A Lexicogrammatical Analysis of a Televised Interview

Steve Lia

Abstract

With direct reference to Michael Halliday's lexicogrammatical approach (Halliday, 2014), I have attempted to show through a lexicogrammatical analysis of the opening three questions of an interview, evidence to support my claim that the interviewee deliberately attempted to solicit the support and sympathy of the interviewer and the listening public through the lexical and grammatical choices she made.

2017 will mark the twentieth anniversary of the tragic death of one of Britain's most popular royals. On August 31, 1997, Lady Diana Frances Spencer, 'the people's princess', affectionately referred to simply as Lady Di, was killed at the age of 36 in Paris in a fatal car crash that claimed not only her life, but also that of her companion, Dodi Fayed, son of the billionaire business tycoon Mohamed Al Fayed. The outpouring of grief that followed the untimely death of the princess was testament to her global popularity.

Only two years earlier, Princess Diana was the subject of a televised, pre-recorded interview for the BBC current affairs programme, Panorama. This was no ordinary interview.

The interview was conducted by Martin Bashir on November 20, 1995 and its subsequent broadcast caused a stir throughout the United Kingdom, particularly amongst those with an interest in the British monarchy and the tabloid persona of Lady Di. The fallout from the interview, during which the Princess made several startling revelations about life as a member of the British Royal Family seemed to divide the nation. There were those who sympathised with her and her predicament. She suffered from bulimia and there were reports of at least two suicide attempts and claims that she was abused and unloved by her in-laws, specifically her then husband, Prince Charles. And then there were others who admired her and commended her on her courage and conviction in speaking out against what she perceived as a cruel and vindictive institution that was the British Monarchy. And others still who simply saw her as a conniving opportunist.

To this day, the interview continues to divide opinions and provides ideal material for linguistic analysis. In June 2015, I played excerpts of the interview to 23 English Communication university students in Tokyo, Japan and together we studied the transcript. The idea was to gauge the reaction of my young learners—familiar with the Lady Di 'cult', but not familiar enough with the situation and events surrounding the princess and the British Royal Family of the time to influence their opinions either way. Not surprisingly, reactions were mixed. Most felt pity for Diana, but some remained unconvinced by the princess's performance, but found it difficult to explain why, and what it was that they didn't find convincing. I, too, held the view that the princess was attempting to manipulate the emotions of the viewers, the British public in particular, trying to win the people over, to get them to side with her against her husband and the institution that she believed vilified her and that he personified.

But was the princess a victim of her circumstances or was she, as Christopher Hitchens (Hitchens, 2011) famously put it, "A simpering Bambi narcissist."?

In order to answer this question and to explain why several of my students and I were so unconvinced by how the princess spoke and by what she said, I will attempt to show through a lexicogrammatical analysis of the princess's responses to the opening three questions in the interview, evidence to support my claim that she was, from the outset, willfully attempting to solicit the support and sympathy of the British public through the lexical and grammatical choices she made.

I will begin in *Part One* with a brief commentary on the following:

所属：リベラルアーツ学部リベラルアーツ学科

1）Field of Discourse
2）Tenor of Discourse
3）Mode of Discourse

In *Part Two*, I will endeavour to use a lexicogrammatical analysis (see *Appendix 1*) to highlight what I consider to be the salient metafunctional elements (i. e. choice of *themes*, *tenses*, *processes*, *negative polarity*, *circumstances* and *cohesion*) and through my knowledge of context and culture comment on the contextual description with a view to establishing the aims laid out above.

A transcript of the first three questions and responses in the interview is also attached (see *Appendix 2*) and each clause is numbered for ease of reference.

Part One: Discourse

1）Field of Discourse

The experiential domain concerns an interview with one interviewer and one interviewee. The short term goal of the excerpt seems to be to clarify the interviewee's feelings on assuming her new role as a member of the British Royal Family at the outset of her marriage.

As for the long term goal, even Royal analysts would be hard pressed to conclude what that might be. Referring to our knowledge of context and culture we might conclude that the interview is a response, some may say 'vindictive retort' to the interviewee's husband and to his 'tell all' interview conducted a year or so earlier in which he spoke candidly about his relationship with Diana. A cynic, therefore, may see the long term goal as an attempt on the part of the interviewee to discredit the Royal Family with the intention of provoking a reform of the institution. Some might even suggest that the Princess's long term goal was to end her marriage with Prince Charles although she denied this during the latter part of the interview.

2）Tenor of Discourse

The agentive or societal roles are interviewer and interviewee.

On analysis of the mood choices, we can see that the interviewer, by using the inquisitive mood, seems in control, demanding, albeit politely, clarification, whilst the Princess, using the declarative mood, assumes the role of 'provider'. However, in a socio-cultural context, this hierarchic situation is turned around. The Princess, by the very nature of her role in society, is of a higher social rank, with the interviewer acknowledging his lower status. There is in fact linguistic evidence to support this. The interviewer addresses the interviewee as 'Your Royal Highness', using her title, thus acknowledging her superior social status in relation to his. This is also proof that social distance is maximal.

3）Mode of Discourse

The role of language is dialogic, consisting of interviewer and interviewee. The text was first realized through the medium of speech and later transcribed. The channel is phonic.

As for the rhetorical thrust of the text, one might describe it as explanatory and at times persuasive.

Part Two: A lexicogrammatical analysis

Themes

The outstanding feature here is the consistent positioning of the impersonal *you* as topical theme,

"...*you* always think *you* are prepared for anything..." Clauses 2.1/2.2

"...*you* think *you* have the knowledge..." 3.1/3.2

These 'generalizations' appear no fewer than 7 times between clauses 2.2 and 6.3 in three and four successive clauses (2.2, 3.1, 3.2 and 6.1, 6.2, 6.2.1, 6.3). The reason for this, it could be argued, is to solicit empathy. In spite of her eminence, she would like the public to see her as one of them, a woman, a wife and mother with the same expectations of married life and the same concerns and fears. In using the impersonal *you*, she skillfully draws the listeners into her world. They empathize and in turn sympathize.

Tenses

The Princess contrasts the use of the present tenses (natural when generalizing) with the use of the past simple tense when referring to her own situation and experience. The choice of tenses is to be expected, though a particularly interesting point is the way in which they are grouped. The interviewer's first two questions asked specifically about Diana's own personal experience in which case one would normally expect a response in the past tense, delineating her personal experiences and thoughts at the time of her marriage. Indeed, she does precisely this. However, in both cases she precedes it with a series of present tenses (see Figures 1 and 2 below). Pointing out how things generally are before indulging in your own experiences might appear quite natural, but as it happens twice in quick succession I can't help but feel that it was done intentionally. One must keep in mind that the interview was pre-recorded and there were, no doubt, numerous cuts and retakes before the finished production was aired. Thus, the Princess was allowed more time and thought with which to select her responses and to word them carefully than one would normally have in a spontaneous discussion. I would like to suggest that the use of the present tenses as generalizations pre-empting detailed descriptions of the Princess's own experiences creates the impression that the Princess is not a self-centered person. Had she responded to the questions immediately in past tenses she may have appeared more self-indulgent. Alternatively, the generalizations could be seen as a list of 'excuses' or bona fide reasons for her feelings and expectations—what *is normally* the case *was the case* with the Princess. This brings

Clause	Verbal group	Tense
2.1	think	present
2.2	are prepared	present
3.1	think	present
3.2	have	present
3.2.1 then...	is coming	present
4.1	fell	past
4.2	had	past
4.3	was daunted	past

Fig. 1　Outline of tense sequence in response to the first two questions: clauses 2.1 to 4.3

Clause	Verbal group	Tense
6.1	want to try	present
6.2	don't want to fall back	present
6.2.1	have seen happen	present
6.3 then...	have had	present
7.1	wanted to work	past
8.1	loved	past
8.2	wanted to share	past
9.1	were	past

Fig. 2 Outline of tense sequence in response to the first two questions: clauses 6.1 to 9.1

us back to the point mentioned in *Themes* concerning her desire to present herself as a 'normal' individual, seeking empathy from others who have shared similar experiences. In either case, the Princess seems to be doing her level best to avoid coming across as egocentric though it must be said it was her own decision to do the interview, and she chose the interviewer personally.

The contrast between the past tense and the present tense recurs later (12.1/12.2 and 13.1/14.1). This time, the Princess seems to be stressing that what *was* the case *is still the case now*, and it happens twice in quick succession,

"I *wasn't* daunted. *I'm not* daunted." 12.1/12.2

"It *was* a challenge, it *is* a challenge." 13.1/14.1

The implication here is that the Princess, despite her trials and tribulations, remains resolute, determined not to give in, exhibiting courage and strength in the face of adversity—an apt rallying call to round off the series of opening questions.

Negative polarity

Towards the end of the excerpt there appears a conspicuous double dose of identical clauses of negative polarity with ellipsis of the predicate that begs to be investigated.

"...the media would go quietly, and it didn't." 17.4/17.5

"...it (the media) would go quietly and it didn't." 18.3/18.4

It appears that the Princess is laying blame at someone else's door (the ambiguous *they* occupying the position of topical theme seems to refer to the Royal advisors or administrators). The choice of negative polarity, dropping the predicate for extra impact, and used twice in succession, is the tool she chose to use for the purpose of admonishing herself of any blame for the pressures and stress she came under from the press. She tries to portray herself as innocent and misguided, tugging further at the heartstrings of the watching public.

Processes

Looking at the choices of processes one sees a balance between *mental, material* and *relational* - occurring 12, 12 and 10

times respectively, with minor participation of *existential* (4 times) and *verbal* (2).

However, on closer analysis we can see that *mental* processes outnumber *relational* and *material* almost two to one early on in response to the first two questions. In response to the third question the statistics are reversed with *material* processes prevailing.

First impressions are considered important under normal circumstances, and in the case of this particular interview I would like to suggest that for the Princess they are essential in winning over the public. This was the first time the Princess afforded the British public a private and candid interview and she needed to be sure that she made the right impression. In accentuating *mental* processes the Princess adopts a more delicate, thoughtful approach from the outset.

Using verbal groups such as "think" (clauses 2.1 and 3.1), "feel" (4.1), "be prepared" (2.2) and "be daunted" (4.3), makes the Princess come across as sensitive, sympathetic and even vulnerable—a ploy, perhaps, in her attempt to be the 'Queen of (the people's) hearts'?

Circumstances

A consistent element throughout the first part of the excerpt is the use of temporal adjuncts,

"*At the age of 19* you always think you are prepared for anything..." 2.1

"...you think you have the knowledge of *what is coming ahead*..." 3.1

"...1 was daunted at the prospect *at the time*..." 4.3

The Princess seems to be pleading for sympathy and understanding. After all, how could she have known the situation she was getting herself into at her age? How could she have foreseen what was in store for her? It appears to be a blatant plea of ignorance through innocence.

A further inference here is that since "that time" (i. e. her innocent youth), she has learned (see *Tenses*) but unfortunately, due to no fault of her own, it is too late.

Cohesion/Conclusion

The cohesion of the text lies in the consistent attempts by the Princess to appeal to the public by portraying herself as some sort of victim while at the same time striving to retain dignity and modesty. She was a victim from the outset. She hides behind the ignorance of youth, the expectations one has about married life which are, by her reckoning, inevitably not realized. She was a victim because the things people (it is not entirely clear which people) told her were untrue, she was unprepared for the pressure she was put under by the press as she had been misled, she was isolated and yet through it all she still loved her husband. Furthermore, she wanted to share everything with him, and the thought of profiting from her position by becoming Queen 'wasn't at the forefront of her mind'. In the face of adversity she (is still) "...not daunted...". This theme of admonishing herself of any blame for her predicament is maintained to the end,

"...the higher the media put you...is the bigger the drop." 19.1

As the interview was televised and the channel in which it was realized was phonic, it is necessary to add a few words on the impact of such circumstances on a watching and listening public. It would be untrue to suggest that my views outlined in the above commentary were not influenced, at least in part, by body language, facial expression, phonic stress and intonation etc. However, on close analysis of the lexical and grammatical elements of the transcript of the first fifty or so clauses along with my knowledge of context and culture, I feel I have uncovered sufficient evidence to suggest that the Princess implicitly

attempted to solicit the sympathy of the viewers/listeners through the lexicogrammatical choices she made.

Appendix 1

A lexicogrammatical analysis of three questions and responses in an interview with Lady Diana, Princess of Wales.

Clause 1.1 to 17.1

Cls.	Verbal Group	Pro.	Topical Themes		Text (& int) Themes	Circumstances	
1.1	prepared were	men	Your Royal Highness	Diana		for the pressures	cause:purpose
1.1.1	came from	rel	that	pressures			
2.1	think	men	At the age of 19 (marked)	general		At the age of 19	temp
2.2	are prepared	men	you	general		for anything	cause:purpose
3.1	think	men	you	general	and		
3.2	have	rel	you	general			
3.2.1	is coming	exist	what	the future?	of	ahead	temp
4.1	felt	men	I	Diana	but		
4.2	had	rel	I	Diana			
4.3	was daunted	men	I	Diana	although	at the prospect/at the time	agent/temp
5.1	were	rel	what	expectations			
5.1.1	had	rel	you	Diana	I think (int)	for married life	cause:purpose
6.1	want to try...to make...work	mat	you	general	like...marriage	like any marriage/even harder	man:comp/man
6.2	don't want to fall back	mat	you	general	and	into a pattern	loc
6.2.1	've seen happen	men	you	general	that	in your own family	loc
6.3	've had	rel	you	general	especially...	especially when/like myself	extent/man:comp
7.1	wanted to work	mat	I	Diana		desperately	man
8.1	loved	men	I	Diana		desperately	man
8.2	wanted to share	mat	I	Diana	and	together	accom:com
9.1	were	rel	we	Charles/Diana	and		
10.1	aware were you	men	How (aware...?)	interrogative		How...?	quality
10.1.1	had happened	mat	what	events	of (?)		
11.1	became	rel	you	Diana	after all	ultimately with a view	purpose
11.1.1	to becoming	rel					
12.1	wasn't daunted	men	I	Diana			
12.2	'm not daunted	men	I	Diana	and	by the responsibilities	agent
12.2.1	creates	mat	that role	being Princess	that		
13.1	was	rel	it	being Princess			
14.1	is	rel	it	being Princess			
15.1	was never	exist	it	becoming Queen	as for...	as for becoming Queen	respective
16.1	was	rel	it	becoming Queen			
16.2	thought	men	I	Diana			
17.1	was	rel	The most daunting aspect				

Clause 17.2 to 19.3

Cls.	Verbal Group	Pro.	Topical Themes		Text (& int) Themes	Circumstances	
17.2	were told	verb	my husband and I	Charles and Diana	because		
17.3	got engaged	mat	we	Charles and Diana	when	when	temp
17.4	would go	mat	the media		that		
17.5	didn't (go)	mat	it	media	and	quietly	man
18.1	were married	mat	we	Charles and Diana	and when	when	temp
18.2	said	verb	they	unclear			
18.3	would go	mat	it	media		quietly	man
18.4	didn't (go)	mat	it	media	and		
18.5	started to focus...on	mat	it	media/media attention?	and then	and then/very much	temp/intensity
18.6	seemed to be	exist	I	Diana	and	on the front ..../every single day	loc/temp
18.7	is	rel	which	being on the front page....			
19.1	put...place	men	the higher		and	the higher	comp
19.2	is	rel	the higher	retrieved from 19.1			
19.3	was...aware of	men	I	Diana	and	very	intensity

Appendix 2

Transcript of the first three questions put to Princess Diana by Martin Bashir (Interviewer).

Question/response 1

Interviewer:

Clause 1.1   Your Royal Highness, how prepared were you for the pressures

1.1.1   that came from marrying into the Royal Family?

Princess Diana:

   2.1   At the age of 19, you always think

   2.2   you are prepared for anything.

   3.1   And you think

   3.2   you have the knowledge

   3.2.1   of what is coming ahead.

   4.1   But I felt

   4.3   ［although I was daunted at the prospect at the time］

   4.2   I had the support of my husband-to-be.

Question/response 2

Interviewer:

   5.1   What were the expectations

   5.1.1   you had for married life?

Princess Diana:

   6.1   I think like any marriage

   6.1.1   you want to try even harder to make it work

   6.3   ［especially when you've had divorced parents like myself］

   6.2   and you don't want to fall back into a pattern

   6.2.1   that you've seen happen in your own family.

   7.1   I desperately wanted to work.

   8.1   I desperately loved my husband

   8.2   and I wanted to share everything together.

   9.1   And I thought that

   9.1.1   we were a very good team.

Question/response 3

Interviewer:

   10.1   How aware were you of the significance

   10.1.1 of what happened to you?

   11.1   After all, you became Princess of Wales ultimately with a view

   11.1.1 to becoming Queen.

Princess Diana:

   12.1   I wasn't daunted

   12.2   and I'm not daunted by the responsibilities

   12.2.1 that that role creates.

   13.1   It was a challenge.

   14.1   It is a challenge.

   15.1   As for becoming Queen, it was never at the forefront of my mind at the time.

   16.1   It was a long way off,

   16.2   I thought.

   17.1   The most daunting aspect was the media attention,

17.2   because my husband and I, we were told

17.3   when we got engaged

17.4   that the media would go quietly

17.5   and it didn't.

18.1   And when we were married

18.2   they said

18.3   it would go quietly

18.4   and it didn't,

18.5   and then it started to focus very much on me,

18.6   and I seemed to be on the front of a newspaper every single day,

18.7   which is an isolating experience.

19.1   And the higher the media put you,

19.2   is the bigger the drop,

19.3   and I was very aware of that.

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