

## The survey interview and the logic of conversation: implications for questionnaire construction

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**The Survey Interview and the Logic  
of Conversation:  
Implications for Questionnaire Construction**

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**ZUMA-Arbeitsbericht Nr. 88/03**

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The Survey Interview and the Logic of Conversation:  
Implications for Questionnaire Construction

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The Survey Interview and the Logic of Conversation:  
Implications for Questionnaire Construction

Survey interviews have frequently been considered a special form of conversation. What makes them special is not only that they are "conversations at random", as Converse and Schuman (1974) noted, but that they deviate in many ways from our usual conduct of conversation. Some of these deviations are easy to grasp for the respondent. For example, that the interviewer will ask personal questions but will (hopefully) refrain from disclosing personal information about herself, seems to be a rule of the game that respondents can easily understand and accept -- despite the fact that it violates the reciprocity norm that underlies self-disclosure in everyday life (cf. Cozby, 1973; Hormuth & Archer, 1986).

Other rules that govern the conduct of conversation in everyday life, however, are likely to be applied to the survey interview and have been found to moderate a number of response effects. In the present paper, we will first introduce some of the basic assumptions that underlie conversations in everyday life, and will then review some experimental research that bears on their impact on survey responses.

As Grice (1975), a philosopher of ordinary language use, pointed out, conversations proceed according to a "co-operative" or "relevance" (Sperber & Wilson, 1986) principle.

This principle is comprised of four maxims, as shown in the first chart.

Insert Chart 1

A maxim of quantity requires speakers to make their contribution as informative as is required, but not more informative than is required, and a maxim of quality enjoins speakers not to say anything they believe to be false or lack adequate evidence for. In addition, a maxim of relation enjoins speakers to make their contribution relevant to the aims of the ongoing conversation, while a maxim of manner holds that the contribution should be clear rather than obscure, ambiguous or wordy.

Accordingly, the listener is entitled to assume that the speaker tries to be informative, truthful, relevant, and clear. Moreover, listeners interpret what the speaker says on the assumption that he or she tries to live up to these ideals. And most importantly, if the speaker does not live up to the ideal, listeners are expected to use the context of the utterance to determine its meaning (cf. Clark & Clark, 1977).

Strack and Martin (1987) have suggested to apply these principles in combination with findings from social cognition research (cf. Bodenhausen & Wyer, 1987; Hastie, 1987; Strack, 1988) to survey situations. What are the implications of these maxims for survey interviews and questionnaire construction? In the present paper, we will provide two examples of the numerous

implications that we are currently exploring as part of a comprehensive research program (cf. Schwarz, Hippler, & Strack, 1988; Schwarz, Strack, Hilton, & Naderer, 1987; Strack & Martin, 1986; Strack, Martin & Schwarz, 1987; in press). Specifically, we will illustrate how these principles govern the use of question context in interpreting ambiguous questions, and how these principles determine if one does or does not obtain question order effects.

### Fictitious Issues

To begin with an extreme case, let us consider research on fictitious issues. In this research, respondents are asked to report their opinion on an issue that is either highly obscure and ambiguous, or completely fictitious (e.g., Bishop, Tuchfarber, & Oldendick, 1986; Schuman & Presser, 1981). However, respondents have no reason to assume that the researcher violates each and every maxim that governs social discourse in other settings, by asking a question that is neither informative and truthful, nor relevant and clear. Accordingly, they do what they would be supposed to do in any other setting: They use the context of the conversation to determine the meaning of the ambiguous utterance. Once respondents assigned a particular meaning to the issue, thus transforming the fictitious issue into a better defined issue that makes sense in the context of the interview, they have no problem to report a subjectively meaningful opinion.

A study by Wänke, Strack, & Schwarz (1988) illustrates this

point. In this study, we asked German college students about their attitude toward an "educational contribution". For half of our sample, this target question was preceded by a question that asked them to estimate the average tuition fees that students have to pay at US universities. The other half of the sample had to estimate the amount of money that the Swedish government pays every student as a contribution to his or her living.

As expected, students' attitude toward an "educational contribution" was more favorable when the preceding question referred to money that students receive from the government ( $M = 4.7$ ) than when it referred to tuition fees ( $M = 2.8$  on an 8-point rating scale). Subsequent content analyses of respondents' understanding of the fictitious issues clearly demonstrated that respondents used the context of the "educational contribution" question to determine its meaning. And not surprisingly, the influence of the preceding questions on respondents' attitude toward the fictitious issue was most pronounced when the ambiguous issue was, in fact, interpreted consistent with the preceding context.

Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that responses to fictitious issues do not conform to the model of mental coin flipping that Converse and other early researchers hypothesized, but do show a meaningful and systematic pattern, as Schuman and Kalton (1985) observed.

### Ambiguous Wordings

However, respondents' use of question context in determining the meaning of a question is not restricted to fictitious issues, but applies to other ambiguities as well. Assume, for example, that respondents are asked to indicate how frequently they were "really irritated" recently. Before the respondent can give an answer, he or she must decide what the researcher means by "really irritated". Does this refer to major irritations such as fights with one's spouse or does it refer to minor irritations such as having to wait for service in a restaurant?

To determine the exact meaning of the question, respondents are again likely to consider the context of the question, as they would be expected to do in everyday conversations. In the survey interview, however, the context is made up not only of previous utterances of the interviewer but also of the response alternatives provided to the respondent. In fact, precoded response alternatives have repeatedly been shown to be far more than a simple "measurement device" that informs the researcher about the respondents' behavior or opinion. Rather, they also constitute a source of information for the respondents that informs them about the researcher's expectations about the issue (cf. Schwarz & Hippler, 1987; Schwarz, 1988, in press for detailed discussions).

Accordingly, we found that respondents who were asked to report how often they are irritated on a scale ranging from



"several times a day" to "less than once a week" considered instances of less severe irritation to be the target of the question than respondents who were presented a scale ranging from "several times a year" to "less than once every three months" (Schwarz, Strack, Müller, & Chassein, 1988). Specifically, the former reported "typical examples" of their irritating experiences that were rated as significantly less severe than the latter.

Thus, respondents used their general knowledge about the frequency of mild and severe irritations, in combination with the response alternatives provided to them, to determine the meaning of the ambiguous term "really irritating". Accordingly, the same wording of the question, in combination with different frequency response alternatives, resulted in reports of different experiences.

These two examples illustrate how respondents use the context of the survey interview to determine the meaning of ambiguous utterances if the researcher does not live up to the ideal of making his or her contribution informative, relevant, and clear. In addition, the response alternatives study illustrates that respondents do consider the presumably technical aspects of survey procedures in addition to the more substantive wordings of the question, a conclusion that is further supported by related work on the impact of no-opinion filters on respondents' expectations about subsequent questions (cf. Hippler & Schwarz, 1988).

However, the co-operative principle of social discourse does not only influence how respondents deal with ambiguities in the questionnaire. Rather, this principle also determines which information respondents will or will not provide to the interviewer.

### Context Effects and the Given-New Contract

One of the key features of Grice's "co-operative" principle is the maxim of quantity that requests speakers to make their contribution as informative as is required for the purpose of the conversation, but not more informative than is required. In particular, speakers are not supposed to be redundant and to provide information that the respondent already has. In psycholinguistics, this principle is known as the "given-new contract", that emphasizes that speakers should provide "new" information rather than information that is already "given" (Clark, 1985). Consider the following example adapted from Strack, Martin, & Schwarz (in press):

Conversation A:           Q: How is your family?  
                              A:.....

Conversation B:           Q: How is your wife?  
                              A: .....

                              Q: How is your family?  
                              A: .....

While the term "family" is interpreted to include the wife in Conversation A, this is not the case in Conversation B, because the relevant information about the respondent's wife has already been given. This "given-new principle" is the psychological mechanism that underlies the well-known "part-whole asymmetry" described by Schuman & Presser (1981) and related phenomena, as the next study will illustrate (Strack, Martin, & Schwarz, 1987, Exp. 2).

In this study, American college students were asked to report their general life-satisfaction as well as their dating frequency in a self-administered questionnaire, and the two questions were asked in two different orders. When general life-satisfaction was assessed prior to the frequency of dating, the correlation between both variables was low and not significant,  $r = -.12$ , n.s., as shown in the next chart.

#### Insert Chart 2

Reversing the question order, however, dramatically increased the correlation to  $r = .66$ . This reflects the well-known impact of increased cognitive accessibility (cf. Bodenhausen & Wyer, 1987, for a theoretical introduction). As we elaborated elsewhere (Schwarz & Strack, 1985; in press), respondents do not retrieve all potentially relevant information when they are asked to evaluate their life, but rather form a judgment on the basis of the subset of information that comes to mind most easily at the time of judgment. Accordingly, they were more

likely to consider their dating behavior in making judgments of life-satisfaction when their attention was directed to it by the preceding question than when it was not.

Finally, in the third condition, we manipulated the perceived conversational context. In Condition 2, the dating question was placed at the end of one page and the life-satisfaction question at the beginning of the next page. In Condition 3, however, the two questions were explicitly placed in the same conversational context by a lead-in that read:

"Now, we would like to learn about two areas of life that may be important for people's overall well-being."

Under this condition, the correlation dropped from  $r = .66$  to  $r = .15$ , n.s., suggesting that respondents did not consider their dating behavior when they evaluated their life, despite the fact that the cognitive accessibility of dating information was increased by the previous question. Presumably, respondents did not use this information in forming a judgment about their life in general because they had already "given" it. Thus, the present finding reflects a deliberate disuse of highly accessible information that is due to the operation of the given-new contract.

From a substantive point of view, we would obviously draw very different conclusions about the relationship of dating frequency and life-satisfaction, depending on the order in which the two questions were asked, and whether or not

respondents considered the two questions to be part of the same conversational unit.

While this illustrates how the given-new principle affects the use of previously activated information, the next study (Strack, Martin, & Schwarz, 1987, Exp. 3) demonstrates that the same principle may also determine how respondents interpret -- and answer -- two questions that are highly similar in content. In most studies, reports of happiness with one's life as a whole are highly correlated with reports of general life-satisfaction, and both measures show very similar relationships to other variables, suggesting that respondents do usually not differentiate between the concept of happiness and the concept of satisfaction. The first part of Chart 3 provides a typical example ( $r = .91$ ).

#### Insert Chart 3

For other respondents, however, both questions were again linked in a way that evoked the application of the given-new contract: "The following two questions refer to two aspects of your personal well-being." Under this condition, the correlation dropped significantly to  $r = .59$ ,  $z = 2.47$ ,  $p < .007$ , presumably because respondents disregarded information that they had already used in making the first judgment when they made the subsequent second judgment.

In line with this hypothesis, a follow-up experiment demonstrated dramatically different correlations between

respondents' life-satisfaction judgments and their momentary mood. When the given-new contract was not evoked, happiness as well as satisfaction reports were highly correlated with respondents' momentary mood. Evoking the given-new contract, however, induced respondents to differentiate between both concepts and to ignore information that they used to form the first judgment, when forming the second. Accordingly, the correlation between happiness and mood remained unaffected, whereas the correlation between satisfaction and mood dropped from  $r = .62$ , when the conversational context was not explicitly established, to  $r = .17$ , when it was,  $z = 1.73$ ,  $p < .05$ .

While the manipulations that we used in these exploratory studies were somewhat heavy handed, we are now exploring various features of regular questionnaires that are likely to influence respondents' perception of conversational context, such as lead-ins, similarities and differences in lay-out, and the relation between topics. In the latter regard, it has already become evident that the current phenomenon is not restricted to part-whole questions, as Schuman & Presser's (1981) analysis suggested. Rather, applying the more general framework of conversational principles, we could identify conditions under which the same effect is obtained for question combinations that could be described as whole-whole or whole-part configurations, as well as conditions under which it is not obtained for the traditional part-whole configuration.

## Conclusions

In summary, we hope that the current paper could illustrate that it would serve us well to pay attention to what philosophers of ordinary language use call the "logic of conversation". The logic of conversation provides a conceptual framework in which we can couch some insights that survey researchers have had for quite a while, and it directs our attention to some issues that we have not yet sufficiently dealt with, including the issue under which conditions we do or do not get question order effects.

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## The Co-Operative Principle

### *Maxim of Quantity*

Make your contribution as informative as is required, but not more informative than is required.

### *Maxim of Quality*

Try to make your contribution one that is true. That is, do not say anything you believe to be false or lack adequate evidence for.

### *Maxim of Relation*

Make your contribution relevant to the aims of the ongoing conversation.

### *Maxim of Manner*

Be clear. Try to avoid obscurity, ambiguity, wordiness, and disorderliness in your use of language.

# Response Alternatives

## *Low Frequency*

- \* less than once a year
- \* about once every 6 months
- \* about once every 3 months
- \* more frequently

## *High Frequency*

- \* several times a day
- \* about once every week
- \* two or three times a week
- \* less frequently

## Frequency of Dating and General Happiness

<i>Control</i>	<i>Priming</i>	<i>Conversation</i>
general dating	dating general	dating general + context
<b><math>r = -.12</math></b>	<b><math>r = .66</math></b>	<b><math>r = .15</math></b>

Note. a vs. b,  $p < .001$ ; b vs. c,  $p < .001$ ;  
a vs. c,  $p > .05$ .

# Happiness and Satisfaction

*Happiness  
Satisfaction*

*Happiness  
Satisfaction  
+ Context*

**$r = .91$**

**$r = .59$**

Note.  $p < .007$ .

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