

## **The Chancellor's Memory: Rhetoric and Truth in Discursive Remembering**

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### SUMMARY

This paper explores the notion of truthfulness in research on conversational remembering. It argues that people's accounts of past events, before they can be taken as data on the cognitive workings of memory, need to be examined as contextualized and variable productions that perform pragmatic and rhetorical work; no one version can be taken as a person's real memory. The consequences of this discourse-analytical perspective are examined first through a critical discussion of Ulric Neisser's study of John Dean's testimony to the senate 'Watergate' committee. The issues are then explored more deeply in an analysis of reportings of a different event, in which similar (Watergate-like) issues of memory, truth and accuracy are also at issue. It is argued that: (a) all of Neisser's three kinds of memory—verbatim, gist and 'episodic'—involve problematical assumptions concerning their relation to some true, original event; and (b) that Dean's accounts of his memory and his displays of memory should be approached as occasioned productions oriented pragmatically to the assignment of guilt and avoidance of scapegoating. Through an analysis of newspaper reports (based on memory) of a controversial briefing given by the then British Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel Lawson, we then examine: (a) how discourse about what could be used as an arbiter of truth was rhetorically organized; (b) how participants' versions of events were constructed rhetorically, as parts of arguments; (c) that both sides in the dispute maintained the coherence of their positions by a form of error accounting similar to that used by Neisser with respect to Dean. It is suggested that cognitive psychologists, whether working in the laboratory or attempting to do real-world studies of everyday remembering, need to avoid simplistic notions of true original events, and can do so by addressing the rhetorical organization of participants' memory accounts.

### INTRODUCTION

Ulric Neisser's (1981) 'ecological' analysis of the memory of John Dean was in three ways a welcome departure from much previous memory research. First, it attempted to examine remembering in a natural context; specifically through a comparison between John Dean's testimony to the Watergate hearings, and the published transcripts of some of the original conversations between Dean, Nixon and others. As Neisser (1982) has argued, the study of remembering in natural contexts holds the promise of studying non-trivial, and non-artificial behaviours, and of revealing the functionality of ordinary remembering—why people remember what they do, and when, and in what context and with what significance. These are not merely 'con-

textual' issues for a psychology of remembering, but promise to inform our understanding of the nature of the process itself (cf. Edwards and Middleton, 1987). Second, in adopting a functional view of remembering, the study of Dean's testimony attempted to make sense of the pattern of his rememberings by reference to personal goals such as his perceived need to tell the truth and a desire to display himself in a favourable light. Third, and crucially, it stressed the importance and novelty of studying memory for its accuracy rather than for its inadequacies; a move heavily influenced by the 'ecological optics' of J. J. Gibson (1966; cf. Neisser, 1976, 1988). It is this latter issue, of veridicality and how this is assessed, that we wish to examine here. Our argument is that Neisser's approach to discursive remembering fails to take proper account of the nature of discourse itself, and specifically, its pragmatic organization.

With Neisser and others (for example, Costall and Still, 1987), we shall argue that memory and indeed other 'cognitive processes' can be fruitfully examined as they occur in natural settings; however, we shall emphasize the need to pay full attention to the social and discursive issues raised by such a study (cf. Coulter, 1990; Edwards, 1990; Edwards and Mercer, 1989; Edwards and Middleton, 1986a, 1987, 1988; Harre, 1983; McKinlay *et al.*, 1990; Middleton and Edwards, 1990). We shall also adopt a form of functional analysis. However, we shall follow the implications of such an analysis much further than Neisser has done, employing methods and insights derived from the social psychology of discourse and rhetoric (Billig, 1987; Potter and Wetherell, 1987), from ethnomethodologically influenced approaches both to conversational data in general (e.g. Atkinson and Heritage, 1984; Clark, 1985; Heritage, 1984; Levinson, 1983), and from critical approaches to the theoretical formulations of cognitive science (e.g. Suchman, 1987).

Specifically, we suggest that in any account of conversational remembering, what is required is not merely an extension of traditional cognitive concerns into real-world settings, but a re-focusing of attention upon the dynamics of social action, and in particular, of discourse. Despite the introduction of a limited, formalized version of discourse pragmatics in some approaches to knowledge representation, such as in the study of question-answering (Lehnert, 1978; Graesser and Black, 1985), there has as yet been little attempt to deal either with naturally occurring conversational discourse (as Bekerian, 1987, notes; see also Levinson, 1983: 305-306, on the indeterminacy of naturally occurring question-answer pairs), or with the issues of truth-construction, and the experimenter's own role in that process, that we shall deal with here.

Studies of memory have invariably begun from some unquestioned notion of what really happened—an undisputed record or version of original events, that can be taken to represent the original experience (for the subjects), and also (for the psychologist) the essential criterion of what is remembered, forgotten, inferred, distorted, and so on. Without this prior knowledge of the 'truth', the traditional psychology of memory cannot proceed. Indeed, the starting point for the John Dean study was precisely the availability of tape transcripts of meetings in the Oval Office, which enabled the accuracy of Dean's testimony, taken as evidence of his memory, to be examined. It is the task of this paper to criticize this assumption, that the truth of events can, and must, be pre-established in this way, as a necessary condition for the study of remembering (cf. Edwards and Middleton, 1986a, 1987, on studying remembering without knowledge of 'input'). We offer an alternative approach both

to remembering and to the establishment of true versions, that examines those things as discursive activities, and as participants' concerns.

In the first part of our paper we focus on Neisser's conceptualization and operationalization of the ideas of accurate remembering, truth, and truthfulness. That involves an examination of the adequacy of his conceptual division of three kinds of truth (or of memory, since, as we have argued, the one depends upon the other); and an examination of problems with the criteria used to show Dean's truthfulness. In the second part of the paper we illustrate these points by examining 'remembering' in a natural context—a recent dispute over what was said at a press briefing given by the then U.K. Chancellor of the Exchequer (the senior Minister responsible for major economic policy), Nigel Lawson. This material has the advantage of being similar in many crucial ways to the John Dean/Watergate material (disputations about what was really said at a politically sensitive meeting, about the adequacy and accuracy of various versions of those events, the status of various 'objective' records, and so on), but at the same time it provides additional elements which were missing from the restricted data source that Neisser concentrated on. In particular, it provides for an analysis of the rhetorical context of the event, as well as an opportunity to study processes of event reconstruction occurring over time, which Neisser also clearly recognizes as an important feature of real-world studies (cf. Bartlett, 1932).

It is important at the outset that we make clear the basis upon which we are subjecting Neisser's paper to close scrutiny. It is not out of any disregard, either for Neisser's work in general, or for the Dean paper in particular. On the contrary, we perceive this work to represent a significant and welcome departure from earlier, laboratory-based and information-processing orientations, and to have mapped out many of the important issues that confront the re-location of cognitive studies in the context of real-world activities. It is precisely because of the significance and value of Neisser's work that it merits close attention. Moreover, in pursuing the discourse-analytic perspective, and in addressing notions of truth, veridicality, accuracy of accounts, and how these things are analysable as discursive accomplishments, we inevitably raise issues of how cognitive psychology, or any other study of remembering, constructs truths of its own. Psychology's construction of truths (evidence, models, theory) about remembering are intimately involved in how truth and memory are defined operationally in the analysis of subjects' rememberings. So Neisser's paper itself becomes a proper subject for study, just as in other spheres, analysts of discourse and social action have studied the construction of scientific knowledge (see Gilbert and Mulkey, 1984, for an example of this sort of research, and Woolgar, 1988, for a summary of the field). It is one of the most significant features of the discourse-analytic approach that the same methodology that reveals how ordinary persons construct versions of reality can be turned upon science itself.

## **PART 1: RE-EXAMINING JOHN DEAN'S TESTIMONY**

John Dean was the key witness in the Watergate hearings. Dean had provided in his opening written statement, and again under cross-examination, detailed accounts of conversations in the Oval Office of the White House, between himself, President Nixon, and various high-ranking White House officials. The subsequent publication

of selected transcripts of some of those conversations was seen as providing an opportunity to examine the accuracy of Dean's testimony. Neisser's concern was with what an analysis of Dean's testimony could tell us about the workings of his memory, and about memory in general. In particular, he set out to show that there was a sense in which Dean could be accurate, while apparently misremembering virtually all of the important details.

In Neisser's analysis, not only did Dean misremember the details of time, place and conversation, he also frequently misremembered even the *gist* of what happened and what was said. Despite this,

there is usually a deeper level at which he is right. He gave an accurate portrayal of the real situation, of the actual characters and commitments of the people he knew, and of the events that lay behind the conversations he was trying to remember (Neisser, 1981:4).

Neisser's 'deeper level' of accuracy is the third of a three-part distinction that he draws, between kinds of accurate recall. These are: (1) 'verbatim recall' or 'literal memory'; (2) 'gist'; and (3) 'repisodic memory', in which Dean 'extracted the common themes that remained invariant across many conversations and many experiences, and then incorporated those themes in his testimony' (Neisser, 1981: 20). Unlike Bartlett's (1932) story reconstructions, confabulated and altered across many retellings, 'repisodic' memory is recall distilled from many different but related experiences, in which some significant essence of the truth of things remains, despite all sorts of inaccuracies of detail and circumstance. Notably, 'repisodic memory' has not been taken up with enthusiasm in laboratory-based studies of memory, probably because it does not fit easily into the usual methodological constraints—it involves persons having to go through a long time-series of personally significant experiences, and without the knowledge that they will be called upon to construct a painstaking account of it all later.

Neisser's concern with delineating various 'levels' of accurate recall is part of a broader attempt to establish a Gibsonian 'ecological psychology of memory' (cf. Neisser, 1976, 1982, 1988). While the constructivist, information-processing approach has emphasized forgetting—the distortions, confabulations, and general unreliability which results when memories are schematically assembled in some kind of cognitive processor (Alba and Hasher, 1983)—the ecological perspective seeks to emphasize memory's veridicality: true remembering is something like abstracting the nature of the world from invariances in the flow of the subject's visual field. Neisser's point is that if we look at 'gist' and 'repisodic' remembering in context they can be seen as ways of getting it right about the past.

### **Three kinds of truth**

Let us begin with Neisser's three-part distinction: (1) verbatim recall; (2) gist and (3) repisodic memory. Each can be considered as a kind of text.

#### *Verbatim recall*

This is the kind of recall that is conventionally taken as unproblematically accurate and without distortion, the successful achievement of rote memorization. Rote learning has found itself out of favour in psychological laboratories during the reign

of distortion-oriented information processing and schema approaches. Neisser points out (1982: 17; cf. Rubin, 1977) that, in spite of this neglect, verbatim recall plays an important part in many people's everyday lives, in so far as people might rehearse and remember the Lord's prayer, the National Anthem, songs and poetry, and so on.

However, these sorts of achievements are notable for the special nature of the social-discursive contexts deemed appropriate for their production. The repeated performance of a prayer or a poem is just that—the speaker reproduces her own performance on each occasion. The distinctive feature of these materials is that they are designed for repetition such that, in each case, there is some normatively agreed standard with which any particular rendition can be compared. The situation is quite different with natural dialogue such as that occurring between Nixon and Dean in the Oval Office. It is tempting to imagine that such a dialogue could be rendered to look like the script of a play, such that this could provide a neutral criterion for assessing the accuracy of Dean's version. However, a brief examination of the debate among linguists and conversation analysts about the transcription of talk would quickly show the weakness of that idea. Transcriptions are always highly conventionalized versions of talk, in which the level and content of the encoding of speech depends crucially upon, and develops alongside, the analytical insights that are revealed by it (e.g. Cook, 1990). The general point is that our familiarity with standard orthography gives the idea of assessing verbatim recall a deceptive simplicity which is misleading in practice, where our criteria will be contingent upon the context and purpose of our study.

In addition, pragmatic analyses of speakers' reportings of verbatim versus gist versions of other people's speech (i.e. direct and indirect quotation) point to an interesting patterning of everyday talk that is not reflected in analyses that restrict themselves to considerations of recall accuracy. Speakers may choose to quote speech indirectly *as* gist, or directly *as* verbatim recall, according to such considerations as 'footing' (Goffman, 1979; Levinson, 1988). That is, whatever they may otherwise imply about memory, verbatim and gist reportings afford options for speakers to associate themselves more or less directly with the reported speaker, offering opportunities for acting as intermediary or spokesperson, and for constructive formulations of what was said, or indeed for displaying oneself as possessing a rather acute and veridical recall of otherwise doubtful or questioned events (Wooffitt, 1989). While such studies may not tell us what speakers are *able* to remember, their relevance to the study of memory increases as our interest shifts to ecological settings in which remembering is studied as an actual, and contextualized activity.

### *Recall of gist*

One of the central difficulties with the idea of assessing the accuracy of gist is that, in ordinary conversation, what may be taken as an adequate or accurate gist is, on any particular occasion, and for the participants involved, a disputable matter. Its adequacy will depend upon the communicative context in which the speaker is called upon to produce it. In the context of a psychological experiment this contingency of gist upon communicative considerations is usually amongst those features of everyday talk that find themselves controlled out of the study. What counts as gist is resolved by fiat, by the experimenter, as part of the methodology. A piece of text is analysed for its case-grammatical event structure, story or script structure

(Rumelhart, 1975; Thorndyke 1977; Schank and Abelson, 1977), or is subdivided in advance into a set of 'idea units' (Bransford and Johnson, 1972), or of 'propositions' (Kintsch and Van Dijk, 1978), and the experimenter then counts up how many of these units a subject manages to recall. The social-discursive process of defining gist is expropriated by the analyst, who also has to judge whatever alterations and rewordings subjects produce, as legitimate paraphrases, or else as illegitimate distortions or omissions.

In ordinary conversation, what count as adequate or accurate gists and summaries is a matter for the participants themselves to resolve. And the criteria for doing so will themselves be occasioned and disputable, according to the pragmatic work that the summary is supposed to achieve. For example, we can compare the cognitive psychological notion of gist with the conversation analytic notion of 'formulations', which are conversational events where the nature of an earlier sequence of talk is formulated (Heritage and Watson, 1979; Schegloff, 1972). Typically, such formulations are not neutral summaries but are designed for specific upshots relevant to future actions (Greatbatch, 1986). This is equally true of institutional contexts. For example, Edwards and Mercer (1989) have analysed the way that summaries of classroom lessons, of activities, findings, and conclusions, are used by teachers to reformulate capricious and problematical classroom events according to their originally planned outcomes—in effect, articulating classroom events in terms of what 'ought' to have happened. Others have examined the role of formulations in legal and scientific contexts (Atkinson and Drew, 1979; Yearley, 1986).

Clearly, then, it makes no sense to talk about accurate gist in any decontextualized way, abstracted from conversational pragmatics. We shall demonstrate that Dean's testimony needs to be understood in terms of the pragmatic constraints and objectives of legal discourse.

### *Repisodic memory*

Neisser defines this as a cognitive phenomenon, the process of '[extracting] the common themes that remained invariant'—a very familiar sort of cognitive-perceptual process, often favoured in accounts of perceptual learning, pattern recognition, language and concept acquisition, and so on (see, for example, Nelson's (1981) discussion of the acquisition of 'script' knowledge). Our aim is to question the status of 'repisodic memory' as a cognitive process, as an aspect of Dean's thought, and to relocate it as an artefactual category fashioned through a 'cognitizing' of Dean's discourse, *based on a prior commitment* to Dean's basic truthfulness. The notion of an accurate 'repisodic' memory which is independent of gist and verbatim recall is the outcome of a carefully constructed argument. Neisser's very recognition of the phenomenon relies crucially upon his possessing a knowledge of the truth of what 'really happened' in the White House, which is independent of, but comparable with, Dean's testimony. This is not merely a matter of comparing the tape transcripts with Dean's accounts. It is not verbatim recall, nor even gist, that is at stake here. What Dean's 'repisodic' memory is claimed to have got right, is the general nature of Nixon's involvement and culpability in the cover-up of the Watergate conspiracy.

That the tape transcripts afford such an interpretation is not at all as straightforwardly obvious as it might appear. Indeed, in his foreword to the published transcripts, Nixon himself is quoted as claiming that they clearly *contradict* Dean's testimony (Neisser, 1981–2). Neisser himself relies upon other sorts of evidence:

the outcome of those trials vindicated him . . . If history has ever proven anything, it surely proves that Dean remembered those conversations and told the truth about them (Neisser, 1981: 3).

Neisser can assert in advance of analysing his testimony that Dean was right—the historical outcome is taken not only as self-evident, but as proving Dean's mnemonic correctness. However, this seems to be a rather circular way of demonstrating truthfulness. Insofar as Dean was a crucial prosecution witness, the outcome of the trial merely corresponds with the general upshot of Dean's testimony. The verdict is of Nixon's guilt, not of Dean's truth, whether verbatim, gist or episodic; and it is based on legal criteria, not scientific.

### **Neisser's presentation of Dean's testimony**

Dean's testimony is presented as representing, with minor reservations, the best efforts of a man with a good memory, at accurately recalling the reported events:

The impression Dean made when he testified—that he had a good memory and was determined to tell the truth, even if only because truth-telling would best serve his own interests—was essentially correct (Neisser, 1985: 24).

Moreover, the correctness of Dean's account is warranted in a very direct fashion by the transcripts: '*The transcript makes it quite clear* that Nixon is fully aware of the coverup . . .' (Neisser, 1981: 9). Note how the transcript itself is presented as the agent of its own interpretation (cf. Latour, 1987; Mulkay, 1985), disguising Neisser's own interpretative work in coming to that conclusion. Rather than taking Dean's testimony as a (fairly direct) window upon his memory, we propose that it may be taken instead as a pragmatically designed piece of discourse. It is a series of accounts, occasioned by cross-examination, and oriented towards the avoidance and assigning of blame and mitigation. Seen in this light, features of Dean's testimony are open to new readings. Features that are ostensibly signals of truthfulness and accuracy, the outcome of mnemonic cognitive process, are revealed as communicative devices that Dean uses for warranting his *claims* to truthfulness and accuracy.

Neisser notes some inaccuracies in Dean's testimony about the meeting with Nixon and Haldeman on 15 September. His examination of the transcript reveals that:

Nixon did not say any of the things attributed to him here: He didn't ask Dean to sit down, he didn't say Haldeman had kept him posted, he didn't say Dean had done a good job . . . he didn't say anything about Liddy or the indictments. Nor had Dean himself said the things he later describes himself as saying: that he couldn't take credit, that the matter might unravel some day, etc. (Neisser 1981: 9).

Neisser's principal concern appears to be the extent of Dean's accuracy—how little detail or even gist is correct, while he manages nevertheless to convey the correct impression, that Nixon was engaged in, or at least party to, a cover-up operation. But the pragmatically situated nature of Dean's account is ignored. Both Dean's testimony and the transcript itself were 'just as incriminating' (Neisser, 1981: 9). This word 'incriminating' calls out for further attention, in that it implies a discourse-functional context for Dean's story. For example, Dean presents himself in the following ways:

- (1) As scrupulously modest and honest (not taking credit for the work of others: Dean—'I responded that I could not take credit because others had done much more difficult things than I had done'—quoted by Neisser, 1981: 9).
- (2) As having a particularly good memory. He makes direct claims to this effect—'anyone who recalls my student years knew that I was very fast at recalling information ...' (Neisser, 1981: 5), but also supports it indirectly, via the use of vivid descriptive and narrative detail and supposedly direct quotation, all of which serve to bolster his appearance as someone with a virtually direct perceptual access to the original events: 'you know the way there are two chairs at the side of the President's desk ... on the left-hand chair Mr Haldeman was sitting ...' (Neisser, 1981: 11); 'I can very vividly recall that the way he sort of rolled his chair back from his desk and leaned over to Mr Haldeman and said, "A million dollars is no problem"' (Neisser, 1981: 18).
- (3) As being under the awesome influence and direction of the highest authority in the land (the President of the United States)—as being, therefore, less culpable himself, for his own involvement. Dean rhetorically reiterates Nixon's title, rather than calling him Nixon: 'When you meet with the President of the United States it is a very momentous occasion, and you tend to remember what the President of the United States says when you have a conversation with him' (Neisser, 1981: 6).

On this analysis, Dean's testimony can be seen as a pragmatically oriented phenomenon and certainly not merely a straightforward window upon the workings of his memory. It is contextually occasioned in terms both of conversational turn-taking (as responses to questions, accusations, etc.—cf. Atkinson and Drew, 1979), and also more broadly, in terms of the business of the hearings—as relevant to determining the extent of various people's complicity and guilt, including his own, as well as his own credibility as a witness. It is similarly a part of Dean's display of 'truthfulness' that he expressed metacognitive disclaimers about accuracy—he was careful to deny verbatim recall, but claimed to remember the gist (Neisser, 1981: 3).

Our argument, is that Dean's *truth* is indistinguishable from his mode of *accounting*. His version of his 'memory' is operationally an account, rhetorically couched, in which the accuracy of his detailed evidence is warranted with further accounts of his mnemonic methods (what Neisser calls a temporal version of the method of loci—1981: 5), the fact of his self-attributed 'good memory' (quoted by Neisser 1981: 5), and the metacognitive claim that people do recall important events, such as a conversation with the President of the United States. Where we would disagree with Neisser is in his reading of these pragmatically oriented claims as if they were literal renderings of the nature of Dean's memory.

The pragmatically formulated nature of Dean's rememberings is clearly displayed when we examine a different study of Dean's testimony carried out by Molotch and Boden (1985). Their concern was entirely different from Neisser's, in that they focused upon the exercise of power in Dean's cross-examination. Further, their choice of data was also different; whereas Neisser concentrated almost exclusively on Dean's testimony to Senator Inouye, Molotch and Boden's topic was Dean's testimony to Senator Gurney. The difference between the two kinds of testimony is startling. Inouye asked Dean relatively open-ended questions and allowed him to give

long and elaborate answers without interruption. He also provided the opportunity for Dean to warrant his credibility, by providing the extensive account of his own special memory skills, that is discussed by Neisser. Gurney, in contrast, asked many questions which required simple yes/no answers and at times cut Dean off when he tried to elaborate beyond these. His questioning was also noted as being 'hostile', peppered with disagreements and admonishments.

This difference, of course, is not merely incidental. Molotch and Boden chose to focus on Gurney's examination because he was 'Nixon's man' on the committee which examined Dean (Molotch and Boden, 1985: 275). As such, an adversarial relationship was established, with Gurney attempting to discredit Dean's testimony. For others on the Ervin Committee which examined Dean, particularly Democratic Senators such as Inouye, this adversarial relationship did not obtain. Moreover, Molotch and Boden stress that Dean's actions made him a tempting 'scapegoat' and thus he had considerable personal investment in showing that responsibility lay further up in the White House hierarchy.

The point, then, is that these differences in Dean's testimony need to be understood as an occasioned discursive product oriented to issues of blame (for Nixon) and mitigation (for himself). In Gurney's hostile examination we see Dean's versions criticized, cut off and variously undermined; while in Inouye's sympathetic questioning Dean is given free rein to organize blamings and mitigations (cf. Atkinson and Drew, 1979; Drew, 1990; Pomerantz, 1978; Potter and Wetherell, 1988; Watson, 1978; Wowk, 1984). The difference is graphically illustrated by interchanges specifically on the topic of Dean's memory. As indicated above, Neisser makes much use of Dean's elaborate account to Inouye of his own memory skills and he takes this account to be essentially correct. However, Dean also refers to his memory skills in the course of Gurney's questioning:

DEAN: ... I've told you I'm trying to *recall*. My mind is not a *tape* recorder.

It *does* recall (0.3) *impressions* of conversations *very* well, and the impression I had was that he told—the—he told *me* that Bob had reported to *him* what I had been doing. That was th—the impression that very // clearly came out.

GURNEY: In other words, your—your *whole* thesis on saying that the President of the United States knew about Watergate on September 15 is *purely* an *impression*, there isn't a *single shred* of evidence that came out of this meeting.

(slightly simplified from Molotch and Boden, 1985: // indicates overlap, where Gurney interrupts Dean; italicization indicates emphasis in delivery; (0.3) indicates a pause of 0.3 seconds; a rule—indicates a cut-off in mid utterance).

Two things are striking about this passage. First, in this account, which follows a series of turns where he had found difficulty in answering questions and was 'in a bit of trouble' (Molotch and Boden, 1985: 281), Dean finds it useful to emphasize the shortcomings of his memory as well as its virtues. The disclaimer about being a tape recorder allows Dean to account for various inadequacies in his answers, while the emphasis on the 'gist' quality of remembered impressions allows Dean nevertheless to warrant his essential accuracy. Second, while Neisser, and more tacitly Inouye (who does not disagree with Dean's assessments—see the treatment of this option by Pomerantz, 1978, 1984; Sacks, 1987; Bilmes, 1987; Goodwin and Goodwin, 1987) accept Dean's version, Gurney provides an opposing view. So, rather than displaying a remarkable abstraction of episodic truth, a capturing of underlying

themes and experiences, in Gurney's formulation Dean has provided '*purely an impression*' and not '*a single shred of evidence*'. We can start to see, then, the way that Dean's memory accounts are carefully designed to fit the functional discursive context, and that Neisser's reading of them, as revealing the natural workings of memory, is just one of a variety of interpretative possibilities—indeed, the one offered by Dean himself.

The substantiation of Dean as essentially (repisodically) a truth-teller, requires an account of how he nevertheless got things variably right or wrong. Repisodic memory is defined by Neisser as a characteristic of individual, cognitive processing, and correspondingly, the account of Dean's truth and error is also framed in terms of individual psychological processes. Neisser notes that Dean's apparently superior (more accurate) recall on 21 March is something that requires an explanation. It was supposedly a set-piece script that Dean had rehearsed, and it had for Dean a basis in his psychological aspirations, in his hopes and fears, and in his efforts at self-presentation: it 'fulfilled Dean's hopes', of giving 'a personal lecture to the President . . . It became John Dean's own story' (Neisser, 1981: 16). Neisser seems close here to providing what we have been arguing for, an account of Dean's conversational rememberings as pragmatically occasioned, but opts instead for a personality-oriented, dispositional account (see Burnett, McGee, and Clarke, 1988; Gergen, 1985a; Potter and Edwards, 1990b; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Potter, Stringer, and Wetherell, 1984; Wetherell and Potter, 1988b).

Amongst all of Dean's repisodic correctness in assigning blame and duplicity, the one area in which Neisser has it that Dean got things noticeably wrong was in claiming a special role for himself:

Dean's errors . . . follow, I believe, from Dean's own character and especially from his self-centred assessment of events at the White House. What his testimony really describes is not the September 15 meeting itself but his fantasy of it: the meeting as it should have been, so to speak (Neisser, 1981: 10).

His ego got in the way again (Neisser, 1981: 18).

His ambition reorganized his recollections . . . A different man in the same position might have observed more dispassionately, reflected on his experiences more thoughtfully, and reported them more accurately. Unfortunately, such traits of character are rare (Neisser, 1981: 19).

Thus, Dean's account is explicated by Neisser in terms of truth and error, where errors are due to personal biases, which might be eliminated in a more perfect person.

Neisser's form of accounting here is a familiar one. Numerous studies of the argumentation of lay people (Pollner, 1987; Yearley, 1987), of legal personnel (Atkinson, 1978; Yearley, 1985) and in particular of scientists (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984; Mulkay and Gilbert, 1982; Potter, 1984) show that people tend to attribute deviation from what *they perceive* to be the truth to distorting factors such as personality, lack of competence, and a variety of social psychological and sociological factors. Put another way, there is seen to be nothing to explain in the case of 'factual' accounts because they simply reflect the way things are; it is only when distortions arise that there is something to explain. This idea is reflected in Neisser's treatment of Dean. Dean is presented as functionally distorting the truth in favour of his own 'ego', while with regard to the character of Nixon and others, he merely tells the (repisodic)

truth. It is this straightforward acceptance of the truth of things, we suggest, that stops Neisser from coming to grips with the functional orientation of what he takes to be factual accounts (cf. Adams, 1986; Eglin, 1979; Pomerantz, 1987; Potter and Edwards, 1990a; Potter and Halliday, 1990; Smith, 1978, 1983). Indeed, Neisser's whole argument is based on the premise that memory can be understood as essentially veridical in a Gibsonian fashion and thus he is forced, by his own rhetoric, into having to discount error in this way, as basically not to do with memory *per se*, but nevertheless produced via the distorting prism of another individual factor such as personality. This is unfortunate for an ecologically situated approach to remembering, since one of its most important points of departure from conventional laboratory studies is precisely that the latter seek to exclude all sorts of interesting and essential features of everyday accounts of past events, as not really 'memory' as such, but extraneous to the intrinsic workings of that faculty. The study of remembering as an everyday practice does not have to adopt the psychology of individuals as its explanatory basis (Edwards and Middleton, 1987).

Our argument, then, is that to study conversational remembering, we have to study how recollections are governed by conversational contingencies—the pragmatics of speaking—rather than by appealing to the traditional apparatus of mentalistic, dispositional psychology, and the truth–error distinction. Dean's presentation of himself as having a good memory, as being unwilling to take credit that belongs to others, as only following the authority of others, as telling the truth, all serve to enhance his reliability as a prosecution witness, to bolster his own disputed version of things, and to mitigate his own culpability under cross-examination.

## **PART 2: LAWSONGATE: FUNCTION AND CONSTRUCTION IN REMEMBERING**

Having established the importance of a pragmatic approach to discursive remembering, we turn now to the task of elaborating our theoretical position, and then to demonstrating how it can be applied.

### **Discourse analysis**

The most economical way of introducing discourse analysis is to highlight the inter-related concepts of function, variation, and construction. This will allow us to start to indicate how discourse analysis can provide a very different perspective on traditionally 'cognitive' phenomena, such as memory.

#### *Function*

A number of disparate traditions of language research have stressed its functional nature, most obviously speech act theory and linguistic philosophy more generally (e.g. Austin, 1962; Baker and Hacker, 1982; Ryle, 1949; Searle, 1969; Wittgenstein, 1953) and ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (e.g. Atkinson and Heritage, 1984; Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984, 1988; Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974; Wieder, 1974). Workers in these traditions stress that people do things with their discourse; they make accusations, ask questions, justify their behaviour, and so on; therefore their discourse will be designed accordingly.

These examples should not be taken to imply that the kinds of phenomena we are concerned with can simply be subsumed under the reasons–intentions–goals logic of ordinary reasoning (Yearley, 1988). Our concern is the organization of discourse rather than the mentation of speakers. Indeed, we take issue with the kinds of speech act approaches which depend on specification of intentions (see Levinson, 1983, and Schegloff, 1988 for critiques). Take, for example, the classic study of the way speakers ‘open up’ the closings of telephone conversations (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973). It is possible to examine the workings of this discursive practice without having to decide in each case whether a speaker was artfully and thoughtfully using this technique to get someone off the phone, or whether they were simply finishing their telephone call in a ‘natural’ and unselfconscious manner. Likewise, we can be interested in the way particular kinds of descriptive vocabularies afford specific kinds of evaluations without making the assumption that the speakers intend those evaluations, or even that intentions are a viable analytic resource (cf. Culler, 1984; Derrida, 1977a,b).

Of particular analytic consequence is the fact that the functional or interpretative work done by a stretch of discourse may be inexplicit or hidden. Rather than formulating the specific activity type in the manner of an Austinian formal speech act (‘I name this ship the *Titanic*’: Austin, 1962) in many cases activity is embedded, kept tacit, or concealed (see, for example, Drew, 1984, on requests; and Pomerantz, 1980, on eliciting invitations). Because the action orientation of discourse is often disguised in this way one of the aims of discourse analysis is to reveal its working; one important way of achieving this is through an analysis of variation.

### *Variation*

The action-orientation of discourse makes for variability; what people say will differ according to what they are doing with their words. An event will be described in different ways as the function changes from excusing, for example, to blaming. Variability of this kind has been repeatedly identified in a wide variety of discursive contexts (see Potter and Wetherell, 1987). This variability is central for analysis because of its close connection to function. Because function leads to variation, so variation can be used as an analytic clue to work back to function. We can predict that function will lead to certain kinds of variations and look for the presence of those variations (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1983, 1984; Potter and Mulkay, 1985; Wetherell and Potter, 1988a).

### *Construction*

This perspective on discourse, which sees discourse as put together for purposes and to achieve particular consequences, is a constructivist one (cf. Gergen, 1985b; Latour and Woolgar, 1986; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Potter, Wetherell, Gill, and Edwards, 1990; Woolgar, 1988). The metaphor of construction highlights three things: that discourse is manufactured out of pre-existing linguistic resources; that active selection is involved; and that much of the time we understand the world in terms of specific linguistic versions.

Neisser has, of course, been moving from his early cognitive constructivist position (Neisser, 1967) increasingly towards a position where memories are organized as reflections of the true facts, albeit after a process of episodic synthesis. The constructivism we are concerned to develop here, however, is of a different kind.

Whereas in the cognitive constructivism characteristic of Neisser's early work a person's reality is created through the operation of a variety of mental schemata, analysis and synthesis processes and such, in the discursive constructivism we are recommending the constructive processes are to be found in the organization of talk, and in the situated ordinary reasoning it embodies. Earlier studies have begun to examine the empirical and theoretical bases for studying remembering as a discursive practice (see Middleton and Edwards, 1990, for a summary). The present study seeks to develop a discourse-analytical basis for such work, to investigate how far the phenomena which have traditionally been understood as cognitive or mental can be differently understood not only as real-world activities (as Neisser proposes), but more specifically, as features of everyday discursive practices.

It is important to emphasize that for this kind of naturalistic discourse-analytic inquiry we shall need to take a more circumspect position on 'truth' than either the information-processing or the ecological approaches have done. Given our constructivist theoretical position it would be quite inappropriate for us to legislate as to the truth of the matter; for this is exactly one of the central concerns of the participants' ordinary reasoning. Indeed, as work in the sociology of scientific knowledge has shown, it is vital to maintain a neutral position with respect to what the participants treat as facts, or else their own interests and purposes begin to contaminate the analytic conclusions (Bloor, 1976; Collins, 1981; Mulkey, 1979). As we have argued, this is precisely the issue raised by Neisser's (1981) study, and it is the reason for which that article has been given the close critical scrutiny usually reserved for textual 'data'; it is not that it represents a form of psychologizing that is especially worthy of criticism.

Thus in the analysis that follows 'the truth of what really happened' will not be the starting point for analysis, as it was for Neisser; nor will it be the end goal of the analysis. Rather, our concern will be with the discursive practices of reasoning which the participants bring to bear on this concern. In effect, we are moving from a view of people struggling to remember with the aid of their mental faculties to a view of people struggling with one another in their talk and texts over the real nature of events. It will be our aim to show the essentially contingent and functionally oriented nature of any construction of factuality, or 'true versions of events'. That is, just as we have suggested with respect to John Dean, accounts of 'what happened' occur within and as part of communicative activities such as assigning blame, denying responsibility, justifying interpretations, and are therefore variable in a systematic way that is subject to the requirements of those rhetorical activities.

We turn now to the second body of data, the press reports concerning 'Lawsongate'. While a comparison of a scientific report with a set of newspaper reportings may at first seem inappropriate, we intend to show that very similar issues are raised, and are problematical, in both. These issues include: the ways in which contentious versions of 'what really happened' are constructed, the way appeals are made to ostensibly objective criteria for warranting such claims, the use of rhetorical devices in the establishment of claims to accuracy, and the deployment of explanatory devices for accounting for errors in other people's accounts. After a preliminary summary of the dispute between Chancellor Lawson and the journalists, we shall divide our analysis of the press accounts into three main sections, each of which concerns a major issue in the psychology of remembering, and in the case of John Dean's testimony:

- (1) dispute over *where* the truth lies;
- (2) dispute over the *nature* of the truth;
- (3) dispute over the nature of the *error*.

### **Lawsongate: a gist**

During November of 1988, over several weeks, the British press carried a series of reports and discussions of the content of a disputed conversation which had taken place on the evening of Friday, 4 November between Nigel Lawson, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, and ten journalists from the Sunday newspapers. This meeting was universally characterized as a regular event, one of a series of 'off-the-record' briefings, in which senior politicians are able to 'float ideas in the press', forthcoming policies, plans, and so forth, to which they do not yet want publicly to commit themselves. It was one of a series of 'unattributable' briefings called 'lobby journalism', the 'lobby' being the group of journalists (note: 'lobby' does not carry here its usual connotation, of partisan political pressure groups). Controversy, allegations, and counter-allegations, between journalists and Lawson, centred around several key issues. The most contentious of these issues concerned what Lawson had said about plans to alter benefits payable to old-age pensioners. The Sunday papers reported that a major and controversial alteration was looming, in which benefits, currently payable universally to all pensioners, would in future be 'targeted' upon the more needy, through a process of 'means testing' (income assessment), such that some would receive reduced allowances or none at all, while others might receive increases. Lawson subsequently (on Monday, on radio, television and in Parliament) denied that he had said any such thing, claiming at one point that the journalists had got together and their 'fevered imagination' had produced 'a farrago of invention', 'inaccurate, half-baked' accounts which 'bear no relation whatever to what I said' (*Times, Guardian*, Tuesday, 8 November). The existence of a tape recording of the meeting, itself the subject of later claims and denials, led to whimsical comparisons with Watergate, dubbed 'Lawsongate' (*Observer*, 13 November), and 'a fish and chips version of Nixon's White House Tapes. Expletive deleted' (*Guardian*, 9 November).

The analytic materials we used were derived exclusively from five newspapers: the *Guardian*, *The Times*, the *Observer*, the *Sunday Mirror* and *The Sunday Times*. These particular papers were chosen because they are for the most part considered to be 'quality' papers (the exception, the *Sunday Mirror*, had its own journalist present at the briefing) and they cover a range of political opinion, with the *Guardian*, the *Sunday Mirror* and the *Observer* usually being thought of as rather less right wing/conservative than *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*. The papers were collected each day for a fortnight after the controversial briefing and every article referring to it was collected and photocopied. These articles were coded into a series of topics to allow for a qualitative, yet systematic, analysis. The total archive runs to 53 articles.

### *Where the truth lies*

In this first analytic section our goal is to show that the issue of *where* the truth lies, or what *counts* as the factual record, is a live one for participants. Different participants on different occasions made different suggestions as to how the facts

could be checked. Moreover, we suggest that it would be wrong to take these suggestions as neutral descriptions of attempts to comprehend, because the descriptions can themselves be understood as embedded features of the rhetorical conflicts being played out between the newspapers and the government representatives.

*The tape recording.* All parties to the dispute made frequent recourse to the existence of some objective record which might reveal the unequivocal truth about the original events. The most obvious of these was a tape recording of the meeting, made by a government official who was also present. Neither the tape recording, nor a transcription of it, have to date materialized in public:

when Sunday newspaper journalists challenged him [Lawson] to justify his claims by producing a transcript of the interview a further Treasury embarrassment was revealed. The tape recorder used by an official to record the meeting had failed to work properly (*The Times*, 8 November).

The failure or otherwise of the tape recording was a recurring source of controversy. The papers suggested that this recording would vindicate their version of what went on, just as Neisser took the 'Presidential transcript' to vindicate Dean, and they offered motivated accounts for its non-appearance; the absent tape 'inevitably . . . fuelled suspicions of a cover-up' (*Observer*, 13 November). Press reports detailed several contradictory Treasury statements to the effect that the tape recorder had malfunctioned so that the tape was blank, that there was a transcript of the recording but it would not be released, that the pause button had been accidentally pressed so that the spools did not turn, that the original tape had been lost, and so on.

Treasury officials and journalists alike offered detailed descriptions to warrant their own versions of what happened. Thus:

A Treasury spokesman told the *Guardian* on Wednesday that the tape recorder was a fairly sophisticated machine . . . the light was on but it did not work . . . The tape was blank, according to the Treasury. The machine was a voice-activated recorder. It did not work properly (*Guardian*, 11 November).

The machine's sophistication appears here not as a warrant for how good it was, but on the contrary, as a reasonable basis offered by the Treasury for its unreliability or difficulty of operation.

As counter-evidence that the recorder *was* working, and that the spools were turning, the journalists offered graphic, contextually rich descriptions of the sort that, to Neisser, lent such credibility to John Dean:

At one point I heard a click, and assumed the tape had run out. It was directly in front of me. When I looked to check, the spools were still spinning. The clicking I heard turned out to be Don Macintyre of the *Sunday Telegraph*, seated to my right, chewing a pen top (*Sunday Mirror*, 13 November).

Conflicting claims to the existence, or non-existence, of the tape recording thus varied according to the claimant's pragmatic situation. More interestingly, so also did the ostensibly objective grounds vary, upon which those claims were made. It seems that we can best make sense of these accounts by viewing them as not summoning up details of description and of context according to some abstract overall criterion of truth or accuracy, but because of the specific rhetorical work they could sustain (cf. Pomerantz, 1987).

Thus far, the reader might be forgiven for thinking that this dispute only exists because the full verbatim record is missing. Indeed, the logic of the journalists' suspicion about the missing tape seemed to be based on its potential for resolving the dispute. However, when we come to examine the dispute about the adequacy of the journalists' notes this assessment seems much less plausible.

*The journalists' notes.* Despite the absence of the tape recording, even Lawson appeared willing to grant the existence and reliability of the journalists' detailed shorthand notes. Here the *Guardian* quotes his words in Parliament:

The journalists concerned know very well and if they *look in their notebooks* they will see that the stories that appeared in Sunday's newspapers bear *no relation whatever* to what I said (*Guardian*, 8 November).

Lawson here remarkably claims the journalists' own records as evidence against their accounts, a rhetorical device that is consistent with his claim that they had 'concocted' their stories for lack of anything more exciting to report, but which runs the obvious risk of being directly contradicted by the journalists themselves. The *Guardian* (a daily paper not represented at the lobby briefing) offers its own rationale for Lawson's challenge. The fact that the meeting was to be 'off the record' allowed Lawson room for rhetorical manoeuvre:

So the hacks' notebooks contain only a sketchy summary, not a verbatim note. Mr Lawson was thus on safe ground when he challenged them to back their stories with quotes (*Guardian*, 9 November).

According to the *Guardian*, then, the notion that there existed ten careful and independent sets of detailed shorthand notes was unfounded.

Now, the variable status of these shorthand notes, as possibly precise records of what really happened, is particularly interesting. In the other newspapers, and in the *Guardian* itself, we are informed that there existed 'verbatim notes of the Chancellor's words' (*The Sunday Times*, 13 November), taken by '10 fully trained shorthand-writing journalists' (*Guardian*, 9 November). Yet elsewhere, and sometimes in the same article, the *Guardian* casts serious doubt upon the existence and reliability of those detailed records. Rather than trying to sort out a factual from a false version, we can make sense of this variability by considering the pragmatic contexts in which the two accounts occur (cf. Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

The functional orientation of claims for the detailed accuracy of the journalists' notes is straightforward enough. They operate, in the context of criticism of Lawson, as parts of arguments that support the journalists' versions of events against Lawson's claims for what he said. However, the functional orientation of the *Guardian's* claim that the journalists had only a sketchy summary is slightly more complex. It becomes clear when we note that this claim is part of a broader critique of the lobby system, with its practice of unattributable press 'leakings'—'a system from which, chiefly because of the scope which it offers for tendentious manipulations, the *Guardian* unilaterally withdrew two years ago' (*Guardian*, 11 November). In this version the very unanimity of the Sunday press reports, which in other contexts was used as a warrant for their truth and accuracy, merely shows up their inadequacy:

With that perfectly drilled unanimity which the lobby system shares with the Brigade of Guards . . . Two of the so-called heavies [i.e. the 'quality press'] actually

gave the story an identical headline . . . the stories underneath were equally similar in content (*Guardian*, 7 November).

Similarly, and in a clear rhetorical context:

Because they assumed that the comments were unattributable, the correspondents present did not attempt their usual assiduous verbatim note. Instead they gathered afterwards to ask each other the traditional lobby question: 'What's the story?' . . . The stories duly appeared, with that impressive unanimity which is the dangerous fruit of mass lobby briefings, on Sunday morning (*Guardian*, 11 November).

So, in one discursive context (criticizing Lawson), we are told about a detailed set of notes carefully taken by ten independent senior journalists, each offering in its record of events, a basis of truth sufficiently independent of the journalists' own press stories that they could serve as benchmarks for the accuracy of those same stories. In another discursive context (criticizing the system of lobby journalism), the same notes are characterized as sketchy and incomplete, and in any case, the product of collusion and post-event reconstruction by the journalists concerned. Accounts of whether the notes contained sufficient records of the event, clearly vary according to rhetorical context.

Similar variability is observable in Lawson's discourse, at least as this is reported in the press. Having at first made strong claims that the journalists' reports were fabricated inventions, he subsequently declared 'that the unsourced quotations that had appeared were "absolutely accurate"' (*Guardian*, 11 November). Again, we have what appear to be contradictory versions of events in the discourse of one of its major participants. And again, rather than concerning ourselves with what the absolute truth might be, we can analyse Lawson's variability in terms of the pragmatics and sequencing of his different accounts.

Lawson's second version, in which the journalists' quotations were accepted as accurate, followed the appearance in the press of detailed narratives of what 'actually' happened in the briefing, rich in description of surroundings and sequence, of dialogue and context. These narratives were themselves framed as responses to Lawson's earlier accusations of wild journalistic inaccuracies ('described . . . as "the most inaccurate, half-baked and irresponsible" he had seen in 10 years'—*The Sunday Times*, 13 November). The pragmatic work done by Lawson's apparent *volte-face* was to maintain his disagreement with the journalists, while conceding the accuracy of their reports. This was achieved by his switching the issue from what he actually said, to the claim that what he had said had been misunderstood:

Treasury officials later said that Mr Lawson regarded all the accounts of the briefing given by journalists during the last few days as broadly accurate, though he strongly contested the interpretation given to them (*The Times*, 10 November).

The upshot of Lawson's new statement was of vital importance to the issue of defining what really happened. It now hardly mattered whether there was a direct record of the meeting or not, since the dispute concerned not what was said, but what was meant. That is, despite the dispute about the tape recording which presupposed that it would decide the facts of the matter, here we see the parties agreeing about the words—the 'verbatim truth'—but disagreeing over their interpretation.

The role of constructive work in defining the original event, rather than merely the remembering of it, was now clearly established. But note that even this appears as a pragmatic, discursive resource. It is Lawson, not the journalists (who still claimed to have a clear record which supported their version) who points up the constructive nature of versions. The point is that participants themselves can do what psychologists do, offering either objective or constructive notions of reality, but here we see these theoretical positions deployed flexibly as options, with participants moving from one version to the other, as context and pragmatics require (cf. Latour and Woolgar, 1986; Woolgar, 1988). The reality-construction dichotomy, upon which axis the constructivists and the Gibsonians dispute the real nature of mind, appears here as an everyday rhetorical resource for bolstering different sorts of pragmatic work. 'Realist' common sense is useful when you have a stake in claiming knowledge of the unambiguous truth. Constructivism comes into its own as a device for discounting that claim in others.

*What the truth is*

The notion that the epistemological status of 'original events' is problematic is, of course, nothing new to cognitive psychology, at least when it is concerned not with memory, but with comprehension. It has been commonplace at least since Bartlett (1932; cf. Bransford, 1979) that comprehension and memory are closely linked. Memory is understood to be a function of the comprehensibility of the original experience, and indeed has even been described as a sort of reiteration of the process of comprehension itself (Schank, 1982). Similarly, models of the comprehension of textual materials are understood to require detailed and well organized memory components, models of the world, of events, and of how inferences can be made through consultation with those components, in order to enable sense to be made of the text itself (Winograd, 1972, 1980).

However, the dependence of memory upon comprehension is generally framed as a problem concerning what goes on in the minds of the cognizers—whether experimental subjects or simulations. Psychologists themselves appear to be immune from the problem. They have direct access to the experimental 'input', have often invented it themselves, having built into it its level of comprehensibility, its degrees of ambiguity, and so on, and can plainly see its meaning.

In a psychological experiment, it is relatively easy to determine whether what the subject says is true. The experimenter knows what really happened because she staged it in the first place, or because she kept a record with which the subject's report can be compared (Neisser, 1981: 2).

But in everyday conversational remembering, and in the Lawsongate data, it is precisely the status of the original events that is at issue. By removing that controversy from their study, by expropriating the 'input' as the psychologist's privileged knowledge, a major problematic to which ordinary rememberers address themselves is systematically excluded. The outcome is that the constructive, to-be-achieved nature of that 'original event' cannot be studied. We shall examine now some of the interpretative work that was done in the 'Lawsongate' reports, and then discuss the implications of our analysis for the psychology of memory.

The journalists' presentations of what happened at the meeting went through three distinct phases. In the first Sunday reports, which prompted all the controversy

and denials, the story was simply one of what an anonymous government minister had revealed about plans to 'target' welfare benefits for the elderly upon the less well-off:

Means test threat to pensioners ... 'Targeting' would entail switching resources from benefits currently paid to all pensioners ... and concentrating instead on helping the poorest (*Observer*, 6 November).

This and similar versions of what was said were picked up in the Monday dailies, when Lawson's counter-claims were first being voiced:

The plan is to divert more resources to the genuinely needy by removing the rights of better-off pensioners to receive such universal benefits as ... (*The Times*, 7 November).

The second phase came after Lawson's 'farrago of invention' speech whereupon the journalists produced detailed narrative accounts of the meeting. It was in these accounts that the journalists first oriented themselves to the fact-interpretation distinction, and the constructive task of justifying the meanings that they had assigned to what the Chancellor had actually said:

*The Times* contacted several of the journalists present at the meeting and all were adamant that while the Chancellor did not specifically mention the removal of the £10 Christmas bonus, the loss of free prescriptions for pensioners and the introduction of means testing for old people, the meaning was clear (*The Times*, 7 November).

The major issue for interpretation centred upon the word 'targeting'. Lawson claimed that it was not meant to imply redistribution of resources, but rather the much less controversial offering of *extra* resources to the poor. The journalists were later united in their claim that Lawson had been forced into this offering of extra cash in order to extricate himself from the embarrassment caused by the original leak:

Extra benefits for 2.6 million pensioners rushed through to cover Lawson's means test gaffe (*Guardian*, 25 November).

The very notion of a distinction between fact and interpretation, between what was precisely said and what was obviously meant, was originally introduced by Lawson when faced with the detailed rebuffs of his claim that the journalists had misrepresented him: the journalists had got the quotes right, but had drawn the wrong interpretations from his words. In the third phase the journalists' interpretative work in phase two has become a taken-for-granted background for reverting to a factual account, of what we all know Lawson really said. Let us look at phases two and three.

The journalists happily operated with the distinction Lawson had offered, between what was said and what was meant:

Heading: 'Guardian political reporters sift through the facts, fancies and furore surrounding the Chancellor's briefing on pensions' (*Guardian*, 11 November).

In this metaphor, facts pre-exist like little objects, which can be sifted through, and separated like wheat from chaff, from those other little objects, the 'fancies' of interpretation. However, the facts in question are not merely the words said,

but their meanings. Interpretations have to be made into facts. The journalists' interpretations are presented as what any rational person would be forced to acknowledge, given such powerful warrants as accurate records, independent accounts, vivid memories, contextual plausibility ('logic'), and common knowledge (what everyone knows). And thus the interpretations become indistinguishable from the facts of what was actually said:

*Common knowledge:*

the [press] interpretations of what the Chancellor told the lobby correspondents on Friday *chime in completely with other government moves* (*The Times*, 8 November).

*Any 'practising politician' will tell you never, ever speak of means testing when a euphemism can be used . . . . Instead, 1988 Tories speak of 'accurately targeting need'.*

The meaning of targeting under this government *has never been in any doubt* (*The Sunday Times*, 13 November).

*Context and logic:*

The main message [that imputed by the journalists] in fact, was in line with earlier ministerial statements on targeting. It was a logical next step . . . (*Guardian*, 8 November).

*Discourse context:*

With his words about child benefit *still ringing in our ears*, Mr Lawson turned *immediately* to the pensioners . . . . *As with child benefit*, it sounded as though what he had in mind was . . . switching resources from universal benefits . . . and putting money instead into means-tested payments, targeted on the poorest. Indeed, *the very next question* [on the need to 'educate' his back benchers] reflected that conviction (*Observer*, 13 November).

*Given his previous remarks* about child benefit and his observation that most pensioners were now well-off enough to afford the new, means-tested charges for health check-ups, that sentence could only mean one thing (*The Sunday Times*, 13 November).

I said I was going to write about the changes in pensioners' benefits. I recall using the word 'cuts'. It was another chance for the Treasury to inform me that Lawson had been talking about a new and extra benefit. He [Gieve] didn't do so (*Sunday Mirror*, 13 November).

The other sorts of warrants—appeals to accurate records, independent sources, and vivid memories (graphic descriptions of the scene)—have already been discussed as not at all self-evident, but accomplishments in the rhetoric of truth-telling. What we have in total, then, is a series of discursive devices through which the journalists were able to justify their claims to having provided true and accurate versions of events, such that the upshot of all of their interpretative work is to formulate it

as hardly necessary—the conclusions are obvious, the only ones permissible, inherent in the facts, so that the fact–interpretation distinction is once again pragmatically closed down, with the journalists’ account the only one remaining:

Targeting (the polite word for means testing) ... (*The Sunday Times*, 13 November).

It is entirely right that he should not get away with denying what he said, or with calling a dozen journalists liars (*Guardian*, 15 November).

In *The Sunday Times* formulation, ‘targeting’ is given simply as a direct translation of the term ‘means testing’—terms differing only in their politeness conditions. This effectively short-circuits the fact–interpretation dichotomy altogether, in favour of the journalists’ version. The *Guardian* quotation similarly reifies as simple fact, what once had to be carefully established and argued. What Lawson might have meant is now what Lawson actually said. In addition, Lawson’s inaccuracy appears here presuppositionally, as given information; it is multiply embedded in layers of presupposition (cf. Wilson, 1990):

1. Interpretation is gone—what he said and meant are the same.
2.  $x$  (to deny what he said) presupposes  $y$  (that he said it).
3. That he should get away with  $x$  (denying what he said) presupposes  $x$  and therefore  $y$ .
4. ‘It is entirely right that ...’ further embeds the other already nested propositions.

Clearly, we are now a long way from the difficult business of textual interpretation, where the issue of what Lawson may have said and might have meant was at stake.

#### *What the error is*

One of the features that we noted in Neisser’s study is that to accomplish his account of Dean’s truthfulness he also has to deal with error. Basically, error posed him an interpretative problem, for it was not encompassed by his ‘repisodic’ account of Dean’s remembering (cf. Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984; Mulkay and Gilbert, 1982). To maintain the coherence of his account some other principle needs to be invoked, and the distorting prism of Dean’s personality, his vanity, serves this purpose. While Dean’s account of Nixon is offered as repisodically correct, his own role in events is distorted.

In a similar fashion, the journalists sought to provide a dispositional account of Lawson’s behaviour:

Yet Mr Lawson, though perhaps a trifle insensitive, is a highly intelligent man. So is there something which might account for the timing of the leak? (*Guardian*, 7 November).

But while he is clever, he is sometimes too clever by half. He doesn’t suffer fools gladly .... His super-confidence verging on super-arrogance has too often stirred up trouble .... It was hubris, many [conservatives] will suspect, which got him (and them) into needless trouble this week (*Guardian*, 9 November).

... an object lesson for *the cavalier Chancellor* to choose his words more carefully (*Sunday Mirror*, 13 November).

For both Neisser and the journalists, truthful accounts need no such explanation. There may indeed be an explanation for why somebody *chooses* to tell the truth—it may be in one's interests to do so (Neisser on Dean): one may be forced to admit certain things when presented with overwhelming evidence and argument (the journalists on Lawson). But the nature of the account itself is straightforward—it is the truth. Falsity, on the other hand, calls for a different *kind* of explanation. An infinity of falsities are possible, so we need to account for why particular ones are produced. Dean's vanity led to his presenting himself favourably; Lawson's cavalier self-confidence and arrogance led him to think he could contradict blatant truths, and escape the consequences.

This problem is faced just as much by Lawson as by the journalists. That is, he has to account for why the journalists got it wrong about the content of the briefing. Lawson offers an error account in the course of the parliamentary debate on 7 November; however, it is perhaps significant that the newspapers we studied chose not to quote this passage—which we have taken from the official *Hansard* record—and which has a rather different structure to those accounts quoted:

*Mr Lawson*: ... the statements that appeared in the press on Sunday bore no relation whatever to what I in fact said. What I have said to them is that, while we were absolutely, totally committed to maintaining—

*Ms Clare Short* (Birmingham, Ladywood): They will have their shorthand notes.

*Mr Lawson*: Oh yes, they will have their shorthand notes and they will know it, and they will know they went behind afterwards and *they thought there was not a good enough story and so they produced that* (*Hansard*, 7 November).

Rather than give an account of the error in terms of psychological dispositions, which anyway would be rather more difficult to accomplish for ten individuals simultaneously, Lawson provides an account stressing the institutional pressures on reporters to provide good stories. Lawson's version here attends both to the unanimity of the reporters' accounts (they were the same because they were contrived together) and the difference from what he was intending (because that was not a good enough story: the discursive construction of consensus in these materials is examined in Potter and Edwards, 1990a).

We have argued against the notion of a singular, objective truth that is independent of any particular version of it, or of the constructive work necessary in formulating it. Neisser, Dean, Lawson, and the journalists all take pains to establish the credibility of their versions of truth against possible refutation. In doing so they each present the truth of what happened as what should be obvious to any rational person who is apprised of the evidence, while presenting dispositional accounts of the other participants' errors. As we noted earlier, this is a classic move made in the practice and rhetoric of science (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984; Potter, 1984), where true knowledge requires no contingent explanation, since it is the outcome of the objective scientific method. In contrast, 'false' knowledge is accounted for as being due to some other process, some personal quirk or bias, social influence, false reasoning or whatever.

The problem with these speculative dispositional accounts of error is not so much

with their own intrinsic validity, but rather with the obverse upon which they depend for contrast—the notion of a singular, objective truth, independent of guile or rhetoric, of construction and justification, or of any alternative construction. In the case of cognitive studies of memory, truth is equivalent to the psychologist's direct access to the input. But we have argued that this notion of direct, unconstructive access to a singularly meaningful input is illusory, an artefact of experimental design that avoids rather than usefully pins down the epistemological issues of everyday remembering.

### **DISCUSSION: NEISSER, TRUTH, AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

Let us start by summarizing the principal points we have made. In the first section we argued that Neisser's three kinds of truthful remembering—*verbatim*, *gist* and *repisodic*—are each problematical: there can be no neutral interpretation-free record against which to check claims; what counts as *gist* is an occasioned phenomenon closely related to the specific concerns and interests of the participants; the overall themes and patterns that are taken to exist are not separable from the rhetorical orientation of the different participants. Second, we suggested that Dean's accounts of his memory and his displays of memory could themselves be understood as occasioned productions oriented to the assignment of guilt to the President and towards preventing his own 'scapegoating'. Indeed, Neisser's own version of Dean's performance was seen selectively to reify (read as literal) or ironize (read as functional) Dean's discourse in such a way that the theoretically important notion of *repisodic* abstraction of real features of the world could be sustained, while certain systematic errors were accounted for as due to flaws in Dean's personality.

In the second section we explored this critique further by taking a situation which was comparable to Watergate, but where details of disputation were still readily available. We showed, first, that formulations of where the truth lies are not merely the academic concern of psychologists, but are of practical interest to different parties engaged in a dispute about what went on. Our key point was that these different versions need to be understood as organized rhetorically. Participants' versions of events, and their selection of criteria for truth, could not be disentangled from the pragmatic deployment of these formulations. Second, we showed the way that reasoning about the true nature of the disputed briefing was carried out in a public, accountable manner; and, furthermore, that this reasoning was at its most elaborate when the dispute was at its most acute. Prior to this overt disputation, and again subsequent to it, versions of what happened were treated as straightforward or even self-evident. Finally, we showed the way that both 'sides' in the dispute maintained the coherence of their positions by the use of error accounting, and we pointed out the parallel with the similar form of accounting engaged in by Neisser with respect to Dean's purported errors.

What we have argued, therefore, is that if we are to properly comprehend what Dean, Lawson, and the journalists were doing we need to understand the way notions of accuracy, veridicality, truth, and so on occur in discourse as pragmatically occasioned accomplishments. Neisser's interest in Dean is consistent with his reading of Gibson—perception is to be treated as essentially veridical, and memory is to be studied for how accurate it is. *Verbatim* recall, *gist* and '*repisodic memory*' are

different sorts of accuracy. But when it comes to contentious claims to knowledge the psychologist is in deep epistemological water. How do *we* (as psychologists) know the truth of what is out there, as distinct from, and as a criterion for measuring, how our subjects know it?

All three of Neisser's types of truth, or of accurate recall, featured problematically as to-be-constructed outcomes of the journalists' discourse. The possibility of an objective, *verbatim* record which would solve all problems of what really happened was addressed, but lost itself in the disputation about the tape recording, about the journalists' notes, and about the independence of other sources of information. It is clear that even the existence of a 'verbatim transcript' would not have changed things because both Lawson and the journalists concentrated their efforts not upon what was actually said, which was soon conceded, but upon what it was reasonable to interpret was meant (cf. Emmison, 1989). The *gist* of what was said turns out to be precisely the contentious matter to be resolved concerning what was 'meant', the object of all the journalists' work on contextual situational descriptions, discourse context, common knowledge (what 'we all know' the British government to mean by 'targeting'), and the appeal to plausible inference ('logic'). The *repisodic* truth was equivalent to the consensual upshot: like Nixon, Lawson was finally represented as having 'said it', and as having plainly tried to 'cover up' what he said.

'What really happened', the truth of the matter, is intrinsically a major issue to be dealt with in any study of remembering, whether it be grounded in everyday accounts, or laboratory-based. The adoption of experimental controls, through which the nature of the 'input' is rendered relatively certain and unambiguous, only serves to disguise or side-step the importance within everyday remembering, of the interpretative and constructive work that has to be done with regard to that original truth. Indeed, we might say that everyday conversational remembering often has this as its primary concern—the attempt to construct an acceptable, agreed, or communicatively successful version of what really happened (Edwards and Middleton, 1986a, refer to this as the 'validation function'). Laboratory studies of individual memory neither resolve nor shed light upon that process; they merely remove the issue from the agenda. The psychologist acts authoritatively as validator, knows absolutely what really happened, and arbitrates accordingly, after the results are gathered in. The subjects' rememberings are allowed no part in that process, of arbitrating on what the 'real truth' was, and so they are debarred from what is often, in everyday remembering, their major concern. (In fact, Edwards and Middleton, 1986a, 1986b, 1987, 1988 and also Neisser, 1985, point out that rememberers may frequently have other communicative goals, more important to them than strict accuracy.)

It is not merely that controlled experiments have the advantage, offering us the luxury of keeping records of the 'input' that in ordinary life we do not have. It is that experiments allow us to design: (1) what that input should be (often very simple materials for which the subjects have no responsibility, and no stake in their significance: cf. Edwards and Potter, 1990, on attribution theory), and (2) what the criteria for accurate remembering should be. The ordinarily problematical, and pragmatically occasioned, nature of factual constructions of the 'input' are simply not allowed to rise.

It is important to note that, on this argument, both the 'information-processing' and the 'ecological' approaches to mind are subject to the same problematic with regard to what 'really happened'. Both require that the objective world is

unproblematically known *by the psychologist*, in some way not open to the subjects, in order for the psychologist to know to what extent the subject, whether perceiving, comprehending, or remembering, got it right or not. Both perspectives ask the same question of Dean: what did he get right, and what wrong, measured against the psychologist's privileged access to the truth?

The difference between the information-processing approach to reported memories, and that of discourse analysis, is that the former takes reports as evidence for an essentially perceptual process, which is conceived as a kind of distorted re-experiencing, overlaid or altered by subsequent experience and by the machinations of inner cognitive structures and processes, with the report serving merely (and directly) as evidence of those underlying processes. In fact, Neisser (1976) and other theorists such as Barsalou (1988), who offers an AI oriented cognitive-structural model of autobiographical memory, are also critical of the particular notion of fixed mental representations. However, they do not promote the sort of pragmatic-discursive critique offered here, which would apply equally forcibly to those alternative cognitive perspectives. For discourse analysis, as we have demonstrated, remembering is studied as action, with the report itself taken as the act of remembering, and studiable as a constructed, occasioned version of events. It is analysed directly as discourse, rather than taken as a window upon something else that is supposed to be going on inside the reporter's mind. In examining remembering as a discursive activity we pursue not only a real-world or everyday process (as Neisser, 1982, recommends), but also a richly symbolic and communicative activity, as Bartlett (1932) urged, in criticizing Ebbinghaus's pursuit of the putatively unadulterated mental faculty of memory.

In ordinary conversation, versions of past events are constructed as part of the pragmatics of speaking. There is no one version that can be taken in abstraction as the person's 'memory'. This implies some grounds for a radical departure not only for traditional information-processing approaches to textual memory, but also for ecological studies of discursive remembering. It seems reasonable to abandon the simplistic version of ecology—minds in context, in situational surroundings—and to pursue a more constitutive study of ecology. Mind can be studied as intrinsically social and contextualized; it makes sense to begin with no *a priori* separation of person/mind from its embodiment in communicative practices (cf. Billig, 1987; Edwards and Mercer, 1987; Edwards and Middleton, 1986a, 1987; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Potter and Edwards, 1990b; Sampson, 1988). It is both possible and fruitful to pursue the study of action itself—accounts, versions, constructions—discursive activity. Rather than offering us a window upon the workings of something else called 'mind', discourse can be examined for how speakers orient themselves to notions of mind, using these as resources in conversation (such as in framing accounts of truth and falsity, accomplishing blamings and excuses, mitigations and accusations, explanations of why people do what they do, and so on). Our recommendation is to let go of a commitment to mind as a pre-existing, independently knowable explanation of talk and action (much as Suchman, 1987, argues with regard to cognitive 'plans'). Like the 'truth', the cognitions that are thought to apprehend and distort it are also researchable as discursive formulations, as *versions* of mental life, framed in talk and text, and oriented to the pragmatics of communication. The study of how conceptualizations of cognitive processes are deployed in everyday and scientific discourses will be a major focus of further work.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the following people for making helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper: Michael Billig, John Bowers, Nigel Edley, Ros Gill, Mark Lansdale, David Middleton, Helen Pattison, Margaret Wetherell.

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