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Siân Preece

‘Comes with the territory’

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‘Comes with the territory’
Expert–novice and insider–outsider identities in police interviews

Frances Rock

Introduction

It is a late summer afternoon. A woman in her early twenties is sitting in a quiet bar, talking to a male police officer. She smokes a cigarette, with her chair pushed back from the table. He holds a clipboard. As they talk, he writes on pages clipped to the clipboard, turning to a new sheet periodically. Sometimes they share a joke and sometimes both look serious. At one point they consider a map together. Later she demonstrates movements with her arms and upper body, acting out past events by way of explanation. Scenes like the one just described take place daily, as police officers, in gathering evidence, interview victims and witnesses of crime about what they have experienced. This is done through processes of speaking, listening, reading and writing which construct a written account, a ‘statement’, on the witness’s behalf. Try to picture the language of these encounters. You might imagine descriptions of crime scenes and actions which occurred there. Sure enough, during the interaction described above, the witness talked about an attack in her workplace, explaining who was involved and what happened.

However, we know that interactions in institutional, workplace and professional contexts, like police interviews, are also concerned with presenting, constructing and reconstructing identities, with showing who one is or wants to be and how one affiliates. Many previous studies have indicated that interactions that might be expected to be concerned purely with transacting tasks go well beyond that (e.g. Hobbs 2008; Angouri 2011; Charalambous 2013; Golden and Lanza 2013). In the interview described above, the witness introduced things that appeared completely unconnected to the crime (Rock 2016). For example, while the police officer was noting down the witness’s name and contact information, the witness suddenly said, ‘I come from a tiny village where nothing ever happens; I come to [city name] and this happens.’ Later, when the officer was reading over some text he had just written and beginning to write the next part of the witness’s account, the witness began to rub and move her shoulder and said, ‘I’ve been carrying an autistic child around all day and it’s caned my shoulder in [i.e. injured my shoulder].’ There was no need for the witness to tell the officer about her quiet, uneventful home town and the contrast it offers with the city where she now lives. Likewise the minor shoulder injury happened to be sustained on the day of interview, so subsequent to the crime.
Yet this witness often spoke like this, apparently off-topic, during extended silences. She seemed to want to tell the officer about herself. In doing so she was not simply relating ‘facts’ or filling what might have seemed like an awkward silence. The details she selected and their delivery cast her in a particular way. In the first example, she categorises herself as being from a small town where crime is rare (Sacks 1972). She highlights that she is not the kind of person usually tangled up in police investigations. In the second example, she refers back to earlier talk, which had introduced her volunteering at a playgroup for children with special needs. By flagging this activity, she presents herself as someone public-spirited and even willing to sustain minor injuries for her cause, highlighted through her gestures. In these two statements she presents herself as a novice interviewee and an outsider to policing and crime.

This example serves to illustrate the subject of this chapter: how witness identities are constructed. Through further data, this chapter will explore in more detail how witnesses say who they are during police interviews. It will consider how police officers respond and what witnesses might achieve through identity talk. It will show that the outsider or novice identity performed in the example illustrated above is not the only option for witnesses and that other witnesses take the opposite tack, constructing an identity of expert or insider. In doing so, the case study illustrates how witnesses blur conventional asymmetries of police interviews, in turn challenging assumptions about institutional interactions. It also shows how presentation of identities in legal settings happens one to one.

The study of language in settings construed as ‘workplace’, ‘professional’ or ‘institutional’, such as those in which police operate, give opportunities to undertake applied linguistics: ‘the theoretical and empirical investigation of real world problems in which language is a central issue’ (Brumfit 1995: 27). While disagreement remains on the nature of applied linguistics (see e.g. Rampton 1997; Widdowson 2000; McCarthy 2001) and the fit between ‘real world’, ‘problems’ and ‘theoretical and empirical investigation’, Candlin and Sarangi (2004: 2) propose ‘cutting through’ this ‘knot’ by renewing a focus not on what applied linguistics is, but what it does, how and why. Through this they recommend an applied linguistics which is reflexive about its principles and practices and which makes itself relevant to practitioners (see Rock 2007; Stokoe 2014). This chapter seeks to show how applied linguistics can be used to gain insights on identities in institutional settings. The police interview exemplifies such settings. It is part of a web of legal contexts where institutions connect with those they claim to serve and where, consequently, the presentation of one’s identity can have larger-than-usual consequences.

**Overview**

This chapter is influenced by a conception of identity which draws on interactional sociolinguistic, constructionist and, to some extent, poststructuralist thinking. The position taken here is that that we all inhabit a range of identities as we go about portraying who we are. We can display our inhabited identities in different ways and to different extents at different times of life, or times of day, in different interactions with different individuals, and in different social contexts (see Blommaert 2006). Identities do not just happen. Rather, they are made and remade in and through social interactions. Identity, or ‘making faces’ (Anazaldúa 1990: xvi), is then social, collaborative and constructed.

Research that examines language and identity in legal systems asks who we are, or are taken to be, when we confront the law and what consequences this has. Studies of interpreters in legal settings, for example, indicate their potential to recast the identities of those who they interpret for, making them seem more or less convinced or convincing (e.g.
Hale 2002; Nakane 2008). Many studies have shown that an individual’s ascribed identity can systematically lead to disadvantage in legal setting. This happens, for example, when those whose ethnicity is stigmatised receive negative treatment because of their ascribed ethnic identity (Giles et al. 2012), which can be exploited (e.g. Eades 2008; D’hondt 2009). Identity work in legal settings can meet wide-ranging interactional goals, as Stokoe and Edward’s (2007) and Stokoe’s (2009a, 2009b) concerted studies of ethnicity, categorisation and self-disclosure show. The courtroom has attracted considerable attention from identity scholars. That work has explored how identities can be constructed (Tracy 2009, 2011) and manipulated (e.g. Conley et al. 1978) and asked how the presentation of self can be constrained (e.g. Ehrlich 2008), misrepresented (e.g. Hobbs 2008) and misunderstood (e.g. Gumperz 1982: 175).

Two key characteristics are considered in many of these identity studies and are relevant to this chapter: first, the presence of an audience and, second, the existence of power relations. Considering audience first, many legal contexts examined in relation to identity are public: they involve addressees beyond the immediate interlocutor. These addressees may be physically present, as in the courtroom with its juries, public galleries and press areas, or present only through technology, as in the police–suspect interview where audio and video recordings can allow listeners to access the speech event across times and places. Accordingly, work on identity and law often focuses on how one participant manipulates the identity presentation of another in order to influence an audience. This brings us to the second major focus, power. Because of the presence and influence of audiences, power relations are enacted in legal settings, as interactants try to persuade audiences. Usually, an institutional actor has power over a lay person through their position in a hierarchy, their familiarity with the context’s conventions and their discursive dominance. The asymmetrical relationship allows the more powerful interactant to ascribe identities to the less powerful speaker, who is left to resist undesired ascribed identities more or less effectively. However, power relations are not always as we might expect in police interviews. Research shows how a police suspect can subvert predictable power structures by resisting police officers’ questions (Newbury and Johnson 2006) and challenging and undermining their position (Haworth 2006). Such drama and confrontation does not feature in the interviews I examine here which involve witnesses, rather than suspects, meaning that less is generally at stake. However, the matter of audience and thus interactional asymmetry remains a feature which the witnesses address through identity work.

The data excerpts at the beginning of this chapter indicated that identities flow in and through police interviews. In that instance, the witness presented herself as normally disconnected from the world of police and policing. This involved both being a novice, on the ‘periphery’ (Vickers 2010) of interviewing practice and expectations, but also having ‘outsider identity’ (Van De Mieroop 2007), not fitting into the legal world, its activities and its motivations. This is in D’hondt’s (2009: 807) terms ‘a kind of “otherness of the second order”’. It is not concerned directly with the first-order categories of the legal system, which classify activities as crimes, but rather with assumptions put into play by aspects of identity, but still potentially influential. In the interview we turn to in the following sections, the interviewee presents himself as an expert in being interviewed and an insider to crime and law. An expert is ‘someone who can access specific cultural or other knowledge domains and apply this knowledge in daily practice’ (Androutsopoulos 1997: 10). It is a useful notion when considering police interviews because it brings together the ‘multiple asymmetries of knowing’ which are ‘necessarily’ involved in interactions, with the idea that through interaction ‘participants display … the relevance of
the differing amounts or kinds of their knowing as well as their assumptions concerning the
knowledge of other participants’ (Jacoby and Gonzales 1991: 152). So expertise is a construct,
an ‘achieved identity’ (ibid.: 174), which can be brought to bear by one speaker and ratified,
or not, by their interlocutor. An insider will ‘blend in’, while an outsider will ‘keep a distance’
(Sarangi and Candlin 2003: 278). These are likewise not discrete and exclusive positions. As
Hult (2014: 63) reminds us, an individual can be both simultaneously activating either identity
through symbolic competence.

Methodology

The work presented here is part of a suite of studies on language and policing (e.g. Rock 2007,
2013, 2016). All are grounded in discourse analysis and linguistic ethnography. Each study
focuses on a particular policing activity such as explaining suspects’ rights, handling police com-
plaints and answering telephone calls for police assistance. Each collects naturally occurring data
along with as many additional forms of data as possible, such as:

- Photographs of research sites and the people in them;
- Written documents that underpin policing processes, such as scripts that the police recite
  and leaflets which they distribute;
- Interviews with participants;
- Fieldnotes and research diaries capturing impressions from the field.

The approach to these diverse forms of data has been to consider them in tandem so that
each data source can inform examination of the others. The analytic process involves repeat-
edly visiting and revisiting the data and bringing them into dialogue with theoretical concepts
and perspectives. Sometimes the analysis will zoom in to a particular turn; sometimes it will
identify patterns across exchanges. Sometimes connections will emerge between interviews,
photographs and naturally occurring talk. This methodological framework views language as a
resource for meaning-making. It sees this resource necessarily combining with other semiotic
resources, practices and artefacts (see Domingo, this volume). This view highlights that when
people communicate together they do something complex and ‘multi’. For example, their
communication has multiple functions, meanings and significances simultaneously. In order to
analyse communication, we must not only recognise but also interrogate this multiplicity. The
type of discourse analysis used in linguistic ethnography provides for this by allowing a close
focus on one thing at a time in order to consider its full significance. This is achieved by ask-
ing not only how that thing (a discourse feature or linguistic strategy, for example) looks and
sounds on the talk’s surface, but also how it interweaves across interactions, operates in a textual
and intertextual environment, fits with activities and actions which accompany talk, becomes
part of wider structures and how participants orient to it (see e.g. Gumperz 1982; Ivanič 1998;
Pérez-Milans, this volume).

I began studying witness interviews because I was interested in how texts ‘travel’ through
them (Rock 2001, 2013). This is a productive topic in its own right, as it enables us to find out
more about how people work, alone and together, to transform language, for example from the
spoken to written mode (Rock 2007). However, it is also productive from the perspective of
applied linguistics because the process of transforming texts is one which can influence events
and outcomes in the social world. As Candlin and Sarangi urge (2004: 2), we can usefully ask of
textual transformation not just what it is, but also what it does. The flow of identities alongside
Comes with the territory'

other textual flows is the focus of the case study in this chapter. The notion of identities makes it possible to see interpersonal aspects of interviews from different perspectives. In particular, the following sections present data that explore the identity performances that occurred when participants’ talk was ostensibly superfluous to the main task of telling and recording a story about a crime – informal asides, for example.

The data are from a set of 25 interviews between police officers and witnesses to crimes from murder to minor vandalism in England and Wales. I audio-recorded the interviews, as witness interviews are not routinely audio-recorded in this jurisdiction. I also attended the interviews, so had opportunities to observe gestures, facial expressions and bodily orientations (Matoesian 2012; Martin et al. 2013) as well as the writing practices of the police officers who were tasked with producing a written version of the witness’s words, a ‘statement’ to represent the witness in later legal processes. The police officers allowed me to ‘go along’ (Kusenbach 2003) with them as they went about their work, which permitted conversations about their interviewing practices in general and about things which happened in particular interviews. Thus the research design gave access to police officers who did interviewing, rather than to specific interviews where police officers were, analytically, incidental.

The two interviews presented here neatly exemplify the type of witness identities that arose in the data set.

The data

The interviewer in the data below is an experienced ex-police officer. He is in his late fifties and had been an officer for 30 years. He very recently retired from the police and now interviews part-time and on a freelance basis. The interviewee is an experienced staff nurse (an entry-level nurse) in his early forties who works shifts. The nurse is giving a witness statement after being attacked in the Accident and Emergency Department of a large hospital in an English city (abbreviated to ‘A and E’ by the participants) where he works. Accident and Emergency Departments, as the name suggests, handle unexpected medical incidents. Screaming ambulance sirens and blue lights are a trope of A and E. The often fast-paced work is demanding for staff, who cannot easily predict or prepare for what will happen during their shift. Cases can be life-or-death, but at the other extreme some patients are ‘time-wasters’ or ‘worriers’. Emotions can run high in A and E, with patients and their companions often behaving unexpectedly. In many respects, then, the work of the A and E staff nurse can be seen as akin to the work of a police officer, being public-facing, high-stakes and unpredictable, with a need to distinguish trivial from serious incidents. This connection between working lives becomes important to the way that the witness involves himself in the interview. The interview takes place in a hospital staff-room, which periodically becomes busy.

The incident under investigation was an attempted assault on the nurse by the male partner of a female patient. They had come to hospital with their child one evening. The nurse had suggested that while the patient was being treated, the partner and child should go home to ‘get some rest’ and return to hospital the following day. Despite leaving as requested, they unexpectedly reappeared in the early hours of the morning. It transpired that the female patient’s child and male partner had apparently been travelling around the local area in a taxi, during which time the patient’s partner had been trying to obtain drugs. The nurse was concerned about this turn of events and decided to contact Social Services (the UK welfare service) to try to have the child removed from this man’s care. When the nurse told the man this, there was an altercation and the man attempted to hit the nurse. Nearby police officers restrained the
man. The incident, then, is one in which the nurse’s identity as an institutional actor who works in concert with social agencies and police is foregrounded.

All the names in the data are pseudonyms: the witness is named Will as a memory aid for the reader, as ‘witness’ and ‘Will’ share a first letter. The interviewer is retired and thus not strictly a civilian. However, I refer to him as ‘the police officer’ because this is how the reader is likely to understand someone in this role and, crucially, because the nurse oriented to him as a police representative. He also fulfilled his task in a way typical of an officer. He is referred to as Ollie in the following data extracts. All other places and participants are anonymised.

The first set of extracts (1a–c) occurred at the beginning of the interview. The interviewer, Ollie, had been explaining to Will about what will happen during the interview. He then remarks that they are ‘doing well’, shifting footing (Goffman 1979) from preliminary talk to getting the interview underway.

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**Extract 1a ‘Not the first time’**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ollie (Officer)</th>
<th>Will (Witness)</th>
<th>Ollie</th>
<th>Will</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>oh we’re doing well</td>
<td>((Inaudible: three syllables))</td>
<td>lovely</td>
<td>this is not the first time (.) I’m sure it’s probably not going to be the last time uh hhhhh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In lines 4–5, the witness, Will, responded to the officer’s changed footing by noting his prior experience in giving witness statements about work. The expression ‘not the first time’ implies that the event described ‘should not be taken as an individual incident’ nor ‘a rare happening’ (Bilal et al. 2012: 71). ‘I’m sure it’s not going to be the last’ intensifies and enables him to present himself as aware of, and, possibly, resigned to, future workplace risks. These phrases may serve to poke fun at the darker side of his work, which calls to mind Dyer and Keller-Cohen’s (2000: 298) observation that self-mockery democratises. These idiomatic phrases, in combination with his exaggerated, melodramatic sigh at the turn’s end, suggest that he intends to convey something more than simply the ‘fact’ that he has been interviewed before. That ‘something more’ concerns identity. The verb ‘identify’ and nominalisation ‘identification’ flag that these are processes through which, as Ivanič (1998: 11) puts it, ‘individuals align themselves with groups, communities and/or sets of interests, values, beliefs and practices’. Will’s turn enabled him to present himself as having seen it all before. We might infer that he is someone resigned to unpleasant events (values); that he sees these as typifying his work (beliefs); and perhaps that he takes them in his stride (practices). He also hinted, through these expressions and the sigh, at his alignment with particular interests. He identifies as an expert interviewee – an insider to this task and its requirements. He aligns himself with the officer, as someone else experiencing interviews for neither the first nor the last time. This is in contrast to the witness at the beginning of this chapter, who specifically identified herself as not accustomed to similar interests, values, beliefs and practices. Will later reiterated his position when explaining to a colleague that he would be late starting his shift because he was ‘doing a police statement’. After a hearty laugh, he declared that this ‘comes with the territory really’. Although this formulaic expression connotes resignation to one’s fate (see Paikeday 1992), the witness used it with a certain pride.

Returning to the interview opening, Extract 1b follows directly from 1a and shows how the conversation developed:
Throughout lines 6–26 the officer appeared to lead the witness, telling him what he expects the statement to contain by reading from a written summary devised from evidence to date. He did prospect an opportunity, later in the interview, for the witness to discuss ‘anything else’ (line 28), but concluded that this will need to be brief as he was worried about his car being clamped (lines 31–32).

Police officers are trained to encourage witnesses to tell their own stories with minimal interruption (College of Policing 2014). Ollie seems to fail in this. If we examined this extract in isolation, we might identify power as a factor here. We might assume that the officer’s talk is designed to steer, constrain or even silence Will. However, by considering the witness’s prior turn (Extract 1a), in combination with a focus on identity, we can see that there may be something else going on. Interviewers are given written summaries of crimes but they make their own decisions about whether to mention these summaries to witnesses. In my data, officers variously read them aloud, paraphrased, ignored or emphatically dismissed them. The data suggest that these practices were motivated and situated choices. In this instance, Ollie opted to present a detailed paraphrase. He itemised topics for discussion (lines 6–10) and then clarified what information was required (lines 12–23). While this could be taken to disempower the witness, suggesting that his contribution is perfunctory, it can alternatively be heard as acknowledging the witness as an insider.
who knows that statements require certain elements and might be expected to take the summary as a reminder or briefing on these elements. From this perspective, ‘all we need to know’ (line 12), which introduces the reformulation, casts the interview as routine and straightforward. The officer’s repeated use of the terminology ‘public order offence’ in lines 11 and 23–24 contributes to the impression that he is, right from this early stage in the interview, orienting to the witness as an expert, someone who will likely recognise specialist terms. Terminology is central to legal language. It is a hallmark of legal identity, a specialised register through which speakers foreground knowledge (Van De Mieroop 2007: 1126) and an ‘in-group language’ (Gibbons 2003: 39). Its use here draws the two men together. Ollie’s summary was prefaced with ‘so’ (line 6). Here, ‘so’ raises the possibility that his summary follows from the witness’s expert identity (see Johnson 2002) and thus that Ollie recognised and validated this. Will appeared receptive to being cast as someone who understood the task at hand. Throughout Ollie’s summary, he provided minimal feedback (lines 6–20 and 24–25). He also leaned forward attentively and nodded frequently. He appears to receive Ollie’s summary as informative orientation, not restrictive scripting, and in doing so, he reinforces his position as a professional and expert.

Turning to Ollie’s stated intention to ‘get it down and- get it done … and get out to my car before I get it clamped’ (lines 31–32), the lens of identity reveals more about the officer’s orientation to Will’s insider identity. By confessing that he must hurry, the officer implied that he trusted Will to understand the pressures of a hectic job and to understand that he recounted this in good faith. Ollie, a police officer, and Will, a nurse, are both public servants who encounter situations at work that are experienced by few other workers. Both operate in contexts of rules and responsibilities relating to how and why they can interact with members of the public. Both work long, irregular hours in extreme situations, in which one mistake could end their career – or indeed someone’s life. While each profession has a distinctive identity (see Candlin and Candlin 2007; Rock 2007), we can see Will’s reference to his parking predicament as an opportunity to align their professional worlds, in which both experience haste and compliance. Throughout the interview, these positions developed.

Extract 1c follows soon after 1b. In it, Ollie and Will move into perhaps more generic and familiar identity work, in the form of small talk, ‘supposedly minor, informal, unimportant and non-serious modes of talk’, in this instance ‘time-out talk’ (Coupland 2000: 2). They discuss what the officer calls ‘the tragedy in India’, referring to a severe accident which caused deaths and injuries and had received extensive news coverage.

**Extract 1c ‘That tragedy in India’**

63 Ollie (Officer) ‘bout that tragedy in India ‘ve you seen it // on this //
64 Will (Witness)  //ooh I n-//
65 Ollie good God hhhh
66 Ollie know
67 Will we’d never cope so how the hell they’re coping God knows
68 only knows
69 Ollie I don’t think- I don’t think they are going to cope to be
70 // honest //
71 Will //no they// won’t sure //they won’t//
72 Ollie // and // I’m sure half the people that are (. ) seriously injured are // going to die//
73 Will //they’re going// to
74 Ollie //they’re not going to make it

420
In this extract, we see Ollie and Will presenting themselves as amiable people taking an interest in world events. Ollie selected a topic of professional interest to his medic interlocutor, a developing healthcare emergency. However, this is also an example of two emergency workers sharing their professional perspectives on a situation in which they both have workplace expertise. De Fina et al. (2006: 4) and Gumperz (1982: 185) have commented on the significance of pronouns to the construction of identity, and the use of ‘we’ in Will’s observation in line 67 that ‘we’d never cope’ illustrates connection. Here, ‘we’ could denote Will’s workplace affiliation, the medical profession. Alternatively, ‘we’ might take in emergency response personnel, in which case he includes the officer. Whether this is an exclusive or inclusive use of ‘we’, he is addressing the officer as an equal and insider.

At one point in the interview, Will became so entrenched in his expert, insider identity that he began to do the officer’s job for him. In Extract 2, he had been interrupted from his interview by a colleague passing through the busy staffroom where the interview happened. Will tried to discover, from her, whether she was in the hospital at the time of the attack.

Extract 2 ‘We lost the track’

1 Will (Witness) just a sec were you here last Wednesday Carol
2 Carol (Colleague) what day is it @@
3 Will did you do a night last Wednesday
4 Carol I did nights (.) what did I do (.) I did- no Friday Saturday
5 Sunday
6 Will right fine in which case doesn’t matter trying to work out
7 ((Inaudible: four syllables)) at the minute
8 Will and Carol [further discussion of which nursing staff were on duty on the night of the crime. Ollie writes quietly]
9
10 Will right so we lost the track a bit there

In Extract 2, Will attempted to open up investigative lines for the officer by identifying new witnesses. At the close of the extract, he displayed his identity as an expert statement-giver once more through a structural move that shifted footing, ‘right so we lost the track a bit there’, marking the end of his conversation with Carol and his transition back into the interview (line 10). Such shifts in footing are common from police officers, as we saw in Extract 1a. Will’s accomplishment of this, and his use of the pronoun ‘we’, discussed above, is very reminiscent of the officer’s talk.

So far we have seen Will, the witness, foreground his expert, insider identity and the officer, Ollie, orienting to him as insider and professional equal. At the close of the interview in Extract 3, Will’s insider identity was reinforced by Ollie’s nostalgic narrative.

Extract 3 ‘On more than one occasion’

1 Ollie (Officer) I’ve been in the police for thirty years (.) [W: uuhm] (.)
2 on the t- (.) mmp (.) eighteen of those years on the traffic
3 department and uh although I came here (.) with some of
4 the (.) enquiries we had (.) I think the m- majority of my
5 work covered Hospital A and Hospital B being (.) in
6 Cityside [W: yeh] but I got brought in here and was
7 treated very well on more than one occasion @ when I
8 was assaulted @@@@ (.) the wife was saying
9 [imitating wife] ‘where are you taking him this time’
While this was an amalgam of recollections, it recalls Holmes’s (2006) label, workplace anecdotes. These provide a means of not only doing professional and personal identity but also constructing ‘professional identities of others as good or poor’ (Holmes 2006: 186). We see these processes as Ollie connected his identity to Will’s. Ollie flagged his status as a long-serving police officer (line 1) just as Will is a long-serving nurse. He noted that he has visited Will’s workplace multiple times during his service (lines 3–4 and 6), a point of connection, if not similarity, with Will. He noted in most detail however that, like Will, he has been a victim of assault during his career (lines 6–8, from his own perspective, and lines 8–9, from his wife’s). Just as Will’s experience of workplace violence was ‘not the first time’ and ‘comes with the territory’, Ollie also experienced violence on ‘more than one occasion’. This tying together of their identities as people who encounter danger at work, and do so routinely, initiated in Extract 1b at the beginning of the interview and concluded here, at the interview’s close, is integral to getting the work done.

Discussion

This chapter opened with an extract from a witness interview in which the witness foregrounded her outsider identity, as someone distant from law and crime and not at all expert in statement-giving. In contrast, the data presented in the previous section illustrate an alternative witness identity. In the extracts, we saw how Will, the witness, constructed an identity as an expert interviewee, a professional insider, resigned to experiencing and recounting crime. He appeared to relish this identity and used several devices to support it. These included:

- Lexical choices (pronouns which potentially included Ollie in Will’s in-group);
- Phrasal selections (using idiomatic expressions such as ‘comes with the territory’ for implicature, intensification and self-mockery);
- Practices (recruiting other witnesses);
- Discursive activities (responding to and initiating shifts in footing, such as ‘lost the track’);
- Interactional moves (minimal feedback during expert talk) and physical paralanguage (leaning forward and nodding).

Additionally, the data showed that his identity is not something that he developed single-handedly. Instead the interviewer, Ollie, contributed, co-constructing it (Page 2013). This was done in a number of ways, including:

- Prospection (introducing interview content);
- Topic control (introducing discussion of a medical emergency);
- Changes in footing (when moving between phases of interview);
- Using the discourse marker so (taking up Will’s themes);
- Lexically (using specialist legal terminology such as offence names).

We might ask whether these self-presentations are anything more than chance, in that witnesses cannot present identities that they cannot support. As Ivanič (1998: 10) cautions, while there is a sense of ‘multiplicity, hybridity and fluidity’ conveyed by plurals like ‘subjectivities’ and ‘positionings’, ‘people are not free to take on any identity they choose’. Yet these witnesses did not have to foreground these aspects of themselves but rather chose to do so. I noted at the beginning of this chapter that interactants often work on identity in dramatic ways in legal
settings because of the audience. Here, there is no extended audience, so the identities are only constructed between those present. Nonetheless, identity work is crucial here.

Expert-insider and novice-outsider interview identities are not confined to these interviews. Across the data set the expert-insider identity is co-constructed in multiple interviews with public-facing workers including bar staff, public house managers, security guards and also other police officers. Presenting as an expert could be seen as a risky strategy. By doing it, the witness claims to understand the task at hand and sanctions the officer to take knowledge of processes and norms for granted. This has practical advantages, making interviews more speedy and focused, but also offers interpersonal advantages. By acknowledging a witness as an insider, as able to share back-stage humour about public-facing jobs and with common concerns, social distance can be decreased and affiliation achieved. This raises the question of why witnesses would take up the opposite positioning, inhabiting the identity of a naive outsider. Yet this position certainly offers interpersonal advantage. The novice witness is not subject to high expectations. They have ousted themselves as likely to need help and thereby invited the officer’s interventions. Interpersonally, the witness appeals to the officer’s own experiences of being an outsider. Even as they create social distance by differentiating themselves, they also minimise that distance by alluding to the recognisable experience of being outside. Foregrounding a novice identity also appeals to the notion of the innocent bystander, which enables a novice witness to present him/herself as having observed criminal events ‘in passing’ (Zimmerman 1992) and as an ordinary person (Sacks 1972: 215). The novice-outsider identity was predominantly taken up by women in the wider data set. However, a much larger data set would be needed to establish whether this was a gendered practice.

Where the novice-outsider witness might appear to be a ‘good witness’ because they bring a fresh view of a crime, untainted by prior experiences, the expert-insider witness brings their expertise – their ability to appraise an incident dispassionately because they have ‘seen it all before’. In the ‘Overview of theoretical perspectives’ section of this chapter, I noted that identity had often been studied in those legal settings which were extremely public. Identities of courtroom participants, for example, are paraded for all to see. In contrast, in witness interviews, identities of interviewees and even interviewers are salient interpersonally (they are about the relationship between the speakers) yet with institutional implications (they can influence the way that the task gets done).

**Issues for applied linguistics**

The case study presented in this chapter raises a number of issues for applied linguistics. Application of linguistic knowledge to legal settings is an obvious and important form of applied linguistic work. It is obvious because language is so fundamental to all aspects of the operation of law, and important because of the potential value of linguistic work to the just operation of legal processes through measures such as training for practitioners and campaigning about legal issues. Another important issue for applied linguistics is that, in police interviews with witnesses, language and communication accomplish what is intended to be a process of transmission from the witness to the legal system. The linguist is well equipped to comment on the impoverished nature of the metaphor of transmission to such a process and to note ways in which the processes around speech and writing function. Their challenge is, recalling Candlin and Sarangi (2004), to share insights with practitioners in order to contribute not only to what applied linguistics is, but also what it does.
Summary

This chapter sees identity as fluid and negotiable. It explores what this means in a specific social context – that of the police interview with a witness to a crime. Police interviews with witnesses ask those who have seen crimes to recount their experience in order that evidence can be gathered for criminal investigation. While a witness interview, with this purpose, might appear to be an encounter in which the task will be the focus, the chapter shows that the presentation of identity also features. Talk from two witness interviews is examined. In one, the witness presents herself as a novice interviewee who is naive to the experience of crime and an outsider to the activity of being interviewed by a police officer. In the other, the witness presents himself as experienced in being exposed to violent crime, an expert interviewee and someone who is an insider to the world of policing and intense public service. The chapter examines how witnesses construct expert–novice or insider–outsider identities and why they might do so. It suggests that the foregrounding of these identities has interactional functions such as lowering expectations and showing alignment, but also that these identities help with getting the task done in showing whether help is needed or things can be taken for granted.

Related topics

Ethnomethodological and conversation analytic approaches to identity; Language and identity in linguistic ethnography; Ethics in language and identity research; Challenges for language and identity researchers in the collection and transcription of spoken interaction; Being a language teacher in the content classroom: teacher identity and content and language integrated learning (CLIL); The future of identity research: impact and new developments in sociolinguistics.

Further reading

Kjelsvik, B. (2014). “‘Winning a battle, but losing the war’: contested identities, narratives, and interaction in asylum interviews’, Text and Talk, 34(1): 89–115. (This journal article examines interviews with asylum seekers which aim to assess their claims to asylum. It suggests that these interviews progress differently depending on how interviewees are framed.)


Note

1 The most recent statistics for England and Wales reveal around 6.9 million incidents of crime against households and adults (aged over 15) annually (Office of National Statistics 2015).
References


Frances Rock


### Appendix

**Transcription conventions**

@@@ Laughter (each @ indicates 1 second’s duration)

@funny Enclosed words said while laughing

= Latching on

((something)) Unclear speech (the ‘best guess’ at what was said is included; if applicable, otherwise the number of inaudible syllables is noted or approximated)

//speech// Overlapping talk

[coughs] ‘Stage directions’ and other extra-linguistic features

[W: yep] Minimal feedback within extended turns

(.) A pause of one second or less

(3.4) A pause of the duration indicated inside the brackets in seconds

hhhhh Outbreath