

The hunting of the talk

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There's a linguist for you! Always listening. Never off-duty. And how hard you have to listen, to be sure of picking up such items as a double *is*, which are often said so quickly and in a phonetically reduced form. It reminds me of the trouble I had, several years ago, when, along with Derek Davy, I first began to investigate the nature of natural, spontaneous, everyday, conversational English.

The first problem, of course, was how to get hold of it. We needed samples which would genuinely represent the genre – and good quality recordings, too, so that we could hear every detail of pronunciation. It isn't really desirable to go up to a group of people on a street corner or in a cafe, clutching a tape-recorder, thrust a microphone close to their mouths and ask them to produce a sample of natural, spontaneous, everyday conversation. Even if they chose to cooperate, the sample would not be genuine: people begin to talk more carefully and less fluently, when they know they are being recorded.

What is the alternative? We could of course have hidden the microphone, candid-camera-like – put it under the table in the cafe, or used a directional microphone from across the street. But there are problems in doing this kind of thing, as President Nixon once discovered – and we had no desire to be responsible

for the first academic linguistic Watergate. Apart from anything else, recordings made with a hidden microphone are generally of very poor quality (so I understand).

This is the 'observer paradox', which has exercised the ingenuity of many linguists, sociologists, psychologists, and others. How can we observe natural behaviour without being part of – and thus influencing – that behaviour? Several people have devised ways of getting people to forget about the tape-recorder, with varying degrees of success. This is how we went about it.

I invited a group of friends around to my house, telling them that it was to record their speech. I said I was interested in their regional accents, and that it would take only a few minutes. Thus on one evening (for example) three people turned up and were shown into my front room. When they saw the room, they were a bit taken aback, for it was laid out as a studio. In front of each easy chair there was a microphone at head height, with wires leading to a mixer unit, and to a tape recorder in the middle of the floor. They sat down, somewhat gingerly, and I explained that all I wanted was for them to count from 1 to 20. Then we could relax and have a drink.

I turned on the tape-recorder, and each in turn solemnly counted from 1 to 20, in their best accents. When it was over, I

turned the tape-recorder off, and brought out the drinks. I was roundly criticised for having such an idiotic job, and for the rest of the evening there was general jolly conversation – marred only by the fact that I had to take a telephone call in another room, which unfortunately lasted some time.

Or at least, that is how it would appear. For, of course, the microphones were not connected to the tape-recorder in the middle of the room at all, but to a different tape-recorder which was turning happily away in the kitchen. The participants, having seen the visible tape-recorder switched off, paid no more attention to the microphones, which stayed in front of their chairs, only a few inches from their mouths (thus guaranteeing excellent acoustic quality). And my protracted absence meant that I was able to obtain an uncontaminated piece of dialogue, as natural as it is possible to find.

I should perhaps add that, unlike Watergate, I did tell my friends what had really happened, after the event was over, and gave them the option of erasing the tape. None of them ever wanted to – though for some years afterwards I was left in no doubt that I was morally obligated to them, in the sense that it always seemed to be my round when it came to the purchase of drinks. Linguistic research can be a very expensive business.