

Lecture 44 Listening and Speaking

Some researchers like to think of the interview as a dialogue. Ideas and opinions are discussed to arrive at new directions and meanings.

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As a dialogue, an ethnographic interview is made up of both listening and speaking. How do we listen? And, How do we speak? These questions require careful consideration in doing an ethnographic interview. Let us explore them here; let us start with listening.

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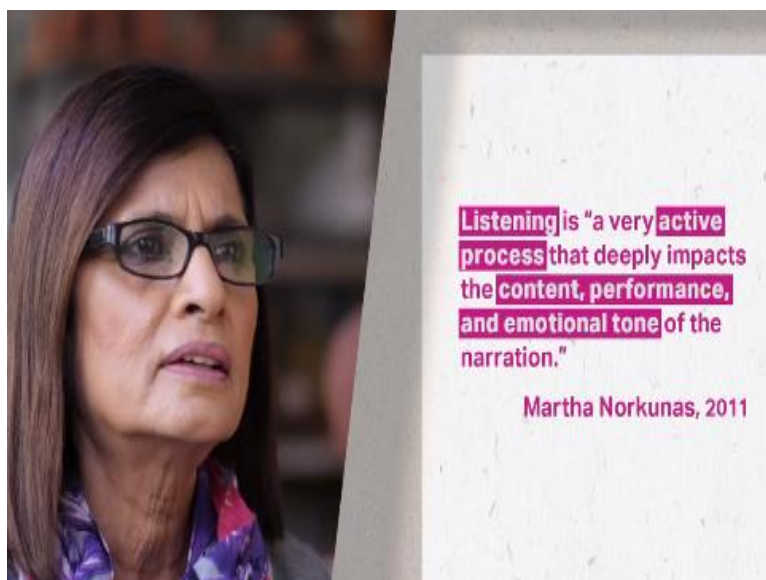
What does it mean to listen? In an ethnographic interview, we listen in order to learn from the other, to do this we need to create space in the conversation and in our minds so that they can fill it with their ideas and thoughts. Let me tell you a story that I heard long ago from my teacher. An aspiring professor once visited a Zen master. He wanted to know about Zen philosophy and practices.

The Master invited the professor in and served him tea. The professor spoke incessantly about how keen he was to learn from him and how he had already read so many books about Zen and so on. The Master poured tea into the visitor's cup and kept pouring. Soon the cup was flowing over, then the Master did not stop. The professor finally stopped talking and exclaimed,, "Master, it is overfull, no more will go in.

Looking up the Master smiled, you are just like this cup, filled with your own ideas and speculations. How can I teach you anything unless you first empty yourself."

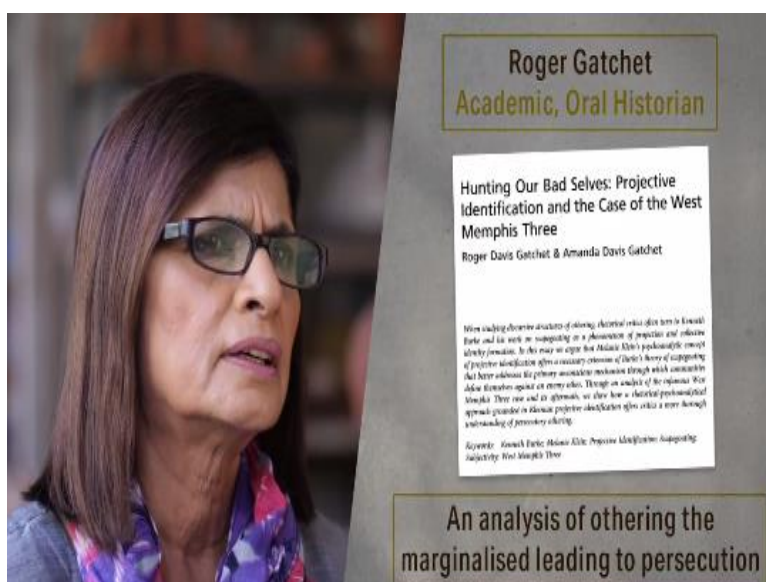
This story, among other things teaches us the importance of listening.

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By listening, we can learn what the other thinks, we have to know what they think is important. In ethnography, we listen in order to understand the meanings underlying what is spoken and what is unspoken. Let us hear a short description of a researcher's experience of listening

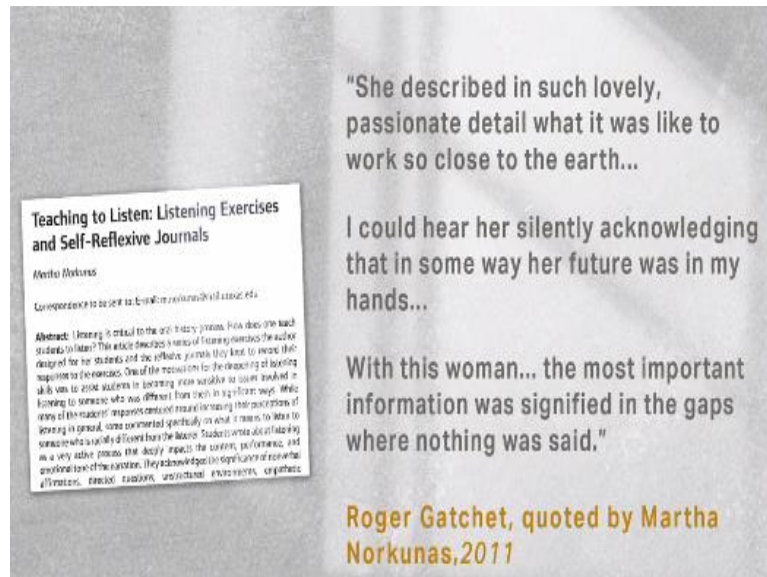
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The interviewer here is Roger Gatchet, a student of oral history. As part of his studies, he interviewed an older woman from Mexico where she had spent much of her life working as a farm labourer. Having moved to America, she was looking for a way to build her life in a new country. As an unlettered working-class immigrant, this was a difficult journey. Gatchet

had met her when she had come to the temporary employment agency where he worked, hoping to find a job, as she spoke to him he listened to the words that she used, her dialect, her narratives. He observed her expressions and the gestures she made. Through this, he learned much about her; he even thinks that she did not speak about directly.

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One of these was of her relationship with the earth, which had developed over years of farm work. He also sensed how important it was for her to get a job in America. And she hoped that Gatchet thanks to his job at the employment agency could help her. Much of his understanding came from listening to the silences and the gaps in her speech. Gatchet reflection reveals to us several important things about his participant.

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It reveals the importance of listening to words, silences and non-verbal expressions. Through the process of listening, Gatchet built a relationship of understanding and empathy with his participant. By relating the emotions in her voice to the words that she spoke, he learnt what farm work meant to her. And of the pressing nature of her current needs. Let us pause here and do an exercise.

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Watch this video of an interview between a researcher and participant. I would like you to reflect on some of the things that the participants say in this interview by answering the questions that appear on the screen.

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REFLECTION SPOT (4)

Raniben smiles while Meghiben converses with the researcher.
What does Raniben's smile convey?
How did you deduce that?

What may be the reasons for Meghiben's reluctance to go to her house to bring the embroidered map?



Post your response in the discussion forum.

In the video, we can see Meghiben and Raniben. The researcher is speaking to Meghiben, asking her how far her house is. When Meghiben answers, Raniben seated next to her smiles, what does this smile convey? How did you deduce that? What you think maybe the reasons for Meghiben reluctance to go to her house to bring the embroider map. Do post your answers in their discussion forum.

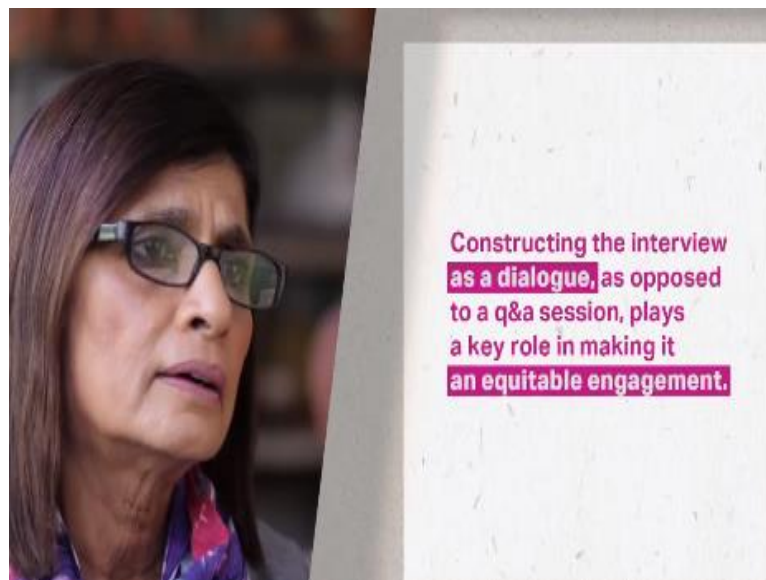
By posting your answers on the forum, you will have the opportunity to engage in discussions with your peers about it. Let us get back to where we were. We were discussing the importance of listening to our participants. Speaking is just as important. In an interview, what does it mean to speak? In interviewing someone, we too express ourselves by asking questions, responding to the participant through silence and non-verbal expressions. In all of these different ways, we speak to our participants.

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In an interview, the act of speaking is closely related to the power equation between the researcher and the participant.

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If we simply listen and do not speak or share our thoughts, it becomes an unequal conversation where we are 'taking information' without giving anything back. It might also be awkward, even uncomfortable for the participant to keep talking to someone who does not contribute to the conversation at all.

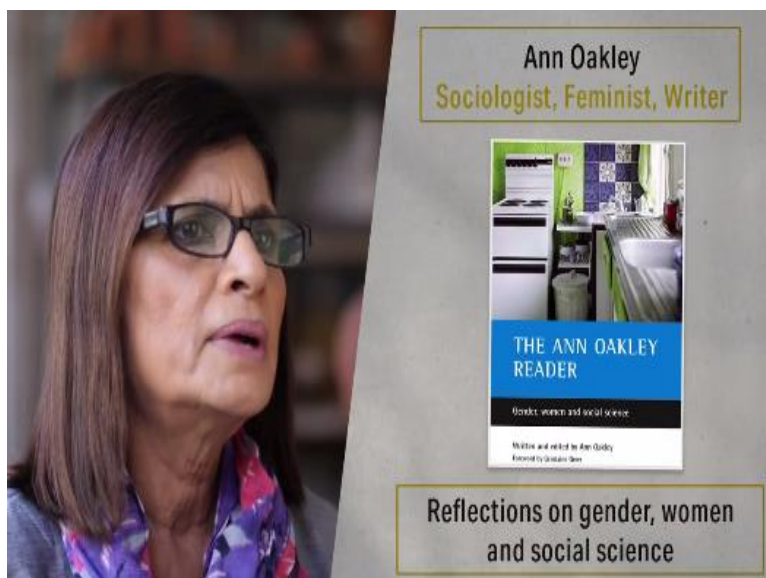
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By sharing our ideas and experiences, we make the conversation more equal and lively. We move from being an interviewer to someone they can have an interesting and engaging conversation with. Importantly in speaking about ourselves, we reveal our own vulnerabilities. This amuses the participant to feel more secure about disclosing their experiences. Till a few decades, many researchers believed it was wrong to share their own opinions during an interview.

This, they believe, would bias the participant. While some of these concerns are very valid, some researchers challenged this idea for the reasons we have just discussed.

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A major shift came with the work of feminist researchers like Anne Oakley for those of you who like to learn more about this shift. We have some material including an interview with Oakley that we can listen to and we even take a quiz to revise what you have learned.