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Discourse knowledge and activity type in social service interview openings: 'Okay Miss Debby Girl tell me what's going on.'

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DISCOURSE KNOWLEDGE AND ACTIVITY TYPE IN SOCIAL SERVICE INTERVIEW OPENINGS:

OKAY MISS DEBBY GIRL, TELL ME WHAT'S GOING ON.

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0. ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the nature of interview styles at a privately funded social service agency. At this agency, which helps people in a financial emergency, clients are interviewed by volunteers to determine the clients' eligibility for financial assistance. In this paper, I test Levinson's (1992) definition of activity type through an examination of how interviewers, within the beginning moments, share knowledge of the social service interview with the clients. Specifically, I explore how two volunteer interviewers open sessions with their clients. Three different interviews were recorded for each of eleven interviewers at the agency. The data reveal two distinct interview opening styles, one of which is clearly more beneficial to the clients because *the clients'* understanding of what is expected of them in the interview setting helps to determine appropriate linguistic contributions to the interview. The conclusion explores the importance of these findings in relation to social service agencies and to discourse studies, as well as to issues of race and gender.

1. INTRODUCTION

Levinson (1992: 69) defines activity types as situations that are bound by constraints on contributions from participants. Those constraints provide a specific way of interpreting utterances that are produced within the activity. This means that if interlocutors do not share the discourse knowledge required to interpret both the activity type and the language within it, then they will lack a level playing field in the language game.[1] The following example, quoted from Levinson (1992: 68), illustrates the constraints on both discourse contributions and interpretation of linguistic utterances within the activity type:

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1   **Alright Peter.**
2   **Here!**
3   **Farewell people.**
4   **C'mon Peter.**
5   **Beautiful tip!**
6   **Right over here.**

Without knowing the activity type—in this case, a basketball game—we would be hard pressed either to adequately contribute to the discourse or to correctly interpret those utterances.

In this paper, I will show two distinct openings of interview styles that volunteer interviewers use with clients at a social service agency. The first and more common approach, what I will name the *Just the Facts* style, is defined as an elicitation of a description of the client's situation. Conversely, the second approach, to use my own coined term also, is the *First Things First* style, a style that encompasses an explanation of 1) the purpose of the agency, 2) the criteria set by the agency's board of directors, and 3) the structure of the interview process itself. Based on Levinson's notion of activity, I will argue that only one of the interview openings, i.e. the *First Things First* style, is beneficial to the client in facilitating the process of obtaining financial assistance, since the interviewers have more knowledge regarding the activity type of the social service interview than the clients do.

2. DATA SOURCE

The data for this study come from audio recordings of interviews at the "Haven," a small, private social service organization located in a suburban town in the southeastern United States.[2] Governed by a board of directors, the Haven functions as a religious ministry to assist people in the community by taking funds from contributing religious organizations, businesses, and individuals and by distributing those funds according to the guidelines of the agency. In order to receive this financial assistance, clients must meet the primary criterion of the Haven, which is an emergency loss of income. A loss of income can occur through the client's being fired without cause, illness that results in extensive time off from work, natural disaster, and separation or divorce, among others. If the client suffers greater-than-normal expenses rather than a loss of income *per se*, then the client would certainly also meet the primary criterion. Not included here are instances of unjustifiable losses of income such as: quitting a job, buying gifts that clients cannot afford,

going on vacation and then being unable to pay bills, and paying (re)connection fees for utilities, among many others.

Most of the Haven's volunteers are middle-aged or senior citizens who donate their time and efforts to the community via service at the Haven. All of the volunteers are white, middle-class women and men who want to help people less fortunate than themselves. Most of the volunteers have at least an undergraduate degree; several are former teachers. The volunteers work only one morning every week. Additionally, all of the volunteers are members of congregations that donate money to the Haven. It is likely, therefore, that many of the workers know each other socially outside their interaction at the Haven.

A large percentage of the clients who come to the Haven are working-class African-American women who do not have the financial resources to pay their bills, feed and clothe their families, and/or keep a roof over their heads. There is also a percentage of clients who are white, and most of them are women also. Some of the clients receive some form of government assistance, like TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, previously known as AFDC—Aid to Families with Dependent Children), Social Security, and/or food stamps. Many of the clients, however, do not receive any form of government assistance and are new to the social service environment. It is this interesting blend of people from a range of socioeconomic statuses that makes the interview process such a widely diverse experience for both clients and interviewers alike.
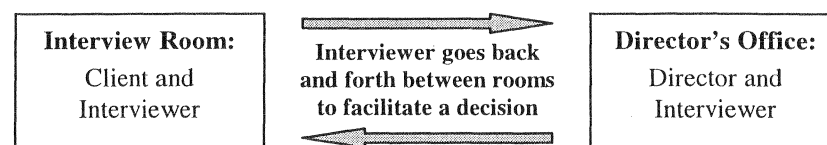
2.1. THE INTERVIEW PROCESS AT THE HAVEN

The client's initial experience at the Haven is to give certain information to the receptionist: this stage of the interview is called 'intake' at the Haven. The volunteer receptionist who 'does intake' fills out a portion of the intake sheet, obtaining specific data from the client: name, date of birth, social security number, address, place of employment, number of people in the household, etc. After the receptionist has finished writing down this information, the client is asked to wait in the intake room until the interviewer asks him or her to come to the interview room. The remainder of the intake sheet is completed by the interviewer.

Once the client and interviewer are seated together in the interview room, the interviewers spend anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour with the clients in their attempts to find a way to help the clients financially. However, the interview does not take place solely between

those two participants. Interviewers are the ones who gather facts about the client's case, over and above the information the client gives to the receptionist. Specifically, the interviewer must elicit both the client's budget (to get an idea of the client's monthly income and expenses) and the reason(s) why the client needs financial assistance. When the interviewer deems that the client has provided enough information, then he or she goes to talk to the director about the case.

The director's office is completely separate from the interview rooms, so the director and the client rarely if ever come into contact with each other. This division within the interview process is represented by the following figure:

Interview Room: Client and Interviewer	Interviewer goes back and forth between rooms to facilitate a decision	Director's Office: Director and Interviewer

Interviews at the Haven, therefore, are bicameral: the client meets with an interviewer in one room and they discuss certain information; then the interviewer goes to a separate room to consult with the director. This process repeats cyclically until the director and interviewer agree on one of the following three courses of action:

- to grant financial assistance, or
- to postpone a decision until more information is provided by the client, at which time a second interview will be arranged, or
- to reject the client's claim for assistance on the grounds that the client's situation does not meet the Haven's criteria.

The fact that the client and the director are physically separated from each other is a very important point for my analysis because it is the responsibility of the interviewer to relay the client's situation to the director so that the director can reach an informed decision about an appropriate course of action. Clearly, the foundation for this decision lies in the manner in which the interviewer represents the client's case. Ideally, the interviewer will work relentlessly to understand the client's situation in order to effectively advocate for the client by relaying accurate information to the director.

3. DATA

The opening sections of the two interviews that comprise this data set are very clear samples of interview openings at the Haven. The first opening style I will discuss, the *Just the Facts* style, maintains the discrepancy of discourse knowledge between clients and interviewers regarding the activity type; simply put, the interviewer does not initially share with the client any information about the interview process. In contrast, the second kind of opening, or *First Things First* style, ameliorates this discrepancy so that the client has a clearer understanding of the interview process at the Haven.

It is important to note here that I use the term *interview openings* in a significantly different way from *conversation opener*. Schegloff (1979) and Hopper (1989), among others, have studied conversation openers to analyze how interlocutors begin conversations with each other. In the various studies on telephone conversations, researchers found a somewhat reliably characteristic set of caller/respondent sequences used to open conversations, beginning with the ringing telephone as the summons: 1) summons/answer sequence; 2) identification sequence; 3) greeting sequence; and 4) exchange of initial inquiries (Nofsinger 1991: 138-39). I do not consider conversation openers here because, as an artifact of my research design, they are inextricably bound within the process of obtaining informant permission to record the interviews. In other words, the conversation openers were not recorded because they took place before the recording began, during the time when the purpose and nature of this research were explained to the clients. An examination of conversation openers, then, would not be an acceptably authentic part of this investigation into interview styles.

3.1. *JUST THE FACTS* STYLE

The first interview under discussion begins with a fact-finding mission. "Al" is a white male interviewer who has been a volunteer at the Haven for more than five years. He volunteers once a week, like all Haven volunteers do. "Lois" is an African-American female and has come to the Haven for help with her electricity bill. She has been out of work for three months and does not plan to go back soon—the reasons for which will become apparent later in the interview.

> Al: How we- we help you this morning.
> Lois: With my light bill.

> Al: Okay. Uh- have you ha- got your light bill with you?
> Lois: Yes sir.

Al begins the interview with a question to find out why Lois has come to the Haven.[3] What we do not see here is an indication of the rules of the activity type—Al does not initially explain to Lois what the rules of the activity type are; he does not provide an overview of the interview process for Lois. Later in the interview, Al does explain each step in the process, but *only when the interview process has reached that step*.

What happens next in Al and Lois's interview is typical of most interviews at the Haven that do not begin with an explanation of the activity type. It is during the interview itself rather than the interview opening that the interviewer tells the client what will happen next:

> Al: Thank you. [interviewer unfolds paper—18 seconds silence] Is that this month's bill?
> Lois: No sir. I think it's- fuh- it's for two months. It's eighty something /dollars./
> Al: /Eighty/ Eighty nine eighty. Yes. (.) What happened last month?
> Lois: I didn't have the money to pay it.
> Al: Well? Let's go down and (.) see what your expenses are and (.) what your income is and then we'll know where we go from there. How much do you pay for rent a month?

According to the interviewer, once he has the client's budget written down and tallied, '[they]'ll know where [they] go from there.' The significant detail here is that only the interviewer really knows where "they" will go from there; the client has not been told and has no way of knowing.

Nevertheless, as was stated earlier, Al does indeed try to explain the rules of the game—i.e., the constraints of the activity type—by telling Lois about each discrete step in the process. In this instance, the next step is writing down on the intake form what Lois' income and expenses are. What Al fails to say, though, is that after he gets all the budget information from Lois and after he feels he has a clear understanding of Lois' reason(s) why she does not have enough money to pay her electricity bill, he has to leave the interview room to determine a course of action. It is only after Al has gotten this budget information that he then tells Lois the next step in the process: consultation with the director.

Al then immediately leaves the interview room and goes to the director's office where he and the director, "Renee," confer about Lois' case. He advises Renee that he does not believe Lois has any justifiable loss of income.

Al: **There's a two month** [power] **bill here- she /doesn't work/**
Renee: **/Mm./**
         [4 turns omitted]
Al: **On a bill.** (.) **Uh- I'm trying to tell her how she's gonna pay next month's bill and she says /well/**
Renee: **/Yeah./**
Al: **She may go to her church and ask for /some help/**
Renee: **/[inaud]/.**
Al: **and- sometime uh** (.) **the-** [religious organization] **helped her I says- you can't afford to keep- having a- place to pay your- your uh- electric bill and- not have any money coming in but she says th- if we can help her out this month she'll do something else next month.**

Despite Al's misgivings, Renee asks Al to continue the interview with Lois to see if any new information can be gleaned about why she needs financial assistance.

Upon returning to the interview room from the director's office, Al re-establishes the question-answer format with Lois, but does not seem to think that her situation fits the board of directors' criteria. Even though Lois seems to offer the requisite information, Al, for whatever reason, does not hear Lois' contributions:

         [interviewer and researcher return to interview room; tape recording is resumed]
Al: **Lois- I need to ask you a few more questions that I didn't ask you earlier.**
Lois: **/All right./**
Al: **/Who pays/ for your rent?**
Lois: [clears throat] [Another religious organization] **did.**
         (3)
Al: **Last month or every month they don't /[inaud]/**
Lois: **/Uh/ I- I- was two months behind because I- after I went in the hospital, I let somebody else stay- there and they let it got behind so** [the religious organization] **paid it- for me.**
Al: **Yeah but w- who's gonna pay it next month?**

Ironically, while she tries to answer Al's question during the postconsultation talk, Lois gives Al the exact information that he was looking for before the consultation with the director when Al asks her 'What happened last month?' She tells him that she was in the hospital, and pending verification by the interviewer, this is always a justifiable loss of income according to the Haven's guidelines. But Lois' linguistic utterance is not appropriate temporally because this information should have been given during the preconsultation talk. It is clear that Al does not "hear" Lois' response, because he does not react the way he "should" react in this instance, which is to ask Lois for verification of her hospitalization. Instead, he presses upon Lois the importance of being able to take care of herself next month.

Lois: **Well I was thinking about uh- getting a roommate or boarder or something I really don't know.** (.)
Al: [whispered] **Okay.** [regular volume] **Our- situation is as I told you before- you have no resources- and you don't have a job.**
Lois: **Right.** (.)
Al: **Isn't there some /way/**
Lois: **/I'm on/ medical leave I'm supposed to be hearing something- this week or next week one from- uh- social security s- it's social security supplemental-**
Al: **Right.**
Lois: **Mmhmm.**

Once again, Lois has indicated that her loss of income is that she has been under a doctor's care; in fact, she has been on medical leave from work. Despite the fact that this is a reiteration of what she said just moments earlier, Al does not yet "hear" her justification for not being able to pay her electric bill. Instead, Al focuses on Lois' ability to pay her rent for the upcoming month, indicating that he does not consider Lois' situation to entitle her to financial assistance from the Haven.

Al: **Uh** (4) **In order for us to be of any help, we have to know- that- there'll be something to take care of all this from- next month and the next month and the next month** (.) **and** (.) **you don't have work- you are not- you're not- able to work?**
Lois: **No- I'm d- I'm on- I'm still on medical leave I'm still under the doctor.**
Al: **Right.**

Lois: Mmhmm.
        (5)
Al: If there was some way you could move (.) back in with your
        mother this would avoid paying rent would avoid paying- uh (.)
        the electric bill (..) Our policy- there has to be some way that
        you're going to be t- able to take care of this next month- and- I
        don't see anyway /here/
Lois: /Well/ [name of organization] had got uhm (.) in
        contact with the people f- for my rent- and they told me that they
        would try to work with me you know.
Al: Well I think that's fine but it's- you're depending on some-
        agency to help you- and and we- are only able to help those that
        can- un- someway help themselves.
Lois: Mmhmm.

Notice Lois' indication that she has applied for disability because of a medical condition and that she would be hearing the decision about it shortly. This is the third instance that Lois has indicated her medical condition, yet Al still has not responded. Notice also that even though Al says 'Right,' he clearly does not accept this as a contribution to the discourse that will meet the criteria of the Haven. That Al rejects Lois' explanation is further evidenced by the fact that, in his utterance after the five-second pause, he tells Lois that she has to be able to take care of next month. Indeed, Al continues his *persuasion* of Lois to move in with her mother until such time as she can afford to live on her own again, and all the while Lois tells Al that there is a distinct possibility she will soon receive disability benefits and will be able to remain in her home.[4] So here we see that Lois is learning to play the language game as the interview progresses; that is, she is learning the constraints of the activity type. She realizes that the information Al is looking for is that she will be able to pay her bills within the next month, and so she contributes the appropriate utterance to the discourse. Unfortunately, even though Lois's contributions are appropriate to the discourse as a whole, they do not fit within the constraints of the activity type. Specifically, Lois' utterances do not occur at a time when Al expects them. Therefore, it seems that no contribution she makes to the talk during this section of the interview (post-consultation with the director) will be interpreted by Al as satisfying the Haven's criteria.

Al ends the interview by repeating his suggestions to Lois that she try to find some other place to live until she is able to live on her own again.

3.2. *FIRST THINGS FIRST* STYLE

In contrast to Al's *Just the Facts* information-gathering technique, "Gina" uses the *First Things First* interview style to begin sessions with her clients. Gina is a white female who has been a volunteer at the Haven for less than five years, and who volunteers once a week. The *First Things First* interview style that she uses is an approach to beginning an interview session in a way that explains to the client the rules of the activity type. Specifically, Gina explains: 1) the purpose of the Haven; 2) the criteria of the Haven's board of directors; and 3) the structure of the interview process. In this interview, "Debby," an African-American female, has come to the Haven for help to pay her electric bill, just as Lois did.

Gina: Okay. Debby- just to us to start off just to explain the Haven a
        little bit to you what we can cannot do?
Debby: Okay.
Gina: There're like thirty-six different [religious organizations] that
        sponsor the Haven and they have a board of directors. This
        board of directors has put some guidelines down and its
        guidelines what they're trying to do is to help people that- uh
        have a need through no fault of their own there's been a loss of
        income for some /reason/
Debby: /Mmhmm./
Gina: Uh- /out in/
Debby: /[clears throat]/
Gina: the hospital they lost their job /through/
Debby: /Yes./
Gina: nothing that they have done. (.) What I want you to do- is to (.)
        tell me what has happened (.) then I take this information to our
        administrator- and she knows all the guidelines and she sees
        that your situation if it falls within the guidelines that the
        [religious organizations] set up.
Debby: Okay.
Gina: Uh- what they [religious organizations] are looking for is to be
        able to help you- this month- but you're gonna be able to make
        it on your own next month.
Debby: Okay.
Gina: They uh- don't want to just be a band-aid an- on a situation
        that's gonna keep reoccurring cuz they want you to be able to
        be self-sufficient and- be able to do the things that you need to-
        to be able to do.

Debby: **Alright.**
  [2 turns omitted]
Gina: **Anything that you tell me uh Debby I need to be verific-
  verified. That's just one of the policies, too. You know, if there
  was a loss of income I need to see uh financial statements-**
Debby: **Mmhmm.**
Gina: **uh- or just whatever. So what you'll do if you'll just tell me- the
  situation- what is going on in your life- then I'll get a budget
  from you and see how much money is coming in and how much
  money is going out so we can both see-**
Debby: **/Okay./**
Gina: **/you know/ how things are going. Okay Miss Debby girl
  /tell me/**
Debby: **/[coughs]/**
Gina: **what's going on.**

Interwoven throughout Gina's turns here are descriptions of the Haven. In her first extended turn, Gina describes the nature of the Haven and the primary criterion used by the director to determine clients' eligibility for assistance, i.e., a loss of income. The rest of Gina's turns are similar; she tells Debby that assistance from the Haven is provided only if the client can prove the emergency situation is a temporary one and if the client will be able to handle the regular bills when they come due the following month. Her final extended turn, additionally, includes a description of the second stage of the interview, a summary of income and expenses. This turn has the same effect as Al's statement to Lois about budget information: 'Let's go down and (.) see what your expenses are and (.) what your income is and then we'll know where we go from there.' The interviewer informs the client that the next stage of the interview will take place in a specific kind of way. The difference, of course, is that Gina's statement is contextualized within her larger explanation of the interview activity type at the Haven.

After the initial explanation of the Haven and the interview process, Gina's directive, *Okay Miss Debby girl tell me what's going on*, is pragmatically equivalent to Al's directive of *How can we help you this morning?* Essentially, Gina is telling Debby, just as Al indicates to Lois, 'It's time for you to give me the facts.' The important distinction between Gina's *First Things First* style and Al's *Just the Facts* style is that Gina prefaces her directive with an explanation of the activity type in which she and Debby will engage. Gina thereby facilitates Debby's

chances of receiving financial assistance by preparing Debby for what is expected of her during the course of the interview and, therefore, helping Debby to effectively contribute to the ongoing discourse.

The effects of the *First Things First* style are clear within this interview. Since Gina has explained the process of the interview, Debby is able to contribute appropriate responses. The linguistic utterances that Debby produces throughout the course of the interview are appropriate temporally because they are situated within the discourse at a time when Gina expects them, and they are appropriate topically because they contain the information required to determine Debby's eligibility for assistance from the Haven. The following example is taken from the time immediately after Gina's explanation of the activity type, when she directs Debby to tell her 'what's going on.'

Debby: **Okay my- the job where I'm working at is- the work is real
  slow and I was laid off this week.**
Gina: **And now where are you working /Debby/.**
Debby: **/[company]/.**
  [interviewer takes notes--5 seconds silence]
Gina: **Did you- Did they give you any kind of uh (.) paper uh-
  furlough paper or- /laid off/**
Debby: **/No/ they didn't give me /no paper./**
Gina: **/Separation/ notice?**
Debby: **Mm-mm. /This is/**
Gina: **/You don't have-/**
Debby: **Since I'm just gonna be laid off for a week.**
Gina: **Okay laid off for a week. (3) Okay Ladybug? (.)**
Debby: **And uhm- well my checks is kind of short anyway because I
  have a garnishment that is going towards me.**
Gina: **Okay. (3) Okay.**
Debby: **And uh I just really need some help in paying my light bill.**

Debby gives Gina the information that Gina said would be necessary. First, Debby's loss of income occurred through no fault of her own. Second, Debby indicates that this is a temporary situation because she has been laid off only for a week. Both of these statements, if verifiable, qualify Debby for assistance from the Haven.

This is not to say, of course, that misunderstandings between Gina and Debby do not occur; it is just that there is not a communication breakdown as dramatic as the one between Al and Lois. In Debby's case, the remainder of the interview proceeds smoothly and the Haven is

able to provide financial assistance to her so she can keep her electricity on.

3.3. A BRIEF NOTE ON GENDER STYLES

The discrepancy between Al's style and Gina's style supports the notion that women tend to be more cooperative in their discourse styles than men (cf. Coates 1988). For example, Gina provides an overview of the Haven's interview process by using a combination of her more knowledgeable position as interviewer and her gender style to cooperatively help Debby, in the less knowledgeable position of client, to build knowledge of the activity type. This combination helps Debby to successfully contribute to the discourse in the interview setting. In contrast to Gina, Al uses the *Just the Facts* style, a style that does not allow for an initial overview of the activity type. Instead of cooperatively building a knowledge base with Lois, Al utilizes a competitive discourse style (Coates 1988), requiring that his interlocutor participate in the discourse without adequate knowledge of the activity type. As a result, the interview between Lois and Al is ended without Al's offering any financial assistance to Lois. It seems imperative, then, that further investigation into interview styles should examine the possibility that a "feminine" style is more helpful in this setting than a "masculine" style.

4. DISCUSSION

Levinson (1992: 97) claims that activity types 'play a central role in language usage...: on the one hand, they constrain what will count as an allowable contribution to each activity; and on the other hand, they help to determine how what one says will be taken—that is, what kind of inferences will be made from what is said.' Fairclough (1992: 67) says that discourse is the site of power struggle—where the struggle for power takes place. He also notes that one of the objects of the struggle for power is the discourse: whoever controls the discourse controls 1) the social interaction, 2) the process of text production, and 3) the text itself (1992: 73).

On a very practical level, it is important to remember that it is the interviewers at the Haven who ask questions and the clients who have to answer those questions. That is, unlike turn allocation in ordinary conversation (Nofsinger 1991: 82), turn allocation in the social service interview has already taken place. Predetermined turn allocation is a

discourse feature in a number of different settings: the news interview, the examination of witnesses in the courtroom, interrogation of suspects in police stations, and doctor-patient interaction, among many others. Similar to doctors, lawyers, reporters, and police officers, the interviewers at the Haven are able to dictate both the direction the interview will take and the rate at which the interview will progress.[5] Although clients at the Haven sometimes interject their own linguistic utterances (for example, they might ask a question of the interviewer or clarify a previous point they made), the overwhelming tendency is that the clients follow the lead of the interviewer in the turn-taking process. The clients at the Haven, like witnesses, suspects, and patients, usually comply with the requirements of the discourse setting in order to contribute to the interview in an appropriate manner. In terms of turn allocation, then, the interviewers control both the process of text production as well as the text.

What is less clear, however, is the extent to which the interviewers control the social interaction. Since all of the interviewers are white and middle class, and since most clients are African American and working class, it stands to reason that these sociocultural characteristics may play an important role in the interview process. Assessing the attitudes of the interviewers and the clients toward each other based on race, class, gender, and language would perhaps establish valuable insight into the social relationships of the interview participants. A particularly fruitful theoretical frame for examining client attitudes toward interviewers and the interview process comes from what Smitherman calls the 'push-pull syndrome.' According to Smitherman, speakers of African American Vernacular English are acutely aware of the forces that push them toward using standard American English (e.g., in the interview setting) as well as those ties that pull them toward using AAVE (e.g., a social environment in which most or all participants are speakers of AAVE) (1977:10 ff). How do these competing forces play a role within the interview process?

Nevertheless, since the interviewers (who are white and middle class) control two of the three aspects of discourse, i.e. both the process of text production and the text itself, it is also critically important to assess interviewer attitudes toward the clients. For example, assuming they are aware of such issues, how do the interviewers deal with the possibility that their own perceptions of the clients based on race (especially if it surfaces as an attitude toward the interlocutor based on linguistic

differences) in conjunction with potential institutionalized racism (which would have to be determined through an examination of Haven policy) may influence the construction of the interview discourse? Subsequently, how do the interviewers' attitudes toward the clients affect the outcome of the interview? Specifically, can an interviewer's attitude toward a client actually prevent that client from receiving assistance from the Haven even though the client technically qualifies for that assistance?

5. CONCLUSION

The concepts of discourse knowledge and activity type have strong implications for playing what Levinson (1992) calls the language game. If the clients who come to the Haven were knowledgeable about the rules of the language game they are expected to play, then perhaps they would be better able to successfully participate in the activity type and even have a chance to win the language game. According to Haven statistics, roughly half of the clients who make appointments for an interview are new to the Haven. These clients do not know the constraints of the activity type because they have no way of knowing them. Of the remaining half of the clients, most have visited the Haven only two or three times, and that is over a span of more than one year. Therefore, it seems likely that even the clients who have experienced the interview process more than once may not have a clear understanding of the activity type at the Haven.

Ultimately, the data in this study reveal two distinct interview opening styles: the *Just the Facts* style and the *First Things First* style. Clearly, the *First Things First* style is the more beneficial one to the clients because the extent of *the clients'* understanding of the constraints of the activity type determines clients' allowable linguistic contributions to the interview and how those contributions will be interpreted by the interviewers. In order to help the clients understand the interview setting at the Haven, interviewers must be highly sensitive to the fact that they have disproportionately more discourse power than the clients who seek financial assistance. By sharing with the clients at the beginning of the interview an understanding of the constraints of the activity type (i.e., the interview process), the client will be much more able to contribute appropriate utterances to the discourse both temporally and topically. It is the sharing of knowledge between Gina and Debby that facilitated Debby's receipt of financial assistance, and I strongly believe that if Al had opened his interview with Lois by using the *First Things First* style,

the interview would not have ended so badly for Lois. Without knowledge of the activity type, clients have little chance of winning the language game. Indeed, one of the few chances they might have is if the interviewers who care about the clients' plight takes the time to coach them through the rules of the language game so that the clients get the financial assistance they so desperately need.

NOTES

1. Concepts similar to 'activity type' abound. Tannen (1993) discusses 'structures of expectation,' which include the ideas of frame, script, and schema, among others. In that chapter, Tannen looks at how 'expectations affect language production' (21); this is indeed similar to what I want to do in this article. I nevertheless prefer Levinson's notion of 'activity type' for this study because, to me, it more strongly suggests the process of doing work, i.e., that both the interviewer and client contribute linguistic utterances within a specific activity so as to achieve the specific goal of determining whether or not the clients receive financial assistance.
2. All names and some identifying personal information have been changed to protect informant and institutional anonymity.
3. Transcript conventions:
   * /talk/ words between slashes indicate overlapping talk, positioned above simultaneous talk in the following turn
   * [talk] words between brackets indicate comments by the researcher and/or changes in the transcript made by the researcher to protect the identity of the informants
   * (.) each dot within parentheses indicates a one second pause (within speaker turn) or gap (between speaker turns); a numeral between parentheses (5) indicates number of seconds of silence
   * talk- a single dash (when not used orthographically as a hyphen) indicates a pause of less than one second but that is nevertheless a noticeable one
   * talk? indicates rising (question) intonation
4. I use the technical sense of *persuasion* here on the basis of Fisher and Todd (1986) in their research about a medical doctor who felt it more important to persuade his patient to follow a specific course of action

rather than hear her contributions to the discourse. The patient came to her gynecologist and indicated that she was interested in using a diaphragm as her method of birth control. By the end of the appointment, however, the doctor had persuaded the patient to use birth control pills instead, even though no clear medical reason was given for doing so.

5. Though outside the scope of this paper, it is interesting to note that Al uses what Rostila (1995) calls the 'shutting down the conversation' technique with Lois at the end of their interview. Instead of trying to mitigate the harshness of the denial of Lois' request for financial assistance, Al employs 'Okay' as a conversation closer a number of times in several different turns to indicate his desire to end the interview.

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