



Interviews and Interaction as Sociolinguistic Data

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Torn between two methods: A confessional autobiography

- The dilemma of the sociocultural linguist: Disciplinary ideologies of methodology
 - Sociolinguistics (Conduct interviews!)
 - Linguistic anthropology (Document interaction!)
- The Bay City High School study (Northern California)
- The Orchard High School study (Southern California)
- The Nerd Girls in Paradise study (aka Female Undergraduate Science Majors at UCSB)

Methods for collecting spoken language data

- Researcher-driven methods: The structure of the interaction is guided by the researcher
 - Interviews
 - Focus groups (relatively rare in sociocultural linguistics)
- Speaker-driven methods: The structure of the interaction is guided by the study participants
 - Recordings of “naturally occurring” interaction
 - Peer conversation
 - Other forms of interaction and social activity
- Hybrid methods: Partially guided by the researcher and partially by the participants
 - Semistructured conversations (Alim 2004)

Research interview methods in sociocultural linguistics



- Sociolinguistic interviews
- Semi-structured interviews
- Ethnographic interviews



The sociolinguistic interview

- An experimental methodology devised by Labov (1972)
- Allows for the elicitation of a range of speech styles in a single interaction
 - The interviewer systematically manipulates the speech situation so that the interviewee will produce more vernacular-like or more standard-like speech
- Typically takes place in interviewee's space
- Widely used (with some adaptations) in quantitative sociolinguistics



The semi-structured interview

- Some questions are prepared in advance; others arise during the interview itself
- The interviewer may either remain detached (conventional social science) or foster rapport with the interviewee (more common in sociolinguistics)
- May or may not take place in interviewee's space
- Used in language attitude research, qualitative sociolinguistics, and quantitative sociolinguistics (often along with the sociolinguistic interview)

The ethnographic interview



- Conducted as part of a broader ethnographic study
 - There's no such thing as an ethnographic interview without ethnography (i.e., long-term participant-observation in a community with the goal of gaining cultural understanding from the inside)
- Questions are generated through participant-observation
- Takes place in interviewee's space and as much as possible according to interviewee's interactional rules (cf. Briggs 1986)
- Often used in linguistic anthropology and ethnographic sociolinguistics



The pros and cons of interviews

- Strengths

- Rapid
- Controlled (to some degree)
- Provide information about participant background, attitudes, etc. that may be difficult to gather by other means

- Limitations

- Reliance on interviewee self-report
- May approximate but do not fully capture the speaker's speech in everyday life

“Naturally occurring” interaction

- Peer conversation
 - Privileged data type for conversation analysis
- Other types of interaction and social activity
 - Researchers of institutional discourse (classrooms, courtrooms, politics, etc.)
 - Linguistic anthropologists documenting the speech events of a community
 - Often requires video-based data collection
 - Linguistic and social practices are embodied

The pros and cons of interactional data

- Strengths

- Gives a fuller picture of participants' everyday linguistic and cultural practices

- Limitations

- Some kinds of phenomena don't occur often enough for us to rely on interactional data alone

Conducting culturally meaningful interviews

- Develop your questions based on what you're seeing in the field, not a predetermined research agenda
 - Start with open-ended questions
 - Let people show/tell you what's important and then ask them about that
 - This is the process of ethnographic discovery
- Ask about the entire sociocultural matrix, not (just) language
- Figure out what your role in the community is, and play that role in the interview
 - Usually, this role is some variation of "clueless outsider"

Conducting culturally meaningful interviews

- Get to know people before you interview them
- Make the interview situation familiar/comfortable for the interviewee
 - Conduct it in their space
 - Act like a real person, not a researcher
 - Don't consult a written list of questions
 - Possibly include more than one person
 - Possibly enlist a culturally savvy fieldworker
- Try to approximate ordinary conversation
 - Certainly: Show interest
 - Possibly: Reciprocate stories, answer as well as ask questions, don't frame it as an interview
- But don't ever treat interview data as conversation—it's an entirely different genre

Recording culturally meaningful interaction



- Make the recording equipment as (visually and/or culturally) unobtrusive as possible
- Be a participant, not just an observer
 - Your own language socialization will help you understand local cultural practices
- Vary what/who you document to get a more complete picture
 - Focus on the margins and background as well as the front and center of an interaction or activity
 - Vary the location of the recorder or camera
- The recorder or camera provides a very partial record—take fieldnotes at the time or immediately afterward



Combining methodologies

- In data collection
 - Use interactional data to generate more interview questions
 - Use playback interviews (Gumperz 1982) to get participants' responses to the interaction
 - Look for background information, attitudes, etc. in interaction
- In data analysis
 - Analyze interviews interactionally
 - Not just for their content or as a medium from which to extract variables
 - Analyze linguistic variables in interaction
 - Compare findings from both types of data



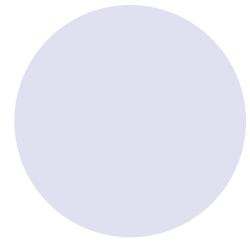
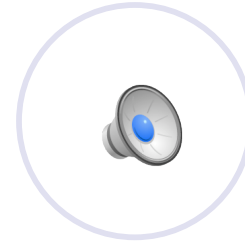
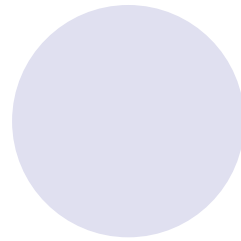
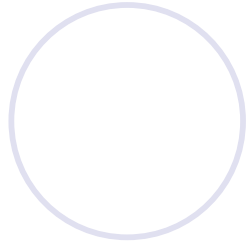
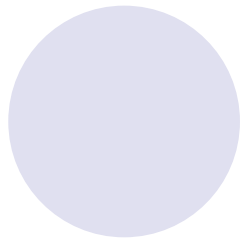
An example

- Bay City High School study
- Ethnographic interviews with high school students
- Gathering basic demographic information became an opportunity for ethnographic discovery (thanks to interactional analysis of the data long afterward)

The “for the record” request



1 Mary: ... (^name)?
2 Claire: Beth.
3 Mary: Okay.
4 A:nd,
5 what is you:r,
6 age,
7 sex,
8 (.) ethnicity,
9 and year in school.
10 Claire: Okay,
11 I'm sixteen years old.
12 (1.6) Female.
13 (1.7) Junior.
14 (1.7) And I guess I'm w- white. h:



15 Mary: hh You guess?
16 Claire: hh Well,
17 h I mean
18 I I I hate questions like that,
19 it's like,
20 we:ll,
21 h let's see,
22 if you w- really want to trace my
heritage, h
23 Mary: hh Yeah,
24 if you want.=
25 =I mean however you would (.) describe
yourself.=
26 Claire: =I'm a m:utt.
27 Mary: Okay.
28 Mutt:'s good enough.
29 U:m,



Ethnic self-labeling and whiteness

- Self-labeling was a problem particularly for white students
- At Bay City High School, a “majority minority” high school, white students often felt themselves to lack a culture or to be a member of a problematic (i.e., dominant) culture
- Analyzing interviews ethnographically and interactionally sheds light on this issue



Be responsible to your data

- Don't artificially narrow your scope
 - Stay attuned to the entire sociocultural matrix in which language is used
- Don't interpret data using intuitions based on your own cultural background
 - Be sure your interpretations are based on solid empirical (ethnographic) evidence
- Don't force your data to fit some theory or concept or preconceived notion
 - If you're "looking for" something specific, you're not being ethnographic
 - Start with your data and connect what you observe to the theories that are relevant to your findings



Be responsible to your data

- Reflect on (and write about) your role in interviews and interaction—you're a part of the data
- There's no such thing as perfect data (or "bad" data)—work with what you have, not what you wish you had
- Don't try to make things too tidy
 - Real life is complicated—don't try to tie up the loose ends and messiness (they're the beginning of your next project!)

References



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