
PERSONALITY IN THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC INTERVIEW SITUATION

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Abstract

Personality as an influential factor in the sociolinguistic interview situation is a topic which has been the focus of much speculation, but little research seems to have been done by sociolinguists. This paper presents the findings of a study into aspects of personality in the sociolinguistic interview situation. Gregariousness is the facet of extroversion with which people most commonly associate the notion of an 'extrovert'. Although this facet was expected to have a significant effect on the participants' percentage of talk time, the relationship was found to be non-significant. However there was a significant relationship between another facet of Extroversion, namely Warmth, and the percentage of time the participants spoke in the interview. Significant results were unexpectedly obtained for the association between duration of interviewer speech and duration of interviewee speech. Clear patterns were also found between the way interviewees said 'No' to questions asked by the interviewer, and personality.

1. Introduction

This paper presents the results of a study on personality as a significant factor in the sociolinguistic interview situation. Although sociolinguists do not seem to have studied the effects of personality on the interview situation, an analysis of the interview situation in terms of two-person interaction can be found in the literature of psychology. The present study investigated the relationship between amount of speech and personality facets as identified by the NEO PI-

R, a standard psychology questionnaire used to measure personality. I hypothesised that amount of talk in the interview would be significantly influenced by the personality of the informant.

2. Background

2.1 Personality Type

The NEO PI-R personality questionnaire (Costa and McCrae 1992) was used to measure personality in this study. The NEO PI-R is a revised form of the NEO Personality Inventory, and is based on the ‘Big Five’ approach to personality psychology, a taxonomy of personality traits developed over a period of time by researchers such as Allport and Odbert (1936), and Cattell (1946). Five factors of personality make up the model, commonly remembered by the mnemonic OCEAN: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extroversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism.

Costa and McCrae's NEO PI-R personality questionnaire is trait-based, and employs the Big Five (i.e., OCEAN) as domains. McCrae and Costa (1990: 177) argue that traits from the five-factor model of personality can be measured ‘with an acceptable degree of accuracy by either self-reports or ratings from knowledgeable sources’. Their studies also demonstrate ‘that over the adult portion of the life course there is little change in the average level of most commonly measured personality traits’ (McCrae and Costa 1990: 177). The NEO PI shows cross-cultural stability, and, as noted by Pervin ‘there is growing evidence that people in diverse cultures, using very different languages, construe personality in accord with the five-factor model’ (1993: 308–309).

The NEO PI-R questionnaire consists of 240 questions, 48 for each of the five domains. The response to each question is made on a Likert scale, a five-point scale ranging from ‘Strongly Agree’ to ‘Strongly Disagree’. Each domain consists of six facets, each of which is assessed by eight questions. Facets are more specific traits, which, when formed into a cluster, constitute a domain. The questionnaire gives a set of scores for each facet and an overall score for each of the domains.

After the NEO PI-R professional manual was consulted, the two domains which were hypothesised to be most relevant to this study were Openness and Extroversion. Due to time constraints and the difficulties of drawing on a dataset many times in statistical analysis, it was not possible to assess the

influence of all five domains and their facets on amount of speech in the sociolinguistic interview. Brief descriptions of the Openness and Extroversion domains and their facets, based on the NEO PI-R professional manual (Costa and McCrae 1992), are provided below.

Facets of Openness are designated by the *aspect* or *area of experience* to which the person is open. Facets under the domain 'Openness to experience' are Fantasy, Aesthetics, Feelings, Actions, Ideas, and Values. Individuals who are open to Fantasy have a vivid imagination and an active fantasy life. High scorers on the Aesthetics scale have a deep appreciation for art and beauty. Those people who score highly on the Feelings facet experience deeper and more differential emotional states and feel both happiness and unhappiness more intensely than others. Openness to Action is realised behaviourally in the willingness to try different activities, go to new places, or eat unusual foods. The Ideas facet is characterised by open-mindedness and a willingness to consider new, perhaps unconventional ideas. Openness to Values means the readiness to re-examine social, political, and religious values.

The Extroversion domain includes facets of Warmth, Gregariousness, Assertiveness, Activity, Excitement-seeking, and Positive emotions. Introversion may be realised as the absence of Extroversion rather than being the opposite of Extroversion. Warmth is the facet of Extroversion most relevant to interpersonal intimacy issues—Warm people are affectionate and friendly and genuinely like people. Gregariousness is the preference for other people's company, and is the facet which most people think of, when they talk about Extroverts. High scorers of the Assertiveness facet are dominant, forceful, and socially ascendant. A high Activity scorer displays a need to keep busy, to lead a fast-paced life. High scorers on the scale of Excitement-seeking crave excitement and stimulation, and like bright colours and noisy environments. The facet of Positive emotions is the tendency to experience positive emotions such as joy, happiness, love and excitement.

Two facets of Extroversion and two of Openness were used in this study. The reason why specific facets—rather than whole domains—were investigated, was that thorough research into the descriptions in the NEO PI-R professional manual led to the conclusion that not every facet of Extroversion and Openness was pertinent to the specific situation of a two-person speech interaction. The four facets chosen were: Warmth, Gregariousness (Extroversion), and Ideas and Fantasy (Openness). It was hypothesised that these facets would be most significant in influencing quantity of speech in the interview situation. The facets of Ideas and Fantasy were chosen because of

the ‘Openness to experience’ nature of the questions used in the interview (see ‘*The Interview*’ in Methodology section). That is to say, the Openness to Experience facets of Ideas and Fantasy relate to the questions dealing with ghosts/UFO’s and danger of death, as openmindedness of the paranormal or the supernatural may have influenced participants in this study into answering the way they did. For example, one could imagine that if a participant was not openminded about these kinds of phenomena, then it could follow that the participant may be curt or not interested in answering the question. Gregariousness was chosen because it is the facet of Extroversion which corresponds with the notion of an ‘Extrovert’ in the general sense. Warmth was also investigated as it is the facet of Extroversion most related to issues of interpersonal intimacy, and it therefore seemed that it would be the facet most likely to relate to conversational interaction between people.

3. Relevance of personality in the interview situation

*3.1 Sociolinguistic considerations*¹

Few sociolinguists have speculated on the relevance of personality in the interview situation. Past sociolinguistic studies looking at the interview situation have neglected the possibility of personality influencing the interview situation, and have instead looked at the effects of addressee status or solidarity, gender, insider versus outsider status and ethnicity² (see Rickford and McNair-Knox 1994: 236).

Wolfram and Fasold acknowledge that personality is a component of the sociolinguistic interview, but believe that it cannot be controlled for (1974: 54). Other linguists acknowledge personality as an integral part of situation. Brown and Fraser (1979: 56) state that ‘it is clear that situational factors, both participant and nonparticipant ones, are interlinked in highly complex ways: class is related to power and status at an interpersonal as well as institutional level, and mood, personality, social relationship, purpose and setting are all related.’ Robinson (1972: 144) notes that ‘Two separable theoretical issues are necessarily linked in natural situations—personality and role relationship; we expect role relationships to constrain verbal behaviour, but personality characteristics also affect what is said.’

Other authors discuss the topic of verbal output and personality (Scherer 1979: 118; Scherer and Giles 1979: 178). Scherer and Giles (1979: 178) have reviewed the literature and remark that ‘extroversion seems to be the only trait

which is consistently found to be associated with a greater amount of verbal output or longer total speaking time.' The problem here is that 'extroversion' is not defined and there are potentially many ways to define it. Scherer and Scherer (cited in Scherer 1979: 119) have argued that personality traits and attitudes are more likely to determine behaviour than are situational factors.

Furnham (1990: 77–78) claims that there are six possible relationships between personality and speech/language. The first possibility is that there is no such relationship; the second is that personality 'determines' speech; and the remaining options deal with the possibility that speech 'determines' personality, that personality and speech are reciprocally determined, that there are mixed relationships between personality and speech, and finally, that personality and speech are moderated by other variables. This paper is concerned with the concept of personality being one of the factors determining speech.

3.2 Psychological Considerations

Much of the research on the interview situation has been conducted by clinical psychologists, principally Matarazzo and Wiens (1972). After studying several groups of interviewees, and testing and retesting them in the interview environment, Matarazzo et al. (cited in Matarazzo 1973: 138) found very little intraspeaker variation. From this they concluded that the speech behaviour of any given individual is highly stable. They hypothesised that interviewer variables could influence the interviewee's average duration of utterance within certain parts of an interview (Matarazzo and Wiens 1972: 82). In fact, they found that an instructed interviewer can reproducibly modify, up or down and at will, the speech behaviour of one after another of his interviewees, and that as soon as he withdraws this influencing tactic the interviewees revert to their own baseline (Matarazzo and Wiens 1972: 118). If this is true for the sociolinguistic interview, then it has serious implications for the interviewer's technique on the language behaviour under study.

Other authors in the field of psychology report interesting results in the area of personality in the interview situation. For example, Cope (1969, cited in Furnham 1990: 80) found that Extroversion is the only trait which has consistently been found to be associated with a greater amount of verbal output or longer total speaking time.

4. Methodology

4.1 *Participants*³

Participants were chosen from a linguistics class at the University of Canterbury. Twenty-five individuals, including some non-New Zealanders, volunteered to participate. The relationship between the nationality of participants and their amount of talk time was considered, due to the possibility of different cultural conventions of a speech act (Gumperz 1982: 12). It was decided that nationality was not problematic in this case, as there were very few interviewees who were of non-New Zealand origin. It was also considered that nationality would not unduly affect the variable of personality, as there is evidence to suggest that the Big Five factors are reliable across cultures (Pervin 1993: 308–309).

Volunteers ranged in age from 19 to 68 years. This range was not considered problematic, as the Big Five have been found to be stable throughout life (McCrae and Costa 1990: 177). Indeed, Caspi and Moffitt (cited in McAdams 1994: 301) have found that ‘trait consistency prevails even in the face of monumental changes in life circumstances.’

After consent was obtained, participants were requested to complete an NEO PI-R questionnaire form. The subjects were reminded that there are no right or wrong answers, and were requested to answer as honestly and accurately as possible. They were then interviewed by the author. Analysis of the NEO PI-R questionnaires was completed some time after the interviews, and the participants were given feedback in the form of a sheet summarising the results of their individual questionnaires.

A range of personality scores was obtained from the participants (see Table 1). In a normal population, the expected range for the majority is 30–70, the expected mean of T-scores is 50, and the expected standard deviation is 10. As can be seen from Table 1, this sample's means and standard deviations are close to the expected norms, therefore one can conclude that this sample does not differ markedly from the general population.

4.2 *The Interview*⁴

After completing the NEO PI-R form, each participant was interviewed individually in a room away from other participants. All interviews were conducted by the author and consisted of five questions:

- Have you ever been in a danger of death situation? Tell me about it.

	GREGARIOUSNESS	WARMTH	IDEAS	FANTASY
Mean	49.88	50.18	55.36	60.90
Median	54.08	51.05	55.60	61.60
Mode	54.26	51.05	61.60	67.60
Standard Deviation	12.66	11.98	9.31	9.93
Range	44.68	52.50	38.80	36.11
Minimum	24.47	21.75	33.60	41.49
Maximum	69.15	74.25	72.40	77.60
Sum	1246.91	1254.52	1384	1522.42
No. of participants	25	25	25	25

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the facets of Gregariousness, Warmth, Ideas and Fantasy

- Have you ever had an experience involving UFO's, or aliens?
- Have you ever heard a good story about aliens/UFO's? Tell me about it.
- Have you ever seen a ghost?
- Do you know a good ghost story?

The interview was structured in the above way because I wanted to isolate the variable of personality in this research. I endeavoured to ask questions in the same way in every interview so that everything was kept constant apart from the variable of personality (see 'Discussion' section). It should be noted that in asking these five questions I wished to simulate the first five to ten minutes of a standard sociolinguistic interview so that I could look at personality in its 'rawest' form in the interview (i.e. before the participants 'warmed'⁵ to the interview situation) and see why the beginnings of interviews and in fact, whole interviews are sometimes stilted. I acknowledge that this is the reason why many sociolinguists choose to ignore the first five to ten minutes of the interview for phonetic analysis purposes. However for this research it was appropriate to study the simulated beginnings of an interview to investigate personality, as the effect of personality sometimes 'wears off' during the course of a long interview. The point of looking at the interview in this way was to see if I could find out which personality traits are marked in speech.

The questions listed above are standard sociolinguistic interview questions

calculated to encourage respondents to become highly involved in *what* they are saying and thus pay less attention to *how* they are saying it. The first, Labov's famous 'Danger of Death' question, is one frequently used in sociolinguistic research to overcome the 'Observer's Paradox' and gain access to the vernacular (1978: 209-210).

The interviews typically lasted between three and ten minutes, and the total duration of the interviews ranged from one minute to twenty-three minutes.

4. Analysis

Three types of analyses were employed to define the notion of 'quantity of speech'. The first focused on the participants' percentage of talk time versus their Warmth, Gregariousness, Ideas, and Fantasy scores. The second analysis considered the interviewer's speech and pause time versus the interviewee's speech and pause time. The third analysis involved an examination of the way in which the interviewees said 'No' to the set questions.

Speech and pausing was timed using a stopwatch. Pauses as well as speech were included when calculating the interviewee speech duration, as these two measures combined yield a 'speech turn'. The total duration of the interview was also measured, and the proportion of 'talk time' for the interviewee, including pauses, was calculated as a proportion of the total interview time.

Normality of the data was checked using the Wilk-Shapiro test, which tests for normality when the number of subjects is less than fifty. After determining that the data was not normally distributed, the non-parametric test Kendall's tau-b was used.

In the qualitative analysis, coded descriptions were assigned to the ways in which the interviewees said 'No' to the set interview questions.⁶ The codes used in this study are ordered in terms of length below.

SHORT = 'No', 'No' response, with long pauses, 'No. Not really' answer, and 'No', then curt explanation.

MEDIUM = 'No', then short explanation, 'No', then explanation.

LONG = 'No', then long explanation.

5. Results

In addition to Kendall's tau-b analysis, Bonferroni correction was used with the data, because testing four different facets draws on the dataset four times, and this must be accounted for when investigating significance levels. After Bonferroni correction, for the results investigating facets to be significant at an overall level of $p < 0.05$, p should be less than 0.0125. Table 2 gives the Kendall's tau-b results for all of the relevant comparisons.

Table 2 shows that, with regard to the amount of talk, there were only two statistically significant results in this study. Firstly, despite my best efforts to keep it uniform across the interviews, the duration of my speech actually varied, and the results show a significant relationship between interviewer's talk time and interviewee's talk time ($\text{tau-b} = 0.480$, $p = 0.001$).

Secondly, there is a strong relationship between participants' percentage of talk time and Warmth scores ($\text{tau-b} = 0.363$, $p = 0.013$). Warmth is the only one of the Extroversion facets that is significant. The Openness facets investigated are not significant in predicting quantity of interviewee speech, in spite of the type of question asked in the interview, which related to those specific facets.

With regard to the analysis of how participants said 'No', the results show

COMPARISON	KENDALL'S TAU-B	P =
Participants percentage of talk time versus Warmth score	0.363	0.013
Participants percentage of talk time versus Gregariousness score	0.143	n.s
Participants percentage of talk time versus Ideas score	-0.017	n.s
Participants percentage of talk time versus Fantasy score	0.068	n.s
Interviewee duration versus interviewer duration	0.480	0.001

Table 2: Kendall's tau-b analysis of talk time versus other factors

SUBJECT	W SCORE	G SCORE	'NO' RESPONSE TYPE	UNDER/OVER MEAN FOR WARMTH	UNDER/OVER MEAN FOR GREGARIOUSNESS
U	21.75	37.76	SHORT	UNDER	UNDER
C	32.63	24.47	SHORT	UNDER	UNDER
M	32.63	35.11	SHORT	UNDER	UNDER
D	32.63	43.62	SHORT	UNDER	UNDER
W	37.89	47.87	SHORT	UNDER	UNDER
V	39.25	35.71	SHORT	UNDER	UNDER
Q	49.25	43.88	SHORT	UNDER	UNDER
T	48.42	60.64	MEDIUM	UNDER	OVER
E	51.05	43.62	MEDIUM	OVER	UNDER
J	51.05	54.26	MEDIUM	OVER	OVER
F	51.05	54.26	MEDIUM	OVER	OVER
P	51.05	67.02	MEDIUM	OVER	OVER
L	53.68	35.11	MEDIUM	OVER	UNDER
B	53.68	43.62	MEDIUM	OVER	UNDER
A	54.25	52.04	MEDIUM	OVER	OVER
X	56.32	54.26	MEDIUM	OVER	OVER
S	48.42	56.38	LONG	UNDER	OVER
O	48.42	56.38	LONG	UNDER	OVER
I	56.32	67.02	LONG	OVER	OVER
N	58.95	69.15	LONG	OVER	OVER
H	61.58	62.77	LONG	OVER	OVER
K	64.21	67.02	LONG	OVER	OVER
R	74.25	54.08	LONG	OVER	OVER

Key: W= Warmth

G= Gregariousness

Mean Warmth Score = 50.18

Mean Gregariousness Score= 49.88

N.B: Two of the participants interviewed for this research replied "yes" to every question and are therefore not included in this table.

Table 3: Interviewee's types of 'No' response (in order of response length)

a clear pattern (See Table 3). Interviewees whose Warmth and Gregariousness scores were below the mean gave minimal (short) answers to the interview questions when replying in the negative. Minimal answers are defined as ‘No’, ‘‘No’’ with long pauses’, ‘No, not really’ and ‘‘No’’ plus curt explanation’. Speakers with either a Warmth or a Gregariousness score above the mean regularly gave longer negative responses, such as ‘‘No’’, then short explanation’, ‘‘No’’ then explanation’.

For definitions of ‘No’ response coding, please refer to Analysis section above.

6. Discussion

The results of this research indicate that the way personality affects the sociolinguistic interview situation is complex. It was expected that facets of Extroversion, namely Warmth and Gregariousness, would be strongly related to quantity of interviewee speech, but in fact only Warmth was seen to be an important factor in this respect. It was also expected that the nature of participants’ ‘No’ responses would be related to their Warmth and Gregariousness scores. Indeed, those participants whose scores on these facets exceeded the mean regularly gave longer responses compared with those participants with Warmth and Gregariousness scores below the mean. Therefore, although statistically insignificant in relation to interviewee duration, Gregariousness does appear to interact with the facet of Warmth to affect the nature of participants’ interview behaviour.

Results on the Ideas and Fantasy facets of the Openness domain were found to be non-significant, indicating that this domain is less related to quantity of speech than Extroversion. These facets were investigated as the interview questions were indirectly involved in the ‘Openness to Experience’ facets, Ideas and Fantasy. It was thought that a person with a low score in ‘Fantasy’ or ‘Ideas’ would probably talk for less periods of time on this subject, as they were not open to the paranormal. In fact, it was found that there was no relationship between ‘Openness to Experience’ facets and amount of speech from the interviewee, therefore showing that the questions employed in this study had no effect on the response given by the interviewee.

With regard to the significant relationship found between the duration of interviewer speech and the duration of interviewee speech, the initial hypothesis in this study was that it was unlikely that a strong association would be

found. It could be argued that this result does not demonstrate causation in one direction or the other; it merely shows that there is an association. Matarazzo and Wiens (1972: 118), in their interviewee modification study, found that the interviewer's talk time can influence the interviewee's talk time. These researchers were, of course, deliberately modifying the interviewer utterance to test their hypothesis that the interviewee is influenced by the interviewer. However, in the present study the same interviewer (the author) conducted all the interviews and actively attempted to keep speech and pause time consistent across interviews. In fact, the interviewers talk time varied and it can be concluded that the interviewer was influenced by the interviewees, and not the other way around as Matarazzo and Wiens (1972) have found.

Such a significant relationship indicates an interaction of the interviewer's and interviewee's personality traits, something which should be investigated further in the future. The result demonstrates clearly the extent to which sociolinguistic interviewers can be subconsciously influenced by the person they are interviewing. Like other individuals, sociolinguists exhibit the phenomenon of 'convergence' which occurs in a social interaction where individuals shift their speech styles to become more like that of those with whom they are interacting (Giles and Smith 1979: 46). Giles and Coupland (1991: 63) define convergence as 'a strategy whereby individuals adapt to each other's communicative behaviours in terms of a wide range of linguistic/prosodic/non-vocal features including speech rate, pausal phenomena and utterance length, phonological variants, smiling, gaze and so on.'

This is important for the linguistic interview situation, as convergence has implications for the amount of speech obtained for the purposes of linguistic analysis. For example, in the situation where a talkative and non-talkative participant are interacting, one might expect that the talkative person may reduce their utterance length to become more like that of the non-talkative person. This is, in fact, what happened in this research. My own speech and pause time (interviewer duration) was significantly influenced by the interviewee's speech and pause time (interviewee duration). Personality therefore, can account for why the interviewee in a given interview does not speak much. I believe that it is not the case that this lack of speech directly reflects the interviewer's ability in that situation, it is merely that personality is a stronger factor. Another point which is worth mentioning is that perhaps the style of the interviewee's speech relates to personality and therefore if a casual/formal style is required in a given study it may be wise to include those speakers who have high and low scores in 'Warmth'.

Further study to investigate the phenomenon of personality interaction between both the interviewee and the interviewer would be worthwhile, as this may provide more clues as to how personality can be an influential factor in the sociolinguistic interview situation with respect to quantity of speech (and indeed other areas such as phonology, style, etc). Future studies may also find that using different questions, approaching the interview differently, or looking at different facets of personality as identified by the NEO-PI, gains different results to those discussed above, as it is possible that other personality facets could have an influence on the interview situation.

This study has been worthwhile as we can now see that it is indeed possible to study personality in the sociolinguistic interview situation. This study has also been important as it provides more understanding of what is involved in the sociolinguistic interview situation. I believe that there is still much to be researched on this matter, and that with more research, we will gain better understanding of personality in the sociolinguistic interview situation instead of merely taking it for granted that personality affects the sociolinguistic interview. As we now know, personality is a factor in this type of situation, and, more specifically, we know that 'Warmth' affects this situation. Other traits may be investigated in the future to determine specifically which traits affect the sociolinguistic interview.

7. Conclusion

Social scientists have speculated about the importance of Extroversion in a two-person interaction, but until now research has not been conducted on specific facets. The results of this study show that the interviewee's personality—in particular the Warmth facet of Extroversion—influences the amount of talk. A further finding is that the nature of participants' 'No' responses relates to their Gregariousness and Warmth scores.

One outcome of this study that was not entirely expected was the significant relationship between interviewer duration and interviewee duration, this despite the fact that the interviewer was trying to be consistent with all participants. This shows that 'convergence' was occurring in the interviews, and perhaps even 'convergence' of the interviewer's and the interviewees' personalities.

This research was carried out to see how personality affects the sociolinguistic interview situation. More research on this area will provide linguists and psychologists with sound evidence on which traits influence speech quantity

in a given interaction. The sociolinguistic interview situation is complicated, however I have demonstrated that the effects of personality on the interview can be tested.

Notes

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- 1 The phenomenon of the sociolinguistic interview situation will not be discussed here. Discussions of this type of interview have been made by many linguists and social scientists (See, for example, Milroy 1987; Wolfson 1976; Labov 1978; Schiffrin in Tannen 1993; Gumperz and Hymes 1972).
- 2 See Bell and Johnson (1997) for a study on gender and ethnicity, and Cukor-Avila and Bailey (2001) for a study on ethnicity in the sociolinguistic interview situation.
- 3 Approval for this research was given by the Human Ethics Committee at the University of Canterbury. Great care was taken to assure participants of their anonymity, and to ensure that all ethical considerations were considered and resolved.
- 4 Participants in this research were given a code number for the interview, and a different code number for the NEO-PI personality test to guarantee their anonymity. As a further precaution, they were subsequently assigned a different code again, for the write-up of this research.
- 5 'warmed' is used here in the general sense.
- 6 If participants said 'yes' to the questions in the interview, they always provided an explanation. For this reason, analysis was carried out to investigate if there were patterns of how the interviewees said 'No'. Any participant who consistently answered positively to the interview questions was not included in the 'No' analysis, for obvious reasons. The results were checked independently and both the author and the independent checker agreed on the results as shown in Table 3.

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