

## Crime Narratives in Mandarin Police-Suspect Investigative Interview: Narrative Elements and Their Construction

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Received 3 March 2015; accepted 20 July 2015  
Published online 26 September 2015

### Abstract

Investigative interview is the process in which suspects recount and reconstruct past events. Police officers' participation plays a vital role in the construction of crime narratives. This study, through conversational analysis of Mandarin investigative interview, scrutinizes into narrative elements involved in crime narratives and their construction. It is found that: a) narrative elements embedded in investigative interview mainly involve abstract, main action and background information and a major part of crime narrative is on background information; b) crime narrative is constructed in the interaction between police officers and suspects. Narrative elements are usually co-constructed by police officers and suspects. Suspects complete their narrative through description, evaluation and explanation, while police officers actively participate in the narrative through backchannels and questioning in various ways; c) the participation of police officers in the narrative is constrained by institutional situation and their epistemic status of crimes.

**Key words:** Investigative interview; Narrative elements; Police officers; Suspects; Co-construction

Yao, Y. (2015). Crime Narratives in Mandarin Police-Suspect Investigative Interview: Narrative Elements and Their Construction. *Canadian Social Science*, 11(9), 52-59. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/7505>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/7505>

### INTRODUCTION

Storytelling plays a very important role in people's daily communication, through which tellers can share with others their own experience and at the same time storytelling can be used to activate communication atmosphere or persuade others. The study of storytelling can be attributed to narrative inquiry, which regards narrative as "universal mode that human beings use to organize individuals' survival experience and socio-cultural experience." (Zhao, 2013, p.1)

Research on narrative has developed from classical structuralism to postclassical new narratology. New narratology focuses on narrative forms and functions, and has been widely addressed in psychology, pedagogy, anthropology, sociology, linguistics and law, etc.. Traditional narrative inquiry usually used static texts or literary works as the research object, focusing on narrators' identity and life style which were embodied in the texts. New narratology starts to involve the study of dynamic narratives, namely storytelling in everyday conversation, not only focusing on the language devices used by storytellers, but recipients' verbal or nonverbal reactions in storytelling. Current linguistic studies on storytelling are mainly limited in everyday conversation, with researchers' interest in narrative language and construction of narrators' identities, sequential conversational environment of storytelling, functions of storytelling in conversation and recipients' participation in conversation (Archakis & Takona, 2012; Liddicoat, 2007; Norrick, 2012; Schegloff, 2007; Tolins & Fox Tree, 2014; Zhao, 2013, 2014). In addition to naturally occurring everyday conversation, narrative inquiry has also been extended to language education, medicine, law, language, and many other research areas (Bilmes, 2012; Juzwik et al., 2008; Razmia et al., 2014).

Narratives widely exist in police-suspect investigative interviews, with suspects acting as narrators and police officers acting as recipients. Police officers play a vital role in suspects' telling of stories. They "control the narrative process and specific topics involved in the telling, evaluating the credibility and validity of suspects' stories, foregrounding information with legal significance and backgrounding information with less legal significance" (Huang, 2012, p.94). Thus, investigative interview is the process in which suspects recount and reconstruct past events to police officers through storytelling and police officers' participation is of vital importance to the construction of the whole crime narrative. Crime narrative is accomplished through the interaction between police officers and suspects. Limited studies, however, explore the construction of crime stories from the perspective of conversational narrative. Based on this, this study intends to scrutinize into the internal narrative structure and co-construction of narrative elements of crime stories involved in Mandarin police-suspect investigative interview.

## 1. DATA AND RESEARCH METHOD

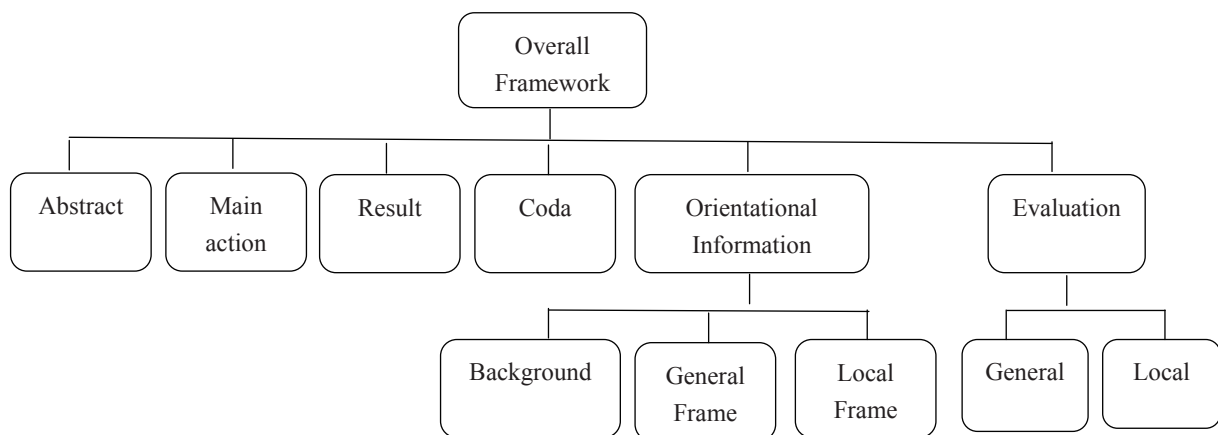
The data in the present study are approximately 100 interviews between police officers and arrested suspects. These interviews took place and were recorded at various police stations in one of the major China provinces from 2008 to 2012. The cases involved are mainly neighbourhood crime and other community problems. The data were collected at the police stations' data storage departments and transcribed using Jefferson's (2004) system for conversation analysis. During the process of transcription, place names and people's names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Conversation analysis is adopted as the research method for the present study. Conversation analysis aims to explore the patterns, structures and practices that are to be found in conversation: turns at talk and turn taking, turn design, social action, and sequence organization

(Drew, 2005, p.79). This study makes the whole crime narrative as the research object, with narrative elements and co-construction of crime stories as the focus. In so doing, characteristics of crime narratives in Mandarin police-suspect investigative interviews may be analyzed from a different perspective.

## 2. ELEMENTS OF CRIME NARRATIVE

The storytelling process in everyday conversation is not disorderly, but follows a certain pattern. Not only the story itself but also interaction embedded by stories exhibits specific sequential characteristics. According to Labov (1972), narrative framework consists of six elements: abstract, orientation, complicating actions, evaluation, result and coda. These elements are not necessarily presented in a fixed order, because the expression of each of these elements in specific narratives is different. But stories must be represented by a set of temporally ordered and causally connected events. Labov's narrative mode, undoubtedly, can help describe and explain some oral narratives, it is, however, puts much emphasis on narrators' language, while neglects the interaction between narrators and recipients. Based on this, Polanyi (1985) expanded the study on oral narrative by presenting that narrative was composed by different narrative clauses, which could provide a complete explanation of the story. Polanyi's conversational storytelling emphasized the co-narration completed by storytellers and recipients. Based on the ideas of both Labov and Polanyi, Norrick (2000, p.29) reclassified the elements of oral narratives. He identified abstract, main action, resolution and coda as well as various types of orientational information (background, general frame, local frame) and evaluation (general versus local). By reference to Labov's (1972) and Norrick's (2000) classification of narrative elements, we can summarize below the internal structure of oral narratives and explore the elements involved in crime narratives.



**Figure 1**  
**Overall Structure of Oral Narrative**

*Abstract* is a brief statement of the theme from the story, usually presented in a sentence or two, with its purpose to arouse the audience's interests. The abstract of crime narrative is usually the summary of crime stories, which can be pointed out by police officers at the beginning of the investigative interview. For instance, police officers can use the following sentences to start the interview, "Why do you fight with xxx today? Tell us what has happened." Or "Tell us why you take crossbow today". The abstract of crime narrative can also be expressed out by the suspects under police officers' initiation. For example, in an interview on gambling, at the very beginning, the police asked: "Do you know why you were summoned to the police station?" The suspect replied: "playing cards". "Playing cards" is thus the abstract of the crime. *Main action* in crime narrative refers to the main events involved in the narration about the crime, which can be analyzed using Polanyi's narrative clauses. For example, main events involved in the narrative of a case about carrying fireworks illegally are listed as follows: "The suspect called the boss; the boss asked the suspect to carry the fireworks; the suspect went to X's house to carry fireworks"; main events involved in a gambling case are: "The suspect visited X; After he arrived at X's house, the suspect called Y; Z happened to come; X, Z and the suspect gambled". The main events involved in this study are mainly those which can be placed temporally. *Result* is the concluding part of a narrative, usually signifying the end of the story. Suspects could refer directly to the result of the crime, for example, "...I planned to post fliers in other villages, but was detected by the police and was brought to the police station". Even though participators of narrative (in this case police officers and suspects) did not refer to the result of the crime directly, we could still make an inference according to our common sense that the result of crime narrative should be "suspects" being arrested by the police". *Coda* signifies the ending of the narrative, during which narrators could relate the story told to the present life or events happening on other occasions. Coda in crime narrative is usually related to suspects' attitude and coding strategy to the effects of their crimes. For example, in a narrative on the case of picking a quarrel and challenging a fight, the suspect expressed his desire to take the consequences, "I would pay ten thousand RMB for medical bills".

*Oriental information* provides background information of the story, such as time, location and characters involved in the story. According to Norrick (2000, pp.33-34), *general frame* subordinated to orientational information mainly includes the time and place of information, such as the location of the story and the storyteller's age when the story happened. *Local frame* directly points to the specific time involved in the story, for example, "this particular time" or "tonight" etc.. To facilitate the present analysis, the location of the case

is classified to general frame, while the time of the case to local frame. Other relevant information, such as suspects' motivation, means of committing crimes (gambling sites, gambling rules) is classified to background information. Crime narrative is largely carried out around background information. In a gambling case, background information involved in suspects' narration is as follows: "Take turns to be bankers with five RMB at the bottom, twenty-five RMB at the top; could win fifty or sixty RMB at a round; gambling at X's at the same village; no bonus for X; 200 RMB was put on the desk; neither lose nor win". Making distinctions of orientational information could "highlight the sorts of clues a hearer might use in understanding the story, and they reveal teller strategies of recall and verbalization" (Norrick, 2000, p.34). *Evaluation* usually refers to the cause of the narrative and to the purpose of the narrator by telling the story. Evaluation can be clearly put forward in the narrative, and may also be embedded in an inexplicit way. Local evaluation in crime narrative is developed around one main event in the case, for example, "I did not feel good because somebody hit me", "I just wanted to help him"; general evaluation is usually the suspects' attitude towards the crime they committed, such as "I know I did something wrong"; "I should not have stolen"; "I realized my mistake".

The above analysis confirms that narrative behaviors exist in suspects' confessing to crimes, which can be analyzed using the internal narrative framework. Mandarin police-suspect investigative interview is composed of two parts, procedural questions and substantive questions. Procedural questions are largely used to know the name, age, ID numbers, and family members of suspects, while substantive questions are about crime stories. Thus, this study mainly draws on the data belonging to substantive questioning. Not all crime narratives can involve all the narrative elements mentioned above. Through the analysis of narrative elements involved in 100 public security cases, we can find the characteristics of frequency of narrative elements in crime narratives. Crime narratives mainly involve the elements of abstract, main action and orientational information. All the narratives of the 100 public security cases involve the element of background information (the narration of suspects' motivations, crime gang, means of committing a crime, etc.). By examining the narrative elements involved in crime narratives, we could find the characteristics of crime narrative from the perspective of narrative structure. For example, most of the crime narratives involved abstract (74%); police officers placed extra emphasis on the questioning of relevant background information; although narrators seldom referred to the result of the crime (25%), we could make an inference that the result of all the cases should be "being arrested by the police"; suspects committing the same crime may provide different background information, which provides a basis for a

second investigative interview. Analyzing crime narratives by referring to internal narrative framework could help the police acquire relevant crime information as soon as possible, thus facilitating the process of investigative interview. For instance, by using orientational information provided by suspects, police officers could get to know the fact of the whole case, including crime related characters, time, place, motivation, means of committing a crime and consequences of the crime, etc.. Besides, specific background information could help the police in determining conviction and measurement of penalty.

### 3. CO-CONSTRUCTION OF CRIME NARRATIVE

As the people who experience the whole event, suspects undoubtedly have the highest epistemic status of crimes, therefore it is natural that narrative elements of crimes are mainly provided by suspects. Police officers, however, should actively participate in crime narratives, trying to get the details of crimes through questioning. Police officers' participation plays a vital role in the construction of narrative elements such as abstract, main action and background information.

#### 3.1 Co-Construction of Abstract

Abstract of crime narrative is usually presented at the very beginning of investigative interview. The following example is the beginning of an interview with a female suspect arrested for assault, which includes 11 turns altogether. The abstract of this story is that the suspect quarreled and fought with X's wife. This abstract is not actively provided by the suspect, but was initiated by the police officers. The first police officer used the pre-inquiry sequence (line 1 and line 3) to ask the suspect whether something happened in her village at 7 o'clock. After the officer got the positive reply from the suspect (line 4), he asked directly what kind of thing that happened and helped the suspect present the abstract of the story. And in line 11, the first police officer directly asked the suspect to tell the details of the story. Therefore, it is the police officer who helped the narrator present the abstract and start the crime narrative.

- (1)
- 01 P1: JinTian jiao ni lai ne jiushi wen wen jintian zaoshang qidian laizhong Today call you come that is ask ask today morning seven o'clock Today we called you to come here in order to ask you
- 02 S: En.  
En.  
En.
- 03 P1: E: you shenme shi fasheng ma? Zai ni zhuangshang?  
Uh: have what thing happen at your village on

- Whether at your village something happened at seven o'clock.
- 04 S: En: fasheng le  
En: happened  
En: Something happened.
- 05 P1: Shenme shi a?  
What event  
What happened?
- 06 S: Jiushi e: : X shenme hehe=  
That is, Uh: : X what (hhenhh)  
That is, Uh: : X-- (hhenhh)
- 07 P2: =ni gen shui a X'xifu naozhang shiba  
=You with whom, X's wife quarreled, yes  
=You quarreled with X's wife, didn't you?
- 08 S: Ai X naozhang lai  
Yes X quarreled  
Yes, I quarreled with X.
- 09 P2: O.  
Oh.  
Oh.
- 10 S: Ta shao zhi lai mei daqiang da wo le naozhang le keshi  
She burn paper no speaking hit me fight but She ignored me and hit me when she was burning pilgrim paper.  
I quarreled with her.
- 11 P1: Ni bana qingkuang xiangxi shuoshuo  
You that condition detailed tell tell  
Tell us what happened in details.  
(P1=First police officer; S=Suspect; P2=Second police officer)

Besides, the abstract of crime narrative can also be presented directly by police officers, which can be exemplified by except 2 and 3.

- (2)
- 01 P: Ni shuoshuo jintian yinwei shenme gen X naozhang de?  
You tell tell today why what with X quarreled
- 02 Ni ba jingguo shuoshuo lai  
you process tell tell.  
Tell us why you quarreled with X today.
- 03 S: Ta: zaochen qi dian  
She morning seven o'clock  
At seven in the morning, she:
- (3)
- 01 P: Lai shuoshuo ni dai nu de qingkuang lai  
Come tell tell you take crossbow details  
Tell us why you take the crossbow with you.
- 02 S: An daizhe nu-an qu da jiaquezi lai  
I took crossbow I go shoot sparrows  
I took my crossbow in order to shoot sparrows.

In the above two excerpts, it is the police officer who directly presented the abstract and started the whole narrative, which is different from oral narrative in daily conversation. In everyday conversation, usually it is the



storyteller who gets the telling right through the pre-announcement sequence, while in investigative interview, narrators (in this sense suspects) started the storytelling under the guidance of police officers. Suspects usually do not confess to crimes voluntarily. Thus, the abstract of crime narrative is co-constructed by police officers.

### 3.2 Co-Construction of Main Action

During the process of storytelling, it is narrators who occupy long turns to finish the telling of stories, while at the same time recipients should make appropriate feedback to the narrators.

Specific backchannels, such as *oh wow*, are context sensitive in that they express addressees' responses to the content of the previous turn. Generic backchannels, such as *uh huh* or *yeah*, respond not to the content of the previous talk, but rather to the need to display understanding and continued attention to the speaker. (Tolins & Fox Tree, 2014, p.154)

During the interview, police officers' use of generic backchannels usually signifies their continued attention to suspects' narration, which could co-construct the main action with suspects. For instance, suspects would narrate the main events involved in the cases, which are presented through a long speaking turn composed of several TCUs. During this process, police officers would utter generic backchannel tokens such as "*Oh, En, A*" to show his participation in the narration. Backchannels at different places of the turns play different roles in the narrative. Through the analysis of location where generic backchannels occur, we could find these backchannels could occur in the middle of suspects' speaking turns or after their speaking turns. Backchannel occurring in the middle of the speaking turns signifies police officers' support to the suspects, with its purpose to show attention to the narration while not to grab the speaking turn. Take Excerpt 4 as an example.

- (4)
- 01 S: Ma de shihou ta ye meigan chulai  
Curse when he too not dare come out  
He didn't dare to come out while I was cursing.
- 02 P: O.  
Oh.  
Oh.
- 03 S: Wo yibian mazhe yibian shuo, zhiyao ni  
chulai, ni jintian I when was cursing when  
saying as long as you come out, you today
- 04 ni fanzheng zaowan ni dei chulai, you no  
matter how sooner or later you have to come out,
- 05 ni chulai wo-wo jiu kan si ni, wo kan yige  
zhuan yige you come out, I-I will chop die you  
I chop one win one When I was cursing I was  
saying: "as long as you come out today, I will kill  
you. I will be the winner if I kill you".
- 06 P: En.  
En.  
En.

- 07 S: Ai. Kan yige gouben kan liangge zhuan yige  
Yes chop one recover cost chop two win one  
Yes. I will be the winner even when I kill only  
one person.
- 08 P: Oooo.  
OhOhOhOh  
OhOhOhOh
- 09 S: Ai. Ta yizhi jiu mei chulai.  
Yes he always did not come out  
Yes. He did not come out.

Example 4 is excerpted from a case of threatening others. Lines 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9 constitute suspects' speaking turn, during which the police officer utters brief verbal feedback "*Oh*", "*En*", "*OhOhOhOh*" in line 2, line 6 and line 8 respectively. These backchannels did not stop the suspect's turn, while encouraged the suspect to finish his turn. After the officer uttered these backchannels in line 6 and line 8, the suspect expressed his attention to these backchannels and continued his narration. Besides, in the interaction between suspects and police officers, police officers often use narrative continuers which make the suspects' subsequent telling turns involve new information related to crimes. For example,

- (5)
- 01 P: Dangshi nage X ganma lai?  
At that time that X do what  
What was X doing at that time?
- 02 S: X cong cheshang dengzhe de  
X from car on waiting  
X was waiting in the car.
- 03 P: Cong cheshang dengzhe de? Jiushi dengyu gei  
nimen kanzhe ren bei, From car on waiting that  
is equal give you watch people
- 04 kanzhe laileren hao han nimen kuai pao a, shiba?  
Watching come people good shout you quickly  
run yes  
Waiting in the car? He was waiting to watch on  
and give warnings to you when other people  
approached, wasn't he?
- 05 S: Shide  
Yes.  
Yes.
- 06 P: Ranhou ne?  
Then  
What happened then?
- 07 S: Ranhou zhai wan gua an jiu shunzhe lu  
wang bei zou.  
Then pick finish watermelon I did along road  
to north walk.  
After we finished picking out watermelons, we  
went to north along the road.

In line 6 the police officer uttered narrative continuer "*ranhou ne* (What happened then?)", and the suspect provided information of new event in the subsequent turn "*Ranhou zhai wan gua an jiu shunzhe lu wang bei*

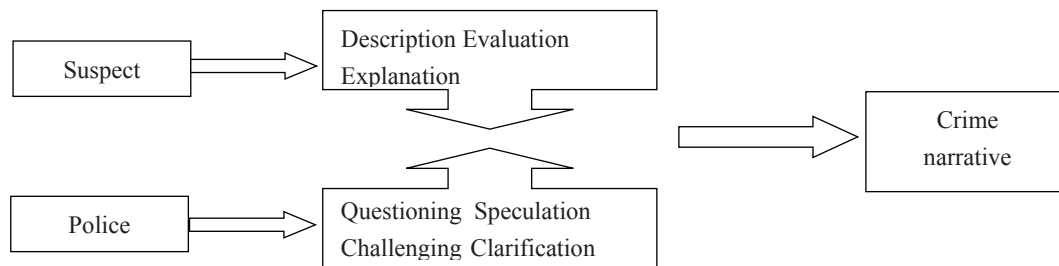
zou (After we finished picking out watermelons, we went to north along the road)". There are several kinds of continuers occurring in the interview: "jiezhe shuo (Continue talking)", "jixu shuo (Continue talking)", "ranhou ne (What happened then)", "houlai ne (What happened afterwards?" "houlai you zenmeyang le (what happened afterwards?)", "zenme nong de (how is it to be so?)", etc.. These narrative continuers occurred frequently in the police officers' speaking turns, and all their subsequent turns involved the suspects' new information related to the crime. Thus, police officers' use of backchannels could exert active effects on suspects' construction of main events.

### 3.3 Co-Construction of Background Information

The suspect's narrative is the description of crime stories based on a certain order and contains the evaluation and explanation of narrative elements. Suspects' crime narrative usually involve the elements such as time and location of events which can be classified to orientational information, and if they do not mention the relevant background information, police officers would in time intervene and ask them to provide some details. Thus, the question-answer sequences in crime narrative are mainly carried out around background information. In question-answer sequences, police officers "different means of questioning would exert great influence on suspects"

narration, such as acquiring new information, asking for confirmation and challenging the suspects' narration. Acquiring new information usually is completed through the first turns of question-answer sequences, such as wh-questions or polar questions, while asking for confirmation is through the polar questions and tag questions. Besides, police officers could also challenge the suspects' narration through polar questions which can elicit new background information from the suspects.

Although background information of crimes is finally provided or confirmed by the suspects, police officers play a very important role in its construction. Investigative interview is dominated by police officers and their participation is prevalent in the narrative, such as starting and ending the narrative, promoting the narrative process, improving the narrative content and changing the direction of narrative. Police officers' participation steers the whole crime narrative and the final narrative is actually co-constructed by both police officers and suspects in the interview. The construction of crime story is a kind of conversational narrative. By referring to Ochs and Capps's (2001, pp.18-19) model for conversational narrative, we could make a conversational narrative model of investigative interview, which can be used to explain how police officers and suspects co-construct crime narrative in the interaction.



**Figure 2**  
**Conversational Narrative Construction of Crime Narrative**

Crime narrative is co-constructed by both police officers and suspects and the process of suspects' description, evaluation and explanation of crimes is closely related with police officers' questioning, suspicion, challenge and clarification. Police officers would use different kinds of questions to ask suspects to describe or explain the details of crime, while suspects' narration would follow a certain kind of order, such as the order of time or the order of cause and effect, and the narration would also involve suspects' evaluation of certain events. Suspects' narration would at the same time cause the feedback from police officers, and police officers would speculate or challenge suspects' narration or ask the suspects to confirm some details. Therefore, crime narrative is co-constructed by police officers and suspects, which is obviously different from the narrator-dominated oral narrative in Labov's study.

The roles of police officers and suspects as recipients and narrators respectively could also be changed in certain conversational environment. For example, police officers could also act as narrators, "narrating through questioning the suspects" (Yu, 2013, p.67). The reason and ways of police officers' participation in the narrative is presented in the following section.

## 4. INTERPRETATION OF POLICE OFFICERS' PARTICIPATION IN NARRATIVE

Investigative interview is a kind of interaction between police officers and suspects and the process of interrogation is also a kind of narrative process, which is composed of narrative participants, narrative medium and

narrative result. Detailed crime information is the result of conversational narrative, while conversational narrative is mainly referred to from the perspective of narrative medium, that is, narrative is not the solo narration of one single person but a kind of interaction. During the process of crime narrative, people who know the details of crimes are not limited to suspects, and police officers would participate in crime narrative through different kinds of means. Police officers' participation in narrative is constrained by institutional environment and their epistemic status of crimes.

First of all, as a kind of typical institutional discourse, investigative interview is goal-orientated. "Police officers should try to make the suspect voluntarily and truly confess to the crimes." (Wei, 2003, pp.5-6) When suspects' solo narration could not provide explicit and comprehensive description of the crime, police officers would in time intervene in the narrative and order the suspects to provide complete crime details.

Secondly, language devices used by police officers when participating in the narrative are determined by police officers' epistemic status of crimes. When participating in the crime narrative, police officers would select different language devices to perform one social action. For example, police officers could use polar questions or tag questions in their speaking turns to perform the social action of information confirmation, while select wh-questions or polar questions to perform the social action of acquiring information. In the meantime, the same language device could perform different social actions, for example, tag questions can be used by police officers to perform both the action of information confirmation and the action of facilitating the narrative process. The selection of questions depends on police officers' epistemic status of crime details. In the first turns of question-answer sequences, police officers used polar questions and tag questions to ask the suspects to confirm the information and these questions indicate police officers' known epistemic status of crime details. This, however, only applies to polar questions and tag questions occurring in the first turns of question-answer sequences and does not apply to other question types in that police officers with known epistemic status could also use other types of questions such as wh-questions to elicit detailed description of crimes from suspects.

Narrative in investigative interview is performed through a series of question-answer sequences. Both suspects who act as narrators and police officers who act as recipients should all be restrained by the specific institution—police station. In investigative interaction, most of the first pair parts of minimal adjacency pair are initiated by police officers, while suspects just narrate the details of story under the police officers' guidance. Police officers' means of questioning could exert great influence on suspects' narration. The analysis of question types and their sequential positions and functions could help

us discover how police officers' participation influence suspects' narration.

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## CONCLUSION

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Narrative is prevalent in investigative interview. Investigative interview is the process of suspects' reconstruction of what happened in the past. Through the analysis of narrative elements involved in 100 Mandarin investigative interviews, we could find that elements involved in crime narratives mainly focus on abstract, main action and background information, while question-answer sequences are largely about background information. Crime narrative is co-constructed in the interaction between police officers and suspects. In suspects' narrative process, police officers would participate actively by using brief verbal feedback and different kinds of questions. Crime narrative is dominated by police officers and police officers' participation can occur at every part of narrative, for example, starting the narrative, facilitating the narrative, perfecting the narrative or changing the direction of narrative. Crime narrative exists in a typical institutional environment and police officers' participation is constrained by this institutional setting and their epistemic status of crimes. Analyzing police officers' role in the construction of crime narrative from the perspective of conversational narrative can help police officers know better the process of investigative interview.

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