



Jornades de Foment de la
Investigació

**INFLUENCE OF
THE SYMBOLIC
INTERACTION
THEORY IN THE
VIOLATION OF
DISCOURSE
PRINCIPLES.**

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ABSTRACT

This article tries to show the relationship between the violation of discourse principles, the presumptions, and knowledge of interview participants. In order to show this relationship we have based our study on the Symbolic Interaction Theory. According to this theory interviewer and respondent exhibit a kind of reflexive intelligence as they negotiate the meaning of questions on the one hand, and the meaning of answers on the other. Interview participants use discourse principles in order to express the right meaning or to hide the real meaning, according to their presumption. Finally, we can affirm that both the Symbolic Interaction Theory and the Principle of Relevance are based on the same presumptions.

1. INTRODUCTION

In interviews, questions and answers depend upon the presumptions, or knowledge, about both the interviewer and the respondent. The interviewer prepares questions according to his/her knowledge about the respondent, that is, his/her sympathy to the respondent, the purpose of the interview, the political ideas he/she defends, and so on. All this rebounds in the use the interviewer makes of discourse principles (Principle of Relevance, Interpersonal Principles and Textual Principles). With the respondent occurs the same, there are a lot of factors that influence the respondent's answers. We base our study on the Symbolic Interaction Theory, explained in the next point. We have tried to apply this theory to the analysis of how discourse principles are used in interviews.

Moreover, it would be interesting to check whether this theory of interactionism between participants really occurs in a real interview. We must bear in mind that this theory dates back to 1969 well before the developments discourse analysis has undergone more recently, specially by Sperber and Wilson.

Then our main concerns will be

a) to see the influence of the Symbolic Interaction Theory in the violation of Discourse Principles; and

b) to check the validity of this theory and its relationships with the Principle of Relevance stated by Sperber and Wilson.

In order to do that we have analysed three interviews in which the respondents belong to different social class, country, political ideas, and so on; besides, in the interviews the attitude of the interviewer changes according to the respondent to whom he/she addresses.

2. DISCOURSE PRINCIPLES

We have based our study on the Relevance Principle, Interpersonal Principles and Textual Principles. Now we are going to explain briefly these principles.

RELEVANCE PRINCIPLE

This principle was conceived by Sperber and Wilson, and it was based upon Grice's Maxim of *Relation*. According to this principle participants in a communicative act tend to accept the first available interpretation that is found consistent with this principle. Relevance "seems to involve a special type of informativeness. Intuitively speaking, one remark is relevant to another if the two combine to yield information which was not derivable from either in isolation." (Sperber & Wilson, 1986: 75)

This principle states that, in language use, utterances arise the expectation in the audience, making them expect that what is being said is in some way relevant to them. Thus, without the

assumption of a common set of shared beliefs and knowledge, participants would never attempt to communicate. This fact –that communication is intentional- derives in the existence of two general discourse principles: the Economy Principle and the Contextual Effect Principle. In the balance of these two principles resides what Sperber and Wilson call the ‘optimal relevance’: “when a speaker ... is able to produce the greatest number of contextual effects for the smallest processing effort”. (Ruiz de Mendoza, 1993: 44).

INTERPERSONAL PRINCIPLES

These principles are used in order to indicate, establish, or maintain social relationships between people. In the interviews we are going to analyse two interpersonal principles: the Co-operative Principle and the Politeness Principles (Leech, 1983).

- *Co-operative Principle*. According to this principle we interpret language on the assumption that the sender is obeying four maxims:

Maxim of Quality: ‘be true’

Maxim of Quantity: ‘be brief’

Maxim of Relevance: ‘be relevant’

Maxim of Manner: ‘be clear’

- *Politeness Principle*. This principle may be formulated as a series of maxims people assume are being followed in the utterances of others. These maxims are:

- Don’t impose.

- Give options.

- Make your receiver feel good.

TEXTUAL PRINCIPLES

These principles deal with textual rhetoric (Slobin, 1975) , that is, the principles that condition the production and interpretation of texts. There are four textual principles:

- *The Processibility Principle*: ‘be humanly processible in ongoing time’

- *The Clarity Principle*: ‘be clear’

- *The Economy Principle*: ‘be quick and easy’

- *The Expressivity Principle*: ‘be expressive’

These are the principles upon which we have based our study. Inasmuch as what we are going to analyse are interviews, we will pay more attention to the interpersonal principles. These principles, as we said previously, are used in order to establish social relationships, which is the aim of interviews.

3. SYMBOLIC INTERACTION THEORY

The term ‘symbolic interactionism’ was coined by the sociologist Herbert Blumer, who has been a lifelong advocate of a set of ideas first put forward by the social philosopher George Herbert Mead. In 1969, Blumer concisely lists the key ideas that define the way symbolic interactionists view social

interaction. Symbolic interactionists would argue that these ideas go a long way toward capturing the fundamental characteristics of human behaviour –including question-answer behaviour.

The following is a list of the tenets identified by Blumer (Foddy, 1994: 19):

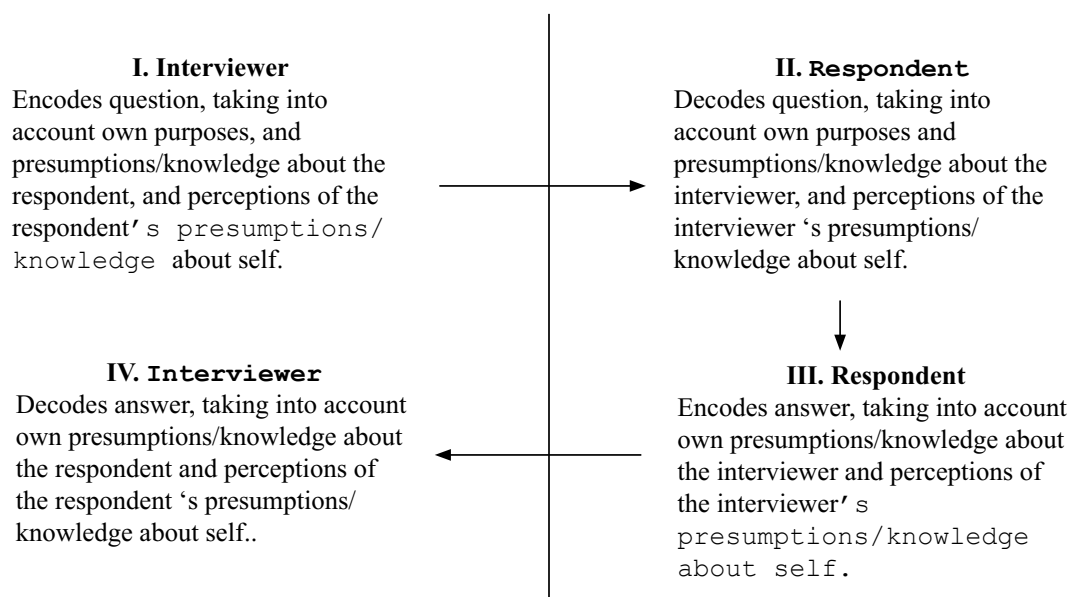
1. Human beings interpret and define each other's actions. They do not merely react to each other in a simple stimulus-response fashion. Responses are not made to acts but rather to 'interpreted acts', that is, to the meaning social actors ascribe to one another's acts.
2. Human beings can be the objects of their own attention. In other words, they can act toward themselves as they act toward others.
3. Conscious social behaviour is intentional behaviour. Human beings construct and rehearse different possible lines of action in their imagination before choosing how to act in a given social situation.
4. Interpreting, planning and acting are ongoing processes which begin anew at every stage of social interaction. Further, both parties in a dyadic interaction engage in these processes. Basic to these processes is the fact that each actor takes not only his or her own view on the other into account but the other's view of him- or her- self, when constructing possible lines of action.
5. Mead referred to the general process of taking another into account when imaginatively constructing possible lines of action as 'taking the role' of the other. Along with the observation that social actors have selves, the observation of human intelligence is, in part, reflexive in character is specially important.
6. Finally, Blumer stresses that these processes occur in all social situations, although they will be most obvious in newly formed situations as the interactants struggle to align their behaviours with one another.

In brief, symbolic interactionists claim that social participants in any social situation are constantly negotiating a shared definition of the situation; taking one another's viewpoints into account; and interpreting one another's behaviour as they imaginatively construct possible lines of interaction before selecting lines of action for implementation.

The model of the symbolic interactionist view of question answer behaviour (see figure 1, next page), depicts question-answer behaviour as involving complex four-step communication cycles. Central to this model is the assumption that before a successful communication cycle can occur, a question must be understood by the respondent in the way the researcher intended, and the answer must be understood by the researcher in the way the respondent intended. It is a mistake to view the respondents as passive agents, they negotiate meaning of questions on the one hand, and the meaning of answers on the other.

Finally, we must say that this theory appeared as a new conception of understanding the question-answer behaviour. Before this theory appeared, theoreticians had thought question-answer behaviour was based on the stimulus-response model.

Figure 1: Model of the symbolic interactionist view of question-answer behaviour (Foddy, 1994: 22).



4. ANALYSIS OF THE LINGUISTIC DATA

Now we are going to analyse the interviews. We have selected three interviews chosen from the magazines *Times*, and *Newsweek*. In these interviews the respondents belong to different social statuses. In the first interview the respondent is Osama bin Laden, a famous terrorist. In the second interview the respondent is Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's former Prime Minister. Finally, in the third interview the respondent is George Bush, former candidate to being the president of the USA.

We have selected these interviews because the variety of the respondents warrants us that the interviewer's attitude towards them is different in every case. So, in this way, we will be able to show how the Symbolic Interaction Theory influences the violation of Discourse Principles.

Let's start to analyse the interviews.

INTERVIEW 1 (PAGES 9-11)

First of all, we must analyse who and to whom this interview was written. This interview, made to Osama bin Laden –a terrorist-, was published by *Time*, a North American magazine. So, the point of view is quite clear, the reporter deals with him as he was a dangerous terrorist, the responsible for some killings. The attitude of the respondent will be clearly defensive; he knows the American Government blames him for the attacks, so, he will be very cautiously on his answers, trying to hide the truth.

All these factors commented previously shape the basis of our study, this basis is the Symbolic Interaction Theory. According to this theory, both interviewer and respondent will try to interpret questions and answers according to the presumptions about the one who responds (this will be the case of the interviewer), or the one who interviews (the case of the respondent).

The first question is a good example: "Are you responsible for the bomb attacks on the two American embassies in Africa?" This is a very hard question, and very direct to the purpose of

the interview, i.e. to show that the respondent is guilty of these attacks (we must note that the first line of the article says: “The alleged mastermind of attacks on two embassies ...”, and the headline is “Conversation with terror”).

Analysing this question we see that the interviewer violates the Politeness Principle, he is absolutely direct. Why? Maybe because he thinks the respondent knows that everyone blames him for these attacks, so in that case the respondent must not be offended.

The answer to this question is very peculiar; the respondent violates the Economy Principle and the Maxim of Manner. The reason for doing that is that he (Osama), wants to hide the truth and justify the attacks, because he knows the interviewer’s point of view and because he knows if his answer is affirmative the American Government would have a good reason to blame and attack him. So, the presumptions and knowledge about the interviewer, and also the reader, makes the respondent violate some discourse principles.

Let’s continue with another question. The second question is “Do you know the men who have been arrested for these attacks?”. At first it looks like a simple question. However, if we look into the next question we see that it has a clear purpose. The next question says: “But all those arrested are said to have been associated with you.” The interviewer seeing that the respondent does not answer the question properly states an indirect question. Here we can see clearly that the purpose of the interviewer is that the respondent confirm what almost everyone knows. The respondent at the beginning does not answer the question properly. There he violates, once more, the Maxim of Manner, and the Maxim of Relevance. However, when the interviewer states the indirect question the respondent tells the truth and tries to justify it.

Finally, we are going to analyse the sixth question. This question says: “The U.S. says you are trying to acquire chemical and nuclear weapons.” This is another indirect question stated by the interviewer. He obviously knows that the answer to that question must be affirmative, but he states this in order to see how Osama bin Laden justifies his answer. Osama tries to justify the answer because he knows that a simple affirmative answer could increase the U.S. attacks, and ,indeed, everyone would blame him for this fact. Nevertheless, the respondent does not answer the question directly –he does not say “yes”- but he violates the Maxim of Manner, and the Maxim of Relevance. From his answer we can infer that it is affirmative, but the respondent’s presumptions about the interviewer and the readers force him to hide the truth.

This is a very interesting interview, because the respondent always tries to hide the truth and justify it by means of the violation of some discourse principles. In almost every question the respondent is violating some principle. As we have said, this is caused by the respondent’s presumptions about the interviewer. The respondent knows, more or less, what the interviewer knows about him and what the readers think about him, so he must try to justify his answer in order to change the point of view of the interviewer and readers. It is quite evident that participants negotiate a shared definition of the situation, interpreting each other’s statements according to their own knowledge.

Here, we must stress that, as the point six of the previous point states, the processes of the symbolic interaction theory are more obvious in ‘newly formed situations as the interactants struggle to align their behaviour with one another’. So, bearing in mind that it is very difficult to get an interview with one of the most wanted terrorists on earth, it is not strange that both participants were careful in their questions and/or answers.

INTERVIEW 2: (PAGES 11-12)

The second interview was published by the magazine *Time*, January 1999. In this case the respondent is Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's former Prime Minister. This interview is more standard than the other one. The interviewer wants to know how the respondents conceives his own fall and what is his plan to return to a normal situation. The respondent knows that, for the interviewer, it is a bad time for him, and he will try to give a good image of himself and of the government he represents. In this interview there are rarely violations of discourse principles, but there are some interesting things.

In contrast to the first interview, the respondent answers clearly to almost all the questions. Why? Because he is a Prime Minister, and his responsibilities are different from the responsibilities of a terrorist. The questions are more indirect and a good example of that is the fourth question: "So you give yourself some of the blame for this?". This is a question very similar to the first question of the interview 1 ("Are you responsible for ..."), but in this case the question is more indirect and polite, due to the interviewer's presumptions and knowledge about the respondent. The answer is also a bit different to bin Laden's answer. Netanyahu answers affirmatively to this question, and in a very indirect way, but it is easier for the reader to infer the meaning of the answer. The respondent knows the interviewer's presumptions about the human beings (in our culture it is more accepted that the human beings make mistakes, see Clinton's case, for example); so he thinks that remembering that he is human can help the interviewer justify his mistake. At first, it could seem as a violation of the Relevance Principle, but thanks to our background knowledge (our cultural knowledge), we are able to understand the answer.

To sum up, this interview is quite propitious to our goal, that is, to demonstrate the influence of the Symbolic Interaction Theory in the violation of Discourse Principles, so, we have to bear in mind that, owing to the interests of both the interviewer and the respondent, the participants violate or not violate these principles. When the interests of the participants are different, they violate Discourse Principles. It is utterly obvious, inasmuch as when people are very respectful, conversations are more conventionalised and, therefore, discourse principles are not violated so often.

INTERVIEW 3: (PAGES 12-13)

The respondent to this interview, published by the magazine *Newsweek*, is George W. Bush. He had to be very cautiously in his answers because he was a candidate for the U.S. government. He knows what the interviewer's purpose is, or at least, he must have a small idea of it. The interviewer's purpose is to demonstrate the influence of his father in his life as politician.

The questions are very direct, it is like a short-answer questionnaire. In this interview there are scarcely violations of Discourse Principles. The most interesting questions are the two concluding questions. In the seventh question ("That was a risk"), an indirect question, the respondent does not answer it properly, but he tries to make a distinction between the people who doesn't risk anything, and the people who, like him, takes risk in his life. Is it a violation of the Maxim of Relevance? I don't think so. He is trying to justify what is widely known, that it was a risk.

The last question is also interesting. It says: "Your biggest mistake?" Here the interviewer violates the Politeness Principle, it seems that it is not the best way to enunciate a question to a candidate for the U.S. Government. However, the interviewer's presumption about the respondent makes him state the question in this way. The interviewer must think that, as it is known in our culture, humans make constantly mistakes, so the respondent would not be offended if he is asked for his biggest mistakes.

Nevertheless, Bush understands the question only as a political question, and not as a personal question –maybe it is made on purpose in order to avoid that personal youth errors come into light. Therefore, we cannot affirm that Bush violates the Relevance Principle because of the ambiguity of the question, only if we knew what the interviewer was thinking when making the question we could affirm that.

Concluding, the interviewer violates the Politeness Principle when he thinks that the respondent won't be offended about the question, and the respondent sometimes answers at the edge of violating the Relevance Principle. Thus, once more, the interviewer's presumptions about the respondent influence in the violation of Discourse Principles and vice-versa.

5. CONCLUSION

As we said in the introduction, this study has been carried out in order to (a) see how the Symbolic Interaction Theory influences the violation of Discourse Principles, and more specifically (b) to show its relationship with the Principle of Relevance.

(a) In the analysis of the interviews we have checked the influence of the Symbolic Interaction Theory in the violation of Discourse Principles. We can see that when interviewer and respondent differ in their points of view, there is a general tendency to violate the discourse principle of co-operation. However, when they share the same points of view about the some topic, discourse principles are not violated.

This is, of course, a very general summary, although some exceptions could be expected. However, the most important point is that discourse principles are violated, mainly, when the points of view of the participants are different, i.e. when the participants think that what they are going to say is not shared by the other one. Then, they try to hide the truth, give an unnecessary justification of the answer, speak about another topic, and so on, violating the discourse principles. The discourse principle more often violated is the Co-operative Principle (Maxims of Manner and Relation).

So, the participants' presumptions and knowledge about the other participants influences in the violation of discourse principles, when the participants disagree.

(b) We have seen that this theory explain that the interviewer's attitude changes from hard and direct to the benefit of the interviewee's situation. However, there is a issue that remains unexplained: Is there any relationship between the Symbolic Interaction Theory and the inferential model proposed by Sperber and Wilson? We can affirm that both, the Symbolic Interaction Theory and the Relevance Principle, are based on the same presumptions: both theories conceive language as involving an intentional and inferential attitude on the part of the participants. Moreover, according to these theories participants interact with each other according to what they know –or guess- about the other one, creating in this way, a communicative bridge that links them, and that can collapse if there is some misunderstanding.

Finally, we can conclude this article by saying that it is a good example of how two disciplines of human science, as social psychology and discourse studies or pragmatics, achieve the same kind of goals and conclusions from different points of view.

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW 1

CONVERSATION WITH TERROR

Bin Laden on the bombings: “God knows that we have been pleased at the killing of the American soldiers.”

Osama bin Laden—the alleged mastermind of attacks on two U.S. embassies—has been in hiding since the U.S. launched missiles against his bases in Afghanistan last August. Yet on Dec. 22, the summons suddenly came: Would Rahimullah Yusufzai, who reports for the *News* of Pakistan, as well as TIME and ABC, like to interview Bin Laden? After a car trip through the Afghan desert (and getting stuck in the sand three times), Yusufzai arrived at an encampment of three tents. Polite and given to praising God in nearly every sentence, Bin Laden sipped water from a cup (he was nursing a sore throat) and nestled an AK-47 as he spoke. Eager to deny reports that he has cancer, Bin Laden said he enjoys riding horses and playing soccer, but he used a stick to walk because of a bad back. He also spends time with his three wives and children in Afghanistan. Aides say his contact with the world is limited to newspaper and radio reports. Though he has a sat phone, it sits mostly idle: he fears the U.S. would use the signal to target an attack.

TIME: *Are you responsible for the bomb attacks on the two American embassies in Africa?*

Osama bin Laden: The International Islamic Front for Jihad against the U.S. and Israel has, by the grace of God, issued a crystal-clear *fatwa* [decree] calling on the Islamic nation to carry on jihad

[holy war] aimed at liberating holy sites. The nation of Muhammad has responded to this appeal. If the instigation for jihad against the Jews and the Americans in order to liberate al-Aksa Mosque and the Holy *Ka'aba* [Islamic shrines in Jerusalem and Saudi Arabia] is considered a crime, then let history be a witness that I am a criminal. Our job is to instigate and, by the grace of God, we did that, and certain people responded to this instigation.

TIME: *Do you know the men who have been arrested for these attacks?*

Osama bin Laden: What I know is that those who risked their lives to earn the pleasure of God are real men. They managed to rid the Islamic nation of disgrace. We hold them in the highest esteem.

TIME: *But all those arrested are said to have been associated with you.*

Osama bin Laden: Wadih el-Hage [an alleged Bin Laden associate who is being held in custody in New York City on charges stemming from the attacks on the embassies] was one of our brothers whom God was kind enough to steer to the path of relief work for Afghan refugees. I still remember him, though I have not seen him or heard from him for many years. He has nothing to do with the U.S. allegations. As for Mohamed Rashed al-'Owhali [another suspect in the bombings], we were informed that he is a Saudi from the province of Najd. The fact of the matter is that America, and in particular the CIA, wanted to cover up its failure in the aftermath of the events that took place in Riyadh, Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, Capetown, Kampala—and other places, God willing, in the future—by arresting any person who had participated in the Islamic jihad in Afghanistan. We pray to God to end the plight [of the arrested men], and we are confident they will be exonerated.

TIME: *How do you react to the December attack on Iraq by U.S. and British forces?*

Osama bin Laden: There is no doubt that the treacherous attack has confirmed that Britain and America are acting on behalf of Israel and the Jews, paving the way for the Jews to divide the Muslim world once again, enslave it and loot the rest of its wealth. A great part of the force that carried out the attack came from certain gulf countries that have lost their sovereignty. Now infidels walk everywhere on the land where Muhammad was born and where the Koran was revealed to him. The situation is serious. The rulers have become powerless. Muslims should carry out their obligations, since the rulers of the region have accepted the invasion of their countries. These countries belong to Islam and not the rulers.

TIME: *What can the U.S. expect from you now?*

Osama bin Laden: Any thief or criminal or robber who enters another country in order to steal should expect to be exposed to murder at any time. For the American forces to expect anything from me personally reflects a very narrow perception. Thousands of millions of Muslims are angry. The Americans should expect reactions from the Muslim world that are proportionate to the injustice they inflict.

TIME: *The U.S. says you are trying to acquire chemical and nuclear weapons.*

Osama bin Laden: Acquiring weapons for the defense of Muslims is a religious duty. If I have indeed acquired these weapons then I thank God for enabling me to do so. And if I seek to acquire these weapons, I am carrying out a duty. It would be a sin for Muslims not to try to possess the weapons that would prevent the infidels from inflicting harm on Muslims.

TIME: *The U.S. is trying to stop the flow of funds to your organization. Has it been able to do so?*

Osama bin Laden: The U.S. knows that I have attacked it, by the grace of God, for more than 10 years now. The U.S. alleges that I am fully responsible for the killing of its soldiers in Somalia. God knows that we have been pleased at the killing of American soldiers. This was achieved by the grace of God and the efforts of the *mujahedin* from among the Somali brothers and other Arab *mujahedin* who had been in Afghanistan before that. America has been trying ever since to tighten its economic blockade against us and to arrest me. It has failed. This blockade does not hurt us much. We expect to be rewarded by God.

TIME: *Is your Islamic message having an impact?*

Osama bin Laden: Winds of change have blown in order to lift the injustice to which the world is subjected by America and its supporters and the Jews who are collaborating with them. Look at what is happening these days in Indonesia, where Suharto, a despot who ruled for 30 years, was overthrown. The time will come, sooner rather than later, when criminal despots who betrayed God and his Prophet, and betrayed their trust and their nation, will face the same fate.

TIME: *But there are many Muslims who do not agree with your kind of violence.*

Osama bin Laden: We should fully understand our religion. Fighting is a part of our religion and our Shari'a [an Islamic legal code]. Those who love God and his Prophet and this religion cannot deny that. Whoever denies even a minor tenet of our religion commits the gravest sin in Islam. Those who sympathize with the infidels -such as the PLO in Palestine or the so-called Palestinian Authority—have been trying for tens of years to get back some of their rights. They laid down arms and abandoned what is called violence and tried peaceful bargaining. What did the Jews give them? They did not give them even 1% of their rights.

TIME: *America, the world's only superpower, has called you Public Enemy No.1. Are you worried?*

Osama bin Laden: Hostility toward America is a religious duty, and we hope to be rewarded for it by God. To call us Enemy No. 1 or 2 does not hurt us. Osama bin Laden is confident that the Islamic nation will carry out its duty. I am confident that Muslims will be able to end the legend of the so-called superpower that is America.

TIME, JANUARY 11, 1999

INTERVIEW 2

IN FIGHTING TRIM

In an exclusive interview, Netanyahu describes his fall-and his plan to return

Do you regard the sudden call for elections as a failure?

Well, it's a failure of the coalition. It was just a question of time before it fell because of a challenge from the right flank. I could have kept the government had I submitted to the terms posed to me from my right wing, which said that if I would tear up Oslo and the Wye accord they would stay. I refused, and equally I refused subsequent conditions from the left that said I [should] go

ahead and implement Oslo regardless of Palestinian violations and no matter what violence the Palestinians perpetrate on us.

What happens to the Wye agreement now?

The Wye agreement is not suspended. It is awaiting Palestinian compliance. I wish Arafat would stop the violence, stop calling for the release of terrorist murderers, comply with the other promises the Palestinians made to us. If they would comply with their obligations and cease their violations, we would implement the next phase well before the elections.

What would you do differently in a second term?

I wouldn't do anything differently on the political side. Where I would do things differently is in the management of egos. I would say the Prime Minister has to devote equal time not only to the tasks of security and peacemaking and economic reform, all of which I did to my utmost, but to the maintenance, shall we say, of, ah, personal relationships.

So you give yourself some of the blame for this?

Oh, who doesn't make mistakes?

Both major parties are being advised by American political consultants. To what effect?

I don't think it has that much effect. It'll certainly make for a lively campaign. What I see imported from the U.S., I'm sorry to say, is the tactic of the lowest personal attack, which I believe in the end the voters will reject.

Why is it that you're unpopular among politicians and popular with the people?

It's the physics of the record disk. Those in the outer circle move with greater speed, and the closer you get to the pivot the slower they turn. So [laughing] it's the same thing. Those who are closest to the hub of politics move the slowest. It may take them a few years to accept the leadership. There's a cadre of people who were ahead of me when I entered the Likud, who never really accepted my leadership.

The most common criticism of you across the political spectrum is that you are deceitful. Why?

Every time somebody does not receive from you what they want, they say, "Netanyahu lied to me." That's another way of saying, "I didn't get from Netanyahu what I wanted."

Recently your father, of all people, suggested you might make a better Foreign Minister than Prime Minister.

The addendum to that that you're not quoting is that [he said] nobody would be a better Prime Minister. I'll live with that.

TIME, JANUARY 11, 1999

INTERVIEW 3

'A SON OF A FAMOUS NAME'

George W. Bush on his record, his reputation and his dad.

Gov. George W. Bush invited NEWSWEEK'S Howard Fineman and Jonathan Alter Aboard his Campaign bus in New Hampshire recently for a rare and wide-ranging conversation. Excerpts:

NEWSWEEK: Why do you think you're underestimated?

BUSH: Because I am a son of a famous name, and I think many people assume that much of my life has been given to me. I understand that there is a natural tendency for people to say George Bush's son will be successful. That's how life works. He's the son of somebody famous and powerful, therefore it's a natural that he's going to be successful.

Isn't it how life works?

It didn't work that way if you're the governor of Texas. People didn't vote for me because I was George Bush's son. I ran against a very popular person and a very strong personality. When people got into that voting booth they didn't say, "I think I'm going to vote for George W., because he was raised by George H. W." They voted because I laid out a specific agenda that was more clear than Ann Richards's and a vision that was more positive.

That [Bush name] didn't hurt.

It didn't help. What matters was, these are people with their own self-interest in mind. It had nothing to do with who my father was and had everything to do with my ability and their ability to get things done for Texas. My only point is: there is a difference between a record of performance that is based upon talent and not based upon name. That is why, frankly, all this discussion about being George Bush's son, can he do the job, doesn't bother me in the least. It's just part of the background noise. My father was the guy, a great World War II hero, who was branded a wimp at one time. I understand the labelling that goes on in the political process. This is a phase.

Isn't it fair to say that at virtually every stage of your life –whether Andover or Yale or the original investors in your business- if you weren't living on the club-floor level, you had the key in your pocket?

I was raised well; I was raised by two loving parents. Being George Bush's son has its pluses, and it had its minuses. There are people who say, "I'm going to give him a break because of who his dad is, "I'm not going to give him a break because of who his dad is".

But overall, do you think you benefited from him?

I'm proud to be George Bush's son. I think the question you should ask is, Given the opportunity, did he perform? The other option was to go into the fetal position in a West Texas dugout and not emerge. That is not my style. I'm an active person who has tried to make a difference in life.

What is the biggest crisis that you think proves your mettle?

The first big decision was running for office. Taking on Ann Richards. There was a decision full of all kinds of risks. And the risk was I wouldn't win, of course.

That was a big risk.

There's a lot of people in life that says, "I'm going to risk nothing in life". Lots of folks say, "I'm going to sit on the sidelines 'cause I don't want to risk anything."

Your biggest mistake?

Not anticipating the price of oil dropping. Not having a crystal ball that I could have sold during the boom instead of trying to build a company. I don't know if many others were able to forecast the bust either.

NEWSWEEK, JANUARY 24, 2000

FOOTNOTES

- 1 This interview is the most interesting and extensive of all the interviews selected, because in it we can see clearly and easily the purpose of our study. That is why we have analysed it in more depth.