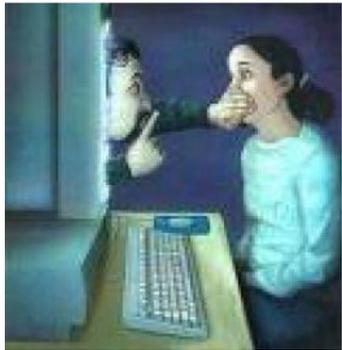


# Experimental methods in discursive research

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This poster uses a research project into the online conversations of sex offenders and the children they abuse to further the arguments for the acceptability of experimental work as a research tool for linguists.

Many researchers have expressed a preference for 'naturally-occurring' data, arguing that it has a privileged status over 'artificial' data. I argue that not only is such a view conceptually problematic but also, in certain contexts, particularly in the applied forensic context, a rejection of experimentally elicited data would limit the possibilities for analyses and so limit the contribution linguistics can make to addressing a serious social problem.

One area of undercover online police work in which linguists have been able to offer their expertise is in assisting police officers in the assumption of alternative online identities. Such a strategy might be considered in cases where a child has been identified as having been the victim of online grooming. In such a situation the child will be removed and a police officer may be authorised to take on the identity of the child to continue the online interaction with a view to making an arrest. Through our police partners we have access to a number of sets of data relating to this process (see Table 1).

Working with such data is difficult in many different ways and it is not wholly necessary in order to answer our more general research questions. These considerations led us to the conclusion that an experimental approach could be developed, in order to elicit data comparable to these sets.

## Experimental Design:

- The *Interlocutor* engaged in IM with the *Judge*;
- The *Impersonator* replaced the *Interlocutor* at some point during the 15 minute chat);
- The *Judge* judged **when** the *Interlocutor* had been replaced, and told us **why** they thought this

Table 1: Available data sets

Data set	Description	Strengths	Drawbacks
'Genuine' data	IM chats from resolved cases, between offenders and the children they are grooming and/or abusing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Authentic', naturally occurring.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No access to participants;</li> <li>• 'Messy' data;</li> <li>• Possibility that one offender/victim has several aliases (this is not recorded);</li> <li>• Sensitive content</li> </ul>
Operational data	Historical IM chats between offenders and undercover officers (UCOs) who have assumed the identity of a child for the purposes of drawing out and arresting the offender.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possibility of comparison with genuine victim logs to assess competence at identity assumption.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No access to participants;</li> <li>• No record of offenders' suspicions or the linguistic criteria on which they may have based these;</li> <li>• No records of UCOs' preparation for identity assumption;</li> <li>• Sensitive content</li> </ul>
Training data	IM chats between police trainers playing the role of the offender, and trainee UCOs assuming the identity of a child victim. These take place as part of the two week Pilgrim online undercover training course, after the trainees have had input from forensic linguists.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Written record of trainers' feedback;</li> <li>• Observation of trainees' preparation time and the task itself from both ends is permitted and can be recorded in note form</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Around 30 minutes of conversation per student only;</li> <li>• No systematic means of assessing the effect of preparation;</li> <li>• Trainer feedback focussed mainly on operational matters rather than language use;</li> <li>• Sensitive content</li> </ul>

3. Please provide information about what leads you to believe a switch occurred at this point. This could relate to the language used, the topics discussed, the general tone, etc.

2:28:24 PM  
**judge\_participant\_12:** although I'm having my teeth taken out that week under general anaesthetic so I don't know if I'll be up for partying! kinda sad...

2:28:33 PM  
**interlocuter\_participant\_10\_11:** Kinda scary!!

2:28:36 PM  
**interlocuter\_participant\_10\_11:** 🙄

2:28:57 PM  
**judge\_participant\_12:** yeah a little, I'm just looking forward to getting it over and done with

2:29:11 PM  
**interlocuter\_participant\_10\_11:** Yes! Don't worry

2:29:22 PM  
**judge\_participant\_12:** They cancelled it last week

2:29:31 PM  
**interlocuter\_participant\_10\_11:** That's terrible!

2:29:40 PM  
**interlocuter\_participant\_10\_11:** I hate dentists!

2:29:49 PM  
**judge\_participant\_12:** yeah it was really annoying, they phoned like 13 hours before the surgery!

2:30:04 PM  
**judge\_participant\_12:** I don't mind it generally

2:30:08 PM  
**interlocuter\_participant\_10\_11:** Oh my God, that's totally irritating

2:30:15 PM  
**interlocuter\_participant\_10\_11:** Anyway...

'Yes! Don't worry' - Alice commonly starts with an exclamation like this, followed by 'that's terrible!'.  
 - Although I'm not entirely sure because the 2 preceding utterances I believe could have been Alice too.  
 - I believe Alice made an effort to start with capital letters to imitate Alice,

14:23:25 **judge\_participant\_23:** Ikr! What has happened to me?!?!?  
 14:23:30 **interlocuter\_participant\_24\_22:** ikr?  
 14:23:35 **interlocuter\_participant\_24\_22:** that is a bit slangy for you  
 14:23:38 **judge\_participant\_23:** ikr = I know right  
 14:23:43 **interlocuter\_participant\_24\_22:** I know what it meant !!!  
 14:23:45 **interlocuter\_participant\_24\_22:** hahahhaa  
 14:23:49 **interlocuter\_participant\_24\_22:** knew\*  
 14:23:52 **judge\_participant\_23:** ahahaha sure you did 😊  
 14:23:58 **interlocuter\_participant\_24\_22:** I did indeed  
 14:24:04 **judge\_participant\_23:** And I totally believe you  
 14:24:05 **interlocuter\_participant\_24\_22:** don't get all chee-y on me  
 14:24:13 **interlocuter\_participant\_24\_22:** yes yes  
 14:24:18 **interlocuter\_participant\_24\_22:** hahah  
 14:24:33 **interlocuter\_participant\_24\_22:** I keep thinking what N is going to think when she reads these transcripts  
 14:24:50 **judge\_participant\_23:** She's just going to laugh at us all  
 14:24:59 **interlocuter\_participant\_24\_22:** Indeed!  
 14:25:06 **judge\_participant\_23:** When you're reading this, N, please remember I gave you a cookie!  
 14:25:08 **interlocuter\_participant\_24\_22:** Hahaha  
**judge\_participant\_23:** So don't judge me too harshly.

The distinction between 'naturalistic' and 'contrived' data has been problematized elsewhere (see Speer, 2002). By focussing on participants' orientation to their knowledge that their language is being recorded, we can gain a clearer picture of the means by which this plays a part in the ongoing construction of situated identities.

I have furthered the arguments for the acceptability of experimental work as a research tool for linguists. These data allow for questions to be asked that could not be addressed in other ways. I assert that it does not necessarily threaten the usefulness of the data to adopt a methodology where participants are fully aware that their linguistic performance is likely to be monitored. In fact, this may lead to the elicitation of richer texts as participants deliberately stage their performances for the researcher, as well as for each other.

## Reference

Speer, S. A., 2002. "Natural' and 'contrived' data: a sustainable distinction?' *Discourse Studies* 4 (4), 511-525.