# The interview as a research method : a case study of narratives on war

# The Interview as a Research Method: A Case Study of Narratives on War

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The interview as a research method has been utilized in various disciplines such as 1) anthropology, 2) folkloristics, 3) oral history, 4) sociolinguistics, and 5) sociology. Briggs (1986) discusses the methodological problems of interviewing in these fields and argues that an analysis of "metacommunicative" practices is essential for understanding the interview as a research method. Based on his linguistic anthropological argument, this paper seeks to examine methodological problems from a different perspective, namely, the micro-macro link of social interaction, by using the example of an interview on war.

First, macro and micro perspectives in an interview between a Japanese researcher and an American informant are introduced. The macro perspective pertains to the US-Japan relations during World War II, while the micro perspective is related to Goffman's study (1967) on face-work in interaction. Second, the "metapragmatic" relation between the macro and micro aspects of interaction is explained through linguistic anthropological theory, focusing on a discussion of the first-person pronoun "we" and the concept of "contextualization/textualization." Finally, the micro-macro link of interaction is illustrated through examples from the interview. Thus, this study shows that the long-standing question of "how micro and macro aspects of social phenomena are related" in social science is an issue of metapragmatics in linguistic anthropological terms.

**Keywords:** interview, methodology, first-person pronoun, metapragmatics, World War II

## 1. Introduction

The interview as a research method has been utilized in various disciplines. Briggs (1986: 6–28) enumerates the following research fields that employ interviewing: 1) anthropology, 2) folkloristics, 3) oral history, 4) sociolinguistics, and 5) sociology.[1] He discusses the

methodological problems associated with interviewing in these fields and argues that an analysis of "metacommunicative"[2] practices is essential for understanding the interview as a research method. Based on the linguistic anthropological argument presented by Briggs (*ibid*.), this paper seeks to use illustrative examples from an interview on the subject of war for examining these methodological problems from the perspective of the micro-macro link of social interaction, which is a recurring theme in social science.

First, this paper introduces the macro and micro perspectives in an interview on war between a Japanese researcher and an American informant. The macro perspective pertains to the US-Japan relations during World War II, while the micro perspective is related to Goffman's study (1967) on face-work in interaction. Second, the "metapragmatic" relation between these macro and micro aspects of interaction is explained through linguistic anthropological theory, focusing on a discussion of the first-person plural pronoun "we" and the concept of "contextualization/textualization." Finally, the micro-macro link (metapragmatics) of interaction is illustrated through some examples from an interview on war, focusing on linguistic features such as contrastive pairs, delays, and deixis. Thus, the interview as an interaction will be shown to be textualized by micro identity negotiations (face-work) and macro identity negotiations (identification with a nation-state), and the longstanding question in social science — how micro and macro aspects of social phenomena are related — will be shown to be an issue of metapragmatics in linguistic anthropological terms. This paper mainly deals with the interview as a research method, focusing on its methodological aspects; therefore, only a few illustrative examples from an interview on war are analyzed, and historical studies concerning war (the study of history itself) recede into the background.

## 2.  Micro and Macro Perspectives in the Interview

The "micro" and "macro" aspects of social phenomena and how these aspects are related or disconnected have been a persistent theme in social science. As Schegloff (1987: 208) argues, the distinction between "microanalysis" and "macroanalysis" is based on the relativistic continuum between the two on a bipolar edge. In general, works by researchers such as Emile Durkheim and Max Weber are categorized as macroanalyses of social phenomena, whereas works by researchers such as Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel are categorized as microanalyses.

Regarding an interview on war, the micro aspects are related to face-work, which occurs in the "here-and-now" of interactional interviewing. On the other hand, the macro aspects are related to history, concerning a war that occurred in the past. This section will discuss these micro and macro perspectives in the interview on war. First, this paper will introduce historical macro aspects of the US-Japan relations during World War II and Anderson's claim (1983) that nationalism is constructed through war and modernization, including a discussion on the use of "we" as national identity. Next, a micro perspective on interviewing, that is, the concept of face-work (Goffman, 1967), will be analyzed.

Before entering into detailed arguments, it should be noted how the term "interview" is defined in the context of this paper. This article treats an interview as an interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. As Briggs (1986) and Cicourel (1964) state, an interview is not a method for objectively collecting valid and reliable information from the interviewee, rather the interview itself is a social-indexical interaction: "The interviewer's task is thus not that of fishing for 'the true attitude or sentiment,' but one of interpreting the subtle and intricate intersection of factors that converge to form a particular interview" (Briggs, *ibid*.: 22). Although the role of interpretation is as important for interviews as for other everyday encounters,

it is also true that an interview is a particular type of communication that differs from everyday conversation. Interviews are dialogic texts that are largely structured by the interviewer and the norms of the interview. In an interview, the interviewer usually adopts the role of asking a question and the interviewee usually answers the question. Thus, this paper's argument is based on the idea that the interview is a particular type of social interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee.

## 2. 1　The US-Japan Relations during World War II: Nationalism and "We" Identity

World War II was a critical event in the history of the US-Japan relations, forming a macro aspect of an interview on war between a Japanese researcher and an American informant.[3] Following Japan's surrender at the war's conclusion, the two nations were framed in a certain power relationship between the "defeated nation" and the "victorious nation." Such a framework made people more conscious of their national identity, as it differed from the "Other." Currently, people say, "As a Japanese, I think . . ." or "We are American, so we live like . . ."; however, the perception that "I'm Japanese" or "I'm American" is neither universal nor essential. This sense of national identity emerged only through the process of modernization, including wars and revolutions that increased contact with the "Other" and the resulting awareness of contrastiveness. When the concept of the nation-state was created through the process of modernization, the concept of national identity also emerged and continued to grow.

Anderson (1983) argues that a nation is not a universal entity as is often presumed, but an imagined political community. According to his discussion, this imagined community owes a great deal to the spread of print-capitalism and the emergence of national languages. In the Middle Ages, Latin was the only "Language" in Europe; that is, it was the sacred language of the Bible. After the Bible was translated

into languages such as English, German, and French through religious reformations, dictionaries were written for each language, and these languages were subsequently institutionalized as national languages. Print-capitalism contributed to the spread of such national languages (print languages) and the emergence of national identities held by people who believed that they shared the same language and space-time. An example of its consequence is that an individual in Lille assumes that an individual in Lyon, whom he/she has never met and perhaps will never meet, speaks the same language and inhabits the same space-time because he/she imagines that they belong to the same community (*ibid*.: 77). This kind of imaginary construction is possible only as a result of the aforementioned modernization. Considering such historical macro aspects of an interview are important for the analysis of the interview as an interaction.

## 2. 2　Face-Work

Regarding the micro aspects of interaction, Goffman (1967) states that people are always expected to bear in mind their roles, status, and feelings in order to maintain the face of the self and that of the other participants in interactions. For instance, he states that social etiquette "warns men against asking for New Year's Eve dates too early in the season, lest the girl find it difficult to provide a gentle excuse for refusing" (*ibid*.: 29). A man asking for a date is supposed to show that he is considerate enough to recognize the importance of the woman's face and that of the self, as refusing an invitation might lead to embarrassment, confusion, or resentment, which results in the interactants' faces not being maintained. In Goffman's articles, such face-work is one of the key concepts in analyzing an interaction.

It is possible that an interviewee might respond with different statements according to interviewer's characteristics, such as gender and way of speaking. One reason why the interviewee may change his/her responses seems to be related to Goffman's theory on face-

work as explained above. The interviewer and the interviewee are performing face-work in the interview, which is inevitable because an interview is a social interaction situated in a specific context, much the same as an everyday encounter. The participants in an interview are expected to maintain their faces by bearing in mind the other's role, status, and feelings and by adjusting their behaviors according to the expressive rules or expectations of society/culture.

In an interview, the interviewer mainly assumes the role of asking questions. Generally, the interviewee answers these questions. As Cicourel (1964: 82) states, "The interviewer may have the upper hand in that he or she will probably be more experienced in this kind of exchange and because he may have learned to control emotional outbursts"; the interviewee might feel that the interviewer must be more skilled at and more used to controlling the interview. Some kind of power dynamic is inevitable in interviews and in other everyday encounters.

Concerning the interview on the subject of war between a Japanese researcher and an American interviewee, the participants are more or less expected to behave as "Japanese" and "American" and maintain each other's face as "American" and "Japanese," which is undoubtedly highly sensitive face-work because Japan and the US fought each other during World War II. What the interviewer and the interviewee narrate is thus situated both in the micro and macro context of the interview; the former is concerned with the interactants' "here-and-now" roles, status, and feelings, while the latter is concerned with their socio-historical backgrounds. In Section 4 of this paper, face-work in the interview is analyzed in detail, taking into consideration the relationship between interactants' statements and the relevant contexts. Before analyzing concrete examples, the next section examines how micro and macro aspects of social phenomena are connected as "metapragmatics" in interaction on the basis of linguistic anthropological theory.

## 3.　Metapragmatics in Linguistic Anthropology

This section investigates how the traditional micro and macro issues of interaction outlined in the previous section are related to "metapragmatics" in linguistic anthropology, focusing on the characteristics of first-person pronouns and the process of "contextualization" and "textualization."

### 3.1　First-Person Plural Pronoun: "We"

A first-person pronoun that is highly context dependent is called a "shifter" because its referent "shifts" according to contexts, similarly to other personal pronouns, deixis, or tense (Silverstein, 1976). As Benveniste (1966) argues, a first-person pronoun lacks a fixed reference unlike other common nouns (e.g., apple or desk) and its referent depends on the speaker who utters the pronouns "I" or "we." That is, the utterance of the first-person pronouns "I" or "we" can be interpreted only in relation to the context (the speaker). In particular, the first-person plural pronoun "we" can be used in two ways: inclusively or exclusively (Silverstein, 1987). The inclusive "we" refers to a group of people including the speaker and the addressee, whereas the exclusive "we" refers to a group of people including the speaker but excluding the addressee. In addition to these two meanings of "we" on a referential dimension, the exclusive and inclusive use of "we" have some interactional effects on a social-indexical dimension.

Interaction such as an interview has at least two dimensions: a referential dimension and a social-indexical dimension. In simple terms, the former is concerned with what is said, while the latter is concerned with what is done. For instance, a woman might say, "I hate you" to her husband in a playful tone. On a referential dimension, what is said carries the literal meaning that she hates him. However, on a social-indexical dimension, what is conveyed is the contrary, "I love you," which is indexed by tonal cues.

Concerning the use of "we" on a social-indexical dimension, the

inclusive "we" indexes the intimate ingroupness between the speaker and the addressee. On the other hand, the exclusive "we" indexes the distance or difference between the speaker and the addressee. That is, the social-indexical dimension is related to the interactants' identity negotiations. A concrete example of the use of "we" on the social-indexical dimension is discussed in Section 4.

### 3. 2　Metapragmatics: Contextualization/Textualization

Gumperz (1982) used the term "contextualization cue" to refer to a signal that enables us to interpret an interaction, as seen in the afore-mentioned example of "I hate you." It provides us with a clue as to how to interpret the interaction, or in other terms, "metapragmatics." Metapragmatics is the process that enables us to interpret pragmatics (interaction), which is processed at the meta-level. Contextualization through contextualization cues and textualization are both important elements of metapragmatics. Contextualization is the process of in-dexing the surrounding contexts, while textualization is the process of interpreting an interaction through contextualization. A first-person pronoun is considered to be "metapragmatically highly transparent" because it is interpreted (textualized) only by directly (transparently) indexing the context, that is, the speaker (contextualization) (Koyama, 2009: 27–31). Metapragmatics is such a continual process of contex-tualization and textualization.

Goffman's face-work as a micro aspect of interaction and Ander-son's national identity as a macro aspect of interaction, as explained in Section 2, are both related to metapragmatics, including contextual-ization and textualization. Face-work contextualizes and textualizes an interaction on a more micro level in that it focuses on the interactants' "here and now" roles, status, and feelings. The use of "we" also con-textualizes and textualizes an interaction on the micro and macro levels in that the use of "we" is related both to a micro identity nego-tiation (as seen in the exclusive and inclusive use of "we") and to a

nation-state including its history (as seen in the use of the national "we": "we as Americans"). Such macro and micro perspectives in identity negotiations are important in exploring interactions, which will be demonstrated in the following analysis of an interview.

## 4. A Case Study of an Interview on War

Finally, we will discuss a few illustrative examples from an interview on the subject of war. Our analysis focuses on metapragmatics as explained in the previous section, which includes analyses of micro identity negotiations (face-work in an interview) and (micro) macro identity negotiations (identification with a nation-state by using the national "we" in an interview). The following interview data are from one of several interviews that I conducted in 2006 with the US citizens living in Japan. This article focuses in particular on the narrative of Mr. A, a 22-year-old exchange student from the University of Michigan, who, at that time, had lived in Japan for approximately one month.

## 4.1 National "We" Identity in the Interview

The utterances below are responses to a question about the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the interview conducted.

(1) A: I think that's uh, um, we as Americans and you as Japanese have the right to know, uh what happened.

(2) A: I'm sure you were taught something completely different because your ancestors experienced something terrible, whereas we were the ones that, uh, did that [the atomic bombing].

The first utterance contains the expression "we as Americans," which indexes a national identity and reveals the historical macro aspects of the interaction. Since Anderson (1983) argues that a nation is an imagined political community that emerges from the process of mod-

ernization, the interviewee's utterance is certainly related to history, which makes him associate his identity with a nation-state.[4)]

In addition, it should be noted that the first-person plural pronoun "we" is used in an exclusive way. The exclusive "we" indexes the distance or difference between the speaker and the addressee on a social-indexical dimension. The use of the exclusive "we" in this case clearly highlights the contrastiveness between Japan and the US, and consequently, also between the interviewer and the interviewee, which enables the interactants to interpret the interaction as an interview between a Japanese researcher and an American informant. Thus, the use of "Japanese/American" and "we/you" contribute to the contextualization and textualization process (metapragmatics) of the utterances.

## 4. 2　Face-Work in the Interview: Delay and Preface

The following utterance from the interview clearly shows certain traits of hesitation; that is, it has a number of hesitant remarks.

(3) A: When I saw that the topic <u>was</u>, <u>was</u> the bombing, I almost didn't know if I should say yes to an interview with you, because <u>I didn't know, um, a lot on the subject</u>, <u>um</u>, which, <u>uh</u> for me as an American, <u>um</u>, and it is America who, <u>um</u>, <u>bomb</u>, <u>did do the bombing</u>, <u>um</u>, to Japan.

(4) A: <u>Ummm</u>, <u>I don't, I don't</u>, I guess, <u>I don't really know</u> how I feel. I feel as though if it hadn't been done, then there could have been more, <u>uh</u>, fighting. [ . . . ] <u>So, sorry</u> I, it's so vague, or it's so roundabout.

The utterance above contains delays in the form of markers or announcers of dispreferred seconds ("um" and "uh"), the use of a qualifier ("I didn't know a lot"), and various forms of hesitation ("was, was" and "bomb, did do the bombing").

Levinson (1983) states that preferred seconds of an adjacency pair have less material than dispreferred seconds in much the same way as unmarkedness contrasts with markedness. Such dispreferred seconds have certain characteristics: delay, prefaces, accounts, and a declination component (*ibid*.: 334). In the utterances above, these characteristics are evident. Mr. A's utterance shows hesitant characteristics through his use of markers or announcers of dispreferred seconds ("ummm," "uh"), apologies ("sorry"), the use of a qualifier ("I don't really know"), and other forms of hesitation ("I don't, I don't").

Such hesitant characteristics in the utterances above seem to be caused by the participants' face-work, that is, identity negotiations. The utterances seem to be influenced by the "here-and-now" (micro) context and the socio-historical (macro) context (metapragmatically regimented). In the interview, the participants are conversing about World War II. During the war, the US detonated two atomic bombs over Japan, and when the war ended, Japan became the "defeated nation," while the US became the "victorious nation." Such contrastiveness between the two nations stands out in history, and the historical difference is contextualized by the situation of an interview with respect to this war. The socio-historical context contributes to the textualization of the interactants' utterances, so that the interviewer is indexed as Japanese and the interviewee is indexed as American. In the micro situation, the "Japanese" interviewer asking questions to the "American" interviewee concerning World War II creates an awkward situation. Japan and the US had engaged in hostilities at Pearl Harbor and at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The awkward situation that arose when individuals from these two nations conversed on the war metapragmatically caused (regimented) the hesitant utterances. The interviewer and the interviewee engaged themselves in face-work, based on surrounding contexts such as their status and roles or the perceived "heaviness" of a question about the atomic bombings. It seems that the interactants tend to utter hesitant words,

as illustrated above, because they are expected to perform such face-work and identity negotiations in order to maintain their faces during an interview.

This paper investigated how the "here-and-now" (micro) contexts and the socio-historical (macro) contexts of an interview are meta-pragmatically related to each other, focusing on the use of the deixis "we." Both contexts contribute to the interactants' identity negotia-tions in an interview, which includes face-work and identification with a nation-state. It is clear that one of the long-standing questions in social science — how micro and macro aspects of social phenomena are connected — is a metapragmatic issue in linguistic anthropologi-cal terms. Thus, while conducting an analysis of an interview, it is hereafter necessary to take into consideration such metapragmatic aspects of interaction.

## 5.　Conclusion

This paper began with an explanation of the concept of face-work and nationalism, including a discussion on the use of the national "we." Next, metapragmatics in linguistic anthropology was explained. Lastly, illustrative examples concerning the metapragmatic aspects and identity negotiations in interviews were introduced, focusing on lin-guistic forms such as delays, deixis, and contrastive pairs. Conse-quently, the paper clarified the following: how the "here-and-now" context and the socio-historical context of an interview metaprag-matically contribute to the interactants' identity negotiations including face-work and identification with a nation-state.

The analysis of an interview tends to be conducted only on a ref-erential dimension of communication; that is, through what is said. However, a social-indexical dimension is also necessary for the analy-sis of an interview as an interaction. The analysis of an interview without such a consideration would lack validity. Although an inter-view is a social interaction situated in certain contexts, much the same

as everyday conversation, it is also a particular type of interaction structured by the role of the interviewer and the norms of the interview that are different from other everyday encounters, which this article has attempted to shed light upon.

## Notes

1) An "interview" in this context ranges from formal to informal interviews depending on the research, such as open-ended interviews, semi-structured interviews, and structured interviews. Briggs (1986) does not deal with recent trends of interviewing such as the grounded theory approach or conversation analysis. However, my understanding is that these relatively new approaches would continue to struggle with the same methodological problems as the traditional approaches discussed by Briggs (*ibid.*).

2) The concept of "metacommunicative" practices here is similar to "meta-communication" in Bateson (1972) and the "metalingual" function of language in Jakobson (1960), which basically refer to "communication about communication." Silverstein (1993) elaborated these concepts into the more comprehensive notion of "metapragmatics." The relevant details are provided in Section 3.

3) Regarding the issue of what is meant by "American" or "Japanese" in this paper, the interviewee referred to in this paper was born in the US and had spent more than 20 years in that country during his upbringing; however, this paper does not support the notion that there are people with essentially "American" or "Japanese" characteristics. Rather, this paper attempts to explore how "Japaneseness" or "Americanness" is indexed in an interaction as "we"-ness came to be imagined in the process of modernization, as discussed in this paper and in that of Silverstein (2000).

4) Strong identification with a nation-state, as demonstrated in the interview with Mr. A, did not necessarily occur in all the interviews on World War II. Another interviewee, Mr. B expressed himself as follows:

B: I'm American, originally from New York City [ . . . ] But, I don't know that I'm a normal American. A lot of Americans have this attitude, "My country, right or wrong." And, my attitude is, "If it's wrong, I'm not gonna do it." [ . . . ] So, maybe I'm not a typical American in certain ways, while I'm typical of the certain group of

Americans, but not . . .

Although he refers to himself as being an American, he indicates that he is somewhat different from (typical) Americans. Thus, identity is indexed differently according to the interviewee or the contexts of the interaction.

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