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## Proposal

### **Title: On-Site Visit Interviews in External Quality Assurance Procedures – a Linguistic, Empirical Approach**

#### **Abstract:**

On-site visit interviews play a crucial role in external quality assurance procedures. Nevertheless, so far there seems to be little empirical research, both in linguistics, and in the field of quality assurance research and studies in higher education.

The contexts of these interviews are diverse, complex and demanding; pitfalls and challenges are manifold. In linguistics, and particularly in the field of discourse analysis, a broad range of approaches can be successfully applied to analyse and understand the challenges of these interview situations. In the long term, an in-depth programme of research could potentially provide agencies as well as peers with valuable advice on how to steer the interviews effectively towards constructive conversations and avoid awkward communicative situations.

In this paper we present preliminary results of a pilot study that was conducted by the ZHAW Department of Applied Linguistics in cooperation with the Swiss Agency of Accreditation and Quality Assurance (AAQ).

#### **Text of paper:**

### **1 Introduction**

The interviews during on-site visits play a crucial role for the outcome of external quality assurance procedures. An educated guess would be that the opinion formed by an expert group during on-site visit interviews influences decisively the outcome, notably the final reports, of these procedures. Interestingly, no empirically-based research can be found regarding questions such as how these *interviews* (we will address the question of definitions in chapter 3 of this paper) are organised, how the interlocutors interact with each other, or whether problems can emerge due to diverse cultural and professional backgrounds as well as fields of specialisation – to name but a few aspects. If difficult situations arise during evaluation processes, members of the agencies, the peer panel or the institutions evaluated, in a rather vague way, usually express that the interviews worked “somehow not quite well”.

In 2014, interviews which were conducted during an AAQ *Quality audit*-procedure at a university in German-speaking Switzerland were recorded and subsequently analysed by ZHAW linguists. At an early stage of these analyses, some tendencies, patterns and focal points could be identified, namely an unclear communicative situation, peers with different professional as well as cultural backgrounds, and different hierarchies at different levels.

In this paper, we will look more closely at the role of the interviews in the quality assurance procedure and discuss linguistic definitions and approaches. On the basis of a transcript of an interview, we will point out which problems are likely to arise and suggest possible reasons why they occur.



## 2 Methodological Approaches & Data

We adopt a qualitative and ethnomethodological approach<sup>1</sup>. Empirical data is gathered and research questions are formulated based on data analysis and further specified during empirical work. In our pilot study, nine interviews were recorded, all of which were held with different groups during the on-site visit. Firstly, a systematic inventory<sup>2</sup> for each recorded interview was created to specify relevant research questions and main points of interest, which were then discussed and evaluated with AAQ staff members. Secondly, one of the conversations was transcribed following the GAT2 linguistic transcription conventions<sup>3</sup> in order to deepen the analysis and to specify relevant research fields and literature. The analysis of the interaction is carried out according to the principles of conversation analysis<sup>4</sup> and discourse analysis<sup>5</sup>, drawing also on discourse linguistics<sup>6</sup>. Our main objective is to define the concept of on-site visit interviews based on empirical data. In the next section, we compare the object of study with definitions offered by AAQ and discourse analytic approaches.

## 3 “On-Site Visit Interviews”

### 3.1 Definitions and Procedures according to AAQ

*Quality audits* in Switzerland, to which we refer in this paper, but also other external quality assurance procedures, are usually divided into different phases<sup>7</sup>: Most commonly there is a preparatory phase with a process of self-evaluation, followed by a phase of external evaluation – usually accompanied by an on-site visit with interviews, concluding in an external QA-report by the expert group.

The interviews analysed in this paper were conducted during an on-site visit by an expert panel as part of a *Quality audit*-procedure. This panel consisted of five persons, including a chairperson.

Regarding the role expectation of the experts the agency states: “They regard themselves as ‘peers’ who seek to make an contribution to the advancement of the quality assurance system through critical but constructive feedback.” Concerning the general organisation of the interviews, AAQ provides only very general guidelines: The designated chair heads the panel and moderates the interviews. Furthermore, the experts must not pose leading questions; communication with other peers is not permitted, and mobile phones must be switched off. All participants of the evaluated institution should be open, polite, cooperative, transparent, clear and constructive in their answers, and make sure that everyone has an opportunity to speak.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. e.g. Denzin 1989 [1970], 2004; Flick et al. 2004; Steinke 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. e.g. Deppermann 2001, 32–35.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Selting et al. 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. e.g. Hutchby/Wooffitt 1998; Lerner 2004; Sacks et al. 1974, Sacks 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Roth/Spiegel 2013b, a, Roth 2015.

<sup>6</sup> “Diskurslinguistik,” cf. Spitzmüller/Warnke 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Kastelliz 2014, 20–23; OAQ 2012 and Le Fort 2014 for Switzerland.

<sup>8</sup> „Die Mitglieder der Expertengruppe begegnen den Vertreterinnen und Vertretern der Hochschule mit Respekt; sind kritisch und konstruktiv; fördern die Meinungsvielfalt durch einen offenen Austausch; stellen sicher, dass sich alle Interviewpartner und -partnerinnen äussern können“ (OAQ 2012: 30).

### 3.2 Linguistic Approaches

In linguistic research literature, the interactional situation outlined above is yet to be described, which means that there is no precise, reliable theoretical definition. In practice, the terminology used is highly inconsistent: In German the conversations are called *Gespräche*, *Interviews* or *Interviewsitzungen*; in English they are referred to as *discussions*, *conversations* or *interviews*. Even during the quality audit we recorded, the peers used different terms, depending on the key group.<sup>9</sup> This is a challenge, both theoretically and empirically:

- Theoretical: An *interview* and a *discussion* are two completely different types of conversation ("Gesprächssorten"). To rely on a general definition, the Penguin English Dictionary (Allen 2000) defines a *discussion* as "1. consideration of a question in open debate or conversation, 2. a conversation or debate about something" whereas an *interview* is described in the same dictionary as "1. a formal consultation used to evaluate qualifications, e.g. of a prospective student or employee, 2. meeting at which information is obtained, e.g. by a journalist [...]."<sup>10</sup> Also in everyday language these general definitions refer to completely different interactional situations or – in conversation analytic terms – different types of *activities*: Whereas a *discussion* is a rather open space for debate, an interview implies a specific hierarchy and entitlements (e.g. to ask the questions).<sup>11</sup>
- Empirical: It makes a big difference to the interlocutors whether an expert is announcing the meeting as a *discussion* (*Gespräch*) or as an *interview*. According to our short definition above, a discussion is less hierarchical in its organisation than an interview. It can be shown in our data that, depending on the opening of the meeting and its definition, the conversation unfolds differently.

To sum up, we are not able to define the type of conversation in question in advance since existing terminology and definitions are neither consistent nor sufficient. According to our methodological approach, the only way to describe the interviews appropriately is to analyse every interaction in its own right and to deduce the relevant characteristics for a description.

In addition, and even more importantly, it appeared that the interlocutors themselves (as part of the expert panel or as a member of the university) had no collective conception of the communicative situation. They had different expectations depending on their own communicative experience and the very communicative situation.

As initial analysis of our data has shown, there are some crucial points that have an influence on whether an *interview* is successful. It is necessary to conduct a more thorough analysis of those points in order to establish a comprehensive definition of the interaction:

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<sup>9</sup> *Gespräch* when talking to members of the university management, *Interview* or *Interviewsitzung* when talking to students or the research assistants and PhD students.

<sup>10</sup> The same can be said about the German terms *Gespräch* und *Interview*: According to the German Dictionary DUDEN a *Gespräch* is "ein mündlicher Gedankenaustausch in Rede und Gegenrede über ein bestimmtes Thema" whereas an *Interview* is „eine verabredete Zusammenkunft zur Veröffentlichung durch Presse, Rundfunk oder Fernsehen bestimmtes Gespräch zwischen einer [bekannten] Person und einem Reporter, in dem diese sich zu gezielten, aktuelle [politische] Themen oder die eigene Person betreffenden Fragen äußert.“ In German the semantic aspect of the „job interview“ is missing, but nevertheless there is a clear distinction according to hierarchy of the interlocutors in these two situations.

<sup>11</sup> And we do not even consider here the meaning of *interview* as a research instrument in the social sciences, which could be relevant for social scientists in the meetings.



- (1) The *opening of the conversation*: As various studies in conversation analysis have shown, the opening of a conversation has a crucial impact on the way it unfolds.<sup>12</sup>
- (2) The *course of the conversation*
- (3) The *closing of the conversation*<sup>13</sup>
- (4) The different *interlocutors*, their position in the expert panel or the institution.<sup>14</sup>
- (5) The *concept of quality* and the lack of its definition in the conversations.

In the following section we will discuss these aspects on the basis of empirical data:

#### **4 Case Study – Empirical Evidence**

The importance of the importance of the five factors mentioned above shall be shown in the following analysis of an on-site visit interview example.

The interview analysed here was conducted with the university management. The expert panel consisted of five people: EXP\_1 who was the designated chair and moderator of the discussion and EXP\_2, a professor who is very experienced in the field of quality assurance and university management. EXP\_3 is an expert in quality management and EXP\_4 a professor – both were taking part in an audit process for the first time. EXP\_5 was the student member. An AAQ staff member, AAQ\_1, was also present.

From the evaluated university, there were seven members of the management: Uni1\_1–7. Uni1\_1 is the group leader, who is employed full-time in the management, whereas the others have different part-time positions beside their occupation as professors.

All of the participants are native German speakers, but speak different German dialects (Swiss, German and Austrian varieties) which highlights differences in their cultural backgrounds. During the interview they spoke Standard German.

The interview took place on the first day of the on-site visit and lasted 75 minutes.

##### **(1) The Opening of the Conversation**

The meeting is opened by the designated chair and moderator EXP\_1. He is thanking everybody and goes on:

025 EXP\_1: °h äh und äh ja damit haben wir jetzt eine erste allgemeine  
gesprächsrunde mit Ihnen==  
°h uh and uh well so we have an initial, general round of discussion  
with you

He defines the interview as *an initial, general round of discussion* a definition that implies an open conversation.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. e.g. Mondada/Schmitt 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. e.g. Schegloff/Sacks 1999.

<sup>14</sup> For the conceptualisation of institutional communication by CA see Hutchby/Wooffitt 1998: 137–160.

## (2) The Course of the Conversation

Due to space restrictions we will focus on one aspect of the issues discussed during the interview. After a rather general statement about quality assurance at the evaluated university, a more difficult issue is addressed: the withdrawal of a professorial chair by the management of the university. Uni1\_1 tries to avoid answering, but the expert EXP\_2 keeps insisting and asking questions about financial issues<sup>15</sup>. As he receives no answer, he goes on by asking even more directly: *How do you cope with the situation that you are lacking money?*<sup>16</sup>. This leads to an interesting reaction on a metaphorical level:

314 nv: (0.83)  
 315 Uni1\_1: das ist ein idealer moment [um unsere leitung administration  
 (.) <<smile voice> doktor Uni1\_2 ins gefecht zu schicken->]  
*this is an ideal moment to send our administrative manager, doctor  
 Uni1\_2, into battle*  
 316 alle: [(Gelächter)]  
 ((Laughing))  
 317 EXP\_2: ich möchte IHN bitten hier den (b/f)all aufzunehmen  
*I'd like to ask him to take up the (case/ball)*

Uni1\_1 pauses for almost a second (L314) and then answers with a war metaphor: "I'm sending the director of administration into the battle". Everybody laughs (L316), which might show that the joke is well received, or that the participants are trying to relax a tense situation.<sup>17</sup> EXP\_2 then explicitly invites Uni1\_2 to take over. This marks the beginning of a critical situation in this interview between Uni1\_1 and EXP\_2, who is not the chair and moderator of the interview, but the most experienced person.

Different reasons can lead to this critical situation: One assumption which needs to be analysed more deeply is the different communication mentalities of the interlocutors: Even though they are all native German speakers, one can assume by their dialects that they were socialized in different communication cultures. There is little linguistic literature concerning the issue of different communication norms in the German-speaking regions (Werlen 1998) but there are indications that the placement of important thematic issues is organised differently in Germany and Switzerland<sup>18</sup>:

One basic difference between a German and a Swiss communication mentality seems to be aspects of "directness". Whereas in Germany interlocutors tend to be more direct on different levels, in Switzerland one needs to be more indirect in conversation.<sup>19</sup> So, contrary to Switzerland, it is less problematic in Germany to raise important issues at the beginning of a discussion. In Switzerland, interlocutors start with more general and less important topics and address the more important issues rather at the end of a discussion; directness is to be avoided (cf. Werlen 1998: 221). In our data we can observe how an

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<sup>15</sup> Line 294 in the transcript.

<sup>16</sup> Lines 301–306 in the transcript.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. Holmes 2003: 109–135.

<sup>18</sup> We plan to conduct further research on this topic and will give here only some initial indications from our data.

<sup>19</sup> Werlen 1998 describes this as "Maxime der Rücksichtnahme" which she defines as one of the Swiss communication maxims (Werlen 1998: 22).

important, and delicate, thematic issue, placed at the very beginning of the interview, leads to animosities during the subsequent conversation.

### (3) The Closing of the Conversation

It is not possible to provide a detailed analysis of the interview and the critical relation between EXP\_1 and Uni1\_1 at this point. However, a look at the closing of the meeting shows that Uni1\_1 and EXP\_2 are "fighting" for their position until the end of the interview. In the following table, a so-called *sequence analysis*, the organisation of the closing sequence of the interview, is presented:

	Lines	Speaker	Issue	Talk
1	2437– 2439	Uni1_1	Conclusion of the last section	<i>Zumindest nicht rocket science wie man das aufteilt it's not rocket science how you divide this</i>
2	2440	Uni1_1	Assessment of his own previous statement	<i>Das wäre ein ideales schlusswort that would be an ideal way to conclude</i>
3	2441	Everybody	Laughing	
4	2442– 2443	EXP_1	Take over the turn (Co-construction)	<i>Für die erste Interviewsitzung For this first interview session</i>
5	2444	unclear	Side comment concerning conclusion in 1	<i>Rocket science das machen nicht wir das machen hoffentlich die anderen rocket science this is not what we do, but hopefully the others</i>
6	2445– 2446	EXP_1	Thanking remarks	
7	2447	Uni1_4	Side comment ( <i>rocket science</i> )	<i>Ja genau Yes exactly</i>
8	2448	EXP_1	Thanking remarks	
9	2449– 2451	Uni1_1	Thanking for coming and commitment (Co-construction)	<i>und für euer IHR engagement-sie haben ein (.) STRENGende drei tAge vor sich; and for your commitment you have an exhausting three days ahead of you</i>
10	2452	everybody	Laughing	

In general, in a moderated talk, the moderator closes the discussion and gives the final thanks. In the example, we see that Uni1\_1, the group leader, defines the conclusion to the meeting (1 and 2). The moderator takes up the group leader's final remark in a co-construction (lines 2242–43, ... *for the first interview.*). By completing his sentence, the



moderator makes clear that he should be in charge of the closing of the conversation. He subsequently thanks everybody for his or her contribution. The group leader instead does not let EXP\_1 have the final say and closes the discussion himself.

#### **(4) The Different Interlocutors, their Position in the Expert Panel or the Institution**

It was already evident in the short analysis that there is a critical constellation in this interview setting. On the one hand, we have two leaders in the expert group: EXP\_1 who is the moderator and entitled to lead the discussion, and EXP\_2 who is the most experienced expert, which is displayed through his communicative style. On the other hand, Uni1\_1 leads the hierarchy in his management. So one problem can be identified on the level of the organisation of the discussion: EXP\_1 in his role as the moderator is entitled to lead the discussion. However, there is a competition between EXP\_1 and EXP\_2 due to the broader experience of EXP\_2 on a professional level.

The importance of the background of the speakers has been demonstrated by referring to their different communication mentalities<sup>20</sup>: The critical situation between the two "leaders" in the respective groups seems to have its origin in culturally-based rules. These mostly implicit rules guide the interlocutors' expectations towards the positioning of important issues in the course of a discussion. Due to an unfavourable thematic progression the discussion does not proceed very well.

#### **(5) The Concept of Quality**

With regard to the complete corpus of nine recorded interviews, it is striking that a definition of *quality* is missing, although this is the essential concept of a quality assurance system. Interestingly, the definition of quality seems to be a gap: quality is an elusive concept and seems to be difficult to define. According to a discourse analytical perspective, the lack of a certain issue in a discourse can indicate two things: either, the issue is so clear to everybody that there is no need to discuss it, or it is a taboo. As Roth points out:

Das *Ungesagte*, das, was sich in einem Diskurs sprachlich nicht manifestiert und damit der Diskurslinguistik nicht zugänglich ist, hat also zwei gegensätzliche Ausprägungen: das *Unsagbare* und das *Selbstverständliche*. (Roth 2015: 159)<sup>21</sup>

In our preliminary study we can only point out that the concept of *quality* is not explicitly discussed in our data. The data need to be analysed in more detail to explore whether the participants cannot or do not want to discuss this concept, or whether it is simply already clear to everybody.

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<sup>20</sup> As mentioned in the introductory remarks, the interaction is also influenced by the speakers' different professional and personal backgrounds.

<sup>21</sup> Translation: That which is not expressed in discourse, and which is therefore not available for discourse linguistic analysis, has two opposite meanings: that which is unspeakable and that which is self-evident.



## 5 Conclusion and Avenues for Further Research

In this initial analysis, we have shown how important the following aspects and their clarification are for the on-site visit interviews:

- A consistent definition of the communicative setting (interview or discussion), or raising awareness of how much a definition can influence the progress of a meeting.<sup>22</sup>
- A clear definition of the chair's respectively moderator's tasks and her/his role in the expert panel as well as a clear definition of course of the conversation. A stronger inclusion of the agency member as moderator could be considered.
- For experts it is not sufficient to be fluent in the language (dialect or standard variety) of the evaluation process. When it comes to critical situations, interlocutors tend to rely on communicative patterns they were socialized in. Therefore, a higher linguistic awareness is required.

In this paper we have used a case study to show a number of difficulties that can arise in complex and unclear communication situations during interviews within the framework of external quality assurance procedures. In the next phase, we will deepen and expand the analysis by including more data, especially the written statements in order to have a broader discourse analytic view of the whole evaluation process. The final results will be used to develop tools in order to optimise the interviews. These tools will consist of different elements which improve the organisation of the quality assurance procedures in general and provide agencies as well as experts with guidelines of how to lead the interviews. Peer training and coaching will complete these measures.

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<sup>22</sup> In this paper, we did not consider other interviews of the same *Quality audit*-procedure; meetings that are defined as *interviews* are highly different from *discussions* in terms of their organisation.

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