Individual style in an American public opinion survey: 
Personal performance and the ideology of referentiality

BARBARA JOHNSTONE

Department of English
Texas A&M University
College Station, TX 77843-4227

ABSTRACT

The anonymous telephone public opinion survey is supposed to be invariant. Interviewers' individual linguistic styles are supposed to be suppressed. However, transcripts of interviews show that no two interviewers perform the task alike. Interviewers make changes in the scripted introduction and add unscripted answer-acknowledgments and commentary throughout the interviews, the effect of which is to point up their identities as individuals rather than merely fillers of the interviewer role. Much of the deviation can be explained by the heightened requirement for politeness in the "cold call," for Americans one of the most egregious of interactional impositions. But no two interviewers fulfill this requirement in quite the same way. This may be because Americans value individuality in discourse, so that in order to be polite it is necessary to perform a differentiated, individual self. Such an understanding of personhood, and its linguistic ramifications, conflicts with the positivistic understanding of language on which survey research is based. In light of the amount of individual variation where one might not expect to find it, I suggest that linguists focus attention on the individual voice. (Individual variation, individual voice, interviewing, public opinion polls, survey research, politeness)

We all have our individual styles in conversation and considered address, and they are never the arbitrary and casual things we think them to be.

― Edward Sapir

Sociolinguists have for the most part left the question of individual variation in linguistic behavior to psycholinguists and literary critics. But everyday experience suggests that each person has an individual way of talking, recognizable partly because of voice quality and geographically and socially influenced aspects of phonology, lexis, and syntax, but also partly because of characteristic discourse-level choices. What is individual voice? How and when does it emerge in discourse?

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One approach to understanding the reasons for individual voice would be through examining speech events in which the display of an individual’s linguistic voice is meant to be suppressed, situations in which people are not evaluated on the basis of how well or how clearly they express their individual identities, or in which variation from individual to individual is supposed to be avoided. If people perform linguistic tasks they suppose “a machine could do” (and that machines sometimes do, in fact, do) in individually varied ways, it will be for the most pressing reasons. One such event is the telephone public opinion survey. The expressed goal of a public opinion poll is the production of information, and this product is valued precisely to the extent that the interviews are not influenced by individual idiosyncrasy on the part of interviewers. If polls proceed the way they are intended to proceed, one might expect individual expression to be nonexistent. If it is not – if there is variation from interviewer to interviewer – then it will be worth wondering why.

I examined 36 telephone opinion poll interviews conducted by 24 different interviewers to see if there was individual variation and, if so, where it occurred and what forms it took. In these interviews, randomly selected respondents answered the same questions asked for the same purpose by a very homogeneous group of interviewers, all of whom used the same written questionnaire and were trained to use it the same way. I found individual variation throughout the poll interviews, even in the most completely scripted and least interactive portions: people appear to express their linguistic individuality not only when they are being judged on the basis of it – as in the composition of a poem or the performance of a story in conversation – but even when they are not required to or when they are not supposed to.

In what follows, I first discuss the public opinion poll as a speech event and the positivistic ideology about language that underlies its designers’ and users’ understanding of how it works. I then show what it is like in practice, describing variation from interviewer to interviewer in how three speech acts are performed. Finally, I propose explanations for the presence and prevalence of variation in a speech task understood to be carried out in an invariant manner and evaluated as if it were.

**Perspectives on the Telephone Survey**

As Briggs (1986) pointed out, social facts about interlocutors – such as age, sex, and occupation, which influence what speakers say and how they say it in other speech events – are supposed to be suppressed in telephone interviews. Such interviews are thus understood to be as anonymous as any sort of talk. The public opinion poll interview is understood, by people who use its product, by its designers, by interviewers, and by many (though not all) respondents, to be conversation at its most externally controlled and least self-expressive. It is meant to be as referential as talk can get – interviewers are supposed to introduce the task, ask the questions, and respond to the

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swers exactly the same way other interviewers do and exactly the way in each interview. The only thing that counts for the statistics that result from the poll are the respondents’ answers, coded by the interviewers on a copy of the questionnaire with a number, word, or short phrase. If there were any speech task in which there was no individual variation at all, one might expect it to be that of the poll interviewer.

Scholarship about interviewing has demonstrated, of course, that language does not act as a neutral code for the exchange of facts in this speech event, any more than in any other. Interviewers inevitably affect the results of interviews (Hyman et al. 1954), and middle-class respondents adapt better to the communicative expectations of interviews than do lower-class respondents (Strauss & Schatzman 1955). Brenner (1981) evaluated turn types in face-to-face interviews and found that 12.98 percent of all questions were “significantly altered” by interviewers. Theorists such as Cicourel (1964:74–75) and Briggs (1986:23–24) have pointed out that the two goals of survey research – validity and reliability – are incompatible. A completely reliable interview would be completely standardized, so as to assure that the same results would occur another time, but a completely standardized interview is least likely to get at respondents’ real feelings and opinions.

But scholarship such as this appears to have minimal practical impact. Directors of polls, interviewers, and consumers of survey information justify survey research in general, and interviewing in particular, with reference to a positivistic ideology of science and to the belief that discourse can be designed in such a way as to be impersonal, value-free and purely referential. The knowledge that completely standardized interviews are inherently invalid is glossed over. Practitioners like the director of the Texas Poll assume that variability, because it can lead to biased results, is error, and they train their staffs to stray from the written schedule as little as possible. Supervisors are supposed to check to see that interviewers stick to the script. The reputation of the polling agency, and hence its ability to attract clients, depends on assurance that interviews are always conducted the same way.

Manuals for interviewers and textbooks about interviewing reiterate that “differences among research interviewers must be minimized or eliminated” (Nathan 1986:69). Interviewers must “be inflexible, bound to the predetermined wording schedule and sequence of questions” (ibid.:17). “Generally each vocalization should be planned word for word and used by each [interviewer] exactly as written. Only in very rare circumstances should an [interviewer] deviate from the planned wording” (Stano & Reinsch 1982:65). Interviewers are to ask all questions in a “neutral, straightforward way” (Hoinville et al. 1978:100), “without variation in inflection or emphasis” (Nathan 1986:68). They are not supposed to rephrase or explain questions, provide any clues about their own attitudes, say anything about their own backgrounds, or provide any more than minimal acknowledgments of an.
Questions are asked in topical sets. In the survey I discuss here, questions include a set about how various public officials are performing, a set about skin cancer, a set about the supercollider under construction in Texas, and a set about abortion. Whether or not some questions are asked depends on the answers to others (e.g., people who say they have never heard of the supercollider are not asked any further questions about it). Questions in some sets are rotated to minimize effects of question order. The questionnaire prescribes exact wording for the introductory portion of the interview and for each question, as well as for topic shifts between sets of questions ("On a different topic," "On another subject," "Now we want to ask about some questions about families"). If it starts promptly and if nothing occurs except for question asking and answering, an interview lasts about 20 minutes. Not all are that short, however. The tapes on which the interviews were recorded lasted 45 minutes, and some interviews were even longer than that.

To examine individual variation in Texas Poll interviews, I selected 36 interviews, taped and transcribed, from the January 1989 run of the poll. These were chosen to include at least one from each of the 24 interviewers who conducted the survey. Three of these interviewers are male, 21 are female; one is black and two are Hispanic. In order to be able to examine interviewer consistency as well as variability among interviewers, I also examined seven additional interviews by one of the female interviewers (so that there are altogether eight by her) and five additional interviews by one of the male interviewers (altogether, six). In addition, as some tapes began with repeated attempts to locate an appropriate respondent, I was able to examine multiple introductions by two other interviewers.

As I was interested in seeing when individual variation occurs as well as whether it occurs, I looked at three elements of each interview: the interviewers' fully scripted introductions; interviewers' acknowledgments of respondents' answers (not scripted but required, especially in telephone talk, so that respondents will know they have been heard); and interviewers' unsolicited comments during or about responses, which are neither scripted nor required. For each of these three speech acts, I asked three questions. First, is there variation from speaker to speaker? (The answer is that in every case there is.) Second, how easy is it to describe the range of ways interviewers do the same thing? Third, what are the continua along which interviewers' choices, in general, seem to vary? I suggest two, one discourse-syntactic (hypotaxis vs. parataxis in clause connections) and one interactional (degree of personability).

**Introductions**

This bit of talk takes place at the very beginning of the interaction, immediately after someone at the number called picks up the phone and says "Hello." The script printed on the schedule of questions is this:
Hello, this is _________ calling for the Texas Poll, a statewide, nonpartisan public opinion poll. This month we are conducting a confidential survey of public opinion in Texas, and we'd really appreciate your help and cooperation.

There are five underlying clauses in this passage:

1. this is _________
2. [I am] calling for the Texas Poll
3. [the Texas Poll is] a statewide, nonpartisan public opinion poll
4. this month we are conducting a confidential survey of public opinion in Texas
5. we'd really appreciate your help and cooperation

Of the 21 occurrences of the complete introduction, only two are exactly the same as the script on the schedule. Only two others are identical to each other; both of these differ from the protocol in adding I'm before calling (thus making clause 2 finite), adding two ands to the script, and substituting with for for in clause 2. Both of these interviewers chose to use their first and last names rather than first name only to fill in the blank in the first clause. (All interviewers have been given pseudonyms.)

Three of the 24 interviewers were making call-backs to respondents who were unavailable or unwilling to answer the survey on an earlier occasion. Interviewers begin these with part of the script before shifting to an unsupervised explanation of the function of the call.

Hello, this is Walt Field and I'm calling for the Texas Poll. And uh . . . I have uh, uh . . . a message to . . . We called a couple of days ago and that we should, we should try back today.

Hi, my name is Jessica Whitman. OI'm calling with the Texas Poll. [Resp.: Yeah.] I believe, uh, someone called for you yesterday.

Note that neither the first nor the second clauses in these two examples is identical. The dissimilarities are highlighted in the second example. Walt Field began with "Hello," and Jessica Whitman with "Hi." For Field's "this is," Whitman said "my name is." Both interviewers changed the script's embedded "calling for the Texas Poll" to the independent clause "I'm calling." Field connected the two clauses with and, and Whitman changed for to with.

Two introductions are quite deviant, involving reordering and deletion of information in the script, and addition of other information.

Hello, uh my name is Lianne and I'm calling for the Texas Poll. We're doing a statewide, nonpartisan public opinion poll, and it's a confidential survey of public opinion in Texas, sir.

Hello, my name is Elizabeth McMillan and I'm calling for Texas A&M University? for a Texas Poll that we're conducting? [Resp.: uh-huh] and

it's just a statewide, nonpartisan public opinion poll that we do . . . times a year. It's a confidential survey of public opinion in Texas? and we'd appreciate your help with it?

The remaining 15 introductions differ from one another, and from the script, along two axes. The first has to do with how the five clauses in the script are connected. Any of the five clauses can be spoken as an independent clause; whereas in the script only three clauses are independent, in the interviews all five can be. With the exception of the first, each clause can be connected to the preceding clause with and. Thus, the partially hypotactic, mostly adynastic script (there is only one and) can be spoken as a completely paratactic, polysyndetic passage.

Hello. My name is Mary Porter and I am calling from the Texas Poll and this is a statewide, nonpartisan public opinion poll and in this month we are conducting a confidential survey of public opinions in Texas and we would really appreciate your help and cooperation but first of all ma'am . . .

Five interviewers, on the other hand, connected clauses only once, in four cases between the third and fourth clauses ("and this month we are conducting . . .") and in one case between the second and third clause ("and the Texas Poll is . . ."). In the middle of this range, two or three ands may be employed, at the beginnings of any combination of clauses. The third clause, which appears in the script as the appositive noun phrase "a statewide, nonpartisan public opinion poll," was actually spoken that way by only six of the 24 interviewers. More often, it occurred as a finite clause. Seven options were employed.

It's a statewide . . .
It's just a statewide . . .
This is a statewide . . .
This is merely a statewide . . .
We're a statewide . . .
We're doing the statewide . . .
which is a statewide . . .

In summary, interviewers almost always spoke a version of the introduction that was more paratactic and polysyndetic than the version on their script, but they did so in a wide variety of ways.

The other axis along which the introductions vary is what could be called "personability," or how often and in what ways the introductions make reference to the people involved in the interaction. The script refers twice to we ("we are conducting," "we'd really appreciate"), and the interviewer is required to refer to him- or herself by name ("this is _________"). In all cases except two of the non-call-back introductions, the two required we
were included, and in every case at least one extra reference to I or we was added. Elaine Maldonado included the two required wes, as well as three extra first person pronouns:

Hi, my name is Elaine and I'm calling for the Texas Poll. We're a statewide, nonpartisan public opinion poll. And this month we are conducting a confidential survey of public opinion in Texas. We'd really appreciate your help and cooperation. Do you have a few moments?

There is also another marker of personality in Elaine Maldonado's introduction, the appended question addressed to and about the respondent: “Do you have a few moments?” Other markers of personality are common as well. Ten of the interviewers used only their first names, but others chose to give both first and last names. This format suggests more clearly that people are interacting as individuals than does the first-name-only format, which is used to identify the filler of the server role in many service encounters. Thirteen interviewers added sir or ma'am. Four exchanged the script's hello for the more personable hi, though one made a shift in the other direction with good afternoon.

There is also some variation from interview to interview by the same interviewer. But the range of variation is much smaller. Each individual tended to use certain formulas repeatedly, despite the fact that respondents' interactional styles and conversational demands varied widely. Of four interviewers for whom multiple introductions were analyzed, one consistently said the introduction exactly the same way (a way that differed from the script in several respects). Of six introductions by Timothy Kiefer, no two were alike, but each began with the same opening formula, “Hello, my name is Timothy Kiefer.” Jose Santos' two introductions were different, but both included the idiosyncratic wording “this is merely a statewide, nonpartisan public opinion poll.” Laurie Peters' six introductions were all different, but she always used her first name only, always added and before the third clause, and all but once expanded this clause to “it’s a statewide, nonpartisan . . .” All but once, she pluralized the script's singular opinion in “we are conducting a confidential survey of public opinions.”

If any part of the poll interviews could be expected to display little individual variation, it would be the introductions. This segment of the interview occurs before interviewer and respondent know anything about each other (except that the interviewer has heard the respondent’s voice and may thereby have identified his or her sex and ethnicity). The introduction is completely scripted on the questionnaire. Yet out of 24 cases, the introduction occurs 22 different ways. The interviewers appear in almost all cases to have been responding to the same troubles with the script: It is too “writerly” – too hypotactic and asyndetic – to be easily understandable, and too distancing to be effective in encouraging respondents to cooperate. But no two interviewers corrected these problems the same way. The result is 24 different voices, doing 22 different things structurally.

The 24 voices are also doing several different things semantically. The respondent’s reaction to the introduction was often an understanding “yeah” or “okay,” but it also sometimes displayed incomplete understanding (“Let me save you some time. Are you asking for donations?”) or no understanding at all (“Hold on a second. Let me turn the TV down,” or “What?”). And not all are doing the same thing pragmatically. Though most interviewers succeeded in eliciting cooperation, some failed, and whereas some of the subsequent interviews turned out to be businesslike and brief, others turned into banter, flirtation, or argument.

Acknowledgment of answers

At the end of each answer and before making the transition to the next question, interviewers must indicate that the answer is satisfactory in format (i.e., codable on the interviewer’s questionnaire) and complete, and that it has been heard. All 24 interviewers did this. Because the poll interviews take place over the phone, answer-acknowledgment needs to be done verbally (rather than, as often in face-to-face conversation, by eye movement or other gesture), and interviewers are instructed to provide it. This element of the interviewees' linguistic behavior is thus required, but unlike the introduction it is not scripted. I examined the first five acknowledgments in each interview.

Interestingly, acknowledgments of answers look as if they were partially scripted. Interviewers almost invariably chose okay or some variant (m’kay; ‘kay). This may have had to do with the fact that Texas Poll trainers suggest this discourse marker to interviewers as appropriately neutral. But okay is rarely the whole of an answer acknowledgment. Okay may be spoken with question intonation. In addition to okay, an acknowledgment may repeat part or all of the answer, either before or after okay, in what Merritt (1977) referred to as a “playback.”

Resp.: Well, right now, the economy right now.
Int.: The economy? Okay.

An acknowledgment may also add a synonym to okay, such as all right, right, or I see, or gotcha.

Resp.: Your education.
Int.: Education. Okay, gotcha, education.

Or the acknowledgment may announce that the interviewer needs time to encode the answer.

Resp.: . . . I mean the work. Lot of people out of work.
Int.: Okay, let me get that down.

Acknowledgments often include a transition to the next question, such as and then, now, well now, and the next one is now. Many interviewers, but
not all, also used the scripted transitions on the questionnaire, which include looking ahead, turning to X, and thinking about X. Occasionally, an interviewer provided only a transition, without okay, or no acknowledgment at all. M’aum can be part of the acknowledgment, as can a comment on the answer preceding okay.

You did? Okay, uh, [next question]
Oh, is that right? Okay.

In a few cases, interviewers adopt riskier, ambiguous strategies for acknowledging answers, strategies that could appear evaluative.

That’ll work.
Well that’s, that’s what we want Arturo.
That’s great.

Though individuals are not entirely consistent in the strategies they use for answer-acknowledgment, there is far less variation within interviews, and across interviews by the same interviewer, than across interviews by different interviewers. Some interviewers tended to repeat part of the answer; others did not. Some tended to repeat combinations like “okay, okay” or “okay, all right,” whereas others did not. Some regularly used now in making the transition to the next question, whereas others did not. In the six interviews by Timothy Kiefer, he invariably said okay, then almost invariably now, then the scripted transition to the next question.

Okay. Now looking ahead . . .
Okay. Turning to business conditions . . .
Okay. And we’re interested . . .

Laurie Peters’ eight interviews display a similar, and similarly consistent pattern, although she tended not to use okay.

Though the range of variation is small, the choices individuals make for acknowledging answers tell their respondents something about them as individuals and help shape the texture of the interview. If the interview were really the predictable, anonymous, referential sort of speech its users assume it is, then these small differences should not occur.

Unelicited comments on answers

I look next at an element of the interviewers’ talk that is neither scripted nor required: interviewers’ unelicited comments during or about respondents’ answers, comments that are not responses to direct verbal prompts by the respondent, such as “Could you repeat that?” or “How am I supposed to answer that?” To begin with a rather stunning example, one interviewer, during a respondent’s anecdote about abortion, interjected:

That’s, ah-hah, that’s. That happened with a friend of mine too. So, that happened with a friend of mine’s family too. They adopted a baby, a little girl.
or when the answer was inappropriate to the question, as when one respondent answered a multiple-choice question rating Texas as a place to live with "I like it just fine," and "fine" was not one of the choices read to her.

Okay. Most of our questions have a specific answer. You can just choose from the answers I read you.

Other functions interviewers' comments could serve included commentary on the poll's procedures or questions,

Resp.: Uh... well, that's kind of a loaded question. I'd say yeah, I'd say yes.
→ Int.: Okay. Yeah, now they're real simplified questions, I guess they have to be more or less.

or allusion to other respondents,

Resp.: [objects to the choices given in a fixed-alternative question]
→ Int.: Okay. Well, talking to others I think we do need a... a middle category.

or commentary on their own performance.

Ah... I wasn't trying to insult your intelligence...

Okay. Okay. I'm still trying to figure out how to spell Wichita Falls. ((laughs)) I'm stupid.

In one interview, the respondent sounded congested and sneezed, which provoked, "Bless you. Did you sneeze?" and "Sounds like you're getting over a bad cold?" from the interviewer.

Variation in interviewers' unelicited comments, except in the case of reassurances, is enormous, both in structure and function. There are many ways to stray, slightly, from the task at hand, and many choices of words and syntax along each tangential path. What interviewers' unelicited comments have in common, though, is that they tend to create the sense that a real individual is speaking with another real individual.

REASONS FOR INDIVIDUAL VARIATION

To summarize, I found that there is syntactic, lexical, and discourse-structural variation from interviewer to interviewer throughout the poll interviews, in the most completely scripted parts as well as in the most unscripted and optional. There are several ways of explaining this finding.

PERSONHOOD AS PERFORMANCE

Some of the deviation from the explicit and implicit script of the interview task has to do with enhancing its referential function. For example, interviewers make the introduction less subordinative in order to make it easier to understand by ear, and reassure hesitant respondents and instruct confused ones in order to make the flow of answers continue. But most of the deviation from the explicit and implicit script of the interview task has the effect of enhancing the individuality of the speaker. When interviewers deviate from the script, they speak as themselves rather than as representatives of the Texas Poll.

In order to understand why this is inevitable, it is helpful to think of Goffman's (1959) elucidation of personhood as performance. It is not only in culturally acknowledged genres of verbal art that Americans are required to put their uses of language on display. People are performing talk even when they are not overtly held accountable by their peers for the quality of their talk, as they are when they write poems, tell stories, rap on the street, or make jokes in conversation. As Tannen (1984) showed, middle-class white American dinner-table conversations are performances; so are midwesterners' recounts of the facts of their lives (Johnstone 1990). The research I report on here takes this observation a step further. People perform their linguistic identities not only when they are culturally required to or when the situation is neutral with respect to whether performance is required. People perform their individual linguistic selves even when they are not supposed to. Why, though, should this be the case?

PERSONABILITY AND POLITESSNESS

Interviewers perform their individual identities because talk will not continue unless they do. Seasoned poll interviewers are in fact perfectly aware of this and acknowledge that even though they know why they are supposed to stick to the script, interviewers who do are less successful. Potential respondents hang up the phone.

For Americans, unsolicited telephone calls from strangers are an infringement of privacy, a serious threat to a person's right to choose whom to interact with. Furthermore, the poll asks questions that may embarrass respondents, either by forcing them to admit ignorance or by requiring them to divulge private information (such as their income, age, and religion). Interviewers are required to violate strongly held beliefs about how people should treat one another. (For this reason, the job is perceived as very stressful, and the turnover rate is high.) In Brown and Levinson's (1987) terms, the interviewer's call is a "face-threatening act," or FTA, and FTAs are rude unless they are mitigated by means of various "politeness strategies." The beginning of the call, before respondents have agreed to participate and hence before they have implicitly agreed to be imposed on, is especially crucial in this regard.

Some attempts to mitigate the rudeness that the interview requires are built into the script. The introduction gives reasons for the imposition ("the Texas Poll, a statewide, nonpartisan public opinion survey. . . . This month we're conducting . . .") and suggests that the interviewer and respondent could work together ("We'd really appreciate your . . . cooperation."). In these ways, the script incorporates "positive politeness" (Brown & Levinson 1987), anticipating the respondent's desire to be informed and equal. "Negative" po-
liteness strategies are also incorporated, strategies that acknowledge the respondent's need to be left alone. The tone of the scripted introduction is deferentially formal and depersonalizes the interviewer by employing we rather than I, and interviewers are put in debt to respondents, who will "help" them by participating.

By the time respondents are asked to provide their age, income, religious affiliation, and other personal facts at the end of the interview, interviewer and respondent have been conversing for at least 15 minutes, and the original imposition has implicitly been excused. The new imposition of requesting items of information that Americans do not normally divulge to strangers, and about which it is normally rude to ask, requires another scripted expression of politeness. This takes the form of a brief explanation: "Finally, I'd like to ask you a few questions about yourself so that we can see how different groups of people feel about the things we've been talking about." Especially interesting in this passage are the pronoun choices. The voice of the Poll is represented first with personal I ("I'd like to ask") and then with less personal exclusive we ("so that we can see"), and the respondent first with you ("...to ask you") and then with inclusive we ("the things we've been talking about"). The result is that respondents can in effect choose whether to hear the Poll as an individual expressing positive-politeness solidarity or an impersonal entity keeping its negative-politeness distance, and whether they themselves are negative-politeness yours or positive-politeness were.

Many of the interviewers' deviations from the script can also be seen as politeness strategies, both of the positive and of the negative sort. Interviewers express positive politeness by allowing respondents to stray from the topic if it appears that respondents want to do so. They express personal interest in respondents' answers. They create solidarity by identifying themselves with respondents and by asserting common ground. They explain what they are doing, and why. They reduce the imposition of requesting personal information by divulging information about themselves. They console respondents who are forced to admit ignorance. Interviewers also employ negative politeness strategies. Their voices sometimes sound tentative and hedged. They show respect with sir or ma'am. They apologize for difficult questions. They thank respondents and express indebtedness to them. In short, the scripted politeness markers do not appear to provide enough mitigation for the imposition of a cold call, and interviewers appear to be required to add more. It could, in fact, be argued that failing to add extra expressions of politeness would in itself be impolite, as reading from a script, no matter how polite the script is, is not polite.

But whereas all interviewers are bound by the special requirements of this speech event for politeness, not all fulfill the obligation the same way. No two sound alike. Some are successful using mainly deferential, businesslike, negative politeness; others are equally successful with friendly, sympathetic, positive strategies. Some use a mixture, the way the script does. The 36 interviews I examined are too few and the interviewers too homogeneous a group to allow for comparisons among subgroups, but the data suggest that an interviewer's choice of politeness strategies does not correlate in any simple way with social factors. Of the three male interviewers, one favored negative politeness (and sounded very cool and efficient), one favored positive politeness (e.g., he elicited long digressions from his respondent by acknowledging answers with, "Oh, is that right?"); and the third employed both. Nor does audience design appear always to be a factor. Of the two interviewers for whom there are multiple interviews, one sounded almost exactly the same in every one, and the other sounded very different depending on whom she was talking to.

Politeness, then, can help explain why interviewers deviate from the script, and why many of the deviations take the forms they do. But why are all interviews not the same? Why do interviewers' extra expressions of politeness not take a common form? To answer this question, it is useful to turn from general observations about interaction to more specific observations about culture.

Individuation and culture

Being polite means acting like a person and treating other people as people. What it means to be a person, though, is not everywhere the same. Whereas it may be that some sort of conception of the self, as distinct from other selves and from nonhuman things, is universal (Hallowell 1955), specific ideologies about personhood vary from society to society and from era to era. In Bali, for example, individuals are seen as characters playing parts in the "never-changing pageant that is Balinese life" (Geertz 1984:128). They are defined by titles and designations, as an actor is defined by a role; consistent performance of one's externally defined role is what matters. Idiosyncracy is cause for shame, because when people let individuality show they fall out of character. The case has been made that this conception of person as social role was also characteristic of our Western forebears, until the Roman era, when "persona" as mask became "person" as individual legal entity (Mauss 1938) 1985).

The Texas Poll interviewers and respondents appear to share a conception of person diametrically opposed to that of the Balinese. Being a person is being an individual, and self-expression is crucial for mental health and social acceptance. Americans' individualism has been remarked on for as long as Americans have been a nation, by outsiders such as de Tocqueville as well as by insiders such as Thoreau and Emerson. Sincerity is valued more than conformity, and even the most traditional forms of speech (such as wedding vows), which must elsewhere be repeated verbatim, are often seen as meaningless unless done differently by different people. "Playing a role" or
speaking “lines” is dishonest and not true to the self. What it means to be a “character” is not to play a preordained part but rather the opposite. If someone is a character it is because she behaves differently than others and thus sets herself apart for special notice. It is insincere, rude, and, increasingly, illegal to treat a person as the filler of a role rather than as a distinct individual. People sometimes insist on treating others as expressing individuality even when they are not, as, for example, in the Jerzy Kosinski novel *Being There*, in which the infantile protagonist mindlessly repeats whatever he hears, and is taken for a creative genius.

The required expression of individuality occurs in many modalities, among them language. To use language completely idiosyncratically would be to be incomprehensible, in humans, of strategies for figuring out what someone might mean even if one has not heard it said that way before means that it is possible to do new things with language. And, crucially for our purposes here, it is more polite to express one’s individuality than it is to be completely conventional, because being different means being engaged, paying attention to what one is doing, not “being a machine.” This, then, is why politeness strategies in the survey interviews, though all chosen from a conventional set of possibilities, take the varied form they do rather than a more consistent form. Individual variation, in short, is polite, because poll interviewers are culturally required to act as individuals and treat others as individuals.

**DISCUSSION**

The research I have reported on here raises issues for linguistic practice and linguistic theory. The first has to do with anonymous telephone public opinion surveys. As mentioned, previous research has shown that public opinion polls are flawed by their nature. But public opinion surveys continue to be widely used, and their results, in the United States, are enormously powerful. (Polls that report how people plan to vote in political elections can affect how people do vote, for example.)

The continued use of public opinion surveys has in part to do with the usual slow or nonexistent flow of information in any field from academic theoreticians to practitioners. In part, it has to do with conscious decisions about the cost–benefit ratio of the procedure; people use it in spite of its shortcomings. But it also has to do with ideologies about language and language users. Language is understood by pollsters and poll-users as a code, a tool for exchanging objective information that, if used carefully, can be infallible. For survey work, this means that if questions are worded correctly, and the interviewers trained well, facts can be elicited. Of course, the questions need to be asked exactly the same way each time, and from the perspective of this theory of language, there is no reason for this not to be possible. Poll interviewers, on the other hand, need to express individuated personalities. By their design, polls require identical wordings, but if the interviewers in fact all talked the same way, refusing to depart from the script, they would be perceived as machinelike and unresponsive to the individuated personalities of their respondents, and the respondents might stop cooperating. The problem is thus more radical, and perhaps less easily soluble, than has been previously suggested.

Though poll interviewers express their individuality by means of linguistic choices drawn from relatively restricted conventional sets, the result of all their ways of deviating from the script is that each one has an individual style, an individual voice that can be tracked across interviews with very different respondents who are making very different interactional demands. Edward Sapir devoted considerable attention to individual voice, especially in the essay “Speech as a Personality Trait” (Mandelbaum 1949:533–43). Sapir pointed out that the individual speech patterns by which we know one person from another are made up of elements from all levels of language: the physical voice, “voice dynamics” (intonation, rhythm, speed, and pacing), pronunciation, vocabulary, and style. Sapir’s goal in discussing the loci of individual variation was to “obtain a valuable lever for psychiatric work” and, possibly, to “arrive at certain very pertinent conclusions regarding personality” (ibid.:543). But his discussion bears on the nature of language as well as the nature of personality. To understand discourse, it is crucial to understand individual variation. “It would be a very complicated problem,” Sapir wrote, “to disentangle the social and individual determinants of style, but it is a theoretically possible one” (ibid.:542).

Hymes (1979) took up and expanded Sapir’s discussion of individual differences, listing four possible motivations linguists might have for studying individual style (ibid.:36). According to Hymes, some see individual differences as residues in what is essentially a study of common patterns; a person with this view might study individual characteristics simply for completeness. Others might find it helpful to consider individual differences in attempts to answer other sorts of questions about language, such as, perhaps, questions about the nature of sociolinguistic variation. Or the study of individual differences could be seen as a way to help alleviate the social problems (such as misunderstanding, perhaps) that they cause. Alternatively, individual differences could be given “foundational status” as a “vantage point from which to consider questions of method and theory in the study of language in general” (ibid.:36).

In one way of doing linguistics, deriving from the discourse-based philosophical tradition of close reading of texts, individual differences do have foundational status. In this view, people create grammar by talking; the language, linguistic competence, or langue usually seen as prior to talk, performance, or parole is in fact a consequence of discourse. Hopper (1988), for example, wrote of “emergent grammar”; Tannen (1989) of a “poetics of
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talk," in which utterances are created out of snatches of remembered speech and of others' phrases; Becker (1984, 1988) of a "linguistics of particularity," in which "langauging" is the focus. As the goal of linguists in this more humanistic paradigm is to work toward understanding language through coming to understand particular instances of language use, describing what makes a given text different from others - its individual, particular language - is as important as understanding what makes it similar to others. So, for example, Friedrich and Redfield (1979:435) suggested that "our models of language and of linguistic should include individual language and speech as significant variables," and Becker (1981:5) pointed out that "the most difficult task for the philologist is to hear the individual voice." The Texas Poll suggests that individual voice is not only present, but crucial, in every speech event. It suggests the need for a linguistics of individuality based in the stylistics of the most mundane forms of everyday talk.

NOTES
1. An earlier, very different version of this article was presented at NWAWE '88 at Duke University in 1989. I am grateful to James Dyer of the Texas A&M University Public Policy Resources Laboratory for allowing the January 1989 Texas Poll to be taped, and to Guy Bailey for taping it and making the tapes available to me. This part of the project, as well as some of the transcription, were funded by NSF grant BNS-8812352 to Bailey. I am also grateful to the student volunteers who transcribed others of the tapes I discuss here: Laura Anderson, Joyokung Baek, Mike Brooks, Lisa Golding, Elizabeth Lewis, Tanya Long, John Snow, Leslie Sagondares, and Lillian Wooley. Dawn Washington provided invaluable help in coding the data, and she and I are both grateful to the Department of English at Texas A&M for the Undergraduate Research Opportunities grant that funded her work. I have received extremely useful reactions to drafts of this article from members of the Texas A&M Linguistics Colloquium and the Discourse Studies Group, especially Kathleen Ferrara, Jimmie Killingsworth, and Robert Ivie, and from Dell Hymes, Jane Hill, Leslie Milroy, Carol Myers-Scotton, Ellen Bartoo, and Neal Norrick.

2. Male respondents in interviews conducted by females, apparently often uncomfortable with the fact that the interviewer controls the flow of topics and turns in the interaction, sometimes attempt to break the interview frame by such means as giving facetious or inappropriately formatted answers. Their talk is thus often quite self-expressive. Female respondents are more likely to be cooperative and hence less self-expressive (see Johnstone & Ferrara 1991).

3. Kathleen Ferrara suggested this term.

4. It should be borne in mind that interviewers and respondents almost all speak Southern varieties of American English. Whereas respondents' ethnicity may have been clear from their voices in some cases, in many cases it probably was not. Research by Bailey and Maynor (1989) and Haley (1990) showed that people cannot reliably distinguish Southern whites' voices from those of blacks, especially when the speakers are older.

5. Tannen's (1989) notion of "involvement," developed from Lakoff's (1973) work on politeness, captures the same facts about how interlocutors must always simultaneously respect each other's needs for independence and for connection.

6. It would be interesting to look for sociolinguistic correlates of interviewers' politeness choices, using more data, but that would be a different project, which would obscure the level of variation I am concerned with here.

7. Claims for conceptions of person like the Balinese have also been made by Read (1955) for the Gahuku-Gama (New Guinea) and by Dumont (1970) for India. Shweder and Bourne (1984) reported on a questionnaire study of concepts of person in India.


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REFERENCES


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