UK police interviews: a linguistic analysis of Afro-Caribbean and white British suspect interviews

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During the last twenty-five years, racist abuse, little or no protection for black people, and an assumption that all black people are criminals, are just some of the accusations which have been levelled at the approach to policing in the UK (Kalunta-Crumpton 2000). As a result of this, tensions between the Afro-Caribbean community and the police service in the UK are known to exist, and the relationship between them is strained. This fragile relationship has, at times, reached breaking point and can be witnessed in different periods of time, but most noticeably during the Brixton Riots of 1981 and also the aftermath
of Stephen Lawrence’s murder in 1993. The outcome of the inquiry into the
handling of the Stephen Lawrence case saw the Metropolitan Police Service
held accountable for their failure to treat his murder as racially motivated
(Macpherson 1999). Given all this, it is somewhat surprising that police inter-
views with Afro-Caribbean and White British suspects are under-researched in
the field of sociolinguistics. The only comparable research examines the treat-
ment of Aboriginal Australians in courtroom interaction and police interviews
(Eades 1994 and subsequent works).

To address this gap in the research, this thesis considers twenty police inter-
views conducted with Afro-Caribbean and White British suspects in custody
suites across England and Wales. A combined quantitative and qualitative
framework was adopted; the application of both methods strengthens the
findings. The quantitative approach reveals the differences that exist between
the Afro-Caribbean and White British suspect interviews whilst the qualitative
approach can go some way in explaining why these differences exist.

The approaches to discourse and the features chosen for the qualitative anal-
ysis were data driven. Consequently, the approach taken combines the analytical
strengths of Conversation Analysis with the critical social stance of Critical
Discourse Analysis. The analysis focuses on two linguistic features: over-lap-
ing talk and so- prefaced questions, as well as considering the implications of
repetition of questions and accusations.

There is a wealth of well known literature about overlapping talk (see for
instance, Goldberg 1990). In this literature, overlapping talk is analysed in a
variety of ways; ranging from attributing a high frequency of overlaps to power-
ful talk and claiming that all overlaps are dominance-related (e.g. Dunbar and
Burgoon 2005) to considering the multiple functions of overlapping talk, where
context is crucial for establishing function (e.g. Friedland and Penn 2003).
It is worth pointing out here that the latter is the widely accepted approach
in sociolinguistics and is used here. However, during the process of coding
overlapping talk, a further dimension proved significant in understanding and
encapsulating the power dynamics of a police interview. This dimension was
whether the proposition in the overlap was taken up or not taken up by the
interruptee. The overall term used to refer to these phenomena is responsivity.

In contrast to overlapping talk, there is considerably less literature on so-
prefaced questions. However, what there is, suggests that so- prefaced questions
are generally a feature of power-asymmetric discourse (Cotterill 2003). Broadly
speaking, so- prefaced questions fall under one of two categories; information-
seeking and confirmation-seeking (Newbury and Johnson 2006). This is a
good starting point for the analysis because it takes into account the macro
functions of so- prefaced questions which reveal two things; whether suspects
have been given the opportunity to provide new information and whether
they are coerced to agree with propositions in questions. It is also important

to consider the macro functions of so- prefaced questions, as this provides an

insight into the degree of information control as well as the extent to which

suspects are expected to agree with propositions in questions.

From a CA perspective, so- prefaced questions fall under the umbrella of for-

mulations and are confirmation- seeking (Johnson 2002). A helpful distinction

in CA is the use of gist and upshot to describe formulating practices. Gists are

essentially a summary of the prior talk, while upshots also draw out a relevant

implication which the other speaker is expected to ratify. Therefore, upshots

can have an underlying purpose and may not necessarily be in tune with what

the original speaker meant. What this means is that the police officer, having

changed the agenda, is in a greater position to challenge the suspect (Drew

2003). Analysis involving so- prefaced formulations is therefore one way to

reveal the power relationships between suspects and police officers.

The main finding from the quantitative analysis of overlapping talk regard-

ing responsivity is that the Afro-Caribbean suspects’ propositions are taken

up to a lesser degree than any other group. This clearly shows that the police

officers had more power and control than the Afro-Caribbean suspects in these

interviews and potentially has something to do with race and suspect status.

The question that remains is why the Afro-Caribbean suspects were taken

up on fewer occasions than their White British counterparts. The qualitative

analyses reveal this is a result of the overlapping style of the Afro-Caribbean sus-

pects. Whilst there are a number of potential reasons why the Afro-Caribbean

suspects display a different conversational style to the White British suspects, it

is not possible to establish which reason is the most plausible with the present

data. Consequently, more research is needed on the African Diaspora, as well

as investigating attitudes towards overlapping talk.

The overall frequency of so- prefaced questions is low. However, there is a

significant difference between the Afro-Caribbean and White British inter-

views in relation to this feature. In particular, there is a higher frequency of

confirmation-seeking so- prefaced questions in the Afro-Caribbean suspect

interviews. When these results are broken down further, there is a higher

frequency of upshots in the Afro-Caribbean suspect interviews. This shows

us that the Afro-Caribbean suspects were constrained in a way that the White

British suspects were not. Crucially, upshots enabled the police interviewers

to constrain the Afro-Caribbean suspects to take up and defend new agendas

which were not necessarily in tune with what they said.

A particularly interesting finding from this research is that the racial ine-

quality observed in the overlapping talk analyses is a result of the suspects’

behaviour, whereas in the so- prefaced questions analyses, racial inequality is

produced by the police officers. Interaction is a mutual activity, and this means
it is important to look at the contributions of all participants in a given interaction. Therefore, in order to address the central research question of unequal treatment/institutional racism, it is relevant to examine how the contributions of both suspects and police officers can lead to inequality.

The link between ethnicity and the differential treatment of Afro-Caribbean suspects might be considered tenuous, given that the reason the Afro-Caribbean suspects are taken up less is as a result of when they overlap the interviewing officers, rather than because they are black. However, race and colour are made relevant by the police officers, and, as such, there is the potential for racist attitudes to surface.

The findings from this research have important implications for police interviewing in the UK and potentially world-wide.

References


