throwing food around, and the husband is exasperated. Mrs Smithson leaves, saying “I have to go to work.” In this partially shared context we might interpret the wife as sympathetic, but drawing attention to the fact that her work is ‘non-optional,’ and thus that she is not in a position to help.

Clearly, changing the context can change participants understanding of an action or utterance. Adding to this complexity is the fact that people move between contexts, bringing the concerns of one context into another. Indeed, our scenario occurs at the border between home and work contexts. Mrs Smithson may feel that she should stay at home to help her husband *and* that she should go to work. Thus, she may experience her own utterance, and the associated action of leaving, as a tension between home and work contexts. Thus while work and family contexts are usually separate in geographical space (occurring in different buildings), they can be

overlapping and interacting in semantic space (i.e., the concerns and audiences of one context are psychological present in the other context; Gillespie, Kadianaki & O'Sullivan-Lago, 2012).

The first sensitizing question ('What is the context?') is a good starting point, but it is often too broad for a detailed analysis of meaning. Accordingly, we suggest refining the basic question about context, with a series of more probing questions. The next five sensitizing questions examine what the speaker is doing, who is being addressed, who is doing the talking, what future is constituted and the possible responses to the utterance.

## **(2) What is the Speaker Doing?**

The second sensitizing question probes further into the activity context, asking what it is that the speaker is doing. It is widely agreed that utterances are actions, and that people do things with words (Austin, 1962; Wittgenstein, 1953). Accordingly, many analyses of discourse begin with a question such as 'what is this participant doing here?' (Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997; de Kok & Widdicombe, 2010) or 'why this (utterance/phrase/action) now?' (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998). To understand what is being done, we suggest three sub-questions. First, (2.1) *what prompted the utterance?*

**Illustration:** Returning to Mrs Smithson, is the utterance 'I have to go to work' a response to the husband saying 'pass me the baby wipes'? If so, the utterance may be a justification for declining the request. Or, is the utterance a response to the wife seeing the clock on the wall? If so, it might indicate that she has a meeting and/or that she is unaware of her husband's plight.

Sometimes utterances are prompted by things which are not said or even present, but rather, which are imminent or simply possible. As Billig argues (1987), statements are typically argumentative, crafted against a possible alternative. Utterances shape the future by suppressing alternative futures. Thus in order to understand the space of possibility within which the utterance is attempting to shape

the future, it can be useful to ask, (2.2) *what is the alternative that is being argued against?*

**Illustration:** One alternative to 'I have to go to work' might be 'I will help,' and if so, the meaning of the utterance for the speaker is an excuse for not helping. Equally, an alternative might be 'I am free skip work,' and if so, the meaning of the utterance for the participants might be as a reminder of Mrs Smithson's lack of freedom and/or her feeling of being trapped in work.

Utterances don't only respond to the past or possible alternatives, they also attempt to 'set up' a future. This is particularly evident in narratives, including personal life-stories, films, novels, and so on. While life is lived forwards, narratives are constructed backwards. Thus details early on in a narrative often set up subsequent turns in the narrative. This opens up a space for interpretation, which can be prompted by the sub-question, (2.3) *what is the speaker trying to set up?*

**Illustration:** If the Smithsons were characters in a narrative, then we could ask what function the phrase "I have to go to work" serves. It might be a pretext for Mrs Smithson to leave the house and have a chance encounter, or means to convey to the audience Mrs Smithson's commitment to her career. Analyzing narratives gives added emphasis to the analysts' motto that nothing is accidental.

### **(3) Who is Being Addressed?**

Bakhtin (1986) observed that all utterances are 'addressed' to an audience, not simply in the sense of being spoken in the presence of an audience, but in the sense of being tailor-made for that audience and anticipating the audience's response. Speakers listen to themselves as they speak, making on-going adjustments from the standpoint of the audience. "[T]he speaker monitors what he is saying in accordance with what he assumes to be the listener's outlook and background information" (Rommetveit, 1983, p. 12). But, of course, the speaker does not know the actual perspective of the other, and thus speaks on the basis of assumptions (Gillespie, 2006). Analyzing the addressivity of an utterance thus entails recovering

from the utterance what the speaker assumes about the audience. Accordingly, the first sensitizing sub-question is, (3.1) *what does the utterance assume about its audience?*

**Illustration:** The wife's utterance 'I have to go to work' possibly assumes that the husband feels unable to cope and that he wants her help. If it is said in an apologetic tone it might anticipate an accusation of skirting childcare responsibilities. If it is said in an assertive tone, then it might imply that Mr Smithson should be able to cope. Equally, if she adds 'I have an appointment at 9am' she might be anticipating his response that being a little late for work is not usually a problem.

Dialogue always occurs in the shadow of 'third parties' (Marková, 2006). Any interaction exists within the wider social world, history, and the horizon of future interactions (Linell, 2009). Third parties can be specific or general and physically present or merely present in a psychological sense (perhaps supported by artifacts). Third parties are particularly evident in courtrooms. The defendant answering the prosecuting barrister is meant to do so 'under oath,' that is, addressing the abstract third party of 'truth', but the most salient third parties are usually the judge and jury. The question to ask is, (3.2) *does the utterance address any third parties?*

**Illustration:** It may be that, although, Mrs Smithson is ostensibly talking to her husband, she is indirectly orienting to her children. She might be trying to role-model working motherhood. Alternatively, she might be addressing an absent third party, such as her boss who recently implied that punctuality leads to promotion, or a more generalized audience, such as a work ethic. As with all the previous examples, to decide which interpretation is the most robust requires data beyond the utterance itself.

#### **(4) Who is Doing the Talking?**

Ostensibly it is the speaker who talks. The speaker is responding to something, engaging in some action, trying to have some effect. Yet, while recognizing each

utterance as an act of agency, we also need to conceptualize it as an appropriation of a pre-existing discourse, which, in a sense, is talking through the speaker.

The utterance appears to be furrowed with distant and barely audible echoes of changes of speech subjects and dialogic overtones, greatly weakened utterance boundaries that are completely permeable to the author's expression. [...] Each individual utterance is a link in the chain of speech communion. It has clear-cut boundaries that are determined by the change of speech subjects (speakers), but within these boundaries the utterance, like Leibniz's monad, reflects the speech processes, others' utterances, and, above all, preceding links in the chain. (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 93)

Each utterance reflects its own history. Changes of perspective which were previously between people now re-appear, reflected and refracted, within the utterance itself. Phrases, ideas, and words are re-used, re-contextualized, and put to novel uses. But they are never completely dominated (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293). If words could be severed from their history, they would become meaningless. The tension is ever present: "Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293). This is not to say that utterances are determined by history, rather, there is a tension between the possibilities of the discourse and the interests of the speaker. Speakers appropriate existing discourses, bending them to a new context, using them in a new way, while also being constrained by the history of those discourses.

One way to explore the history of an utterance is to examine direct quotations (e.g., 'X said 'Y)'), indirect quotations (e.g., 'X thinks Y'), and unreferenced quotations (e.g., 'Y'). Detecting direct and indirect quotations, often referred to as reported speech, is relatively straightforward and has been widely discussed (Coulmas, 1986; Holt, 1996). Detecting unreferenced quotations, sometimes called ventriloquations (Wertsch, 1991), is more challenging because it is not evident from the utterance itself, but only becomes evident through knowledge of what has gone before. All forms of quotation are interesting, because they link the utterance into a chain of utterances, and destabilize any simplistic conception of who is doing the talking. The first question is, (4.1) *does the utterance contain a quotation?*

**Illustration:** Imagine that on the day preceding our fictional scenario Mr Smithson had left Mrs Smithson to look after the unruly children, saying “I have to go to work” as he left. This would make Mrs Smithson’s utterance a mutually acknowledged quotation pointing to the previous day, implicating payback. The meaning of the utterance changes completely when spoken a second time, coming to mean: ‘you were wrong to leave me with the kids yesterday. See how you like it!’

Direct and indirect quotation is often used when speakers are taking issue with the quotation, or at least positioning themselves apart from it. Accordingly, it is important to ask the follow up questions: (4.2) *How does the speaker respond to the quotation?*

**Illustration:** One could imagine Mr Smith saying: “you are always saying ‘I have to go to work,’ well, you should at least acknowledge that your ‘work’ is only possible because I look after the kids.” Here the explicit quotation is being used to take a position and make an argument. In this way the phrase ‘I have to go to work’ becomes a resource for the husband to argue that his contribution is undervalued.

Sometimes people indirectly quote common culture, that is, widespread tropes, ideas or narratives (Wertsch, 1991). In these cases it is impossible to identify ‘the’ source. Culture, in a general way, provides people with narrative templates (Wertsch, 2008) and content, which people repeat as if it is their own. Accordingly, it is often helpful to ask, (4.3) *is the utterance voicing a cultural trope?*

**Illustration:** “I have to go to work” is a common excuse. Conveniently it externalizes the cause of action, exonerating the speaker of responsibility. Arguably, the wife would help if she could, but she is claiming that she has no choice. The excuse draws upon widespread practices and representations of work in our society, what it means to be employed and be accountable to an employer. The utterance is a cultural trope which binds the husband into its implications. However, as a trope it also comes with established counter-tropes. The husband could question the wife’s priorities and her work-life-balance. Such retorts, however, would again be echoes of established discourses.

Dialogue can also be analyzed at the level of a normative structure of patterned expectation. Even if the parties are interacting for the first time, they approach each other with expectations (Marková, 2003), and thus it is partly these normative expectations which are speaking. These interactional patterns have variously been called 'speech genres' (Bakhtin, 1986), 'language games' (Wittgenstein, 1953) and 'communicative activity types' (Linell, 2009). These are all defined by having a pattern which has enough stability in time to sustain a micro-history and micro-culture, providing each participant with expectations and acceptable things to say. Accordingly, the analyst can ask, (4.4) *what is the genre of interaction?*

**Illustration:** In the Smithson family there might be a routine for how the wife departs for work, with the wife stating she is leaving and the husband acknowledging this with something like 'see you at six-thirty'. It would be odd if Mrs Smithson left for work without initiating the routine. From this standpoint, the utterance is not a propositional statement or even an excuse. It is, rather, an initiation of the 'leaving the house' routine. The routine, in this sense, is part of the utterance, coming to the foreground through the utterance. Of course, the utterance is never or rarely dominated by the genre. The husband can withhold his finalizing of the routine, making it difficult for the wife to leave, and forcing her to acknowledge an unfinished interaction within which he expects assistance.

## (5) What Future is Constituted?

"An utterance is never just a reflection or an expression of something already existing outside it that is given and final," Bakhtin (1986, p.119) wrote, "it always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable." While speakers try to do things with words, the words, let loose in their new context, have their own dynamic, usually reproducing the social order with minute variations. The utterance-as-event constitutes the speaker, the listener, and their object, baptizing them into a more or less changed future. A first sub-question is, (5.1) *how does the utterance make history?*



**Illustration:** Mrs Smithson's utterance 'I have to go to work' might transform the morning routine into a marital dispute, corresponding to a genre change. The husband might resist her statement in the subsequent turn; or he might say nothing, but return to the issue over dinner. In either case the utterance creates an event in history. The utterance might begin to have a local meaning in the couple's micro-culture (Clark & Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986). For example, if the dispute were resolved with a negotiated division of labor within the household, the meaning of 'I have to go to work' would become: 'remember our agreement, you do the childcare while I make the money'.

Insofar as each utterance is addressed to an audience, it not only makes assumptions about the audience, but it also is an event which reproduces the identity of both the speaker and the audience in the light of those assumptions. Positioning is the way in which "selves are located in conversations as observably and intersubjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines" (Davis and Harré, 1990: 48). As with addressivity, positioning is inherent in any situated utterance. Hence, the sub-question: (5.2) *how does the utterance position people?*

**Illustration:** Mrs Smithson's utterance 'I have to go to work' might position herself as the breadwinner and Mr Smithson as lazy. Or, indeed, it might position her as trapped in work and him as free to spend time with their adorable children. How do we know which interpretation is most valid? Such interpretations need to be made in the light of subsequent turns, actions and responses. The husband may let the positioning pass, thus providing little clue as to what has been accepted. Or, he might resist, making some comment about not being lazy, which would give us a clear indication of how he felt positioned. Of course, positioning can be contested. Mrs Smithson might deny that she was implying that he was lazy.

In so far as each utterance is future constituting, participants often struggle to control that future. Utterances block and afford particular responses. Each utterance invokes expectations, inviting certain responses, and making other responses seem inappropriate (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010b). Interlocutors might attempt to maneuver conversations in certain directions such that issues appear to arise, as if by accident, because raising the issues directly, and out of context, would give them un-desired

significance. Such attempts at ‘steering’ the conversation are covered by Q2.3 (‘What is the speaker setting up?’), under the larger question of what the speaker is trying to do. The present concern is not upon the intent of the speaker (i.e., what the speaker is doing) but rather upon the actual consequences of the utterance for the direction of the utterance (i.e., regardless of the speaker’s intention). One way into this issue is to ask, (5.3) *what responses are enabled or constrained?*

**Illustration:** Mrs Smithson’s utterance ‘I have to go to work’ might result in a segue from a conversation about tidying up the kitchen to a discussion about Mr Smithson’s latest job application. Alternatively (or additionally), the utterance may steer the conversation away from a discussion about housework and childcare, an issue which Mr Smithson is keen to raise.

## (6) What are the Responses?

Each utterance is a link in a “chain” of dialogue, with each decontextualizing previous utterances, giving them new meaning, and drawing out new relevancies (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 93). Mead (1922) similarly argued that the meaning of a gesture is, in part, determined by the subsequent responses it elicits. Conversation analysis leverages this insight to provide a proof criterion for interpretations. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974, p. 729) recommend that analysts test their own interpretations of an utterance against the subsequent responses of the participants. Dialogism also emphasizes the importance of subsequent turns, but, treats them more broadly, taking account of private responses and responses which occur outside of the immediate situation. Some such responses are not directly accessible, but can either be inferred from the available data or reconstructed using, for example, post hoc interviews. We consider the responses of each party, starting with the interlocutor. The interlocutor is the person ostensibly being spoken to (i.e., Mr Smithson), and does not necessarily coincide with the addressee (Salgado, Cunha & Bento, 2013). The sub-question is: (6.1) *what is the response of the interlocutor?*

**Illustration:** We have already seen how Mr Smithson’s response can constitute Mrs Smithson’s utterance as an excuse or a departure routine. One could imagine many

alternative responses, each bringing out new aspects of meaning. Mr Smithson might respond 'you are cooking dinner tonight,' implying a debt and a means of repaying it. This explicit response, however, should not blind us to covert responses which might only be evident outside of the immediate situation. The husband, for example, might become suspicious about how keen Mrs Smithson is to get to the office, wondering what this new-found enthusiasm indicates.

Third parties are also important within dialogue, as discussed above (Q3.2). Present third parties can also respond to the utterance, thus constituting new meanings. Even what ostensibly looks like no response from a present third party is a response, providing tacit acceptance of the unfolding events. To unpack these issues, the sub-question is, (6.2), *what is the response of third parties?*

**Illustration:** Imagine, for example, that the children respond to the utterance, asking, 'why does Daddy never go to work?' Or, 'why does Mummy never want to stay and play?' Each response would constitute Mrs Smithson's utterance as meaningful to the children in different ways, and, moreover, would likely make those meanings salient to Mrs Smithson.

An important aspect of dialogism is that speakers respond to their own utterances (Gillespie, 2007). "In dialogue we do not know exactly what we are going to say, and we can surprise not only the other but even ourselves" (Anderson, Baxter and Cissna, 2004, p. 1). We are, as Marková (2003, p. 89) describes "thinking through the mouth." Accordingly, the analyst can also ask: (6.3) *what is the response of the speaker?*

**Illustration:** Mrs Smithson could respond to her own utterance in various ways. Maybe she hears an echo of her father, who used to leave the house each morning with a similar phrase, and thus feels herself as living up to his ideals of diligent punctuality. Or, maybe she responds to the phrase with a pang of anxiety about neglecting her children. Such responses may remain private, requiring post hoc interviewing and detailed interpretation to unpack. Sometimes such private responses are betrayed by subsequent actions, for example, if Mrs Smithson

returned home from work with a present for the children we might suspect that her private response was that she had been neglecting her children.

## **Clues for When to Ask Sensitizing Questions**

It would be a waste of effort to exhaustively analyze each utterance in a substantial dataset using these six questions (and 16 sub-questions). One key aspect of expertise is knowing when and where to focus the beam of interpretation (Morison & Macleod, 2013). While there is no formula which can reliably identify entry points for interpretation, there are clues. As skilled ordinary language users, all humans are sensitive to intonation, hesitation, emotion, and contradiction. The key is to combine this everyday expertise with academic discipline.

The following discussion identifies some of the clues for when it can be useful to ask the sensitizing questions (see also Table 1). We envision these clues to provide a first step, aiding in the location of potentially fruitful utterances or sequences which would, in a second step, be more fully analyzed using the afore mentioned sensitizing questions. The clues we offer are very tentative, they are tips based on our experience and should not be seen as a rigorous method. Moreover, what a clue indicates seems, to us, to be fundamentally contextual and thus impossible to definitively define. Nevertheless, keeping an eye out for these clues can help guide the sensitive researcher toward interesting moments in their data which might relinquish insight upon further analysis.

Contradictions, within or between utterances, take a variety of forms (semantic, intonation, non-verbal) and can indicate shifting or colliding contexts. Disagreements between speakers or disjunctions between words and actions (either reported or observed) can also indicate colliding contexts. Sometimes people try to manage different contexts and frames of reference using words such as 'but,' 'however,' 'yet,' and 'on the other hand.' Such words, however, can also be indicative of shifts of addressivity during an exchange (for example, Mrs Smithson saying 'I have to go to work, but, I feel bad leaving you with this mess'). Caveats, disclaimers and

apologies, in our experience, can also indicate an attempt to manage different contexts and audiences (for example, 'I'm sorry, but, I have to go to work').

Direct or indirect quotations (i.e., reported speech) often indicate the management of different points of view, and perhaps some positioning vis-à-vis those perspectives. Whenever there is a quotation, it can be useful to ask, how is it responded to? Is it agreed or disagreed with? Or, is it introduced to have an effect on someone else, perhaps as a source of authority, or a positioning as being close to someone?

Emphasis on pronouns (such as Mrs Smithson emphasizing 'I') or morally loaded terms (such as 'work') often indicate issues of identity and positioning. Tracking changes in pronoun use across an interaction can also reveal instabilities in identity boundaries (Gillespie, 2007). Identity issues are also often marked by resistance and re-phrasings (for example, Mr Smithson saying 'I'm not being lazy, I'm looking after the kids'). However, it should be borne in mind that overt resistance is rarely acceptable, and it will often take subtle and delayed forms, leading to subsequent utterances which seem overly particular or out of place. One way into identity positioning can be for the analyst to use themselves as instrument, asking, how would I feel if that were said to me?

An utterance which seems out of place, not appearing to follow naturally from what went before, can indicate the speaker's motivation (such as Mrs Smithson returning with a present for the children). The sensitizing questions to ask are, what is the speaker trying to do? Why are they saying this now? What is the alternative? Sometimes utterances seem out of place because they invoke the wrong genre, being, for example, too formal or informal. Accordingly, it can also be useful to inquire about the genre, and how the utterance fits, or does not fit, into the genre. Out of place utterances which sound "foreign in the mouth" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293) can also indicate ventriloquation. As any essay assessor knows, patches of polished coherence amidst confusion indicate plagiarism.

Hesitations, sentence restarts, changes of track, and shifts of perspective can indicate changes in addressivity, awareness of new audiences, or private responses to the dawning implications of what is being said. Truncated sentences with vague

identifiers (such as ‘this’ and ‘that’) can also indicate self-directed speech (Werner & Kaplan, 1963; see also, Gillespie & Zittoun, 2013).

Table 1: Clues indicating when to ask sensitizing questions

Clues	Sensitizing Questions
Utterance seems out of place	<b>What is the context?</b>
Contradictions, disagreements, tensions, perspective management ('but', 'however,' 'yet' etc.), caveats	Are there overlapping contexts?
Out of context, strong initiation	<b>What is the speaker doing?</b>
	What prompted the utterance?
Perspective management ('but', 'however,' 'yet' etc.), implications, resistance	What is the alternative that is being argued against?
Connections between present and future	What is the speaker trying to set up?
Hesitation, rephrasing	<b>Who is being addressed?</b>
Audience resistance	What is assumed about the audience?
Utterance seems disconnected from immediate context	Does the utterance address any third parties?
Utterance 'sounds foreign in the mouth'	<b>Who is doing the talking?</b>
Direct quotes, indirect quotes	Does the utterance contain a quotation?
	How does the speaker respond to the quotation?
Common turns of phrase, out of context, different style	Is the utterance voicing a cultural trope?
Repetition of pattern	What is the genre of interaction?
Change in the situation or genre of interaction	<b>What future is constituted?</b>
	How does the utterance make history?
Morally loaded words, identity implications, resistance	How does the utterance position people?
Topic cut short, topic change	What responses are enabled or constrained?
Possible proof of interpretation, plurality of meanings	<b>What are the responses?</b>
	What is the response of the interlocutor?
	What is the response of third parties?
Explicit responses to self, hesitation, truncation, rephrasing, subsequent actions seem out of place	What is the response of the speaker?

Finally, the most important clues for identifying valuable lines of analysis are not within the utterance itself or the immediate context, but come from a rich ethnographic understanding of the broader context. Each of the foregoing interpretations of the meaning of 'I have to go to work' depends upon data beyond the isolated utterance. Having access to this broader contextual knowledge (through participation, observation or background interviews or documentation) enables the analyst see connections, and those connections are clues. Thus knowing about Mrs Smithson's boss, family, father, television habits, routines, recent conversations and so on provides the researcher with the material necessary to see the significance of hesitations and phrasings.

## **Conclusion**

The present article has proposed a method for analyzing the meaning of an utterance based on the theoretical assumptions of dialogism. This proposal makes contributions to the debate about the possibility of a method for analyzing dialogicality, to understanding of the role of context in research, and more broadly to the debate about methods appropriate for qualitative research.

When Grossen (2010) argues that dialogism is not compatible with methods of analysis, we agree, if methods are understood as practices designed to produce singular 'definitive' findings through following a prescribed series of steps, in the application of institutionally legitimized processes. Such methods cannot capture meaning which is holistic, pluralistic, and unfinished (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). However, we do not wish to leave the term 'methods' solely to refer to mechanical procedures. We have extended the notion of method to include the process of interpretation, in which the researcher (as a skilled language user and an appropriator of theory) becomes a 'human instrument,' a vehicle for making the leap to novel insights. Sensitizing questions, which operationalize dialogism theory into useful empirical tools, orients the researcher without directing the researcher. Such a method which facilitates rather than formalizes, we argue, is suited to the assumptions of dialogism.

Dialogism is not the only tradition to take context seriously. Accordingly, in presenting a method that is context-sensitive and interpretative, we have sought to make a broader contribution to the understanding of context in research. Often context is viewed as problematic, as a source of confounding variability and noise, and an obstacle to generalization. However, in the present article context is far from being problematic or ignored. We have presented 19 interpretations of the utterance 'I have to go to work,' and all interpretations have gone beyond what a dictionary would reveal, with none pertaining to the propositional content of the phrase. Each interpretation is particular and has been made possible by manipulating the context of the utterance. Moreover, it is the particularities of the explored contexts that constrain interpretation, making some interpretations more or less valid. Thus, rather than being an obstacle, context underlies the possibility of both making interpretations and determining the validity of those interpretations.

Finally, this article is also a contribution to the broader debate about methods appropriate to interpretative qualitative research. The charge of 'methodolatry' (Danziger, 1990; Chamberlain, 2000) which has been levelled against mechanical coding procedures or unthinking adherence to a legitimated series of steps (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) has made qualitative researchers wary of the strictures of 'method', when they understand meaning as variable, flexible, multiple and unfinished. Billig (1998, p. 200) argues against 'methodology' and in favor of "traditional scholarship" when researchers seek to uncover the complex workings of language and ideology. He suggests that scholarly reading, argumentation, and sensitive intuition have become wrongly delegitimized by a scientific culture focused on the standardization of methods. Sympathetic to the argument against such standardization, we have suggested that 'method' need not be 'methodolatry' and that 'method', from an interpretative qualitative research perspective can be more akin to education, serving to sensitize and hone the 'human instrument'. We have sought to articulate a 'method' that is more specific and concrete than a recommendation to be scholarly, and more open than a strict series of methodological steps to be followed. As such, we contribute to the 'methods' literature that seeks to build the interpretative skills of the 'human instrument'. Those understanding interpretive inquiry as relying on the 'human instrument' usually make an argument for honing that instrument through



experience (e.g. Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Flyvbjerg (2001) argues that the researcher's in-depth engagement with the complexities of context are the 'royal road' to understanding, and that reading detailed case studies is the next best thing to 'being there'. Here, the researcher is being educated, through engaging in research, to make skilled judgments in context. In these accounts, however, the process of interpretation remains opaque and tacit, a creative and somewhat unpredictable 'black box.' Without undermining this emphasis on experience, the present article has sought to make the interpretative process more explicit. The journey from data through theory to interpretation can be articulated to facilitate both transparency and training. Specifically, we have attempted to synthesize theory and experience into sensitizing questions which can orient the process of interpretation and facilitate the leap from data to interpretation.

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