

Analysing Qualitative Data

Once you have an audio recording of your interview or focus group, then you need to transcribe it – to produce a typescript version. It is this typescript text that you will focus on in your analysis (though you might also make use of notes made during or immediately after the data collection activity that contain additional information, eg about body language perhaps). So how can you analyse this text?

In analysing something we may identify components within it and the relationships between those components. So we are interested in identifying the components within our text. What could those components be? Well, it depends on how we divide up the text. We need to identify parts of the text that can be regarded as separable from one another.

We could divide the text up into its component sentences. Sentences are clearly separable from one another and this is perhaps one of the most obvious ways of dividing the text up. In doing this, we would be using our understanding of syntax – the rules governing what is to be considered a sentence. A sentence is thus called a syntactical unit of content.

People do not usually speak in syntactically correct sentences, so using sentences as the units of content into which we going to divide up our text is not always going to be very easy or helpful if our text is a transcript of spoken words. We could choose instead to use words as a syntactical unit of content or we could consider some way of dividing up the text that is not related to syntax at all.

An alternative to using syntactical units is to use propositional units. In doing this we identify components that have the form of propositions. A proposition is a statement that has the property of being either true or false. For example, consider the sentence: “Morale here is low and the pay is poor”. This is a single sentence and so would be treated as a single component if we were using sentences as our syntactical unit of content. But it contains two propositions: (1) morale is low; and (2) the pay is poor. Thus, if were using propositional units of content as our way of dividing up the text into its component parts then we would have two components here.

So we have two alternative ways of identifying the component parts of our transcript: using syntactical units and using propositional units. This process is also sometimes called unitising – the breaking down of text into units. It is now possible, should we so wish, to take a sample from our text and analyse that further. We can count how many units of content we have in our data, and we could examine some proportion of them more thoroughly, perhaps randomly selecting units for inclusion in our detailed analysis. So the units of content we have been discussing so far may also be called sampling units. (If you were analysing newspaper editorial columns you might use complete editorials as

sampling units and you might well select a random sample of these to analyse in detail.) However, for our purposes, we wish to analyse all of the data and we will use the sampling units in a slightly different way.

We will wish to identify what are called recording units. These are a subset of the sampling units identified by having some particular characteristic. If you were using words as your sampling units then words with emotional connotations might be recording units. We will probably use several or many recording units, eg propositional units connected with morale; propositional units connected with rewards; propositional units connected with working hours etc etc. These recording units are what we are really interested in because they are related to the theoretical concepts we use to make sense of what our research participants have been saying. (In this example, the theoretical concepts are those used in human resource management.)

In some cases, such as when a focus group discussion has been quite wide ranging, we may also need to think about context units. In a focus group on impulse buying, for example, the discussion may have ranged over small-scale purchases of sweets at the supermarket checkout to the buying of much more expensive items during a Saturday afternoon of strolling around the shops, and from buying in the high street to buying online. These are all different contexts in which impulse buying might take place. If we also identify the subset of sampling units that have a connection to a particular context then we will find that our recording units are also context units.

An alternative way of thinking about this process is to think in terms of coding. All our units of content (either syntactic or propositional) are allocated two codes. One code is the particular characteristic the unit of content has, eg connected with use of credit cards; and the other is the context in which the unit of content occurs, eg online shopping.

The following extract from the transcript of an edition of the Radio 4 programme called *Analysis* shows how we could begin to analyse a piece of text. Notice that the transcript is not syntactically correct throughout, because it is a verbatim transcript of what the contributors to the programme said.

1 http://news.bbc.co.uk/nol/shared/spl/hi/programmes/analysis/transcripts/19_07_07.txt
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4 RADIO 4

5
6 CURRENT AFFAIRS

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8 ANALYSIS

9 **GO GREEN, OR ELSE!**

10
11 TRANSCRIPT OF A RECORDED DOCUMENTARY

12
13 Presenter: Camilla Cavendish

14 Producer: Ingrid Hassler

15 Editor: Nicola Meyrick

16
17 BBC

18 White City

19 201 Wood Lane

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23 020 8752 7279

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26 Broadcast Date: 19.07.07 2030-2100

27 Repeat Date: 22.07.07 2130-2200

28 CD Number: PLN728/07VT1029

29 Duration: 27'38"

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31 Taking part in order of appearance:

32
33 David Miliband, formerly Environment Secretary, now Foreign Secretary

34
35 Ruth Lea, Director of the Centre for Policy Studies

36
37 Andrew Simms, Policy Director, New Economics Foundation

38
39 Solitaire Townsend, Director of Futerra

40
41 John Leaman, Director of Environmental Research, 'Ipsos Mori'

42
43 Andrew Cooper, Director of the polling organisation 'Populus'

44
45 David Madden, Campaign Coordinator for The Rising Tide Coalition

46
47 Miranda Lewis, Associate Director, Institute for Public Policy Research

48
49 Tim Jackson, Professor of Sustainable Development, University of Surrey

50 CAVENDISH: Earlier this month, a hundred rock bands played what was
51 billed as the world's biggest concert – or was it the world's biggest conceit?
52 <As Live Earth played on seven continents, Al Gore told citizens to urge their
53 governments to reduce carbon emissions by 90%.>

Comment [C1]: The text within the < > is a proposition; we may judge it to be true or false.

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56 <We have yet to see whether pop can rock governments.> But <the British
57 government has already set ambitious targets on climate change: to reduce
58 emissions to 60% of their 1990 level by 2050.> <In little more than the time it
59 took to stigmatise drink-driving, politicians hope to shift us to low-carbon
60 living.> Can they do it? And what kind of mood music will they need to play?

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63 MILIBAND: <We need you, the people of Britain responsible for 44% of the
64 UK's emissions through their decisions on electricity, heat and transport, to
65 change their behaviour.>

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68 LEA: <I can do something about conserving British water supplies.> <I
69 can't do that much about actually dealing with global carbon emissions.> And
70 <we know that China and India, particularly China, their carbon emissions are
71 rising rapidly each year.> So <the idea that by switching the lights off
72 perhaps in Piccadilly Circus and that's going to save the planet - I laughed.>

Comment [C2]: This phrase is interesting and perhaps problematic. It is not written as a proposition. We may decide to rewrite it as a proposition that conveys the speaker's meaning: "The idea that switching the lights off in public spaces in the UK is going to save the planet is laughable."

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75 MILIBAND: <British people do have a sense of moral impulse>, <they do
76 have a sense of the needs of their grandchildren>, <they do have a
77 commitment to doing the right thing.> <What they want is to be able to do the
78 right thing in an easy way and, if possible, be rewarded for it.> <If we
79 organise that, then we're in business.>

Comment [C3]: This portion of text contains three propositions but we may feel that the speaker is making only one claim – he's making the same claim in three different ways. We need to decide whether to treat this as three units of content or one.

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82 CAVENDISH: Foreign Secretary David Miliband, who was Environment
83 Secretary until the recent reshuffle, appealing to our better natures. And Ruth
84 Lea, Director of the right-leaning Centre for Policy Studies, sceptical about
85 whether national exhortation can solve a global challenge. So what can
86 government do to persuade us to act now, on a problem which will affect

87 other nations and future generations in a country notorious for our suspicion
88 of bossy politicians?

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90 Environmental experts disagree about how to get the messages across.

91 Here are Andrew Simms and Solitaire Townsend:

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94 SIMMS: We might imagine that the next batch of sports utility vehicles
95 to roll off the production line might carry messages like 'global warming kills,'
96 'driving cars like this can endanger your children and future generations' -
97 leave people in no confusion about the consequences of their actions.

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100 TOWNSEND: If we're just making people more and more scared without
101 building their sense of agency, we've missed half of the equation. I'll put it in
102 the language that we see out there, which is: "You are all going to die ...
103 unless you change your light bulbs." It's called climate porn, climate
104 pornography. It's that we almost enjoy the Armageddon-ness of it. It's like
105 picking a scab: it's all going to be awful.

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108 CAVENDISH: There's certainly been a lot of Armageddon around lately. And
109 enough billboards depicting a fragile Earth to paper the planet. Solitaire
110 Townsend is the director of the communications consultancy 'Futerra', which
111 is running climate change campaigns for both business and government.
112 She thinks that merely urging people to be responsible will not do the trick:

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115 TOWNSEND: It's called the bystander effect, which is the more people that
116 are aware of a problem, the less any one individual feels responsible to act
117 on it. Climate change and other environmental issues are suffering from the
118 biggest, baddest bystander effect that there's ever been. It's
119 intergenerational, it's global. You know you can shout until you're blue in the
120 face about the current generation's responsibility to deal with this. All that
121 does is make us feel more guilty. If I can give a clear and present advantage
122 to taking action right now - that doesn't have to be financial, it could be social
123 advantage, it could be a status advantage - people will take action now.

124 CAVENDISH: Her emphasis on clear and present advantage reflects our
125 hard-wired human tendency to live now, pay later. We are notoriously bad at
126 thinking long-term. But, according to John Leaman, Director of Environmental
127 Research at pollsters Ipsos Mori, many people are already convinced that
128 climate change is not just a matter for their children, but an issue here and
129 now:

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132 LEAMAN: We've got something like a third of the British public now
133 saying that they feel personally that they've seen evidence of climate change
134 - most obviously in the weather of course: recently we've had extreme
135 flooding and so on and un-seasonal weather. There have also been
136 instances such as the Buncefield oil depot fire, which was one of the things
137 which triggered people's concerns if you like about man's impact on the
138 environment, albeit unintentional.

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141 CAVENDISH: After the Buncefield fire came the Stern Report, which even
142 made it onto the front page of *The Sun*. By the end of last year, 74% of
143 people in one poll said that climate change would influence how they would
144 vote at the next election. The shift has been dramatic. But will those who
145 express such concerns welcome being told what to do about it? Andrew
146 Simms is Policy Director of the New Economics Foundation in London and
147 author of several books on climate change. He believes that the Second
148 World War provides a useful historical precedent for the kind of changes that
149 may be needed.

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152 SIMMS: What's fascinating when you look back to the Second World
153 War is that today we think everybody saw the threat and fell into line and did
154 the things they were told to do. It wasn't like that. It was a struggle to get
155 people initially to take it seriously. When they tried to introduce taxes on
156 luxuries, it was fought tooth and nail all the way; when Keynes stood up and
157 tried to devise a system for war savings, that was a struggle. As today we
158 may have carbon appeasers, back then there were people who didn't really
159 think it was important enough to radically change their lives. But change they
160 did and change they did for a variety of reasons. One was a comprehensive

161 government-led, public education programme, which used the best artists and
162 the best entertainers and performers and writers the country had. You saw
163 peer to peer pressure. In the six year period from 1938 using a combination
164 of public pressure and regulation, including rationing, you saw a 95% drop in
165 the use of private vehicles, you saw an 80 plus percent drop in the use of
166 electrical appliances in homes. There were leaflets asking you how many
167 pairs of knickers did you have to have in your drawer. Every aspect of life
168 was interrogated for where there might be waste. It was done with wit, it was
169 done with humour.

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172 CAVENDISH: The power of humour seems as relevant as ever today, when
173 environmentalists and politicians are better at moralising. But even with the
174 best satirists to hand, a Blitz spirit would be hard to revive. The war against
175 climate change is a strange kind of war, one in which we are each both victim
176 and villain. Some scientists say that we have only ten years to avoid tipping
177 points which could make climate change rapid and irreversible. But such
178 concepts still lack the brute force of an immediate threat. There is a difference
179 between acknowledging the problem and actually doing something about it,
180 says Andrew Cooper, Director of the polling organisation 'Populus'.

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183 COOPER: To an implausible degree, people say that they are already
184 taking every possible step. For example, 81% of people say that they only
185 boil as much water as they need, they don't automatically fill the kettle; 4 out
186 of 5 people say that they don't use the standby button on their television set;
187 76% say that they recycle everything in their house that can be recycled; two
188 thirds of people say that they only buy low energy light bulbs. Now that's
189 despite the fact that, according to the National Consumer Council, only 11%
190 of the light bulb market is currently for low energy light bulbs and at the
191 current growth rate they're projecting that it'll only be 13% by 2020. So
192 clearly people are over - claiming here. What it clearly tells us is that people
193 perceive that there is now a sort of cultural norm that the right answer is to
194 say that you are doing these things, that you are acting responsibly in respect
195 of the environment even though they're not. So it is also by the fact that
196 they're over- claiming evidence of a significant mood change in importance of
197 the issue.

Comment [C4]: This section is interesting because it is about a different time and a different issue that the speaker is using for comparative purposes. We may need to identify this as a context unit so that if we identify recording units in this section we can interpret them in their correct context – a discussion of World War II.

198 CAVENDISH: The mood is changing, but not enough. So why don't human
199 beings who watch Al Gore's video or worry about polar bears just get up, walk
200 down the hall and turn down the thermostat? Solitaire Townsend points to an
201 extensive body of research:

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204 TOWNSEND: Take, for example, a study that was done in the US with male
205 students and young female students in a co-ed hall of residence. Now there
206 was a laundry downstairs where there were dryers and washing machines,
207 but there was also the ability to hang your clothes out to dry outside. Now the
208 women were hanging their clothes out to dry outside and the men were using
209 the dryers. Big campaigns were done with these students: "Save Money, Dry
210 on the Line"; "Save the Environment, Dry on the Line". And the men
211 continued to use the dryers. And so these researchers asked the women
212 what they thought of the men, and <the women thought that the men who
213 hung their clothes out to dry on the line were more likely to be poor, probably
214 gay and just generally less sexually attractive.> What they realised there was
215 this wasn't a rational challenge to behaviour; this was a status challenge.
216 They had to raise the status of the behaviour. I live in an ex-council area. My
217 residents' association won't let us hang our clothes out to dry on the line
218 because it makes us look like we're still a council area.

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221 CAVENDISH: Status has a big influence on our behaviour, in ways that are
222 more subtle than just biggest is best. Anthropologists say that in almost
223 every civilisation, consumption forms a fundamental part of the narrative that
224 people construct about themselves and which is essential to their
225 psychological well-being.

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228 TOWNSEND: <If I change my light bulbs and put cavity wall insulation in my
229 home and turn all my lights off when I go to bed and half fill my kettle, it's not
230 something that's giving me any social status, it's not something which my
231 neighbours can see>; whereas if I put a wind turbine on my house or a solar
232 panel on my house or park a Toyota Prius outside my front door, it's a social
233 proof action. Now that doesn't necessarily mean that you did it for climate
234 change. One of my friends has got a solar panel on the north-facing roof of

Comment [C5]: Here is a sampling unit (a proposition) that we might identify as a recording unit if we are using sampling units connected with social status, say, as a recording unit. In other words, we might allocate this sampling unit to the code "social status".

Comment [C6]: Here is another sampling unit we could code to "social status".