

Ordinary Language Interviewing

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I have been interested in culture and language since young adulthood at least. After graduating from high school I worked for a year on a fruit farm in Norway and in a children's home in Swedish-speaking southern Finland. I already knew French and a little German from my high school studies, and during my stay in Scandinavia, I learned some Norwegian and Swedish, too.

In college I started out studying psychology and psycholinguistics, but soon shifted to international relations (IR), which I thought better spoke to the pressing problems of the world. I discovered quickly, however, that much IR theory rested upon assumptions about human nature that it was ill equipped to assess. In search of answers, I designed my own major, which I called "social theory." I oriented my reading toward those who had something to say about why people do what they do. That project led me eventually to the philosophy of the social sciences, which addressed the deeper question of how we know what we know. At about this time I also spent my junior year in Senegal, where I learned to speak Wolof.

When I returned to the United States, I started exploring the epistemological and ontological assumptions underlying various theories of international conflict, drawing on the work of phenomenologists Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. This exercise led to a thesis on "the metaphysics of war." By the end of it, I had become aware of language as a tool for clearing up ambiguities of motive. Merleau-Ponty and other phenomenologists teach us that there is no Archimedean point outside the world upon which to stand. One is always inside the world, and the world is messy. We cannot find answers to all the questions we want to address, I learned, but an attentiveness to language can help with some of them. This realization sparked my interest in ordinary language philosophy, which allowed me to do phenomenological work without the burden of phenomenology's heavy jargon.

In graduate school at Berkeley I had a foreign language area studies fellowship to study Wolof, which made available to me, among other things, a native-speaking tutor. My tutor's mother was active in Senegalese politics, and she would send him cassette tapes of political rallies that she recorded. During my lessons, we often listened to these tapes, and it became clear to me that Wolof words such as "demokaraasi" and "politig" were only roughly equivalent to what I knew as "democracy" and "politics." There was born the idea for my dissertation: to study the (Wolof) vocabulary of politics as a way to understand (Senegalese) political culture. The project became, literally, the study of "democracy in translation."

* * *

You are weaving a thatched roof for your hut. Here you can do it all out in the field.
 You place the frame on the ground, you put it together, you plait the straw.
 You do everything. But you can't lift it yourself. It is too heavy to pick up.
 You have to call someone to help you. You call one person, you call another.
 Together you all lift it up. That is our demokaraasi.
 —*Peanut farmer, village of Ngabu, Senegal; translated from Wolof* (Schaffer 1998, 60)

When your child is of the proper age and wants to enter a life of marriage, he needs to ask permission from his parents—this is demokrasya. If there were no demokrasya, he would do anything he wants. He could even go to another country.
 —*Rag maker, Quezon City, Philippines; translated from Tagalog* (Schaffer 2002, 13)

Ordinary language interviewing is a tool for uncovering the meaning of words in everyday talk. It is a tool for uncovering the meaning of *demokaraasi* to the peanut farmer, and of *demokrasya* to the rag maker. By studying the meaning of a word in English—or the meaning of roughly equivalent words in other languages—the promise is to gain insight into the various social realities these words name, evoke, or realize.

This chapter answers some basic questions about ordinary language interviewing: what it is, what can be discovered through it, and how to actually do it. To make its relevance more transparent and its techniques easier to learn, the chapter includes an extended interview excerpt.

WHAT IS ORDINARY LANGUAGE INTERVIEWING?

This interviewing strategy finds its roots in ordinary language philosophy as pioneered by J.L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Within the field of philosophy, a fundamental contribution of Austin and Wittgenstein was to recognize that long-standing debates on questions like “do people have free will?” or “is it possible to really know something?” are symptomatic of conceptual puzzlement. To clear up such conceptual confusion, Austin and Wittgenstein teach us, requires looking at the complex and often internally contradictory grammars of words like “will,” “freedom,” or “knowledge.”¹

“Ordinary language interviewing” is a shorthand label I use for the self-conscious application of interviewing techniques inspired by ordinary language philosophy.² It borrows from Austin and Wittgenstein three basic insights. First, *everyday words reflect the accumulated wisdom or shared culture of a community*. As Austin (1979, 182) put it: “Our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connexions they have found worth marking, in the lifetimes of many generations.” It follows that we can use a study of words as a window into that shared culture. This point is illustrated well by David Laitin, who, by drawing on Austin’s analysis of acceptable and unacceptable excuses, shows how close attention to meaning can shed light on English speakers’ shared standards of responsibility:

Although [Austin] is not explicit on this, one could derive from his discussion a guide to an anthropologist or ethnolinguist who came to study the English tribe. The anthropologist should notice that it is acceptable to tread on a snail “inadvertently,” tip over the salt shaker “inadvertently,” but *not* to tread on the baby “inadvertently.” “Inadvertent” means, according to Austin, “a class of incidental happenings which must occur in the doing of any physical act,” and is used when that incidental happening causes some (usually small) distress. Our foreign anthropologist, in learning English, might capture the sense of “inadvertence” as

meaning merely “unintentional” (which, incidentally, is the definition in my dictionary). Suppose he does tread on a baby in one of the native’s houses, and offers, “I did it inadvertently.” And suppose the native returns with “That wasn’t inadvertence! That was pure callousness.” What is our anthropologist to think? Is he getting a lesson in the English language (he used “inadvertent” when he should have used “callous”), or was it a lesson in morality (treading on a baby is far more egregious than treading on a snail; and for the former, a simple excuse is not sufficient)? In fact, what the anthropologist is learning is both the English language *and* the standards of misdeeds among English speakers. (Laitin 1977, 154)

To learn the meaning of words like “power,” “freedom,” or “administration” is to learn not only a part of the English language but also shared standards for calling something an instance of power, freedom, or administration. It is to learn, in other words, what power, freedom, or administration really are.

The second insight borrowed from Austin and Wittgenstein is that *the meaning of a word consists in how the word is used*. As Wittgenstein stated it pithily: “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (1968, paragraph 43). To study the meaning of “rights” or “corruption” thus requires more than flipping through a dictionary; it necessitates investigating how people actually use these words in a wide range of (political and nonpolitical) contexts.

The third and last insight is that *complicating a study of meaning in language is the reality that the various uses of a word need not fit together neatly*. Wittgenstein wrote:

Consider . . . the proceedings that we call “games.” I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don’t say: “There *must* be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’”—but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something in common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. . . .—Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ball-games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost.—Are they all “amusing”? Compare chess with noughts and crosses [known as tic-tac-toe in American English—ed.]. Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience. In ball games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of games like ring-a-ring-a-roses; here is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! And we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way; can see how similarities crop up and disappear.

And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing—sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities in detail.

I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblances”; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. (1968, paragraph 66–67; emphasis in original)

The various uses or meanings of a word do not interlock precisely like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Consequently, to say that we can identify shared meanings implicit in a word is not to

claim that those meanings can be arranged tidily. A word can be used in a variety of different, and sometimes contradictory, ways (even by one person, in one conversation). So when we speak of “the” meaning of a term, we need to include not only points of agreement, but also areas of ambiguity and contestedness.

WHAT CAN BE LEARNED THROUGH ORDINARY LANGUAGE INTERVIEWING?

Careful analysis of the terms people use can be a valuable tool for understanding the social phenomena that political scientists want to investigate. Voting, property, and citizenship are real to political actors themselves. To accurately interpret the intentions of such actors, it is helpful to take seriously their words, and the categories that these words reflect. It would be difficult, for instance, to understand the institution of voting in the United States without learning the meaning of the word “vote.” As Charles Taylor explained, “the realities here are social practices; and these cannot be identified in abstraction from the language we use to describe them, or invoke them, or carry them out” (1977, 117).

Of course different tools are appropriate to different research agendas. An ordinary language approach is most helpful when one’s analysis rests centrally upon terms that posit a particular set of intentions on the part of political actors. Take, for example, the study of democracy. Scholars often posit a causal link between free elections and democratic accountability, a link, not incidentally, which today provides one of the theoretical underpinnings for many US and World Bank governance and democracy-building programs around the world. But this link is tenable only if voters do indeed expect elected officials to act in the public interest and in accordance with the rule of law. For this reason, it is important to verify that voters do, in fact, hold such expectations. Looking at how voters use words like “vote,” “democracy,” or “accountability” might reveal the kinds of expectations they actually hold.

Ordinary language interviewing is all the more helpful when the people under investigation are from a culture different from one’s own, when there are significant differences between their intentions (and vocabulary) and one’s own. To return to Wittgenstein, we might think of family resemblances as existing between the uses of roughly equivalent words in different languages. That is, there may be a complex pattern of overlapping and crisscrossing similarities shared by a word and its “relatives” in other languages: by English “administration,” Dutch *bestuur*, and German *verwaltung*; by English “politics,” Arabic *siyasa*, and Hindi *rajniti*; by English “democracy,” Chinese *minzhu*, and Wolof “demokaraasi.” Differences between the meanings of these words are important because they might reveal, to the outside observer, different repertoires of action and motivation. Interview data from a study I conducted on the meaning of demokaraasi, for instance, showed that to many Senegalese voters, demands for electoral accountability are diluted by concerns about social cohesion and collective security. Voting, like helping to hoist a roof onto a neighbor’s hut, is an act of mutual solidarity. When voting, an evaluation of the abilities or achievements of candidates is often less important than keeping village relationships in good repair. The causal link between elections and accountability is thus weak (Schaffer 1998, 86–115).

Ordinary language interviewing, of course, can also be used to investigate fruitfully the intentions of people who speak one’s own language. Cultural differences, after all, often exist among speakers of the same language. Consequently, it can be revealing to examine whether the use of particular terms varies across (and within) subcultures of one’s own language community. Among the important subcultures of American English speakers are ones defined by class, race, gender, profession, ideology, and sexual orientation.³ One may even find linguistic particularities (and

distinctive repertoires of action and purpose) in groups as restricted as a policy circle, government agency, or local PTA.

HOW DOES ONE CONDUCT AN ORDINARY LANGUAGE INTERVIEW?

The purpose of the ordinary language interview is to look at language in use—to engage the interviewee in a conversation and, within that conversation, to provide the person with occasions to use particular words of interest in ways that reveal their various meanings. Although the ordinary language interview is open ended, it is nevertheless structured to the extent that it is designed to expose the meanings of words through deliberate questioning strategies. Most helpful in this endeavor, I have found, are *judgment questions*. Such questions require the interviewee to express opinions and make discriminations that reveal standards implicit in a term:

- Is there “x” where you live now?
- Is “x” good or bad?
- Is there a place or a country in the world that does not have “x”?

I have also found it useful to employ five other kinds of follow-up questions:

1. *Elaboration prompts* that invite the interviewee to flesh out or amplify what he or she is saying:
 - Can you explain?
 - Can you elaborate?
 - Please say more.
 - Why do you say that?
 - How so?
 - Really?
2. *Example prompts* that can help both you (the interviewer) and the interviewee think more concretely about the question at hand:
 - Can you give an example (from national politics, from your community, from your own personal experience, etc.)?
3. *Internal logic questions* that provide an opportunity for the interviewee to reflect more deeply about what he or she is saying:
 - Earlier you said “x,” but now you seem to be saying “not x.” Can you explain what you mean by “x” and “not x”?
 - Earlier, you seemed to be saying that “a” has something to do with both “b” and “c.” I’m not sure I understand how “b” and “c” are related. Can you explain?
4. *Restatement questions* that confirm that you understand what the interviewee is saying, and also demonstrate to the interviewee that you are listening, that you are taking him or her seriously:
 - If I understand correctly, you are saying that . . .⁴
5. *Direct questions* that ask explicitly what the interviewee understands the meaning of term “x” to be:
 - What do you think “x” means?
 - To you, what is “x”?⁵

Let us look now at an excerpt from an actual interview. I chose this excerpt because it starts with a seemingly odd, somewhat elliptical statement on the part of the interviewee. But gentle, persistent questioning reveals that the person has something very cogent to say. The interview was conducted in a poor neighborhood of Quezon City, the largest city in the Philippines, by a research assistant I trained in the methods of ordinary language interviewing. I was not present during this interview, which was tape-recorded and later transcribed. The interviewee—Juan de la Cruz (a fictitious name)—is a forty-eight-year-old man. The interview took place in Juan’s home, and both the interviewer and Juan were speaking the Tagalog language. We chose Juan, along with the other people we interviewed, at random from the voter registry. One purpose of this study was to explore how urban poor Filipino voters such as Juan understand “demokrasya,” the Tagalog rough equivalent of “democracy.”

Interviewer: Is demokrasya good or bad? [*scripted judgment question*]

Juan de la Cruz: For me, it’s kind of bad. It’s a chopping board.

Interviewer: Can you explain please? [*elaboration prompt*]

Juan de la Cruz: Demokrasya is used to take advantage of people.

Interviewer: To take advantage of people, what do you mean? [*elaboration prompt*]

Juan de la Cruz: Well, we have demokrasya, but it’s only a pretext.

Interviewer: A pretext? A pretext for what? [*elaboration prompt*]

Juan de la Cruz: It’s a way to get out of a situation. For me, demokrasya is not right. It doesn’t come from good. It comes from bad.

Interviewer: So how is demokrasya used to take advantage of people? [*elaboration prompt*]

Juan de la Cruz: Because of freedom of speech, or freedom of the press. We’re in a demokrasya, so you can’t stop abusive people from saying whatever they want.

Interviewer: Let’s take freedom of speech first. Can you give me an example of what you’re talking about? [*prompt for concrete example*]

Juan de la Cruz: When there is freedom of speech in politics, politicians can abuse their opponents.

Interviewer: What kinds of abusive things do they say? [*prompt for concrete example*]

Juan de la Cruz: Rotten things about their opponents’ lives. They even dig into the grandchildren, even the family is affected.

Interviewer: What kinds of rotten things? [*elaboration prompt*]

Juan de la Cruz: Badness, corruption, family background.

Interviewer: Family background? [*elaboration prompt*]

Juan de la Cruz: Yes.

Interviewer: For example? [*prompt for concrete example*]

Juan de la Cruz: Even the family, the affairs of the family are dug into, where the family hails from. If they’ve been immoral, even back to the grandfather of their grandfather. Politicians say that because we’re in a demokrasya, they can say that, to inform the people.

Interviewer: You don’t condone their use of freedom of speech? [*elaboration prompt*]

Juan de la Cruz: No, it’s not acceptable.

Interviewer: Why not? [*judgment question*]

Juan de la Cruz: With freedom of speech, you should be allowed to say good things—you’re free to do that; but bad things, you shouldn’t be allowed to say those. In Tagalog we say that demokrasya is *kalayaan* [*roughly, “freedom”*]. But in my opinion, there is no true

kalayaan because there are limits that should be respected. You have rights, you can make choices, but there are limits.

Interviewer: Limits? [*elaboration prompt*]

Juan de la Cruz: Yes. That's why you cannot say that you are really free. In essence really, if you consider it, if you look at it, there should be limits to kalayaan.

Interviewer: Let's go back to freedom of the press. How does freedom of the press get used to take advantage of people? [*elaboration prompt*]

Juan de la Cruz: In the press, it's the same. They can say things or report things that will be harmful to a person. That shouldn't be the case. It should be controlled by law. But because they say, "we are free, we have all the rights to inform the people," because we're in a demokrasya, they will write those harmful things.

Interviewer: Do you know of examples here in your neighborhood, so that I can have a clearer idea of what you are talking about with regard to freedom of speech and freedom of the press? [*prompt for concrete example*]

Juan de la Cruz: Yes . . . that . . . the . . . [*pause*]

Interviewer: For example here in MRB? [MRB stands for "medium rise buildings," the government-built low income housing project in which Juan lives.] [*prompt for concrete example*]

Juan de la Cruz: Here in MRB, there are lots. Because what residents hear doesn't coincide with what's actually happening.

Interviewer: For example? [*prompt for concrete example*]

Juan de la Cruz: They are covering things up at our meetings, even in something as basic as setting the agenda. When you get to the meeting, you see that they've changed the original agenda. When we get to the discussions, things change. When you ask them, they will say, "we have a right to change that, we are free to do that." That's what they'll say to you. Or they will say, "we're not the ones who came out with the agenda you saw."

Interviewer: So if I understand what you're saying: demokrasya isn't really good because there is a tendency to abuse it, to abuse kalayaan? [*restatement question*]

Juan de la Cruz: Yes. That's it. People use it to avoid their responsibilities. Yup, that's my take on demokrasya. During the time of Marcos . . . I am in favor of what happened then.

Interviewer: What about the time of Marcos? [*scripted judgment question, though here brought up by the interviewee*]

Juan de la Cruz: There was a dictatorship, but that was better.

Interviewer: How was it better? [*judgment question*]

Juan de la Cruz: Because the enforcement of law was better.

Interviewer: For example? [*prompt for concrete example*]

Juan de la Cruz: For example in situations of peace and order.

Interviewer: So let me ask you now, do you think there is demokrasya in the Philippines today? [*scripted judgment question*]

Juan de la Cruz: They say we are practicing demokrasya now, but it's like nothing, it's of no use.

Interviewer: Why do you say that it's of no use? [*elaboration prompt*]

Juan de la Cruz: Just look at the differences between the rich and the poor, at the treatment by the government of the rich and poor. . . . [*pause*] You hear many things. When a candidate doesn't want to be beaten by another he will not concede defeat. He will say he was cheated. Daboy today, what do we hear from Daboy? When the time came and he lost, what did he say?⁶

Interviewer: That he was cheated.

Juan de la Cruz: He was cheated! [*laughs*]

Interviewer: Is the example of Daboy related to what you were saying about differences in how the rich and poor are treated by the government? [*internal logic question*]

Juan de la Cruz: Yes. Because if there is demokrasya, there shouldn't be discrimination by the government, especially by the government. But the government discriminates against the poor.

Interviewer: How so? [*elaboration prompt*]

Juan de la Cruz: Take government programs that they say are for the poor. In almost all government programs, the aspect of the poor is not absent. Right? You observe that. Their chopping board—their pretext—is the poor. The president, senators—they all justify these programs by saying they will benefit the poor. But look at who benefits.

Interviewer: Who benefits? [*elaboration prompt*]

Juan de la Cruz: The elites, the rich, those who run things. The poor are used as an excuse, as a justification for the programs, but they don't get a thing.

Interviewer: Can you give a specific example? [*prompt for concrete example*]

Juan de la Cruz: I will give you one. Look here in MRB, at this housing project. The beneficiaries of these housing units are not qualified recipients. In the government program, renters—those who don't own their own housing—should have the first priority. But look, almost 70 percent of MRB residents were already homeowners.

Interviewer: Really? [*elaboration prompt*]

Juan de la Cruz: Those who got units here are those who have money, those who can pay. Many people here own property elsewhere already. Their properties in the provinces are very large. They get units here so that while their children are studying in Manila, they have somewhere to live. This is an example of discrimination.

Interviewer: So if I understand correctly: what you're saying is that government programs are publicly promoted as being for the poor, but in reality they do not serve the poor? [*restatement question*]

Juan de la Cruz: Yes, that's it. Those who benefit are rich.

Interviewer: You spoke earlier about elections, about incumbents not willing to concede defeat. [*return to internal logic question*]

Juan de la Cruz: If they lose, they don't want to concede. Where is the demokrasya in that?

Interviewer: Why isn't there demokrasya in that? [*internal logic question*]

Juan de la Cruz: That's not demokrasya because you don't want to recognize defeat. Where is the demokrasya? The people are not free anymore, their votes are ignored. Where is their kalayaan? If there really is demokrasya . . . if you lose, you lose. You don't create problems.

Interviewer: Can you give a concrete example? [*prompt for concrete example*]

Juan de la Cruz: Even here in our place. Here in our association. Our election here is supposedly yearly. But when a person holds a position, he doesn't want to call elections. The person does everything he can to stay in power. This is just small, this association of ours. Things get much worse at the national level.

Interviewer: Let me ask you another question. What does demokrasya mean to you? [*scripted direct question*]

Juan de la Cruz: For me, it's an ideology. If I connect it to religious teachings, it's an ideology of Satan.

Interviewer: Why do you say that? [*elaboration prompt*]

Juan de la Cruz: It's used to ruin the minds of people, to make them go against things that should be obeyed.

Interviewer: Can you explain? [*elaboration prompt*]

Juan de la Cruz: People want to be free, that's what they're after, to be free. But there are laws that should be respected, that's what I was saying earlier. There are laws we should obey.

Interviewer: So how does that make demokrasya a satanic ideology? [*elaboration prompt*]

Juan de la Cruz: It's a satanic ideology because most people don't want to be constrained by laws. They only want to do their own thing.

Interviewer: Why do you think so many people like demokrasya? [*judgment question*]

Juan de la Cruz: Why do they like it? It's money. They can use demokrasya to break the law. That's why I say demokrasya is a satanic ideology because it is being used to justify breaking the law. If not for the anomalies that demokrasya produces, it would be okay.

Interviewer: It would be okay because there would be lawfulness? [*restatement question*]

Juan de la Cruz: Yes, because we would have the rule of law. [*chuckles*]

We learn that to Juan demokrasya has something to do with unbridled freedom of speech—including the freedom to lie and to say harmful things. It also involves people not only being able to say what they want, but having their voices heard and, more importantly, registered—“not having their votes ignored,” as Juan puts it. It also entails fair treatment by the government. “If there is demokrasya, there shouldn't be discrimination by the government,” in Juan's words, “especially by the government.”

We also learn, and here Juan echoes the sentiments of many people we interviewed, that a major problem with how Philippine demokrasya actually operates is that private citizens and government officials act in ways that are rude, hurtful, and unlawful; that people, especially the poor, are not treated with regard or dignity. A few weeks before this interview was conducted, hundreds of thousands of mostly poor people from Quezon City and other areas of metropolitan Manila rallied in angry protest, calling for a change in government and the establishment of what they called “true demokrasya.” True demokrasya, in the eyes of many protesters, seemingly requires the government to treat the poor with consideration—just as, in the rag maker's conception, demokrasya requires children to treat their parents with respect. The words and actions of the demonstrators take on special meaning and intelligibility in light of Juan's, and the rag maker's, remarks.⁷

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, let us examine briefly a few methodological issues that attend the use of ordinary language interviewing. To begin with, it is important to recall that language use and meaning can vary with the speaker's class, race, gender, and so on. It is, consequently, essential to get a sample of language use that is representative of different kinds of speakers. A random sample might be used, especially when the community is relatively small. In the Philippines, I studied one urban community with about 14,000 registered voters and randomly selected 2 percent of the people listed on the voter registry. With the help of two interviewers I trained, it took four months to conduct 139 interviews, including those with Juan and the rag maker.⁸ To study a larger com-

munity, a quota sampling strategy might be more feasible.⁹ This strategy can be used to ensure that the sample includes speakers of different ages, sexes, classes, education levels, religions, dialects, ethnicities, party affiliations, areas of residence, and the like. When doing fieldwork in Senegal, I used this sampling strategy to interview 100 people from around the country who met various demographic criteria, including the peanut farmer from Ngabu.

It is also helpful to remember that during the interview there are no right or wrong answers. The goal is to elicit meaning, not to correct, instruct, or pass judgment. In this regard, ordinary language interviewing is similar to “elite” interviewing to the extent that the respondent is treated as an expert about the topic at hand. A nonjudgmental demeanor is different, of course, from blankness or impassivity. In conducting any conversational interview, including an ordinary language interview, it is obviously important to put the interviewee at ease. It is thus altogether appropriate to express empathy by smiling, laughing, frowning, or showing surprise at the proper cues. It is also appropriate to be candid and natural when fielding questions posed by the interviewee (as long as the answers do not correct, instruct, pass judgment, or convey information about the words under investigation). Thus, when Juan asked, “When the time came and [Daboy] lost, what did he say?” the interviewer, who was familiar with the Daboy affair, was correct to reply, “that he was cheated.”¹⁰

When it comes to the analysis of interview data, to drawing conclusions about how words are actually used, it is useful to recall Wittgenstein’s treatment of “games.” He prompts us to “look and see whether there is anything common to all.” When Wittgenstein himself looks, he sees “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing.” One challenge of ordinary language analysis is to sort out this complexity, which is typical of many words and not just “games.” I personally find it helpful, as a first step, to organize various usages visually. I draw a Venn diagram to literally map out, roughly, how they relate to one another. Once I build up an understanding from the data, I then try to confirm that it is accurate. In ordinary language analysis, confirmation involves producing examples that sound right or natural to members of the language community.¹¹ Austin’s discussion of “accident” and “mistake” provides a template for constructing a confirmatory example in the form of a question:

You have a donkey, so have I, and they graze in the same field. The day comes when I conceive a dislike for mine. I go to shoot it, draw a bead on it, fire: the brute falls in its tracks. I inspect the victim, and find to my horror that it is your donkey. I appear on the doorstep with the remains and say—what? “I say, old sport, I’m awfully sorry, &c., I’ve shot your donkey *by accident*”? Or “*by mistake*”? Then again, I go to shoot my donkey as before, draw a bead on it, fire—but as I do so, the beasts move, and to my horror yours falls. Again the scene on the doorstep—what do I say? “By mistake?” Or “by accident?” (Austin 1979, 185 [emphasis in original])

Posing questions of similar form to community members (preferably ones who did not participate in the initial interviews) can help verify that one understands the grammar of a word, or words, more or less correctly.

Another point worth mentioning is that even when studying the terms used by political actors themselves yields important information, political scientists need not limit themselves to the very same terms in making their analyses. That the Nazis never spoke of their actions as “genocide” should not prevent scholars studying the holocaust from describing it as an instance of genocide—though in arriving at that conclusion they may well need to figure out what the Nazis meant by words such as *endlösung* (final solution), *sonderbehandlung* (special treatment), or *aussiedlung*

(evacuation). There may be good and varied reasons for the analyst to construct her own categories. In such cases, an attentiveness to ordinary language can help tether her categories to the experiences of the people she seeks to understand.

Finally, a word about the issue of falsification. Reliance on any kind of interview data poses special problems, for the interview setting itself may affect how people react to your questions. Their answers may reflect what they assume you want to know, or what they take to be in their interest for you to know (Rieder 1994; Schaffer 1998, 19). Ordinary language interviewing, I believe, is less prone to this problem than other forms of interviewing. Certainly, in ordinary language interviewing people may shade or misrepresent their true feelings and opinions. People are, however, unlikely to falsify the conventionalized meanings they draw upon when expressing those feelings and opinions. I may lie about whether I think the political system of a country is just, but it would be difficult for me to alter how I use the word “just.”

NOTES

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1. An excellent introduction to ordinary language philosophy, and a clear exposition of its significance for social science, can be found in Pitkin (1972).

2. Scholars working from different epistemological starting points have also examined language to gain insight into shared social and political realities. See for instance Hyden (1970), Hymes (1970), Lewis (1988), Geertz (1980), and Johnson (1995).

3. On class see Labov (1966), on race see Labov (1969), on gender see R. Lakoff (1976), on professions see Edelman (1984), on ideology see David Green (1987), and on sexual orientation see Leap (1996).

4. In formulating a restatement question, it is important to mirror carefully what the interviewee has actually said, lest the question become a leading one. Still, in my own experience of interviewing, the most revealing answers have tended to come when I apparently misunderstood what the interviewee was trying to say: “No, that’s not what I said. What I really meant was . . .”

5. Direct questions, I have found, are best asked at the end of an interview, where they provide the interviewee an opportunity to make sense of the concrete examples he or she has already brought up. If asked too early, there is a risk that the interviewee might use the particular meaning of “x” he or she articulates to guide all further comments about “x.” Saving direct questions until the end permits the conversation to remain open ended.

6. “Daboy” is the nickname of action star Rudy Fernandez, who ran for mayor of Quezon City in 2001. When the vote count showed him losing the race, he accused the winning candidate of committing massive electoral fraud, without furnishing any evidence to back up that claim. This interview took place soon after the 2001 elections.

7. For a more in-depth discussion of the meaning of *demokrasya*, see Schaffer (2010).

8. Originally, 278 people were chosen for the sample. In this highly transient area, 107 of them had moved out of the community after registering. Two had died. Of the 171 people who actually still lived there, our response rate was 81 percent, thus the 139 interviews.

9. On quota sampling see Bernard (1988, 96–97).

10. Other useful techniques for putting the interviewee at ease can be found in Leech (2002).

11. On this manner of confirmation see Searle (1969, 12–15), Pitkin (1972, 15), and Cavell (1976, 33–37).