

# *Description and levels of description of a lived experience.*

*Pierre Vermersch*

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A/- What is a description? Describe what? Why “levels” of description? Idea of a *description interview* rather than an explicitation interview?

► What does it mean to describe?

In a recent paper, I gave a detailed explanation of my position on the concept of description<sup>1</sup>. I will sum it up. To describe is neither to interpret, nor to comment, nor to analyse. The goal is to name in the least interpretive manner possible. And the way to achieve it is to be the closest possible to the facts. But this is only a regulating ideal, because putting something into language always leads to a partial unknown interpretation. In principle, there is no such thing as a pure description. But one can aim at producing a description that would be the least interpretative possible within the limits of his skills in mastering language. In the same way, a description is not an analysis, because the analysis should come after the description. But by segmenting the continuity of the lived experience in order to name its elements, one creates a first form of analysis, it is unavoidable, it is one of the important limits of using language.

► The descriptive goal of the explicitation interview.

The aim of the *description interview* is to acquire knowledge on the sequences of a lived experience by leading the one who is experiencing it<sup>2</sup> to describe it with words<sup>3</sup>. The description process will have two purposes. First of all, to have the one who is being interviewed put his experience into words with his very own vocabulary. Second of all, to mobilise an expert understanding of what it means to describe the sequences of a lived experience in a way that is firm and non-inductive. On the one hand, therefore, we have the spontaneous denominations of the person being interviewed, which reflect his own descriptive categories, and on the other hand the expert knowledge of the interviewer who knows what is needed (in structure) in order to generate a description of the sequences.

The interviewer guiding the interview has to be careful not to influence the denominations spontaneously produced by the one being interviewed, in other words, to not influence the interviewee's denomination of the content of his lived experience, in order to gather the exact words (the categories are underlying) of the one being interviewed. But, on his own, the interviewee will not go far. One has, therefore, to guide him in structure so that he will describe what he does not know how to describe spontaneously. For example, by asking a question about how the interviewee gathered his information, because it has not been expressed, but by guiding his attention towards “what are you taking into account at the moment” (the one he has just talked about) or “how did you know it was right?” (supposing he did use that word). Here lies all the quiet and subtle perlocutionary effects produced by language without content, language that denotes the attentional target but doesn't name its content. But, in order to do this, the interviewer always has in mind a grid of possible/necessary information that will make the lived experience sequences intelligible. This grid will allow him to notice what is missing, the omissions, the incompleteness, the fuzziness, the approximations. Not that he, himself, is aware of the content, but his own categorisation space will allow him to detect the absence of content and try to focus his attention, in the memory, on what is missing. Not by saying that it is missing, because this would be a judgement, and it would put the interviewee in a meta-position, making him judge/evaluate his own discourse, but by asking articulated questions about what he is saying :

and when you do x, what do you begin with (supposing that the interviewee has already named the action x)? And how did you know that you knew? (in order to obtain the information on the criteria of the end). Etc.

## B) The levels of description.

Now that the concept of description and the purpose of the description are made clear, it appears necessary to make a distinction within the description interview practice between the “levels of description” and the sequences of the lived experience. These levels of description will be defined from the point of view of the interviewer. I chose to call them “levels”, because there is clearly a gradation starting from the most evident, what appears the most easily to the consciousness (level 1, global description already rendered conscious) up to what is most concealed (level 4, organisational, organic, infra-conscious). But not only is there an evident concealed gradation, there is also a great difference of status between the levels: the first two describe the content of the lived experience; the third one describes states of consciousness that only have an indirect and allusive relation with the content of the lived experience. They are the intellectual feelings. The fourth one describes an organic reality, generally invisible but nonetheless essential, permanently active: the organisational dimension of the lived experience. Here are some characteristics of these four levels.

*L1 global level of a description of the conduct: the stages.*

A first<sup>4</sup> level of description (L1), concerns the principal stages of the lived experience. They were already reflexively conscious or weakly implicit. This level of description is the one which is spontaneous because it is easier to perceive during the re-memorisation.

In my example [reminder: I am giving an instruction to the group at the beginning of the awakened dream induction which I am supervising and, at a certain point, I apply it to myself. Therefore, there is a transition between the moment when I give the instruction and the moment when I end up answering it], a description of my conduct comes to me spontaneously which can easily be organised in four great stages that follow each other: stage 1: I decide to apply the instruction that I just gave to the group to myself [instruction summed-up: take the time to picture a pleasant place]; stage 2: I briefly mention, through a few images which do not contain much detail, a place in Dordogne where I recently went on holiday. Stage 3: I very quickly move on to the next evocation, four locations related to where I usually go for a walk, I do not remember them. Stage 4: progressively, a place imposes itself on me, a place that I discovered only recently and which is suitable for this exercise. These four stages are global, clearly organised. At this level of description, we know what happened, but we do not understand what happened, we do not yet have the intelligibility of my conduct.

*L2, detailed level of description of the conduct: fragmentation and expansion.*

The second level of description (N2), is the one that one can generate while being guided during a description interview, or by taking time for one or several self-description sessions (see the fine article by Claudine in this number). It is based on a fragmentation of the big stages into micro stages, then, eventually, into yet other elementary actions, and it will become possible to expand the properties, the qualities, contained within each of these moments, to better distinguish them from each other. This level is the opportunity to help become aware of what was pre-reflected at the moment of the action. The point of distinguishing this L2 from the first one is that this one is not accessible without a personal expertise (like the one you get from learning the self-description techniques). And if one does not have the personal expertise, without being guided by a description interview meant to lead to such a description. Because the point of this description interview is to generate verbalisations with this level of detail. One can also consider that this

level is based on surpassing what is implicit, particularly in relation with the limits of the act of consciousness. The description interview will lead to the reflecting act (the passage to the reflected consciousness) of what has been experienced on the pre-reflected consciousness mode. Therefore, the distinction between the L1 and the L2 is not only based on a difference in the level of detail, but on the fact that these details are implicit, pre-reflected, and that awareness, as much as acts of recollection, needs to be guided.

In my example, between the moment when I decide to apply the instruction to myself and the moment when I am picturing the first images of Dordogne, there is an interval which realises the transition, and I can name the presence of this interval between the two stages, even if I cannot say anything more about the content of this transition (see the N3 and N4); instruction ► transition ► pictures of Dordogne; stage 1 ► transition (1, 2) ► stage 2.

Then, in the next stage (stage 2) which consists in quickly examining the places in Dordogne, I can describe the fact that there are successively four weakly sketched images of different places. I could quite easily describe the content, the composition, my reaction to each of these images, but I would not be able to say clearly why I chose them, then dismissed them, etc... Stage 2 ► transition (2, 3) ► stage 3.

And so within the stage 2, there are four sub-stages, and the sections, the transitions, which put an end to the current act and turn towards the next one (each act of choosing and of processing each image is a stage).

S2 Dordogne ► stage 2,1 ► T ► stage 2,2 ► T ► stage 2,3 ► T ► stage 2,4 ► T (2, 3) ► S3

But even in this case it is very partial, because if I named the sub-stages correctly, I did not go into their detail, nor examine the transitions. For example, I only superficially gave a detail of these images' properties because I was guided and that the interviewer "kept me in touch with this past moment". Which means that, at the very beginning of the interview, this information was not yet available to me, I was not aware of the detail of what I had taken into account and I know that I did not finely examine the criteria used to choose, then to dismiss, each of these images that I saw stealthily and which would give us information on the transitions. The same applies to the following stages.

*L3 description of the non-thematic states of consciousness: the intellectual feelings.*

The level 3 of description (L3) is the "intellectual feelings" level (see Burloud). The intellectual feelings are superficially very various. It can be a corporeal feeling, a gesture, a feeling of movement, of distance, of being wrapped up or of direction, an image or the portion of an image without a direct link with the content of the thought, a symbol, a gap, a void, etc.

For example, when I describe my lived experience, I am riveted by the impression of a direction, a dynamic, then an image, which draws this direction or dynamic, a drawing in the shape of a vague spindle, moving from the bottom left up to the top right, like a symbolic image depicting velocity, a continuous movement from the beginning of the instruction until the result. Or, I become aware later, by going back to the description, that at the starting point of this spindle there is another layer and then there is an orange ball.

At first, this level appears to not make a lot of sense and it even seems like there is no need to take it into account. Therefore, it is only interesting if we understand that it is the "symbolic", "indirect", "non-verbal" expression of the level of thought that is operating but in an infra-conscious way (it is the word chosen by Burloud), or also at the level of the organism's potential. In fact, what is fascinating for us, is that the intellectual feeling is proof of the active, productive, oriented, adapted, finalised functioning of our organic cognition, not driven by the "I".

*N4, description of what presides the organisation of the conduct*

The level 4 is the organisational level of the sequences of the experienced acts. For this reason, it is a level that is practically invisible to the subject who, yet, implements it. Why would the organisational level be invisible to the one who experiences the situation?

An organisation, a schema for example, is like the structure of different possibles of a finalised action, with stages and junctions. At each junction is a test which allows one to stop what he is doing and decide what path will lead to the next stage. **This is why one cannot observe the schema**, only see the manifestation of it, because it is a structure which, in its whole, is going to modulate itself according to new criteria that appears in the situation and within the limits of its assimilating capacities (see the schemas and equilibrium theory by Piaget). So one never sees the schema, just its partial renewal, its instantiation, this is to say the sequence of actions. The fact that it is the manifestation of a schema must be *inferred* by crosschecking the form of repetitions, or by realising that the manner of proceeding is indirect, counter-intuitive, which would tend to prove that there is something else than spontaneity, or *recognised* by the one who experiences it and implements it like a schema. Recognised, means that the subject can identify in retrospect, or while he is acting, that he knows that what he is doing is the expression of a learnt, developed, already used organisation. But this recognition only easily applies to the most systemised procedures and that have already been rendered conscious by the exercise. It pertains to metacognition. Countless schemas and intentions have unwittingly been formed in our selves by the simple repetition of comparable situations. For us, the important methodological point is that these schemas can also be rendered conscious in retrospect.

The organisational level is the expression of our past. It is a structured sedimentation of our past accumulated experiences which underlies our activities and which expresses our tendencies, our attitudes and already established schemas (see Burloud). It does give us access to the grammar of our acts, but this grammar is itself pre-selected by our co-identities (see Claudine), so by our values, by the representation that we have of our mission. This is why the *spontaneous* or *provoked* apparition of intellectual feelings (L3) is appealing, because it both alerts and potentially informs us of the presence of this organisational level and of the possibility of using the intellectual feeling as the basis for a “universal focusing<sup>5</sup>” which will, in turn, lead oneself to ask himself this question: “what does it teach me? What is happening? Why do I proceed like I do?”. The L4 update is, therefore, not simply a work of description, as if the meaning was already there and that one only had to put it into words; nor simply a work of reflection, which would require reasoning from the intellectual feeling. But a work of what I call “reflètement<sup>6</sup>”, this is to say the mobilisation of a particular act which generates an *awakening intention* from questions such as “what does this teach me?”, and which collects the answer which has emerged. Or, very simply (I experienced this in my example and we find it in Claudine’s work) by maintaining an open contact with the intellectual feeling which appeared (“infusion” strategy, Dynèle would say). The “reflètement” is not a controlled act, but an invoked act, resulting from an awakening intention<sup>7</sup>.

For example, the intellectual feeling of a “spindle going through space” reveals itself first of all as the figuration of a dynamic organisation of my choices, dynamic which is there from the start and goes on constantly until the final result, as if (it) knew where (it) was going. But with this information that coats the figuration which itself expresses the feeling of velocity, I am still little informed about the intelligibility which has been animating this velocity from the beginning.

The next stage will be to be able to name the content of this “small orange ball” intellectual feeling that appears in the beginning, as being the “symbolisation” of a set of criteria that I could enounce without trouble and which actually animates my choices and my dismissals. More deeply will appear to me yet another intellectual feeling which will inform me of the presence of

a choice schema in this type of activity, founded on my equivalent experiences of guiding a supervised awaken dream. (the detailed examples will be presented and analysed in an article for the n°105 in collaboration with M. Maurel et J. Crozier).

What do you think?

Maybe, as Maryse Maurel suggested to me, this could allow you to reread the old interviews with new glasses, new categories.

*As far as I'm concerned, I feel that this new categorical organisation is very important.*