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# Power in elite interviewing: Lessons from feminist studies for political science

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ABSTRACT

Power imbalances between participants are a central aspect of elite interviews. As feminist social scientists have argued, power imbalances can affect not only the practical structure of interviews but also experiential and normative dimensions of the relationship that emerges between interview parties. At present, there are limited means to concretely analyse power differentials in elite interviews. This article addresses this gap by drawing upon feminist sociolinguistics to develop an original "power index" to measure power in the elite interviewing context within the social sciences. The index is applied to interview text to explore its utility and develop a method that can be fruitfully extended in future studies. (108 words).



## Introduction

Elite interviewing is a key qualitative research method in the social sciences. Elite interviews are useful for the purposes of political biography and to ascertain the perspectives of those at the centre of political debates (Richards, 1996). Elite interviews also allow researchers to trace the policy process that underpins key political events (Leech, 2002; Tansey, 2007). Although elite interviewing is foundational to social analysis, mainstream accounts often lack critical reflection upon the issue of power and how it is refracted, pervades and potentially influences elite interviews. In contrast, some feminist social scientists have long argued that power relations are central to interviews, although generally the focus is upon the protection and empowerment of vulnerable interview subjects, rather than interviews with privileged elites (i.e. Acker et al., 1983; Burgess-Proctor, 2015; Cotterill, 1992; DeVault & Gross, 2007; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Oakley, 1981; Olesen, 2005). More recently, feminist scholars focusing upon elite interviews have argued that female researchers may face inverted situations of power imbalance within elite interviews, and that certain strategies can be adopted to minimise control of interviews by respondents (Abels & Behrens, 2009; Puwar, 1997).

Given this focus upon power, we should elucidate the term. Although rarely defined in the elite interviewing scholarship, it can be viewed as both situational and institutional. Power is held by an individual "where a certain proposed difference to significant outcomes can be made or resisted" by one person over the other (Lukes, 1986, p. 15, cited in Deem, 1994, p. 153). Accordingly, in the elite interviewing setting, power refers to the capacity of the interviewee to make or resist certain outcomes, with regard to responses to questions. The field of sociolinguistics centres on the analysis of social relations and power differentials, as reflected through language, and provides a useful tool to conduct a secondary analysis of elite interviews. Drawing upon and synthesising feminist sociolinguistics knowledge around language and power, this article develops a series of hypotheses about how language should look when a power relationship is in operation in an elite interview. The aggregate of powerful utterances of each participant in an interview is divided over the aggregate of powerless utterances in order to derive a "power ratio." A lower power ratio indicates less power in speech and a higher power ratio indicates more power. The difference in power ratios can be compared to ascertain the extent of a power imbalance between interview participants. The final section of this article applies the power index to one elite interview undertaken for a project on immigration policy-making, complimented by qualitative analysis of the same interview. Through a detailed analysis it demonstrates that the power ratio can be fruitfully applied as a tool to assess the power dynamics within elite interview material. The article thereby critically reflects upon these dynamics both for future interviews and for the interpretation and analysis of interview data.

Critical scholars have identified how gender may operate alongside class, educational status, race, ethnicity, disability and cultural context to shape interview power relationships (Bergvall, 1999; Marx, 2001; May, 2014; Ortbals & Rinker, 2009).[1] My focus on gender in this article

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[1] That said, the focus on intersectional features is generally within the broader interview scholarship rather than elite interviews per se, see only Ortbals & Rinker, 2009 for such a focus within political science.

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is not to discount the importance of intersecting forms of (in)equality, but rather to provide an initial foray into the measurement of power relations within elite political interviews. Future works could extend the power indicators to a broader array of factors. In order to control for the possible role of ethnicity and educational status in the current analysis, the empirical example selected in this article is of an interviewer and respondent of the same ethnic, educational and linguistic background. Furthermore, it is important to note that this article does not assume that power relations in elite interviews are problematic and must be eradicated entirely, rather, treats this as an empirical question that necessitates further analysis.

## The mainstream elite interviewing scholarship and its limitations

The elite interviewing literature is a small but important area of social science research methodology. There are two key definitions of "elite" that emerge from this scholarship. The first focuses on those in powerful positions. This generally refers to individuals in senior elected political and executive government roles (see for instance Leech, 2002, p. 663; Lilleker, 2003, p. 207; Peabody et al., 1990, p. 451; Rivera, Kozyreva, & Sarovskii, 2002, p. 683) or those who hold positions of professional prestige, such as high level bankers (Littig, 2009; McDowell, 1998, p. 2135). Particularly in the German scholarship, definitions of "elites" may include functional experts who hold expertise even if they are of not high organizational stature (Bogner, Menz, Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2009; Littig, 2009). Richards (1996, p. 199) provides a useful definition of positional elites as: "a group of individuals, who hold, or have held, a privileged position in society and, as such, as far as a political scientist is concerned, are likely to have had more influence on political outcomes than general members of the public." The focus here is on individuals who occupy institutional and social power.

Much of the political science literature dispenses practical advice to researchers on how to gain access to elites (Burnham, Lutz, Grant, & Layton-Henry, 2008; Dexter, 1970, pp. 28–36; Lilleker, 2003, pp. 208–210; Richards, 1996, p. 202; Rivera et al., 2002, p. 684). Scholars have also focused on the preferred structure of interviews (Berry, 2002, p. 681; Burnham et al., 2008, pp. 238–245; Dexter, 1970, pp. 23–5; 50–78; Lilleker, 2003, pp. 210–11; Peabody et al., 1990, pp. 451) or the importance of adequate preparation before interviews take place (Davies 2001, 76–7; Richards, 1996, p. 202). Some research identifies potential uses of elite interviewing data: Tansey (2007) sets out the key functions of data acquired through elite interviews, including making inferences about a larger population's characteristics and decisions, such as a population of bureaucrats (Tansey, 2007, p. 767; see also Goldstein, 2002, p. 669) or "shed[ding] light on the hidden elements of political action that are not clear from an analysis of political outcomes or other primary sources" (Tansey, 2007, p. 767; see also Lilleker, 2003, p. 208).

Discussions of power are implicit within the mainstream social science literature on elite interviewing. Margaret Desmond (2004, p. 265) argues that "with elite interviewees, the [relationship] is inevitably asymmetrical regardless of the research strategies deployed." The powerful elites ("very powerful and self-assured people") are contrasted with "an obscure academic, who poses, so far as [the elites] are concerned, absolutely no threat" (Schoenberger, 1992, p. 217; see also Bygnes, 2008 and Leech, 2002). Power imbalance between interviewer and interviewee is viewed as not only inevitable but also as problematic. According to Richards (1996, p. 201) "by the very nature of elite interviews, it is the interviewee who has the power. They control the information the interviewer is trying to eke out." On this basis, scholars warn of the risk that elites will take control of the interview and view the management of this exigency, as one of the key challenges for elite interviewers (Burnham et al., 2008, p. 241; Lilleker, 2003, p. 211, citing Seidman, 1998, pp. 89–90; Richards, 1996, p. 201). Social scientists frequently reconcile the risks posed by power imbalance for interview pragmatically on the grounds that elite interviewing may be the only research method available (Kogan, 1994, p. 77) or argue that the effects of this power imbalance on measurement issues can be minimised through triangulation (Berry, 2002, p. 680; Brians, Willnat, Manheim, & Rich, 2010, p. 367; p. 375; Burnham et al., 2008, p. 246; Davies, 2001, p. 78; Dexter, 1970, pp. 14 16; 17; Lilleker, 2003, p. 208; Richards, 1996, p. 204). Alternatively, Richards (1996, p. 200) counsels that data gleaned from elite interviewing should only be taken as evidence of "an interviewee's subjective analysis of a particular episode or situation" and not in any way as presenting "the truth" (Richards, 1996, p. 200; see also Brians et al., 2010, p. 367; King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994, p. 112). German scholars Bogner and Menz (2009, pp. 58–69) create a typology of forms of expert interviews ranging from the interviewer as co-expert, to the interviewer as expert, to him or her as a layperson, to interviewer as either accomplice or critic of the respondent. As these authors note, not only do these categorisations challenge the notion of a singular, "neutral" approach to elite interviews, they also invoke various forms of power relations that can shape the interview content. The current article provides a methodological approach that permits textual analysis of interview material and placement with typologies such as those offered by Bogner et al. (2009) or Abels and Behrens (2009).

### *Feminist approaches to elite interviewing*

Feminist approaches to elite interviewing offer an important expansion of our understanding of power in elite interviewing. In contrast to the mainstream elite interviewing literature, feminist scholarship has historically focused on the perceived powerlessness of interviewees. Famously, Ann Oakley (1981, pp. 31; 41–9) argued from a normative perspective that an interview must not be viewed as an exercise in mere data collection, but also as an empowerment process for both parties. To attempt to maintain scientific objectivity in interviewing is not only impossible, Oakley (1981, p. 31) argued, it also overlooks the role of emotion in interviewing and presents a "masculinist paradigm." The focus of much of this feminist scholarship is on an non-elite informant with an intention of reducing power imbalances between interview parties, pursing an ethic of care towards research subjects, empowering the interview subject and ultimately and thereby enabling broader positive social change (Burgess-Proctor, 2015, pp.16–7; 2006). Researcher reflexivity around her of his own relative social power is a central component of this exercise (Acker et al., 1983; Burgess-Proctor, 2015, p. 126; Cotterill, 1992; DeVault & Gross, 2007; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Oakley, 1981; Olesen, 2005; for a discussion Puwar, 1997, p. para 11.1). More recently, Adrianna Kezar (2003) has proposed that this normative focus in the early feminist interviewing scholarship can be fruitfully applied to elite interviews. She argues that the interviewer in an elite interview should be concerned with both commitment and engagement with the interviewee. Mutual trust and egalitarian relations should be developed and oppression should be minimised in the interview space. In short, the "asymmetry in power" that is often present in elite interviews is critiqued and relative power imbalances should be "transformed" into a more equal relationship that leads to consciousness raising between interview participants.

There is a distinctly activist intention behind such feminist appraisals of interview methods (Kezar, 2003, pp.400–2). Yet, an assumption and preference for equality in elite interviews is not universally supported in the feminist scholarship. Lyons and Chipperfield (2000) challenge whether rapport is a worthy pursuit in and of itself and note that it could undermine the interview content. Further complicating the classic feminist perspective of a disadvantaged female interviewer, Abels and Behrens (2009, p. 47) argue that women researchers are less likely to be subject to what they call the "iceberg effect", where the interviewer demonstrates "inert unwillingness to give out information", due to a distrust of the interviewee. In this sense, a perceived lack of power but also heightened trustworthiness held by female interviewers, particularly young interviewers, may in fact act to their advantage (from the Anglo-Saxon scholarship, see also Marshall, 1984,

pp 239; 246; Deem, 1994, p.157; Ortbals and Rinker, 2009, pp. 288–9). This scholarship highlights the point, also identified in this article, that power in itself is not necessarily problematic in elite interviews but rather provides a basis for further interpretation and analysis.

While power relations are central to the feminist discussion of elite interviewing, the method to explicate such relations is unclear. This is also true of standard interviews that are subjected to feminist power analysis, such as McDermott's (2004) work on social class and power among lesbians speaking about their first sexual encounters. Frequently, such analyses involve descriptive examples of power but less systematic analysis of the issue (McDowell, 1998, p. 2138; Sarikakis, 2003; Smith, 2006, pp. 646–8). We find a similar pattern in non-feminist analyses that consider power relations (i.e. Bogner et al., 2009). At times, a range of interviews and interviewees are considered in the secondary analysis of power relations, but the particular method to identify power relations within the interview material are not explicated (i.e. Welch, Marschan-Piekkari, Penttinen, & Tahvanainen, 2002). Further, the examples are often qualitatively selected from within each interview, meaning that it is harder to assess each interview in its totality. In short, while existing approaches identify a variety of reasons to consider power relations within elite interviews, they are limited in their scope to address the best ways to measure and critically assess actual interview material with regards to such relations. It is precisely such a measure that the current article provides.

### *A new method for analysis of power in elite interviews: Drawing concepts from sociolinguistics*

The existing elite interviewing scholarship (both mainstream and feminist) identifies insights into power relations within elite interviews and offers some practical tips to ameliorate this outcome in instances where it is viewed as problematic. However, the scholarship does not present a method to adequately identify power relations in the first place, meaning that such relations are a product of researcher "pronouncement," rather than a strong evidence base. In response to this empirical and analytical shortcoming, this article develops a new method to analyse power in elite interviews. Sociolinguistics, rather than political science or other areas of the social sciences, provides the key tools here.

Sociolinguists are centrally interested in the way language is constructed as a social phenomenon. Traditionally, in sociolinguistics, the focus has been on the effect of class inequalities on the way in which language is structured and the way people interact linguistically. In the 1970s, attention turned to the broader issues of power in language, especially as it relates to gender. In her seminal text, *Language and Women's Place*, Robin Lakoff classified "women's speech" as marked by hesitancy and uncertainty, which undermined the nature of what women said and reflected women's lesser social stature when compared with men (Lakoff, 1975, p. 7). This work has broader implications for the study of power.

Since the 1970s, sociolinguists have developed an increasingly nuanced assessment of gender effects and their implications for power relations in speech. Early "dominance" theories argued that women in conversations were often required to do the "shit work" by facilitating conversation (Fishman, 1983, pp. 99–100). Others argued that men frequently dominate in conversation (Lakoff, 1975; West, 1979). These features of "male" and "female" forms of language, as it came to be known at the time, had the effect, these scholars argued, of perpetuating linguistically, power imbalances between men and women (Fishman, 1983, pp. 99–100). With time, theories around gender, language and power have been contested as stereotyping women's language as consistently powerless (Coates, 2004, p. 95; Talbot, 2003). Yet, recent theorists have suggested that these utterances may symbolise power differentials, rather than gendered relations per se (O'Barr and Atikins, 1981, p. 94). In addition, social class and ethnicity, as much as for gender, can inform the relative power of language (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1999, p. 193, cited in Sunderland & Litosseliti, 2002, p. 4; Grob, Meyers, & Schuh, 1997, p. 296). Focussing exclusively on gender and inferring that gender is the key sources of power differentials can therefore fail to consider other grounds for variation in the powerfulness or powerlessness of language (Eckert, 1989; Mills, 2002, p. 74; O'Barr and Atikins, 1981, pp. 98–99; 109–10). To overcome these critiques, the demographics of powerless and powerful speakers are treated in this article as a key point of empirical investigation, rather than as fixed identities. The indicators of powerful and powerless speech are ones where there is a strong support (if not unanimous agreement) in the existing sociolinguistics scholarship.

It could be argued that sociolinguistic indicators of powerful and powerless speech are less appropriately applied to interviews with political elites than the usual contexts of sociolinguistic analysis: informal friendships, marriages and educational contexts. Yet, some of these theories have also been successfully utilised to analyse media interviews with political elites (Macaulay, 2001; Pasfield-Neofitou, 2007; Winter, 1993) and gendered patterns of speech in legislative committees (Kathlene, 1995). Scholars have not examined elite interviews conducted in a closed context for research purposes; these are forms of interaction that do not share the aggressive quality of investigative journalism, or the partisan combat of legislative committees. The focus on elite interviews in this paper therefore offers an opportunity for expanding the sociolinguistics scholarship, as well as providing insights into elite interviewing methods, which is a core research method for political scientists.

### *Power indicators derived from sociolinguistics*

Feminist sociolinguistics scholarship identifies a number of linguistic devices that can be analysed to interpret powerful and powerlessness speech. I focus first on indicators of power.

*Silences and pauses.* Deliberate use of silence can be seen as a form of power. Feminist sociolinguists have argued that it can be a way for one speaker to exercise dominance in a conversation over the person who is awaiting a response (DeFrancisco, 1998; Gibbon, 1999, p. 127; Sattel, 1983). Delayed silences of more than two seconds, or non-responses, represent a disjuncture in conversation and may signal to the addressee that there is a "lack of commitment to ongoing conversation" (Coates, 2004, pp. 123–4; see also Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003, p. 119). On the other hand, a delayed response may indicate a lack of understanding on the part of the addressee, or a simple thinking process, rather than an active attempt to silence another party. In light of this ambiguity, delays of over two seconds are counted and also analysed qualitatively in the context in which they occurred.[i]

*Interruptions.* Interruptions reinforce power differentials (Zimmerman & West, 1977, cited in West & Zimmerman, 1983, p. 103). This is because interruptions violate the interrupted party's right to a "turn" in conversation. Linguistic scholar Schegloff (1972) argued that conversations ideally operates according to "turn taking", in which one party has the opportunity to speak and the other listens, whereafter this pattern is reversed. Working from a critique of this classic work, feminist sociolinguistics argue that classic turn-taking is most likely in relations of equal power. An interruption, in contrast, can be seen as an intrusion into another person's "turn" and therefore, as a sign of the speaker exercising power over their conversational partner. Interruptions need to be distinguished from simultaneous speech or overlap, which can facilitate interaction and therefore can stand as a symbol of cooperation, rather that domination and power (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003, p. 122; Grob et al., 1997, p. 290). An interruption is a "deep incursion…

[i] The choice to focus on silences in excess of two seconds is arbitrary. Other commentators have considered silences (pauses) ranging from one second upwards: Winter (1993), 129, citing Butterworth, 1980 and Jefferson, 1989). Increasing the period of silence minimises the risk that powerful silences will be conflated with silences that denote misunderstanding or contemplation on the part of the addressant.

that [has] the potential to disrupt a speaker's turn" (West & Zimmerman, 1983, pp. 104; 105). So, while an incidental "*yeah*" or "*right*" or "*really?*" can be seen as a facilitative overlap of speech consistent with turn-taking, or an attempt to clarify information, an interruption is not viewed in this solidarity building fashion. In their studies, West and Zimmerman find that men are far more likely to interrupt women than the other way around. They interpret this to signal male denial of women's "equal status…as conversational partners", in turn mirroring women's weaker position in society (Zimmerman & West, 1975, p. 125).

While the recent sociolinguistic literature provides mixed evidence on whether men do in fact interrupt women at a statistically significant higher rate than the reverse (Anderson and Leaper, 1998; James & Clarke, 1993, c.f. Karakowsky, McBey, & Miller, 2004, p. 424), there is consensus that successful interruption itself is a manifestation of power in speech (Anderson and Leaper, 1998, p. 227, citing Aries, 1996; Karakowsky et al., 2004; Smith-Lovin & Brody, 1989; Winter, 1993). In fact, interruptions in elite interviews are seen to be more likely to represent power differential than in day-to-day speech, given the expectation of adherence to turn-taking in this more formal setting (Winter, 1993, p. 125). It is necessary to distinguish between speech overlap that involves a facilitative or "back channel" function, such as "*yeah*" or "*uh-huh*", or that is simply reflective of a lack of clarity on the part of the listener, from interruptions denoting power and dominance (Anderson and Leaper, 1998, pp. 227; 224; Hannah & Murachver, 2007, p. 275). There is a rich literature on the measurement of interruption and its distinction from overlaps (Tannen, 1994; James & Clarke, 1993; Okamoto, Slattery Rashotte, & Smith-Lovin, 2002). For current purposes, I adopt a syntactical definition of an interruption as occurring when there is a "deep intrusion more than two syllables away from a possible turn-transition space" (West & Zimmerman, 1983, discussed in Okamoto et al., 2002, 40). Or, to put it in non-linguistic terms, there is an interruption when such an intrusion occurs more than two syllables before what we would consider to be the point where the speaker should normally stop speaking. To ensure that interruptions are not confused with instances of information clarification or "attentiveness and solidarity" (Farley, 2008, 242), all examples are also assessed qualitatively.

*Lengthy monologues.* Dominating conversation through lengthy monologues can be seen as an indicator of power. In these scenarios, the speaker may be attempting to set themselves up or to perpetuate status (James & Drakich, 1993). Monologues are contrary to the idea of turn-taking, as they heavily privilege the participation rights of the speaker over the listener (Coates, 2004, pp. 134; 136). In the context of political elites, monologues, can at times, lead to frustratingly lengthy tangents. However, they can also contribute to insights into the issues under consideration. Indeed, discrepancy in interviewer and interviewee stanza length is to be expected, as elucidating interviewee answers are the central goal of political interviews (Winter, 1993, p. 120). Counting uninterrupted speech of more than nine sentences provides an indicator of lengthy monologues.[ii]

*Commands.* The use of commands is a clear indicator of power as it imposes directions upon the addressee in a way that is difficult for that person to avoid (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003, p. 188). Commands are utilised to exercise dominance, hold attention, to pass on information, or in more extreme forms, to threaten or coerce another person (Robertson & Murachver, 2003, p. 322). Imperatives such as "*Do this!*", or "*Sit there!*" are associated with power on the part of the speaker. Commands denote impoliteness, which is more likely to be associated with those in positions of power (Deuchar, 1988, cited in Gibbon, 1999, p. 134). Given their harsh effect and the generally polite context of elite interviews, it is anticipated that commands will be fairly infrequent in the data. "Mitigated directives" that appear more as suggestions for joint action, such as "*Let's…*" or "*Why don't we*" (see Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003, pp. 141–2; Goodwin, 1980, 1990, 1998) are more ambiguous in their social meaning and are therefore not coded as indicators of power.

*Powerlessness indicators derived from sociolinguistics*

According to Grob et al. (1997, p. 283) "powerless language has been defined as speech marked by hesitancy and tentativeness." Powerless speech is polite (Gibbon, 1999), it is cautious and it includes more forms of disclaimers, and intensifiers of language, than powerful speech (Lakoff, 1975). Drawing on the sociolinguistics literature, a series of indicators of powerlessness are derived.

*Being interrupted.* Consistent with the argument above that interruption is an example of powerful, dominating speech, being interrupted can be seen as an example of linguistic powerlessness. The same measure of interruption adopted to capture powerful speech can be inverted to measure interruptions. For instance, if a speaker is unsuccessful in completing their sentence more than two syllables away from the end of their turn, this is taken as an indicator of them being interrupted.

*Facilitative phrases.* Also known as "hedges", facilitative phrases have been identified as indicators of powerlessness, as they create a right to speak only through linking to what the more powerful speaker has already said. An example of a facilitative phrase is "*you know*?" or "*d'ya know?*", or a variety of speech modifiers, such as "*probably,*" "*sorta,*" "*kinda,*" and "*fairly.*" Facilitative phrases perform an important function in maintaining the flow of conversation, but can also be seen as a way for one party to maintain power over another in a conversation (Lakoff, 1975, p. 53; Bucholtz, 2003, p. 51; see also O'Barr & Atikins, 1981 and Fishman, 1983, p. 401, cited in Holmes, 1986, p. 4). Facilitative phrases can be distinguished from standard speech as they do not add to the substantive meaning of the speech, rather they merely position that speech socially (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003, p. 184). Some sociolinguists suggest that it is simplistic to always equate facilitative phrases, such as "*you know*", with powerlessness. In a comprehensive study of the phrase "*you know*", Holmes (1986) distinguishes between uses of "*you know*" that impart certainty, and those that impart uncertainty on the part of the speaker. While the former suggests confidence, the latter fits the more traditional conception of "*you know*" as "mitigating, apologetic, and attenuating" (Holmes, 1986, p. 7). In the current article, I focus on the use of the phrase "*you know*" conferred in this uncertain way.[iii]

*Attention beginnings and disclaimers.* A powerless speaker will feel the need to justify that what they are about to say is worthy, rather than assuming that the other speakers will find it such (Fishman, 1983, p. 95). Following this line of argument, Fishman (1983, p. 95) found that sentence beginnings such as "*this is interesting*" are used to substantiate the worthiness of the future claim. As Gibbon (1999, p. 127) argues, attention beginnings invite the other party to respond and assume a need to justify the use of the floor on the part of the speaker. Similarly, disclaimers partially negate what is to come and infer hesitancy on the part of the speaker. These include sentences beginning with the phrase

[ii] Nine sentences is selected here as measure of a length monologue because analysis of several elite interview indicators showed that nine sentences was well beyond the median length of interviewee response to a question.

[iii] The uncertain uses of "you know" includes when a speaker appeals to another speaker through this phrase to seek validation of a statement. The following examples are cited from Holmes 1986, 10–11: "*Young man to friends at dinner party.*" "People can now see how narrow my eyes are set together *you/know*." In this uncertain way, "*you know*" can also mark imprecision and a false start in speaking. For instance: *Young man requesting clarification of previous speaker, his flatmate*: "better/entertainment product or better/*you\know*/music, musicians." A variety of other examples are given by Holmes – introducing qualifying information or indicating a false start (1986, 11–12), which were also drawn upon in the coding.

"*I don't know*" or "*I could be wrong about this, but…*" Disclaimers often feature at the beginning of a powerless sentence (Grob et al., 1997, pp. 286; 290).

*Back channelling.* As noted above, interruptions must be distinguished from back channelling, which serves at best as a facilitative function in conversation, and when unevenly distributed between parties, as an indicator of powerlessness. As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003), p. 110) note, a degree of back channelling is expected in the English speaking world and to fail to back channel "leaves an interlocutor high and dry, wondering if they're being listened to or understood." Back channelling takes the form of phrases such as "*mmm…*" or "*hmmm*" or "*yes…*" or "*yeah*" and indicates active listening (Gibbon, 1999, p. 127). The literature is divided over whether women use back channelling more than men. Nonetheless, there appears to be agreement that back channelling, if it is undertaken disproportionately by one party, represents a form of disempowerment (Coates, 2004, pp. 87–8).

Taken in its totality, the sociolinguistic literature provides useful insights into how powerful and powerless language should look. We can code and count utterances to assess the language of participants in elite interviews. The hypothesised effects and the proposed measurements of these linguistic utterances are outlined in Table 1.

## Results and discussion

The sociolinguistic indicators summarised in Table 1 above, are applied to the transcription of an elite interview, which was coded according to the relevant indicators. As developed by O'Barr and Atikins (1981), pp. 100–1) in their study of powerful speech in the courtroom setting, the ratio of powerful to powerless utterances by interviewer and interviewee can be compared to analyse the overall distribution of power, within, as well as across, interviews. The current article applies the sociolinguistic indicators to one elite interview conducted with a senior, male industry leader in Australia by the researcher as part of a broader project on immigration policy making in Australia. For reasons of confidentiality and ethics, his identity is not revealed in this article, although permission was granted to use the interview for this secondary analysis. This particular interview was selected because initial qualitative analysis suggested that it revealed interesting issues of power and contained many of the relevant indicators identified in the sociolinguistics literature. Further, he and the researcher are of the same ethnic background. While a singular case, this interview provides a useful exemplar for exploration of the power index developed due to the perception of a power imbalance on the part of the interviewer. While we cannot extrapolate generalizable principles regarding power and elite interviewing from this case, it does provide the basis for an initial investigation of these issues that could be fruitfully extended in future analysis with a broader array of case studies. However, at present, optimal depth is achieved through careful examination of one interview that exemplified strongly gendered power dynamics in the view of the researcher.

In the following section of the article, I set out the use of power indicators in this one elite interview. The interview was coded by two coders in NVivo, with an intercoder agreement of >95% for all indicators. As Table 2 clarifies, looking first at the use of powerful language in the interview, it is clear that the respondent used far more of these forms of speech than the interviewer. He interrupted over three times as much as he was interrupted, he also engaged in at least one lengthy monologue, whereas the interviewer did not engage in any. As noted above, the latter is unsurprising, given that the purpose of an elite interview is to elicit detailed responses to complex issues and explains the discrepancy between interviewer and interviewee in the use of powerless language (see Table 3).

There were no examples of pure imperative commands in this interview. Of more interest, is the high number of silences used by the interviewee (19 silences), compared with the interviewer (two). A qualitative analysis of these silences indicates that, at times, they projected authority on the part of the respondent. An example is provided below:

> Interviewee: "That's probably right. (Interviewer: uhmmm) The Canadians watch pretty carefully what we do on immigration, and of course Quebec has its own immigration policy. (Yep) (pause, 2 s). Strange that isn't it?"

Here, the silence after the interviewer's back-channelling "*Yep*" amounted to a non-response to the back channel and also created anticipation for the interviewee's next statement regarding Quebec's immigration policy – "*Strange that isn't it?*" In fact, the use of rhetorical questions was frequent in this interview and conveyed the sense of the interviewee conducting an interview with himself. The two second silence after the "*yep*" has the effect of silencing further commentary about Quebec's immigration policy on the part of the interviewer. However, on other occasions, the silence appeared instead to convey more contemplation on the part of the respondent, as the following example illustrates:

> Interviewer: Was that the [organisation's] position from the 80s onwards or was this position developed later? (pause, 2 s)
>
> Interviewee: "No I think [the organisation's] position was influenced more by Government policy direction in that respect, (Okay yeah) as distinct from initiating it, (uhuh) to be fair."

Here, it appears that the silence reflects not an attempt to impose an opinion upon the interviewer, but rather an attempt by the interviewee to recall what his organisation's position was in the 1980s.

Turning to powerless language, it is clear that the interviewer used eight times more powerless language that the interviewee. The aggregate is greatly inflated by the count of back channelling. Some asymmetry in

**Table 1**
Sociolinguistic utterance and hypothesised effect within elite interviews.

| Powerful language | Form |
|---|---|
| Silences | Silences measured according to 2, 3 and 4+ pause increments. |
| Interruptions | Interruption before the speaker is more than two syllables away from the end of the turn-transition space. |
| Lengthy monologues | Number of monologues of nine sentences or more without interruption (back channelling permitted). |
| Commands | Total number. |
| Powerless language | |
| Being interrupted | Interrupted before more than two syllables away from the end of the turn. |
| Facilitative phrases | Total number of uncertain uses of "you know" (using the method of Holmes 1986). |
| Attention beginnings and disclaimers | Total number |
| Back channelling | Total number |

**Table 2**
Use of powerful language in one elite interview.

| | Interviewer | Interviewee |
|---|---|---|
| Commands | 0 | 0 |
| Interruptions | 3 | 11 |
| Lengthy monologues | 0 | 1 |
| Silences | | |
| 2 s | 1 | 13 |
| 3 s | 1 | 3 |
| 4 s+ | 0 | 3 |
| Total | 5 | 31 |

**Table 3**
Use of powerless language in one elite interview.

| | Interviewer | Interviewee |
|---|---|---|
| Attention beginnings | 1 | 0 |
| Back channelling | 132 | 15 |
| Being interrupted | 11 | 3 |
| Facilitative language ("you know") | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 144 | 18 |

back channelling is to be expected in elite interviewing.[iv] One interesting feature of this interview was that some forms of powerless language that the literature predicts will be used frequently by women, were rarely used by the interviewer. Attention beginnings and disclaimers were used only once, and the facilitative phrase "*you know*" was not used at all. With regard to being interrupted, it is clear that the interviewer was more often interrupted than the interviewee. This count draws upon the fairly rigid definition of interruption developed by West and Zimmerman (1983). We will recall, that under this definition, an interruption occurs when the speaker is broken more than two syllables away from the end of their turn. The following discussion over skilled immigration points tests provides an example of such an interruption:

> Interviewer: The age was cut substantially, the maximum points for age from what was it 60 down to 49, which obviously meant that it was targeted towards a younger group of migrants. They would be most successful under the new points test. Was this something that [the organisation] was […]
>
> Interviewee: "[Ahh,] well actually while we don't object to that… there are… today's 50 is really 40 (hmmm)."

The square parentheses denote interruptions. Analysis of the entire interview indicates that in the early stages, interruptions often occurred in instances where the interviewer held the floor for more than one sentence, as in this case here. This may have contributed to an irritation on the part of the interviewee about the interviewer holding the floor for an extended period of time. In contrast, towards the end of the interview, the interviewer was more likely to interrupt, as the following example indicates:

> Interviewer: But now they are moving towards (*laughs*) a targeted model, the Canadians, with their provincial nominee program.
>
> Interviewee: "Yeah but […](*sounds frustrated*)"
>
> Interviewer: [Maybe] they didn't have the best model when they introduced it.
>
> Interviewee: "Precisely, and they didn't apply the language tests adequately (yep), so I'm not sure that the outcomes negated the merits of a generic skills approach (no)."

This quotation from the end of the interview demonstrates that, over the course of the interview, possibly as a result of the respondent's experience of the interview, the relationship between the parties appears to have changed and they were more able to engage in a two-and-fro conversational format, which more closely approximates Schegloff's (1972) notion of "turn taking." Nonetheless, these changes towards the end of the interview do not negate differences in "power ratios" when the interview is considered as a whole. The interviewer's ratio of powerful/powerless language utterances was 5/144 or 0.03. This can be compared with the interviewee's 31/18 ratio of 1.72. A higher ratio indicates more use of powerful language. Overall, the differences in the use of powerless language appear to reflect different social, age and gender differentials on the part of the interview participants, although this proposition would need to be tested through a larger study. There were also spatial dimensions to this interview, which are not reflected in purely text-based analysis, such as the fact that for the first half of the interview, the respondent did not face the interviewer, rather, he was sitting in a profile position that conveyed disinterest. Interestingly, towards the end of the interview, his body language changed and he faced the interviewer. It was also during this latter period in the interview, that the conversation more approximated the turn-taking ideal as recommended by socio-linguists.

## Conclusion

This article has presented a new way to measure and analyse power in elite interviews through the coding and quantification of speech within elite interviews. Feminist approaches offer much to mainstream elite interviewing methods through the identification of normative and empirical grounds to examine power in such interviews. Yet it is the field of feminist sociolinguistics that most helpfully opens a space to analyse power relationships within elite interviews. This article argues that an essential first step to address these concerns is to develop a means to measure and evaluate power in such interviews. What is said and what is not said in an elite interview may have as much to do with the dynamics between individual participants, as it does with the existing knowledge or experiences of the participants. Power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee may also affect whether an interviewer feels that he or she is able to ask certain questions clearly and without interruption, whether she or he is taken seriously, and therefore given full and meaningful responses at the necessary level of detail, or whether certain facts are withheld and denied. From a normative perspective, power imbalances may be something that interviewers wish to minimise. Furthermore, from an analytical perspective, understanding power dynamics may be important to contextualise the material that emerges from an elite interview (Bogner et al., 2009, 71).

Yet, at present, there is limited empirical guidance on how to ascertain if there is a power imbalance in the first place. In order to examine this possibility in a robust manner, a necessary first step is to develop a way to measure power in elite interviews. Drawing upon the rich feminist sociolinguistic scholarship, this article has developed a power ratio that can be used to conduct secondary analysis of elite interviewing transcripts. Close analysis of one elite interview demonstrates important differences in power between interviewer and interviewee that create a methodological tool that may be fruitfully applied to create generalizable theory and empirical findings, as well as a means to operationalize existing typologies of expert interviews, such as those developed by Bogner et al. (2009) and Abels and Behrens (2009). The value of this article lies primarily in exploring the potential for such a method to explore power within elite interviewing.

The extent to which power issues emerge in elite interviews can be examined comparatively for broader inferences to be drawn. Future studies could apply the power index to a broader array of interviews with individuals from different professions, of different ethic and language background and of different ages and genders, to consider the ways in which language manifests differently across varied cultural contexts. This would also permit researchers to retest some of the power index metrics, such as the number of sentences that comprises a "lengthy monologue." In this way, variance in demographic features and across the timing of the interviews could be maximised. From a sociolinguistic perspective, applying these indicators to the study of elite interviews extends those theories considered in the workplace, educational system, or within marriage, to a new area of analysis: the elite political world.

[iv] Even if the high level of back-channelling is omitted, there is still an imbalance in the powerless ratios (0.42 for the interviewer compared with 10.3 for the interviewee).

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