

The method of sequence analysis within the framework of Objective Hermeneutics - Origins and exemplification

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Abstract

In Objective Hermeneutics, sequence analysis is the name of a methodical procedure for the interpretation of meaning-structured expressive forms and textual data. This contribution describes the concrete circumstances of its emergence in the context of the research project 'Elternhaus und Schule' (Parents and School), which was led by Ulrich Oevermann and colleagues in the early 1970s. The article explains the research questions, initial problems of data collection and important milestones from which sequence analysis gradually emerged. Using the example of a letter analysis from the context of youth welfare, the procedure is explained in the second, empirical part.

Keywords: sequence analysis – Objective Hermeneutics – meaning structure – Ulrich Oevermann.

German Abstract

Innerhalb der Objektiven Hermeneutik bezeichnet Sequenzanalyse ein methodisches Verfahren der Auswertung von sinnstrukturierten Ausdrucksgestalten und textförmigen Daten. Dieser Beitrag schildert die konkreten Umstände ihrer Entstehung im Kontext des Forschungsprojektes 'Elternhaus und Schule', das von Ulrich Oevermann und Kollegen Anfang der 1970er Jahre geleitet wurde. Er erläutert die Forschungsfragen, anfängliche Probleme der Datenerhebung und wichtige Wegmarken, aus denen sich allmählich die Sequenzanalyse gebildet hat. Am Beispiel einer Briefanalyse aus dem Kontext der Jugendhilfe wird das Vorgehen im zweiten, empirischen Teil erläutert.

Keywords: Sequenzanalyse – Objektive Hermeneutik – Bedeutungsstrukturen – Ulrich Oevermann.

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1. Introduction

In the German speaking countries, sociology underwent an important phase of methodological innovation in the 1970s, which considerably refined its instruments of data collection and analysis and opened up new approaches to qualitative empirical research. Today, these innovations are also used in other disciplines such as anthropology, political science, education or psychology to collect and analyse non-standardised data, such as open-ended interviews, biographic narratives, group discussions, or protocols of natural interactions such as parent-child interactions or doctor-patient conversations. Today, these methods are usually labeled as 'qualitative' because they analyse 'non-numerical' data, i.e. entities that are constituted by language and semantic or symbolic meaning. They include a wide range of methodological traditions, ranging from ethnomethodology and conversation analysis to various discourse-analytical, content-analytical, and interpretive social-phenomenological methods.

During that era, a group of sociologists with an interest in the sociology of language played a decisive part in this innovative development. Within various research projects, several research groups were formed from the 1970s onwards, which tested new methods in parallel with each other and established their own approaches in the process. Some of these methodological groups were inspired by developments in the USA and are now well connected to the international discourse. These include, for example, the work of Jörg Bergmann or Fritz Schütze, who fostered the ethnomethodological approach and conversation analysis in Germany (Kallmeyer/Schütze 1976). Other approaches have emerged largely independently of the English-language discourse on methodology and have so far not been widely received in the English-speaking world. This is especially true of Objective Hermeneutics, although it has produced a completely independent methodology.

The fact that there has been little reception of Objective Hermeneutics in the English-speaking world might also be related to some practical hurdles. Objective hermeneutics has produced a method that is geared towards a very literal and detailed interpretation of linguistic data and requires extensive linguistic competence of the social researcher in the language of the data. Since Objective Hermeneutics originated in the German-speaking world, most analyses have been developed on German-language data. Admittedly, some analyses have long been available on data from the English-speaking world and there are also presentations of the method in English.¹ But Objective Hermeneutics is still hardly practiced and taught in the English-speaking countries and is therefore less well known. In a sense, the method is waiting to be discovered internationally.

In this contribution, the context of the emergence of Objective Hermeneutics will be briefly sketched. The original questions and research problems from which the methodological procedure emerged in the early 1970s will be described and some basic features of its methodology will be presented. Emphasis will be placed on the concept of sequence and sequentiality, which is used differently in Objective Hermeneutics than it was by the founders of conversation analysis Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson (part 2). After that, the basic rules of methodology and procedural doctrine of Objective Hermeneutics are briefly explained

¹ A list of English-language publications on and deriving from Objective Hermeneutics can be found here: <https://www.agoh.de/bibliographie/literaturdatenbank/englische-texte.html>

(part 3). Finally, an example of sequence analysis is given based on a letter from a girl to her sister (part 4), before returning to the notion of sequentiality in the conclusion.

2. The Emergence of Objective Hermeneutics

Objective Hermeneutics emerged in the early 1970s in the context of a research project funded by the Max Planck Society in Berlin entitled *Elternhaus und Schule* (Parental home and School), which was intended to examine children's success at school in the context of different social influencing factors. In the context of educational policy debates of the 1960s and 1970s in West Germany, this project aimed to focus primarily on non-school influencing factors that affected learning processes. That included personal factors such as intelligence, motivational structures, children's extracurricular interests and hobbies, milieu-specific characteristics of the parental home such as level of education, occupation, regional culture or religion, as well as family-specific and micro-sociological factors such as parenting styles, language codes or educational practices, for example in supporting homework. This project *Elternhaus und Schule* ran between 1968 and 1974 and was led by Ulrich Oevermann, Lothar Krappmann and Kurt Kreppner.²

One focus was on the effects of educational styles on learning performance and school motivation. Oevermann had previously introduced the British sociolinguist Basil Bernstein's distinction between elaborated and restricted code into the German debate as part of his dissertation and now wanted to make this approach fruitful for other questions (Oevermann 1970; Bernstein 1964). From today's perspective, the methodological approach of this ambitious project was quite conventional: the original plan was to conduct a comprehensive survey of standardised data representing the various factors and then to analyse these data sets using correlation analysis. The survey was to be conducted by means of a questionnaire, which was to contain scales as well as yes/no answers, and which was to be sent to about one thousand households with children between 4 to 6 years of age.

In preparation for the creation of such a questionnaire, individual families were first to be visited and observed in their everyday life. The project leaders wanted to study typical parent-child interactions more closely in order to be able to formulate the questions of the questionnaire more precisely and purposefully. Typical situations of a family were to be observed: having dinner together, helping with homework, or playing the board game 'Mensch-Ärgere-Dich-Nicht' (known in the English-speaking world as Ludo or Parcheesi). Some families were also selected who were known to receive support from the youth welfare office because the families were financially or otherwise burdened. These family observations were mainly carried out by Oevermann and his co-worker at the time, Yvonne Schütze.

In addition to the observations that took place in teams of two, many interactions were recorded using an audio recorder with a tape reel. This was to compensate for the disadvantages of observation. It had already become apparent at the beginning

² I refer to various sources on what happened, in particular to some conversations I was able to have with Oevermann, most recently in the spring of 2021. Of particular interest is the reproduction of a long conversation between Oevermann, Fritz Schütze, Detlev Garz, Klaus Kraimer and Gerhard Riemann on the beginnings of Objective Hermeneutics: Garz/Kraimer/Riemann (2019); cf. also my earlier account, which also includes the later development (Franzmann 2016).

of the project that the social researchers were not able to record all the information and impressions that seemed important to them in a situation, because the processes and interactions were simply too complex. Sometimes important information was missing, e.g. the number of dice in a game, and sometimes it turned out afterwards how important the exact wording of a statement would have been, but this was not available and could not be recalled from memory without gaps. The project members subsequently had the problem of no longer fully recognising the situation they had experienced in their notes. If, on the other hand, meticulousness in note-taking was increased, the attention to other details during the situations suffered. Thus, the impression remained that observation as a method, as indispensable as it is in the social sciences, does not do justice to the complexity of such social situations and remains comparatively incomplete and superficial. Therefore, the situations were recorded with the help of an audio device from the Revox company. It supported the project members and gave them the opportunity to focus on those aspects of the situation that the recording device could not capture. This was especially important for the Ludo game. In order to be able to adequately interpret the interactions of the adults and children, the exchanges of words were recorded. But at the same time the emotional movements of the players were noted by the observer and the numbers thrown on the dice or the moves on the game board were also recorded, so that one could better understand the overall events and know which events the spoken contributions reacted to.

What was initially intended as an aid shifted in importance over time: the observation notes complemented the audio recordings, not the other way around. The audio recordings had the unbeatable advantage that their content was an authentic protocol of what actually happened. They reproduce and hold the lively interactions of a family as they actually took place, albeit limited to the auditory dimension.³ However, this expanded the methodological operations. One could listen to the recordings again and again, make them the subject of one's interpretations, but also compare one's interpretations with the wording. Another advantage of recordings is that, unlike observation notes, they have not passed through a filter of subjectivity, a filter of the current attention, interpretive capacities or prejudice structures of the social scientists themselves. They give a raw but undisguised and unabridged account of what happened, creating a kind of corrective to the datum against hasty, simplistic or ideological conclusions.⁴ They enable a method-critical discussion

³ In opposition to other traditions of audio analysis, Objective Hermeneutics rests on the assumption that the audio recordings preserve an authentic reflection of what actually happened. Authenticity in this context is to be understood as a term that refers to an occurrence or happening, which really took place. The recording preserves a trace, a leftover, which is technically produced. The recording preserves insofar the situation itself and everything which was technically detectable. Of course, the range of data represented in a recording is limited by the possibilities of the technology. Audio recordings are limited to the audible range, sounds, noises, speeches. Video technology extends the range of recording to the visible range, but still includes limitations, especially of perspective. Nevertheless, such recordings contain the situation itself as it was, what was really spoken, authentic, unaltered, or - for whom this sounds too ontological - something of it, a trace that allows us to reconstruct operating structures in a situation. However, this is always only possible as far as the data available to us allow. Therefore, the interpretation of data in Objective Hermeneutics is always only an approximation to reality.

⁴ In Objective Hermeneutics, the recording of a natural practice is preferred to any other method of data production, as long as it is technically possible and there are no ethical reasons for not

about which interpretations do justice to what has actually happened, and helps confirm whether the interpretation actually takes adequate account of all phenomena in the record and whether it explicates them in a logic and comprehensible way.⁵

2.1. Protocols and transcription

However, the advantage of logging social interactions using audio devices only really becomes tangible when the audio recordings are also transcribed. From linguistics and conversation analysis, the demand for the most accurate transcription possible was already known at that time. In the transcript, not only are phonemes transferred into graphemes, but an originally diachronic event, which on the audio tape still presents itself as a fleeting practice and temporal succession of linguistic utterances, is transferred into a synchronic-spatial structure. This structure is one whereby the written language provides the natural notational system of this transfer and the utterances are reproduced line by line as a spatial succession according to the reading direction of a language (e.g. from top left to right, in Indo-European languages). With such transcripts, many things become methodically possible again that would otherwise remain unthinkable: the reproduction of the wording can be checked on the tape and made more precise. One does not have to constantly rewind if a statement is to be interpreted, as one can deal with the question of what a statement means while reading.

Such interaction transcripts hold many astonishing experiences in store for scientists. One immediately notices, for example, how grammatically impure the spoken language often is, how many pauses, sentence breaks, nested sentences are employed. This observation had already inspired Chomsky to claim that children's language acquisition could never be explained by mere imitative learning, because parents do not present the many rules of a language adequately and without error. An inferential rule consciousness must be assumed in the native speaker, which reconstructs the rules of a language from the incorrect language material presented.

doing so. Protocols of natural practice are also used in other schools of social research methodology, but they have a specific status in Objective Hermeneutics. Protocols are data collected in situ, as Oevermann calls it in reference to medicine or archaeology and palaeontology: images of real events in their original position without distorting or superimposing changes. In this respect, the protocol establishes its own type of data, for which there must be a corresponding method of evaluation. A method that is capable of adapting to the character and content of those protocols and unlocking their content.

⁵ The problem of reactivity, i.e. the concern that the collection of the protocols could change the situation itself to such an extent that the structures would no longer be reflected unaltered, is something I will only briefly address here. The concern was initially shared and discussed in Objective Hermeneutics, but the sequence analyses of the family structures contained in the material soon fostered the conviction, still widely shared in Objective Hermeneutics today, that the presence of outside social researchers or the seemingly artificial situations of interviews or conversation recordings is not a real problem. It may indeed have an influence on the spontaneity of the interactants. But one can trust that the structures one is interested in will express the relational logic of a family anyway. Parents with authoritarian parenting styles, for example, would not, or only very rarely, allow themselves to be carried away into rudely snapping at or chastising their child in recording situations. And yet such a parenting style is expressed and is usually easy to understand. Linguistic interaction usually depicts much more than people are aware of and can control, including unconscious dispositions or things that should not leak out. Therefore, the problem of reactivity is not considered to be so important.

Another observation concerns the idioms, the many linguistic peculiarities of oral language. Above all, however, one has the succession of utterances spatially in front of one and can discuss the question of what an utterance means along the lines of the question of at which point in a speech and utterance an interpretative option is raised and at which point it is eliminated. The notation of written language makes it possible to break down what is said into units that are arranged in a sequence.

But which aspects should one use to explore such transcribed interactions between parents and their children? What can a methodological approach be based on? Oevermann and his colleagues in the project 'Parents and School' arrived at their own approach only after a phase of experimenting with different options and experiencing various wrong turns and detours.⁶

During the trial phase, 1969-1974, conversation analytic approaches had also been considered. Oevermann oriented himself for a while on Labov or Wunderlich and also on Robert Freed Bales' model of interaction process analysis for observing small groups. There was also a DFG group on 'Verbal Interaction' involving the sociologists Fritz Schütze, Thomas Luckmann or the linguists Konrad Ehlich, Jochen Rehbein and Norbert Dittmar (cf. Ploder 2018). Oevermann withdrew from this group, again because, in his view, the type of interaction analysis practiced there was driven by a linguistic interest in general flow diagrams of conversations. His real interest was in specific family constellations and his questions were originally sociological. He thus wanted to know how the internal life of a family could be understood from the recorded family interactions and how the structural interrelationships between the way parents and children interacted in everyday life and the children's learning processes at school could be investigated. He was convinced that conversation analysis and linguistics could contribute to this goal. But he was also convinced of the necessity to go beyond them and find a way to evaluate the observations and interaction protocols in such a way that, on the one hand, the specifics of a family could be worked out from them and, on the other hand, the transferable dimensions and impact factors could be made visible.⁷

At some point the debates in the group on sociology of language petered out because they became unfruitful, and Oevermann recalls the situation as follows (Garz/Kraimer/Riemann 2016:22; translation by the author):

How do you evaluate the things now? Then I realised that the instruments that were available were not sufficient. We tried things out for a long time. It was a dramatic process with many arguments. And at some point it died, and then I turned the rudder around 180 degrees... . Now, in addition, I did most of the observations myself together with Yvonne Schütze... . And we knew the families really well. So that we could say that in what we now find out with the instruments, mostly classification systems, i.e. subsumption logic, ... we do not recognise our cases sufficiently. So at some point we relied on our perception.

Oevermann thus tried to avert the threat of the failure of the project by no longer work with known models at all and trying something completely new. Obviously, his own experience played an important role in this as, similar to the observation notes themselves, all the models that had been used did not seem to do justice to the

⁶ A first systematic presentation of the methodology of Objective Hermeneutics was presented at the Sociology Congress in Kassel in 1976, and the first relevant publication followed in 1979 (Oevermann/Allert/Konau/Krambeck 1979).

⁷ I am referring to an interview with Oevermann in the summer of 2020.

complexity of real family life as it was experienced in practice. The impression always remained that important dimensions and relationships could not be adequately represented through those models. When Oevermann says that he then relied on his perception, this of course does not in itself describe a method, but at best offers a habitual corrective against reductionist models. Habitual corrective means a perceived discrepancy between empirical data and personally observed reality that appeared to be much more complex. However, this corrective had an important consequence. Oevermann then began to read the transcripts of the protocols without preconceptions and search schemes. He brushed aside all questions of how one could identify and read out any features and codings in these texts and set about understanding the interactions from the linguistic material alone, as far as possible without presuppositions.

If one chooses such an approach, one must first read the text. Here one encounters a simple initial question. How far must one read in order to understand an utterance? Should one read it in its entirety, i.e. to the end of a speech, because only then will one know what something is leading up to? Or should you read the counter-speech of an interlocutor, for example, because then you know the reactions of the interlocutor and how he or she received that speech? Or should you read a transcript in its entirety before interpreting it, because then you can better assess all the turns of phrase and themes? One can already see from this simple question how many different options and pitfalls there are. On this question, too, Oevermann arrived at a radically different practice after trial and error, namely a form of interpretation diametrically opposed to normal reading habits. He thus made it a rule to initially read only so far until a first chance opened up in the text to form a reading. This could come after the first word, a clearing of the throat or after a sentence, any meaning-bearing unit that allows one to ask the question: What does it mean and who could have said it under what circumstances?

2.2. Developing a new method of interpretation

By following this procedure, Oevermann reacted to the experience that reading larger sections of text, no matter how comprehensive they are, always only leads to the fact that one can no longer control the formation of readings. This was the case, for example, when individual sections of an actor's speech were read, and even more so when entire changes of interaction were read in one piece. If you proceed in this way, the formation of readings becomes completely uncontrollable after only a few sentences. It is simply too complex. It is no longer possible to keep track of which readings come up at which point, and at which point they are refuted and excluded if necessary.

Reading large amounts of text is an understandable procedure because it corresponds to our reading habit, but it is useless scientifically. For understanding, a comparison of practical understanding and methodical understanding is helpful. In practice, people usually proceed by reading or listening in such a way that they abandon themselves to a text until it has come to a natural end. Reading long passages and listening until a speaker has spoken is the norm. In oral interactions, this is already a requirement of politeness. Even when reading written texts, one trusts that an author has worked through her or his text editorially in such a way that one may abandon oneself to it. Such abandonment is only interrupted in exceptional

cases when there are manifest crises of comprehension and we can no longer make sense of a text, which we then indicate by frowning, questioning or other gestures of incomprehension. We are even prepared to bridge any difficulties of understanding that arise for a long time by continuing to listen and hoping that any misunderstanding that arises will be clarified by later statements. Such an advance on sense is necessary in practical conversations, but scientific understanding must proceed in exactly the opposite way. Various arguments support this claim (cf. Oevermann/Allert/Konau/Krambeck 1976):

(i) Unlike practical understanding, methodological understanding cannot afford to start with the assumption that there is always already a consistent meaning inherent in the text, and that we only have to follow a speaker/author long enough for it to be presented to us or for it to become apparent to us. On the one hand, this would underestimate the possibility that in verbal interactions there can also be logical breaks, inconsistencies, ambiguities, which are not mere linguistic errors, but in themselves meaningful indications of structures of personality operating behind the language, the social relational structure of a family, milieu-specific patterns of interpretation, and so on. On the other hand, one would unquestioningly follow the assumption that we as interpreters want above all to understand what a speaker wants to say, i.e. what his or her intentionality is. So, it is important to understand what he actually said. One must not unquestioningly assume that the two coincide. It is about the difference between what is objectively said and what is subjectively meant. This would mean that a speaker/author more or less consciously controls and masters the meaning of his speech, or that if he fails to do so, it was merely a matter of linguistic errors. This is a misleading assumption. The expressive forms of human interactions also contain motives and motivations that a speaker/author need not always be aware of and cannot control, an observation also emphasised by neuroscience and previously by psychoanalysis. And an analysis of interaction protocols also confirms that neither the speakers nor even the listeners to a speech can be fully aware of the complexity of what is being said.

(ii) Another argument concerns the sequentiality of the interactions themselves: Interactions are a sequence of individual acts that react to each other. In the interaction protocols, these are speech acts. At that time, Oevermann was already familiar with speech act theory, probably through Habermas (cf. Austin 1962; Searle 1969). Every speech act produces meanings and is structured or framed by the type of speech act, (assertion, question, promise etc.). Each of these utterances is to be understood as a reaction to preceding utterances, insofar as it responds in some way to what was said before, just as it in turn represents a potential stimulus for subsequent utterances. But what does 'react' mean in the context of speech acts? It means that an actor (B) has not only heard the utterance of an interlocutor (A) but has inwardly interpreted it and given it a mental representation. Interpretation here means taking meaning from a linguistic material, and something is meaningful to us when we know what follows from something said and how we can react to it.⁸ So action structures meaning, and meaning structures action. Something has mean-

⁸ Oevermann later referred to authors of American pragmatism, first and foremost Charles S. Peirce, as well as George Herbert Mead, but also to Noam Chomsky or Claude Levi-Strauss, for the methodological justification of Objective Hermeneutics.

ing when a structured set of possible actions logically follows from it. Understanding a speech act therefore means knowing what to do and being able to design meaningful responses. Which of these possible actions actually takes place is then no longer the decision of the speaker (A), but a function of the selection that person (B) makes from the set of possible responses.

Now, on the one hand, the methodological question arises as to how one can actually recognise whether an interlocutor has understood the utterance of an interlocutor correctly and completely. We cannot look into the head of an interpreter. Subjectivity is never directly accessible, introspection is not an acceptable intersubjectively testable method. As external observers, we can only indirectly conclude from the reactions how the interlocutor has received the utterance. But we only recognise from this whether there must have been a meaningful interpretation, because a response forms a logically meaningful connection and the interaction continues in a meaningful way. However, whether the actor had actually understood all possible interpretations of what was said and had actually mentally gone through all conceivable meaningful connections usually remains hidden from us. On the other hand, however, the question arises of the factors and patterns according to which an interpreter takes in the wording of an utterance and extracts a meaning from it. This is what the project *Elternhaus und Schule* (Parents and School) was interested in, because it asked about parenting styles and educational practices and their significance for success at school. What mental structure determines how certain interpretations are created and connections formed or not in interactions with children?⁹ In order to be able to discuss such a question based on linguistic material, one must first have designed and worked out oneself which options of interpretation a given utterance raises and which it excludes. So we must first interpret a sequence ourselves and explicate possible readings that can be brought up and that represent a meaningful connection within a data. Only then, when we have such a foil, can we ask which of the objectively possible interpretations may have been taken up by the actor and which not.¹⁰ Only with such a draft of objective options of interpretation can the subsequent utterance in turn be interpreted in terms of the open interpretations a speaker takes up and how he or she does so.

We can make a certain argumentative shortcut at this point. Oevermann did not relate this logic of reconstructing meaningful connections solely to the sequence of whole speech units in an interaction, but already did so in relation to the smallest meaningful units of an expressive *gestalt* within a speaker's speech. In this context, the term *gestalt* is used without any specific reference to gestalt theory. He means a formation of possibilities. Objective Hermeneutics prefers the concept of structure, which is not understood as a static entity, but as a process-like order of sequence.

⁹ In 1973, Oevermann began to work out theoretically what he meant by mental structures as an interpretation model. Later, he differentiated the model and supplemented it by habitus formations that are unconscious, worldviews and ideologies (Oevermann 1973, cf. Oevermann 2001).

¹⁰ The concept of objective possibilities was first introduced in German sociology by Max Weber, even though Weber did not yet refer to linguistic options for interpretation, but more generally to real options for action in a concrete situation. The name of the method 'Objective Hermeneutics' is derived from the same basic idea. It is not a matter of assuming that an objective interpretation could be achieved with the help of the method, which would no longer be contestable, but rather that with its help the field of objectively given possible interpretations in a concrete data can be methodically opened up.

As a consequence of these considerations, a practice of hermeneutic text interpretation was developed that explicates readings along the natural course of speech acts and adapts to the sequences of linguistic utterances. This gave rise to the methodological procedure of sequence analysis, which is considered the core of Objective Hermeneutics.

2.3. From sequence to sequence analysis

Sequences are understood as units of action in a dynamic order of actions. The term sequence in Objective Hermeneutics refers to meaning-bearing elements in a protocol and is not congruent with the way it is used in conversation analysis. Sequences are first of all linguistic signs, sentences, utterances which, in a sequential order controlled by syntactic rules, produce a structure of meaning which can be interpreted on its own. 'Meaning structure' refers to the set or totality of possible interpretative options opened up by the wording of the text. Their development takes place by first patiently interpreting an initial utterance and explaining what it can mean: Who could have meaningfully said such an utterance under which circumstances? At the beginning, this can also be an audible sigh or a prolonged 'ah' that makes a first interpretation necessary. Only when all possible options of readings have been pronounced does the analysis progress and move on to a next sequence, whereby it is then deduced from the sensible connection which of the previously opened interpretations can be continued with a second sequence and which interpretations are eliminated or which ambiguities, if any, remain. Between the sequences, therefore, there are basic, logical relationships of meaning and sequence. Sequences are therefore not to be equated with a linguistic unit, e.g. with a sentence, nor diffusely with non-linguistic units of action.

Understanding the sequential order of meanings seems to be a special feature of Objective Hermeneutics. In any case, there are hardly any cross-references to the conversation analysis of Sacks or Schegloff, in which the concept of sequence is also prominently used and applied to the sequence of interactions. Oevermann has linked the concept of sequence with the meaning-generating structures of language controlled by syntactic rules and in doing so has oriented himself more towards Chomsky's linguistics (Chomsky 1957, 1965), although Chomsky does not use the concept of sequence himself. Linguists like Chomsky are more oriented towards the question of how syntax and grammatical rules can be adequately described and explained. How is the position of individual linguistic word categories in a linguistic unit such as the sentence assigned and how must the words be constituted (inflected) so that they are considered to conform to the rules and be perceived as well-formed by a listener/speaker of a language? The interest in the grammatical production structure of language aims at the rule system of a single language itself and the fact that language can produce an infinite number of sentences with a finite number of rules (Humboldt 1998). This is also relevant to sociology, insofar as it relates to linguistic data. However, sociology does not want to understand grammatical structures for their own sake, but those parameters which, beyond the grammatical and pragmatic rules, explain the concrete contents and expressive forms of linguistic products. This not only means rules of pragmatism, but also parameters that operate in a respective concrete practice, e.g. the relational logic of a family, the parenting styles of parents. Oevermann uses linguistic knowledge to analyse the laws of the

social operating behind language, i.e. those parameters that are responsible for a listener/speaker speaking his or her sentence in a certain way in a certain situation.

Although Oevermann had postponed collaboration with linguists and conversation analysts for the reasons mentioned above, modern linguistics nevertheless plays a major role in the emergence of Objective Hermeneutics. Following Noam Chomsky's theory of language, it is possible to make use of the fact that native speakers have an intuitive awareness of grammatical rules that allows them to form linguistically well-formed sentences, i.e. sentences that conform to the rules, or to recognise and correct non-rule-conforming constructions. From this, Chomsky's linguistics derives the assumption that it must be possible to determine in principle for every linguistic entity whether it is appropriate or not, which makes it possible to reconstruct the rule effective behind it. Doubtful cases are an exception and can usually be overcome with the formation of clear cases.

The concept of rules is central to Objective Hermeneutics. Oevermann made use of Chomsky's argument of an intuitive awareness of rules, which is available to every native speaker, for the analysis of meaning structures. He saw the possibility of interpreting the protocols of family interactions directly and asking at each sequence point of a text which potential readings are opened up by the text itself. It is left to the subsequent sequences to reveal which of the hypothetical readings raised are continued or discarded in the protocol. The meaning structures generated in this process are objective insofar as it is assumed that the interpretive options raised in the text are given independently of the interpreters, even if it requires appropriation for a meaning structure to be mentally manifested. The claim, then, is that it is not the scholarly interpreter who constructs the readings, but the text itself.

The goal of interpretation is the formation of a case hypothesis about the parameters operative in a life practice, which, beyond the rules of grammar, pragmatics, etc., control the selection of interpretive options. Such a hypothesis becomes possible as soon as a pattern emerges in a text over several sequences and selections of an interpretive option become permanent or repeated. This points to deep-seated habitual routines and patterns of action.

3. Basic rules of sequence analysis in Objective Hermeneutics

Sequence analysis follows three basic rules with which the procedure is condensed (cf. Oevermann 2002).

3.1. Totality rule

All conceivable 'readings' raised by the wording of a first sequence are to be explicated. In doing so, the interpreters ask: 'Which person could have said such a statement under which circumstances to whom and what does it mean?' Readings that seem unusual or meaningless or that one already thinks will not apply should also be explicitly raised. All readings that can be applied from the wording are to be made explicit. The goal is maximum accuracy and appreciation of detail. It is best to work together in a team because this ensures that no readings are forgotten or left out. For the practice of reading, this means that one should not continue reading until all readings have been made explicit!

3.2. Literalness / Thrift / Frugality

The second rule of literalness is a complementary rule to the rule of totality. All readings should be raised, but ideally only those that are really covered by the wording. Constructions that go beyond this, that hypothetically design those conditions under which something could have been said by adding complex assumptions, should be avoided, because they cannot be methodically controlled and decided at this point in the sequence. What is required are those readings that must be, not those that can be. In the practice of analysis, this makes it necessary to learn how to critically weigh readings according to whether they contain more complex assumptions or implications. What is required is to use such assumptions sparingly and to favour those readings that have the fewest assumptions. Linked to the rule of parsimony is the requirement of not adding contextual information for interpretation unless this is absolutely necessary. Instead, a text should always be interpreted from within itself before information from other sources about the case, an author or an era is consulted. This is called: 'Immanence before context!' Exceptions are only recognised in relation to proper names or historical data.

3.3. Sequentiality

Only when all the readings of a first sequence have been explicated does one move on to the next sequence and continue the interpretation. This next sequence is not interpreted in isolation, but the formation of the readings is continued following the first sequence. The question is asked which readings can be continued in the light of the second sequence and which are eliminated. In most cases, some of the initially applied interpretations are already eliminated here. However, only those readings that are really logically no longer tenable are excluded. Therefore, as the sequence analysis progresses, it remains important to always remember the original readings and for all open interpretive paths to formulate what a subsequent utterance sequence means for them. Through this procedure, readings are not only evaluated logically in the sense of a logical connection or exclusion, they are updated and enriched in terms of content, becoming more concise and more contoured.

In this way, it becomes possible that the answers to the question posed at the beginning, namely, 'Who could have said this statement and under what circumstances to whom?' allow increasingly clear statements to be made about the situation and the persons acting in it, and furthermore about the nature of their relationship.

3.4. From text interpretation to case hypothesis

The analysis of the meaning structures of texts is not an end in itself but pursues the goal of reconstructing the generative structures in a practice that has produced a textual form of expression. As soon as this is possible, an initial hypothesis is formed in Objective Hermeneutics. This is the case, for example, when one notices that ways and modes of speaking are repeated or that certain behaviours or interpretations are repeated and solidified, although one can design in the analysis that

it could also be otherwise. This points to structural routines and deep-seated patterns. Here, a methodological operation of cross-checking begins again that is in a sense one level of explication higher. Cross-checking means the targeted search for possible text passages that could falsify the hypothesis.

The checking of a case hypothesis takes place either on other passages in the same text or on other data that comes from the same practice and is a possible falsifier.¹¹ Once a case hypothesis has been formulated, a targeted search is made for passages that could be possible falsifiers, because they do not easily conform to an emerging interpretation. If a case hypothesis is confirmed and repeated, one can ask what predictions the case hypothesis regarding the people who produced the interaction protocols.

In the next chapter, I will illustrate the basic features of the procedure with the example of a letter.

4. 'Dear Angelina' - A letter analysis as an example

The letter does not come from the data of the project 'Parents and School,' but from a completely different, much more recent context. The background is not even a research project, but a question in the context of a pedagogical intervention practice in youth welfare. More will be mentioned about this later. The letter is nevertheless well suited for exemplifying the procedure because it is short and because it allows the development of a relatively far-reaching case hypothesis on the structural background of its occasion and the life practice from which it emerges in relatively few sentences.

The letter is reproduced anonymously for reasons of data protection and is also not reproduced in facsimile. The addressee also does not need to know more. A few pieces of information on the context will be added after the analysis. At this point, only its wording will concern us.

The letter begins with a typical German form of address.

(Sequence 1) 'Liebe Angelina' (Dear Angelina)

This form of address contrasts with formal forms of address such as 'Sehr geehrte' ('Dear Madame'), which are common in business letters or letters from authorities, law firms or companies. Formal forms of address would always be appropriate in German when people are not known to each other and face each other in a role-like manner. To address a complete stranger as 'dear' would risk being perceived as hastily friendly, as aloof and encroaching. The underlying pragmatic rule is that a form of address must always do justice to a person's social position, and that strangers first meet each other in a respectfully distanced manner before choosing forms of address that presuppose closeness and familiarity. A business letter or similar can therefore be practically ruled out at this point.

The form of address implies familiarity and closeness, as is customary among people who know each other well and feel a friendship or are even related to each

¹¹ The term *practice* (Praxis) has become a basic concept in Oevermann's sociology and has been elaborated by him since the 1970s in the theoretical pair of terms of crisis and routine. A summary of his work on that topic can be found in his farewell lecture *Krise und Routine als analytisches Paradigma in den Sozialwissenschaften* (Oevermann 2016).

other. Among spouses, relatives, friends or friendly colleagues, the form of address is customary today, especially if they have offered each other the 'Du.' Incidentally, a familiar form of address, 'dear,' is always appropriate and customary when addressing children, even when addressed by adults who do not know the child.

Unlike phrases such as 'hello' or 'hi,' this form of address has a semantic meaning in that it predicates the person being addressed. 'Liebe/Dear' implies that a person is benevolent, sympathetic, lovable, not evil. Children are assumed to be 'lieb/kind' per se, which is probably to be understood as an expression of an assumed childlike innocence, whereas for adults this cannot necessarily be assumed. The formal address respectfully leaves this question undecided.

Furthermore, we can infer that the person addressed is female and that she is being doted upon, another expression of familiarity and closeness. The salutation 'dear' can also exist in combination with a surname, for example 'Dear Mrs. Herzog,' while the reverse usage 'Dear Angelina' is practically excluded. Addressing someone by their first name therefore either speaks for a relationship between people who have been familiar with each other for a long time or intend to be familiar. Or here a person is speaking to a child.

(Sequence 2) 'Heute mochte ich mich bei dir melden.' / 'Today I wanted to get in touch with you.'

The letter begins with a deictic reference to a period of time. In contrast to yesterday or tomorrow, it refers to the current day. This period refers to a concrete event. 'Today' formally encompasses the time between 0:00 a.m. and midnight, and in practical terms the time between waking up in the morning and going to sleep in the evening. The word opens a statement about this day. 'Today is the day when...'; 'today the following happened'; 'today I did/will do such and such,' etc.

It is striking that the sentence is then continued in the past tense. This is also unusual in German, even if it does not violate the rules. Those who are familiar with the German language could read it as a typing or spelling mistake, and that the two dots above the ö have been forgotten. Then the o would be read as ö ('would like') and the word would not be read in the past tense but in the present tense. However, this would undermine the literalness rule of the sequence analysis and possibly skip a reading. A spelling mistake cannot be ruled out, but we must take the trouble to also look for a meaningful interpretation for the use of the past tense. And one can also find an option:

Reported is an impulse, an impulse to an action. The verb 'liked,' from 'to like,' means that something should be done gladly. However, it is reported as if this impulse had occurred earlier in the day, did not immediately turn into action, and was only carried out later. Something inhibited or hindered the concrete execution of the writing of the letter. The impulse could not be acted upon spontaneously. The desire to establish contact must have been irritated or unsettled by something. And this complicated and puzzling inhibition of the impulse is reported, indeed it is with this that the letter is begun. So it does come to fruition later, but only in that this inhibition is expressed in it. It is placed at the beginning of the letter, as if the letter writer wanted to remember the original impulse again at the moment of writing. In this way, he or she is communicating more than simply the completion of a contact.

The word 'melden' now makes it clear that it is initially only a matter of establishing a contact in the first place. The word 'melden' has many technical connotations in German and is used in 'Meldewesen' (reporting system), 'polizeiliche Meldestelle' (police reporting office), 'eine Meldung machen' (make a report) etc. It also means in the present sentence that a contact is to be established. What is presupposed here, however, is that it is not a matter of transmitting information, but of establishing or renewing a contact that is to be established for its own sake. The author of the letter thus assumes that Angelina and the letter writer already have a relationship, a contact, and that the author wants to refresh the relationship after a long time. The contact is itself the information, or that there was an impulse to do so. It expresses an interest in Angelina, a desire for a mutual exchange.

We can now hypothetically consider at this point which person might have said something like this in which situation. Speaking for oneself, this is still comparatively vague and abstract at this early stage. It is conceivable, for example, that a person is trying to resume contact with a friend after a long break or even after an argument. This does not happen unencumbered, not spontaneously, as she still has to overcome herself. What could be the reason for her inhibited impulse? Either she is afraid of being rejected again or she has difficulty taking the first step and overcoming her pride. In any case, it is assumed that Angelina is not a complete stranger and that the desire for contact follows on from something that has already been shared.

(Sequence 3) 'Ich bin deine Schwester Emma' / 'I am your sister Emma.'

The sender now introduces herself. She marks her kinship relationship to the addressee and predicates herself from Angelina's perspective in the position she occupies for Angelina in the kinship system. Logically, it follows that both have the same mother or father or parents. The reading according to which a religious clergywoman could also express herself here can be ruled out, because she would have introduced herself as 'Sister Emma' without the personal pronoun ('your'). The personal pronoun forces the assumption of a kinship category. Logically, by the way, it is possible that there are other sisters with other names.

For the outsider, it becomes apparent that there must be exceptional circumstances here, because obviously the sisters do not know each other at all. They have either never lived together or it may have been only a short period of time long ago, so that they have subsequently lost touch with each other. It is not even certain whether Angelina even knows of her sister's existence. On the other hand, a quarrel can be ruled out as the background, because in such a case Emma would not introduce herself as if she were a stranger. Siblings who quarrel break off contact, sometimes to the point of death, but they still know very well who they are even after decades, and even if they would perhaps no longer recognise each other. Here, however, practical life contact can be ruled out; it is opened with this letter in the first place.

Such contact now raises numerous questions: Does one of the sisters still live with their parents? What are the reasons for their separation? Here, too, various options can be sketched out: Either the children have been orphaned and separated by a catastrophe such as war, displacement, accident or illness, or the parents had to give up or relinquish at least one of the girls sometime after their birth, so that she grew up elsewhere. A third option would be that the girls do not have the same

mother, but the same father, who had another child with another woman outside of an existing or then existing relationship, so that the sisters grew up separately from each other.

(Sequence 4) 'Ich bin 12 Jahre alt und lebe schon 10 Jahre und ein halbes Jahr in meiner Pflegefamilie.' / 'I am 12 years old and have been living in my foster family for 10 years and a half.'

The introduction continues, the reading finds its affirmation, after the two do not know each other. What does it mean when a girl is 12 years old? Some general characteristics can be listed. At twelve, a girl is at the beginning or in the middle of her puberty. The physical change towards sexual maturity has begun. Menstruation may have started, for example, and their appearance changes. In many industrialised countries, 12-year-olds already attend secondary school, the sixth or seventh grade depending on the age of enrolment and the school system. According to Piaget's developmental psychology, at the age of 12 adolescents are in the transition between the concrete-operational and formal-operational phases of their cognitive thinking. With the onset of adolescence, the desire for independence becomes great, questions about one's own identity become important: Who am I and will I be? What do I want to do with my life? Where do I come from? Detachment from the parental home is on the horizon with its many positive gains in freedom as well as threatening demands. Conflicts about domestic rules and norms are increasing. Contact with friends in the peer group is becoming more and more important and young people are very concerned with themselves and their appearance and how they are seen in the eyes of others. Of course, we don't know what exactly applies to Emma and how she experiences her twelfth year. But it can be hypothetically narrowed down.

If she now writes that she has been living in 'her' foster family for ten and a half years, this gives us further information that we can enter into the interpretation. First of all: She would have lived with her mother for a maximum of one and a half years, if there was no other previous outside care in infancy. It is striking that she explicitly mentions the half year and does not round it off. It seems to be very important to her to count each half year. She counts the years and the months, something that children living with their birth parents would never do in this way, because birth and admission to a family or length of stay and age would coincide and would never be considered worth mentioning. Here, however, the two stand apart. There was a life before foster care and a life after removal from the milieu of origin.

Life in the foster family is thus perceived and presented as a kind of special achievement. This special achievement is to be understood in a positive way: It is not 'counted down' as in the case of a prisoner in fortress detention who scribbles the days until his release on the wall, but the months of the stay are added up. It is counted as an achievement. Of course, this is very specific. It expresses that Emma does not take it for granted that she has lived this long in her foster family. She has indeed arrived there, because it is 'her' foster family with whom she identifies. But she has never managed to get rid of the worry of a possible renewed failure there. Only against the background of a possible failure is it a record to have lived there 'already ten and a half years.' The German particle 'schon' is to be read here in the sense of a positive valuation of something achieved. So Emma has not been able to integrate herself into her family in such a way that she has been able to put aside the worry of failure. We can only speculate about the reasons for this. Either she

herself clung to a special status as a guest, a foster child or a child in exile, or the foster parents were never able to give her the feeling that she was accepted unconditionally. Both together are also conceivable.

The fact that she speaks of 'her' foster family can only mean that she has nevertheless developed a bond of some kind with the people of this family. With such a long duration and the age of admission, anything else would also speak for a pedagogical disaster. We do not have to assume that here. Nevertheless, the way she speaks is also distancing; she does not speak of her 'new parents' or of the 'Meyer family.' She expresses that she understands her life as the fate of a foster child and as the source of a special life situation.

We can leave it open at this point whether Emma knows that the word 'foster family' is also an official term in Germany for those families who take in children from other people's parents without adopting them. Foster parents do not have custody and guardianship rights, which can remain with the natural parents or be transferred by the court to a legal guardian. Foster families also receive financial compensation from the state. This is regulated in the German Social Code § 33 SGB VIII. Foster families are assigned by youth welfare offices. However, Emma uses the term, and we follow her in it as long as we have no indication that her family deviates from it.

(Sequence 5) 'Ich hab dich ganz doll lieb' / 'I am fond of you/I love you very much.'

This is followed by a gesture of affection, which is nevertheless somewhat clichéd. 'Ganz doll' means something like 'immeasurable,' 'extraordinary.' While the German word 'lieben' (to love) and the phrase 'Ich liebe Dich!' (I love you!) are reserved for a special, extraordinary situations and are used for declarations of love from which something follows, the phrase 'lieb haben' (be fond of) is also said in everyday life, when one wants to remind someone of an affection which, however, is not critically in question. Or which one also says to someone whom one likes and who also knows this, but with whom one does not necessarily have to have an intimate partnership. That's why it's said even when not much depends on it. It is typical of youth jargon. It has even made it into its own acronym in WhatsApp communication (hdgdl).

It is striking that the formula is used although the author Emma does not yet know her addressee Angelina. How does she know whether she really 'loves' her? The formula therefore seems premature, even encroaching, since Emma cannot be sure that her professed affection is really welcome by Angelina. Even though it is somewhat clichéd, which can be less than binding, we must nevertheless not doubt that Emma does mean it. But what does this mean here, in the context of this letter? Emma unintentionally expresses that she does not derive her affection for Angelina from her and a perceived sympathy for her. After all, she has no contact with her. Rather, she derives the expression of affection from herself. One possibility: Because Emma has formed an inner image of Angelina that is great and likeable, just as fans form an image of their idols that they think are great, although this has less to do with reality than with their image and staging on a screen or stage. This would mean that Emma had already built up a fictional relationship with Angelina. And this would also give a motive for her inhibited impulse at the beginning of the letter to contact Angelina. For contacting her would put her sister's fictional imagination to the test and could destroy an idea she had perhaps grown fond of. The other possibility: Emma expresses affection out of a general normative expectation of

sibling solidarity, which she wants to live up to because 'sisters just love each other.' Angelina is assumed to be in need of affective solidarity from her sister and it must mean something to her when she is told that her sister loves her. The latter would mean that Emma does not wait to see if Angelina deserves or wants to reciprocate this sibling solidarity, but it is simply insinuated. And Emma claims to be able to perform it here in the name of a higher normative family bond.

Both interpretations ultimately converge in that Angelina is incorporated into an inner world of Emma. At the same time, the letter is an activity that exposes these inner worlds to a test of reality. That alone would be enough to motivate the initial uncertainty.

(Sequence 6) 'Ich hab dich ganz doll lieb und Mama hat dich auch ganz doll lieb, das weiß ich ganz genau.' / 'I am fond of you and Mum is fond of you very much too, I know that for sure.'

Emma even expands her statement and assures Angelina of her mother's affection. It is implied that Angelina does not know her mother, but that she is needy to hear that she loves her. It assumes that Angelina does not have sufficient contact with her mother, but she does. She becomes a transmitter here, a medium and witness to an experience with the mother. Her sister appears as a girl who longs for her mother and is unsure whether she is loved or not. Emma assures her of this. So the mother thinks of the children, loves them, is not malicious or indifferent, but is attached to her children. Whatever had caused the separation from the mother is not due to a lack of affection, but to other reasons: To illness, prison or the Youth Welfare Office, - in any case, an external power to which the mother has had to bow. But her love for the children themselves is true and unbroken.

Emma seems to make it her mission here to restore the affective cohesion of a family of origin. Knowing nothing of Angelina, she imposes this cohesion on her. She does not know whether Angelina also feels a desire for closeness right now. It stands to reason that she acts out her own longings and worries and transfers her desires to her sister.

Finally, the use of the child's pet name 'Mum' for the birth mother shows that the foster mother has not moved up to the position of an affective-intimate mother. A distance has always remained, while an originally existing symbiotic social relationship is maintained with the birth mother, although this social relationship can hardly have consisted of more than extraordinary visiting contacts after the child was one and a half years old.

(Sequence 7) 'Ich weiß leider nicht, wo Mama im Moment ist.' / 'Unfortunately I don't know where Mum is at the moment.'

Now the text comes to a dramatic head. Emma herself has lost contact with her mother. Her mother has disappeared and can no longer be reached. The news itself should also worry Angelina. There is the possibility that something has happened to the mother. Another motive becomes apparent as to why Emma is contacting Angelina at this point in time. Emma obviously had contact with her mother, but now she fears losing contact for good. It is conceivable that she is trying to compensate for the impending loss of contact with people from her family of origin by contacting her sister. At the same time, she makes herself into a person who actively does something for the cohesion of the family of origin.

(Sequence 8) 'Eins verspreche ich dir, dass Mama uns niemals vergessen wird' / 'One thing I promise you is that Mummy will never forget us.'

Now the assumptions become more and more gloomy. The mother is written off, never comes back. She doesn't die, but she falls into some kind of derangement and disappears forever into psychiatry or drug use or something else. But she will never forget her children. Why can Emma promise this? Apparently, she not only wishes it, but she firmly believes it. She appears here as a prophetess and witness to motherly love. It expresses her own hopes as unshakeable convictions. As it contrasts with the fact that Emma has not lived with her mother for years and that there must have been reasons for the original separation, this is of course an idealisation that is set against the contrary consideration that the mother may have abandoned or neglected her children. Another reading is more aggressive: 'I promise you one thing' also means that one will make sure that something happens. It shows traits of anger against the mother. Both readings, the certainty of never forgetting and the angry demand, are of course not compatible with each other and remain logically as well as affectively contradictory.

Against this background, we can further spell out our overall interpretation of the case. It stands to reason that Emma herself is in a biographical crisis, which is expressed here. She is going through puberty and is dealing with questions of her identity and detachment from the parental home. To do this, she needs stability. She has apparently also received this stability as a foster child over ten years. But this involves an inner identity as a foster child who knows and imagines a double belonging: On the one hand the belonging to her foster family in which she lives and goes through her socialisation processes, the world of reality, demands and conflicts. On the other hand, the affiliation to her family of origin, especially to her mother, which is not very real and which she idealises as a kind of fictitious family novel against the foster family. From this she draws strength and confidence in her conflicts and it gives her stability with regard to the pressing questions of puberty: Why is she alive at all? What are the motives for her birth? And does her mother (and father) like her? All these questions cannot be answered satisfactorily by the foster parents themselves. It is quite possible that detachment conflicts have already begun in her foster family. What is important for us, however, is that the stability of their construction is threatened because the birth mother has now disappeared. This coincidence is threatening for Emma. Her solution: She seeks contact with her sister and assumes the position of a 'big sister' who, as a substitute for the mother, ensures the cohesion of the family. She pushes into a position that the sister will find in need of help and consolation, while she is able to give that help.

This is a complex case hypothesis, but one that is inferred from the wording. It is not claimed that it has already been established. For this, further expressive figures, e.g. interviews with Emma, would have to be evaluated. But so far it is an interpretation that could plausibly explain what was said and that takes into account the details of the speech.

(Sequence 9) 'Ich bleibe dran mit Mama, dass auch du sie nochmal sehen kannst und ich sie nochmal sehen kann.' / 'I'll keep on with mum so that you can also see her again and I can see her again.'

The promise will be extended. The gloomy prognosis is also increased once again. Emma will actively work to regain contact with the mother. She promises a social

work-like, detective-like persistence, and presents herself as the one who, like a big sister, takes on the task and mission of taking care of the matter 'with mother' on Angelina's behalf. It seems as if Emma is expecting the worst and hopes to be able to see her mother at least once more. So it is about a last contact with the mother. The scenario is very bleak and suggests that the worst is to be expected and even a final contact is not certain. Therefore, Angelina would have to be grateful to her sister if she succeeded in making this last contact again. The message is: Here is someone who really cares about you and stands up for the family!

We can now summarily take note of the conclusion of the letter:

(Sequence 10) 'Ich hoffe, dass wir uns auch mal sehen bei Frau Lindenthal. Ich gebe dir ein Foto dann siehst du mal, wie ich aussehe.

Liebe Grüße

Deine Schwester'

'I hope we'll see each other at Mrs Lindenthal's. I'll give you a photo so you can see what I look like.

Best regards

Your sister'

The end of the letter returns to a rather unspectacular, pragmatic approach to contact and is also no longer phrased in a pushy way. 'Let's see' means to leave it to chance, not to purposefully bring about an opportunity, but merely to initiate it. Ms Lindenthal is the employee of a youth centre that both children know independently of each other, so the insinuation suggests. The desire to get to know each other is thus not intrusive at the crucial point, but reserved, and this seems quite appropriate considering that the sisters have not met before. Even the offer of a photo is mentioned as if in passing, 'then you'll see what I look like.' Emma insinuates a certain curiosity about Angelina's appearance, but she doesn't want to attach any further importance to it, but she doesn't shy away from expression of it either. It is noticeable that there is no longer any complicated action, but rather a completely appropriate childlike initiation of contact. The greeting is also friendly. Finally, the sentence 'I am fond of / love you' is handwritten under the word 'sister,' which reinforces the statement from the beginning of the letter. By the way, Angelina is nine years old at the time of the letter; neither sister has lived with the other for a single day with their common mother. When Angelina read the letter, she didn't react to it for a period of three months. Then she asked to get in contact with her sister but didn't renew it after a while. Their mother really had been absent due to her drug abuse and mental problems.

We have before us a letter with which a 12-year-old girl seeks initial contact with her sister, who is three years younger. Both are placed in different (specialised) foster families within the framework of youth welfare, where they have been living for years. Various reasons can be established from the letter that the letter writer Emma seeks contact with the sister also because she herself is in a crisis, although she instead suggests in the letter that Angelina has a crisis-like need for reassurance of the love of her mother and sister. Emma poses as a big sister who assures Angelina of her mother's and sister's love as representatives of the family of origin. She presumably engages in 'family cohesion' because the disappearance of her mother threatens the illusion of an idealised counter-concept to her own foster family and

Emma saves herself by taking Angelina's place as big sister and substitute for her mother.

The analysis of this letter was carried out in the context of a pedagogical consultation with Angelina's foster parents in a youth welfare organisation. The professionals wanted to know how Angelina should be accompanied and supported when she reads this letter with its stimuli.

5. Conclusion

I return to the starting point. First, I described the beginnings of Objective Hermeneutics based on empirical problems in the research project 'Parents and Schools'. Then I explained the basic methodological rules of sequence analysis and finally presented the procedure using an example. Now I revisit the notion of sequentiality. This is unfolded in Objective Hermeneutics largely independently of the development of conversation analysis. Although it ultimately refers to the same social phenomenon, the concept of sequentiality in Objective Hermeneutics means something different. It not only refers to the sequence of individual actions in interactions such as turn-taking, openings and closings, but to the sequential structure of the linguistic data itself, which generates a structure of meanings in a speech. These structures of meaning and the patterns of interpretation, which select some options and ignore others, are the real object of interest for Objective Hermeneutics. Although there are many similarities between conversation analysis and Objective Hermeneutics, e.g. the emphasis on the importance of interaction protocols collected in a real situation, or the importance of precise transcription of such audio recordings, the methodological differences are nevertheless unmistakable. Like conversation analysis, Objective Hermeneutics assumes that interactions are singular events that can only be explained by the circumstances of a specific situation. But in contrast to conversation analysis, Objective Hermeneutics assumes that higher-level social structures operate in them and regulate the way in which interactants conduct their conversation. These superordinate structures are, for example, habitual dispositions and interpretive patterns, which perceive or block objective possibilities of actions opened up in previous actions. Such a habitus is the biographical result of many other situations before, in which action problems were mastered for the first time and in which decisions were made successfully, decisions that have worked and therefore have become the basis for routines, which regulate an action in the present.

In our example, we were reconstructing the action of a pubescent girl within a complex family structure, which let her live without their mother in a context of youth welfare in a foster family. In detail, many questions were raised, but with little data we have developed a complex non-trivial hypothesis regarding the presumable biographical identity crisis of Emma in her foster family. Such a hypothesis could easily be corrected or specified more precisely through other data, discussions and surveys, so that conclusions and pedagogical recommendations can be based on it.

Objective Hermeneutics assumes that such dynamic structures of action can be reconstructed from the meaning structures of every type of textual protocols. It thus sees the reason that this is possible in the fact that structures of meaning are generated by two types of parameters, that can be reconstructed in a generally valid way.

The first parameter operates in and through the rules of grammar, syntax, logic, speech acts, and social rules of situational pragmatics (such as greetings etc.), which are shared by all actors. These rules open up objective meanings and connections that can be designed as hypothetical scenarios and must be explicated at any sequence if one wants to do justice to a piece of data, even if a potential scenario doesn't actually take place.

The second parameter is the entity that chooses from the given objective possibilities. It follows certain possibilities while it blocks or fends off others. This entity is the life practise itself, a person, a family, a company or country, every social entity, which makes its own decisions and has to live with them. Every life practise follows its own pattern. Every family or person is able to use chances, while it does not take advantages of others, which are nonetheless objectively possible. To explore those case specific patterns, it is useful to reconstruct protocols of interaction in which they occur.

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