

BBC. The Language of Interviews

What is an interview?

An interview takes place between a presenter of a program – or *interviewer* – and someone who has been invited onto the program to speak about a particular topic – the *interviewee*. The interviewee is often an expert on the topic or someone who has strong opinions, for example a politician talking about the government or a cinema critic talking about a new film. The interviewer's task is to get the interviewee to say as much as possible about the topic, usually by asking many questions.

I. Here are three extracts from BBC World Service interviews with...

1. a **showbusiness news reporter**.
2. a **business reporter**.
3. a **film critic**.

Match the interviewee above with their interview below.

a) **Interviewer:** What are the words which really irritate you when they publicize their films?

Derek: Well, I think the word 'great' – great acting, great drama... but what's even more irritating is when they cut out of your review something slightly out of context so that you may say, 'Despite the fact that it's far too long, this is a pretty good movie' and they will say, 'A pretty good movie'.

Interviewer: So you have to be extremely careful when you're writing that nothing can be taken out of context.

Derek: Well, it's almost impossible because they'll take a couple of words out, whatever you say.

b) **Patrick:** Recently the trend is for mergers across borders and countries, and frequently this means one company buying another. But the phrase that is used is 'merger of equals' which frequently it's not. One company is simply buying the other.

Interviewer: And for one set of people involved in the company it's not good news.

Patrick: No, because often, from the top to the bottom, there are job losses.

c) **Tom:** When you go to cover these events, there are publicists out in force who want you to use showbiz language. On the other hand, I do try to damp it down because I do see showbusiness reporting as a journalistic endeavor. We're not just there to have a good time and fawn all over these glittering stars.

Interviewer: But I guess amongst all the glitter and all the glamour it must be hard not to be swept along.

Tom: Yes, I think it really occurs at the most intense level with the big Hollywood blockbusters because they make them into what they call 'event movies'.

II. Find three words in each passage which we associate with the interviewee's job.

III. Look at the interviewer's 'questions'. How many of them are real questions?

The Language of Interviewers

In the extracts above, we find only one example of a 'real' question: 'What are the words which really irritate you?' The other examples of the interviewer's speech are statements which the interviewee can agree with, or which can help him say more. So, for example, in **a**), the interviewer's comment (So you have to be careful...) shows the interviewee what the listener has understood from what he has said. In **c**) the interviewer gives his opinion of what life is like as a showbusiness reporter. This means that the interviewee has a point he can agree with and talk about further. When listening to interviews, remember that the interviewer's job is to **prompt** or help the interviewee to talk. If the interviewer uses too many direct questions, the interviewee will soon stop speaking. Therefore, the interviewer uses comments such as **conclusions**, **summaries**, and **contrasting opinions** to help the interviewee speak about the topic.

Listening task

When you next listen to an interview on the radio, try to focus on what the interviewer says. How many questions does he ask? What comments does he make? Listening closely to the interviewer will help you identify what the interviewee is going to talk about next.