

# From belief to behavior: exploring what language research methods truly measure

Aleksandra Siemieniuk

VIZJA University, Poland, The Maria Grzegorzewska University, Poland

<https://doi.org/10.36505/TheLinguisticProceedings/2025/16/01/022/000682>

## Abstract

Research on language use often relies on self-report questionnaires. While efficient, this method captures beliefs about language rather than the behavior itself. This paper compares three methodological approaches: self-report questionnaires, an elicited-production task based on structured scenarios, and a semi-structured conversational task. Using examples from a study on self-presentation in Polish, I illustrate the type of data each method provides—from trait-level ratings to concrete utterances and co-constructed interaction. I argue that combining these approaches offers a more complete account of language use than any single method alone, providing a general framework for psycholinguistic research.

Keywords: methodology, self-report, elicited production, conversational analysis

## Introduction

Many aspects of language use are contextual and only partly conscious. Any empirical study must therefore choose what kind of data will represent the phenomenon.

In psychology and psycholinguistics, the default is self-report questionnaires, in which participants rate statements on a scale to produce trait-like scores. In linguistic research, researchers often use natural conversations, which provide rich detail but less control. Between these are elicited-production tasks, where participants produce language in response to controlled stimuli.

This paper takes a methodological perspective. It compares self-report, elicited production, and conversational data, asking: (i) what questions can each method answer? (ii) what are their main limitations? and (iii) whether we can use them interchangeably? I will use examples from my study on self-directed humour in Poland to illustrate the above-mentioned methods; the conclusions are general for linguistics researchers.

## Methodology

### Self-report questionnaires

Self-report instruments conceptualize language use as a subjective disposition. They are efficient for large samples and well-suited to questions such as “How do self-perceived communication styles relate to personality?” However, they

---

© The International Linguistic Society

Proceedings Phonetics 2025 Hong Kong: 16th International Conference on Linguistic Research and Applications

operate at a high level of abstraction. Respondents generalize across many episodes (“I often...”), which makes the method vulnerable to well-documented biases (Paulhus, 2002): (i) social desirability, (ii) recall bias, and (iii) limited meta-pragmatic awareness. Self-report provides information about self-construal, but almost no direct evidence of how language is actually used.

### Elicited Production from Structured Scenarios

A second family of methods elicits concrete utterances in response to controlled situations. Scenarios can be verbal or visual; in my research, I designed cartoons showing everyday mishaps, but the schema is similar for purely textual vignettes (see Figure 1).

Such tasks are placed somewhere between abstraction and naturalism (Gernsbacher & Foertsch, 1999). Contextual control is higher than in spontaneous data, because all participants face the same scenario. At the same time, behavioural specificity is greater than in self-report, because responses are actual examples of language use.

Imagine that you are a character in the illustration.

What message would you text to a friend about your work-from-home professionalism?

Enter at least 10 characters.



Figure 1. Example of a structured scenario used in the elicited-production task.

For example, in the scenario shown in Figure 1, one participant said, “Business on top, party on the bottom!” Another commented, “I am so bad at being professional when working from home.” Although both scored similarly on a self-defeating humour scale, their comments reveal different emotional tones. These differences are only visible through the actual language production. The scenario-based elicitation method allowed me to explore how interlocutors express self-evaluation both lexically and syntactically (e.g., through metaphors and hyperbole). However, we must be aware of limited assumptions about

language use drawn from this data; participants imagine scenarios rather than experiencing them.

### Conversational Methods

Conversational methods are based on the foundation that human communication is naturally interactive (Garrod & Pickering, 2007). Researchers might observe these interactions in natural settings during informal conversations or encourage participants to discuss specific topics. In my study, they openly shared their experiences on predetermined topics. Then, I reviewed transcripts and video recordings to identify gestures, facial expressions, and paralinguistic cues. All of them are crucial to analyse non-literal speech (Poggi & Vincze, 2018). Their role involves accurately interpreting the meaning of utterances.

It is illustrated in the following excerpt from the conversation on the topic: “Choose NFZ – because your health deserves the best!” (NFZ, the National Health Fund, is known in Poland for long waiting times and questionable quality). Let us examine the transcript by focusing solely on the verbal data.

Speaker 1 [SPK\_1]: I generally have an outstanding experience with the NFZ, and somehow it amuses me now, but on the other hand, it can only make me despair. I don't remember why, but I completely lost feeling in my hands, like it just cut off.

Speaker 2 [SPK\_2]: In your hands? Only?

SPK\_1: Yes, in my hands. [...] So we went to the hospital... we waited, I think, two hours... Doctor saw me. He did something like this and said I was just pretending and that I should leave...

SPK\_2: So I'm dying here, I mean.

SPK\_1: Yes... he did something like that and said, “Well, listen, madam. Generally, your daughter is pretending, so...”

First, SPK\_1 sets a complex emotional frame with resignation and a smile, which quickly gives way to a frown as she states, “It can only make me despair.” Her facial expressions reflect frustration. She uses a pinch gesture to illustrate her symptoms, making her account more vivid and believable.

A participant in the study emphasizes the doctor's dismissive gesture, in which he states she is ‘pretending.’ This physical cue shows disbelief and invalidates her experience. Conclusion, ‘Generally, your daughter is pretending,’ with a detached tone, confirms this invalidation. The contrast between SPK\_1's distress and the doctor's dismissive behaviour forms the story's core conflict.

The listener actively co-constructs the narration. Question, “In your hands? Only?”, with a leaned-forward posture and focused gaze, signals engagement. When SPK\_1 says, “So I'm dying here, I mean,” their facial expression shifts to frustration.

This approach reminds us that language is a social phenomenon—a system of meanings created collaboratively. It gives insights into the interlocutor's perspective and communication strategies. This interactive aspect of language is

almost impossible to be accurately studied through self-reports or isolated responses. However, this method reduces experimental control and increases transcription and coding costs.

## Conclusion

Table 1 shows that these three methods serve different purposes and are not interchangeable. Self-report is best for examining individual differences, elicited production for analyzing the linguistic structure of utterances in typical contexts, and conversational data are essential for studying interactional use and functions.

Table 1. Comparison of three approaches to studying language use.

Dimension	Questionnaire	Elicited Production	Conversation
Ecological Validity	↓↓	↓↑	↑↑
Researcher Control	↑↑	↓↑	↓↓
Linguistic Detail	↓↓	↓↑	↑↑
Researcher Effort	↓↓	↓↑	↑↑

## Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the National Science Center (NCN) in Poland, under Grant PRELUDIUM (2023/49/N/HS2/03693).

## References

- Paulhus, D.L. 2002. Socially desirable responding: The evolution of a construct. In H. I. Braun, D. N. Jackson, D. E. Wiley (Eds.), *The role of constructs in psychological and educational measurement* (pp. 49–69). Erlbaum.
- Gernsbacher, M.A., Foertsch, A. 1999. Using picture-priming to investigate the structure and growth of discourse representations. *Discourse Processes*, 27(2), 167–187.
- Garrod, S., Pickering, M. J. 2007. Alignment in dialogue. In Gernsbacher M.A. (Ed.), *Handbook of psycholinguistics* (pp. 305–325).
- Poggi, I., Vincze, V. 2018. The role of facial expression and tone of voice in expressing and recognizing irony. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 2368.