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Research project on LINGUA interviews:

proceedings and results

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LINGUA

- Scientific unit for linguistic analyses of origin within the Swiss Federal Office for Migration

- Linguistic analysis + evaluation of country knowledge > to investigate main socialisation

- External experts: linguists, familiar with country and culture

- LINGUA-staff: linguists (recruiting, coaching, verifying quality standards)

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LINGUA Interviews

- Conducted by LINGUA-experts/interviewers (anonymous)
- Aim: gather cultural and linguistic information
- Interview by telephone
- Length: 45-60 min.
- Basic structure:

  - Introduction

  - Personal data ($\rightarrow$ profile)

  - Topics concern daily life (no asylum motives)

= data for analysis

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LINGUA Research project

➢ Internal funding available (spring 2006)

➢ Call for projects (summer 2006)

➢ Selection of a Research Team (autumn 2006)

Remarks on the conduct and major results of the applied scientific research project „LINGUA-interviews“

Workshop on linguistic analyses
within the asylum procedure
23rd-24th July 2008
in
Centre Général Guisan, Lausanne, Switzerland

Dr. Olaf Behrend

Background and first research idea

- September 2006 we, Dr. Peter Münte and me, sociologists working for German universities, noticed the LINGUA request for proposal.

- To us it seemed, that LINGUA was aware of problems concerning the interviews and that the problems were not clear to them by then, so we concluded that there was a real research question and we therefore handed in a research proposal.

- After discussing our first proposal with the LINGUA team we suggested the following research design :
  - transcribing an amount of 10 to 20 LINGUA interviews,
  - analysing the openings of the interviews in detail by **sequential analysis** to gain insight into the range of attitudes of the interviewers towards the applicants (subjects)
  - reconstructing different conversational patterns of the interviewers

- We also suggested to consider in our research the final expert opinion (expertise), LINGUA form texts and other official documents concerning the asylum procedure in order to understand the structure and logics of the interconnectedness of asylum procedure, interview and expert opinion.

On sequential analysis

- Sequential analysis is a qualitative social research method.
- The research data are gained through the exact verbal transcription of recorded interactions.
- The very detailed reconstructive analysis of data allows to discover objective structures of significance which represent the latent structures of meaning of action itself.
- Sequential analysis depends on the five following methodological rules:
  - pure literality!
  - Never leave the sequential structure of action!
  - 'artificial naivety' of the interpreter,
  - totality and–in addition to this rule–the rule of parsimony of interpretations.

- Considering the structures of meaning of action leads to reconstructions of the social context of the conversational situations analysed. In this dimension sequential analysis differs from conversational analysis (which focuses on conversational patterns).

Transcription No. 1

P: HELLO?

Q: (1,1) hello good morning.

P: guten morgen (.) bless you.

Q: (1,2) how are you this morning? ((clicking noise))

P: fine ma.

Q: ((clicking)) okay (.) ahm (.) we are going to (.) have (1,0) a kind of an interview over the telephone (.) ALL RIGHT?

P: OKAY.

Q: but before we do so (.) i need to explain to you the purpose of this interview (..) ((soft)) hmm?

P: okay.

First research impressions

- Examining the openings of the first transcriptions in detail we noticed, that the telephone interviews are conducted in a relatively uniform way.

- Therefore we extended our research strategy by a (less detailed) comparison of all submitted interviews in full length.

- This comparison stabilized our impression of uniformity.

- We finally reconstructed the following segmentation of the LINGUA interviews.

Segmentation

(1) The telephone conference is realized technically between the LINGUA service centre and a guard; the subject's identity is controlled, then the interviewer is put through to the subject

(2) the communication channel is checked and opened for greeting

(3) question concerning well being of the subject (optional)

(4) explanation of interview (according to a LINGUA form text)

(5) opening of the verification of biographical data

(6) verification concerning the personal/ biographical data of the subject (according to a LINGUA form text)

(7) opening of the test/check of allegations (optional)

(8) test/check of allegations (main part)

(9) termination

Results on requirements for action

- it became clear that the interviewer is confronted with social context preconditions concerning the LINGUA interview on at least 5 levels:
  - Asylum procedure, procedural decisions by LINGUA, telephone conversation, subject and expertise
- These preconditions lead to many practical requirements for action in the interview (see most important ones below):
  - clarification: which language shall be and which can be used?
  - introduction of the interviewer as interviewer and temporal representative of the Swiss authorities,
  - explanation of the procedural background and function of this interview,
  - explanation of legal options of appeal against the outcome of the interview (expertise result)

- According to the data the interviewer do not meet fully the requirements in all interviews.

Results on interview conduct

- The interviewers realize, as mentioned above, the requirements for action of the interviews in an uniform and prestructured way.
- Uniformity:
  - All interviewers try to check the allegations of the subject; most of them also try to ascertain;
  - in some cases interviewer even try to convict the subject **in the interview;**
  - this is realized mostly by closed questions (yes/no), which dominate our data (like in a test)
  - The aspects of checking, ascertaining and in some cases convicting are the goals of the expertise, but the interviewers use these aspects as the pragmatics of the interview. However, the goals of the interview differ from the goals of the expertise!
- Prestructuredness
  - There is also a very close relation of LINGUA form texts and interview conduct > almost all interviewers **read** the introduction text as an explanation of the interview to the subjects.
  - **But reading out a text to somebody is different from realizing a text as an interaction!**
  - This difference of pragmatics is well known from other administrative contexts.

Mismatch of conduct and requirements

- our results concerning the interview conduct contradict the requirements of the interview, especially if the LINGUA interview is seen as a chance to gain a comprehensive expression form of the subjects (as data base for the expertise).
- Important is that this does not lead to the conclusion that the expertises were so far insufficient. They reach the standards of scientific expertise without question. Why?
- The researched interviews deliver enough data to form conditionals sentences of the type:
  - **„If Mr. or Mrs. X has lived under the conditions Y, he or she should know Y-specific items or express him- or herself in a Y-specific way"**
- These conditionals are the basis for the expertises.

- But the interviews could be conducted in a way that leads to more data and more biographic details.
- to change the conduct of the interviews is a practical decision of LINGUA.
- Therefore, scientific research ends at this point, consulting starts.

Practical conclusions I

- The question in **practical respect** was: how to conduct interviews in a strategic way to...
  - offer the subject suggestive conditions for self presentation
  - appeal to subjects who try to hide their real origin.
- We found answers at two levels:
  1. We reconstructed **all empirical question forms** (seven forms in three classes, see next), brought them into a system and evaluated their use.
  2. For this evaluation we developed **a model for the LINGUA interview**, which tries to consider the biography of the subject in a way that links the individual with the specific culture and lifestyle, so that conditional sentences can be formed.
     - The model consists (after explaining the setting and the position of the interviewer clearly to the subject) of three main phases:
       1. biographical profile as a basis for
       2. asking specific deepening questions on relevant facts of biography and lifestyle (main part)
       3. (if the main part was not sufficient): concluding test of knowledge and of linguistic forms and expressions.

Types of question

1. **Pragmatics I: Closed-ended inquiry**
   - Questions of existence and familiarity (yes/no): „Do you know …?" → use only very rarely!
   - Cultural investigating questions (yes/no): „Are there …?" → okay, but use only as occasional follow-on question!
   - Obvious test questions: „"What is…?"; „How do you call …?" → use only rarely as follow-on question!

2. **Pragmatics II: Open-ended questions**
   - Stereotype questions: „What's a typical dish in …?"→ DON'T USE! Better ask in a more concrete way!
   - completely open-ended questions: „Tell me something!" → DON'T USE!

3. **Pragmatics III: Open-ended and interested questions**
   - interested questions about daily practices: „How are houses built where you live?" → use as follow-on question, important!
   - Ego-focused questions: „please tell me, how you used to get to school!"→ recommended type of question!

Practical conclusions II

- we finally developed three main rules for a new interview model.
- If the interviewer follows these main rules, chances are best to gather the necessary data in the interview.
- Main Rules:
    1. rule of trust: „everything the subject says should be taken as true"
    2. rule of authenticity: „everything said by the subject should be taken as new and interesting"
    3. rule of opacity: „conduct the interview in a way, that the aim of the expertise (check, ascertain, convict) is not going to influence the interview"
- All conclusions, the rules and other aspects are presented in a handbook.
- Besides the handbook we suggested LINGUA to sensitize interviewers for
    - their position in the interview as representative of Swiss authorities,
    - the requirements of the interview and the subject,
    - the new interview model, the use of good questions and the three rules through a special training.