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From police interrogation to police record

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English Summary

At the beginning of this PhD project I set out to collect police interrogations and police records as part of the bigger research project 'intertextuality in judicial contexts' in which we aimed to follow the suspect's statement from police interrogation to trial. Once we had permission from the Ministry of Justice I was relatively soon welcomed by the police to sit in on interrogations and to record these special kinds of interactions. At the police station I learned what it takes to collect such unique material that is usually not available to the public.

When I had collected the material, 15 police interrogations and their police records, I had the basis for my research. The interrogations I recorded were with 11 different police officers and 14 different suspects. Suspects were interrogated about crimes such as robbery, extortion, threatening, handling goods and violent robberies. The suspects, aged between 14 and 42, come from all sorts of backgrounds and have various histories in relation to crimes and imprisonment.

The officers also come from different backgrounds; they have various levels of experience within the police and various levels of experience with interrogating. Interrogations were conducted with one or two officers. The ways in which the records were written up and the ways in which the officers managed the various activities of the interrogation (asking questions, listening, typing, writing on a piece of paper) not only differed amongst the officers, but also differed from one interrogation to the next with the same officers.

The different phases of the police interrogation were carried out in a more or less homogeneous manner. In general, officers began the interrogation by doing some preliminary activities on the computer while waiting for the suspect to be brought to the interrogation room. When the suspect arrived, he was either given the caution immediately, or some form-filling questions were first asked. Officers then conducted a social interrogation in about half of the cases or otherwise immediately started with the case-related interrogation. The interrogation was rounded off with exit activities such as printing the record, having the suspect read through the record and signing the documents.

After having recorded the interrogations I started transcribing my materials. While closely looking at the data, I started to identify the puzzle that the material offered. When looking at the product of the police interrogation, the police record, three styles were prevalent: the monologue style, the recontextualisation phrase style and the question-answer style. None of these writing styles, however, reflected the sometimes informal, emotional or particularly conversational language and interaction I had experienced as an observer in the interrogation room. When returning to how suspects told their stories in the recordings, I did not find the complex, recontextualised, formal statements and wordings that were so apparent in the police records. Additionally, although the question-answer style did show what questions were asked during the interrogation, the monologue style made it appear as if the statements were volunteered by the suspects.

This observation led to questions about the process of constructing a police record. Asking questions, listening to answers, typing and asking further questions are tasks that the police officer has

to manage. For the suspect, who is mainly answering questions, listening and waiting, there is most at stake during the case-related phase. It is here that the officer is seeking the truth, and the suspect may or may not want to or cannot tell “what happened.” I became curious about how the officer and suspect manage and orient to the main activities that are going on in the various phases of the police interrogation, particularly the activities of talking and typing, and how the suspects’ stories are, in this process, transformed from a story to be told into a story to be written. This led to two research questions which became the main focus of this dissertation:

- 1) *How are the suspects’ stories elicited, told and written down during the interrogation?*
- 2) *How are talk and typing coordinated in the various phases of the interrogation?*

The first research question was explored thoroughly in chapter 4. In this chapter I analyzed how the suspects’ stories transform from talk to text. Although the suspect plays a major role in the construction of his own story, we also see that the majority of the records are written up according to P’s agenda, in P’s words, reformulating P’s questions and selecting the words appropriate for P’s future audience.

In this chapter I first looked at how the suspects’ stories were elicited. Officers frame their story elicitation questions in such a way that it invites suspects to tell an innocent story. When officers let the suspects tell their stories in a longer turn-at-talk, I labeled these types of stories “free” stories. Officers respond with minimal acknowledgement tokens, encouraging suspects to continue telling their story about what happened. Other officers soon interrupt the suspect when they tell their stories. I labeled these types of stories “supervised” stories. Here, we clearly see that the officer steers the suspect’s story in a particular direction. Answers can be “correct” and officers encourage suspects to tell the “correct” version of the story – a story that the officer may already have heard from the victim or witnesses. A third way in which stories are told is that officers “impose” a story. Officers tell the suspect how the events occurred and then the officer may or may not list a number of yes/no interrogatives that the suspect may or may not confirm (or he confirms all interrogatives at once). Such yes/no interrogatives can be powerful as they preformulate the answer (see Raymond, 2003), leaving little space for the suspect to say things differently.

Either through further questioning, through interruptions or because the officer tells the story him- or herself (or a combination thereof), officers co-construct and construct a story according to their own structure and chronology. We see that the “most reportable event” as defined by Labov & Waletzky (1967) is adapted from an “innocent” story about doing ordinary things to a story about intentional actions. In the written stories we see that the temporal order has been changed to create a coherent story that includes facts relating to time, location, names of people and direction.

At the same time, by looking at the written record we cannot see how the stories were constructed. The various interactional styles of eliciting, telling and responding to a story are not shown in the record. Questions are sometimes completely left out (monologue style), or they have been

rephrased as if they were spoken by the suspect whereas they were actually uttered by the officer (recontextualisation phrase style).

The second research question was examined in chapter 5. Here, I looked at how the officer and suspect coordinated and oriented to talking and typing. Generally, talking and typing are sequentially organized and separate activities. Even when there is some overlap, these two prevalent activities are managed unproblematically in this specific institutional setting. Overlap of talk and typing occurs when the answers are projectable, keystrokes are short, or when P is for example reading out loud what he/she is currently typing. The typing demonstrates not only when answers are recordable, but also demonstrates the projectability of an answer. In other words, how talk and typing are organized and oriented to shows us what information from the suspect's story matters for the construction of the police record. A way for P to share with S what has been typed or what is about to be typed, is through the use of formulations. Such formulations function as a mid-way point between talk and typing and not only help structure the interrogation, but also provide S with an opportunity to make changes to the record during the interaction.

Of course typing and talking are not managed the same throughout every interrogation with every different officer. We must take into account contextual factors such as the different phases of the interrogation. The various goals of the various phases of the interrogation require a different orientation to the typing. For example, during the form-filling phase, questions and answers are short whereas during the case-related phase officers are seeking the truth and "doing interrogating." Furthermore, the number of officers who are conducting the interrogation can differ. When there are two officers, typing becomes more of a background activity while at the same time the typing officer also has more time to make the police record 'appropriate' for the future readers of the document.

In the last section of chapter 5 I demonstrated that typing can play a role in structuring the interrogation. Through interjecting the talk, keeping the floor, and overruling information from the suspect, officers are in control not only of writing up the document but also of the interaction. Suspects orient to the pre-allocation of turns and activities by answering for the typing. Typing therefore further defines the asymmetrical roles between the professional (the police officer) and the lay-person (the suspect).