

I

Sense and sensibility: the conversational etiquette of English national self-identification

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English national identity: the incitement to discourse

By reason of some strange, obscure elements in him the Englishman remains, as he has always been, a somewhat incomprehensible being. (Dixon, 1931: 33)

In his historical analysis of the idea of English national character, Peter Mandler tracked the path of this 'slippery and flexible' (2006: 2) construct over the course of the past two centuries. In this chapter I will focus on a contemporary variant of this discourse: the idea of English national identity. The terms 'national character' and 'national identity' are often treated as synonymous. However, for the purposes of this chapter, I shall take 'national character' to refer to the psychological traits or cultural habits of a national people, and 'national identity' to refer to the ways in which members of a national group reflexively understand themselves.

Explicit conversation concerning the distinctive psychological qualities of particular national peoples has, to some extent, fallen out of fashion. In his account of the frontiers of British identity, Robin Cohen asserted that, 'Nowadays, it would be quite impossible in scholarly circles to get away with grand generalisations about national character' (1994: 2). Similarly, Mandler (2006) noted how debates concerning English national character declined over the course of the twentieth century. It might be reasonable to suppose that, as a subject of public debate, the topic of English national identity would circumvent a good deal of the normative opprobrium currently associated with explicit talk about English national character.

In public conversation, as in everyday talk, it is necessary to

establish the reportability of any offering, if only to ward off the possible response of ‘Why are you telling me that?’ (Sacks, 1992: 12). Mandler (2006) documents a long tradition of casting English national character as extraordinary or enigmatic. Similarly, in more contemporary debates, English national identity may be cast as remarkable, problematic or perverse in a variety of ways. Historical narratives may be used to construct stories of lost identity, or to present English national self-conception as lagging hopelessly behind the post-Imperial, post-Devolution times:

With the loss of the British Empire, large-scale immigration, the call of Europe, and renewed nationalist movements that threaten the ‘break-up’ of Britain, it is the English who find themselves most acutely faced with questions of national identity. (Kumar, 2006: 428)

International comparisons may be invoked to cast English orientations to national identity as extra-ordinary (*‘unlike the rest of us’*):

I recall spending an evening . . . talking to a prominent English novelist about identity. I mentioned that I could not understand the reticence of English people, unlike the rest of us on the island, to talk about what it meant to be English. The novelist replied testily that it was like asking people about their religion and sex lives, something they were very reluctant to do. (McCrone, 2006: 276)

Talk about English national identity may be wrapped in moral-panic rhetoric, with the speaker suggesting that some facet of English national self-consciousness (or the absence of national self-consciousness) represents a threat to democratic governance:

Former Home Secretary David Blunkett has called on the English to reclaim their sense of national identity . . . Mr Blunkett said: ‘There is a real danger that if we simply neglect or talk down national identity – people’s sense of common belonging and shared values – we risk creating a festering, resentful national identity, an identity based not on confidence but on grievance’. (politics.co.uk, Tuesday 15 March 2005)

What one most needs is to re-establish what we mean by being English, and when we have done that, we can see what the overlap of that identity is with a British identity. The consequences to politics of a country losing its identity is equivalent to an individual losing their own mind, and we all know what the outcome in those circumstances is. (Frank Field MP, 2009)¹

Significantly, commentators often seek to establish the newsworthy status of their observations by suggesting that their own discussion of English national identity is filling a discursive vacuum. Krishan

Kumar noted in the preface of his scholarly treatise, *The Making of English National Identity*, that '[t]here is no native tradition of reflection on English national identity' (2003: x). In a rather more circumspect manner, David McCrone (2006) added a question mark to the title of his review of recent texts on Englishness: 'A nation that dares not speak its name?' In political debates, it is common for a speaker to couple his or her own remarks on English national identity with a quotation from G.K. Chesterton's *The Secret People*: 'you do not know us. For we have not spoken yet' (1915: 243).

Extending this line of argument, it is often suggested that the problem of English national identity (whatever it may be) may be addressed through further incitement to discourse.² The past few years have witnessed the development of a range of strategies for extorting more, or better, talk about national identity from the English people. These include technologies used to monitor the national subjectivities of the population of England (illustrated, for example, by the inclusion of questions on national self-definition as a regular feature of the annual British Social Attitudes surveys). Less formally, English people may be encouraged to publicly broadcast their national sentiments, fantasies and desires through some medium of mass communication (exemplified by the *What England Means to Me* website).³

The research interview as incitement to discourse

In this chapter I will focus on one particular device currently used to elicit talk about English national identity: the research interview. It has been claimed that we now live in an 'interview society' (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997) and, according to most estimates, interviews are currently used in about 90 per cent of social scientific research. It is, then, hardly surprising that a number of researchers (myself included) have used interviews and focus groups to study the national identity of the white ethnic majority population of England.⁴ Some of this research has employed heterogeneous samples of adults (Abell, et al., 2006; 2007; Condor, 1996; 1997; 2000; 2006; 2010; Condor & Abell, 2006a; 2006b; Mann, 2006; Mann & Fenton, 2009; Skey, 2009; 2010) or young people (Carrington & Short, 1998; Faas, 2008; Fenton, 2007). Other studies have concentrated on particular sub-groups such as elite women (Edmunds & Turner, 2001); mothers in London (Byrne, 2007); soldiers (Gibson & Abell, 2004; Gibson & Condor, 2009); and English people in North Wales (Day et al., 2006), Scotland (Bechhofer et al, 1999; Kiely et al., 2005a; 2005b) and Berwick-upon-Tweed (Kiely et al., 2000).

Broadly speaking, researchers can view the talk that takes place in interviews and focus groups in two ways (see Abell & Myers, 2008). I shall term these the Confessional Model and the Conversational Model.

Researchers who adopt the Confessional Model treat the interview as a period of time out from mundane social life, a context in which the respondent is given the opportunity to reflect upon, and provide testimony concerning, their everyday experiences. The interview encounter is designed in such a manner as to minimise so-called 'interviewer effects', treating the interviewer as a neutral presence charged simply with the task of encouraging informants to disclose personal information. Social scientists who approach interview talk in this way tend to focus on the semantic content of the respondents' accounts, which are generally interpreted as relatively straightforward reports of what the individual 'thinks about being English and British', their 'lived and felt aspect of national identity', and so forth.

In contrast, the Conversational Model treats research interviews as instances of situated social interaction. Researchers who adopt this kind of approach do not typically presume that interview talk provides definitive and unmediated ('depth') insight into what people actually think or feel at a particular point in historical or biographical time.⁵ Rather, they are interested in what interview conversations may reveal about the ideological and rhetorical resources that participants use to manage their self-presentation, to construct narratives of identity, and to describe, explain and cast judgement upon the social world. Analysts who approach interview accounts as instances of talk-in-action do not necessarily take the semantic content of talk (what linguists would term the *sense* of the utterances) at face value. Rather, they are also attentive to pragmatic aspects of meaning (what linguists would term the *force* of the utterances), often conveyed through conventions of non-literal signification, such as implicature, ellipsis and irony.

In this chapter, I will consider some of the ways in which white English people talk about national identity in interview encounters, basing my observations on a corpus of transcripts of conversational interviews conducted in England between 1995 and 2009.⁶ For the purposes of this chapter I will not be especially concerned with what the respondents say their national identity is (for example, whether they say that they regard themselves as English or British). Rather, I shall consider how the respondents go about articulating claims to, or denials of, national identity, with a view to explicating what people are *doing* when they set about answering questions about national identity.

Four traffic rules of English national self-identification⁷

Researchers regularly report that interview respondents in England often display difficulties answering questions concerning national identity. For example, respondents may produce ‘silly’ answers; they may offer contradictory replies within a couple of minutes of conversational time; they may deny any sense of national identity or disclaim any interest in the subject; they may express a measure of confusion over whether they should say that they are British or English. The conventional way of interpreting these kinds of accounts is to treat them as a source of information concerning the speaker’s interior mental life. However, a focus on the manner and situations in which these accounts are actually voiced affords a different sort of interpretation. It seems that these kinds of answers often reveal less about how English people subjectively understand themselves than about the respondents’ understanding of the social etiquette of talk about national identity.

Deborah Cameron has noted the reflexive character of talk in contemporary British societies:

[w]e live in what might be called a ‘communication culture’ . . . a culture that is particularly self-conscious and reflexive about communication, and that generates large quantities of metadiscourse about it. For the members of such a culture it is axiomatically ‘good to talk’ – but at the same time it is natural to make judgements about what kinds of talk are good and which are less good. (Cameron, 2000: viii)

When I reconsidered my corpus of interview transcripts for the purpose of this chapter, I was struck by the fact that the respondents were rarely treating their accounts of national identity as introspective self-reports. More often than not, respondents were talking about the act of talking.⁸ Sometimes this involved metadiscursive commentary on the ongoing interview dialogue (for example, references to the interviewer’s act of posing a question, or their own act of formulating an answer). Sometimes this involved references to conversations on national identity taking place at other times or in other places.

In addition, it was clear that the interview participants were routinely orienting to, and were often explicitly invoking, normative judgements concerning the right and wrong ways to talk about national identity.⁹ In the following pages I will outline four general rules of conversational etiquette to which speakers typically oriented in the course of talk about national identity.¹⁰

Rule 1: don't state the obvious

Social scientists who attempt to solicit testimony concerning national identity from white people in England often report difficulty sustaining their respondents' engagement with the topic for any length of time.¹¹ The interviewer's task can be rendered especially difficult when a respondent appears unwilling or unable to talk about their national identity at all. An example of this sort of situation is presented in extract 1.¹²

Extract 1: 'I know how to speak.'

I Would you describe yourself as English?

LW I've always been, I am what I am, not, I, I know how to speak, and I know how to speak properly. When I moved from Romford to Brighton, all the girls at school, I went to a girls' school, they all took the mickey out the way I spoke.

In this case, the semantic meaning of the interviewer's question would, on the face of it at least, appear relatively transparent. However, LW's reply would be difficult to classify using conventional social scientific schema for coding answers to questions concerning national identity. The standardised items on national identity used in the British Social Attitudes surveys, for example, do not include: 'I know how to speak properly', amongst the permitted response options.

So what should we make of LW's reply? Is she suffering from some sensory deficit? (Did she mishear the interviewer?) Is she suffering from some cognitive or discursive deficit? (Does she not understand the semantic meaning of the phrase, 'describe yourself as English?') Does she have such a low level of awareness of, or concern with, matters of national identity that she is not cognitively primed to understand the interviewer's question in these terms?

Of course, any or all of these explanations could be correct. However, it should be noted that LW did not generally display difficulties of hearing or comprehension, and later in her interview LW talked about England and Britain at some length. Consequently, a more likely explanation for her response in extract 1 is that, at this point in the conversation, LW was treating her national identity as a conversational 'given'. Sacks has noted how, in cooperative conversation, 'it is your business not to tell others what you can suppose they know' (1992: 14).¹³ By the same token, of course, it is incumbent upon us not to ask questions to which we already know the answers.¹⁴ In the case of extract 1, LW may have been assuming that the interviewer, having already heard her talk about her life and background,

would be aware of the fact that she is (and knows herself to be) English. Under these circumstances, LW might well have inferred that the interviewer intended her question to be interpreted figuratively.

Although the exchange in extract 1 is rather idiosyncratic, it illustrates a more general phenomenon, whereby white ethnic majority interview respondents in England are inclined to treat national identity as a taken-for-granted fact of life, rather than as a suitable topic for conversation (see also Mann, 2006). Social scientists who adopt a confessional approach to interview talk are inclined to cast situations in which national identity is treated as both figuratively and literally unremarkable as presenting the social scientists with an insuperable barrier to research. Further, they are inclined to presume that settings in which people treat national identity as unremarkable are also contexts in which people lack a clear sense of national self-awareness (see Bechhofer & McCrone, 2009: 5). From the perspective of the Conversational Model of interview talk, both of these assumptions are questionable. As Billig's (1995) analysis of 'banal' national consciousness demonstrated, when people's accounts are treated as samples of discourse it is possible to treat the taken-for-granted as an analytic topic in its own right. Moreover, the tendency to treat national identity as common knowledge need not be interpreted as evidence that the speakers necessarily lack clear, reflexive, understanding of the subject.¹⁵

More generally, social scientists have noted that – far from indicating some social pathology, discursive deficit, or conceptual absence – the capacity to establish tacit understandings (or 'common ground') represents an essential precondition for mutual comprehension (Clark, 1996). Further, the very process of relying upon shared tacit knowledge enables conversationalists to display intersubjectivity, and thereby serves as an essential mechanism for cementing social bonds. Goffman, for example, noted two ways in which rhetorical ellipsis may contribute to the delicate choreography of social interaction. First, the act of taking particular social facts for granted minimises a speaker's imposition upon his or her audience: 'if we could not rely on our listeners grasping the point without extended elaboration, we could hardly afford the time to say anything; similarly, if they could not depend on our taking into consideration what they already know, they could hardly afford the time to listen' (1983: 2).

Second, through the very practice of presuming a measure of shared understanding, dialogic partners are able to display empathy and attention to each other's needs. Hence, not only is it often unnecessary to state the obvious, but doing so can also constitute a breach of

civility in so far as this may be taken to imply the absence of consideration for, or understanding of, one's audience. As Goffman noted, 'one's cognitive presuppositions about the ... capacities of others present can become closely mingled with politeness understandings' (1983: 29).

In his own fieldwork, Goffman focused on the ways in which people claim and attribute identities in everyday social encounters. Significantly, he noted that people rarely report their identities directly. Rather, information about identity is typically *given off* non-verbally during the course of mundane social action. Similarly, Billig (1995) argued that people do not always need to report their nationality explicitly, since they are typically able to give off cues to this identity through accent and linguistic deixis.

A consideration of ways in which the respondents in my corpus of interview transcripts conveyed information concerning their national identity through pronoun use (*we, us*), revealed complex laminations of meaning that could easily be overlooked if a researcher were to accept the propositional content of their accounts at face value. For example, in extract 2 EG claims not to think of himself as English, whilst also displaying awareness of his status *as* English through the use of a speaker-inclusive notional '*we*':

Extract 2:

EG I don't think of myself as English because **we** do some twatty things.

Similarly, in extract 3, SM denies '*feeling anything*' about being English or British, but then justifies this stance using a speaker-inclusive national '*we*' and '*us*':

Extract 3a: 'Absolutely wholeheartedly not British or English in the slightest.'

I Tryna see really if you're British or English.

SM I feel absolutely wholeheartedly not British or English in the slightest.

I Not British? Why not?

SM No, not not British, and I don't feel anything like there's anything brilliant or proud to be about being British or English. I'm sorry, I

I That's fine, that's interesting.

SM I, I cannot bear, I can't express this strongly enough.

I We've hit a nerve here.

SM No. No. No. No.

((laughter))

It's, just, I just felt that the Conservative Party hit a new depth when they started going on about this . . . Because, things like, I mean, it's just, things like, **we** in this country have the best British, er best steel industry in the world, except it is not competitive because **we're** not in the Euro, and I just think that small minded mentality is just, you, it's just, I absolutely abhor it, and I just think, what is great to be about English? . . . I just think that the images that people from abroad have of **us** aren't images that are particularly helpful or anything I absolutely want to be associated with.

Cases like this alert us to the problems that can arise when a researcher interprets fragments of people's verbal accounts apart from the precise context in which they were voiced. Specifically, it seems that when white people who have been born and are resident in England tell an English interviewer that they do not think of themselves, feel, or see themselves as English or British, they do not always intend their words to be interpreted literally.

In the case of extract 3a we can see how the non-literal status of a national identity denial can also be signalled by the use of hyperbole, or what conversation analysts call 'extreme case formulations' (see Edwards, 2000). In his immediate response to the interviewer's question, SM asserts baldly: *'I feel absolutely wholeheartedly not British or English in the slightest.'* In isolation, this might be taken as evidence that SM did, indeed, not feel British or English in the slightest. However, this interpretation is undermined both by SM's subsequent use of a speaker-inclusive national '*we*', and also by his explanation, in which he uses the phrase '*feel [British or English]*' as a figurative reference to Conservative, xenophobic nationalism. In this case, then, the use of an extreme case formulation (*'absolutely wholeheartedly not . . . in the slightest'*) is designed to display his investment in his rejection of national chauvinism, not to flag the literal truth of his denial of national identity.

The non-literal nature of SM's categorical national identity denial also becomes apparent when, a little while later in the conversation, the interviewer raises the '*British or English*' question again. At this point, SM displays a revised understanding of the question (*'Yeah. I see, I see'*), and offers a revised response in which he first acknowledges the common-sense status of his English identity (*'obviously . . .'*), and then goes on to assert, *'I see myself very much as being English'*:

Extract 3b: 'Obviously I see myself as English.'

I So, I guess, in national terms, you don't see, you don't see yourself as English? Or as British?

SM Yeah. Yeah. I see, I see, I suppose, that, yeah, obviously, I see myself as English. As, as, no, I suppose, I make the distinction, I see myself very much as being English.

Rule 2: do not make an issue of your national identity

Sperber and Wilson distinguished two ways in which an idea, object or event may be referred to in the course of conversation, which they term *use* and *mention*: 'USE of an expression involves reference to what the expression refers to; MENTION of an expression involves reference to the expression itself' (1981: 303). Situations in which speakers tacitly allude to their national identity (through pronoun use or implication) involve the discursive *use* of the construct. Conversely, situations in which speakers *talk about* their sense of national identity, the construct of national identities, or the language used for denoting national identities, involve *mention* formulations.

From the interview transcripts, it was clear that respondents were generally more willing to allude to their national identity in the course of discussing some other issue than they were to treat their sense of national identity as a topic of conversation in its own right. As we have seen, in so far as a speaker could assume that their audience was already aware of their national identity, the very act of mentioning it could breach the *don't state the obvious* rule. In addition, respondents were inclined to treat the act of mentioning one's national identity as subject to additional normative prescriptions concerning decorum and demeanour. Faced with the task of answering a direct question concerning national identity, respondents often attempted to inoculate themselves against a possible charge of inappropriate discursive conduct. They commonly stressed that their act of mentioning their national identity had been specifically occasioned by the interviewer's question ('*since you ask ...*'), and should not be interpreted as a spontaneous utterance. They also commonly suggested that, in the general course of everyday life, uninvited public assertions of English or British national identity constitute a potential affront to others:

Extract 4: 'If ... someone from abroad says "Where are you from?" ...'

BR I mean, I'm English. But only in so much as if someone turns round to me and says, 'Where are you from?' Say, someone from abroad says, 'Where are you from?' I'm from England, all right. But that's it. [...] You get people who take it too far, you get people who are, like, 'I am English,' and 'I want you to know I'm English', so to do that I've got to be like so against you, it's untrue.

In addition, respondents were inclined to stress the need to regulate verbal proclamations of national identity in the interests of public civility:

Extract 5: 'No need to make a song and dance about it ...'

GH Well, if somebody actually asked me then yes, I'd say I'm British. But I wouldn't be one of those people who goes around sounding it from the rooftops.

I Why not?

GH Well, I suppose I know I'm British, and that's what matters. No need to make a song and dance about it.

Extract 6: 'I don't stand up and shout.'

I So do you see yourselves, you talk about being, talking about England, whatever, do you see yourselves then as, I'm tryna think with you having travelled abroad, do you see yourselves still as British?

TB Well, yeah, but I don't, some people, I don't, I don't particularly

MB I don't stand up and shout

TB No I don't

MB 'I am British', and

TB I don't stand up and shout 'I'm British', and

MB 'don't do this', and 'we'll fly the Union Jack from here, there and everywhere', you know.

In extracts 4, 5 and 6, the respondents all emphasise their personal adherence to norms of discursive civility through contrast with '*people who take it too far*'; '*people who go sounding it from the rooftops*'; '*some people*' who '*stand up and shout*'. This can be seen as an example of a general tendency whereby people in England construct national self-imagery through the use of intranational comparisons (Condor, 1996; 2006; Condor & Abell, 2006 a; 2006b). That is, rather than define themselves in contrast to a foreign Other, people from England are more inclined to judge their own orientation to national identity through contrast to an imaginary class of compatriots located in the

past, in different places (North vs. South, urban vs. rural locations), in different social classes, generations or amongst people of different political persuasions.

Of course, interview respondents do not always display, or report, restraint in national self-identification. Take, for example, the stretch of talk reported in extract 7, below. The respondent, HW, was a member of the far right British National Party, and the position that he adopted exemplified the kind of stance that BR (extract 4) attributed to his nationalist Other. In order to emphasise his investment in being – and being recognised as – English rather than British, HW presents the interviewer with an emblematic example involving an incident that occurred when he was serving in the (British) army during the Troubles in Northern Ireland:

Extract 7: ‘I’m not fucking British, I’m fucking English.’

HW I’ve been petrol bombed, bottles of piss thrown at me, bags of shit, you name it, I’ve had it thrown at me. And I was like walking down the street on a night patrol one night, and I heard this ‘You fucking Brit bastard’. I’m not fucking British, I’m fucking English. So I told them and they don’t like that then, see? [. . .] I’m English, and they called me a Brit bastard. I said, ‘No I’m not. I’m English’, and they don’t like that.

Three things are worth noting about this stretch of talk. First, this sort of account was statistically exceptional: it was rare for the respondents to report energetically asserting their national identity in social encounters, and the people who did so tended to belong to distinctive subgroups.¹⁶ Second, HW is orienting to the fact that his reported actions breach conventional norms of discursive decorum: he casts his vigorous assertion of his English identity as an act of verbal aggression, produced in response to exceptional provocation. Third, extract 7 is also unusual in so far as HW treats his public assertion of national identity as an act of ‘telling’: that is, of literal self-disclosure. As we shall see in the next section, white ethnic majority respondents in England were generally less inclined to view national identity avowals as a means by which to assert their authentic self-concepts, than to view them as a means by which to display consideration and respect for their audience.

Rule 3: national identity avowals should be recipient-designed

In ordinary social life, conversational offerings tend to be designed with a view to the assumed knowledge, and purposes, of the addressee (Garfinkel, 1967). As we have seen, English interview respondents are often inclined to treat their national identity as common knowledge: that is, as information that was already shared with their English interviewer. However, respondents often invoked two exceptional situations in which it may be appropriate to explicitly mention one's national identity: during travel abroad, and on ceremonial occasions in which one is required to answer a question about nationality for bureaucratic purposes. Both of these situations were associated with normative prescriptions concerning the 'right' way to answer a question. And in both cases, respondents generally understood a 'right' answer to be one which was designed to be intelligible to, and to fit the purposes of, the addressee.¹⁷

Rule 3a: semantic accommodation (use language that your addressee will understand)

In extract 8, respondent LH explains why she reported 'saying' that she is English with reference to the likely perspective of a foreign audience:

Extract 8: 'I'm responding to the way I feel that they're thinking.'

LH Do you know what? Do you know one of the reasons why I say 'English'?

I Mm.

LH I'm, I'm, I only really answer that question obviously when I'm abroad, and I think it's because foreigners use the term English rather than British. Maybe because of the language.

I Yeah, yeah.

LH Yeah, so I don't actually think it means anything other than perhaps I'm responding to the way I feel that they're thinking. Like the French call Britain Angleterre don't they?

It was not unusual for an interview respondent to answer a direct question concerning national identity with the phrase, '*it would depend*', or the metadiscursive comment, '*it's a difficult one*'. Interestingly, in most cases, when a respondent uttered these phrases, they were not commenting on their subjective experience of national identity. Rather they were reflecting on the difficulty of producing a definitive answer to a question about how they 'describe' their national

identity, or what they ‘call’ themselves, in view of the need to accommodate to the various perspectives that might be adopted by a foreign conversational partner:

Extract 9: ‘It would depend on who I was talking to and where I was and what I was responding to.’

MC: I think a lot would depend on who was asking me really. It’s a difficult one, because when we were travelling. I think when people used to come up and, you know, they knew where you were from obviously but, you know, but if I were being asked, like in America, I would have been more inclined to say British. In Australia or New Zealand I’d have been more inclined to say English because of the history. Do you know what I mean?

I Yeah.

MC: I think for Americans, you know, Britain is like about this big anyway ((gestures a small area with hands)), so I mean, you know what I mean? I would use both of those names but I feel it would depend on who I was talking to and where I was and what I was responding to.

Rule 3b: pragmatic accommodation (tailor your answer to the questioner’s purposes)

In England, questions about national ‘identity’ are capable of being interpreted in two different ways. On the one hand, they can be understood as requests for information about the addressee’s ontological (for example citizenship) status (*‘what are you?’*). On the other hand, they can be understood as enquiries about the addressee’s self-concept (*‘how do you feel about being ...?’*). In their interview accounts, respondents often suggested that their understanding of the force of a request for information concerning national identity could vary as a function of conversational content. We have already noted how, in real or imagined face-to-face interactions with another English person, speakers were liable to treat their ontological status as English as a conversational given. Consequently, in this kind of setting, speakers were disposed to interpret questions about their sense of national identity as questions about their subjective self-image. In other imagined contexts – such as conversations taking place abroad or written communication – speakers were inclined to interpret questions concerning their national identity as requests for information about their citizenship status.

There was also some evidence that interview respondents’ preferred interpretations of questions about national identity varied according

to their social class and level of education. Generally, people from working-class backgrounds or with relatively low levels of formal education were liable to interpret questions about national identity as invitations to self-disclose. In contrast, people from middle-class backgrounds or with relatively high levels of education were more inclined to regard questions concerning national identity as requests for information about citizenship status.

Extract 10 reports a stretch of interview dialogue between an interviewer and two elderly sisters. Both agree that the only time the question of national identity '*ever crops up*' is for the purpose of foreign travel. However, their understanding of the force of the question (and hence what would constitute a felicitous reply) differs. KG, an ex-teacher, treats the procedure of filling out a passport application form as a ceremonial context requiring a standard response. In contrast AG, an ex-factory worker with no post-compulsory education, justifies her choice of answer with reference to '*how I think of myself*'.

Extract 10: 'I think British is what people expect.'

KG The only time it ever crops up is when you have to fill in a passport. You know when you are travelling (inaudible) you never discuss—

I It doesn't crop up?

KG No.

AG No.

KG If there was a question that asked your nationality, then we would definitely put—, but unless (.)

I So, so you'd put English rather than British, would you?

AG Oh yes.

KG I've started to put British but I used to always write English.

AG Oh no, I still write English.

I Why?

AG I suppose that's how I think of myself.

I Why have you started to put British?

KG Well, because I've decided – I think it's the more acceptable (.) nowadays

AG Well, maybe, but I think I'm—

[...]

KG I don't know. But I think British is what people expect.

When people interpreted questions relating to national identity as bureaucratic requests for information about citizenship, they could cast replies designed to assert the speaker's authentic self-concept as uncooperative and self-indulgent:

Extract 11: National self-assertion versus pragmatic cooperation

PJ I remember the customs guard up on the bus in France, and looked round and he said 'Anglais?' And these two, two Scottish lecturers came up and said, 'Ecosse!' and, and, and the customs guard just kind of raised his eyebrows as if to say 'yeah of course, of course, of course'. But I wonder if the French, for example, I mean (.) what's the French for British, I don't know if there is a French-?

I I don't, I don't know.

PJ Whether they think of England and Scotland as the same, that's what I'm saying, 'no, they're Anglais' ... Anyway I imagine that customs guards are not really that bothered about what people ... personally prefer to be called. I'd hazard a guess that if you are a customs guard you'll really be a bit more interested in knowing how many cigarettes someone is allowed to be carrying.

Awareness of the dialogic quality of public conversations in liberal democracies should, of course, caution us against assuming that accommodation between everyday and bureaucratic discourses of national identity involves a one-way process. At the time of writing, moves are afoot to reword the English Census item on nationality in response to a perceived preference on the part of the public to interpret this as an invitation to report their subjective sense of identity. As explained by the National Statistician.¹⁸

With the new devolved administrations, there has been an increasing interest in 'national' consciousness with many people wanting their 'national' identity to be acknowledged. Many people in the White British ethnic group feel that their national identity is English. The Office for National Statistics encourages organizations to collect data on national identity and recommends the following question:

'What do you consider your national identity to be?'

The question allows respondents to choose more than one identity (if they think of themselves as having more than one). This is because national identity is self-defined, i.e. it is something that is subjectively meaningful to the person concerned. (*Hansard*, 4 July 2005, column 128W).

It is, of course, unlikely that this bureaucratic response will accomplish permanent conversational closure. On the contrary, this revised

form of wording has already prompted objections on the grounds that it precludes the possibility that Englishness might be construed as an objective civic status.¹⁹

Rule 4: design your national identity avowals with a view to the sensitivities of the actual or potential audience

In previous work, my colleagues and I have considered how national identity claims are often made with a view to impression-management or, to use Goffman's terminology, establishing and maintaining the 'face' of the speaker. We have suggested, for example, that whereas people in Scotland often attempt to project a positive face *through* a strong claim to national identity, speakers in England are more inclined to treat national self-identification as a potentially face-threatening act, and consequently are often inclined to project an image of themselves as rational and moral individuals *despite* their acknowledgement of their national identity (Condor & Abell, 2006 a; 2006b).

In everyday social encounters, rules of facework are typically treated as reciprocal. In the course of social interaction, people do not simply act to maintain their own face, but also act in such a way as to protect, or enhance, the face of the other participants. One interesting aspect of the interview discussions of national identity related to the ways in which speakers were inclined to import national Others into the interview conversation, typically positioning foreigners either as co-conversation-alists or as ratified overhearers. We have seen how respondents could invoke an imaginary foreign audience when describing situations in which explicit national identity avowals might reasonably be expected. In addition, respondents often replied to questions about national identity with a reference to the imagined sensitivities of a generalised foreign Other. The default assumption was that any strong, or uninvited, national identity claim could be viewed as a potential threat to the face of national Others (see for example extract 4 above). Even those respondents who claimed a strong sense of national identity commonly prefaced their assertion with a disclaimer to the effect that this was not intended as an insult to others:

Extract 12: 'It's not meant to be an affrontery.'

ST: I say I'm English, you know, it's not to be an affrontery to them, because the Scots, the Irish, the Welsh, but, they do it the other way round, don't they? Very quick to let you know that their origin is Welsh or Scottish, and, yeah, I think I'd be the same.

Interview respondents could orient to the potential sensitivities of various classes of Other: the other UK nations; other nations in the British Isles; British citizens or denizens of different national heritages; People outside the British Isles. In addition, respondents could endorse different views concerning the likely preferences of these Others. For example, speakers could justify '*saying British*' on the grounds that this displayed sensitivity to their black and ethnic minority compatriots:

Extract 13: 'because ... ethnic minorities say they are British.'

- I In terms of nationality, what would you say you were? (.)
 CK Oh, er, British.
 I Not English?
 CK Well obviously I am English. I could hardly deny it ((*laugh*)) but I'd probably be more likely to say British.
 I Because?
 CK: Because it's more inclusive. Black people and ethnic minorities say they are British. British is everyone.

On the other hand, people could justify describing themselves as English on the grounds that this displayed appropriate tactful deference to the sensitivities of both ethnic and national UK minorities:

Extract 14: 'I don't want to presume a commonality.'

- I What would you describe yourself then as nationally?
 PV English.
 I English.
 PV Yeah.
 I Why are you English? What makes you say that?
 PV Erm. Well, I suppose cos I'm kind of aware that, you know, there's people who describe themselves as Scottish and Welsh, and to try and describe yourself as British, is trying to identify, you know, I, I just think it's more accurate, really, and I mean, all this stuff about language, and stuff. It's all, you know, it's, it's, yeah, I think it's more accurate, and so I tend to say it.
 I Is that because
 PV So I was almost to say, 'I'm from England, Pakistan, Scotland or Wales.'
 I Mm. (.) So is that because you don't feel any kind of erm commonality I suppose for people in Scotland and Wales? Is it because you want to be seen as distinct?
 PV No. Well, I don't know if I, I wouldn't presu- well I suppose, I dunno, I dunno
 ((*laughter*))

- maybe I'm not pres– no, no, no, no, but maybe I'm not presuming it, I don't want to presume a commonality with these people really.
- I Mm. (.) Mm.
- PV That's very generous of me, isn't it?
- I I think it's a lovely thing.
- ((laughter))
- PV It's like stepping on their
- ((laughter))
- I dunno.

Sometimes people suggested that the best way to display affinity with Scotland was to '*say British*':

Extract 15: 'Because I . . . feel an affinity for Scotland.'

- JJ I used to say I was English just because I hadn't really thought about it. When I actually thought about it, I thought, well, I am British, actually. So, I got myself into the habit of saying 'I'm British' when somebody else asks what nationality I am, which doesn't happen very often, so it wasn't very easy to go round saying that ((laughs)) but, yeah, that was something I deliberately did because of those things, because I sort of do feel an affinity for Scotland.

In other situations people suggested that the right way to display sensitivity to the population of Scotland was to '*say English*':

Extract 16: 'That's what they would prefer.'

- I What would you say your nationality was?
- SE Oh English, very much. I – I'd say I was English.
- I Why English? English more than British?
- SE I think I would have always said British but because the Scottish don't want to be any part of that, then probably I'd say English now. Not because I feel any different from someone who lives in Scotland or Ireland or anything else, but that's what they would prefer so that's what my – my response would be probably.

Sometimes people spontaneously mentioned the problem of attempting to display tactful sensitivity to the imagined sensibilities of all Other people all of the time:

Extract 17: 'Other people would take offence.'

- I What do you see as your country?
- PG As my country?
- I Yes.
- PG Yes, that's a hard one. I don't know because I'd like to say – I'd like

to say it's the U – well, I can't say the UK because I think other people would take offence at that I can't call myself – I don't like to think of myself as like, you know, English as in I am not the same or not part of the same people as the Scottish, the Welsh, cos really we are, it's just that, but then, you know, I mean someone from Northern Ireland might take offence at me saying I was like, you know – I like to think of my country as like the United Kingdom rather than – which is fair enough because, you know, I dunno.

On other occasions, a respondent's recognition of the ambiguous connotations of particular forms of national self-labelling could be prompted by the interviewer. For example, shortly after SE had explained that she would '*say English*' with reference to the preferences of '*someone who lives in Scotland or Ireland or anything else*' (extract 16 above) the interviewer asked, '*what about ethnic minorities?*':

Extract 18: 'There isn't a correct answer, is there?'

I So what about ethnic minorities?

SE Erm. Oh yeah. I think that perhaps they would prefer British. Yeah they would. Erm. Oh God

((laughter))

Fuck. So what's the right answer then? Oh fuck. There isn't a correct answer, is there?

((laughter))

Lost in translation: (mis)understanding interview conversations on English national identity

The social dynamics of communication in research interviews

In this chapter I have been adopting a rather literal take on the notion of a 'conversation' on English national identity. Specifically, I have been focusing on the kind of talk that takes place when an interviewer asks a white person from an ethnic majority background, born and currently resident in England, to describe and to account for their personal sense of national identity.

Social scientists who elicit conversations on English national identity through 'qualitative', 'depth' or 'conversational' interviewing typically remark on a tendency on the part of respondents to disclaim a strong sense of national identity and to express confusion over whether they should call themselves English or British. Those researchers who adopt what I termed a confessional approach to interview discourse are apt to conclude that people who respond in this way are dispositionally uninterested in matters relating to national-

ity, or that they possess a non-salient, weak, ill-defined or confused sense of national identity.

In this chapter I have been questioning the value of this kind of approach. I suggested that in so far as research interviews constitute a form of conversation, we would not necessarily expect to be able to understand respondents' accounts by attending simply to the literal sense of the words that they utter. As in all conversational contexts, the meaning of an interview response will depend on the precise context and intonation in which the statement is made. More generally, successful communication in interview encounters, as in other forms of conversation, is likely to rely upon the ability of the participants to establish common ground, and to accommodate to each other's perspectives.

Clark and Brennan (1991) outlined three grounding mechanisms that people use to coordinate their understanding in everyday conversational contexts: the heuristic of co-presence (used in particular to establish the meaning of indexical referents like 'here', 'now' and 'we'); the heuristic of linguistic copresence (by virtue of which participants treat information that has already been introduced into a conversation as shared common ground); and the heuristic of community membership (according to which participants employ cultural stereotypes to gauge the likely level and content of their conversational partner's prior knowledge and beliefs). In this chapter I have shown how interview respondents can also be seen to employ these heuristics when they answer questions about national identity. For example, when speaking with an English interviewer, English people are inclined to treat their ontological status *as* English and *as* British as something that goes without saying. In so doing, they are using the heuristic of copresence (assuming that the interviewer will be able to interpret the identity markers that they are giving off through accent and pronoun use); the heuristic of linguistic copresence (assuming that an interviewer will remember what they have already said earlier in the interview about their place of birth etc.); and the heuristic of community membership (respondents make this clear when they mention how their accounts are likely to depend, quite literally, upon where their audience is coming from).

Grounding mechanisms are not only used to establish the sense-in-context of any particular contribution to an ongoing conversation. They are also used to determine the kind of speech act (Austin, 1962) that a speaker is performing: what is it that they are *doing* when they direct a particular statement to a particular person in a particular context. Researchers adopting the Confessional approach to interview

talk tend to presume that their respondents will (conveniently) be solely engaged in the act of literal self-disclosure. However, as we have seen, attention to the precise ways in which white respondents in England formulate their avowals or denials of national self-identity in interview exchanges suggests that they are in fact often engaging in displays of social sensibility. What is at stake is not so much the accuracy or authenticity of their national self-descriptions, as their ability to display socially appropriate forms of intersubjectivity, empathy, tact and decorum.

Miscommunication in the research process

The fact that conversationalists routinely employ grounding mechanisms to coordinate their understandings does not, of course, guarantee that they will always succeed. Instances of miscommunication can be especially common in exchanges between people who do not share what Clark and Schober term 'cultural common ground' (1992). Consequently, it is not surprising to find that misunderstandings regularly arise in research contexts in which the interviewer and respondent differ in age, ethnic, national or social class backgrounds (see Abell et al., 2006, for an example of a misunderstanding between a Scottish interviewer and an English respondent).²⁰ Troubles in interview conversations between people from similar backgrounds can also occur when interviewer and respondent have a different understanding of the point of the conversation, or when they are using vague words (like 'English', 'national' or 'identity') in different ways. We have seen one example of this kind of breakdown in communication in extract 1, in which the respondent misunderstands the interviewer's question, 'Would you describe yourself as English?' as an invitation to discuss the class-marking of her accented speech.

Research conversations are not, of course, restricted to the local exchange that takes place between interviewer and interviewee for the purposes of collecting data. Academic discourse involves an extended process of communication within and between various networks of participants, conducted through a variety of different media, and extending across long stretches of time and large expanses of geographical space. During the process of dissemination and translation, transformations in meaning can occur at any stage. Breakdowns in communication regularly occur in the course of academic communication (for example, when one author 'misrepresents' the work of another), and information is often lost or distorted in translation between academic, media, political and popular realms of discourse. In the interests of brevity, I shall limit my concern to the ways in which

misrepresentations of respondents' meanings can arise in the course of analysing interview discourse at a distance from the immediate conversational context for which the talk was originally designed.

One obvious danger is that researchers who analyse records of research interviews may not attend sufficiently closely to *what*, precisely, a respondent was actually saying at a particular moment in conversational time. Analysts are often keen to identify segments of the interview data that correspond with their own (theoretically-derived) analytic categories. When this is the case, the analyst may treat the precise wording of a respondent's account as an irrelevance. When they come to present 'quotations' to their readers, the author may not be especially concerned about reproducing the micro-details of a speaker's original utterance²¹. Similarly, in the course of presentation, authors often summarise their respondents' accounts using gist-formulations, translating the speaker's original words into their own preferred terminology.

The potential dangers of lexical re-glossing become apparent once we recognise how, in its original conversational context, the meaning of a statement often hinges on what Billig (1995: 93) described as 'small', 'prosaic' and 'routine' words. Billig's interest was in the way national representations may be conveyed through pronouns ('here', 'us', 'them') or nonspecific nouns like 'people'. In this chapter I noted how a failure to attend to a speaker's apparently incidental use of pro-terms like 'we' and 'us' might lead to misleading interpretations of 'denials' of national identity.

Similarly, speakers can convey important information through their precise choice of, and artful slips between, verbs used to designate the psychological condition of self-identity. In some contexts, whether a respondent says that they 'say', 'feel' or 'are' English may be crucial to the sense of their utterance (see Condor et al., 2006). In this chapter I noted how, when answering questions about national self-labelling (*'English or British?'*), interview respondents often interpret the phrases 'say you are', 'describe yourself as' or 'call yourself' as a reference to the act of public self-pronouncement *as opposed to* private self-conception. Consequently, their replies often take the form of metadiscursive reflections concerning the traffic rules of talk about national identity, rather than reports of their subjective sense of self.²²

The risk of misrepresenting respondents' accounts of national identity at the point of analysis is not restricted to the danger of overlooking the finer details of the transcript record. Paradoxically, the techniques that are commonly used to transform interview conversations into useable data, and to ensure the validity and reliability of

social scientific analyses, involve stripping away a good deal of the information that the original conversationalists would have been using to establish mutual comprehension.

On the one hand, the procedure of recording interviews, and then translating the auditory record into written form, facilitates comparison and classification in so far as it renders the conversations mobile, and enables the researcher to assemble a corpus of conversations together in a single 'centre of calculation' (Latour, 1987). On the other hand, the very fact that the analytic process is distanced both temporally and spatially from the immediate situation in which the talk originally took place compromises the analysts' ability to employ the heuristic of co-presence. The process of audiorecording interviews involves a loss of information concerning the body posture, gaze and facial expression of the interlocuters. The conventions used for transcribing these recordings often strip the original utterances of their prosodic features, including speed and volume of delivery, inflection and emphasis. Most established methods used for analysing interview accounts involve the segmentation of transcripts, thereby compromising the analyst's ability to employ the heuristic of linguistic copresence.

Faced with the task of interpreting shards of conversation as stand-alone utterances, and deprived of most of the information concerning context, tone and manner of delivery which would have been available to the original conversationalists, it is hardly surprising that researchers should sometimes resort to the heuristic of community membership. After all, even if they cannot see or hear the speakers, and are not aware of the conversation preceding the utterance in question, the researcher does at least know that the respondent (their own identity claims notwithstanding) *is* white and English. The tendency to interpret denials and mitigations of national self-conception as evidence of the abnormalities – and possibly deficiencies – of English national identity may, then, often owe less to the researcher's grounded appreciation of what the speaker actually meant, than to their preconceptions concerning the polymorphous perversities of English national character.

Notes

- 1 www.frankfield.co.uk/campaigns/devolution. All websites in Chapter 1 were accessed on 12 December 2010.
- 2 Concerns over the repression of talk regarding English national identity have historically coincided with a veritable discursive explosion on the

subject. This situation parallels the kind of process that Foucault (1979) observed in discourses of sexuality in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

- 3 http://whatenglandmeanstome.co.uk/?page_id=2.
- 4 Research on the national self-perceptions of minority racial or ethnic individuals in England has typically been discussed as a matter of 'British identity' (see Condor et al., 2006). The recent flurry of political and media interest in questions of national identity as they relate specifically to England has tended to focus on the white ethnic majority population. For the purposes of this chapter I shall be focusing exclusively on the interview discourse of this specific sub-group.
- 5 Social psychologists who adopt the Conversational Model typically assume an agnostic stance concerning the validity of respondents' accounts. Psychological research has shown that people's autobiographical memories, their description of their mental states, and the explanations that they provide for them, are often highly unreliable. With specific regard to the topic of national identity, recent experimental work has, for example, demonstrated that people who sincerely endorse civic understandings of nation may nevertheless display an unconscious tendency to construe national identity in ethno-racial terms (Devos & Ma, 2008).
- 6 The corpus currently comprises transcripts of 1862 lightly structured ('conversational') interviews conducted between 1995 and 2007. This includes interviews collected for the project *Nationals and Migrants*, within the Constitutional Change and Identity programme funded by the Leverhulme Trust (Grant Number (3511), and for the project *Orientations of Young Men and Women to Citizenship and European Identity* (EC, contract no. HPSE-CT-2001-00077). For further details on the procedures used to conduct and analyse the interviews, see Condor (2006; 2010).
- 7 I am borrowing the phrase 'traffic rules' from Goffman (1955).
- 8 Jackie Abell and I (Condor & Abell, 2006a) have noted how the perspectives adopted by social scientists typically mirror the dominant vernacular assumptions about national identity held by members of their national communities. Significantly, the stance that I am adopting in this chapter – treating interview discourse as a situated conversation rather than a device for exposing speakers' private psychological states – parallels the kind of orientation that interview respondents in England commonly adopted towards their own talk about national identity.
- 9 Clearly, if we treat interview talk as situated dialogue, it follows that we should treat the interviewer as an active participant in the unfolding conversation. Unfortunately, space constraints preclude my fully explicating how the interviewers orient to the same normative concerns as the respondents.
- 10 These four principles tended to be accepted by people from a wide variety of backgrounds. In addition, people tended to adhere to these principles irrespective of whether they expressed a strong or weak sense of national

identity, or whether they chose to describe themselves as English, British, both or neither.

- 11 It can also prove very difficult to initiate a research conversation about national identity in England. The interviews in my corpus were all conducted as (relatively) respondent-directed conversations. The interviewer tried not to prime the topic of national identity, but rather attempted in the first instance to elicit ‘spontaneous’ talk on the topic by steering the conversation round to matters such as home and mobility, political change, the monarchy, holidays and foreign travel, ‘the war’, football, and so forth. In practice, however, respondents in England very rarely talked explicitly about their own sense of national identity in response to such prompts. Consequently, the interviewer typically had to resort to elicit, or to maintain, nation-identity talk through direct questioning.
- 12 For the purposes of this chapter I am using a simplified form of transcription notation, based on Jefferson’s (2004) system:
- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| <u>underline</u> | Stress on syllable or word. |
| CAPITALS | Material spoken louder than surrounding talk. |
| dash– | Abrupt cut off. |
| ‘inverted commas’ | Intonation of quotation. |
| question mark? | Rising inflection. |
| (2) | Pause measured to the nearest second. |
| (.) | Hearable pause of less than one second. |
| ((brackets)) | Transcriber’s note of something hard to represent phonetically. |
| Bold | Word or phrase of especial analytic significance. |
| [...] | Omitted material. |
- 13 This idea is also central to Grice’s (1975) conversational maxims of quantity (‘Do not make your contribution to the conversation more informative than is required’) and manner (‘Be brief [avoid unnecessary prolixity]’).
- 14 Interviewers also oriented to this presumption when – as was often the case – they prefaced their requests for information concerning national identity with the softener, ‘This may sound like a silly question, but’ (see also Mann, 2006).
- 15 In his account of banal national consciousness Billig (1995) adopts the term ‘mindless’. With hindsight, this is possibly regrettable, since the term carries connotations of irrationality. More recently, social psychologists have been inclined to describe the kind of well-established (often early-learned) knowledge that can be used without being brought to the forefront of the mind or mentioned in conversation by the less loaded term, ‘implicit’.
- 16 Specifically, they tended either to be people who held far-right political views, or to be people with experience of living in Scotland, where we might surmise they had habituated to different normative traffic rules of national self-identification (see Condor & Abell, 2006a).

- 17 A good deal of recent research in England has been prompted by concerns relating to whether, and how, national identities may be changing in response to UK constitutional change. The data set that I am using here includes transcripts of interviews conducted before, during, and after the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. In many respects, the ways in which people in England orient to questions relating to national identity has remained remarkably consistent over time. People interviewed relatively recently may, like AG in extract 10, refer to having changed the ways in which they answer a question about their national identity. However, on inspection, it appears that the changes that the respondents are describing usually pertain to norms relating to 'the right thing to say', rather than to transformations in their subjective sense of self (for further examples, see extracts 15 and 16).
- 18 Note that this concern to (re)design a census item on 'identity' to accommodate (perceived) public concerns over subjective experience is currently confined to the bureaucratic category of nationality. There are apparently no analogous plans to include 'What do you consider your gender/age to be?' as census items.
- 19 Britology Watch: Deconstructing 'British Values'. 25 October 2009. <http://britologywatch.wordpress.com/2009/10/24/the-2011-census-and-the-suppression-of-english-identity/>. The author of this piece also takes issue with the way in which the 'national' identity question has been formulated for Census purposes as a question about (white) 'ethnic' identity.
- 20 This observation might lead us to question the common conceit that cultural distance grants epistemic privilege, as illustrated for example by Kumar's (2003) well-known contention that English national identity 'cannot be understood from the inside out but more from the outside in'.
- 21 It is also common practice for transcribers and/or researchers to clean up interview transcripts and even to 'correct' a respondents' wording.
- 22 It is a social scientific cliché that all national identities are constructed *vis-à-vis* an Other. As Bechhofer and McCrone (2009: 65) recently put it, 'Having a sense of who you are in national identity terms involving knowing who you are not.' Traditionally, social scientists have adopted what we might term a Saidian perspective, according to which national Others are understood to represent the ontological counter to, or antithesis of, the national Self. However, attention to the ways in which the English respondents discussed matters relating to national identity in the conversational interview context points to the possibility that National Others may also be represented in a Meadian or Bakhtinian sense, that is, as imagined dialogic partners. In this case, recognition of Difference may not be cast as grounds for ontological self-celebration, but rather as a precondition for mutual perspective-taking.