Alison Sealey
'I just couldn't do it': representations of constraint in an oral history corpus

Abstract
Corpus linguistic techniques are increasingly being used by discourse analysts whose interest is in the 'critical' issues of inequality and the representation of disadvantaged groups. This article reports an extension of these approaches, where concordancing was used to analyse a corpus of 144 transcribed oral history interviews in order to explore the issue of constraint on the speakers' goals and experiences. The analysis is of the expression *I couldn't*, which is contextualised with reference to research on negation and modality in authentic discourse contexts. The paper explores the ways in which *I couldn't* is deployed to refer to constraints of three main kinds: physical (pertaining to the body and material objects); structural (pertaining to the distribution of resources) and cultural (pertaining to social norms and expectations). The approach illustrates the advantage of maintaining an analytical distinction between the discursive and the material, so as to explore the interplay between them.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis; oral history; realism; corpus analysis

1. Introduction
One function of discourse analysis, and of critical discourse analysis (CDA) in particular, is to explore the ways in which discourse is involved in the legitimation of power and the manufacture of consent. Studies in CDA often highlight lexical items used by the powerful and influential to describe people and processes in particular ways (e.g. Caldas-Coulthard and Moon 2010; Clark 1992; Gabrielatos and Baker 2008; van Leeuwen 1996), but here, rather than social category terms, I explore how speakers reflect explicitly on things they have not been able to achieve, focusing on the discursive means by which they articulate their experiences of being constrained in their efforts to reach their goals. The empirical contribution of this study to CDA is its identification, in people's accounts of their experiences, of a particular means by which the various constraints which have thwarted their goals are discursively 'naturalised'. This raises the question of the extent to which the constraints identified in the discourse are reducible to their construal within discourse, and this more theoretical issue is taken up in the final sections of the article.

The linguistic system provides us with resources to describe our experience, and both corpus analysis and CDA have pointed out many aspects of the shading and nuances associated with the lexico-grammar which common sense would suppose, erroneously, to be a transparent medium of communication. Fairclough (1989: 102) puts it this way: 'the social processes constituting languages in general (and meanings in particular) are hidden beneath their appearance of being just naturally, commonsensically "there".' One example is the ways in which presupposition is encoded in discourse, often examined in relation to media representations (e.g. Fairclough 1989), but relevant at the interpersonal level too. Levinson (1983: 168) defines presupposition as a pragmatic inference - 'any kind of background assumption against which an action, theory, expression or utterance makes sense or is rational,' and Degano (2007) cites this in her discussion of how corpus techniques can identify focal items for investigations of the phenomenon. She also extends the semantic concept of presuppositions (which emphasises how links are understood between one

proposition and another) to the relations 'between a speaker and a proposition' (Stalnaker 1973: 447 in Degano (2007: 364)). Degano continues: 'The important aspect is what the speaker takes for granted when s/he uses certain sentences, the background of knowledge or beliefs which s/he thinks is shared by the participants in the communicative exchange.' In other words, when we choose how to express ourselves to our interlocutors, we draw on discursive resources which have already been shaped to represent the world in particular ways.

Thus the questions driving the present analysis are: What do the speakers in this corpus of life history interviews report themselves as being unable to do? What do they say (or imply) are the causes of the inability to achieve these things? What norms and expectations are consistent with these goals being identified by the speakers as unattainable?

The remainder of the paper introduces the data, methods of analysis and quantitative findings, linking these with previous research. Expressions of three main kinds of constraint are then presented with reference to examples in context, leading to discussion of some theoretical issues and implications.

2. Data
The corpus used comprises 1.8 million words of transcribed oral history interviews. 150 interviews, each lasting up to 90 minutes, were recorded in 2000-2001 by two oral historians as part of the 'Millennibrum' Project (hence the 'MB' corpus) and deposited in Birmingham Central Library. Of these, 144 have been released for further research in accordance with the ethical consent procedures employed by the library. The aim of this project, which follows in a tradition of oral history research (e.g. Thompson 2000) was to preserve the narrative accounts of a diverse range of residents of the city at the turn of the millennium, for local people to participate 'in presenting and recording their experiences, beliefs, contributions to the community and hopes for the future' (Dick 2002). The topics covered in the interviews included: the interviewees' childhood memories and experiences of school; first experiences of work and subsequent jobs; family life before leaving home, and relationships with parents and siblings; adult relationships, including courtship, marriage and, in some cases, the breakdown of relationships; experiences of moving and migration; parenting and hopes for their children's future. All interviewees had the option, of course, to omit any of these topics from their account if they wished. (For more detailed information about the data, see Author 2009.)

The use of interview transcripts as data invites comment, given that these cannot be understood as direct, transparent windows onto an objective reality. Much attention has been paid, particularly in the context of qualitative research, to the importance of recognising the co-constructed nature of the interview and the negotiations between interviewer and interviewee (e.g. Block 2000; Pavlenko 2007; Talmy 2010; for a recent overview in applied linguistics see Talmy and Richards 2011; on the analysis of interviews eliciting personal narratives, see Gimenez 2010). In the present study, however, the focus is less on the interview as a means of accessing each speaker's subjective understanding, and more on patterns of linguistic production across large numbers of instances, from a perspective which affords interviewees a warrant to report on their first-person experiences. The issue to probe, then, is how those experiences are discursively construed, including evidence of how the readily available lexico-grammar serves to naturalise unequal social relations.

3. Method

Debate about critical discourse analysis has been stimulated not only by its theoretical claims, but also by its methods. CDA is centrally concerned with identifying the ways in which language is deployed to further the interests of the powerful at the expense of the oppressed, and a critical analysis of discourse can contribute to understanding how people conceive of their projects and means of achieving them, and how the most readily available discursive resources privilege some conceptions over others. The potential of corpus linguistics to assist in this process is becoming increasingly recognised, perhaps influenced by critics of CDA who were unconvinced by its methods of selecting and analysing texts (e.g. Widdowson 1995; Hardt-Mautner 1995; Stubbs 1997; Garzone and Santulli 2004; O'Halloran and Coffin 2004). CDA and corpus linguistics have more recently been linked as forming 'a useful methodological synergy' (Baker 2008; see also Mautner 2005; Coffin and O'Halloran 2006; Degano 2007; Caldas-Coulthard and Moon 2010).

In the analysis which follows, recurrent patterns which may indicate routinised ways of describing constraint are readily identified using corpus methods, but these are necessarily supplemented by the interpretation in context of the strings found automatically. The software used was AntConc (Anthony 2008) and WordSmith Tools (Scott 2008)[1].

3. Analysis
3.1 The node string: *I couldn't* – quantitative results
As noted above, in contrast to studies which have concentrated on words and phrases connoting judgement, evaluation and appraisal of social groups, and which have therefore highlighted expressions of affect and epistemic modality, I selected a deontic modal, in order to explore how the speakers represent the limits on what they have been able to accomplish in the circumstances in which they have found themselves. Thus the string chosen for the present study was *I couldn't*.

Of course there are many ways in which speakers can choose to verbalise the concept of constraint, and some of these alternatives are indeed used by the speakers in this corpus. There are 10 occurrences of *not able*, four of which are in the string *I was not able* (of which three are 'I was not able to have/bear children,' all from the same interview). There are 10 instances of *I wasn't able to*, while *unable* occurs 12 times, of which just two are in the string *I was unable*. The string *I could not* occurs 52 times, in 20 of the interviews. By contrast with these variants, the string *I couldn't*, used by all the speakers, is considerably more frequent, with 569 occurrences, and is arguably the least marked and most direct way in which speakers report themselves as having been unable to do something, and the results, while necessarily not comprehensive, are illuminating.

The verb *could* is a core item in the modality system, classified as belonging to the category of modals expressing permission / possibility / ability (Biber et al 1999; Facchinetti 2000). Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) classify *could* as 'low' on the modality scale when it has positive polarity, but 'high' when in its negative form. Labov (1972) identifies negation as a basic evaluative resource, and as Nørgaard (2007: 37) notes, 'negatives are not just formally marked, but also stand out in terms of their pragmatic function.' She reviews various theories about the reasons for speakers choosing these marked constructions, all of which highlight the difference between what is and what might otherwise be the case. Hidalgo-Downing

---

[1] AntConc was used for more basic analysis, and WordSmith for more complex queries. Where appropriate, results from the two programs were cross-checked.

(2000) notes that negation has received relatively little attention in discourse pragmatics. Here and elsewhere, she cites Givón (1993) on the presuppositional nature of negation:

> [A]ccording to Givón, negation shares interesting properties with presupposition as a discourse phenomenon because "A negative assertion is indeed made on the tacit assumption that the hearer has heard about, believes in, is likely to take for granted, or is at least familiar with the corresponding affirmative proposition" (1993: 189). (Hidalgo-Downing 2002: 120)

Thus when a speaker in the MB corpus reports what s/he *couldn't* do, s/he invokes what might have been the case, and often, as we shall see, what was desirable or desired. 'Only because people envisage particular courses of action,' notes Archer (2003: 4), 'can one speak of their constraint … .' One interpretation of a quantitative comparison of *could* and *couldn't* in the MB corpus is that, as a discourse genre, the life history is characterised by reflection on what one would have liked to do but was not able to, as these results contrast strikingly with the tendencies identified in previous corpus studies. In the MB corpus, while *could*, with 2934 occurrences, is indeed more frequent than *couldn't*, with 1468, the proportion of the negative form is strikingly high, at 33.3% of the total. With the first person pronoun *I* as subject (disregarding intervening elements such as *just* or *obviously* for this initial overview of the distribution, and looking only at the strings *I could* and *I couldn't*), the negative form represents an even higher proportion of the total: *I could* occurs 870 times and *I couldn't* 569. Thus, of the total of 1439 occurrences of *I could/couldn't*, 39.5% are negative – a proportion over twice as high as that found in the more heterogeneous range of genres explored by Biber et al (1999) and Facchinetti (2000).

The analysis of the verbs with which *couldn't* occurs in this corpus is restricted to 582 of the 621 instances of the strings *I couldn't*, *I just couldn't* and *I really couldn't*, omitting 39 instances where *couldn't* is not followed by a main verb, as this has occurred earlier in the sentence (e.g. 'I could think it on those lines now but **I couldn't** at that time'). Subjuncts sometimes intervene in this set between the modal and the main verb, including *actually* (6 times); *even* (8); *just* (3); *possibly* (8); *quite* (3) and *really* (19). These instances are included with the figures for each of the main verbs identified (i.e. 'I couldn't wait' and 'I couldn't really wait' are both counted as occurrences of *wait* as main verb), but the qualitative analysis explores some of these examples in more detail.

There are 122 different main verbs in this data set, of which just over half (65) occur only once, and another 15 twice. In order to generate a typology of constraints alluded to by these speakers, I begin with the 10 main verbs that occur 15 times or more. Then, because the focus is on the qualitative questions of what speakers report themselves as being unable to do, and how they refer to constraints on the realisation of their goals, the issue of frequency becomes less central, and attention is turned to the examples in context. Readers may judge for themselves whether they find the broad typology proposed applicable to the examples cited; examples from the concordance lines of verbs other than the 10 most frequent are included occasionally as further illustrations.

The 10 most frequent verbs following *I couldn't* are *get; believe; do; understand; have; see; go; afford; find; stand.* Unsurprisingly, several of these verbs are delexicalised (or, more accurately, 'desemanticized' Stubbs 2001: 32): *do* and *have* can have grammatical roles in the clause, while *get* and *go* can be used to carry a very wide range of meaning. There is a concern in this list with processes of perception and cognition (*believe*, *understand; see; find*) and all these items are frequently used in a figurative as well as a literal sense.

3.2 Material constraints: the physical world and the body

Several themes relating to the embodied, physical experience of reality can be identified from the concordance lines. No matter how they are encoded in language, some constraints on what people have found themselves able to do are characterised by their interactions with material objects. In these instances, *couldn't* carries its dynamic, rather than deontic, meaning. That is, the constraint is of a literal and physical rather than figurative and socio-cultural kind. See Figure 1 for examples where the interviewees reflect on the limitations of their bodies, whether these limitations are temporary, permanent, or have developed over time. For example, the interviewee in 1.5 explains why a job as a toolmaker was unsuitable for him, while the constraints in 1.7 are articulated by a man who developed diabetes, had his legs amputated and also lost his eyesight.

Figure 1 about here

These snippets portray a refractory physical world as the body's experiences of it are articulated with reference to what is not possible – although in other parts of the interviews attention may be focused on ways the speakers have found to mitigate the constraints they identify. Other kinds of interaction between the world and the body which encounters it are also represented in some of the concordance lines. One speaker, for example, recalls coping with a growing family while housed in the upper floor of a maisonette (see 1.9). She recounts being told how difficult it was to move from a flat to a house, which is her explanation for seizing the opportunity when it arose to exchange the upstairs flat for a house. Stairs constitute a physical barrier for some users (in this case a mother with a pram), expressed in this data using *I couldn't*. Another practical issue is raised by the interviewee quoted in 1.8. She explains early in her interview, 'I've got achondroplasia. People may hear this word and not realise what it means, it's dwarf in brackets [inverted commas]'. She contrasts her experience of bus travel in the past with what is possible now.

We have here a hint of the relevance of discourse and ideology to accounts of physical constraints. As with housing, so with transport: when those responsible for public transport provide buses with high steps, users who are substantially shorter than the average are literally unable to use them and thus are restricted in their mobility. Changes to the design of the bus make a significant difference to some people's opportunities for movement. *I couldn't* is the unmarked way of representing the constraint. However, if the material world were organised differently, and access and convenience for everyone were high political priorities, then perhaps constraints would be less readily accepted and could be verbalised differently: whereas 'These buses/ cash dispensers / light switches are inaccessible', for example, foregrounds the resources and their properties, *I couldn't* locates the constraint within the speaker, as the grammatical subject of this negative modal, so that any external responsibility remains unidentified.

With the choice of 'you' elsewhere in this example ('now you've got the low buses), the speaker implicitly identifies with a wider population which has benefited from 'the low buses'. Indeed, *you couldn't* is another frequent string in the corpus (occurring 173 times), typically used in the senses identified by Kitigawa and Lehrer (1990) and discussed by Lampropoulou and Myers (2010). That is, through the use of *you*, interviewees identify with a wider group of people, but in ways which are 'subtle but emotionally important, suggesting constraints, burdens, implicit and explicit moral codes, routines, and shared knowledge' (Lampropoulou and Myers 2010).

5

As embodied beings we are part of the material world as well as actors in the social and cultural spheres, but restrictions on what we can do are not identical for everyone. Those who are affected in similar ways share interests with others in the same situation, and may be thought of as '*collectivities* sharing the same life chances' (Archer 1995: 257, original emphasis). The choice of *you couldn't* rather than *I couldn't* alludes to these 'collectivities' of social agency, and is consistent with what Brannen and Nilsen (2005: 424) refer to as 'the discourse of the "citizen"', in welfare states with 'concerns about collective welfare and life situations'. They contrast this with a growing 'political emphasis placed on markets, and a "customer ideology"', where 'both social scientific and public discourses … have shifted … to matters of 'individual life style' which relate to consumerism and market choices.' The recognition of collective agency cannot be taken for granted, and members of oppressed groups have always had to struggle to achieve it. As an activist in the disability rights movement expresses it:

> Our society is built on a competitive market foundation and it is this social system that disables us. From this point of view disabled people are forced to live in a social prison. … Nothing less than dismantling the prison and replacing it with a non-competitive form of society can break down the doors which bar our emancipation.

Finkelstein (2001 online)

Clearly, such formulations illustrate how discursive resources can be used to articulate shared interests and, further, the collective action which could perhaps overcome these constraints. This writer chooses the active construction 'this … system disables us', a marked contrast with the more common expression *I am disabled*, which represents constraints or restrictions as an individual, rather than collective, issue.

This leads to the consideration of another way in which social actors are differentially placed to respond to what they encounter in the world – the unequal distribution of material resources.

3.3 Financial constraints: the unequal distribution of material resources
At the time of writing, there is heated public debate about government cuts to public spending in many areas of the world. Politicians, commentators and correspondents to the media argue both about what resources are available and about how they should be distributed, among individuals and collectively. One dimension of this debate is what 'the country can afford'. On the one hand, there are those who query the allocation of public money to military projects and the massive disparity of income between the richest and the poorest. Other views are illustrated by a letter to a local newspaper in the UK, headlined 'We cannot afford foreign aid in austere times' (Lindsay 2010). Likewise, a reader on the 'This is money' website comments 'The taxpayer cannot afford 40% of school leavers to go to University' and 'The country is in very substantial debt, education is expensive, we cannot afford it' ('Mel P.' 2010). The concept of what collectives and individuals can 'afford' is ideologically loaded, but this can easily pass unnoticed, as 'the notion of the "customer who pays" replaces the notion of the "citizen who has rights", for example in access to higher education' (Brannen and Nilsen 2005: 425)

Figure 2 about here

In the MB corpus (see Figure 2) the string *I couldn't afford* usually denotes speakers' representations of themselves as unable to obtain or acquire a specific material object.

Financial constraints are expressed using other verbs too, including *get* (2.5 – 2.9; 2.14 – 2.16) and *find* (2.10 – 2.12). While the structured social relations which pre-exist us place us, involuntarily, into agential positions where resources are unequally distributed, it is the way actors experience this as individuals that is foregrounded by the unmarked *I couldn't* construction. In 2.10, for example, a Jamaican immigrant, denied housing on the grounds of her colour, uses the construction 'I couldn't find,' which focuses on her quest, rather than on the practice, legal at the time, of excluding people in certain categories from accommodation, and the social arrangements which facilitated and sanctioned this.

There are many other instances in the corpus of speakers being constrained in their access to a wide range of goods and services – not only money, but the means to obtain money from employment. Examples 2.11 – 2.13 denote these speakers' stance towards their responsibility in 'the labour market'. The phrase 'find a job' is a very common one (it returns over 37 million hits on Google) but not uncontroversial. Political debate about (un)employment (another 'hot topic' in the UK at the time of writing) involves different views about where responsibility lies for the availability – and take-up – of job opportunities. There is currently in higher education a growing concern with 'graduate employability', which locates responsibility for being 'employable' with the job-seeker, as though the politics and economics of the 'job market' were a neutral given.

> The dominant public discourses in the western world, particularly in its emphasis on markets and the consumer, supports and celebrates individualisation and individual choice. Autonomy and independence are held up as desirable goals for human beings which thereby makes it difficult to address the ways in which people are dependent upon one another.
Brannen and Nilsen (2005: 426)

Closely linked with employment opportunities, as is evident in 2.13, are educational opportunities, and, again, these speakers voice the constraints they have experienced in this social domain. The examples in Figure 2 illustrate the point made by Fairclough and quoted above (1989: 102), that it is 'normal' to expect social arrangements - including money, goods, services and opportunities – to be distributed in particular ways. This distribution may be inequitable, and speakers are not so completely at the mercy of discursive patterns that they never express dissatisfaction with injustice and inequality. For example (and in addition to reflections on these issues in other parts of the interviews), 2.16 uses the formulation *I couldn't* while also representing this constraint as unfair. However, the resources offered to us by the language can contribute to perceptions and descriptions of 'social processes' as 'being just naturally, commonsensically "there".'

CDA has often drawn attention to nominalisation, where, for example, the social process of 'employers sacking workers' is described as 'unemployment rising' (see, for example, Halliday and Martin 1993). The examples presented here indicate another way in which speakers draw on a discursive formulation – in this case, *I couldn't* – so that the focus is on the constraint as experienced by the individual, rather than on the 'domain of contextual resources' (Layder 1997). As Layder makes clear, 'material, dominative and cultural/discursive resources are unevenly spread throughout any social system and hence differentially available to various groups of a class, gender and racialized nature'. At the same time, these resources 'connect with subjectivities and have a cognitive-emotive reality embedded in actors' experiences of the social world' (p.81). This connection between material constraints and expectations or presuppositions about what life is like takes us to the third category of constraint – cultural norms.

3.4 Cultural constraints: norms and expectations

While physical objects, including the body itself, are implicated in some constraints, and material conditions, such as the availability of education and employment, in others, a third source of constraint is of a more abstract kind. Three examples in Figure 1 (1.4, 1.6 and 1.7) involve the string *I couldn't see*, and two of these speakers literally lack the sense of sight. Presupposed in their framing of their life histories is the desirability of sight; one of them reflects on the stigma associated with her disability, and the 'great strain' she experienced as she tried to 'lead a normal life'. Used in its literal sense, *I couldn't see* invokes the state of affairs with which it is contrasted (being able to see as 'normal'), but it is more frequently used in allusions to values, attitudes and norms. Many of the main verbs in this 'cultural' category combine cognition, perception and evaluation, and when preceded by *I couldn't* the string denotes a conflict between social norms and the speaker's own stance. When these speakers refer to what they couldn't 'see', 'believe' or 'stand', they draw attention to areas of difference between social expectations and their own perspectives.

Figure 3a about here

The strings *I can't [/ couldn't / don't / didn't] believe it* are very common and typically used as expressions of surprise, denoting a contrast between the speaker's expectations and some actual occurrence or state of affairs. In this corpus, *I couldn't believe* is usually associated with positively evaluated experiences which are unexpected, thus indirectly indicating a less positively perceived typicality (see 3.1 – 3.5). Some other main verbs have a similar function (see 3.6 – 3.10), where 'get used to' and 'get over', for example, allude to the contrast between what had hitherto been perceived as normal and what was now possible or available. These contrasts are not always positive evaluations, however, as in 3.9 and 3.10, where the speakers articulate their puzzlement over unfamiliarly negative experiences.

Figure 3b about here

I couldn't stand is an explicit negative evaluation – of a job (3.11; 3.12), a situation or a relationship (3.13 – 3.16), and often precedes an account of action the speaker took in response. Example 3.17 is about the speaker's decision to accept her family's support in raising her illegitimate child, and here she contrasts this decision with the other options available. At another point in her interview, she explains that she kept her daughter's existence a secret at work:

> … because I would never have got the job I got if they'd have known I was an unmarried mother, because in those days there weren't any - I am talking in the 60's again - to my knowledge - there were no laws that protected the unmarried mother.

Here, structured social relations, in the form of legislation, as well as cultural norms about marriage and motherhood, generate the context within which the speaker is obliged to take her decision. In 3.18, the speaker recalls her first job after leaving school, when she refused a post as a shop assistant because it did not satisfy her ambition to be a window-dresser. What she 'couldn't see' was the employment context as both her mother and potential employers saw it. 3.19 contrasts the speaker's stance towards a situation with the norms, both socio-cultural and political, pertaining to war and the armed forces. As well as 'I couldn't see the point', this contrastive stance is expressed in two other negative constructions ('I didn't believe in' and 'I don't think'). The contrast in 3.20 is between the norms derived from religious teaching and the speaker's increasing rejection of these.

Speakers' awareness of discrepancies between their stance and a norm from which this differs is also suggested by the inclusion in the *I couldn't* string of the subjuncts reported above (see Figure 3c).

Figure 3c about here

The adverbs *really*, *just*, *possibly*, *actually* and *even* in these examples mitigate bald statements about what the speaker 'couldn't' do. In 3.21, it is unnecessary ('needless to say') to entertain the idea of not accepting an honour – although this option was raised in the letter informing the interviewee that he was in the running for it. In several cases, the implied contrast is between what might be generally expected now and how things were in an earlier phase of the speaker's history (e.g. 3.27-3.29), and the adverb hints at a justification for having acted then in ways which might be less well thought of now. (Of the function of *really*, Diani (2008: 317) states that it '… says "yes, I'm telling the truth in spite of what you might think"', which 'also fits the use of *really* with negation, where it acts as an emphasizer'.) In other examples, the adverb is a subtle marker of the speaker's implied awareness of what other people would have thought likely (e.g. 3.22; 3.25) or desirable (3.23; 3.24; 3.26; 3.30).

All of these examples point to an identification of personal choices which are at odds with the norms and expectations of others: partners, relatives, employers and/or the wider society.

4. Discussion
The questions posed about this corpus of life history interviews were about the kinds of things which the speakers report themselves as being unable to do, what they suggest are the causes of the inability to achieve these things, and what their discursive choices imply about the norms and expectations which contextualise the constraints they identify. As the analyst, using corpus methods, I have grouped the data into three broad categories, suggesting that it is helpful to identify how the physical, the material and the cultural aspects of constraint are discursively construed[2]. In this section, I pursue the implications for CDA of acknowledging these as each having contributions to make to its goal of rendering relations of power more visible (Fairclough and Wodak 1997: 258).

I want to suggest a way of conceptualising the relationship between the discursive and the material which gives due weight to each, thus facilitating an examination of the interplay between them. Strongly anti-realist positions, such as that developed by Teubert, for example, stress that 'the discourse, and not the world out there, is the only reality to which we have direct, unmediated access' (2010:18). The contributors to the MB corpus, negotiating 'the world out there' in all its – and their – physicality (stairs, buses, blindness, irritated skin), have only discursive resources with which to report these experiences, but nevertheless, as Sayer avers, while 'the world can only be understood in terms of available conceptual resources, the latter do not determine the structure of the world itself' (1992: 83). For Teubert, discourse is all there is: '[w]ithout people discussing them there would be neither apples nor pears,' so that 'discourse analysts can easily do without the discourse-external reality.' (2010: 171). Far from it: discourse analysts have a responsibility to consider the

---

[2] 'Construed', rather than 'constructed', because the constraints themselves are not reducible to the language used to denote them: there are real consequences (broken bones, loss of income, social isolation) to disregarding them. However, discursive resources provide different ways of articulating people's subjective responses to these objective circumstances.

different ways in which discourse-external reality may be described, and to draw attention to the alternatives, as well as to the implications of some patterns becoming more dominant than others.

Interacting with the refractory physical world is the complex network of social relations, the contexts and conditions within which people make choices and decisions – the aspect of society referred to as 'structure'. Pre-existing, structured social and economic relations provide the contexts into which we are all born and from within which we 'make our way through the world' (Archer 2007). These realities - of the unequal distribution of material resources and the means of accessing them, including by selling our labour (see 3.3 above) - can be expressed in various ways, but cultural conventions tend to normalise such formulations as 'I couldn't get' and 'I couldn't find', where the negative polarity is associated with the speaker rather than the social and economic conditions by which s/he is confronted. While agents shape and form society, by both 'the intended and unintended consequences of their activities' (Archer 1995: 5), not all agents are equally well placed to influence the form it takes.

In the MB corpus data, there are references to inequality and to the way membership of a particular group correlates with restrictions on ambition and the thwarting of goals. However, the data in many ways supports the claims of a number of sociologists that people are discouraged from seeing their biographical trajectories as anything other than their own individual responsibility. As Bauman (2001) points out, the contemporary trend is to think of society as a collection of individuals, and to tell our life stories from that perspective:

> All articulations open up certain possibilities and close down some others. The distinctive feature of the stories told in our times is that they articulate individual lives in a way that excludes or suppresses (prevents from articulation) the possibility of tracking down the links connecting individual fate to the ways and means by which society as a whole operates.

Bauman (2001: 9)

The data presented here provides detailed, specific instances of a discursive pattern which is consistent with this claim[3]. CDA may concern itself with even 'the most unremarkable and everyday of texts' (Kress 1990: 84), and the present study demonstrates that the process of representing constraint in the most unremarkable and everyday of phrases - *I couldn't* - is less ideologically neutral than it might appear. Analysis of the discourse which the MB speakers deploy reveals how routinely available resources may serve to shape their reflections in particular ways. It can help to demonstrate how 'recurrent ways of talking,' while they 'do not determine thought, … provide familiar and conventional representations of people and events, by filtering and crystallizing ideas, and by providing pre-fabricated means by which ideas can be easily conveyed and grasped' (Stubbs 1996: 158). The presupposition that income and job opportunities will be unequally distributed is hidden in many instances of *I couldn't*, foregrounding as it does the individual's experience, rather than their agential location. Furthermore, as Brannen and Nilson (2005) suggest, with reference to their data comprising focus groups in which young people reflect on their situations and prospects:

> … the structural side of life is more often expressed in the silences which punctuate narratives. While the lives people *live* continue to be processually and contextually embedded, people may find the external and structural forces that shape their lives

---

[3] It would be interesting to compare the current data with life histories from an earlier period, but that is beyond the scope of this study.

more difficult to comprehend and therefore talk about. Individualisation in its current meaning and usage can therefore also be construed as serving an ideological purpose in shaping *perspectives* about life.

Brannen and Nilson (2005: 423, emphasis in original)

The third category of constraints alluded to is equally important, because it is here that we find the most explicit evidence that people are not merely the unwitting victims of structural forces, nor the dupes of ideology or discourse. Acknowledging that, as agents, we are influenced by the differentiated distribution of resources, Archer notes that even so 'people do not respond in uniform fashion under the same structured circumstances' (2007: 11). The way in which agency interacts with structure and culture is a focus of Archer's recent work, which has explored in particular the uniquely human capacity for reflexivity, defined as '*the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa*' (Archer 2007: 4, italics in original). Archer puts forward 'reflexivity' 'as the answer to *how* "the causal power of social forms is mediated *through* human agency"' (p.15). Her argument is that no structure or culture is consistent or coherent enough to persist and endure 'without constant resort to the reflexively governed actions of its members' (Archer 2007: 49). Again, this reflective 'internal conversation' is, necessarily, articulated explicitly through the medium of language, and when speakers report what they 'couldn't believe' or 'couldn't stand', they draw attention to their reflections on the values surrounding them and the contrasting nature of their own choices and decisions.

5. Conclusion

The semiotic resources which constitute culture are available to people to adopt, deploy and adapt, but the differential access to, among other things, educational opportunities, means that we are not equally placed to make decisions about how experience is encoded in discourse.

For as long as analysts have identified the ideological properties of discourse, there has been debate about the relationships between concepts, terms and practice, including the question of how far modifying the labels used to denote social groups or processes (such as women or migration, for example) leads to changes in practice. Equivalent modifications to formulations such as *I couldn't* are hard to imagine – much as expressions for some concepts in particular languages are difficult to translate into others without recourse to extensive periphrasis. This in itself is interesting: if Bauman is right, this innocuous-seeming little phrase may be one tiny component of the means by which 'the stories told in our times' remain silent about 'the supra-individual factors shaping the course of an individual life,' construing these as '"brute facts" which the story-tellers can neither challenge nor negotiate …' (Bauman 2001: 9). A further implication for researchers is the need to be alert to the 'silences' when first-person accounts are used as data. Structural constraints (e.g. opportunities for, and conditions of, employment) may not be named as such, and cultural norms (e.g. the realisation of familial roles or adherence to religious teaching) may be left implicit, but while 'structural and cultural properties *objectively* shape the situations that agents confront involuntarily', subjects nevertheless define their 'own constellations of concerns … in relation to the three orders of natural reality: nature, practice and the social,' deciding on courses of action as they '*subjectively* determine their practical projects in relation to their *objective* circumstances' (Archer 2007: 17). In the data presented here, the discursive choices made by the MB speakers demonstrate their reflexive capacity to respond to what is experienced as undesirable by taking action, either 'leaving' or 'sticking at it' (3.11-3.12).

One means of contributing to the goals of CDA, then, is to develop analytical approaches which take account of structure, agency and culture - and of the interplay between them. These transcribed interviews are, obviously, not themselves the events remembered by those who produce them. They are accounts, mediated by semiotic resources, produced in the context of a particular kind of social interaction. When these speakers, in their life history interviews, allude to what is possible, what is desirable and what is permissible, the discursive means by which they do so cannot help but draw on and reproduce socio-cultural norms. The analysis presented here differs in emphasis from the social constructionism which would downplay, or detach the accounts altogether from, these people's actual experiences in an objectively extant social world. The implications of this approach are twofold. On the one hand, discursive resources are seen as a means of accessing – albeit imperfectly, fallibly and partially – social phenomena which are not reducible to the language itself. On the other hand, the recognition of the distinctiveness of each component of the social world (structure, agency and discourse - as a cultural resource) enables an investigation of the influence which each exerts on the others.

References

Anthony, L. (2008) *AntConc*. Waseda, Japan

Archer, M. (1988) *Culture and Agency: the place of culture in social theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Archer, M. (1995) *Realist Social Theory: the morphogenetic approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Archer, M.S. (2003) *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Archer, M.S. (2007) *Making our Way through the World: human reflexivity and social mobility*. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press.

Baker, P., Gabrielatos, C., KhosraviNik, M., Krzyzanowski, M., McEnery, T. and Wodak, R. (2008) A useful methodological synergy? Combining critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics to examine discourses of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK press. *Discourse and Society* 19 (3), 273 - 306.

Bauman, Z. (2000) *The Individualized Society*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S. and Finegan, E. (1999) *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*: Pearson Education Ltd.

Block, D. (2000) Interview Research in TESOL: problematizing interview data: voices in the mind's machine? *TESOL Quarterly* 34, 757-763.

Brannen, J. and Nilsen, A. (2005) Individualisation, choice and structure: a discussion of current trends in sociological analysis. *Sociological Review*, 412 - 428.

Caldas-Coulthard, C.R. and Moon, R. (2010) 'Curvy, hunky, kinky': using corpora as tools for critical analysis. *Discourse & Society* 21, 99 - 133.

Clark, K. (1992) The linguistics of blame: representations of women in *The Sun's* reporting of crimes of sexual violence. In M. Toolan (ed.) *Language, Text and Context*. London: Routledge.

Coffin, C. and O'Halloran, K. (2006) The role of appraisal and corpora in detecting covert evaluation. *Functions of Language* 13 (1), 77 - 110.

Degano, C. (2007) Presupposition and dissociation in discourse: a corpus study. *Argumentation* 21, 361–378.

Diani, G. (2008) Emphasizers in spoken and written academic discourse: the case of *really*. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics* 13 (3), 296 – 321.

Dick, M. (ed.) (2002) *Millennibrum: bringing Birmingham history to life*. CD-ROM. Birmingham: Birmingham City Council

Facchinetti, R. (2000) Can and could in contemporary British English: a study of the ICEGB corpus. Paper presented at *Language and Computers, New Frontiers of Corpus Research. Papers from the Twenty First International Conference on English Language Research on Computerized Corpora* Sydney.

Fairclough, N. (1989) *Language and Power*. London: Longman.

Fairclough, N. (2003) *Analysing Discourse: textual analysis for social research*. London: Routledge.

Fairclough, N. and Wodak, R. (1997) Critical discourse analysis. *Discourse Studies: a multidisciplinary introduction. Vol. 2 Discourse as Social Interaction*. London: Sage.

Finkelstein, V. (2001) *The Social Model of Disability Repossessed*. Manchester: Manchester Coalition of Disabled People in http://www.dfid.gov.uk/r4d/PDF/Outputs/Disability/RedPov_agenda.pdf. Accessed 8th August 2011

Gabrielatos, C. and Baker, P. (2008) Fleeing, sneaking, flooding: a corpus analysis of discursive constructions of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK press, 1996-2005. *Journal of English Linguistics* 36 (5), 5 - 38.

Garzone, G. and Santulli, F. (2004) What can corpus linguistic do for Critical Discourse Analysis? In A. Partington, J. Morley and L. Haarman (eds) *Corpora and Discourse*. Bern: Peter Lang.

Gimenez, J.C. (2010) Narrative analysis in linguistic research. In L. Litosseliti (ed.) *Research Methods in Linguistics*. London and New York: Continuum.

Givón, T. (1993) *English Grammar: a function-based approach*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Halliday, M.A.K. and Martin, J.R. (1993) *Writing Science*. London: Falmer Press.

Halliday, M.A.K. and Matthiessen, C.M.I.M. (2004) *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Arnold.

Hardt-Mautner, G. (1995) *Only Connect. Critical Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics*. UCREL, Lancaster.

Hidalgo-Downing, L. (2000) Negation in discourse: a text world approach to Joseph Heller's Catch-22. *Language and Literature* 9, 215.

Hidalgo-Downing, L. (2002) Creating things that are not: the role of negation in the poetry of Wisława Szymborska. *Journal of Literary Semantics* 31 (2), 113 – 132.

Kitigawa, C. and Lehrer, A. (1990) Impersonal uses of personal pronouns. *Journal of Pragmatics* 14, 739 - 759.

Kress, G. (1990) Critical Discourse Analysis. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 11 (1), 84 - 99.

Labov, W. (1972) *Language in the Inner City: studies in the Black English Vernacular*: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Lampropoulou, S. and Myers, G. (2010) Impersonal 'you' in social research interviews. Paper presented at *British Association for Applied Linguistics Annual Meeting* Aberdeen.

Layder, D. (1997) *Modern Social Theory: key debates and new directions*. London: UCL Press.

Levinson, S.C. (1983) *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lindsay, J. D. (2010) We cannot afford foreign aid in austere times. Letter to *The Courier*, http://bit.ly/c1HLGx. Accessed 11th November 2010

Mautner, G. (2005) Time to get wired: using web-based corpora in critical discourse analysis. *Discourse and Society* 16 (6), 809-828.

'Mel P.' (2010) Comment in response to Lambert, S. Should students protest on tuition fees? *Thisismoney.co.uk*. http://bit.ly/afNRHE. Accessed 11th November 2010

Nørgaard, N. (2007) Disordered collarettes and uncovered tables: negative polarity as a stylistic device in Joyce's "Two Gallants". *Journal of Literary Semantics* 36, 35 – 52.

O'Halloran, K. and Coffin, C. (2004) Checking over-interpretation and under-interpretation: help from corpora in critical linguistics. In C. Coffin, A. Hewings and K. O'Halloran (eds) *Applying English Grammar: functional and corpus approaches*: Hodder & Stoughton Educational.

Pavlenko, A. (2007) Autobiographic narratives as data in applied linguistics. *Applied Linguistics* 28 (2), 163 – 188.

Scott, M. (2008) *WordSmith Tools* (Version 5), Liverpool: Lexical Analysis Software

Stalnaker, R. (1973) Presuppositions. *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 2, 447–457.

Stubbs, M. (1996) *Text and Corpus Analysis*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Stubbs, M. (1997) Whorf's children: critical comments on critical discourse analysis (CDA). In A. Ryan and A. Wray (eds) *Evolving models of language*. Clevedon: British Association of Applied Linguistics / Multilingual Matters.

Stubbs, M. (2001) *Words and Phrases: corpus studies of lexical semantics*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Talmy, S. (2010) Qualitative interviews in applied linguistics: from research instrument to social practice. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 30, 128 - 148.

Talmy, S. and Richards, K. (2011) Theorizing qualitative research interviews in applied linguistics. *Applied Linguistics* 32 (1), 1 - 5.

Teubert, W. (2010) *Meaning, Discourse and Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thompson, P. (2000 3rd edn.) *The Voice of the Past: oral history*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

van Leeuwen, T. (1996) The representation of social actors. In C.R. Caldas-Coulthard and M. Coulthard (eds) *Texts and practices*. London: Routledge.

Widdowson, H.G. (1995) Discourse analysis: a critical view. *Language and Literature* 4 (3), 157–172.

Figures

1.1	I actually fell on to the third floor because **I couldn't** get down to the first floor because I was trapped. Injured my knees (044MB)
1.2	and my back was blistered and I was in a terrible state I had sunstroke and I didn't enjoy any of the rest of that holiday, **I couldn't** get comfortable and I just had to have ointment plastered on me for days afterwards (016MB)
1.3	**I just couldn't** stop shivering. I remember when I stood up to take my trousers off, **I couldn't** stand on one leg because I was shivering that much, so I had to sit down again and sort of change my clothes, like an old person really (081MB)
1.4	when I used to decelerate the fumes used to come into the car and we were going out one night, <$nam and myself and we were going down, and we came to a corner, and of course **I couldn't** see and we ended up on the canal bank because and much to the amazement of these fishing people, cos **I just couldn't** see a thing through the smoke that was coming out! (015MB)
1.5	it didn't really take off for me because **I couldn't** handle the suds and the oils I got a peculiar skin that didn't take to it (015MB)
1.6	Now with hindsight, I don't know, I mean obviously it worked out for me but it was very very hard, you think about it, **I couldn't** see the board and so things like reading and writing it was just impossible. Well, my gran taught me to write! (056MB)
1.7	And she carries on from where I left off because **I couldn't** see to do the books and couldn't do things right, and with having me legs off and one thing and another (005MB)
1.8	If the bus didn't come in near enough to the pavement **I couldn't** get on the bus but now you've got the low buses where the step comes down, it's very much easier (062MB)
1.9	so I exchanged but just before that I had my son <$name and that was November 1960 and I thought well with all these stairs **I couldn't** get the pram up and down, yes I would exchange to go into an old house which was ready to be pulled down (109MB)

Figure 1: Material constraints

2.1	we hadn't got any towels and **I couldn't** afford them either (109MB)
2.2	because of being a one-parent family my daughter … **I couldn't** really afford a lot of clothes (064MB)
2.3	I borrowed a jock strap and I borrowed a pair of shorts as well again, because **I couldn't** afford to buy them and I played rugby for <$place> (025MB)
2.4	**I couldn't** afford a car but I bought a little A35 van (014MB)
2.5	time went on and it was getting harder, **I couldn't** get the baby into a nursery, I had the baby home for eleven months (MB012)
2.6	I was stuck in a rut as far as Birmingham was concerned, **I couldn't** get a job that was career-orientated and the only sort of work I could get was the equivalent of clerical work (MB67)
2.7	That was 1958 and I was still 14 and so you couldn't really be considered for apprenticeships until you were about 16 and so **I couldn't** get an apprenticeship so you used to have to try and find a job anywhere you could then (MB37)
2.8	you had to go back and sign on so I was running to the signing on office to sign on for a job **I couldn't** get and come back here. (MB127)

2.9	because **I couldn't** get the job, them didn't want to give us job, then so we start on this, that and the other. (MB024)
2.10	I had to find a place to live and I encountered definitely prejudice, that **I couldn't** find a place to live. I saw in the newspaper the lady had advertised somewhere and I went to see the room, she opened the door, had a look at me and without saying a word, shut the door in my face. That really hurt me. (MB032)
2.11	The arms firm weren't terribly rich with commissions, **I couldn't** find a job there, so I began to think of going back to the motor trade, the aircraft business (MB027)
2.12	I was living in Stafford and commuting from Stafford to Redditch, a two hour journey each way, but it was it was worth it because **I couldn't** find any sort of employment that I enjoyed or gave me the remuneration that I needed to keep up the standard of living that I was enjoying. (MB124)
2.13	I just left with nothing. I had no and **I couldn't** go out and get a decent job because I had no qualifications to go and do that. I left school at 16 in 1991 (MB051)
2.14	at the time **I couldn't** get a course on model or jig making, I had to do baton making and foundry work (MB006)
2.15	at first it was a great adventure and then difficulties began to arise, we lived in a flat again and **I couldn't** get into school because the educational structure in Scotland was different from England (MB082)
2.16	**I couldn't** get that place for a year, I kept applying for it I had the place at the university but **I couldn't** get secondment and a lot of men I know got secondment, the women didn't and I got very frustrated (MB022)

Figure 2: Financial constraints

3.1	the letter arrived with the Downing Street stamp on and **I just couldn't** believe it, you know, oh God, I thought what is this? What is this? And everyone was saying, open it, (MB010)
3.2	once I became a postman, **I couldn't** believe it and if you ask me the best time of my life that I've spent in Britain and Great Britain is the time when I worked as a postman (MB072)
3.3	there was this letter sitting on the side from the UCE, and **I couldn't** believe it and I opened it up and I only read the first few lines and it said, Congratulations, you have been accepted (MB051)
3.4	this job was £11,000 a year and it had also got a bungalow with it, so **I couldn't** believe it, and I had got a bungalow, and I had got a house (MB049)
3.5	gorgeous, **I couldn't** believe my luck when I walked in really (MB098)
3.6	he did a great job, he was there, anything I needed, he was there. Helped me decorate, did the plaster, he was there, **I couldn't** understand that anything I wanted, help, support and he was there. I was so shocked, I felt wanted (MB033)
3.7	I spent all, up until then, all my life in Handsworth and Handsworth Wood but **I couldn't** get over the fact that people spoke to you in the road in Moseley and I thought I'm so glad.
3.8	I really enjoyed that and **I couldn't** get used to it being so free and easy after being at school, you know
3.9	I never seen any back to back houses till I came here in 1955, and **I couldn't** understand why six families could be sharing one toilet and **I couldn't** get over that you know (MB109)

3.10	at that time there was a lot of class distinction and it grieved me at the time; **I couldn't** understand it at school, I was allowed to play with the children at school and yet on my way home **I couldn't** play with them, **I couldn't** walk with them, I had to be separated because we are different class; I could only play with children of my class because the way how they look at it, I'd be dragging the families' name down (MB074).

Figure 3a: Cultural constraints – speakers' expectations challenged

3.11	so **I couldn't** stand the job, but I stuck at it and in the end the Area Office was moved down to London Area Office, so the job became defunct (MB007)
3.12	it got to a point when I was that sick of it, I decided to leave, so I took redundancy **I couldn't** stand it anymore so I took redundancy and now I was out of work (MB005)
3.13	**I couldn't** stand any more of my father although it hurt me to think of me mother and me sisters, but I left home and I thought this is it (MB042)
3.14	I ran away, I had enough, **I couldn't** stand it no longer, so I decided I'd come to Birmingham. So I came to Birmingham (MB036)
3.15	And **I couldn't** stand it ! And I used to think to myself What the hell am I doing with this bloody nutcase ! (MB137)
3.16	I left home when I was eighteen, and I lived in the city centre by myself, because **I couldn't** stand the family pressures, to the small flat was five kids, and a mother screaming all the time (MB105)
3.17	I suppose that I could have just gone off and done it on my own and took <$name into a bedsit and got on with it, but **I couldn't** see the point of that, why make her suffer for something (MB017)
3.18	I came away from there, very disappointed for my mom because she wanted me to do those three years but **I couldn't** see it then and I don't think you do realise that you have to go on the first step first (MB132)
3.19	I didn't believe in war. I'd got strong views about how stupid it was and judging by the previous war, the Great War, I don't think anybody won and **I couldn't** see the point of losing all those lives. (MB130)
3.20	I was beginning to feel that my religion was setting boundaries beyond which **I couldn't** travel, so I think it was at that time that I felt the courage to sort of begin to move away from it all (MB023)

Figure 3b: Cultural constraints – challenging the expectations of others

		The topic of the speaker 's utterance
3.21	needless to say, **I couldn't really** refuse something like that (MB037)	reaction to being given an MBE
3.22	But I mean there was a lot of hatred to the Irish. **I couldn't really** blame people because it was despicable. (MB137)	the pub bombings of 1974; (the speaker is Irish)
3.23	She was quite upset, as you can imagine, and more particularly because **I couldn't really** tell her what was wrong and why I was so unhappy at home (MB016)	fear of her stepfather; ('she' is the speaker's grandmother)
3.24	**I couldn't actually** go back and say listen I can be foreman (MB047)	changes in opportunities in the motor trade

3.25	after that **I just couldn't settle** in Ireland, I'd got a good job, I was working in the hospital there, my husband was working (MB049)	the contrast between reasons for staying in Ireland and yet wanting to return to Birmingham
3.26	**I just couldn't** face any more studying and it was all getting too much for me so I decided to give up (MB134)	response to failing college exams
3.27	I have had people saying, Oh, that can't possibly be true! I'd say Well, **I couldn't possibly** have made it up. (MB014)	sexist remarks made to her early in her career
3.28	I know one or two who hadn't actually got any children, so they were able to concentrate on their careers, but **I couldn't possibly** have done that because someone had got to stay at home and look after the children (MB007)	prioritising mothering responsibilities over career
3.29	**I couldn't even** afford to say, I don't like it, because that was something that you never did. (MB046)	working in an unpleasant job
3.30	I started living on benefits and I personally didn't have a problem with that for myself. I was in a situation where **I couldn't possibly** have worked. My children needed me so much (MB143)	prioritising mothering responsibilities over earning

Figure 3c: Acknowledging norms: the role of subjuncts