

# Becoming an Expert Interviewer – Part 1

*Assumption differs from derivation as theft differs from honest toil...Bertrand Russell*

Avinoam Sapir is a world authority on interrogation and questioning techniques and an adviser to the Mossad, FBI and ASIO, among other organisations. He says “*The more you load your questions with information, the less pure information you get back*” Sapir heads the U.S. based Laboratory for Scientific Interrogation. He says it’s just plain dumb to “*give away the intent of your line of questioning by loading it with the paraphernalia of your own prejudices*”. He quotes Deuteronomy (13:13 - 15) as an ideal definition of the identity of a professional questioner “*Thou shall inquire, make search, and ask diligently*”.

What Sapir is hinting at is the ‘loading’ of your questions with pre-suppositions, mind reads, hallucinations, inappropriate argument, multiple parts, double binds, and so on. Let’s analyse the above quote to get to the core of what he means:

*Thou shall inquire:* This can simply mean to examine or question. Sounds easy doesn’t it? But many people find it extremely difficult to examine without prejudice. They yield to powerful inner urges to filter information through their own personal maps of the world. This is more and less a natural human trait. A Master Interviewer, however, attempts to establish as neutral a questioning environment as is possible in the context and circumstances.

Establishing a neutral-ish questioning environment means suspending belief: belief in what you think *you* know and your beliefs about the person you’re questioning. It means choosing not to contrast your world-view with that of your interviewee. It means putting aside your assumptions, understandings, conclusions, prejudices, beliefs, values, attitudes, etc., from time to time during the encounter, so as to ‘unpack’ or reveal the so-called reality of your subject’s assumptions, judgements, conclusions, and so on. It involves entering a questioning encounter with a high quotient of fair-mindedness and a willingness to accept that your reality is not reality itself, but just a *picture* of reality: one of many.

*Make Search:* Look for clues. Think of a crime scene context. When competent investigators search a crime scene they search for *sameness and difference*. They keep a keen eye out for anything, no matter how small, which may not belong to the natural environment of the crime scene. They make few judgements on what they uncover at the scene, but catalogue their discoveries for further analysis. A skilled investigator will resist the temptation to prematurely leap to conclusions. S/he will endeavour to treat information and clues impartially, as fragments of a bigger, and yet unknown, picture. This contrasts with a person who fits the fragments into a picture they already have in mind.

*Ask diligently:* Asking and not ‘telling’. Any question will guide a subject towards a particular spectrum of answers. For example, asking a person a simple question like “what food do you eat?” directs the person towards a general domain of inquiry, and pre-supposes the person makes distinctions and choices in food. However the question “What meat do you like best?” assumes meat is something that is meant to be liked. It pre-supposes the person eats meat, has likes over dislikes, and make distinctions and choices in a particular category of food. The second question narrows the answer spectrum, and ‘tells’ the subject something. It makes assumptions that may not be valid and loads the question with the “paraphernalia of the questioner’s own prejudices”

What Sapir also says is that loaded questions *not only draw a flow of information from the interviewee to the interviewer, but transmit a flow of information from the interviewer to the interviewee*. He goes as far as to say

that the most serious impediment to the recovery of accurate, high value, information is the interviewer him/herself. He should know, as he's credited with having designed a scientific content analysis system which has a similar level of accuracy to that of a lie detector.

How does an interviewer become a serious impediment to the recovery of high value information? Sapir argues that questions can represent a "*short course for the subject on how to lie to us*". This has a particular bearing on political and investigative interviewing: the more you load your questions with information, the more you 'tell' an interviewee how much you know and what it is you're after.

Experienced public performers scan questions for clues of what the interviewer knows and where the questions are leading. This allows them to head the interviewer off at the pass well before s/he gets close enough to place them in a position of having to lie or conceal information. Purer questions (questions with fewer pre-suppositions etc.) give interviewees less opportunity to conceal certain facts, events, or actions.

In general information gathering, you can extend Sapir's hypothesis to mean that the more information you include in your questions the more 'contaminated' the responses will be. Lets take an analogy to explore the point further. Coffee is a compound we often drink to lubricate conversation. It's made up of a number of chemicals which give coffee its unique attributes, such as taste and aroma. It also contains a chemical that metabolises into a substance which actually changes human behaviour. Caffeine produces electro-chemical changes in the brain, which, in turn, stimulate behavioural change. That's why it's called a stimulant.

Consumed in large enough quantities, caffeine can contaminate your body to the point of causing physical harm. The occasional cup of coffee, we are told, is harmless, but drink enough of it and you'll damage your health. The same applies when you load your questions with the "paraphernalia of your own prejudices". A few pre-suppositions or assumptions in your questions are fine, but overdo it and you'll stimulate behavioural changes in your interviewees which seriously contaminate the results of your interviews.

Modern science has found a solution to the problem and designed a process which separates the caffeine from the coffee and substantially reduces the risk of unhealthy outcomes. We can apply a similar process to our questions. We can conduct "decaffeinated" interviews by seriously cutting down the contaminants in our questions. This will, correspondingly, increase the length and quality of answers. Taking as much of the caffeine as you can out of questions can elevate the 'purity' level of responses.

### **caffeinated questions**

Interviews can be 'adulterated' by questioners in a number of ways:

- the can bog the interview down in challenges of presuppositions
- they may provide clues, or cues, to the interviewee
- interviewers can impose their own world-views on the questioning process
- they could 'coach' the interviewee
- they frequently introduce two value logic to the process (either/or, black/white, right/wrong etc)
- they can lessen the opportunity for 'multilogical' dialogue (approaching issues from various points of view, multiple perspective's, different frames of reference and contexts, etc.)
- they can teach the interviewee how to lie
- they may inhibit the supply of high value information by the narrow parameters of their questions.

The above list covers some important elements of how information is 'contaminated' by questioners and questions. But, how specifically do they 'do' contamination? An answer lays in what you'll come to know as *presuppositions*.

What is a presupposition, and how do you identify it? The short answer is that presuppositions assume something. They are basic underlying assumptions that have to be made by questioners/listeners to make sense of a question or a statement. Linguistically, they can be described as a sentence which must be 'true' in order for another sentence to make sense. Rather than complicate matters with many linguistic distinctions, it may serve your purposes to think of presuppositions in a more general way. So, for the exercise, can you assume presuppositions are the *tested and untested assumptions* people include in questions and statements?

If you were asked, for example, "When are you going to stop lying to your partner?" certain things are assumed:

1. there exists someone termed a partner
2. someone is 'partnered' by/with you ("your" implying closeness/possession)
3. you are said/known to lie to this person
4. an implied standard dictates a need to stop
5. a time frame is assumed by "when"

The assumptions (presuppositions) contained in the above question could be entirely false. If they were, you may have to consider offering a denial. Denials by their nature direct attention towards what is being denied. If you are asked *not* to think of a pink elephant, what is the first thing you think of? A pink elephant of course! So, if your response to the original question was "I do *not* lie to my partner" the locus of attention would be placed on lying to your partner before those listening decided to assess the "not" you placed before the phrase "lie to my partner".

The question "I wonder if you're *not* overreacting to this?" not only means "I think you're overreacting to this" but will also be interpreted by those listening as such. The reason for this is that people cannot 'process' negatives. Assumptions/presuppositions can be unfair and can envelop interviews and conversations in senseless argument.

Presuppositions are often the stuff that not only overload, but also represent an unspoken part, or sub-text, of a question. They may or may not be accurate for the purpose. Another way of looking at presuppositions is to see them as *the things a questioner thinks s/he knows which can become part of the 'givens' of a question*. You can grasp the potential danger here, can you not? In order for a person to make 'sense' of a question you ask, that person has to consciously-unconsciously *accept, or challenge*, certain assumptions you have loaded into the question. This can have a major impact on the type of answers you elicit.

Here is a list of some of the environments in which these more generally defined presuppositions can occur. This list is incomplete, and represents some of the more common milieus where presuppositions can overload your questions. It may appear tougher reading at first, but, as you think about each of the examples below and relate them to your daily conversational experiences, you may come to realise that you instinctively notice presuppositions, even if you don't label them as such:

**existence.** Statements where the existence of some entity is assumed. It could be a person, animal, thing, or something that distinguishes a person, animal, or thing.

("I suddenly realised it wasn't the department, but the minister who was behind this")

Something was realised  
There exists an entity called the Department  
There exists a person named the Minister  
There exists a situation described as "this"

*In order for you to make sense of the sentence, you must 'accept' some of the presuppositions it contains. You are then confronted with a choice: which presuppositions will you question? If you accept the existence of the*

*minister, your question might be something like “And what was she (the minister) doing?”. If you choose not to accept the existence of the minister, your questions may run something like “Which Minister?” “How specifically do you know of her involvement?”*

Questions, similarly, can be loaded with presuppositions of Existence.

(“I wonder whether people are really aware of the unfair rules the banks have imposed on deposits?”)

- (i) There exist rules on deposits
- (ii) The word “aware” presupposes the rules are unfair. This is called a factive predicate, and to make sense of the question, the interviewee needs to accept as ‘true’ the clause following it, namely “the unfair rules”.
- (iii) A further presupposition that the banks may have acted arbitrarily is linked with the “unfair rules” being imposed.

*The above demonstrates an unfortunate trait in many contemporary interviews and everyday questioning encounters. Notice how the loading of the above question with assumptions and presuppositions of Existence, rather than unpacking statements which imply the existence of some thing, situation, distinction, etc., narrows the number of available responses. ‘Purer’ information-seeking questions can help you to uncover whether the givens of a statement are valid.*

**possibility.** Words which denote what is possible.

(“And as you can understand this issue boils down to a matter of choice”)

(“Do people realise how easy it can be to change their eating habits?”)

(“Can’t we be more flexible over waterfront practices?”)

- (I) Use of the modal operator of possibility “can” combined with the factive predicate “understand” presupposes that ‘choice’ is available.
- (ii) Use of possibility phrase ‘easy it can be’ assumes acceptance of changing eating habits. Also a conversational postulate (see below)
- (iii) ‘Can’t’ directs attention on flexibility and invites the interviewee to accept as true that a degree of ‘inflexibility’ occurs on the waterfront. It deflects the answer away from the issue of what is practised on the waterfront.

*When people apply words like should, can, have to, possible etc., notice how your attention is focused on the choice of possible/not possible, can/can’t, could/couldn’t etc., rather than the substance of the statement. For example: the focus in example (ii) is on the ease of change rather than the issue of whether eating habits should be changed or modified. Be careful with the use of these types of pre-suppositions. They can be inferred by listeners as lacking in objectivity.*

**cause - effect.** Statements which imply that an event of any kind is caused by a singular other event or person/s.

(“Does eating burnt meat cause cancer?”)

(“John only behaved that way because he was drunk”)

(“Didn’t your hasty and draconian actions cause the strike?”)

- (i) Presupposes that the singular act will cause complex biological reactions and produce cancer.
- (ii) Makes a sole connection between two events without acknowledging multiple-causation. The statement can be viewed as an absurdity. Presupposes a causal connection between consumption of alcohol and the sum of the behaviour exhibited.
- (iii) Presupposes that actions by one individual hijacked an entire process of free will and choice. False-to-fact because it assumes one individual can make another group of individuals act/feel in a certain way. Also use of “Didn’t” indicates pre-judgement. (see above references to “not”)

*Cause and Effect goes to the heart of how we construct our models of the world. People often connect different elements of their experience of the world and explain them in causal terms. The sentence “John only behaved that way because he was drunk” establishes a causal link between John’s behaviour and his observed drinking: John’s consumption of alcohol ‘caused’ him to engage in the implied unacceptable behaviour. Generally such linkages can be viewed as nonsense, as they fail to take into account the multiple causes and possible choices involved in highly complex behaviours and events.*

**complex equivalence.** Statements or questions assuming/implying that one thing is, equals, or means, another, or that the meaning is the same.

(“So, floating the Australian dollar means we’ll become more competitive?”)

(“You’re scowling at me, you’re angry with me”)

(“He is on the extreme right and that equals free market zealotry, doesn’t it?”)

- (i) Presupposes floating the dollar is equal to being more competitive. All other variables and probabilities have been omitted. Seems simplistic in the extreme.
- (ii) Presupposing that the facial pattern of a person means an expression of a specific emotion. This form of presupposition can be seen as tantamount to an hallucination.
- (iii) Presupposes all right-wingers may express the same enthusiasm. Fails to take into account an index of ideological viewpoints which may exist because of human differences.

**double binds.** Create the illusion of alternatives. They are a common currency of inexperienced questioners. If interviewers knowingly use Double Binds to create the impression of choice without having altruistic reasons for doing so, then you may call their morality into question. When Double Binds are applied for dishonourable reasons by people who are aware of their potency, challenge their apparent deception. Double Binds are also stock-in-trade of propagandists and other ‘toxic’ types who seek to manipulate public opinion.

(“Does the medical profession intend to press for a fee increase or will it push for gap insurance?”)

(“Do you want responsible Liberal government or another three years of Labor mismanagement?”)

(“Would you prefer to continue reading about Double Binds or would you like to know something about how “Why?” elicits non-answers?”)

- (i) This ‘naive’ question presupposes there are only two choices of action the medical profession can take. Introducing alternatives, such as the above, into questions can produce (a. embarrassing challenges from canny interviewees, (b. impoverished answers by limiting responses to the choices you have outlined, and (c. accusations of bias by those who know there are other choices available.
- (ii) This form of deliberately ‘manipulative’ Double Bind creates the illusion that the options are *absolute opposites*. The question presupposes an obligation to choose good over the implied incompetence of Labor. In reality, the choices outlined in the questions could simply represent the difference between savalloys and sausages. If you were to investigate the similarities, rather than the smallish differences, between the two major parties, you may discover they have much in common.
- (iii) Another form of ‘manipulative’ Double Bind. This type of choice-illusion question is often used in therapeutic situations. It’s useful with children who have an unstoppable urge to say “no” (Eg. “Would you like to put your toys away *now* or *before* you have your lunch?”) It’s also helpful in relationships where giving a partner complete choice is interpreted as not caring. (Eg. “Shall we stay home or go watch a movie?”) Notice in question three the options were limited to your continued reading, The option of not reading didn’t enter the equation.

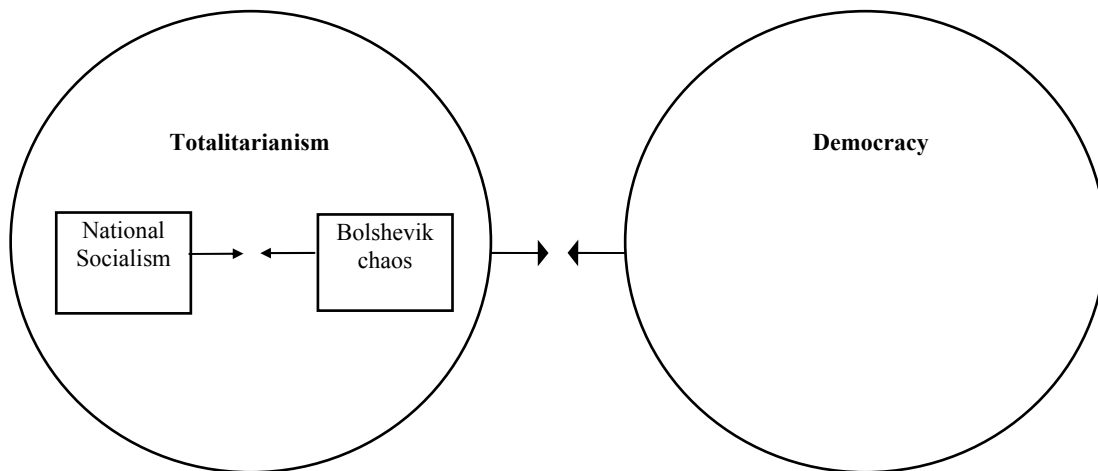
On the surface, you may imagine that adults would be impervious to Double Binds. Research conducted from the late nineteen-fifties to the nineteen-seventies indicates however that adults do indeed fall into the Double Bind trap. It’s postulated that the illusion created by a Double Bind impedes/obstructs the critical-analytic functions of the left hemisphere (the logical ‘side’ of the brain in normally organised people) and educes an unconscious acceptance of plausibility.

In his book, *The Language of Change*, Dr. Paul Watzlawick takes an infamous Double Bind and explains by way of a diagram how the ‘illusion’ of choice is created:

*“National Socialism or Bolshevik Chaos?”*

The Nazi Slogan implies the two ‘systems’ are like chalk and cheese. No third, fourth, etc., option is offered. Watzlawick suggests that, as soon as one steps up into a higher logical level, the illusion disappears. One way to do this is to ask the question “What are the two options (singularly, or

collectively) an example of?" The answer you may arrive at is that they're both totalitarian systems of government. To complete the exercise, now logically step sideways and ask yourself "What other systems of government can I compare them with?" Notice how the illusion disappears, and reasonable choice emerges, as shown in the diagram:



In the diagram above, we discover that National Socialism and Bolshevism are not extreme opposites, but bedfellows. By seeking comparisons with other models of government, you gain an idea of how illusory the so-called choice is.

While not always the case, Double Binds can often be identified by the word "or". Sensitise yourself to the word, and when you notice that it accompanies an illusion of choice, step up logically (as described above) and then step sideways to see if the illusion disappears.

**conversational postulate.** Questions which pre-suppose there are 'Yes' or 'No' answers. These classes of question are often predicated on the assumption that the world can be divided into black and white, right and wrong, yes and no. They can also be a sign of the questioner seeking validation of knowledge and status, using the interview as the means of achieving it. ("Don't you think that if the Prime Minister had chosen to take Pauline Hanson head on we wouldn't have the problem we have in Asia today?") ("Do you feel we need to explore other less simplistic solutions to the drug problem?") ("Is compassion enough when dealing with the unemployed?")

- (i) Requires the subject to say yes or no. The negative 'not' as in "Do not you think" presupposes the Prime Minister caused the "problem" by not confronting Hanson. Is a statement of the questioner's beliefs rather than a question and can be seen as an example of the interviewer reading his/her map on to the Prime Minister's territory.
- (ii) Requires acceptance or rebuttal. Presupposes current 'solutions' to drug problems are simplistic. Once again, a statement of the questioner's beliefs rather than a question. A better question would be something like "To what degree do these solutions address the complex and multiple causes of the drug problem?" Here, the presupposition of complexity more realistically reflects the drug conundrum.
- (iii) Presupposes at the deeper level that compassion isn't enough and a sub-text of being too soft on the unemployed. These types of yes/no questions limit the scope of available answers. A question, such as "What other things do you need to do to make work an attractive proposition to the serially unemployed?" presupposes a broader range of available options to be thought of.

*Conversational Postulates are a common feature of many media interviews and ordinary questioning situations. Their essence is that of eliciting answers within a fairly closed system of options. They frequently take the accusative form and tend to impede a search for answers outside the so-called 'known'.*

**mind reading.** The questioner or speaker claims to know what is going on inside the head of another person, or claims to have knowledge of the unobservable experiences of others without identifying the source of that knowledge. Can often be a projection of the assumption “Well, if I feel this way in these circumstances, so will everyone else”.

(“You really must have wondered whether you would ever get out of the avalanche.”)

(“So you don’t care about what happens to those aborigines whose land claims are rejected?”)

(“I’m sure you’re aware of the residents concerns, so how will you address them?”)

If you analyse the above ‘questions’ you’ll notice they presume knowledge of what the interviewees are experiencing-thinking-feeling internally. If you become aware of a Mind Read slipping out in your questioning, an interesting question to ask yourself is “How do I know?”. Notwithstanding the assistance of a higher force, the usual answer to that question is that you don’t know, so why suggest you do? If you think you do know, your options are obvious: enter therapy, or enter the ranks of the divine. (Note the illusion of choice!)

As you’ve come to be aware, there is a more precise way in which to enter the internal worlds of your subjects and interviewees - ask them to tell you. For example:

(i) “What things were racing through your mind as you were being swallowed by the avalanche?”

(ii) “What thoughts are you having about those aboriginal people who fail in their land claims?” (Note present tense used)

(iii) “What do you know of the resident’s concerns?”

There are many other forms of presupposition. Hopefully, the above have given you a taste for more. It may be useful to learn and be able to identify presuppositions because, apart from ‘overloading’ your questions at times, they can be used by speakers to ‘load’ answers, structure your thought patterns and enter your reality through the tradesmen’s entrance.

Choose to spend some time to notice how people make numerous assumptions about behaviour, ‘truth’, reality, and so on. Notice how their language, or choice of words, provides a powerful clue to their world-views.

When questions begin to make themselves busy in your mind, remember Sapir’s protocols of questioning: “*Thou shall inquire, make search, and ask diligently*”. Think of ways you can avoid loading your questions with *unnecessary* presuppositions and know that with the investment of a little repetitious learning you will be able to identify your lapses in nanoseconds, well before the offending presuppositions take flight from your tongue.