Police interviews with child witnesses
A conversation analysis

A lot is at stake when a police officer interviews a child as a witness of sexual violence. In court, sexual violence cases often depend on one main piece of evidence: the witness testimony by the victim. Therefore, interviewing guidelines are in use for police officers; these guidelines primarily aim at eliciting a reliable testimony from child witnesses. This thesis reports a detailed examination of how the interaction unfolds in Dutch police interviews with child witnesses and child victims, and how the interactional dynamics are affected by the guidelines.

This thesis draws on insights from conversation analysis and focuses on three main issues. First, it analyzes how police officers instruct children on what to do when, for example, the police officer gives an incorrect version of what the child has said. The analysis shows that the obligatory instructions sometimes generate undesirable communicative effects. Second, this thesis investigates spontaneous accounts provided by the children, and concludes that they possibly reflect a normative system that is related to the 'rape myth'. It also shows that police officers’ attempts to be neutral can be interactionally problematic. Finally, this thesis investigates how children respond to questions about their sources of knowledge (how do you know that?). Such questions are recommended by the guidelines to establish the quality of the evidence, but they regularly lead to interactional trouble of various kinds. The author offers several suggestions how to unite judicial demands for truth-seeking and conversational practice.