

'I was just doing X ... when Y': Some inferential properties of a device in accounts of paranormal experiences

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Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of a two-part device which occurs spontaneously in spoken recollections of one class of extraordinary personal experiences. This device is identified as 'I was just doing X ... when Y'. It is argued that there is a culturally-based scepticism about claims to have experienced the paranormal. This paper reports on the ways in which the first part of this device is used by speakers to counter potentially negative inferences which may be drawn about someone simply by virtue of their claim to have encountered paranormal phenomena. The analysis focuses on the ways in which speakers assemble descriptions of what they were doing at the time of the onset of their experience, and some interactional tasks addressed through the way in which these recollections are formulated. Finally, some inferential consequences of the two partedness of the device are noted.

Keywords:

conversations analysis: extraordinary experiences: inferential work: pragmatic devices: scepticism: warranting accounts.

Introduction

In this paper I examine accounts of personal encounters with paranormal phenomena: that is, encounters with ghosts, poltergeist, UFOs; and parapsychological phenomena, such as extra-sensory perception, telekinesis, clairvoyance and out-of-body experiences. My interest in these accounts stems from the fact that people who publicly claim to have encountered paranormal phenomena place themselves in an inauspicious position by virtue of the powerful cultural scepticism about the paranormal. Experiences such as these not only provide an implicit challenge to common-