

A COST OF RELEVANCE PREFERENCES DURING POST-PROTOTYPE DEPLOYMENT INTERVIEWS

JANET MC DONNELL

Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design,
University of the Arts, London
j.mcdonnell@csm.arts.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This work examines the interaction between a researcher-interviewer and a homeowner at the end of a short provotype deployment at the family home. Particular attention is paid to a period in the interview when the interviewee's contributions temporarily diverge from the interviewer's plan. An interpretation of the incident is offered which accounts for what takes place as an urge towards relevance operating at the narrative level – i.e. making sense of a sequence of interview activities - and at the social interaction level explained in terms of local conversational topic relevance.

INTRODUCTION

This contribution to the *Making Design and Analyzing Interaction* track looks at part of a video recording of a semi-structured interview between a researcher and a homeowner at the end of the (9 day) deployment of a provotype in his family home. The interview is part of a study facilitated by SPIRE which brings together a number of stakeholders in the *Indoor Climate and Quality of Life Project*. During the interview a series of activities, supported by various materials, encourages the homeowner to talk about the provotype itself, the experience of having it in the home, and matters related to the project's general aims. In examining an interview such as this we might say that a line of questioning, and any materials to support elicitation are 'successful' when the researcher-interviewer 'gets back' from the interviewee the information s/he is seeking. If we

accept this as a criterion of utility then we see in the video recording a mixed outcome from the interview.

This paper pays particular attention to one part of the interview where, despite the researcher's question and the supporting materials he proffers, the homeowner addresses a different issue from the one raised by the interviewer. The paper suggests a possible way of accounting for this situation, drawing inspiration from a prior study by Matthews concerning the intersection of the rules of engagement for a particular type of interaction (brainstorming) with the rules governing social order. Matthew's insights are outlined below following presentation of the interview data and the approach to analysis of it. This is followed by a discussion of what might account for the route the interview conversation takes as it temporarily deviates from the researcher's intentions. The paper concludes with

some comments on implications for the planning of interviews which comprise a series of conversational activities supported by a collection of (different) materials to prompt elicitation.

MOTIVATION, DATA AND METHOD

The motivation for this study is to contribute to the aims of the conference track, namely to inspect some aspect of *tangible activities* of making 'to investigate whether some of these activities serve particularly well in certain contexts or at certain stages of the process'. Tangible activities of making are defined by the track organizers to include prototyping, provotyping, and generative toolkits, amongst others. However the data available for this study, although its context is the deployment of a provotype, concerns particularly the activities and materials combined together in an interview setting to elicit information from a participant at the end of a provotype deployment. For the purposes of this study, therefore, tangible activities are considered to include the materials-supported interactions that together comprise the end-of-deployment interview. The recorded part of the interview provided for analysis covered the activities shown in italics in the interview structure description provided in figure 1. This comprised a 45 minute extract from the 75 minute interview. The complete description of the

interview in figure 1 is taken directly from material supplied by the maker to the analyst to assist understanding the interviewer's plan, the interview structure, and the wider context of the project within which the provotype deployment played a part. The provotype consists of a lamp (referred to in figures 1 and 2), and a set of five detectors, each sensitive to different environmental parameters, e.g. CO₂, light and sound levels. These detectors are wireless, independent units that can be placed around the home, each one influences the illumination behaviour of the lamp in some way, e.g. colour, size and orientation of the light emitted. The homeowner has not been told what the detectors sense, nor anything about their separate influences on the lamp (see paragraph 3 in figure 1).

The organization of the semi-structured interview as described by the 'maker'

Firstly, a "diary" of the positioning of the lamp and boxes was made: we brought a pre-made map of the house with us, and placed stickers on the places where and when the lamp and the boxes were located throughout the week.

Secondly, we made a blank timeline of the week, and reflected on the behavior of the lamp throughout the week. When did which light occur, what was going on at that moment? After a period of time we added the outdoor climate throughout that week to the timeline, and discussed if relations could be discovered. *Hereafter we provided stickers of different moods, and asked if he could relate them to his moods throughout the week; and to the behavior of the light at that moment.

Thirdly, we discussed how the sensor boxes were connected to the behavior of the lamp. After discussing his guesses, we revealed the coupling of the different sensors that were used, and how they related to the behavior of the lamp.

Fourthly, we tried to bridge from reflections on the lamp to reflections on the indoor climate. Could he reflect on his understanding of indoor climate "through" the lamp? Were there discrepancies in his experience of indoor climate and the status of the lamp?

Fifthly, we tried to envision what an "ideal" indoor climate provotype would be like, in order to find out what he believes is of value within the indoor climate context.

Figure 1 Account of the interview activities, materials and themes for questioning.

In situations such as the set up (maker-analyst pairings) for this themed track, data and orientation towards it precedes choice of method and data analysis. This is becoming increasingly less unusual given the rapid recent growth in enthusiasm in design research for analyzing common datasets and other similar arrangements which attempt to make comparative analysis a possibility (e.g. DTRS7 (McDonnell and Lloyd 2009) and the NSF workshop on studying software design practices (NSF 2010) are two recent examples

in which the author has participated). Here, as in the cases of distributing a common dataset, the analyst is presented with the data first and is invited to construct an interpretation of it in relation to some theme(s), rather than commencing with (say) a research question and addressing it by subsequent gathering of data. Thus, the approach to this study was as follows. The author-analyst initially viewed the video recording repeatedly, bearing in mind the track theme. This led to the identification of an incident during the interview where the interviewee's contribution began to diverge from the interviewer-maker's plan for the conversation. A more detailed study of the conversational interaction around this point in the interview ensued. This was supported by some transcription, including that shown in figure 2, which will be referred to in the interpretation below. The incident (the point where the transcription in figure 2 occurs) takes place at the stage of the interview marked with an asterisk in figure 1.

INTERSECTIONS OF 'RULES'

In a recent study Matthews examined the conversations during brainstorming meetings taking place in the early stages of a design project (Matthews 2009). He paid close attention to how the 'rules' of social interaction intersected with the rules of brainstorming which have been devised specifically to support effective generation of new ideas. His analysis focuses particularly on three aspects of how social order is regulated which might interfere¹ with the rules of brainstorming, namely the ways in which, in verbal interaction, relevance/topic shift, interruption/turn-taking, and criticism are handled. It is not possible, or appropriate, to summarise the study's findings here. But in the discussion, Matthews draws attention to the fact that although there are many different forms of interaction - brainstorming sessions and interviews being two - to be recognized by participants as meaningful interaction of any kind, all such forms of interaction rest on shared practices which regulate social order. As Matthews writes, 'there are no time-outs from social order', however this does not imply necessarily that the rules of social order are deterministic (op.cit.

p.46). In the account of the interview material below, parallels are drawn (for the form of interaction: semi-structured interview) with these observations from Matthews (given in the context of his study of brainstorming): 'orientations to the rules of social order are not suspended on account of the rules of brainstorming ... the rules of brainstorming do have an effect on the proceedings, though it may be a milder effect - and one severely modulated on account of social order - than is typically assumed.' (op.cit. p.46).

What is presented below is an interpretation of the selected incident which looks at the compulsion to relevance at two levels to see how persisting with relevance might account for interference with the interviewer's objectives. In particular, the interpretation proposes to account for the interviewer's response to the interviewee's deviation from what the interviewer wishes to discuss (local topic relevance) and also, operating at a different level of granularity (narrative relevance) to account for the interviewee's (mis) orientation.

INTERPRETATION OF THE INCIDENT

NARRATIVE RELEVANCE

Looking at the description in figure 1 we see the first activity in the interview is about describing (the position of) the lamp. The second is about describing (the behaviour of) the lamp throughout the week, the next is about describing (the behaviour of) the lamp in relation to the weather during the 9 days the lamp was in the home. All goes well until this point. The intention after this point is to shift attention from the householder recalling what the lamp was doing or where it was to what he, and his family were doing, specifically what their moods were during the week, the subject of the recollection task thus shifts from the lamp to the home-dwellers. This is the shift that the interviewee does not make successfully (i.e. interviewer's plan and interviewee's contribution are no longer aligned). What may be happening here is that the interviewee is making (his own) sense of the series of tasks he is asked to undertake - constructing a narrative for himself in the absence of being 'handed' a narrative into which to fit the sequence of activities by the

interviewer. He has to do this dynamically as the interview session proceeds and thus may be making use of local relevance (of next to previous task) as a sense-making strategy. If relevance is operating here it is not of-course at the same level of granularity as that interrogated by Matthews in the work referred to above, it is relevance as a story. We now look at topic relevance at conversational topic level.

LOCAL TOPIC RELEVANCE

The transcript in figure 2 starts at the beginning of the divergence incident. The interviewer, L, at turns 1.2 and 1.4 tells the homeowner, F, about the stick-

ers of different moods he has placed on the table whilst F was absent from the room for a few moments. In turn 1.6 he makes the moods the subject and asks whether the moods relate to the lamp, 'when you think of these + moods ++ does some relate to the lamp'. F starts the activity before L has finished his turn and does apparently respond (turn 1.7) with mood/activity (as described by L in turn 1.4) related to the lamp, '+ we are doing a lot of things and I think it also reacted onto the +', the pause allows L to take a turn (turn 1.8) interrupting F's turn but not his speaking. However once F has placed the label

on the timeline (turn 1.9) it becomes clear that he is actually using the mood labels to describe the mood induced by the behaviour of the lamp and not the behaviour of the lamp as a possible response to mood. So that by F's turn at 1.17, '+ it was very relaxed and calming in the evening' it is clear that the 'it' is the lamp, and the homeowner and his wife (turn 1.19) are the ones becoming calmed.

How does the divergence come about? It may be that the interviewer has failed to signal strongly enough that he is invoking one of the 'rules' of the interview format for interaction – namely that the interviewer will change topic from time to time disrupting/overruling the topic relevance rule of conversation. Interestingly, the interviewer shows reluctance to override topic relevance himself in the exchange which follows the point at which it is clear that F is using the mood stickers to describe his mood in response to the lamp's behaviour. Instead of correcting F, L follows the topic relevance rule himself joining in with F's (incorrect) interpretation of the task (conversation topic) by offering a suggestion as to what mood the lamp might have invoked in the homeowners (at turn 2.1) with, 'like for example the opposite would be annoyed'. From the transcript we can only see that L continues on F's topic we cannot infer his motives or know whether at that moment he is aware of the divergence. It may be he does this consciously – as a politeness - or he may be doing it unconsciously as he exercises his conversation skills (for maintaining social order). However L does appear to be aware that F has gone off plan shortly afterwards, as L does try to return to his planned agenda once (about two minutes after the extract in figure 2) but the moment has passed for collecting this material and after two more minutes it is time to move on to the next activity (paragraph 3 in figure 1).

DISCUSSION

ASSESSING THE INTERPRETATION

The interpretation given above proposes that our essential need to make sense of experiences to the point of creating a coherent narrative when one is not explicitly communicated to us (narrative-level relevance making) and

1.1		[F returns from an interruption and L briefly summarises what they had just finished doing when F left the room. While F was absent the mood words have been placed on the table beside the timeline of the week. F is looking at the mood words]
1.2	L	yeah we made these small yeah just + things we thought that could have the situation be like
1.3	F	er [gaze still towards mood words]
1.4	L	like energetic for example when the children were playing or + er maybe someone was sneezing or it was busy
1.5	F	uhuh [gaze still towards mood words]
1.6	L	or it was + a bit relaxed in the evening and + when you think of these + moods ++ does some relate to the lamp or situations relate /to the lamp\
1.7	F	/I would say that experimenting \ was the first two days it was + we are doing a lot of things and I think it also reacted onto the ++
1.8	L	ok so you /saw\
1.9	F	/how it\ how it changed a lot over /\here\ [places a mood label on the timeline]
1.10	L	/yeah\
1.11	F	how it changed a lot it goes maybe it should be like this [starts to unstick the mood label to place it further along the timeline of the week]
1.12	L	oh it doesn't work oh I don't think you can get it off + or does it work
1.13	F	[peels off label]
1.14	L	oh it does
1.15	F	that's nice + the first two or three days it was like that +
1.16	L	uhuh
1.17	F	again in general I think it was + I would think it was er what did I see ++ [looks at the collection of mood stickers] it was + that it was very relaxed and calming in the evening the first two or three days I would say it was like that if you had six or seven of these [referring to the label he has just placed and gesturing over each of the days on the timeline of the week] I would say
1.18	L	[laughs with other researchers]
1.19	F	and my wife also because she was really sceptical ... [continues]
		[L now goes along with this interpretation of the task – as to be to identify the mood induced by the lamp not the reflection of moods in the lamp – which was L's intention]
2.1	L	like for example the opposite would be annoyed
2.2	F	yeah
2.3	L	would that have been in the beginning or
2.4	F	no I it I would not say annoyed it was curious ... [continues]

Figure 2: Two transcript extracts: total duration (1.1 - 2.4) approx. 90 seconds.

the topic relevance 'rule' which operates as part of the set of rules governing social interaction are one way of accounting for the divergence, and failure to realign interviewer's plan with interviewee's contribution in the data studied. There are other plausible possibilities. For example, it may be that the cues from the interviewer (turns 1.2, 1.4, and 1.6 in figure 2) do their job effectively but are confounded by some mismatch with the prior uses of the materials being used in the session. At the time of the incident the timeline described in paragraph 2 in figure 1 has been established as the place to reflect on and record the behaviour of the lamp, this may be persisting/ being carried over from the tasks where it is first used to all the ones that follow, and therefore is not seen by the interviewee as also a location for recording reflection on his own moods and activities during the week (alongside the ever present behaviour of the lamp). Equally plausible is that there is a subtle cue sequencing cause of the 'problem'. It is while F is absent that the mood words are set out on the table. When he returns he begins to look at these *before* and while L begins to explain the next task (at 1.2, 1.4 and 1.6). Perhaps F has already made his own narrative sense of how the new materials fit with the previous activities and this persists 'despite' L's instructions. In other words perhaps F is hearing but not listening (despite 1.3 and 1.5)!

However, despite these alternative possible accounts, perhaps there is enough in the relevance account to prompt a discussion in the workshop. Matthews' work on the intersection of brainstorming rules and the rules of social interaction are certainly recognized by him to have implications for understanding better what actually happens when designed forms of interaction confront the rules of social order that make them possible at all.

By implication, such understanding would inform design of better forms of interaction for specific purposes, and provide guidance about engaging effectively with the ones we already have. In the situation from which the data used here is drawn, the interviewee is being asked to engage in a series of recollection tasks which are recognized to be sufficiently challenging that a col-

lection of materials has been devised both to support him in doing this and to record what is elicited. Within the collection of activities and the associated materials that together support the interview some may build on others in a sequence, others may not be linked sequentially but may be independent and interchangeable in terms of when in the interview they take place. Whatever may be the interviewer's rationale for the set of activities and the ordering of them, in putting the activities together in a sequence interviewees should be aware, firstly, that interviewees have their own need to make sense of the experience (of the interview as a whole). This may result, inadvertently, in the construction of a narrative by the interviewee that does not serve the interviewer's objectives. Secondly, at the finer level of granularity, as Matthew's more comprehensive and thorough study has shown for brainstorming, the purposes of the particular interaction (here a semi-structured interview supported by activities with materials) may be confounded by the compelling, more fundamental demands of the rules of any social interaction (here local relevance of one turn to its neighbours) unless strong signals are provided which set aside social conversational norms.

CONVERSATION AND INSTITUTIONAL TALK

In studies of talk-in-interaction, much is made of the differences between institutional talk of various forms and what is sometimes referred to as naturally occurring conversation. Definitions are somewhat slippery as natural conversation is often defined as not being something else, e.g. a job interview. Schegloff (1999, p.407) differentiates conversation from other types of talk-in-interaction as, 'talk which is not subject to functionally specific or context-specific restrictions or specialized practices or conventionalized arrangements'. By this definition, the data analysed here is not naturally occurring conversation, on the other hand what is going on is not a conventionalized arrangement to the same extent as, say, a courtroom interrogation or many other formal interview situations. The semi-structuredness of the semi-structured interview based around a series of activities to explore the concrete

experience of living with the prototype (lamp) is not a designed form of interaction that fits particularly well the definition of institutional talk. Institutional talk conforms to specialized turn-taking according to institutional context (e.g. the class room, the doctor-patient consultation, emergency call making).

Heritage (2005, p.106) identifies three characteristics defining institutional talk. First, 'the interaction involves goals that are tied to institution relevant identities'; here we might identify these as the researcher/provocateur and the target of the provocation, the 'provokee'/provotype experiencer. Second, 'the interaction involves special constraints on what is an allowable contribution to the business at hand'; here we might say the researcher asks the questions and sets the agenda for the activities, the provokee does his best to answer and to engage with the materials, but in talk-in-interaction terms there is considerable scope within this e.g. for the provokee to ask questions, to volunteer material he is not being invited to produce and so on (again in contrast to a courtroom setting for example). Third, 'the interaction will involve special inferences that are particular to specific contexts'; this one is even less cut and dried for our participants (compare for example with Heritage's example which is the inferences from the marriage ceremony of certain participants saying certain things in a particular setting). The semi-structured interview is something the homeowner has agreed to take part in as a conclusion to the provotype deployment period. Both participants are fulfilling obligations to the context in this talk but it is less clear what they believe the special inferences to be and that these are shared (conventionalised). Heritage describes institutional talk as 'drastically different from ordinary conversation' (op. cit. p.111) and illustrates this with, among other things, examples of how doctors avoid showing surprise as patients supply information (registered as 'okay' in preference to 'oh' for example). Our participants' interaction seems to be somehow in between institutional talk and natural conversation. Looking at the setting, we see that the interviewee, the homeowner is in

his own house, he is comfortable about dealing with an interruption (going off to answer the door), he is at ease – literally on his own home ground.

The participants are sitting in the living room in comfortable chairs at a low table, and so on. The interviewer, unlike a doctor in a doctor-patient consultation, is able to respond to information supplied by the interviewee with surprise without compromising institutional identity (again contrast with surprise as a discouraged response in doctors' training according to Heritage). The provotype set-up itself is entirely about provoking new ways of experiencing that (indoor climate) which is otherwise unexamined, taken for granted. It is a semi-structured interview with someone who has participated in ethnographic studies for the *Indoor Climate and Quality of Life* project; he is technically knowledgeable and well informed. For example, he uses a meter to measure energy use of devices in his home and surprises and delights the researcher with information about the energy usage of the lamp itself. It therefore isn't clear that either party is working hard in the interaction to talk the other into being in an institutional role (as provoker/provokee in a parallel sense, for example, as that described by Oak (2009) in her

analysis of the performance of architecture through the construction of the roles of architect and client).

Again, there are parallels with Matthews' study of the brainstorming session. The sessions he analysed were criticised by other analysts as 'not being good examples of brainstorming' (Matthews, op.cit. p34) because the participants apparently did not conform to the specialised rules of that interactional genre, partly complying with the definitions of institutional talk whilst at the same time by no means engaging in natural conversation.

The activity-supported interview concluding the provotype deployment seems to be from a similar genre; neither a natural conversation nor institutional talk. The consequences for designing forms of interaction of which will be unfamiliar, semi-formal *by design* - to meet particular elicitation aspirations - opens up a whole range of interesting questions.

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NOTES

¹ *Interact* would be less pejorative, neither are terms Matthews uses as his study is more nuanced than either of these cruder terms would suggest.

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