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	Agree strongly / Agree	Disagree / Disagree strongly
I think it is safe living near Sellafield	79%	17%
I believe the nuclear industry is a safe industry	71%	23%
I am apprehensive about the safety assurances given by the nuclear industry	41%	55%
I am concerned about the health risks posed by the activities of the nuclear industry at Sellafield	40%	58%

Source: North East Market Surveys (Waterton and Wynne 1999)

Figure 2

<p>‘There are some differences in opinion about how safe nuclear power plants are. Some people say they are completely safe, while others say they present dangers and hazards. How do you feel – that it would be safe to have a nuclear energy plant <i>someplace near here</i> or that it would present dangers?’ (Emphasis added [by Rosa and Dunlap])</p>				
	10/75	9/79	9/89	9/90
	%	%	%	%
Safe	42	27	22	25
Would present dangers	43	64	70	67
Don’t know	15	9	8	8

N= 2000

Source: Roper (Rosa and Dunlap 1994)

Figure 1

Acknowledgements: My thanks to Nirex and Jane Hunt for permission to use a passage from the data gathered for the study 'The Front End of the Front End' (<http://domino.lancs.ac.uk/ieppp/Home.nsf>). My thanks also to participants in the panels on 'Applied Linguistics and Real World Problems' at BAAL (2003) and AAAL (2004), to Chris Brumfit and Deborah Cameron for their comments, and to an anonymous referee.

notices. The problem is not just that we in applied linguistics lack a big crossover bestseller that tells the public what we do, like those of Stephen Pinker on language acquisition and psychology (Pinker 1995). There are good writers of potentially popular books in our field (e.g., Agar 1994; Cameron 2000). But the popular books by academics that sell in airport bookshops and are talked about in radio programmes, the books with subtitles beginning 'How . . .' or 'Why . . .', appeal by offering hidden and complete knowledge in an authoritative tone.

What we can offer is an appreciation of what is there on the surface, the intricate way people interact, and the difference these little intricacies make in social action and change. Such detailed studies of talk about opinions have shown ambivalences in attitudes to people with AIDS (Miller et al. 1998), shared anxieties about inner-city community policing (Matoesian and Coldren 2002), evaluation of claims of experts (Myers 2004), and hope, guilt, and defensiveness about environmental sustainability (Hinchliffe 1996; Myers and Macnaghten 1998). The ways people talk connect to the ways they see their world and the ways they act in it and on it. If there is a crisis in public opinion research, it is not a technical problem of sampling, calculation, or prediction, it is that people no longer recognise their own talk and actions in the slogans and the numbers attached to them in surveys. That is where we come in.

Digest poll to predict the 1936 US Presidential election. Gallup's technical innovation was the use of a small but carefully designed representative sample (which enabled him to predict the 1936 election more or less accurately). Gallup's method, systematising what had been left to unsystematic straw poll and crowd counts, quantifying it, and commodifying it, fitted a model of modernity. Readers of polls could recognise the man or woman with the clipboard, the reporting forms, the central calculation office, the statistical results, as signs of a new and improved public opinion.

Polls are now much better at predicting voting behaviour, within their stated limits. But often organisations and people are interested in something much more complicated than predicting an election, that is, understanding what people treat as an issue, what it means to them in their relations with others, what links they make between it and other issues, how much they care about it, how it relates to their daily round of work, commuting, shopping, cooking, getting kids to school. That is why clients who need to know more about response to a policy or decision commission focus groups, citizen juries, inquiries, and other qualitative techniques for researching public opinion (the Nirex study cited here is an example (Hunt and Simmons 2001)). But if these rich qualitative studies are then framed in terms of clients' expectations, and reported back to them in catch phrases, they are still not getting a sense of how people are talking.

We may be able to show, as Gallup did, that there is a crisis in public opinion research; we may have more trouble in showing that we have a solution. Applied linguists are unlikely to sign up hundreds of newspapers to carry their reports of public opinion, the way Gallup did. Conversation analysis may provide insights but it does not provide headlines; there is no news in bringing out what everyone knows but no one

waste, GMOs, mobile phones, or even a proposal for speed bumps in a residential street cannot wait until we arrive at what would be an ideal design of a discussion. There are also issues of scale. Even relatively small exercises in consultation and public opinion research, exercises perhaps smaller than they should be, take place on a grand scale, requiring a large organisation. There are many insights to be had from the kind of small-scale academic study that characterises my own work, but by definition public opinion is something broader.

### **Making a difference**

Despite the problems in adapting applied linguistics to this new area, public opinion is too important to leave to commercial polling organisations, academic public opinion specialists, newspapers and television networks. These institutions claim to speak for ‘the people’, and their results can be powerful, as they recirculate and define the terms of political and practical possibility, on nuclear power, gun control, war, genetically modified foods, vaccinations, trade agreements, or on issues that aren’t even recognised as issues because opinions are not surveyed and do not circulate in this way. If applied linguists who study language and interaction want to intervene, we might consider how these institutions got to be so powerful (Herbst 1993; Schudson 1998).

George Gallup offered an origin myth for public opinion research when he traced the success of his commercial polling organisation to the failure of a previously trusted way of packaging opinions, the provision of a superior technology, and the enlistment of media organisations, because his results were comprehensible to the public as news (Gallup and Rae 1940). We too may be witnessing a failure of current institutions of opinion, even if it is not as spectacular as the case Gallup uses, the failure of the Literary

psychologists who look at cognitive entities in terms of situated interactions (e.g., Billig 1987; Middleton and Edwards 1990; Suchman and Jordan 1990; Edwards and Potter 1992; Antaki and Rapley 1996; Edwards 1997).

**3. Practitioners and academics may not conceptualise the ‘real world problem’ in the same way.** Public opinion researchers conceive of opinions as measurable outputs related to real underlying cognitive entities, attitudes. Discourse analysts and linguists more generally are likely to see them as forms of interaction, tokens in our exchanges with other people. They develop ways of making their studies faster, more reliable, and more easily represented, while we may be making their work slower, more difficult, and more complicated. It would not be surprising if they did not queue up to benefit from our insights.

**4. Practitioners and academics may not conceptualise ‘language’ in the same way, either.** For practitioners in this field, language seems to be an opaque screen between them and their object, a potential source of distortion to be repaired by attention to grammar and word choice (Payne 1951; Sudman and Bradburn 1982). For discourse analysts, language brings with it the historical conditions, cultural value systems, ambivalences, interrelations of participants, and conceptions of the speech event. We see language use as constituting and shaping organisations, identities, social changes, and agency, not as providing a more or less transparent medium for the real entities.

**5. As a practical matter, academic timescales are radically different from those of nonacademics.** Academics plan their projects over years, and since we are generally part-time researchers, even small projects spread out. We tend to focus on aspects of problems that can be studied intensively and in general terms. Consultations on nuclear

have to reconsider our relation to practitioners, and be cautious about presenting ourselves as experts.

**1. Most of the studies of language in institutions of opinion are not by applied linguists.** Public opinion researchers are, of course, already familiar with WH- questions, presuppositions, connotations, and polysemy, and their studies of question wording provide empirical tests of interpretations that go beyond most of our work in semantics and pragmatics. Focus group moderators know more than I do about group dynamics, and those who write reports on focus groups have an effective, if implicit, system for analysing them. There have indeed been important studies by linguists (Low 1996; Low 1999 on questionnaires; Matoesian and Coldren 2002 on focus groups), but we are just as likely to learn about language use from public opinion researchers who have accumulated years of hard-won experience with ambiguity and interpretation. This rather humbling situation is a consequence of a definition of applied linguistics in terms of real world problems – given a problem involving language, it is not necessarily the case that our rather small academic discipline will get there first, or that it will have all the necessary tools.

**2. We bring our own disciplinary biases to new areas.** I have criticized the view of opinions as cognitive entities located in individuals, to be elicited by survey questions and analysed statistically. But large parts of applied linguistics take just such an approach to cognitive entities in language learning, as if they could be considered apart from the situated interactions in which they are elicited. For instance, questionnaire studies of attitudes towards language learning have the same basic problem of reifying cognitive entities. I think we have a lot to learn from sociologists and social

Niemeyer 2003). Experiments initiated by government agencies, whether Oregon Health Decisions (see <http://www.cpn.org/topics/health/commoregon.html> ) or the UK government's debate on genetically modified organisms, GM Nation (see <http://www.gmnation.org.uk/>), are useful exercises in broadening consultation, but remain uncritical about what constitutes opinion. There have been some interesting prescriptions from counselors, political scientists, and activists, for instance from the Public Conversations Project (<http://www.publicconversations.org>) (Becker et al. 1995), and the Deliberative Democracy Consortium (<http://www.deliberative-democracy.net>). What sorts of forums open out discussions to a wider range of participants and views, more engagement between conflicting views, more commitment to and examination of what one says? And one might reasonably ask, of such ideal debates, who would then participate, and why. People enjoy polemics, slogans, repetition of what they already know, playful abuse. Rants, it seems, are entertaining. If there was to be an open and rational discussion of nuclear waste on the television at 8 o'clock tonight, with detailed presentation of all the arguments, would you turn it on? Really?

### **Applied linguists and 'the real world'**

I would like to draw from this particular case – industries of opinion – some more general observations about how applied linguists approach real world problems, such as those we see in other papers in this issue. Such contacts may lead us to questions about our discipline, our framing of problems, our assumptions about language, the scope and scale of research, our own disciplinary biases, and our relation to wider audiences. In all these issues, as in earlier applications to language learning, education, or lexicography, we

## Deliberation and discourse

Critics of polling have long worried about a ‘bandwagon effect’ in which polls would bias public opinion by leading people to join the most popular opinion; polling researchers have long argued that such an effect does not exist (Gallup and Rae 1940). But the omnipresence of institutions of opinion may have other, more subtle effects, reifying public opinion as something out there, already formed and ready to be elicited. Some political theorists have argued that the sum of such individual opinions does not constitute public opinion, whatever Gallup, MORI, USA Today and the Daily Mail might say. They argue for ‘deliberative democracy’, and argue that truly public opinion begins to emerge when one individual opinion has to encounter another, and engage with it in dialogue (Dryzek 1990; Benhabib 1996; Elster 1998; Kim et al. 1999). These theorists argue that decisions based on dialogue are not just more legitimate, they are better, because they have more experiences to draw on, and they are more likely to be accepted.

Critical discourse analysts have argued that there is a gap between the existing public sphere and the ideal, and that gap is certainly there. Fairclough (2000), for instance, calls for democratic dialogue that ‘is accessible to anyone . . . is sensitive to difference . . . gives space for disagreement, dissent, and polemic . . . gives space for new positions . . . to emerge . . . [and] can lead to action’ (182). A typical poll, focus group, or radio phone-in does not begin to meet these criteria.

But we need to ask what sort of forum could provide something like the ideal of dialogue. It is interesting that with all the ink spilled in the last two decades on deliberative democracy (in political theory) and dialogicality (in discourse analysis), there has been so little academic study of actual public dialogues (but see Goodin and

come) with scare quoted around them. They do not just express an opinion, they are a way of talking about expressions of opinion as familiar, everyday conversational acts. Participants in focus groups may not just express the group norm; they may report views of other people, not in the group, or take up devil's advocate positions. Commonplaces can be ways of opening and acknowledging dialogue.

Commonplaces are at the heart of public opinion, but they are a problem for institutions of opinion if they mean people repeat back to researchers the same phrases people have been offered as encapsulating public opinion. This circularity is particularly apparent in the web surveys provided for instance by 'QuickVote™'; when one comes across the page one reads a list of colloquial statements on an issue, clicks one, and then immediately compares one's own 'vote' to those of others who have clicked on the site. These surveys usually have a disclaimer about the obviously biased sample: 'This QuickVote is not scientific and reflects the opinions of only those Internet users who have chosen to participate. The results cannot be assumed to represent the opinions of Internet users in general, nor the public as a whole'. But the problem is not just with the sample, but with the choices as well: we are offered what we will think (on the basis of the news on the rest of the page) is an issue on which we must have an opinion, and we are offered the sorts of words in which we might express this opinion. And then, instantly, these words are given back to us as an aggregate opinion. Snapshot public opinion surveys work more slowly and with a more careful sample, but with the same circularity.

skepticism. In Example 3, M2's 'let's put it this way' signals that what follows is to be taken as one phrasing, that there are alternative, perhaps more direct ways of saying this. He says 'it's . pushed under the carpet', bringing out the commonplace after a pause. The use of the commonplace conveys not just that any accidents there might have been have been concealed, but that they all recognise and share this suspicion of such organisations and the ways they might act. The lack of knowledge and the suspicion are both offered as shared, not as just the opinion of this speaker: 'we haven't been told anything . to the contrary have we.' Or consider a phrase that comes up, not in this passage, but in many focus groups: people (or sheep) who live near nuclear installations are said to 'glow in the dark' (or to have extra limbs). The phrase usually raises a laugh, even when used by people who live near a nuclear installation, but it also conveys vividly the sense of stigmatization that may underlie the answers in Example 2, the survey near Sellafield.

Commonplaces are at the heart of legitimate public opinion – they are one way of referring to shared experiences and points of view, and affirming or questioning what we, as this group here and now, take for granted. There is a long history, from Plato to Bourdieu, of critique of what people take for granted, of 'judgment without reflection' to use Vico's phrase (for background on Vico, see Grassi 1990; for background on Bourdieu, see Myles 2004). What distinguishes commonplaces from the taken-for-granted doxa is that they are by no means unchallengeable; people use commonplaces as commonplaces, and happily invoke a commonplace and its opposite for the same argument, or the same commonplace for opposite arguments (Billig 1987); pro- and anti-nuclear lobbies can both appeal to the need to protect the environment. Commonplaces such as 'Political correctness gone mad' or 'Think globally act locally' come (or should

## Commonplaces

Circularity is built into public opinion research: the big survey organizations ask questions about the issues that are news, and their results then become news (Bourdieu 1990; Bourdieu 1993; Herbst 1993; Schudson 1998). Surveys assume a shared repertoire of issues that people talk about; that's why they can use standard questions (and why phone-in callers can name their topic in a word or two, and opinions can fit on a placard or bumper sticker). They rely on commonplaces, (*koinos topoi, loci communes*). This is the rhetorician's term for short evocations of standard arguments that will work in many situations (Myers and Macnaghten 1998). Though people who aren't rhetoricians typically use the term 'commonplace' to demean a statement, John Shotter, following Vico, argues that they are worth attention, that 'sensory topics' can carry the 'socially shared identities of feeling' of a community (Vico 1988 [1710]; Shotter 1993). References to 9/11, our children's future, the need to take care of one's own family or local group first, or the necessity of the daily drive to work could all be commonplaces; one doesn't need to spell out one's argument. Ellen Barton looks at the use of formulaic phrases and commonplaces in a support group for parents of disabled children; they draw on an existing repertoire, while also signalling a solidarity and shared experience among members of the group (1999).

Commonplaces, pools of shared ways of arguing, are both an opportunity and a problem for opinion research; an opportunity because they are textual instances of shared identities, and a problem because these instances are unstable in meaning. When speakers use commonplaces, they say something on the current topic, but they also invoke a sense of shared experience and perspective, or ironic predictability, or

this anxiety. (See Waterton and Wynne (1999) for discussion of laughter in focus group discussions of risk). In a focus group, it is exactly the community sense of shared norms that is at issue (Bloor et al. 2001), not the aggregation of individual levels of knowledge, trust, or anxiety.

So far I have been praising focus groups because they are more accessible than surveys for interpretation of interaction. But focus groups are not a form of open discussion; they have their own institutional form. The obvious constraints are the moderator's control and topic guide; a more subtle constraint is the participants' emerging sense of what the group is for. As they look around the room and see who else is there, they may talk as locals, or farmers, or mothers, or retired people. Kitzinger has noted that the ongoing interaction makes some responses possible and closes off others (1994). Claudia Puchta and Jonathan Potter have shown in a series of studies the way the moderator provides slots for responses that will be easily detached and used in reports (1999; 2004). Greg Matoesian and Chip Coldren have analysed part of an evaluation group discussion of community policing, and have argued that we miss the response of participants if we look only at their words, missing their full performance using gaze and gestures (2002). My own research has looked at agreement and disagreement, topic shifts, and reported speech, and has considered different styles of moderation (Myers 1998; Myers 1999; Myers and Macnaghten 1999; Macnaghten and Myers 2003; Myers 2004). For most public opinion researchers, these variations in the nature of interaction are trouble, because they make it impossible to abstract any underlying entity, much less a quantity, for 'public opinion'.

with one's community (Wynne 1982; Zonabend 1993; Bolter 1996; Myers forthcoming). The reported feeling of safety is worth recording, but the utterances indicate particular interactions, not necessarily an underlying attitude that exists independent of who is talking to whom.

I have already noted an aggregation of these 'around heres' is not a generalised response to the abstraction of the local, but a confused summation of many concrete localities. And in each of these places, the assertion that one would feel safe with a plant near here could be made with different meanings, as a way of displaying skepticism about claims of environmentalists, or showing common sense in the face of pressure group campaigns, or comparing these dangers to others, or denying the implication that one is a hypocritical NIMBY who accepts the need for nuclear power but says 'Not In My Back Yard'. Bronislaw Szerszynski has drawn on speech act theory to argue that statements of trust are in part performative, that to say 'I trust you' is a commitment that is meant to make you more likely to be worthy of that trust (Szerszynski 1999). In this perspective, when people say that a plant is safe, it could be that they are not describing a situation, but trying to bring it about.

As we see in Example 3, a focus group transcript can suggest some (though not all) of the interaction going on in eliciting an opinion. The joking about the iodine, for instance, serves several functions: showing knowledge of what preparations for an accident might involve, giving the sense that these preparations are inadequate, and that 'outsiders' would be excluded, and that bureaucratic procedures and inefficiency would undermine any procedure. And the laughter suggests that this view of the situation is shared by some or all of the group, and that the group also shares a way of dealing with

‘if we were told something you’d worry’, that ‘if anything has happened it’s pushed under the carpet’. This response unpacks the formulation in a way that is not possible with a questionnaire, drawing out the different contingencies that might affect an answer, and emphasizing the contradictory feelings between the need for the public to believe in the plant management, and the unspoken doubts that remain.

Some of the other issues of wording, of ‘you’ and ‘I’, and ‘around here’, also depend on interaction, on who is talking to whom for what purpose. In Example 2, the report compares responses from people living close to Sellafield to responses from other locations in the region, to make a point about the attitudes of those who should, presumably, know the plant best and have most cause to worry about it. But it can be argued that the people living close to Sellafield were answering a different question. Waterton and Wynne (1999) point out some of the issues of recipient design here: an outsider is asking about the area’s largest employer, perhaps one’s own employer, in questions that assume one can simply agree or disagree. There are also more subtle cultural issues in any response; one might feel pride in one’s work and that of one’s work colleagues, guilt about the risks some say nuclear workers bring to their families (even if one doubts the risks exist), fatalism about any possibility of changing the plant or organization, disgust at different kinds of pollution, isolation in living in a region that is out of sight for most people in the country (and therefore a possible site for nuclear plants), or anger at outsiders who know none of this and joke about Sellafield workers glowing in the dark. If one lives in a community that is stigmatised as polluted and dangerous, and one is talking to someone from outside, one might assert agreement with the safety of the plant, or disagreement with the implied criticism, as a form of solidarity

7. M2      well let's put it this way . we haven't been  
told anything . to the contrary have we
8. M        mm
9. M2      if we were told something then you'd worry about  
it . but it's kept quiet . if anything has  
happened it's . pushed under the carpet

Even with 22 focus groups (in eleven sites), the study of which this transcript is a part cannot give us the scope of the surveys in Example 2, much less the huge scope over space and time of the series in Example 1. But focus groups can tell us about what people do in expressing an opinion, and that can be particularly important in sensitive issues such as those around risk and local identities.

## **Interaction**

The issues about multiple interpretations of wording that I raised with the survey questions apply as well to the questions a focus group moderator might introduce into the discussion, but in a focus group we can also see which interpretations the participants are taking this time, for their purposes. In line 6 of Example 3, the Moderator formulates the discussion up to this point as saying that they are 'pretty confident' about the levels of regulation and control at the plant. But the response is not a simple matter of agreeing or disagreeing, or of placing a response on a scale from 'very confident' to 'very skeptical'. A participant begins (7) with a marker of a dispreferred turn, 'well', and 'let's put it this way', suggesting that his response is not going to confirm this formulation, and then he gives three different responses, that 'we haven't been told anything to the contrary', that

government to deal with nuclear waste. It is worth noting that Nirex was conducting research on how best to open up preliminary public discussion of waste disposal sites (Hunt and Simmons 2001), that is, the client was interested in how people said things (and how they might say more) as well as what they said. Traditional survey methods and official inquiries had failed to give any clear insight into what to do with nuclear waste; not surprisingly, people seem to want something done with it, but not near them. The following excerpt is from a group of people living near a conventional nuclear power plant now being decommissioned; they are talking about the official procedures in case of an accident. One participant has just said she thinks local officials are supposed to have iodine ready.

1. F1 I think there are plenty of . supplies for the  
locals=
2. F2 =for the locals ((laughter))
3. M1 probably need to get a prescription for it  
though . that's gonna take three weeks  
((laughter))
4. F2 being as they've got five little bottles over  
there((laughter))
5. (6)
6. Mod1 so . you seem to be saying you're you're pretty  
confident about the levels of . regulation the  
levels of control

Professionals in public opinion research might point out that all these issues are potential problems, but not necessarily real problems for a given purpose. The survey researcher can test out different wordings, and use different wordings on different but related questions; the problems will wash out over the whole survey, or the series over time, and the results will be reliable. So if there are ambiguities of interpretation of 'safe', they are the same ambiguities year after year, and the series shows reliable changes even if the percentage responses on one year's results might be questioned.

But the reliable result may still be the aggregation of very different interactions, people presenting themselves in different ways for what they see as different purposes. These interactions are lost to us as readers of the report of public opinion. They may matter to us if we are just interested in predicting how people will vote (polls are demonstrably effective at predicting that). But they do matter to us if we are interested in the tensions and contradictions within people's views, the ways they use opinions to present themselves to others, and to relate to friends and family, the ways they use taken-for-granted and familiar opinions, the ways opinions relate to other kinds of talk, and crucially, the way talk about everyday practices such as shopping, travel, or taking the kids to school might relate to actions (Billig 1987; Shotter 1993; Billig 1995; Antaki et al. 1996; Antaki 1997; Puchta and Potter 2002). For insights into these aspects of opinion, we might turn to less structured interviews, or to focus groups, where the interactions around key terms would be treated as interesting, rather than as problematic.

### **Example 3: a focus group extract**

The following extract is from one of a series of focus groups conducted by Jane Hunt and Peter Simmons, in a study commissioned by Nirex, the organisation created by the UK

knowledge of its design, or trust (or lack of trust) in those who work there, or one's sense of agency in doing something about any dangers. In the context of other questions in the Roper Survey (Example 1), 'safety' is to be evaluated in comparative terms, considering other dangers. But comparison is also problematic, requiring some uniform standard of measurement between risks that pose different kinds of uncertainty, different levels of control, and different kinds of effects. (For difficulties in evaluating public perception of risk, see Slovic (2001) and Lupton (1999); for a study of risk in cultural terms see Douglas and Wildavsky (1982)).

- Someplace near here and near Sellafield: 'Someplace near here' must be deliberately vague, to fit all the possible local geographies of the respondents in a national survey. But 'here' has all sorts of meanings not only in geographical scope (five miles? The whole valley? The whole county?), but also in geographical meanings: it could be 'in this area that already has toxic waste dumps' or 'here in Nevada that has had a disproportionate part of radiation risk' or 'here in Michigan where there is high unemployment' or 'here where I look out on my view of the Pacific'. In Example 2 the researchers can be more specific than in a national survey. But asking about living 'near Sellafield' is different from asking about living 'in West Cumbria', 'on the sea', 'near the Lake District', or 'far from cities', all of which are equally true descriptions of the place the survey was administered. 'Near Sellafield' emphasizes that this plant defines the identity of the place, that others think there is good reason not to feel safe there.

wording in Examples 1 and 2, even though the items were undoubtedly well designed for their purposes:

- You and I: Payne starts his list of problem words with ‘you’, because it can be both singular and collective; the ‘you’ in example 1 could mean ‘you personally’ or (less probably) ‘you around here’. In Example 2 the researchers avoid this ambiguity by phrasing the question as ‘I think . . .’ – though they may still have respondents who answer for others around them rather than themselves.
- Think, believe, and feel: Payne also warns against ‘believe’ as a questionnaire word. For some respondents, ‘I think’ may imply knowledge and reflection, and be stronger, while for others ‘I believe’ may imply deeper conviction. So in Example 2, some could have taken the issue in statements 1 and 2 to be, not the difference between ‘safe living near Sellafield’ and ‘a safe industry’, but the difference between ‘think’ and ‘believe’. In Example 1, some people ‘say’ one thing and some people ‘say’ another, but you are asked what you ‘feel’, a word that is not always used with embedded propositions; this use could imply stronger conviction than what people merely say, or less certainty than what people think.
- Safe and danger: In both Example 1 and Example 2, we might look for instance at how people interpret ‘safe’ – as completely safe, safe enough, provided with appropriate protections, comparatively safe. In Example 1, ‘safe’ contrasts with ‘would present dangers’, with the implication that only something without any dangers is safe. People have more complex views of risk. For instance, one could evaluate the safety of a plant in terms of statistics on possible failure, or

## **Example 2: a survey report**

We can compare this national series to a smaller-scale study in the UK conducted in 1995 by North East Market Surveys on people living in West Cumbria, a beautiful and rather sparsely populated area of England in which the main employer is the largest nuclear installation in the UK, the nuclear fuel reprocessing plant at Sellafield. The results were used by Copeland Borough Council (the unit of local government for the area around the plant) in their submission to an inquiry on the proposed use of Sellafield as a nuclear waste site in addition to its other functions. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with four statements, with the results given below:

[Figure 2 here]

The report also noted that those who lived in Seascale (the nearest village to the plant) and those who worked in the plant were more likely to agree with the reassurances in the first two statements, and disagree with the criticisms in the third and fourth. I am taking this example from a paper by Waterton and Wynne (Waterton and Wynne 1999), who use it to criticise some of the assumptions made in surveys on risk; I will return to some of their comments.

## **Words and interpretations**

Most of the research and guidance on both surveys and focus groups is concerned with the planning and wording; for instance, Stanley Payne's classic The Art of Asking Questions (1951) is a witty demonstration of some unexpected ambiguities and associations in apparently straightforward questions. We can find some issues of

local survey (done in my region of the UK), and a focus group transcript (also in the UK, were there have been extensive efforts at public consultation on the topic). I will consider possible questions about the words in these texts, the interactions, the role of commonplaces, and the models of public discourse they suggest.

### **Example 1: a national survey series**

Eugene Rosa and Riley E. Dunlap have reviewed three decades of polling on public attitudes towards nuclear power in the US, for the main US journal of public opinion research (1994). One of the many items they consider is a question asked in October of each year by the Roper organization, concerning the safety of power plants.

[Figure 1 here]

I should note that I have simplified the presentation and argument given by Rosa and Dunlap; they give the full series for each year 1973-1990, and compare the results to those from other, more detailed questions, in which respondents compare the risks posed by various means of producing power, and estimate the risks associated with nuclear plants in comparisons to other risks they might face. Their response to many of the criticisms one might make of specific question items might be that they are pointing to the change of opinion over time, not some essentialist snapshot, and that they are referring to risk in relative terms, not asking respondents to arrive at absolute figures. The years I have chosen are those noted by Rosa and Dunlap to show shifts in opinion after the accidents at Three Mile Island (1979) and Chernobyl (1986).

line of research that focuses on the encounter that produces the data, treating it as an interaction, a conversation like other talk in institutions (Antaki and Rapley 1996; Maynard and Schaeffer 1997; Houtkoop-Steenstra 2000; Maynard and Schaeffer 2000; Maynard et al. 2002). This line of critique can indeed be used to improve survey and focus group techniques by making responses more reliable (see for instance the work of Yuling Pan for the U. S. Bureau of the Census (Pan 2004)).

But even analyses aimed at improving existing techniques (such as Houtkoop-Steenstra 2000) pose a challenge to the whole idea of public opinion research, by seeing opinion not as a unitary entity inside an individual, to be elicited and aggregated, but as something two or more talkers produce in a particular situation. For any given statement of opinion, we need to ask whom the respondent thinks they are talking to, who they are talking as, why are they saying this just now, how this issue fits in the conversation. Traditional public opinion research tells us what the people say; this line of research is equally interested in how they say it. And in studying how they say it, this research leads us to questions about the way people think of themselves and present themselves to others.

I will present three fragments of public opinion research on one heavily researched topic: public attitudes to nuclear power and nuclear waste. The topic is heavily researched because it matters both to the public, worried about safety and about energy supplies, and to the industries that build and operate nuclear plants, and need to find ways of persuading the reluctant public (see for instance, the Nuclear Energy Institute at [www.nei.org](http://www.nei.org)). My textual examples are from a national survey series (in the US, where there have been surveys asking the same questions over long periods), a single

Presser 2003; Bulmer 2004). Some of the most interesting findings have been on cognitive processes studied through think-aloud protocols of respondents answering questions (DeMaio and Rothgeb 1996) or post-questionnaire debriefing (Belson 1981). Graham Low has applied these methodologies to the kind of evaluation questionnaires often used in applied linguistics (Low 1996; Low 1999).

As public opinion researchers have noted, people do talk about some public issues (though not all such issues) in pubs and at the dinner table and on the bus. For the researchers, the parallels between everyday conversation and professional survey validate the opinions found, because people are just having the kind of talk that they usually have, even if institutional modifications are necessary to produce reliable results (Gallup and Rae 1940; Schuman 1986). Public opinion often present the interactional aspects of the process, such as audience design, multiplicity of interpretations, and indexical meanings, as technical problems to be dealt with by testing of the wording of questions and standardisation of interviewer procedures, for instance by changing the order of questions.

But there is an alternative view of the talk involved in the elicitation of opinions. Suchman and Jordan (1990) argue that 'interactional troubles' cannot be so easily eliminated or set aside as the public opinion researchers would have it. In the survey interviews they videotaped, features of everyday conversation that are problematic for standardisation of survey questions included: recipient design, signals of what kind of answer is required, establishment of relevance, repair, and clarification of meaning. Schaeffer and Maynard (1996) provide detailed transcripts of how questioners and respondents work out problematic aspects of the questionnaire. Their work is part of a

interaction involving talk, reading, or writing. However much we dismiss reports of opinions as just opinions, as showing the superficiality and malleability of the public, or the narrowing of public discourse, we are often eager to seize on them when they support our own views. And it could be argued that we are right to seize on such evidence: some sense of the will of the public underpins representative democracy. The questions for us, as linguists and as citizens, are how the signs of opinion are elicited and packaged, and what differences these processes make.

Opinion is big business, and it has attracted a great deal of academic and commercial research in political science, sociology, and social policy studies. Most of this research assumes that opinion is something already out there to be measured, like the average temperature in Antarctica or the number of owls in Oregon. Academic public opinion research examines the instruments, the questionnaires and questions, and the ways they are analysed, and asks how to make the procedures more reliable. But there is another approach to these processes that does not take the act of giving an opinion for granted, that starts with the interactions of questioners and respondents, and asks what opinions are, and how they are transformed between contexts; it is in this approach that I think linguists (and conversation analysts, rhetoricians, and social psychologists) have something to offer.

It is only fair, when criticizing public opinion research, to acknowledge that these institutions have had some impressive successes in prediction (I will return to one of these later). It is also fair to note that academic researchers in this area have from the very beginning pointed out possible limitations and distorting factors in surveys (Lazarsfeld 1944; Payne 1951; Schuman and Presser 1981; Schuman 1986; Schaeffer and

## Introduction

Christopher Brumfit has defined applied linguistics as ‘the theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue’ (Brumfit 2001: 169). In this definition, the scope of the field is much wider than would be suggested by the already broad range of its traditional applications to language learning, education, lexicography, and language policy. It is hard to think of any ‘real-world’ problems -- from global warming to refugees to genetic counseling to outsourced call centres to AIDS/HIV to military intelligence -- that do not have a crucial component of language use.

One important area of language practice in real-world problems that has led to an enormous amount of social science research activity, but has not attracted much involvement from linguists, is the work of the commercial, government, and academic organizations that I have called institutions of opinion (Myers 2004). Measures of public opinion are used by politicians on one side or the other; constant polling fed back into the 2004 US Presidential election, and the debates are followed instantly by focus groups assessing who won. Phone-ins fill radio time, and many web pages (such as that of CNN) have a QuickVote™ feature allowing anyone to express an opinion on the day’s topic. The UK Labour Party held a ‘Big Conversation’ on the future of the country, and my local government conducted a survey on whether the big new road should go to the north or the west of the city (though they did not follow its outcome). It is important to be able to challenge institutions that have such an influence on our political lives.

Institutions of opinion are based on language practices, because questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and even web page surveys all have at their basis some kind of

## ***Applied Linguists and Institutions of Opinion***

### **Abstract**

Public opinion research is not an area that has received much attention from applied linguists. But language lies at the heart of the procedures used to define, elicit, and report opinions, whether through such methods as polling, interviews, and focus groups, or through the less obvious channels of vox pop interviews, letters to the editor, radio phone-ins, or public hearings. In this paper I consider ways in which work in language studies – by linguists, conversation analysts, and social psychologists – might help us understand, improve, or question these procedures, and also give a new perspective on what opinions are. The relation of this new perspective to existing knowledge of academic and professional practitioners in the field may have parallels in other applications where applied linguists encounter experienced professionals and large organisations. Institutions of opinion feed back into political processes, so it is important that we consider them, not only as researchers and professionals, but also as citizens.

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***Applied Linguists and Institutions of Opinion***

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