

**Individual style in an American public opinion survey:  
Personal performance and the ideology of referentiality<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT**

The anonymous telephone public opinion survey is supposed to be invariant. Interviewers' individual linguistic styles are supposed to be suppressed. However, transcripts of interviews show that no two interviewers perform the task alike. Interviewers make changes in the scripted introduction and add unscripted answer-acknowledgments and commentary throughout the interviews, the effect of which is to point up their identities as individuals rather than merely fillers of the interviewer role. Much of the deviation can be explained by the heightened requirement for politeness in the "cold call," for Americans one of the most egregious of interactional impositions. But no two interviewers fulfill this requirement in quite the same way. This may be because Americans value individuality in discourse, so that in order to be polite it is necessary to perform a differentiated, individual self. Such an understanding of personhood, and its linguistic ramifications, conflicts with the positivistic understanding of language on which survey research is based. In light of the amount of individual variation where one might not expect to find it, I suggest that linguists focus attention on the individual voice. (Individual variation, individual voice, interviewing, public opinion polls, survey research, politeness)

*We all have our individual styles in conversation and considered address,  
and they are never the arbitrary and casual things we think them to be.*

- Edward Sapir

Sociolinguists have for the most part left the question of individual variation in linguistic behavior to psycholinguists and literary critics. But everyday experience suggests that each person has an individual way of talking, recognizable partly because of voice quality and geographically and socially influenced aspects of phonology, lexis, and syntax, but also partly because of characteristic discourse-level choices. What is individual voice? How and when does it emerge in discourse?

One approach to understanding the reasons for individual voice would be through examining speech events in which the display of an individual's linguistic voice is meant to be suppressed, situations in which people are not evaluated on the basis of how well or how clearly they express their individual identities, or in which variation from individual to individual is supposed to be avoided. If people perform linguistic tasks they suppose "a machine could do" (and that machines sometimes do, in fact, do) in individually varied ways, it will be for the most pressing reasons. One such event is the telephone public opinion survey. The expressed goal of a public opinion poll is the production of information, and this product is valued precisely to the extent that the interviews are not influenced by individual idiosyncrasy on the part of interviewers. If polls proceed the way they are intended to proceed, one might expect individual expression to be nonexistent. If it is not – if there is variation from interviewer to interviewer – then it will be worth wondering why.

I examined 36 telephone opinion poll interviews conducted by 24 different interviewers to see if there was individual variation and, if so, where it occurred and what forms it took. In these interviews, randomly selected respondents answered the same questions asked for the same purpose by a very homogeneous group of interviewers, all of whom used the same written questionnaire and were trained to use it the same way. I found individual variation throughout the poll interviews, even in the most completely scripted and least interactive portions: people appear to express their linguistic individuality not only when they are being judged on the basis of it – as in the composition of a poem or the performance of a story in conversation – but even when they are not required to or when they are not supposed to.

In what follows, I first discuss the public opinion poll as a speech event and the positivistic ideology about language that underlies its designers' and users' understanding of how it works. I then show what it is like in practice, describing variation from interviewer to interviewer in how three speech acts are performed. Finally, I propose explanations for the presence and prevalence of variation in a speech task understood to be carried out in an invariant manner and evaluated as if it were.

#### PERSPECTIVES ON THE TELEPHONE SURVEY

As Briggs (1986) pointed out, social facts about interlocutors – such as age, sex, and occupation, which influence what speakers say and how they say it in other speech events – are supposed to be suppressed in telephone interviews. Such interviews are thus understood to be as anonymous as any sort of talk. The public opinion poll interview is understood, by people who use its product, by its designers, by interviewers, and by many (though not all) respondents, to be conversation at its most externally controlled and least self-expressive.<sup>2</sup> It is meant to be as referential as talk can get – interviewers are supposed to introduce the task, ask the questions, and respond to the an-

swers exactly the same way other interviewers do and exactly the same way in each interview. The only thing that counts for the statistics that result from the poll are the respondents' answers, coded by the interviewers on a copy of the questionnaire with a number, word, or short phrase. If there were any speech task in which there was no individual variation at all, one might expect it to be that of the poll interviewer.

Scholarship about interviewing has demonstrated, of course, that language does not act as a neutral code for the exchange of facts in this speech event, any more than in any other. Interviewers inevitably affect the results of interviews (Hyman et al. 1954), and middle-class respondents adapt better to the communicative expectations of interviews than do lower-class respondents (Strauss & Schatzman 1955). Brenner (1981) evaluated turn types in face-to-face interviews and found that 12.98 percent of all questions were "significantly altered" by interviewers. Theorists such as Cicourel (1964:74-75) and Briggs (1986:23-24) have pointed out that the two goals of survey research – validity and reliability – are incompatible. A completely reliable interview would be completely standardized, so as to assure that the same results would occur another time, but a completely standardized interview is least likely to get at respondents' real feelings and opinions.

But scholarship such as this appears to have minimal practical impact. Directors of polls, interviewers, and consumers of survey information justify survey research in general, and interviewing in particular, with reference to a positivistic ideology of science and to the belief that discourse can be designed in such a way as to be impersonal, value-free and purely referential. The knowledge that completely standardized interviews are inherently invalid is glossed over. Practitioners like the director of the Texas Poll assume that variability, because it can lead to biased results, is error, and they train their staffs to stray from the written schedule as little as possible. Supervisors are supposed to check to see that interviewers stick to the script. The reputation of the polling agency, and hence its ability to attract clients, depends on assurance that interviews are always conducted the same way.

Manuals for interviewers and textbooks about interviewing reiterate that "differences among research interviewers must be minimized or eliminated" (Nathan 1986:69). Interviewers must "be inflexible, bound to the predetermined wording schedule and sequence of questions" (ibid.:17). "Generally each vocalization should be planned word for word and used by each [interviewer] exactly as written. Only in very rare circumstances should an [interviewer] deviate from the planned wording" (Stano & Reinsch 1982:65). Interviewers are to ask all questions in a "neutral, straightforward way" (Hoinville et al. 1978:100), "without variation in inflection or emphasis" (Nathan 1986:68). They are not supposed to rephrase or explain questions, provide any clues about their own attitudes, say anything about their own backgrounds, or provide any more than minimal acknowledgments of an-

swers. They do never, for example, to respond to an answer with "good" (Hoinville et al. 1978:99-100; Stano & Reinsch 1982:63-64), for "each communication segment you employ outside your planned approach will tend to contaminate your data since additional communication, unrehearsed and unplanned, provides an opportunity for questioner bias to enter the process" (Gottlieb 1986:69).

Interviewing manuals stress the importance of "playing a constructive role" (Hoinville et al. 1978:99) in the interview by establishing "an easy, pleasant relationship with respondents" (ibid.:100); interviewing involves the same skills as ordinary conversation, and interviewers "can and will add informality to the interview by adding link phrases and comments of their own" (ibid.:99). But the goal must be kept in mind: "If your data is to have any meaning, it is essential that each respondent is put through the same experience" (ibid.:59).

#### INDIVIDUAL VARIATION AMONG TEXAS POLL INTERVIEWERS

The Texas Poll is conducted quarterly, under the sponsorship of Harte-Hanks Communication. Each quarter's survey includes questions asked by the Texas A&M University Public Policy Resources Laboratory, which conducts the poll. The answers to these questions are syndicated to the press. In addition, the survey asks questions for public agencies and academic researchers, who pay to have their questions included and for statistical analyses of the answers. (Commercial business such as marketing research is not accepted.) Respondents each quarter are approximately 1,000 residents of Texas, selected by means of a "digit sampling frame" that generates telephone numbers in such a way as to produce a demographically representative sample. Interviewers are trained and paid by the Public Policy Resources Laboratory. Most are college students, almost all are women, most are around 20 years old, and most are from middle- to upper-middle-class urban or suburban families from Texas. No attempt is made to match interviewers and respondents demographically, except when a respondent requests to be interviewed in Spanish; the bilingual interviewers are Hispanic.

Like other such surveys, the Texas Poll is a standardized, scheduled interview (all respondents are meant to answer the same questions, and the wording and order of the questions are specified), which includes both open-ended and fixed-alternative (multiple-choice) questions. Interviews are structured around a schedule of questions that combines elements of a flow chart with elements of a script. Once the telephone is answered, the interview begins with an introduction by the interviewer and a question about birthdays that determines who in the household should be interviewed. If that person is the one who answered the phone, and she or he agrees, the questions begin; if not, the appropriate person is summoned or arrangements are made for a call-back.

Questions are asked in topical sets. In the survey I discuss here, questions include a set about how various public officials are performing, a set about skin cancer, a set about the supercollider under construction in Texas, and a set about abortion. Whether or not some questions are asked depends on the answers to others (e.g., people who say they have never heard of the supercollider are not asked any further questions about it). Questions in some sets are rotated to minimize effects of question order. The questionnaire prescribes exact wording for the introductory portion of the interview and for each question, as well as for topic shifts between sets of questions ("On a different topic," "On another subject," "Now we want to ask some questions about families"). If it starts promptly and if nothing occurs except for question asking and answering, an interview lasts about 20 minutes. Not all are that short, however. The tapes on which the interviews were recorded lasted 45 minutes, and some interviews were even longer than that.

To examine individual variation in Texas Poll interviews, I selected 36 interviews, taped and transcribed, from the January 1989 run of the poll. These were chosen to include at least one from each of the 24 interviewers who conducted the survey. Three of these interviewers are male, 21 are female; one is black and two are Hispanic. In order to be able to examine intra-interviewer consistency as well as variability among interviewers, I also examined seven additional interviews by one of the female interviewers (so that there are altogether eight by her) and five additional interviews by one of the male interviewers (altogether, six). In addition, as some tapes began with repeated attempts to locate an appropriate respondent, I was able to examine multiple introductions by two other interviewers.

As I was interested in seeing *when* individual variation occurs as well as *whether* it occurs, I looked at three elements of each interview: the interviewers' fully scripted introductions; interviewers' acknowledgments of respondents' answers (not scripted but required, especially in telephone talk, so that respondents will know they have been heard); and interviewers' unelicited comments during or about responses, which are neither scripted nor required. For each of these three speech acts, I asked three questions. First, is there variation from speaker to speaker? (The answer is that in every case there is.) Second, how easy is it to describe the range of ways interviewers do the same thing? Third, what are the continua along which interviewers' choices, in general, seem to vary? I suggest two, one discourse-syntactic (hypotaxis vs. parataxis in clause connections) and one interactional (degree of personability).

#### *Introductions*

This bit of talk takes place at the very beginning of the interaction, immediately after someone at the number called picks up the phone and says "Hello." The script printed on the schedule of questions is this:

Hello, this \_\_\_\_\_ calling for the Texas Poll, a statewide, non-partisan public opinion poll. This month we are conducting a confidential survey of public opinion in Texas, and we'd really appreciate your help and cooperation.

There are five underlying clauses in this passage:

1. this is \_\_\_\_\_
2. [I am] calling for the Texas Poll
3. [the Texas Poll is] a statewide, nonpartisan public opinion poll
4. this month we are conducting a confidential survey of public opinion in Texas
5. we'd really appreciate your help and cooperation

Of the 21 occurrences of the complete introduction, only two are exactly the same as the script on the schedule. Only two others are identical to each other; both of these differ from the protocol in adding *I'm* before *calling* (thus making clause 2 finite), adding two *ands* to the script, and substituting *with* for *for* in clause 2. Both of these interviewers chose to use their first and last names rather than first name only to fill in the blank in the first clause. (All interviewers have been given pseudonyms.)

Three of the 24 interviewers were making call-backs to respondents who were unavailable or unwilling to answer the survey on an earlier occasion. Interviewers begin these with part of the script before shifting to an unscripted explanation of the function of the call.

Hello, this is Walt Field and I'm calling for the Texas Poll. And uh . . . I have uh, uh . . . a message to . . . We called a couple of days ago and that we should, we should try back today.

Hi, my name is Jessica Whitman. ØI'm calling *with* the Texas Poll. [Resp.: Yeah.] I believe, uh, someone called for you yesterday.

Note that neither the first nor the second clauses in these two examples is identical. The dissimilarities are highlighted in the second example. Walt Field began with "Hello," and Jessica Whitman with "Hi." For Field's "this is," Whitman said "my name is." Both interviewers changed the script's embedded "calling for the Texas Poll" to the independent clause "I'm calling." Field connected the two clauses with *and*, and Whitman changed *for* to *with*.

Two introductions are quite deviant, involving reordering and deletion of information in the script, and addition of other information.

Hello, uh my name is Lianne and I'm calling for the Texas Poll. We're doing a statewide, nonpartisan public opinion poll, and it's a confidential survey of public opinion in Texas, sir.

Hello, my name is Elizabeth McMillan and I'm calling for Texas A&M University? for a Texas Poll that we're conducting? [Resp.: uh-huh] and

it's just a statewide, nonpartisan public opinion poll that we do \_\_\_\_\_ e times a year. It's a confidential survey of public opinion in Texas? and we'd appreciate your help with it?

The remaining 15 introductions differ from one another, and from the script, along two axes. The first has to do with how the five clauses in the script are connected. Any of the five clauses can be spoken as an independent clause; whereas in the script only three clauses are independent, in the interviews all five can be. With the exception of the first, each clause can be connected to the preceding clause with *and*. Thus, the partially hypotactic, mostly asyndetic script (there is only one *and*) can be spoken as a completely paratactic, polysyndetic passage.

Hello. My name is Mary Porter *and* I am calling from the Texas Poll *and* this is a statewide, nonpartisan public opinion poll *and* in this month we are conducting a confidential survey of public opinions in Texas *and* we would really appreciate your help and cooperation but first of all ma'am . . .

Five interviewers, on the other hand, connected clauses only once, in four cases between the third and fourth clauses ("*and* this month we are conducting . . .") and in one case between the second and third clause ("*and* the Texas Poll is . . ."). In the middle of this range, two or three *ands* may be employed, at the beginnings of any combination of clauses. The third clause, which appears in the script as the appositive noun phrase "a statewide, nonpartisan public opinion poll," was actually spoken that way by only six of the 24 interviewers. More often, it occurred as a finite clause. Seven options were employed.

It's a statewide . . .  
It's just a statewide . . .  
This is a statewide . . .  
This is merely a statewide . . .  
We're a statewide . . .  
We're doing the statewide . . .  
which is a statewide . . .

In summary, interviewers almost always spoke a version of the introduction that was more paratactic and polysyndetic than the version on their script, but they did so in a wide variety of ways.

The other axis along which the introductions vary is what could be called "personability,"<sup>3</sup> or how often and in what ways the introductions make reference to the people involved in the interaction. The script refers twice to *we* ("we are conducting," "we'd really appreciate"), and the interviewer is required to refer to him- or herself by name ("this is \_\_\_\_\_"). In all cases except two of the non-call-back introductions, the two required *wes*

were included, and in every case at least one extra reference to *I* or *we* was added. Elaine Maldonado included the two required *wes*, as well as three extra first person pronouns:

Hi, *my name* is Elaine and *I'm* calling for the Texas Poll. *We're* a statewide, nonpartisan public opinion poll. And this month *we are* conducting a confidential survey of public opinion in Texas. *We'd* really appreciate your help and cooperation. Do you have a few moments?

There is also another marker of personability in Elaine Maldonado's introduction, the appended question addressed to and about the respondent: "Do you have a few moments?" Other markers of personability are common as well. Ten of the interviewers used only their first names, but others chose to give both first and last names. This format suggests more clearly that people are interacting as individuals than does the first-name-only format, which is used to identify the filler of the server role in many service encounters. Thirteen interviewers added *sir* or *ma'am*. Four exchanged the script's *hello* for the more personable *hi*, though one made a shift in the other direction with *good afternoon*.

There is also some variation from interview to interview by the same interviewer. But the range of variation is much smaller. Each individual tended to use certain formulas repeatedly, despite the fact that respondents' interactional styles and conversational demands varied widely. Of four interviewers for whom multiple introductions were analyzed, one consistently said the introduction exactly the same way (a way that differed from the script in several respects). Of six introductions by Timothy Kiefer, no two were alike, but each began with the same opening formula, "Hello, my name is Timothy Kiefer." Jose Santos' two introductions were different, but both included the idiosyncratic wording "this is *merely* a statewide, nonpartisan public opinion poll." Laurie Peters' six introductions were all different, but she always used her first name only, always added *and* before the third clause, and all but once expanded this clause to "*it's* a statewide, nonpartisan . . ." All but once, she pluralized the script's singular *opinion* in "we are conducting a confidential survey of public opinions."

If any part of the poll interviews could be expected to display little individual variation, it would be the introductions. This segment of the interview occurs before interviewer and respondent know anything about each other (except that the interviewer has heard the respondent's voice and may thereby have identified his or her sex and ethnicity).<sup>4</sup> The introduction is completely scripted on the questionnaire. Yet out of 24 cases, the introduction occurs 22 different ways. The interviewers appear in almost all cases to have been responding to the same troubles with the script: It is too "writerly" – too hypotactic and asyndetic – to be easily understandable, and too distancing to be effective in encouraging respondents to cooperate. But no two inter-

viewers corrected these problems the same way. The result is 24 different voices, doing 22 different things structurally.

The 24 voices are also doing several different things semantically. The respondent's reaction to the introduction was often an understanding "yeah" or "okay," but it also sometimes displayed incomplete understanding ("Let me save you some time. Are you asking for donations?") or no understanding at all ("Hold on a second. Let me turn the TV down," or "What?"). And not all are doing the same thing pragmatically. Though most interviewers succeeded in eliciting cooperation, some failed, and whereas some of the subsequent interviews turned out to be businesslike and brief, others turned into banter, flirtation, or argument.

#### *Acknowledgment of answers*

At the end of each answer and before making the transition to the next question, interviewers must indicate that the answer is satisfactory in format (i.e., codable on the interviewer's questionnaire) and complete, and that it has been heard. All 24 interviewers did this. Because the poll interviews take place over the phone, answer-acknowledgment needs to be done verbally (rather than, as often in face-to-face conversation, by eye movement or other gesture), and interviewers are instructed to provide it. This element of the interviewers' linguistic behavior is thus required, but unlike the introduction it is not scripted. I examined the first five acknowledgments in each interview.

Interestingly, acknowledgments of answers look as if they *were* partially scripted. Interviewers almost invariably chose *okay* or some variant (*m'kay*; *'kay*). This may have had to do with the fact that Texas Poll trainers suggest this discourse marker to interviewers as appropriately neutral. But *okay* is rarely the whole of an answer acknowledgment. *Okay* may be spoken with question intonation. In addition to *okay*, an acknowledgment may repeat part or all of the answer, either before or after *okay*, in what Merritt (1977) referred to as a "playback."

Resp.: Well, right now, the economy right now.  
Int.: *The economy?* Okay.

An acknowledgment may also add a synonym to *okay*, such as *all right*, *right*, or *I see*, or *gotcha*.

Resp.: Your education.  
Int.: Education. Okay, *gotcha*, education.

Or the acknowledgment may announce that the interviewer needs time to encode the answer.

Resp.: . . . I mean the work. Lot of people out of work.  
Int.: Okay, *let me get that down*.

Acknowledgments often include a transition to the next question, such as *and then*, *now*, *well now*, and *the next one is now*. Many interviewers, but

