

Pre-Workshop Project: A Sociolinguistic Interview

The interview has been a staple of (variationist) sociolinguistic research since Labov's early work. Still, for various reasons (see Milroy and Gordon 2003, Ch. 3), the sociolinguistic interview is a problematic method for the researcher hoping to record naturalistic, free-flowing, conversational speech. Nevertheless, with proper planning and practice, it is possible to obtain samples of the kind of speech sociolinguists are typically most interested in. To get a better sense of the challenges of conducting sociolinguistic interviews, this exercise invites you to try your hand at it. Specifically, you are asked to conduct a one-on-one interview in which you attempt to record relatively informal, "natural" speech. To make this more of a realistic exercise, you should not interview a friend or anyone you have had casual conversations with in the past. Your interviewee doesn't have to be a stranger, just not someone you know well. Here are some other guidelines/suggestions:

- Plan your interview by sketching some topics you intend to cover. Think about the kinds of information that might be useful to your analysis (e.g. family background), but also consider topics that are likely to generate good talk. You may wish to work out the particular wordings of some questions you want to ask, but be careful about following a script too tightly. Remember you're trying to get a relatively free-flowing, back-and-forth conversational exchange. Have you ever had a fluid conversation with someone conducting a survey?
- The interview should last at least 30 minutes but can go longer if you wish or if you need it to in order to achieve the kind of speech you're seeking.
- You need to produce an audio recording of the interview. You can record it digitally (e.g. through your iPod or laptop), or on audio cassette. Sound quality is important – you need to be able to hear the interviewee well enough to carry out phonetic transcription of his/her speech. Microcassette recorders are not good for this kind of work. Keep in mind that you can get decent recordings from a relatively inexpensive tape recorder if you have a good external microphone.
- After recording the interview you should prepare a transcript of a (roughly) 10-minute section. Choose a section that has some lively back and forth between you and the interviewee. This should be a mainly orthographic transcription, not a phonetic one. You can use whatever transcription conventions you like and record as much detail as you want. You need to include every word spoken by the interviewee but you can decide whether to note pauses, laughs, or other features of the talk. During the workshop we will be using the transcriptions and the recordings to code for phonological and grammatical variables. This kind of analysis does not usually require a transcription that attends to details such as overlap or other aspects of turn-taking (see Garner 2007 and Bucholtz 2000).

Be sure to bring your recording to the workshop and be able to play it there. If you have headphones, it's a good idea to bring them along too. Also, you should have a hard copy of your transcript to write on during the session.