“You keep telling us different things, what do we believe?” *Meta-communication and meta-representation in police interviews*

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Structure: Metacommunication and Metarepresentation in Police Interviews

I: Example A from Interview 1: Application of MC concept
   • Negotiation
   • Evaluation
   • General Significance

II: Example B from Interview 1: Application of MR concept

III: Examples C,D from Interview 2

IV: Conclusions: Applications and Recommendations
Interview 1: Example A

• Int: When I was buying the car [...] the garage has got some sort of insurance that gives the person that buys the vehicle a chance to sort the insurance out.

• Pol: They’re very strange, unbelievable answers you’re giving me.

• Int: The last answers that I have given you are truthful.

• Pol: So what before [sic] you weren’t being truthful?

• Int: What do you mean?
Interview 1: Example A

- Pol: **Well if the answers you’ve just given me are truthful …**
- Int: **It was the same, but we just misunderstood each other, we weren’t able to put the pieces together.**
- Pol: **That’s rubbish, I was very clear in my questioning and with your understanding. It’s only when your solicitor asked to have a further consultation with you, that you have now decided to say a different tack, shall we say.** That’s my opinion and we’re gonna move on.
Metacommunication

MC = Communication about communication: second-order communication that may or may not be congruent, supportive or contradictory of first-order communication

(e.g. They’re very strange, unbelievable answers you’re giving me; The last answers that I have given you are truthful)
Metacommunication: Negotiation

Negotiation about communicative implications (‘implicatures’) of what has been said before

(e.g. Well if the answers you’ve just given me are truthful …;

It [i.e. My statement and Your statement] was the same, but we just misunderstood each other, we weren’t able to put the pieces together)
Metacommunication: Evaluation

MC = Evaluation of ‘communicative quality’ of what has been said before

(e.g. That’s rubbish, I was very clear in my questioning and with your understanding. It’s only when your solicitor asked to have a further consultation with you, that you have now decided to say a different tack, shall we say)
Metacommunication: General significance

• Standard police caution: "You do not have to say anything but it may harm your defence if you do not mention, when questioned, something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence."

• Implicature from euphemistic threat ("may harm ..."): ‘being unresponsive in police interview will be seen as suspicious’
Metacommunication: General significance

MC pervasive in all communication but essential in police interview to assess the communicative and legal significance of all statements by victims, witnesses and/or suspects

• Research question 1: In which way can linguistic analysis of MC help make such assessment more accurate?

• Research question 2: In which way can the linguistic analysis of quotations help make such assessment more accurate?
Interview 1: Example B

• Int. **Maybe I exaggerated** with the midday, but it was around 10.
• Pol: It’s not about exaggerating, it’s about answering a simple question, something you have a great trouble in doing at the moment.
• Int: What do you mean I struggle to answer simple questions?
• Pol: It would be easier if you told us the truth right from the start, rather than us going round to find it out, always changing.
Interview 1:  
Example B

- Int: God I don’t know, I’m not going in circles, every time you try tell the truth no-one believes you, people just believe lies.
- Pol: You keep telling us different things, what do we believe?
- Int: What do you mean by different things?
- Pol: You told us midday, then it’s 10 o’clock, tell us ...
- Int: I just said word midday without thinking, 10, 11, I mean midday by just then.
Metarepresentation

MR = The verbal/mental representation of a first-order representation, e.g. an utterance, thought etc.  
(e.g. You told us midday, then it’s 10 o’clock, …)

Prototypical MR: quotation (direct, indirect, mixed)  
in terms of MR theory = 2\textsuperscript{nd} order representation of a 1\textsuperscript{st} order representation on the basis of  
•metalinguistic (form-related) and  
•interpretive (content-related) resemblances
MR: all uses of explicit or implicit quotation

- Issues of transcription (e.g. quotation marks)
- Issues of translation (translation resemblance)
- Issues of timing (of introducing quotation in interview)

- Issues of interaction, due to MR being part of MC (e.g. *it’s about answering a simple question, something you have a great trouble in doing….., God I don’t know, I’m not going in circles, every time you try tell the truth no-one believes you, people just believe lies.*)
MR relevant for purpose of disambiguation

In cases of contradiction between statements by same Interviewee: establishing which statement the Interviewee wants to maintain

= communicative purpose of Interviewer, possibly in opposition to communicative purposes of interviewee (e.g. preference for vagueness)
Metalinguistic/-communicative resemblance: crucial for “authorship” of respective 1st order utterance

Interpretive resemblance: crucial for course of interview (including further fact-finding purposes)

(for examples A + B: MR used by interviewers interpretively to establish facts about a car journey London-Norfolk, in order to probe further into crimes related to that journey; interviewee uses MR meta-communicatively by defending his authorship, later switches to “no comment” strategy)
It was explained that Int. was previously interviewed on 28th August, 2011, in relation to the matter where he said that on the evening of 27th August, that he had been out with friends, YYYY and PPPP and that they had gone to a nightclub, got into a car and gone straight home. (context: Allegation of assault and rape, this = 3rd interview)

When asked if this was correct, Int. stated that it was half of the truth but confirmed this was what he said in the previous interview.
Interview 2: Example C

- Pol: **Is [sic] that account still stand?**
- Int.: **Yes but** on the way we picked up that prostitute but they [sic] don’t know whereabouts and when, I was so drunk, laying on the back seat in the car, **I don’t know anything.** She did that, we paid money and that’s all.
- Pol: **She did that, we paid money,** then what happened?
- Int.: **And that’s all.** (after confrontation with witnesses’ accounts and DNA evidence, Int. admits what has been proven but still denies criminal allegations)
MR: Application to Interviewee’s tactic in C

Int. declares bulk of previous statement to be only ‘half-truth’ = cancels much of interpretive resemblance to previous own statement (MR), whilst maintaining MC authorship

Int.’s strategy in ‘new round’ of interview:
• trying to ‘limit damage’ of evidence that police have gradually confronted Int. with
• Gradually ‘remembers’ further details which he had previously claimed not to know, relies on excuse of ‘weak memory’
Interview 2: Example D

Interviewee pretends not to know enough English to have negotiated with witness or to understand Interviewer’s English terminology for alleged sex practices, BUT

- knows E. sexist slang terms for prostitutes (*bitch, scum*) and alternative slang terms for sex practices
- According to one interviewer: “You’re actually answering some of our questions before the interpreter is putting them to you though [sic]”

Evidence of Int.’s L2 competence + metalinguistic competence undermines his claims of ‘not understanding’ questions + implicates him (communicatively) as likely offender
Conclusions: Application of MC-MR to Police Interviews

**Framework** for assessing both Interviewers’ and Interviewee’s explicit interpretations + implicit evaluations of quoted statements (comparison with conflicting evidence from content material and from linguistic L2-performance)

**Estimated benefit**: training police interviewers to reflect critically on *communicative* significance of quoted material in interviews in addition to *informative* significance (*Evaluation* stage of PEACE process)

**Practical recommendation**: letting Interviewee ‘own’ their interpretation of MR and their own evaluation at MC level seems advantageous for (meta-)communicative + information-gathering purposes of interviewers
Selected References