The interview process occurs through speech, and the interview products are presented in words. The medium, or the material, with which interviewers work is language. During the last few decades, qualitative social science researchers have been influenced by the linguistic turn in philosophy, and they have started to apply linguistic tools developed in the humanities to analyze their linguistic material. These include linguistic analysis, conversation analysis, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, and deconstruction, which we will now exemplify and discuss in relation to analyses of interviews. While linguistic and conversation analysis mainly focuses on the linguistic structures, the latter forms of analysis address both linguistic structures and meaning. Here we will explore how the different modes of analysis entail different conceptions of the meanings and language of interview texts and how they lead to different questions to the analyzed material.

LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

Interviewing is linguistic interaction, and the product of the interview is a language text. A linguistic analysis addresses the characteristic uses of language.
in an interview, the use of grammar and linguistic forms. A linguistic analysis may thus study an interviewee’s use of active and passive voice and personal and impersonal pronouns, temporal and spatial references, the implied speaker and listener positions, and the use of metaphors.

An example from the grading study may indicate the importance of linguistic form. The analysis did not follow from any linguistic competence of the researcher, but arose as a practical problem of categorizing the pupils’ statements. While most grading experiences and behaviors were commonly described in a first-person form, such as “I find the grades unfair” and “I bluffed the teacher,” a few activities, such as wheedling, were always described in a third-person form, such as “They wheedled” or “One wheedled.” If the researchers had then been more sensitive to the differential use of personal pronouns, we might, in the interviews, have probed more into such a vague expression as “one wheedles” and clarified whether it referred to the speaker or to other pupils. While the ambiguous use of personal pronouns was a method problem when categorizing the statements as referring to the interviewee or to the other pupils, it was of importance to the research topic as one of the many indications of the contrasting social acceptance of bluffing versus wheedling among the Danish high school pupils.

Attention to the linguistic features of an interview may contribute to both generating and verifying the meaning of statements. While understanding the significance of the different uses of grammatical forms such as the above example of personal pronouns may follow from common sense, a linguistically trained reader would immediately look for the linguistic expressions and be able to bring out nuances, which may be important for interpreting the meaning of a statement. Arguments in favor of applying the techniques of linguistics as a “statistics” of qualitative research have even been put forward (Jensen, 1989). With more attention to the linguistic medium of interview research, we may perhaps see social researchers use linguists as consultants when faced with interview texts, corresponding to the commonplace use of statistical consultants when analyzing quantitative data.

Implications for Interviewing and Transcription: Attention to linguistic form may improve the preciseness of interview questions, and further sensitivity in listening to the subjects’ use of language. To carry out systematic linguistic analyses of the interview interaction, detailed verbatim transcription and also linguistic training is necessary.
CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

Conversation analysis is a method for studying talk in interaction. It investigates the structure and the process of linguistic interaction whereby intersubjective understanding is created and maintained. Inspired by ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), conversation analysis implies a pragmatic theory of language, it is about what words and sentences do, and the meaning of a statement is the role it plays in a specific social practice. Conversation analysis started with studies of telephone conversations by Sacks and his colleagues in the 1960s, and has since been used for a wide variety of talk in action, such as doctor-patient interactions, therapy sessions, and news interviews. This methodical “conversation analysis” differs from the use of “conversational analysis” in a more general sense for reading a text by Bourdieu (see Box 6.3) and others.

Conversation analysis examines the minute details of talk-in-interaction, which became generally accessible with the advent of tape recorders. It focuses on the sequencing of talk, in particular upon turn-taking sequences and repair of turn-taking errors. The center of attention is not the speakers’ intentions in a statement, but what a specific speech segment accomplishes. Consequently, the outcome of the conversation analysis of the telephone conversation transcribed in Box 10.1 was:

E apparently has called M after having visited her. She provides a series of “assessments” of the occasion, and M’s friends who were present. E’s assessments are relatively intense and produced in a sort of staccato manner. The first two, on the occasion and the friends in general are accepted with Oh-prefaced short utterances, cut-off when E continues . . . The assessments of Pat are endorsed by M with “yeh,” followed by a somewhat lower level assessment. “a do:11?” with “Yeh isn’t she pretty” and “Oh: she’s a beautiful girl,” with “Yeh I think she’s a pretty girl.” . . . The “work” that is done with these assessments and receipts can be glossed as “showing and receiving gratitude and appreciation, gracefully.” (ten Have, 1999, p. 4)

Conversation analysis thus sticks rather close to the verbal interaction of the speakers, forgoing interpretations in depth. The labor-intensive transcription and the minute analyses of the speech sequences rule out conversation analyses as a general method for analysis of large amounts of interview material. Conversation analysis may, however, be relevant for selected significant parts of an interview, and it may also be useful in the training of interviewers,
to make them aware of the subtleties of the interaction in the interviews. Some researchers within the field of discourse analysis are skeptical of the merits of conversation analysis. Parker (2005, p. 91) thus criticizes its “textual empiricism”—that you can only address what you can see directly in the transcript, thus excluding power and ideology, for example, if they are not explicitly mentioned—and also what he sees as “pointless redescription,” where researchers simply repeat what is said in the transcript in a more detailed way, clouded in seemingly rigorous conversation analysis jargon.

Implications for Transcription: Here there are no specific requirements for interviewers since any verbal exchange can be made the subject of conversation analysis. As was seen in the transcription in Box 10.1, there are, nevertheless, very specific and elaborate requirements for how interviews are to be transcribed in order to be amenable to conversation analysis.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

A narrative is a story. Narrative analyses focus on the meaning and the linguistic form of texts; they address the temporal and social structures and the plots of interview stories. The narrative structures of stories people tell have been worked out in the humanities, starting with Propp’s analysis of the structures of Russian fairy tales in the 1920s, and followed up decades later by Greimas and Labov. In the structure of a fairy tale, the main subject position may be taken by the prince as the protagonist, who seeks the object in the form of the princess. On his way, the prince encounters opponents as well as helpers, and after overcoming the many obstacles, the prince receives from the king the princess and half his kingdom. Greimas used this structure to work out an actant model pertaining to narrative structures in a variety of genres.

Narrative analysis focuses on the stories told during an interview and works out their structures and their plots. If no stories are told spontaneously, a coherent narrative may be constructed from the many episodes spread throughout an interview. The analysis may also be a reconstruction of the many tales told by the different subjects into a “typical” narrative as a richer, more condensed and coherent story than the scattered stories of single interviews. As with meaning condensation, narrative analysis will tend to stay within the vernacular.

A narrative sequence from Mishler’s interview with a furniture craftsman-artist dropping out of the woodworking program at school was presented in Box 8.3. We may also note that the interview on learning interior decorating
from the previous chapter had the spontaneous form of a narrative, which Giorgi did not address in his meaning condensation of the interview. Chapter 6 on designing an interview study was introduced by a constructed narrative of successive emotional deterioration, followed by an idealized story of a linear progression through seven stages of an interview inquiry.

A narrative can be analyzed in many different ways, and here we will mention analyses of structure, plot, and genre. In a linguistic sense, a narrative analysis concerns a chronologically told story, with a focus on how its elements are sequenced. Labov has put forth a standard linguistic framework for narrative analyses (Labov, 1972; Labov & Waletzky, 1967). Using this framework in an analysis can help highlight the structure of a narrative, by breaking the narrative down into specific interconnected components. These are (1) the abstract that provides a summary of the narrative, inserting it into the framework of conversational turn-taking; (2) the orientation of the listener to the time, place, actors, and activity of the narrative; (3) the complicating action, containing the central details of the narrative; (4) the evaluation of the central details; and (5) the coda, which summarizes and returns the narrative time frame to the present (Murray, 2003).

The first four of these components are illustrated in Box 13.1, which contains a narrative Labov calls ‘The first man killed by a car in this town,” and is based on an interview Labov conducted in 1973 with a 73-year-old man from South Lyons, Michigan.

**BOX 13.1 The First Man Killed by a Car in This Town: A Narrative**

**Abstract**

Shall I tell you about the first man got kilt–killed by a car here . . .

Well, I can tell you that.

**Orientation**

He–eh–’fore–’fore they really had cars in town

I think it was a judge–Sawyer–it was a judge in–uhc

I understand he was a judge in Ann Arbor

and he had a son that was a lawyer.

(Continued)
Complicating action
And this son—I guess he must’ve got drunk
because he drove through town with a chauffeur
with one of those old touring cars without, you know—
open tops and everything, big cars, first ones—
and they—they come through town in a—late in the night.
And they went pretty fast, I guess,
and they come out here to the end of a—
where—uh—Pontiac Trail turns right or left in the road
and they couldn’t make the turn
and they turned left
and they tipped over in the ditch,
steerin’ wheel hit this fellow in the heart, this chauffeur,
killed him.

Evaluation
And—uh—the other fellow just broke his thumb—
the lawyer who [hh] was drunk.
They—they say a drunk man [laughs] never gets it [laugh].
Maybe I shouldn’t say that,
I might get in trouble.


The sequencing in Box 13.1 represents a structural analysis, but Labov also supplies us with an analysis of the meaning or the plot of the narrative:

We have no difficulty in understanding this narrative in terms of its main point, established in the evaluation section [. . .]. Big city lawyers are the problem, and the blame is clearly assigned to the drunken lawyer, who
escaped with minor injuries. The narrator makes a little joke about the fact that he, a small town person, might get into trouble by criticizing these city folks with their chauffeurs and big, modern, fancy touring cars. It is the most familiar theme of American culture: the simplicity, honesty and competence of small town people against the sophistication, corruption and incompetence of big city people. (Labov, 2001, p. 4)

Narrative researchers have tried to identify the plots that typically appear in stories. Plots are what order narratives, and the basic plots of modernist stories have been identified as taking a journey, engaging in a contest, enduring suffering, pursuing consummation, and establishing a home. In addition to analyses of structure and plot, narrative analyses can also aim at ascertaining the genre of a story told. The classical literary model thus distinguishes the four genres of comedy, romance, tragedy, and satire (see Murray, 2003, for an overview).

As with any form of qualitative analysis, the narrative approach has its limitations. Recently, Frosh (2007) criticized “narrativism” from a psychoanalytic perspective, arguing that not all aspects of human experience fit neatly into more or less coherent narratives, for human subjects are not just integrated through narratives, but also fragmented. He defends the idea that the human subject is “never a whole, is always riven with partial drives, social discourses that frame available modes of experience, ways of being that are contradictory and reflect the shifting allegiances of power as they play across the body and the mind” (p. 638). Frosh does not want us to abandon narrative analysis, but rather wants qualitative researchers to hold on to the dialectic of deconstructivist fragmentation and narrative integration when describing human experience. Qualitative research exists, as he says, in a tension between “on the one hand, a deconstructionist framework in which the human subject is understood as positioned in and through competing discourses and, on the other, a humanistic framework in which the integrity of the subject is taken to be both a starting- and end-point of analysis.” (p. 639).

Implications for Interviewing and Transcription: Interviewing for narratives was described in Chapter 8, where questioning for concrete episodes and the following up of the subjects’ spontaneous stories, elaborating their temporal and social structures and plots, were emphasized. When transcribing, one may experiment with the textual layout in ways to make the narrative form accessible, such as with the stanzas in Mishler’s craftsman story and the subheadings in Labov’s car story.
DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Discourse analysis focuses on how truth effects are created within discourses that are neither true nor false. Foucault’s (e.g., 1972) analyses of the power relations of discourses have inspired later forms of discourse analysis. Parker defines discourse as “the organization of language into certain kinds of social bonds” (2005, p. 88). In Parker’s version of discourse theory, the approach becomes closely aligned with the study of ideology. An ideology is an organized collection of ideas, and discourse analysis attempts to unravel how such collections of ideas are produced and work in practice. Discourse analysis studies how language is used to create, maintain, and destroy different social bonds, and is in line with the postmodern perspective on the human world as socially and linguistically constructed, which we outlined in Chapter 3. It shares with pragmatism an emphasis on the primacy of doing, of practice, of actions performed in the here and now. Discourses are discontinuous practices, which cross each other and sometimes touch, while just as often ignoring or excluding each other. In Chapter 8, an interview sequence was presented, which, inspired by discourse analysis, was analyzed as a crossing of swords of the diverging discourses of learning of the interviewer and the electronics pupil.

In some respects, the currently popular discursive perspective comes close to a dialectical emphasis on contradictions such as that found in Marxist philosophy (Parker, 2005). Here we will outline some aspects of the multifaceted line of dialectical thought.

**BOX 13.2 Discourse and Dialectics**

Dialectics is the study of internal contradictions—the contradiction between the general and the specific, between appearance and essence, between the quantitative and the qualitative, for example. The development of contradictions is the driving force of change, according to dialectical philosophy.

Dialectical materialism involves the fundamental assumption that the contradictions of material and economic life are the basis of social relations and of consciousness. Human consciousness and behavior are studied within the concrete sociohistorical situation of a class society and its forces and relations of production. The objects of the human sciences are seen as multifaceted and contradictory, consisting of internally related
opposites in continual change and development. Human beings act upon
the world, change it, and are again changed by the consequences of their
actions.

When doing interviews from a discursive or dialectical viewpoint, one
is interested in the contradictions that individuals articulate not as aspects
of concrete individuals per se, but rather as aspects of historical discursive
practices. Sartre outlined this in his attempt to mediate between Marxism,
existentialism, and psychoanalysis in The Problem of Method (1963). His
critique of the individualizing approach of psychoanalysis also pertains to
much current individualist interview research: “How many times has some-
one attempted the feat of psychoanalyzing Robespierre for us without even
understanding that the contradictions in his behavior were conditioned by
the objective contradictions of the situation” (p. 60). Sartre’s parallel cri-
tique of an objectifying Marxist reductionism might also be mentioned:
“Valéry is a petit bourgeois intellectual, no doubt about it. But not every
petit bourgeois intellectual is Valéry” (p. 56).

Discursive and dialectical approaches are not identical, for the former
typically involves a constructionist perspective, whereas the latter approach
is more objectivist and realist. In both the discursive and the dialectical
approaches, however, there is an emphasis upon contradictions and the
new, upon what is becoming and under development. With a conception
of the social world as being developed through contradictions, discursively
and materially, it is important to uncover the new developmental tenden-
cies in order to obtain true knowledge of the social world. The statistical
average, or the representative case of the status quo, are less important than
the new tendencies developing as the status nascendi. If social reality is in
itself contradictory, the task of social science is to investigate the real con-
tradictions of the social situation and posit them against each other. In
other words, if social processes are essentially contradictory, then empiri-
cal methods based on an exclusion of contradictions will be invalid for
uncovering a contradictory social reality.

In Box 13.2, we have attempted to demonstrate the importance of contra-
dictions in studies of discourse—something they share with a dialectical ap-
proach. In discourse analysis, the talk itself has primacy:

Participant’s discourse or social texts are approached in their own right and
not as a secondary route “beyond” the text like attitudes, events or cognitive
processes. Discourse is treated as a potent, action-oriented medium, not a transparent information channel.

Crucial questions for traditional social psychological research thus cease to be relevant. For example, we are not asking whether a sample of people are revealing their “genuine” attitudes to ethnic minorities, or whether fans’ descriptions of what happens on the soccer terraces are “accurate.” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 160)

From a discourse-analytic perspective, some common objections to the validity of research interviewing thus dissolve. This concerns the question of authentic personal meanings—“How do you know you get to know what the interviewees really mean?”—as well as the objective reality question—“How do you know that your interviewee gives a true description of the objective situation?” A persistent objection concerning the reliability of interviewing has been that different interviewers get different results. If subjects present themselves differently to different interviewers, and also change their opinions during the interchange, then interviews do not produce reliable, objective knowledge.

These objections may be based upon conceptions of the research topic, such as attitudes or presentation of the self, as expressions of an essential stable core person. In contrast, a discursive understanding treats attitudes and the self as interrelationally constituted, as emerging out of discursive acts and performances in social interaction. These phenomena may vary in different situations with different interviewers, and interviewing is a sensitive method to investigate the varying social presentations of the self. Thus, according to the differing epistemological conceptions of attitudes and the self—as stable authentic essences, or as socially constituted and more or less fluid ones—the interview appears either as a highly unreliable or as a finely tuned and valid method.

A clear example of discourse analysis is found in Wetherell and Potter’s (1992) research on white New Zealanders’ (Pakeha) construction of “culture,” “race,” and “nation” through their use of discourses or what the authors call interpretative repertoires. The authors conclude that even seemingly egalitarian discourses can contribute to increase racism and discrimination. Wetherell and Potter discovered a general discursive change from the 70s race discourse to contemporary society’s cultural discourse. They identified different cultural discourses, a significant one being culture-as-inheritance, which is seen in the following example, where culture is constructed as unchanging and traditional:

Williamson: I think it’s important they hang on to their culture (yeah) because if I try to think about it, the Pakeha New Zealander hasn’t got a culture (yeah).
I, as far as I know, he hasn’t got one (yeah) unless it’s rugby, racing and beer, that would be his lot (yes) But the Maoris have definitely got something, you know, some definite things that they do and (yeah). No, I say hang onto their culture. (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 129)

Potter and Wetherell interpret this and other interview passages to mean that the Maoris are constructed as “museum attendants,” obliged to maintain their culture for their own sake, which is a construction that has ideological effects by separating culture and politics.

There are many different approaches to discourse analysis, some of which are formal and technical, and others less prescribed. Parker (2005, p. 92) advocates a nonformal approach based on four questions that the researcher can pose to a text when engaging in discourse analytical work: Why is the text interesting? What do we know of the material out of which it was constructed? What are the effects of different readings of the text? How does the text relate to patterns of power? We can illustrate the significance of the questions by looking at a short example, in this case a joke:

Mrs Thatcher goes to a restaurant with her cabinet. She tells the waiter that she will have chicken. The waiter says, “What about the vegetables?” and she replies, “They’ll have chicken too.” (Parker, 2005, p. 93)

Summarizing Parker’s analysis, we may ask first, why is the text interesting? In general, it is not coincidental which parts of a text one stumbles upon as calling for analysis. Qualitative researchers normally choose, and often with good reasons, to analyze those aspects of their material that challenge their preconceptions, seem puzzling in relation to the research question, or simply stand out one way or the other. The Thatcher joke above contains a puzzle that deserves further analysis concerning why it is funny. Second, the researcher should find out what he or she knows of the material out of which the text was constructed. In the case of the joke, it is relevant to consider which political images and ideas lurk in the background and give the joke its sense and point. In the joke, a number of discourses can be identified, such as discourses of masculinity (the members of the cabinet are “less than men”) and of women’s supremacy (perhaps the joke is funny because it reverses the traditional discursive order of male dominance).

Third, the researcher can ask what the effects might be of different discursive readings of a text. The joke can be read from a feminist standpoint, stressing the strength of Thatcher as an assertive political figure who jokes about the
male members of her cabinet, or it can be read as a way of disclosing Thatcher as a caricature, a figure of fun, “handbagging” her opponents. Different readings are possible, and these are themselves forms of social action that will have different discursive effects in practice. Finally, a discourse analyst can ask how the text conforms to or challenges patterns of power. If speech and action are discursive performances that either work for or against power, the question of power is always relevant from a discourse theoretical point of view. How are speakers positioned in social networks of power that grant different rights and duties to speak and act in certain ways? Positioning theory is one recent variety of discourse analysis that highlights the issue of social positioning (see Harré & Moghaddam, 2003), and in the joke example we clearly see positioning in play in the unequal power relationship between Thatcher and her cabinet.

**Implications for Interviewing:** While discourse analysis may be applied to common interviews, such as the one described as “discourses crossing swords” (see Box 8.4), a specific discursive interviewing will focus on variation and diversity, and on the active participation of the interviewer in the discourse, as shown in Chapter 8. The search for real inner meanings and objective presentations of external reality dissolve, and instead there is a focus on the discursive production of a social episode.

**DECONSTRUCTION**

Derrida introduced the concept of “deconstruction” as a combination of “destruction” and “construction.” Deconstruction involves destroying one understanding of a text and opening for construction of other understandings (see Norris, 1987). The focus is not on what the person who uses a concept means, but on what the concept says and does not say. It is affiliated with a critical “hermeneutics of suspicion,” but in line with conversation and discursive analyses, it does not search for any underlying genuine or stable meaning hidden beneath a text. Meaning is understood in relation to an infinite network of other words in a language.

A deconstructive reading tears a text apart, unsettles the concepts it takes for granted, concentrates on the tensions and breaks in a text, on what a text purports to say and what it comes to say, as well as what is not said in the text, on what is excluded by the use of the text’s concepts. A deconstructive reading reveals the presuppositions and internal hierarchies of a text and lays open
the binary oppositions built into modern thought and language, such as true/false, real/unreal, subjective/objective. Deconstruction does not only decompose a text, but also leads to a redescription of the text.

A deconstructive reading could, for example, focus on selected interview passages and phrases and work out the meanings expressed, as well as meanings concealed and excluded by the terms chosen. Rather than deconstructing an interview text, we shall here attempt to deconstruct a phrase recurrently evoked in interview literature, and in the first edition of the present book—"the interview dialogue."

We may start by wondering why the two similar terms interview and dialogue are often added together, and not uncommonly bolstered with embellishing words, such as authentic, real, genuine, egalitarian, and trusting. Dialogue exists in a binary opposition to monologue, which today may connote an old-fashioned, authoritarian form of communication. When dialogue is used in current interview research it is seldom in the rigorous conceptual Socratic form, but more commonly as warm and caring dialogue. "Dialogical interviewing" can suggest a warm empathetic caring, in contrast to alienated and objectifying forms of social research, such as those found in experiments and questionnaires. When the interview is conceived as a dialogue, the implication is that the researcher and subject are egalitarian partners in a close, mutually beneficial personal relationship. The expression "interview dialogue" here glosses over the asymmetrical power relationships of the interview interaction, where the interviewer initiates and terminates the interview, poses the questions, and usually retains a monopoly of interpreting the meaning of what the interviewer says (see Box 2.3).

We further note that the term dialogue is used today in texts from a variety of fields, such as management and education, which advocate "dialogue between managers and workers" and "dialogical education" (Kvale, 2006). In these contexts, with obvious power differences and often conflicts, the term dialogue may provide an impression of equality and harmonious consensus. We will conclude this brief deconstruction of the phrase "interview dialogue" by asking whether the term dialogical interviews used about research interviews, may, corresponding to dialogical management and dialogical education, serve to embellish the power asymmetry and cover up potential conflicts of research interviewers and their interviewees.

Implications for Interviewing: As any kind of text may be made a subject of deconstruction, there are no specific requirements for interviewing. If
a deconstruction of interview texts is considered, the interviewer may, however, address the use of key terms in a variety of contexts, from a multiplicity of perspectives, thereby providing multifaceted material for deconstruction. Although there is, to our knowledge, no worked out practice of deconstructivist interviewing, some of Garfinkel’s (1967) ethnomethodological breaching experiments approach a deconstructive interview. In some experiments, Garfinkel asked his students to engage in ordinary conversations and insisted that the person clarify the sense of commonplace remarks:

(S) Hi, Ray. How is your girl friend feeling?

(E) What do you mean, “How is she feeling?” Do you mean physical or mental?

(S) I mean how is she feeling? What’s the matter with you? (He looked peeved.)

(E) Nothing. Just explain a little clearer what do you mean?

(S) Skip it. How are your Med School applications coming?

(E) What do you mean, “How are they?”

(S) You know what I mean.

(E) I really don’t.


“S” is the subject and “E” is the “experimenter,” deliberately breaching the ordinary production of social order. Like deconstructive analyses that unsettle the taken for granted and reveal textual presuppositions, such conversational experiments highlight the background expectancies that are rarely thematized in everyday life, and the typical result of Garfinkel’s breaches was bewilderment, unease, anxiety, and even anger on behalf of the conversationists. We do not wish to recommend “deconstructivist interviewing” as a new method, but a deconstructive stance toward interviews can help researchers become aware of the inbuilt and largely implicit premises in the social practice of interviewing and how these influence the knowledge that is produced.