



Wheelchair attacks police

by Luke Prodromou

Here's a reading skills task for English teachers and their students: Read this text and answer the questions:

'Interviewer: There's a suggestion that you were rolling towards the police in your wheelchair. Is that true?'

1. Who is the interviewer talking to?
2. What kind of people use wheelchairs?
3. Who made the 'suggestion'?
4. Who does the 'rolling'?
5. In which direction is the 'rolling'?
6. What do you think is the purpose of the 'rolling'?

Like many people around the world, I was shocked by a video clip showing a man in a wheelchair being pulled forcefully from his wheelchair and then dragged across the tarmac of a London street by British policemen during a demonstration just before Christmas, 2010. It was a distressing sight. The context was a protest by students against the huge increase in University tuition fees proposed by the UK coalition government.

But people who saw this video clip were equally shocked by what followed. The 20-year old man in a wheelchair, Jody McIntyre, who suffers from cerebral palsy, was interviewed on 12 December by a BBC journalist, Ben Brown, ostensibly to get to the heart of the matter, the inhuman treatment by police of a disabled man. As the eight-minute interview developed, one became aware, through a subtle and I would say sinister use of language, that the helpless victim of police violence was being cast in the role of culprit, in other words as someone intent on physically attacking the police - with his wheelchair!

In this article, I focus on the linguistic strategy used by the BBC interviewer, in an attempt to demonize McIntyre. The BBC interview is preceded by a video extract showing edited images of the incident. Then Brown, the BBC presenter informs us that 'these pictures appear to show Jody McIntyre, 20 year old fiscal activist and blogger who suffers from cerebral palsy being pulled out of his wheelchair and dragged across the road to the pavement'. This use of the word 'appear' is surprising, bearing mind that we and the BBC man have just seen the young man palpably being dragged along the tarmac by police.

Then the presenter reads out a statement by the London police which focuses on the fact that McIntyre has not yet made a complaint to the police. This point is taken up early on in the interview:

Interviewer: The police say you haven't made any kind of complaint, so why not?

And again:

Interviewer: It's been a few days since this happened. Why haven't you complained before? In discourse terms, the BBC man is speaking from the perspective of the London police: he repeats the police's focus on the lack of an official complaint by the alleged victim. Rhetorically speaking, the BBC presenter is reinforcing the attempt by the police to diminish the severity of the incident: the implication is that there is something suspicious about the victim's failure to make an official complaint, assuming the incident was as serious as the man in the wheelchair claims.

The reporter's second question is in the form of an impersonal statement followed by an interrogative:

'There's a suggestion that you were rolling towards the police in your wheelchair. Is that true?'

The significant thing about this line of questioning is that the impersonal declarative statement in combination with the agent-less noun in 'There's a suggestion...' is very vague: who exactly is responsible for the 'suggestion': the police? The press? bystanders? The speaker himself? We don't know, but we are left to 'fill in the gaps'. The use of the word 'rolling' is also odd, as if there man in the wheelchair is 'self-generating' or is some kind 'self-propelled' object: the choice of words and syntax allows the speaker to omit the agent: the person who was pushing the wheelchair (we learn later that this person was McIntyre's 16-year old brother). This clause, like the previous one, works by 'suggestion' or insinuation: we might well think that there is some vague evidence that the 'disabled person' consciously chose to attack the police by propelling his wheelchair menacingly in their direction.

The interviewee, McIntyre, however, re-establishes the heart of the matter - that the police were acting wrongly in dragging a young man with cerebral palsy from wheelchair and dragging him across the tarmac.

'Jody McIntyre: I think justifying a police officer pulling a disabled person out of a wheelchair and dragging them across a concrete road is quite ridiculous and I'm surprised that you've just tried to do so'.

The interviewer doesn't give up: he says for a second time, more directly, that McIntyre might have been attacking police with his wheelchair at the time of the incident: Interviewer: So that's not true, you were not wheeling yourself towards the police'.

McIntyre focuses on the audio-visual evidence of the film footage: Jody McIntyre: Well I can't physically use my wheelchair myself. My brother was pushing me. I think it's quite obvious from the footage that I was 100% not a threat to anyone. The journalist now adopts a new tactic: he links McIntyre's name with 'radical' and 'revolutionary' beliefs:

Interviewer: In the Observer newspaper you were described as a *cyber radical* and you were quoted as saying you want to build a *revolutionary* movement and that can only happen through direct action on the streets. Do you classify yourself as a *revolutionary*? (My italics).

McIntyre asserts his right to fight the cuts in education and re-establishes the theme of equality of opportunity in education:

Jody McIntyre: I don't classify myself as anything but I think we all have a right to fight against what the government are trying to do. They're trying to tier the education system whereby only the rich will be able to afford it. That is something that I think we should all be fighting against.

The journalist again takes up the motif of a dangerous radical a little bit later when he asks the man in the wheelchair whether he was throwing 'lumps of rock, missiles at the police'. McIntyre denies throwing anything at the police and picks up on his own agenda, 'the real issue', which is cuts in education spending.

Having drawn a blank in his attempt to justify in some way the action of the police, Brown asks whether McIntyre shouted 'anything provocative' at the police that might have 'induced' the police to drag him from his wheelchair.

Definition of 'Induce': to lead or move by persuasion or influence, as to some action or state of mind. The use of the word 'induce' makes the action of the police sound almost reasonable, as if they were making a rational response to the 'persuasive' behaviour of the man with cerebral palsy.

McIntyre's answer to this insinuation that the police were so threatened by verbal abuse as to justify their violent behaviour speaks for itself:

Jody McIntyre: Do you really think a person with cerebral palsy in a wheelchair can pose a threat to a police officer who is armed with weapons?

And the journalist's response to this is a last ditch attempt before the interview ends to suggest that it is OK to drag a dangerous, left-wing person with cerebral palsy who uses a wheelchair across the street:

Interviewer: But you do say that you're a revolutionary (NB: third use of the word 'revolutionary')

Jody McIntyre: I'm asking you: do you think I could have in any way posed a physical threat from the seat of my wheelchair to an army of police officers armed with weapons? This whole line of argument is absolutely ludicrous because you're blaming the victims of violence for that violence.

Instead of concluding this 'strange eventful history' with a reference to the clear use of excessive violence by the police towards a disabled person, the BBC presenter returns for the third time to why McIntyre has not yet made an official complaint about the incident:

Interviewer: When are you going to make your complaint to the police?

The rest you can follow up on the Internet. The video-clip and the BBC interview is available at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXNJ3MZ-AUo>

Jody McIntyre's blog is at:

<http://jodymcintyre.wordpress.com/>

They say that a 'dog bites man' is not news. When it's a case of 'man bites dog' then that is indeed newsworthy. The same could be said of the strange incident of the wheelchair that attacked the London Metropolitan Police.

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