

# The "word carrier"

## Methodological summary

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## The “word carrier”

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### In pictures

*A question is displayed in a busy place together with answers collected before the day of the survey.*



*Intrigued, passers-by and locals stop.*



*Facilitators question them.*

*The answers are immediately written down by scribes.*



*The boards are displayed.*



## One device with three functions

The “word carrier” has three functions which are also three different levels of difficulty within the technique: firstly, it is a way of **creating unexpected encounters** in the public arena, between a question displayed and several answers collected in advance. The process, consisting in a group reversing the usual logic used by sharing a question rather than simply the answers to the question, suffices to trigger encounters with passers-by, who are sometimes far-removed from militant circles. As can be seen in the photo, this first stage may not necessarily lead to an encounter with the organisers.

The second function of the “word carrier” consists in creating **exchanges between strangers** and supposes that the organiser plays a listening role and stimulates passers-by to create a dialogue where everyone learns something: the organiser discovers the views of people they do not usually have the chance to meet and how they position themselves. The passers-by sometimes learn something about themselves, and discover that when listened to and encouraged, they are more capable than they thought of formulating an opinion. They are more inclined to discover what the organisers think since the organisers have allowed them to express themselves first.

The final function of the “word carrier” consists in performing **a public survey**, collecting, summarising, then writing and displaying the opinions of passers-by.

While the first two functions imply simple social skills applied in an unusual manner, the survey function requires ongoing training.

## General approach of the “word carrier” facilitator

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### Creating a cosy environment

When using a “word carrier”, the facilitator essentially focusses on other people expressing themselves. Even though the facilitator is doing this for a reason, even if s/he doesn't hide his/her adhesion to a group, this is not what s/he aims to talk about (contact with the group may take place later). What is important to begin with is what the person s/he meets has to say. By sweeping aside the spectre of the group and its judgment, s/he thus tries to create a cosy environment with a complete stranger – sometimes it is easier to talk to someone you don't know (such encounters could be compared to meeting people on a train).

### Desiring the encounter rather than needing it

People are pleasantly surprised to discover that we may be sincerely interested in what they think and feel, even if such sincerity is not always evident: it can be a difficult exercise to encourage someone to develop their ideas without wholeheartedly agreeing with them. Becoming an interviewer who tries to understand how people other than ourselves work constitutes a real conversion for militants. Personally, I have grown passionate about every-day racist expressions. What could be more fascinating, in fighting discrimination, than following the paths that create such discrimination? It is fascinating and other people pick up on this. If my example illustrates a borderline situation, its simplicity may help militants understand the reasons for the lack of commitment, the problems, the symbolic costs and the stages that may not be bridged.

### Listen first

Nobody likes being told how to act and what to think. While passers-by are nearly always pleased with everything that reinforces their personal opinions, they have a tendency to reject everything that contradicts them. If they are right-wing or conservative, uncommitted or not very interested in speeches, if they are not used to collective action or group messages, will they listen to these strangers whose explanations and practices are so far-removed from theirs? But in contrast, if they begin to feel that someone is listening to them, they will take pleasure in saying what they think or believe. Moreover, not everyone has the same experience of being listened to (it depends on family backgrounds, social position, professional situation and character) and while there is great benefit in being listened to for people who are not often listened to, there is enormous benefit for those who are never listened to.

For us, the stake is thus to surpass the spirit of our initial intention so that the people questioned can take charge of their own propositions, so that they attain what is described in by *Bourdieu* at the end of his book *Misère du Monde*, in the chapter on understanding:

*“By offering them a thoroughly exceptional communication situation, free of the constraints, especially of time, that weigh on most daily exchanges, and by opening up alternatives that encourage or authorise them to express unease, deficiencies or requests that they discover while expressing them, the interviewer helps to create the appearance of an extraordinary argument, which*

*might never have been made and which was, nevertheless, already there, waiting for the necessary conditions of realisation.”<sup>1</sup>*

## **Principles to be kept in mind**

- **Respect the rule of indifference** by presenting to passers-by a device that they can walk through and move about in without being forced to stop. It is important that passers-by feel free to continue on their way without having to show that they have come to see us out of curiosity.
- **Give passers-by the feeling that they do not have to make a contribution:** in the form of money, a signature, point of view or time. They must not perceive us to be making demands, but rather to be offering something (in the same way as street theatre, except that here the show is what the people themselves produce).
- **Make different approaches possible by playing with distance:** large formats removed from any interaction with the organisers for passers-by who are suspicious and want to read in peace; a bar for those who want to talk straight away and explore further; a scribe busy writing, to attract another category of people who are more at ease watching other people “doing” something.
- **Show immediately that different viewpoints are possible:** with or without explanations, poetic or funny, from different age groups, conflicting, etc. Plurality must be evident.
- **Be happy about what we’re doing,** convinced of our usefulness and able to put ourselves in the public’s shoes. Joie de vivre and enthusiasm are infectious. This applies to all audiences, but especially to cautious ones.

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<sup>1</sup> La Misère du Monde, Bourdieu P. (Dir.), p.914

## **What is the purpose of the activity?**

An activity works when it meets requirements. If people stop in the street to spend time with us, if locals and professionals take part in our activities, then our proposal is providing them with something. Here are some undeveloped suggestions resulting from exchanges and observations about what this activity may provide.

### *For interviewers*

- Know how to take risks. Learn how to overcome apprehensions.
- Listen to our society.
- Take pleasure.
- Develop goodwill.
- Feel useful.
- Take part, for a day, in an activity linking you to the world of sociology, journalism and the theatre.

### *For passers-by*

- Avoid getting bored.
- Discover that we are capable of more reflection than we imagined.
- Confide in an unknown third party, in a passing encounter.
- Be heard. Submit what we have to say. Be acknowledged as a subject.
- Have our words on a sign. Be in pride of place.
- Philosophise using ordinary words.

## Establishing the device on public land

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To being with it is important to perform an **on-site check**:

- Observe the area in conditions similar to those applicable to the planned day: the previous week, for example, at the same time.
- Cross-check the observations with a **neighbourhood survey**, particularly with traders and users (cross-checked perspectives).

This provides dynamic **mapping** of the area studied.

Thus a succession of **moments** will be revealed (which will be called time slots) in which attendance and use will vary. **Places** will also be revealed (a place being the area or part of an area occupied by a specific audience for a particular use). Thus the same area in the space of a day – a town square, for example – will become, depending on the time, a meeting place, a picnic area, a place for children coming out of school or an area for skateboarders at the end of the day.

But there is no point in observing an area that changes regularly several times a day for too long. This is why a neighbourhood survey is essential (subject to cross-checking, to avoid discovering that the barman was talking nonsense, for example!).

As a general rule, attendance in the area includes two peak times: between 11.30 a.m. and 1 p.m., and between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m.

### Variables to observe:

- Main, secondary and minor trajectories;
- The direction of pedestrian traffic;
- Flow (quantity);
- Definable elements of trajectories:  
Which direction do people walk in? Where are they coming from? Where do they stay? Where do they stop? Which places (buildings, shops, etc.) are the points of attraction within the space analysed? Which elements are repellent? Begging? NGO consultants? Romanians?  
Here it is possible to begin categorising the audience's sociology and pedestrian dynamics.

Another element to be considered is both visual and sound pollution and competition.

Lastly, do not forget to ask yourself if you like the area and if you would be happy to linger there for a while in conversation.

## Scenography

**Scenography** (from the Greek σκηνή (*skene*) *stage* and γραφειν (*graphein*) *to write*), or set design, now refers to the art of organising a [performance area](#).

The [set designer](#) coordinates both the technical and artistic resources. Using material that is identifiable by the audience. The set designer manipulates volume, objects, colours, lights and textures, taking into account the nature of the material.

### Eye catchers

- On the ground: try using different places, but this can also be a final choice;
- Vertical teaser: on metal gratings or on a rope, or musical staff version (four or five wires);
- Use of street-art;
- Independent shapes (cubes or pyramids);
- Work at height;
- Word paths;
- Mixture of different techniques.

### Orientation

- Several orientations or mixed techniques: cabling plus cubes, for example;
- Oriented at flows but from a distance (the question can be seen from the other side of the pedestrian passageway);
- In the middle of the flow (independent shape);
- Above the flow;
- Alongside the flow.

### Stimulation

- Fake passers-by;
- Fakes arguments or fake laughing;
- Emphasis of specific panels and specific words;
- Free coffee;
- Verbal repetition of panels;
- Writing style.

## Approaching people

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- **Do not apologise**, do not ask someone if they can spare you some time.
- **Allow yourself** a relationship:
  - By smiling, eye contact and direct questions “What would you add to all that?”
  - By starting with what people express: “You look sceptical...”, “It looks like that word shocks you...”, “Something’s making you smile...”.
- You can also be direct but reassuring by asking an **insignificant question** which relates to the visual aspect rather than the subject:
  - Ask if the sign is straight while it’s being set in place.
  - Ask if a word has been spelt correctly.
- **Avoid static positions**, whatever happens: it reminds people of begging, of a person waiting for someone kind enough to agree to speak to them. Most of the time it makes the interviewer uneasy and this unease is communicative.
- Maintain a balance between the direct style and **the possibility of not answering**:
  - “You can give me your opinion if and when you want to.”
  - “You can add something yourself – we have notebooks available...”
  - **Take the inbetween stance** of a salesperson that is available but not too insistent.
- **Find your own personal style**:
  - Take your time, don’t be too “heavy-handed”,
  - Approach people you have a good feeling about,
  - Find your own formula, your own words and means of making contact.
- Strolling is **an exercise for two allowing you to learn to “feel” interactions** and understand the relationship between movement and meeting people: you walk carrying a sign which displays a written question; you change view points; you don’t try to meet people desperately; you just “receive” people who are available. You walk about trying to pick out those who are intrigued by your approach. You can attempt to approach those people.  
Strolling is also a way of “becoming the technique” when it is not possible to set it up, when there is not enough room or you don’t feel completely at ease in the area where it is set up.

## Evaluation criteria for a “good question”

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One of the premises of our work, one of the conditions for its success, consists in starting from other people’s positions, and not our own... When you try to talk about a subject which does not in any way, or only slightly, concern(s) a shared or daily experience **you move very rapidly towards a militant question which requires the exchange with other people to be “forced”**.

**To choose a question, we have the following variables.** The question must:

- Concern shared experiences,
- Refer to what people actually experience and not just what they think: it is better, for example, to get people to talk about “their childhood”, rather than “childhood” in general,
- Address various ages and backgrounds,
- Offer the interviewee different ways in to provide an answer and the interviewer as many openings and possibilities to encourage the interviewee as possible,
- Authorise conflicting answers, according to the diversity of the encounters,
- Refer to internal conflicts,
- Interest the interviewer and give him/her the desire to interview,
- Be capable of dividing a homogenous audience (festivals or congresses) -> diagnostic to be performed in advance.

A question does not need to meet all of these criteria, but it must include several of them. A preliminary test with a similar audience of mixed age and social background (family, colleagues, traders and neighbours) should enable the chosen question to be validated. Note: A question that appears provocative may not provoke much at all.

**List of questions already used for a “word carrier”.**

- What makes you happy?
- What are you passionate about?
- What do you miss from far away?
- What does growing old mean?
- What do you do in your spare time?
- What is important to you in this neighbourhood?
- Do you have contact with people of other generations?
- What makes a good teacher?
- How do we manage to live together?
- What do you wish for in 2007/2008/2009?

- What bothers you?
  - What are your dreams for today's youth?
  - What do you consume too much of?
  - Have you changed your consumer habits?
  - Why is advertising the only decoration in our cities?
  - Our rights, our duties – what would you say about them?
  - But who are travellers?
  - Where are the women?
  - Have you ever felt like an outsider?
  - What are you loyal to?
  - Can you imagine other ways of conducting politics?
  - Is it easier for a man to succeed in life?
  - Are there typically male and typically female activities?
  - What's the purpose of a class representative?
  - What is a good punishment?
  - What is solidarity?
  - What injustices did you experience as a child?
  - What do you feel trapped in?
  - What is changing in your neighbourhood?
  - What is difficult in the workplace?
  - Do today's young people want to work less than before?
  - What is violence?
  - Is ecology an issue for the wealthy?
  - What is good/regrettable about my town is...
  - What is good/regrettable about my neighbourhood is...
  - Being a man means... Being a woman means...
  - Being young in Vendôme means...
  - Being young today means...
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## The interview

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### What are we hoping to hear, understand, reproduce?

Firstly, the “word carrier” makes improbable encounters between very different people possible. Because they have time and because it does not involve too much commitment, passers-by agree to converse with strangers (the facilitators). The facilitators also find themselves face to face with strangers: **familiar strangers** with similar concerns and from similar social circles or **people far-removed from their world**. Thus **the possibility of an intercultural encounter** arises, i.e. the possibility of “finding out what goes on inside the heads of other people”, and discovering what they think and feel. The “word carrier” thus enables us to change the preconceived ideas that we often have about others.

Moreover, in the interviews we will try to draw out **a specific viewpoint, details and expressivity** which bring the other person to life and make them touching. *“It is in the story and the details that the subject materialises, in concrete development, in specific narration, and not in what is intemporal, closed, definitive, a category, box, or case, an affair or a definition”<sup>2</sup> (...)* We want to retransmit this viewpoint through what we could call **an “edifying” proposal**, i.e. one which is instructive, which informs us and allows us to move beyond stereotypes. This viewpoint will be noted then rewritten so that, in turn, through the written word, it touches the passers-by who come to the “word carrier”.

*“By offering them a thoroughly exceptional communication situation, free of the constraints, especially of time, that weigh on most daily exchanges, and by opening up alternatives that encourage or authorise them to express unease, deficiencies or requests that they discover while expressing them; the interviewer helps to create the appearance of an extraordinary argument, which might never have been made and which was, nevertheless, already there, waiting for the necessary conditions of realisation”<sup>3</sup>*

### The negotiation phase

In the first exchanges, passers-by are still wondering who you are and what is about to happen. They have accepted the contact, but that is not enough. The start-up phase needs to be negotiated. Sometimes **they need to know more about who you are**, what you are going to do with their words. However, in contrast to what you might think, this is a minority reaction and most often the interview starts up satisfactorily for both parties. But sometimes, **just like people treading on their partner’s feet while dancing, you don’t find yourself in phase with each other**: what the other person tells you is ordinary, it doesn’t take off, the words remain superficial, or else it is your way of presenting the subject or approaching a question which does not suit the person.

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<sup>2</sup> Kaplan Leslie, *Le Psychanalyste*, Paris, Gallimard, Folio, 1999, 613 p

<sup>3</sup> *La Misère du monde*, Bourdieu P. (Dir.), p.914

**This initial negotiation phase** is the phase that places us in the relationship and the discussion. It **helps us understand each other** so that the exchange can get off the ground and bring pleasure to both. This means, sometimes, forgetting part of the context – on the passer-by's part in his/her desire to provide a good answer or to cut it short, and on the interviewer's part by obtaining a good response, or cutting it short too. This is more a question of feeling than interview technique.

### **Reducing the distance between us and the passers-by**

In his essay on interpretive sociology, *Kaufmann* distinguishes different phases in conducting interviews which are related to our work in public areas. He advises firstly *“preventing any hierarchical relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee through one's manner and **the tone of the exchange, which should be much closer to the tone of a conversation between two equals than of questioning from a superior position**”* (Kaufman, 1996, p.47). For *Bourdieu*, the interviewer must establish non-violent communication, as he supposes that there is an asymmetric positioning between the interviewer and the interviewee. It is indeed the interviewer who, moving in a professional sphere with strong intellectual capital in relation to people contacted who interiorise social positions and their dominating effects, fixes the rules of the game to which the interviewee is subjected. Even if the current situation is not exactly the same – researchers here being lay people – the fact remains that many “submit themselves” to the rules and that passers-by perceive a sense of domination particularly perceivable in the infra-verbal language: *“I'm just a labourer. What do you want with a labourer's point of view?”* To try to limit such effects and reduce *“the symbolic violence that may be exercised through it”* (the interview relationship), *Bourdieu* institutes an “active, methodical” listening process which combines *“Total availability towards the people questioned, submission to the singularity of their specific story, which may, though a kind of mimicry, controlled to a greater or lesser degree, lead to **adopting their language and agreeing with them, feeling the same, and having the same thoughts.**”* (Bourdieu, 1993, pp 1394 & 1395)

## Meaning of putting someone at ease

The interviewer begins by playing a character role: s/he is kind, receptive and reacts positively to everything s/he is told: in order to *“enter the partner’s private feelings and thoughts, the interviewer must entirely forget his/her own opinions and thought categories. Only think about one thing: s/he **has a whole world to discover.**”* (Kaufman, 1996, p.51)

This work finds its equilibrium in the facilitator’s commitment, which must be stated at some point: *“**The informer needs reference points in order to develop his/her argument.** It’s a well-known law of interaction: if you cannot classify your partner, the exchange cannot find a structure”* (Kaufman, 1996, p. 52).

## The art of rekindling conversation

For Kaufmann, interviewers need to use *“a whole arsenal of tactics to favour expression. **Anything goes to encourage talking and encourage talking well: charm, seduction and humour.**”* (Kaufman, 1996, p.55).

Later, he talks of a survey within the survey, which consists in keeping in mind what the other person is saying (but which s/he has not developed) and which will be used to rekindle the exchange: using an initial question, through trial and error and successive adjustments we can reach areas of exchange specific to the survey where the partner has *“something to say”*. **The initial question, transformed by the exchange, takes the form of an adapted, personalised questioning, which will enable the passer-by to construct his/her argument then progress within that argument.** M.L. undertakes an analogous approach when, noting some signals (the person smiles while reading a sign she spies a “client”. She questions the person using this production of signs as a basis by starting the exchange with: *“I see something is making you smile...”*. In this way she offers the first line of attack for the exchange, which starts with the interviewee’s expression. The work of the survey continues in this non-verbal register in the discussion.

## Philosophy

Although we may often refer to the methodology of sociological interviews, we are also in the sphere of philosophy, and more precisely that of **maieutics** (from the Greek maieutikê: the art of giving birth). This term was used by Socrates to designate his teaching method, which consisted in assisting the delivery of the spirits, in other words enabling other people to discover the truths that they carry. Here we are using a **“wild”**, non-orthodox practice, which borrows **techniques from sociology and attempts a philosophical approach on the street corner.**

This is why we are not claiming to analyse data. Our survey is more a human process than a scientific one. What we are hoping to convey is a coproduction between what a person says and what we understand. While the result incites questions, stimulates and may be the subject of speculation, it cannot, however, claim scientific objectivity.