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## Conversation Analysis and the Study of Sociohistorical Change

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### ABSTRACT

We reflect on the affordances and challenges of interactional data in the analysis of long-term institutional change. To this end we draw on our studies of direct encounters between journalists and politicians in news interviews and presidential news conferences and in particular the use of question design as a window into the evolution of journalistic norms and press-state relations over time and the causal antecedents of such change. All analyses that incorporate a concern with environing contexts of interactional change impose certain burdens of empirical demonstration on the researcher. Here we consider three analytic issues that arise in the kind of historical-institutional analysis we have been pursuing: (a) controlling for the situational context, (b) pinpointing the locus of change, and (c) validating indicators of change. Data are in English.

There are numerous resources for documenting processes of social change. A nonexhaustive list of the more prominent forms of historical data would include survey and census results, official records, legal codes, mass media content, and artifacts of elite and popular culture. Each has distinct utilities, but as a class they are removed from, and hence not particularly well suited for, the study of everyday conduct that undergirds institutional and sociocultural realities. Actual social behavior in its natural habitat, situated within encounters with family and friends, colleagues and coworkers, provides a maximally direct window into social phenomena as they are enacted and experienced in everyday life.

Conversation analysis (CA) has become the primary method for observational studies of interactionally situated social behavior, utilizing recordings and transcriptions of actual conduct that has occurred at some particular place and time. In the last decade or so researchers have begun to adapt the CA approach to such data within large-scale comparative projects that include longitudinal data and the study of change over time (see the papers in Pekarek Doehler et al., 2018; see also Deppermann & Schmidt, 2021/[this issue](#)).

In this article we consider some of the payoffs and challenges that attend the use of longitudinal interactional data. Such projects can have a variety of theoretical motivations, including the study of change at the level of language or interaction itself. Linguists have long argued that processes of language change primarily emerge through social interaction (Couper-Kuhlen, 2011; Traugott, 2010, 2012; Traugott & Dasher, 2002), and studies of the lexicon and of the evolution of pragmatic particles such as *well* (Defour & Simon-Vandenberg, 2010; Jucker, 1997; Schourup, 1999) and *oh* (Heritage, 2018; Jucker, 2002; Taavitsainen, 1995, 1997) point to the potential growth and value of studies in this domain.

Interactional data may also serve as a resource for studies of longitudinal change in the acquisition of language by speakers, ranging from the classic work of Brown (1973) on his own children to studies of second-language acquisition and the development of interactional competence (Pekarek Doehler & Balaman, 2021/[this issue](#); Pekarek Doehler & Pochon-Berger, 2015; Pfeiffer & Marina, 2021/[this issue](#);

Skogmyr Marian, 2021/[this issue](#); Stivers et al., 2018). Finally, such data may serve as a resource for investigating change at some nonlinguistic level, such as skill acquisition (e.g., Deppermann, 2018).

In this article we reflect on a further affordance of interaction-based longitudinal data: the analysis of long-term change in institutional and sociocultural forms, drawing on our studies of news interviews and presidential news conferences as arenas for direct encounters between journalists and politicians. These studies, we believe, serve as an action-based window into journalistic norms and press-state relations as they evolve and change over time.

Before proceeding further, it is important to distinguish between the studies described in this article and other longitudinal studies. Setting aside research focusing on pathways of change in language practices themselves over time (Traugott & Dasher, 2002), the research collected in this special issue examines the entanglement of language practices with social relations both in the context of language acquisition and in the context of evolving groups and their memberships (Deppermann & Pekarek Doehler, 2021/[this issue](#)). Correspondingly, our research attempts to specify the reflexive interrelations of language practices with *institutional* realities and where possible the causal antecedents of change. All analyses that incorporate a concern with environing contexts of change impose additional burdens of empirical demonstration on the researcher that can also constrain the utility of particular forms of data.

Our work on historical change in the broadcast media emerged in the context of broadcast news interview research, using broadly contemporaneous data from both the United Kingdom (U.K.) and the United States (U.S.) spanning the years 1975–1995. Our primary objective was to identify fundamental organizational features of news interview interaction (e.g., the specialized turn-taking system for news interviews and normative practices for building questions and responses) using the basic sequential analytic tools of conversation analysis. The findings, synthesized in our monograph (Clayman & Heritage, 2002a), included a consideration of how interactional practices enact key journalistic norms such as neutralism and adversarialness in the treatment of politicians. These practices were robust and stable across data sets; nonetheless, we found that there were subtle variations in their distribution, precise sequential contexts, and action import.

Although dealing primarily with contemporary materials, we also considered processes of historical change in both countries (Clayman & Heritage, 2002a, chapter 2). For instance, we identified an apparent sharpening of British questioning styles over the course of our research period: Questioning appeared to grow more critical, more accusatory, and more focused on the entrapment of public figures. In the British case, this seemed clearly to be linked to the growth of competition in broadcasting following the abolition of the BBC monopoly. All of this work, however, was essentially qualitative in nature, using context-sensitive case analysis and deviant cases to document normative patterns in contemporary news interviews and, to some extent, to suggest how these differed from earlier eras.

Due to data limitations—a relatively constricted timeframe and the complexities of shifting programming contexts—the news interview research was limited in its capacity to document historical change. Our subsequent research shifted from news interviews to presidential news conferences and took up the challenge of historical analysis in a more sustained way. This new research drew upon our findings about news interview questioning practices and fashioned them into resources for a large-scale coding framework. We deployed findings about, for example, question complexity, conventional indirectness, and response preference (including negative interrogatives) as indices of various forms of aggressiveness in journalistic questioning. With a larger and systematically longitudinal data set spanning the latter half of the 20th century (1953–2000; nine presidents; 12 administrations; and a sample size of approximately 4,600 questions),<sup>1</sup> we began incorporating quantitative methods to chart evolving journalistic norms and press-state relations while also identifying the contextual factors that seemed to be driving these trends.

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<sup>1</sup>Because all data in the news interview and presidential news conference projects are a matter of public record, their use poses no human subjects or other ethical concerns.

In what follows we reflect on three analytic issues that arise in the kind of historical analysis that we have been pursuing: (a) controlling for the situational context, (b) pinpointing the locus of change, and (c) validating indicators of change.

### Controlling for the situational context

For interactional data to serve as an index of institutional or sociocultural change, it is essential to control for the local situational context of action. Because social behavior is situationally sensitive, failure to take account for such local factors can seriously confound efforts to link behavioral patterns and trendlines to economic, political, and other extrasituational phenomena. Potentially confounding situational factors can include variations in turn taking and participation frameworks, in spatial arrangements of participants and physical artifacts, in activity structures, and in the immediately prior sequential context of action (Schegloff, 1993). Unless these local factors can be stabilized or otherwise brought under analytical control, it can be difficult to attribute observed variations to the institutional or sociocultural phenomena of primary analytic interest. This difficulty is of course hardly unique to longitudinal interaction research (Pekarek Doehler et al., 2018); it reflects a general problem for comparative analysis—the need to obtain cases or data points that are maximally similar in ways other than the primary variable(s) of interest.

Presidential news conferences are, in many ways, an optimal context for meeting this challenge. Beyond its sheer prominence as a political communication arena and the long-term availability of recorded data (extending back to at least the early 1950s), the news conference is an unusually stable species of social situation. Its central figure—the president—represents a constitutional office with explicitly codified rights and responsibilities that are difficult to amend and indeed have not been revised since the last world war (the 22nd amendment of 1944 established term limits). The news conference itself is a highly formal (Atkinson, 1982) and ritualized occasion with a largely stable ecological arrangement (journalists seated in rows facing the president; wire services in the front row) and a structured participation framework. Contributions are organized by a turn-taking system that normatively restricts conduct to questions and answers. Variations in these arrangements are infrequent and involve tinkering around the edges of what has been a remarkably stable situational form (Cillizza, 2015; Schegloff, 1987, pp. 224–225).

In addition to stability of the situation *in toto*, the local sequential context of action is also stabilized in a way that bears directly on the use of questions as an extractable index of change. The turn-taking framework requires multiple journalists to compete to ask each next question, an arrangement that limits most to a single questioning turn and encourages the preparation of questions in advance. This yields a succession of question-response sequences that tend to be sequentially disjoined from one another. Each successive question is typically asked by a different journalist and is not occasioned by the previous turn or sequence. Moreover, most exceptions to this general pattern (i.e., follow-up questions) can be identified and controlled. The prior sequential context is not only stabilized by this arrangement but also rendered largely irrelevant to the analysis of question-design variations and trends.

Accordingly, the presidential news conference is the kind of structured and stable situation from which actions (in this case journalists' questions) may be extracted and examined for their intrinsic design features, subjected to qualitative or quantitative comparison, and thus used as indicators of extrasituational processes of historical change.

There are some complications to this generally promising picture. Despite the many pressures favoring situational stability, there remain variations that become increasingly substantial further back in time. In the contemporary era there is the distinction between solo news conferences with the president only versus joint conferences involving additional heads of state. Journalists are generally less adversarial when other dignitaries are present (Banning & Billingsley, 2007), which may explain why joint conferences have become increasingly frequent since the 1990s. There is also the distinction between formal conferences held at the White House, versus impromptu encounters with reporters

elsewhere in the interstices of public events (Kumar, 2003), versus conferences outside Washington where the presence of local or international reporters may impact the content and tenor of questioning (cf., Wu et al., 2017).

Further back in time are differences in the degree of news conference “publicity” (Cornwell, 1965; Smith, 1990). News conferences since the mid-1970s have almost always been broadcast live for immediate public consumption, but live broadcasting was sporadic from Kennedy through Nixon (1961–1974) and nonexistent before that. Still further back, throughout the 1930s and even earlier, the news conference was a largely “backstage” encounter with presidents’ remarks treated as off the record by default and hence quotable only with explicit permission. Their main purpose was to provide reporters with background and context for news stories rather than attributable content. Truman and Eisenhower were transitional figures in the shift from private to public news conferences, when verbatim quotation was emerging as routinely permissible, but broadcasting remained off-limits.

In addition, the timing and frequency of news conferences is entirely under the president’s discretion and is widely variable. Conference meetings have become both less common and less regular over the years, ranging from twice weekly under President Franklin Roosevelt to monthly or quarterly by more recent presidents. And some presidents have suspended conference meetings for extended periods during times of scandal (e.g., Reagan and Iran-Contra, Clinton and Monica Lewinsky) or out of a general antipathy toward the press corps (Trump). It’s possible that the time lag since the last conference could impact the content or tenor of questioning (although such an effect has not been documented thus far; see Clayman, Heritage, Elliott, et al., 2007).

Finally, the demographic and other individual-level attributes of journalists are not constant. In the early days of the presidential press conference, the White House press corps was overwhelmingly male and entirely composed of newspaper and wire service reporters. The increasing prevalence of broadcasters and the “feminization” of the press corps over time have been significant trends. These trends vary in their import for the news conference. The changing gender balance of the press corps has had some impact on the tenor of questioning (Clayman, Elliott, et al., 2012; Clayman, Heritage, & Hill, 2020); however, it turned out that there were few differences in the questioning practices of newspaper and broadcast journalists (Clayman, Elliott et al., 2012).

So even in this optimal case, researchers must be alert to shifting circumstances in the local situational context, including the immediate sequential context of action insofar as contingent follow-up questions comprise part of the database. Elsewhere the situational context may be far more variable. Think of the diverse participation and activity frameworks that fall under the rubric of “business meetings” (Asmuß & Svennevig, 2009) or the extent to which tasks and activities fluctuate over the course of a single doctor-patient encounter (Heritage & Maynard, 2006). As a general principle, local situational and sequential factors must be taken into account in any effort to establish a link between evolving practices and broader institutional or socio-cultural contexts.

### **Pinpointing the locus of change**

When local situational contexts have been ruled out as possible sources of variation, there remains the problem of ascertaining what it is beyond the local situation that any observed longitudinal pattern actually indicates. Scholars interested in the evolution of language or interaction *in itself* may be able to sidestep this problem, but it remains an issue for those using language and/or interaction as an index of change at some broader contextual level (e.g., individual competence, group dynamics, institutional, sociocultural, etc.) given the multiplicity of “contexts” in which any interaction is necessarily embedded (Schegloff, 1987, 1991, 1992).

Statistical analyses (e.g., measures of frequency and graphical representations of trendlines, multivariate modeling of the correlates of change, and other techniques) can provide important clues in this respect, as can in-depth analysis of cases and small collections incorporating the sequential embeddedness of action (the places where practices are deployed and the responses they attract). These approaches have inverse strengths and limitations. Sequentially informed case analysis enables emic validation of findings<sup>2</sup> but is vulnerable to confirmation bias in the selective presentation of data excerpts. Quantitative analysis helps protect against confirmation bias but risks losing touch with the displayed understandings of the participants in any given case (Schegloff, 1993). So there can be synergistic payoffs when the approaches are used in combination, although this rarely amounts to a “magic bullet.” Contextual elements can sometimes have diffuse consequences that are intrinsically difficult to document (e.g., Clayman, 2017; Heritage et al., 2001; Hopper & LeBaron, 1998; Stivers & Majid, 2007). Moreover, such factors may be socially undesirable or officially prohibited and thus actively concealed as in the case of racial or gender bias. Accordingly, although multiple methods may not *conclusively* solve the interpretive puzzles that can arise in a given project, they can help point the way toward a resolution.

Returning to our previous research on presidential news conferences (Clayman, Elliott, Heritage, et al., 2006; Clayman & Heritage, 2002b), consider the phenomenon of vigorous or aggressive questioning. This phenomenon may be decomposed into component dimensions with practice-based indicators for each. Questions can vary in their level of *initiative*, with simple unelaborated questions at the passive end of the scale (e.g., Excerpt 1) and statement-prefaced and multipart questions at the more enterprising end (e.g., Excerpt 2, a two-part question that is also statement prefaced). In the latter type of question, the journalist sets the context of inquiry via the preface, while placing multiple response pressures on the president.

(1) [Passive Q (invented)]

1 JRN: How soon can we expect troop redeployments in Lebanon?

(2) [Initiative Q: Reagan 19 Oct. 1983: 20]

1 JRN: S-> Mr. President, before the United States went into Vietnam,  
 2 the French suffered a devastating defeat there by putting  
 3 their troops in a saucer-shaped depression with the enemy  
 4 up around the sides shooting down at them.  
 5 Q-> Doesn't this appear uncomfortably similar to you to the  
 6 way we are deploying our troops in Lebanon on the low ground?  
 7 Q-> And how soon can we expect that we're going to redeploy  
 8 them to a spot that makes more sense?

Questions also vary in the *directness* with which issues are put to the president, with certain indirect question frames (e.g., *Can you tell us . . .*, *Would you explain . . .*, *Can I ask . . .*, as in Excerpts 3 and 4) reducing the pressure for an answer by licensing a nonanswering response (e.g., *No I can't.*).

(3) [Indirect Q: Eisenhower 7 April 1954: 4]

1 JRN: Mr. President, **would you** care to say anything to us  
 2 about the loyalty and patriotism of Edward R. Murrow?  
 3 DDE: I am going to say nothing at all about that...

<sup>2</sup>Emic validation, and its utility for the development of coding systems and quantification, is discussed in the next section.

## (4) [Indirect Q: Eisenhower 8 Oct 1953: 20]

1 JRN: Mr. President, I ask this because many of us  
 2 are not well acquainted with Mr. Mitchell.  
 3 -> **Could I ask** you the same question, sir, in reference to  
 4 him that was asked about Chief Justice Warren last week,  
 5 last week, that is, what are the qualifications that  
 6 attracted Mr. Mitchell to you, as Secretary of Labor?

There are variations as well in *assertiveness*, with some polar question forms (e.g., statement prefaces, negative interrogatives such as *Isn't it . . .*, *Didn't you . . .*) embodying a strong preference or “tilt” toward a particular answer. Here both the prefatory statement and the negative interrogative (arrowed) converge in favoring a *yes*-type response (Heritage & Clayman, 2013).

## (5) [Assertive Q: Reagan 19 Oct 1983: 28]

1 JRN: Mr. President, new figures out today show that housing  
 2 starts were down pretty sharply last month, and the  
 3 number of building permits went down for the second  
 4 month in a row. Analysts are saying this could mean  
 5 the economic recovery is going to level off, maybe kind  
 6 of peter out next year. And more people are becoming  
 7 concerned about high interest rates. And given the  
 8 big deficits being projected by your own administration,  
 9 **isn't it** time for some strong action by you to get  
 10 interest rates down?

Finally, at the level of question content, there are variations in *adversarialness* via the presence of content that is substantively critical of or oppositional toward the president (as in Excerpt 2), as well as explicit demands for *accountability* via questions seeking justification for official actions (e.g., *Why did you . . . How could you . . .*).

In sum, questions may embody more or less initiative, directness, and assertiveness in their form, as well as adversarial content and explicit demands for accountability. Table 1 provides an overview of these dimensions and their practice-based indicators.<sup>3</sup>

Varying frequencies of such practices may be indicative of some sort of shift in journalism or press-state relations over time, but how are such patterns to be understood, and what exactly lies behind them?

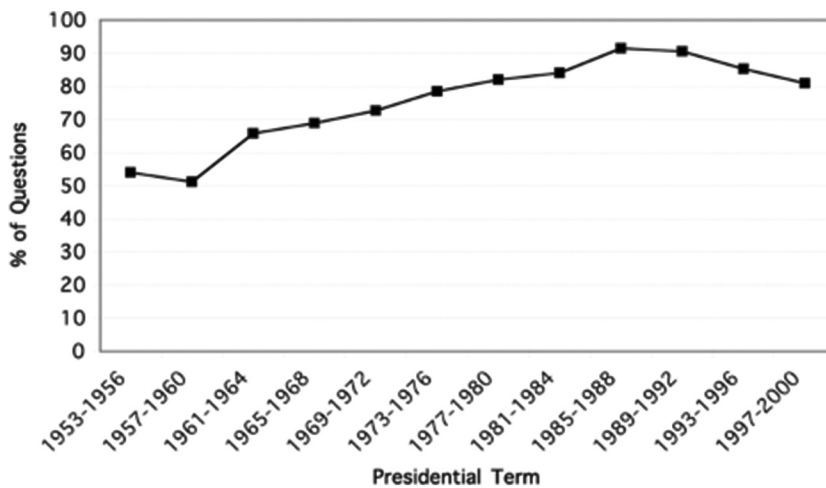
Consider, first, that some gradual trends may be substantial and statistically significant but nonetheless puzzling as to their underpinnings. These *secular trends* are so steady and persistent that they cannot be readily attributed to any evident developments in journalism, politics, or the broader socioeconomic environment. Directness in question design—the decline of indirect question frames (e.g., *Can/could you tell us . . .*, *Will/would you explain . . .*, *Can/may I ask . . .*) in favor of straight interrogatives—exhibits such a pattern of apparent secular change (see Figure 1) (Clayman, Elliott et al., 2006). Questions have grown steadily more direct for almost four decades, with some tapering off toward the end of the sampling period. The general lack of peaks and valleys in this trend suggests that it is largely unaffected by shifts in journalism, presidential administrations, or socioeconomic conditions, and indeed the directness trend is remarkable in its lack of statistically significant associations (Clayman, Heritage, Elliott, et al., 2007). It appears to reflect some deeper “tectonic” shift in social relations, such as a long-term decline in formality or politeness, whether specific to president-press interactions or generic to interaction per se.

<sup>3</sup>For a fuller discussion of the coding framework, see Clayman et al. (2006).

**Table 1.** Framework for coding aggressive questioning.

Dimension	Indicator	Description or Example
Initiative	Statement preface	Q preceded by statement(s)
	Multiple questions	2+ Qs in a single turn
Directness	Follow-up question	Q by same journalist as prior Q
	Absence of self-referencing frames	<i>Can you/could you tell us ...</i> <i>Will you/would you tell us ...</i>
	Absence of other-referencing frames	<i>I wonder whether ...</i> <i>Can I/May I ask ...</i>
Assertiveness	Preface favors <i>yes</i> or <i>no</i>	<i>You promised X. Will X be done soon?</i>
Adversarialness	Negative interrogative	<i>Isn't it ... Couldn't you ...</i>
	Confined to statement preface	<i>Your policy allegedly failed. Is that true?</i>
Accountability	Permeates the overall turn	<i>Your policy failed. When will you change course?</i>
	Explicit request for policy justification	<i>Why did you ...</i> <i>How could you ...</i>

Note. Source: Clayman et al., 2006).



**Figure 1.** Directness by administration. (Source: Clayman et al., 2006).

By contrast, more dynamic trends provide at least some clues as to their underpinnings. Of the documented variations in aggressive questioning, the most dynamic are those associated with questions' topical content, which of course varies on a question-by-question basis. Questions are systematically more aggressive when addressing domestic affairs as opposed to foreign affairs and national security matters (Clayman, Heritage, Elliott, et al., 2007). This differential is substantial and robust. It extends across multiple aggressiveness dimensions (assertiveness, adversarialness, and demands for accountability); and its magnitude does not appear to change significantly over historical time or under different economic conditions (Clayman, Heritage, Elliott, et al., 2007). These patterns suggest that journalists work to modulate their aggressiveness in the foreign policy and national security arenas, thereby granting the president more deference in these areas, but the underlying reasons for this are less obvious. Are journalistic standards simply more relaxed in this area? Or does it result from a more practical constraint, such as the lack of epistemic resources in a domain where presidents have privileged access to information? Or does it reflect a more general social principle captured by the old adage that "politics stops at the water's edge"? When journalists address matters that place them at the water's edge, does their identity as an *American citizen* begin to supersede their identity as a *professional journalist*?



A somewhat less dynamic pattern of longitudinal change is associated with economic conditions as embodied in the business cycle. Questions are more aggressive when either unemployment or interest rates are relatively high, the former being a somewhat stronger predictor of vigorous questioning (Clayman, Heritage, Elliott, et al., 2007). It is tempting to attribute this pattern to professional norms associated with journalistic independence or the watchdog role, with journalists understood to be holding the president to account for the performance of the nation's economy. A difficulty with this view, though, is that the pattern extends beyond questions pertaining to the economy per se; foreign affairs and national security questions also grow more vigorous and adversarial as the economy tanks. This pattern looks less like a manifestation of the watchdog role than it does a more diffuse "mood" associated with economic hard times.

One longer-term pattern of change *does* appear to be linked to a shift in the normative culture of journalism. Using multivariate analysis (logistic regression) and controlling for other significant factors in aggressive questioning (unemployment and interest rates, first vs. second presidential terms, and domestic vs. foreign affairs content), a significant punctuated equilibrium pattern of change may be discerned independent of these other factors (Clayman, Elliott, et al., 2010). This pattern is clearest for the case of adversarial question content (one dimension of the coding system sketched in Table 1). The adjusted trendline for adversarial questions (Figure 2) depicts a sharp elevation in adversarial questioning that becomes evident when variation driven by control variables is subtracted from the picture. There was evidently a stable era of relatively deferential questioning extending from Dwight Eisenhower through Lyndon Johnson (1953–1968), followed by an abrupt shift to more adversarial questioning from Richard Nixon through Bill Clinton (1969–2000). The shape of the adjusted trendline—a "stairstep" pattern indexing distinct and internally stable eras of deferential and then adversarial questioning—strongly suggests a normative tenor of president-press relations that remained largely constant across changes in presidential administrations and fluctuating socioeconomic conditions until something happened to disrupt and "reset" the relationship. That single 1968–1969 inflection point accounts for fully 96% of the administration-level variance in adversarial question content over time (beyond that driven by the control variables noted previously) (Clayman, Elliott, et al., 2010).

Although a disjunctive shift in the normative tenor of president-press relations is plainly evident, it has many plausible explanations: the Vietnam War and the splintering of the elite Cold War consensus, broader societal unrest associated with the civil rights and anti-war movements, the

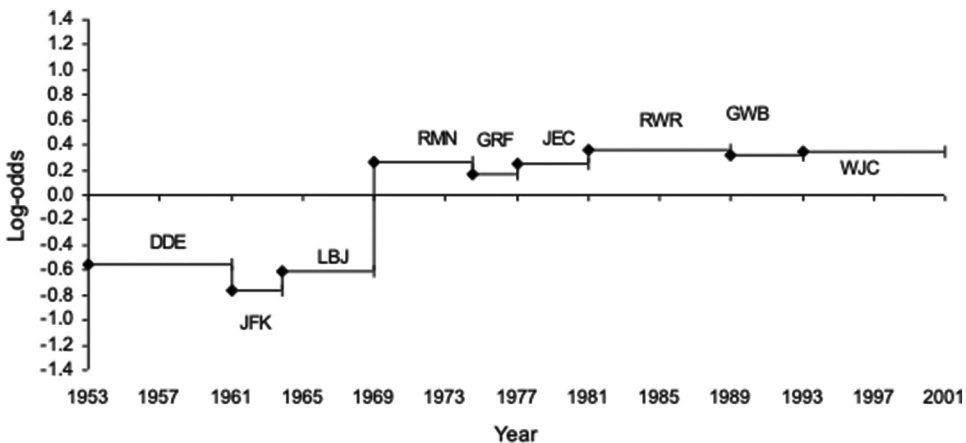


Figure 2. Adjusted log-odds of adversarialness by administration\*, relative to 1953–2000 average.

\*Log-odds is a statistical measure of association used in multivariate modeling with categorical data. The *adjusted* log-odds in this figure measures the association between presidential administration and propensity toward adversarial questioning when other significant factors are controlled (unemployment and interest rates, first vs. second terms, domestic vs. foreign affairs content). Acronyms within the figure refer to administrations in chronological order (Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush, Clinton). (Source: Clayman et al., 2010).

election of Richard Nixon and subsequent abuses of power culminating in the Watergate scandal, etc. The data examined thus far do not enable us to discriminate among these possibilities, but perhaps a more fine-grained examination of the press conferences preceding and following this inflection point, using a convergence of both quantitative and qualitative methods, will resolve this puzzle.

## Validating indicators of change

In the course of this discussion, we've presented a number of claims about the relationship between questioning practices in presidential news conferences and the societal contexts in which they are deployed. These claims are premised on the assumption that the practices in question have the social meanings we ascribe to them and hence that the practices taken together comprise a valid measurement system for tracking levels of vigorous questioning over time. In this section we take up two questions: (a) by what means can we ground the validity of measures treating specific questioning practices as having particular social meanings, and (b) is it reasonable to believe that the validity of these measures endures over time.

As a prelude to these questions, consider the variety of ways that interactional practices may be indicative of societal change. First, there can be absolute changes in the repertoire of practices available to the participants. For the journalists in our studies, certain highly deferential question frames have vanished from the news conference scene. These include frames that in effect request permission to ask, such as *Can I or May I ask . . .*. Similarly frames that reference the president's willingness to respond, such as *Will you or Would you . . .*, have also essentially disappeared. Conversely, the highly assertive negative interrogative form, which strongly favors a *yes*-type response to the point of being treated as hearably opinionated (Heritage, 2002), was extremely rare in the early years of our data set but has now become recurrent. And accusatory questions, such as *How could you . . .*, have similarly materialized as resources within the journalist's tool kit (Clayman & Heritage, 2002b). Each of these cases involves practices that have been added to or subtracted from the journalist's repertoire.

A second type of change involves shifts in the relative frequency of practices that comprise the repertoire. In our own project, most of the remaining practices sketched in Table 1 exhibited a pattern of shifting frequencies over time, which we treated as indicative of institutional or sociocultural change.

The final kind of change involves novel conjunctions of questioning practices—that is, the simultaneous presence of multiple practices (sketched in Table 1). A case in point concerns the combination of hostile question prefaces together with negative interrogatives that presuppose the truth of the preface. To illustrate, in Excerpt 6 the journalist first details a gulf separating the administration's rhetoric on gender equality with the reality of male-dominated appointments (lines 1–4). The subsequent question (lines 5–6) does not merely solicit a response (*How do you respond?, Is that fair?*) but proposes negative consequences for public perceptions. This question is not only highly assertive by virtue of its negative interrogative form, it also builds upon the prefatory statement in a way that treats its propositional content as a given.

### (6) Press Conference of Ronald W. Reagan July 26, 1983

1 Jrn: Mr. President, if I may follow up with another question about  
 2 the Commission, you talk a lot here, and your aides do,  
 3 about the gender gap. And yet that Commission was appointed,  
 4 12 men, no women.  
 5 -> Doesn't that add to the perception that you're insensitive  
 6 to women?

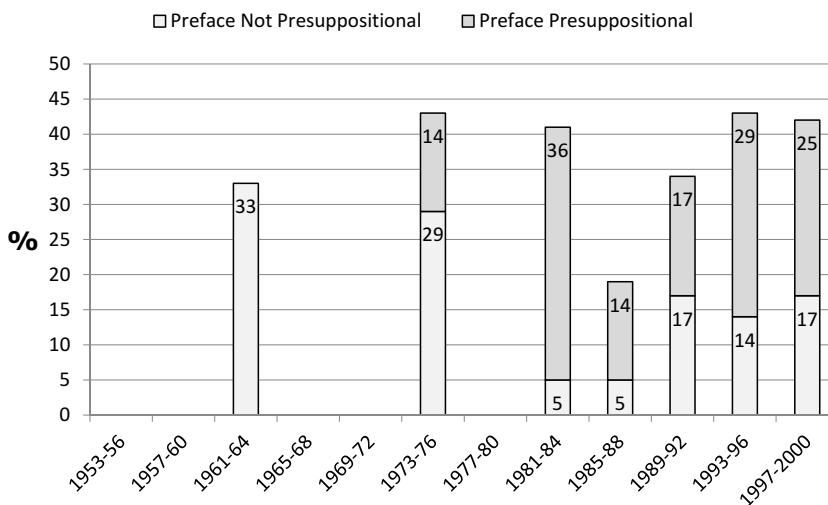
This complex question form was absent from the scene throughout the 1950s and 1960s (see Figure 3). It began to be used sporadically in the 1970s and became the dominant way in which negative interrogatives were deployed from the 1980s onwards.

At the root of each of these indicators of change is one or more interactional practices adduced as embodying some aspect of vigorous questioning (initiative, directness, assertiveness, adversarialness, or the explicit pursuit of accountability). What is the basis for such treatment?

### **Emic validation**

A singular strength of conversation analysis is the grounding of analytic claims about interactional practices by direct reference to the conduct of the participants themselves (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973, p. 290). We will refer to this grounding as *emic validation* (see Pike, 1967). As far as we can determine, CA is the only approach to the analysis of social phenomena that provides for such grounding as a central element of the research process. Indeed, authoritative reflections on research methodology (e.g., Bryman & Cramer, 2004; Bulmer, 2001; Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008), as well as efforts to anatomize the forms of validity that should concern researchers (e.g., Drost, 2011; Gerard & Cohn, 2016; Kimberlin & Winterstein, 2008; Singer, 1982), make no reference to emic validity as an approach to measurement nor how it may be assessed. This is unfortunate, as CA may be uniquely suited for the development of endogenously validated coding and measurement systems utilizing the data of situated social behavior (Stivers, 2015).

How does the sequential approach of CA enable emic validation? First is the “next turn proof procedure” (Sacks et al., 1974, p. 635; Schegloff, 1996, p. 168ff), in which a speaker’s response embodies an understanding of the prior turn-at-talk or other aspects of the occasioning context. For instance, in our own project negative interrogatives (e.g., Excerpt 6) were treated as indexing assertiveness. This treatment was grounded in work on the news interview, showing that interviewees frequently responded to negative interrogatives as overtly opinionated (e.g., “I disagree with that”) (Heritage, 2002). Such responses had the effect of sanctioning interviewers by suggesting they were in violation of a tacitly evoked norm of objectivity. The negative interrogative was the only question form that attracted this kind of response. Similarly, questions with conventionally indirect frames (e.g., *Could you tell us . . .*) have traditionally been observed to be mitigated in their pressure for response (Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp. 129–143), and politicians do occasionally exploit the affordances of such indirect frames in providing an escape route for them while still ostensibly “addressing the question” (e.g., “No I can’t,” also Excerpt 3). While the next-turn proof procedure is not without limitations (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1987; Heritage & Atkinson, 1984; Schegloff, 1996), it is nonetheless a fundamental resource for grounding the analysis of actions in sequence.



**Figure 3.** Negative interrogatives with adversarial prefaces, presuppositional or not, by presidential term (%). (Source: Heritage & Clayman, 2013).

The next-turn procedure does not exhaust the emic resources that CA provides. A second closely related resource focuses on the understandings of speakers rather than recipients, as embodied in speakers' systematic deployment of interactional practices within specific contexts. In our news conference project, the principle is exemplified in the case of negative interrogatives, which were observed to cluster in the environment of follow-up questions or pursuits where their assertiveness was evidently being mobilized as a way of reining in previously evasive presidents (Heritage & Clayman, 2013).

In these ways, context-sensitive sequential analysis can facilitate the building of coding and measurement systems with definite evidence-based grounding in the enacted realities of the participants. This surpasses traditional textbook understandings of the relationship between qualitative and quantitative methods in the trajectory of the research process (Creswell, 2009, pp. 203–224).

### **Etic validation**

In etic validation, by contrast, the fundamental question concerns whether the indicator practices converge with relevant theoretical constructs or with other empirical measures recognized by the scientific community. Etic validation is the predominant form of validity addressed by the research methods literature. Although this literature provides a variety of validation bases and criteria (e.g., Bryman & Cramer, 2004; Kimberlin & Winterstein, 2008; Singer, 1982), two were of particular significance for our study.

We sought to use multiple indicator practices for tracking our phenomena of interest, and indeed every dimension of vigorous questioning was assessed through two or more indicators (see Table 1). For example, assertiveness in polar question design was assessed through the presence of both (a) statement prefaces favoring either a *yes*- or *no*-type response, and (b) negative interrogatives favoring a *yes*-type response. We were able to demonstrate (through tests of the proportional odds assumption<sup>4</sup>) that such diverse indicator practices were highly correlated over time, providing etic evidence that they indexed a common underlying construct (e.g., assertiveness). In this form of etic validation, each indicator practice is validated by reference to other related measures. In turn, this enabled us to combine practices so as to form scales for initiative, directness, assertiveness, etc., with some confidence that the levels of each scale did indeed “belong together” as measures of the same underlying phenomenon.

A second etic validation for our measurement system emerged from the results that it generated. After coding nearly 5,000 questions across five decades and 12 administrations and using distributional and multivariate analyses (logistic regression) to identify trends and contextual associations, many findings were consistent with hypotheses derived from prior research. For example, as predicted, president-press relations indexed through question design had grown more adversarial over time, while the impetus toward more vigorous forms of questioning was modulated in predictable ways by question content, economic conditions, and the president's term in office. To be sure, not all of our predictions were borne out, but the significant patterns and associations that did emerge were congruent with our expectations.

Both of these forms of etic validation involve a kind of methodological “bootstrapping” in which validation emerges as an outcome of the coding system's use rather than its initial foundation. This iterative bootstrapping process is familiar to historians of scientific measurement (e.g., Chang, 2004). In our case, our confidence in bootstrapping procedures was greatly enhanced by the underlying etic validation of the practices, which had been established well before the longitudinal project got underway and indeed guided the development of our behavior-based measurement system (Clayman & Heritage, 2002a).

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<sup>4</sup>The proportional odds assumption is that the coefficients that describe the relationship between, say, the lowest versus all higher categories of a variable are the same as those that describe the relationship between the next-lowest category and all higher categories, etc.

### ***Interactional practices: An index of change or an object of change?***

In this article we have so far concentrated on establishing linkages between interactional practices and the external sociopolitical contexts in which they are deployed and which they putatively index. And we have relied on emic analyses of such practices to guide the formation of our measurement system. These emic analyses were fundamentally based on data from British and American news interviews and press conferences that took place across the period 1975–1995 (Clayman & Heritage, 2002a). Although these data overlap the latter period of our presidential news conference database, the question nonetheless arises as to whether our emic analyses hold good for the earlier period that we examined (1953–1970) and for that matter whether they will hold good for the future.

The distinguished etymologist Charles Sleeth has commented that:

it is a “universally observable fact about language” that the members of a language community, year by year, decade by decade, century by century, act in their daily lives on the assumption that they are speakers of the same language . . . . and yet “imperceptibly” the language changes, even to the point where its present users are not able to understand its earlier or earliest recorded forms, and sometimes not even able to understand each other. (Consider the Romance languages as divergent end-products of the “imperceptible” change of spoken Latin through time.) (Sleeth, 1982).

Is it possible that these kinds of “imperceptible” changes are eroding the emic foundations of our measurement framework? For example, as a given practice becomes less frequent, does it become more “marked” as a choice among relevant alternatives (Bybee, 2003; Haiman, 1998)? Consider, for example, the decline of conventionally indirect question frames, amply documented in our data. As these frames become less common, do they come to be registered as *overly* polite or as part of a politeness ritual (Brown & Levinson, 1987)? In our research we entertained this possibility, and we tested it by looking to see if these question frames came to be associated with substantively hostile question content. As it turned out, this conjecture was not supported in the data to hand. However, we cannot rule out the possibility that such a connection may emerge in the future, so that what was once a general index of deference to the office of the presidency may come to be deployed as a transparent accompaniment of hostile questioning.

Conversely, as a given practice becomes *more* frequent, does it become *less* “marked” and hence a routine questioning resource? For instance, in our data one of the most marked positive changes in frequency involved negative interrogatives and their subsequent association with adversarial question prefaces (see Figure 3). Although we interpreted this trend as indicative of a more assertive and adversarial press corps, there remains the possibility that this question form becomes normalized over time as part of the ordinary cut and thrust of president–press relations. In this case, negative interrogative questioning does not yet appear to have reached a level of frequency that would likely engender such normalization, but the possibility cannot be completely ruled out.

In a 1993 paper, “Reflections on Quantification in the Study of Conversation,” Schegloff raises an additional issue that bears on the validity of behavioral indicators. This concerns the fact that alternative practices may be deployed in the same contexts and to the same end. He notes that:

Quantitative analysis requires an analytically defensible notion of the numerator, the set of types of occurrences whose presence should count as events and, given an adequate conception of environments of relevant possible occurrence, whose nonoccurrence should count as absences. That requires, I argue, an understanding of what sorts of occurrences or practices are alternatives to one another for the participants. (Schegloff, 1993, p. 103)

To adapt one of Schegloff’s (1993) own examples (pp. 108–109), the practices of person reference, one might refer to Schegloff himself as “Manny,” or alternatively to “a major conversation analyst,” or “a student of Yiddish,” or “a former colleague of mine at UCLA.” Beyond this, one can also begin with “Do you know who Manny Schegloff is?” and then simply referring to Schegloff as “he” in the subsequent telling sequence. In this latter case, what would otherwise have been a compact referring expression is expanded to a multi-turn sequence.

Something like this phenomenon—practices that “break from the frame” of more commonplace and familiar alternatives—emerges from our historical data. In the earliest years of formal presidential news conferences, it was not uncommon for journalists to ask questions of the following sort: “Have you gone into the subject thoroughly enough to comment on X?” or “Has the subject of X been brought to your attention?” This question form evidently has a presequential dimension in which the president’s ability to respond is thematized. This practice appears to be a more explicit alternative to conventionally indirect question frames that were commonplace in the 1950s and 1960s. Accordingly, a coding system that relied exclusively on conventionalized question frames as an index of indirectness might underestimate the extent of indirectness during earlier periods and might even overestimate the extent of direct questioning at that time. Beyond this, an unduly narrow coding system that overlooked these earlier practices could miss fundamental historical transformations in assumptions regarding the extent of presidential knowledge and hence their accountability in the public arena.

## Discussion

We have explored a range of methodological issues that arise in adapting CA techniques to the study of historical data. These have included, first, the problem of controlling for the local situational context to facilitate the identification of broader forms of institutional and sociocultural change. We have also commented on how to determine which aspects of sociohistorical context are indexed by changes in interactional practices. And we have considered some of the methods by which language-based coding and measurement systems may be validated. Although the trajectory of research described in this article is toward a quantitative approach, the emic basis of these analyses provides for nonquantitative approaches to these same issues. Indeed, our own earlier work on news interviews rested wholly on qualitative analyses of interactional practices in the news context. This article should not therefore be understood as an assertion of the necessity of quantitative research in either historical or institutional domains.

Our central theme is the value of context-sensitive sequential analysis in providing emic validation of conduct-based measures and also as guiding the construction of such measures to investigate changing interactional practices and their import. Access to this kind of emic validation is, as far as we know, a unique contribution of the conversation analytic method. As we have noted, the original impetus for the presidential news conference work arose from the sequential analysis of news interviews, and the results of that sequential analysis provided the basis for the majority of the measures we used in the subsequent study. This kind of emic validation stands as an alternative to the kinds of covariance-based and related bootstrapping procedures that so frequently attend enterprises of this kind (Chang, 2004; Evans & Foster, 2019).

In his methodological writings, Max Weber famously distinguished what he termed “adequacy at the level of meaning” from “causal adequacy” (Weber, 1978, pp. 11–12). There is an echo of this distinction and its implications in many of the statistically oriented studies that deploy CA resources. Such studies often use statistical methods to establish relationships between already-documented practices of talk and exogenous conditions (e.g., institutional norms, socioeconomic conditions, race or gender) or the social consequences of such practices (e.g., conclusions, recommendations, levels of satisfaction). In Weberian language, CA provides adequacy at the level of meaning, while statistics provide causal adequacy for claims linking practices of talk as causally related to social conditions or outcomes.

We view studies that interweave sequential analysis with statistical methods as standing apart from prototypical CA methods. The heart of the conversation analytic approach has always involved exploiting the affordances of the sequentiality of interaction to gain access to the emic vantage point of the participants in the moment-by-moment construction of interaction. As Schegloff and Sacks (1973, p. 290) put it in a well-known passage:

We have proceeded under the assumption (an assumption borne out by our research) that insofar as the materials we worked with exhibited orderliness, they did so not only for us, indeed not in the first place for us, but for the

co-participants who had produced them. If the materials (records of natural conversations) were orderly, they were so because they had been methodically produced by members of the society for one another, and it was a feature of the conversations that we treated as data that they were produced so as to allow the display by the co-participants to each other of their orderliness, and to allow the participants to display to each other their analysis, appreciation, and use of that orderliness. Accordingly, our analysis has sought to explicate the ways in which the materials are produced by members in orderly ways that exhibit their orderliness, have their orderliness appreciated and used, and have that appreciation displayed and treated as the basis for subsequent action.

From the outset, this indigenously grounded objective has been achieved through context-sensitive case analysis and collections of cases geared to generating findings that are both anchored in single cases and generalizable beyond them (Clayman et al., *in press*; Sacks, 1984). This enterprise, while unquestionably distinctive, is by no means irrelevant to the rest of the social sciences. The fruits of such work, if successful, can be leveraged for other scholarly purposes, including elucidating the many complex linkages between interactions and their inhabiting social contexts.

## Disclosure statement

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