

## **Ethnographic Documentation**

A researcher who captures a high quality audio or video recording of a naturally occurring interaction may have made a valuable beginning, but the job is not done until essential information about the event and its participants has been collected. Without this, an undocumented recording may lose much of its research value. It is easy enough to avoid this, assuming the researcher makes a plan in advance for asking the right questions, and then makes sure to ask them at the right time. The right time is, preferably, the day of the original recording. This section gives guidance on what kind of information is likely to be most useful for shedding light on the events and the participants being recorded. It also describes the process of getting this information. One side benefit of this process of ethnographic documentation is that the field worker has a chance to answer participants' further questions about what kind of project they are participating in.

### **Exit Interview**

It takes time and patience to do a good job of collecting the various kinds of ethnographic and demographic information that are required in order to properly document a conversation or other kind of spoken interaction. For this reason, it is best to plan to do an exit interview, to be carried out after the recording has been completed. In the exit interview, the field worker presents the person who has just been recorded with a questionnaire asking for general demographic information about such things as age, native language, geographical origins, education, and so on. By asking such questions at the end of the interaction, the researcher avoids putting a spotlight on the individual and their linguistic background before the recording is made. If participants talk first and answer questions later, they are less likely to be made self-conscious during the recording itself. And of course, in an exit interview they can ask any questions they may have arisen for them about the nature of the study being done. (Recall that the participants are always given the right to withdraw their consent to participate, if they wish to do this after finding out more information about the project.)

### **Forms**

The following forms are used to record the necessary ethnographic information about the recorded event, and demographic information about the participants in the event.

#### **1 Consent**

Be sure to have each person who appears on your audio or video recording sign a consent form, giving their informed permission for the recording. (See Appendix A.11 on “Consent” for details.)

## **2 Participant Questionnaire**

The purpose of this questionnaire is to gather information about each participant's background, especially those aspects which may influence their form of speaking (such as age, sex, native language, origins, level of education completed, occupation, and so on). Have each person who appears in the recording fill out a questionnaire. You will probably need to help people as they fill out the form, clarifying any questions they may have. In some cases it may be easiest for the field worker to simply fill out the form for them, based on asking them the questions in interview style.

## **3 Event Description**

As soon after the recording as you can, provide a general description of the event recorded, answering the detailed questions on the Event Description form. Include information on any artifacts that may shed light on the event, such as a newspaper that people were pointing to, a printed flyer or course handout they referred to, a specific computer game they were playing, etc.

## **4 Setting Diagram**

This is a simple diagram of the arrangement of the participants within the setting where the recording took place. It is useful for audio recording, but usually superfluous for video recording. Provide the standard header information about the recording, researcher, and date, and then draw a simple diagram, indicating location of speakers, microphones, relevant furniture, and other relevant items.

## **5 Recording Log**

The purpose of making a recording log is to gain a broad overview of the contents of a recording. The log can serve as a rough guide to the recording's contents, especially for locating portions of interest for further investigation. If possible, the field worker who made the recording should do the log, because they may have some relevant insights based on familiarity with the recording context. It is a good idea to make the recording log soon after the recording. (But the time factor is not as critical as it is in the case of the Participant Questionnaire, Event Description, and Setting Diagram.)

At the top of the first page of the log, indicate the following:

- title of the recording
- computer filename of the recording
- name of the researcher making the log
- date the log was made

While reviewing the recording, take notes to describe what is happening in it. For each entry you make, indicate the following:

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- the time on the recording that you are referring to
- what is happening at that time
- who is participating (whenever this changes, i.e. when someone enters or exits)

Evaluate each portion of the recording, using a 5-point scale where 5 is high, for:

- video quality (if applicable)
- audio quality
- transcribability
- research potential

The evaluation for research potential is obviously subjective, and will vary depending on the research goals of the analyst. Nevertheless, it is useful for identifying portions of a recording that may be worth pursuing further via a full transcription.

## **6 Voice Identification Table**

The purpose of making a Voice Identification table is to allow researchers who don't know the people on the recording to correctly identify them, that is, to make the right connection between a voice on the recording and the individual who is represented in the speaker background information which was collected. Even if an arbitrary pseudonym is being used in place of the real name, it is still important to match the transcribed voice to the right demographic information. Note that this task is most important in a large research project where many different transcribers may work with the same data, and where there may be a time lag between making the recording and transcribing it. The task is a fairly quick one, especially if done by the field worker who originally made the recording. It can be easily done at the same time as a recording log.

At the top of the first page of the log, indicate the following:

- title of the recording
- computer filename of the recording
- name of the researcher making the table
- date the table was made

While reviewing the recording, keep track of all the people who appear in it. For each person on the recording, select some distinctive quote in their words. The quote should be one that will allow a future researcher who doesn't know this individual to identify them from the recording. By identify, we do not mean knowing their real name, of course, but simply making the right connection to the (anonymous) paperwork. For each person on the recording, indicate the following:

- the time on the recording when the event you are describing occurs
- who is speaking (use a pseudonym)
- what they said (a sentence is enough)
- how much they participate in this recording (high, low, minimal)
- speaker ID number to match them with the demographic information collected

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