

# **Extracts from conversations representing a social constructionist application on research**

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## **Abstract**

With practical examples from the author's conversations with an international student body the aim of this paper is to illustrate a qualitative analysis used in social construction of reality. Constructionists focus on the meaning humans create in our world; how we *understand* it. Sometimes it is of interest to understand people's world and the meanings they put into it. Constructionists have to take words seriously because words categorize the concept of meaning.

The examples aim to give additional understanding of challenges faced by students' and teachers' studying and working in an ethnic mix. The analysis does not prove anything but merely problematizes phenomena in multicultural classrooms and shows the need for inductive research strategies.

The choice of research strategy is very personal. A constructivist approach is valid as long as the chosen method/strategy can be explained and justified.

*Keywords: social construction, conversation analyses, multiculturalism, classroom context, ethnicity, postmodernism, transcription and excerpt.*

## **1 Introduction**

This is the fourth and last paper in a series of presentations aimed at illustrating how qualitative/hermeneutic/inductive research strategies/methods require clear systematic approaches and therefore cannot be regarded as ad hoc processes (a common argument from deductive researchers). Three examples of post-modern thinking are presented; the aim is to demonstrate a social construction research strategy; an exceptional alternative to find the meaning/consequence/impact of what people say based on experiences in their respective worlds.

Fact and identity construction is very important to understand the worlds of others. With this comes the skill to interpret words people use in an utterance.

Interpretation of talk is fundamental in order to get the true meaning of utterances. Words function as building-stones for the categorization of both the phenomena and people we encounter; the basis for stereotyping.

## 2 Postmodernism

Potter [1, p.88] says that "... any contemporary discussion of ... fact construction must address the debates in postmodernism". Potter also argues, "Any definition of postmodernism is likely to provoke controversy ...", (ibid.).

In short, the significance in postmodernism is focused on how things take place instead of what is perceived. Post-modern researchers try to enlighten the world on what could be described as ways in which people make sense of their social world (ethno-methodology). Postmodernism is involved in the way descriptions and arguments are produced. It also means that any descriptive language cannot be understood by only considering the words spoken, Potter [1]. "You have to understand the underlying system that gives the words their full sense and this system is only realized through the whole set of possible utterances ...", Potter [1, p.70]. The underlying word indicates that there has been anticipation before we talk about it. This makes the post-modern society a world without originals.

People are different in experiences and perception. Fascinatingly, it is through external sources that most humans build an opinion of their world; less of experiencing. When analysing text, one has to take this into consideration. Our world is complex and sometimes also confusing. The world is mysterious. Therefore we have to ask in order to widen our knowledge.

It has become legitimate to express oneself openly. In a deregulated society, in a state of decomposition, non-authoritarian students *critically* listen to their teachers. This behaviour is encouraged in a post-modern (western) world and leads to self-assurance, predominantly in European and North American countries. For many, this behaviour can lead to conflicts between the free and rules i.e. cause confusion in a multicultural classroom. MET institutions, as an example, have to be proactive and good research is this vital.

## 3 Social construction

Social constructivists aim to find out the meaning of what humans create in this world. This we normally do by categorizing what we see, hear, read and experience. Loseke [2] records that our made categories are important because they influence our behaviour as reflected in talk and gestures. The more our categorizations do not represent truth the more disturbed will be our pre-assumptions of others (stereotyping). This can easily result in interaction-problems. Loseke [2, p.19] summarizes this by saying that research interest should be to: "... examine *how* humans create the meaning of social problems ; on *what* we think about the world, on *why* we think that way, on *what happens* because we think the way we do".

The categorization of people is necessary. If we do not do it "... we would be immobilized", Loseke [2, p.129]. "It is through categorization that the specific

sense of something is *constituted*”, Potter [1, p.177]. We can only understand what we have constructed ourselves. If this is correct one can speculate if it is the words I read or if it is I, as a reader, which contributes to my understanding of a text. A reason for a categorization of others is also to give an identity to the ego. When a person says that a picture is beautiful others will automatically be able to categorize that person. To evaluate the truth, with the help of categorization, is problematic bearing in mind that some statements (“claims” to use a denomination by Loseke) are more truthful than others.

The person that we converse with apparently has an identity or perhaps several identities and during the conversation these identities can change and new ones added. What role does the interviewee take during the conversation and why is this role expressed as it is? Who am I? In the past this question was not a big issue because people had a genuine sense of self. But in today’s post-modern era many people have difficulties in identifying themselves. The identification process comprises work of construction by each individual. Loseke [2, p.132] states, “...our reaction to other people are influenced by how we categorize them ...”. Based on how we have categorized a person we treat her/him accordingly and from this treatment that person builds up an own sense of self. The building-process becomes easier if the person belongs to an identity group; this rather common. Persons like to identify themselves with others who are alike in a group; this gives confidence and assurance of the sustainability of the created image of own self.

One educational aim is to give the students a chance to change identity and find ones better self. Work and the work environment normally also trigger a change of identity. The modern human being can choose identification by numerous collective identities already established in the world. To be “assigned” a cultural group is also an identity manifestation. To change culture therefore implies a change in social values. When the group, for some reason, has been discredited and the discernment is correct to the member’s view it results in the member refusing interaction (i.e. to talk) with the group because interaction is an admittance of belonging. The reason being that identity and identity changes, wherever they take place, are fundamentally accomplished through *talk*.

## **4 Analyses of transcriptions**

The following four extracts are taken from relaxed conversations with: 1) a female civil servant from SE Asia and 2) a native English-speaking male seafarer. Both students have graduated with an MSc in Maritime Affairs at the World Maritime University (WMU) in Malmö, Sweden. The analyses are focussing on the phenomena that contribute to different interpretations of the meaning of what is being said.

### **4.1 Transcribing**

Transcription is considered as part of the analysis. It is tedious work; listening and listening again to the conversations in order to get the transfer from spoken

to written words as correctly as possible.

The following transcription-symbols have been used in this study:

(.)	Break in conversation, without measuring the length of the pause
(//)	Overlapping in speech
<u>indicate</u>	Underlined words indicates these words have been stressed
/	The conversation (or sentence) has changed in content; often a spontaneous change
[ ]	My comments on the content of the sentences spoken
.....	Indicates that the context has been out of interest for this research or that it has been impossible to hear or understand what have been said.

The transcription signs are similar, with slight modification, to those used by von Brömssen [3].

Utterances like "mhm" or a tired "yes" or "no" have, in most cases, not been omitted. Spoken sentences have not been adjusted to make them more readable. When a speech *erratum* has been made this is properly indicated. To make the text more authentic, when seen in print, exclamation marks, full stops, comma signs and question marks have been added according to the transcriber's decision. The author is not a linguist but has worked for fifteen years onboard ships with multicultural crews, and for more than twenty years he has worked at the world's apex maritime university with a multicultural staff. At the same time he has addressed (facilitated) a multicultural student body.

## 4.2 Excerpts

In the following excerpts persons addressing students in class are all defined as lecturers i.e. regardless of whether they have other academic/industry status.

The two selected conversations have been chosen because the first shows how answers can be more or less reliable and the second conversation contradicts the first on the issue who can I speak to without showing extreme respect.

### 4.2.1 The female civil servant

In the following three excerpts the student comes from SE Asia. She is about 30 years old, a Buddhist with no seagoing experience. In the text IE is the interviewee and IR is the interviewer.

Excerpt 1. The topic is on how the student seeks clarification on an issue talked about during class and if she finds it disturbing when students asking questions or seek clarifications by interrupting the lecturer.

- 1 IR: You go to the professor?
- 2 IE: Nnnnnn, yes if we cannot can find answer..... [after having tried many other sources]
- 3 we go to the professor. (IR: You will not hesitate to) (//) yes yes.
- 4 IR: Do you hesitate to interrupt a professor during his lecture?
- 5 IE: Nnnnnnn I think quite eh / because for me / (.) I don't know is is. For me I just try to get
- 6 more information first from the lecture. I will not have the (.) something in the anymore
- 7 (laughing) because sometime I maybe / because of the English eh English eh is difficult
- 8 for me. Sometimes, I am not sure that (.) the information that I got at that time is correct
- 9 that he give me or not. Maybe I misunderstand something so I have to know and I will
- 10 check with my friend that he talk like this (laughing) like this or not
- 11 IR: You will not stop him and say I didn't understand this (//) (IE: Noo). Why is it like this?
- 12 IE: Because if I stop him I will stop him all the time. (laughing heavily). I think .....
- 13 because even when when another (.) stop him too many times sometimes we talk just

14 follow ..... but when someone interrupt we will stop thinking about that and maybe the  
 15 question is not relevant with the lesson. So we will loose the concent ....[concentration].  
 16 It is difficult to continue (laughing) ya sometimes not so good.  
 17 IR: Some students interfere by asking questions does this disturb you or? (/)  
 18 IE: Of course, too much (.) yaaaa

The lecturer is apparently the last source to seek clarification on something she has not understood during class. On the question, line (3), “*you will not hesitate to*” she firmly interrupts with a *yes yes*. That *yes* is apparently very strong; she has to interrupt to tell she really cannot go to the lecturer for clarifications. On the replication of the same question, line (4), IE hesitates with Nnnnnn and adds *I think* and twice changes the sentence and adds *I don’t know* and makes a special reference to self, line (5). This would indicate that the first firm *yes* is not as firm as it first sounded. The first *yes* also contradicts her behaviour during this 50 min conversation where she interrupts IR 24 times i.e. an interruption about every second minute. Normally, western men have the opinion that ladies from Asia are timid and shy. This is perhaps not as prevalent as thought and neither the truth. Becker [4] states that a researcher shall not be too gullible “... because people will tell you things that aren’t true from time to time”. IE perhaps did not lie on purpose but her behaviour is not supporting her statement. Such behaviour does not go with a future manager. It is not good for a manager’s reputation to be unclear when staff need advice etc.

IE wishes a lecture to be a one-way communication, a lecturer’s monologue. She tries to “*get more information first from the lecture*”, line (6). Because of her avowal of her own skill in English, considered to be weak, she at the same time is worried if she has understood everything correctly. To get the information verified she will ask a friend after the lecture; not the lecturer. Again, for the third time, the hesitation to see the lecturer is verified, line (11), with *Noo*.

On IR’s question why IE cannot stop the lecturer IE answers with a joke and heavy laughing. Perhaps she is aware and wishes IR to keep the stereotyping he has of an Asian lady. During this conversation, perhaps, she realises that she shows her real self too much.

In this excerpt one can find a clear border where IE changes her identity from I to we. Between lines five and twelve there are thirteen I’s and thereafter between lines thirteen and sixteen she has changed her identity to we; three we’s. In the beginning she has put herself as a pure student expressing herself with I. Before turning to the role of a judge where she expresses her opinions with we, she turns into the role of a clown. She raises her voice and is funny by saying *if I stop him I will stop him all the time*, line (12). With this saying she also underestimates herself because her English is fairly good. As a judge she is saying *we will loose*, line (15), ..., *we will stop*, line (14), ... and *we talk*, line (13). By using first person plural she safeguards her opinion even if IR starts the question with *You will* ....., line (11). Her opinions are expressed with *maybe the question is not relevant* and *sometimes not so good*. The choice of the words *maybe* and *sometimes* put her opinion in shade; the door is open for any interpretation of how serious the statements really are. It looks like she does not dare to have a firm standpoint on this issue. Perhaps she, in this context, is an “animator”, Potter [1, p.143], set to forward, “who says the words”, an opinion she got from

an earlier context expressed by others or another person, Asians presumably. One cannot tell if she distances herself from this apparently general opinion. What she says has an implication on her accountability. "You are not generally accountable for factual claims that are merely reported", (ibid.). This is an important statement to remember when analysing text.

In fact, it is a small fraction of what we know and that we have conveyed opinions on and that we categorize (as all humans do) to build on our own experiences. Loseke [2] also concludes that the categorizations we make are built on types i.e. we judge from a few of a category and allow this to be general for the whole e.g. work category/type. Still, many people are familiar only with workforces from ashore, meaning that sailors are noisy and drunken and a disturbance in society. This image or categorization that they possibly have obtained from old films/literature or old hearsay has become this person's vision of sailors. "... the best we can do is have (sic.) an image of the typical", Loseke [2, p.17]. A person should not be blamed for his categorizations. Categorizing is to see similarities among things. It is commonly human.

Loseke [2, pp.31-45] has further elaborated this idea, much of which we say and think originates from someone else, in his identification of *claims makers*. He distinguishes between five different social pressure groupings/activities that make us attentive to specific phenomena in the world. It should be noted that the truth of a statement or opinion could depend on the type of activities that is set to formulate a specific claim. The five claim makers or activities are: 1) *Cultural feeling groups* (shared values and beliefs), 2) *Popular wisdom*, 3) *Social activists* (groups of likeminded), 4) *Scientists* (evidences above politics and individual ambition) and 5) *Mass media* (packaging claims by others).

This student might be "packaging claims" that others have told her. Alas, do we really receive a true opinion from the interviewee? Perhaps not. If her answer were to be noted, using a quantitative strategy, the accountability dilemma would not be discovered.

Excerpt 2. The topic is on where in the classroom the student positions herself.

- 1 IR: Where do you sit for instance in CP Hall: front, back or (IE: in the back) (laughing).  
2 Why you sit in the back?  
3 IE: Nnnnnnnn I don't know. Maybe my behaviour (.) but in my University [in country X] I  
4 like to sit in the front at front close to professor but it depend on (laughing) / I don't  
5 know. Because the seminar is not too serious sir, I think.  
6 IR: So you feel more relaxed to sit (IE: yes) in the back then (IE: yes). But if it is in a  
7 classroom?  
8 IE: Ya, if we try to get everything, (.) good [to sit] in front (laughing).

A firm answer tells that she prefers to sit at the back. The answer is given interrupting IR. A laugh is added to the answer perhaps indicating that this is not her normal choice. On the question why she prefers to sit at the back she hesitates and starts by saying *I don't know*, line (3). IE claims her behaviour is culturally coined, but it would not be correct because then she should have chosen a front position. And this she does in adding that this is the case in her home university. In line (5) she suggests that the reason could be that seminars at WMU are not serious. This could, of course, be seen as a severe criticism of the seminars at WMU but as Becker [4, p.108] writes "Leaving cases out because they seem tasteless or politically discomfoting is equally guaranteed to be a

mistake". Just the mere fact that she mentions this as a reason for not sitting at the front is worth observing, especially as the explanation has not a good bearing in this context. When IR has seen IE in the auditorium she has been at the front. A guess would be that the reason for her taking the back seat is merely because then she can ask her friend directly, without being impolite, disturbing the lecturer, when there is something said that she couldn't understand. Also, when a lecturer's English is difficult to understand a rear seat is chosen. She sometimes excuses her frank answer with a laugh; *I don't know*, line (5) and *I think*, line (5). There is no attendance control at any lectures or seminars. Seminars are uniformly assessed as lectures in classrooms; her answer is puzzling. IE is about to give a "better" explanation by starting with *but it depend* (sic.) *on*, line (4). Now IE is about to change her mind. Normally, she would say that she likes to sit at the front because then she has more direct contact with the teacher and questions from other students will be less disturbing to her learning. To be shy would be less significant because colleagues are ignored, as if not present. In the beginning of this extract IE takes the role of a presenter of herself and her opinions; *my behaviour*, *my University* and *I like* etc. In line (7) she changes her role and becomes a spokesperson of the students from her country (perhaps yet all Asian students) and the footing becomes we. Still she is safeguarding her statement with *if*, line (8).

Excerpt 3. The topic is on how the student finds the assessment of herself considering that she is not active during class.

- 1 IR: Do you think that the assessment of you also is negative because you don't say very  
2 much in class?  
3 IE: Yes (laughing) yaa (.) But, I think only only the same person that always talk in the  
4 class you can see. I don't know, just a few, a few students that always talk. But if none  
5 talk I will not talk for ever [?]. all the class also, it will be like that. I don't know it  
6 depend on the (.)  
7 IR: You know, if they didn't say anything (/) (IE: Nnn we will not say) it would be boring  
8 also (.)  
9 IE: No, not for me because for me it is OK because if I don't understand something I will  
10 ask later ..... maybe my question is too stupid for another [student] (laughing) I don't  
11 know. (IR: No question is stupid). No, because they already know all [everything]  
12 (laughing).

IE starts with a firm *Yes* as an answer to the question. In the same line (3) she comes with a *But* and with this word it can be understood that the firm answer is perhaps not as firm as it sounded. In addition, IE adds *I think* signalling to IR the answer is linked to some uncertainties. In line (4) she expresses another indication on a doubt on the firm *Yes*; *I don't know*.

The rest of the answer is very non-cohesive and does not make much sense. With words expressing uncertainty IE does not clearly tell IR that her silence in class is believed to have an impact on the assessment of her. The laughing after the *Yes* also indicates that there is uncertainty in the statement. But IE is firm that any disturbance during lectures is a problem for her, even if the lecture becomes boring according to IR. The interruption of IR, line (7), indicates that she is very sure on the negative effect of any interruption of the lecturer. The raised tone of voice, line 4-5, has the same effect: it is bad for me.

On IR's remark *No question is stupid*, line (11), IE answers *No*, which would indicate that she encounters stupid questions during lectures. This disturbs her in

her learning because she only wishes to listen to the lecturer. *Maybe my question is too stupid*, line (10), is a statement making the answer to the original questions something she does not wish to answer. Before entering the WMU's English Study Skills Programme IE had an IELTS level of 6.0 and made good progress. She had about a 75% average final grade in her M.Sc. i.e. she knows that she is capable and that her English is sufficient.

The many laughs in this excerpt could indicate that this question is not particularly important to her. IE did a lot to avoid a "serious" answer to this question.

Can IE be categorized such as giving sincere answers to this topic? The question is perhaps merely as Potter [1, p.139] (my brackets) elaborates in saying "... how he (here she) should act if he (here she) is to be treated as a member of the appropriate category".

In this extract IE takes the role of a worried student. She keeps expressing herself as I but when the question comes on what would be the situation in the classroom, if nobody but the teacher is talking, then she changes her footing to we, in *we will not say*, line (7). IE could well have continued with I because she has already many times said that she is not the person to interrupt the lecturer with a question or a clarification. The reason for the change could be "... to constitute the item as sensitive or controversial", Potter [1, p.144]. IE gives a signal of neutrality. Generally "... the non-specific plural avoids these troubling difficulties with the account", Potter [1, p.162]. This is also the reason why she before a statement either says *I think* or *I don't know*.

In lines 9-12, IE expresses herself on the opinion that all the other students are persons that *already know all*. IE has taken the role of a spokesperson on all students being more knowledgeable than her. Again she has taken the backseat, being modest concerning her knowledge.

#### 4.2.2 The male seafarer

In the excerpt, the student comes from an English speaking country. He is about 30 years old, a Christian with seagoing experience. In the text IE is the interviewee and IR is the interviewer.

Excerpt 4. The topic is on the issue if fellow students can interrupt him when they do not understand what he says.

- 1 IR Can one say that they [the fellow students] don't hesitate to stop you if there is
- 2 something they don't understand?
- 3 IE Ya, ya I would say that's true.
- 4 IR They would say: Hey, [...] what is this?
- 5 IE Right, jah. Because if sometimes I speak too fast I would slow down.
- 6 IR And they openly tell you this?
- 7 IE Ya, ya (.)

These few lines indicate that fellow students do not hesitate to interrupt a colleague. An example of a fellow student was discussed in Excerpt 1, confirming that she does hesitate to interrupt lecturers. The obvious conclusion must be that power distance and students respect for the teacher, as an authority, is a feature, most likely, predominant in shipping circles; a good behaviour in certain contexts but a hindrance in an interactive classroom where one wishes to argue and discuss specific phenomena. Therefore, individual students (read

predominantly female Asian) will feel left out and their grades might suffer from their culturally inherited behaviour. Interestingly, these students still have good grades; they are good at memorizing. At the MSc study-level the exam-questions should be of such type that they encourage independent thinking, draw upon formulating conclusions and find consequences (right or wrong is of minor interest, *arguing and critical thinking* is vital).

## 5 Conclusion

A major goal is to find what happens to a person's identity, values and perceptions in a specific context. The language used and the behaviour showed by the civil servant, demonstrates we are "all alike" when being approached on a level playing field. It shows that culture acts as a barrier for self-defence and protection against the unknown. The theatrical acting becomes less necessary when the two conversing know each other; the stereotyped categorization becomes less deviant. The discussions also show that with less power-distance (excessive respect) the outward show becomes more natural.

Fact constructions in the statements by the interviewee very much depend on the footing. "... the paraphernalia of footing is often a major resource in building factual versions", Potter [1, p.148].

In the first three excerpts there is a remarkable repetition of I: I think, I will check, I don't know (thrice), I don't understand, I will ask, I will not talk, I like, I just try, I am not sure etc. that will underscore she is rather self-centred. Her talk is principally specific for her. How she expresses herself does not have to be typical of her culture. This self-centred approach would possibly make her a good leader among likes and good for survival in a male dominated industry like shipping. When she becomes confident in English, she might be a leader also among non-nationals. An argument against this statement could be that too often, she does not give firm answers. This ego-centred behaviour is perhaps also something that throws our stereotyping of Asian females overboard.

Another phenomenon in our talk is that we often speak in single words, phrases and fragments of sentences. Conversational talk appears to be structured in a rarely consciously clear manner. Sometimes we find it necessary to "watch our language" by avoiding certain phrases or words. Because of this some statements perhaps are more truthful than others. Irony and sarcasm is another way of saying one thing and meaning another, as exemplified in excerpt 1 line 12.

We seldom make deliberate decisions when talking. And as Tannen [5] concludes, "... there's an aesthetic pleasure in communicating cryptically". These phenomena, and also that people suddenly become silent, are difficulties that one still can overcome and analyse in an effort to find the meaning and reason of talk. In excerpts one, two and three the student is expressing herself with different constructed identities. The changes are both frequent and striking. Table 1 summarises this phenomenon and illustrates how the context and the reason for the arguments labels the way she expresses herself.

Table 1: The civil servant's identity changes

Excerpt	Identity	Pronoun	Reason	Topic
1	Student	I, me	This is own opinion assured with "for me"	Stop teacher
1	Clown	I	Expressing own opinion being self-ironic on own behaviour	Stop teacher
1	Judge	We	Safeguarding own opinion when <u>talking about another</u> and others opinions	Stop teacher
2	Declarer	I, my	Statements self guarded with maybe, I don't know, I think	Seating selection in the auditorium
2	Spokesperson	We	Firm statement <u>on behalf of</u> others	Seating selection in the auditorium
3	Worried student	I	Safe guarded with a number of buts	Assessment
3	Students' spokesperson	We	Statement <u>on</u> other students	Class-room situation

People construct themselves and create identities as expectations or views change and in a way to fit the current situation, Potter [1].

One of the powers of descriptions lies in what they fail to describe (ibid.); what has been ignored or left out. Not in any of the three excerpts has this been examined as it is both difficult and contentious.

To understand is not a single-minded operation. Questions associated with constructionism might not seem real or very important. Though, Loseke [2, p.167] summarises that "... constructionist studies nonetheless can give us very important information about the world around us". Apparently, it could give more information of the truth than a tick in a questionnaire box.

### Disclaimer

The views expressed in this paper are the personal views of the author and not necessarily those of the employer of the author.

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