Analele Universității „Ovidius” Constanța. Seria Filologie Vol. XXXII, 1 / 2021

Wondering about Ethics and the Observer's Paradox: The Sociolinguist in the Field

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Abstract: *The main purpose of sociolinguistics is to account for language variation and change and the factors that contribute to these processes. However, nothing of this sort can be accomplished without entering a community to collect empirical data that will help the sociolinguist to provide answers. This study highlights the steps that have to be followed in order to conduct a successful and ethical research project in a community. The main issue that a sociolinguist might encounter in the field when collecting data is known as the Observer's Paradox. Possible ways of overcoming the Observer's Paradox are presented together with the ethical guidelines that have to be followed. The slippery concept of 'speech community' is also tackled, together with that of 'community of practice'. The heart of this study, and also of field research, is the section dedicated to the sociolinguistic interview, which delves into the protocols for designing such an interview, random sampling and eliciting different speech styles.*

Keywords: *speech community, sociolinguistics, Observer's Paradox, sociolinguistic interview, ethics, fieldwork*

1. Preliminary remarks

Sociolinguistics is an area of research which relies on empirical data. This entails that in order to collect data, different methods have to be used. Being a heterogenous field of research, it is challenging to provide an inventory of the methods and fieldwork techniques used in sociolinguistics. The vast majority of studies and research projects focus more on the results and interpretations and less on the data collection procedure. Tagliamonte (2006: 17) is right when asserting that "fieldwork methods may be the best-kept secret of sociolinguistics." In recent years, however, sociolinguists have become aware of the need to tackle this issue and different books and articles have been published (Tagliamonte 2006, Feagin 2013, Schilling 2013, among others) with the aim to shed light as well as to reveal the "mystery" of data collection and research design. Nevertheless, providing an all-encompassing overview of all the fieldwork techniques, as it will be argued later on, is an insurmountable task, as they are continually evolving and one technique which may prove successful in one community might be irrelevant in another. As a result, sociolinguistic research foci have both evolved and "become more nuanced" (Schilling, 2013: 1) since data-related technology transforms itself every day.

Research methods are extremely varied nowadays, if we care to compare them with those used fifty years ago. New software programs (*Goldvarb*, *Rbrul*, *PRAAT*, to name just a few) allow researchers to conduct state-of-the-art and very sophisticated analyses (e.g., multivariate analysis, acoustic analysis, etc.).

Researchers who consider themselves as sociolinguists may try to answer questions such as "*Why do teenagers switch from one language to another and what are the underlying constraints that govern such switches*?" or they might be interested in accounting for "the distribution of the different variants that realize a linguistic variable in a speech community" (Meyerhoff, Adachi, Nanbakhsh, Strycharz, 2012: 121). For example, in what contexts do speakers drop the final [g] in words like *working*, *speaking*? Other sociolinguists are concerned with the age and gender-related differences between the speech of men and women. These topics point to the vastness of sociolinguistic inquiry and the heuristic approach to language and society.

Given that many of the methodological issues that sociolinguists have to face in their fieldwork sometimes overlap with those encountered by linguists, this study will not point to all the technical aspects of sociolinguistic fieldwork. Instead, it will delve into the concepts of "speech community", "the sociolinguistic interview" and "the Observer's Paradox", focusing on ways of overcoming possible conundrums that may arise. Also included is a discussion of the ethical guidelines that should be used in the field, before, during and after the sociolinguistic interview (e.g., when conducting audio or video recordings).

2. The speech community

The term *speech community* was first used by Gumperz (1968: 381-6) to refer to any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage. Years later, Labov (1972: 120-121) noted that "the speech community is not defined by any marked agreement in the use of language elements, so much as by participation in a set of shared norms. These norms may be observed in overt types of evaluative behavior, and by the uniformity of abstract patterns of variation which are invariant in respect to particular levels of usage."

Researchers have yet to reach a consensus as to a shared definition of *speech community* since some focus on "internal, subjective perceptions of commonality", while others are interested in "objectively observed patterns of commonality" (Meyerhoff et al. 2012: 125). As sociolinguists, we are interested in language and linguistic systematicity (Schilling, 2013: 19) but we also insist that language resides in social space rather than in a person's cognitive space. For some the interest is purely linguistic, while for others it is social, for instance the linguistic practices of teenagers who live in a neighbourhood. Such different perspectives might account for the distinctive definitions found in the literature: Patrick’s (2002: 577) “socially-based unit of linguistic analysis”, Bucholtz’s (1999: 203) “language-based unit of social analysis” or the unifying definition provided by Meyerhoff et al. (2012: 125) “any socially meaningful grouping of speakers whose direct and indirect interactions with each other contribute to the maintenance, establishment or contestation of a social order recognizable to the speakers or researchers.” Despite such opposing views, sociolinguists are united in their agreement that language and society are intertwined and no linguistic analysis is complete without taking into account the social aspect. After all, we are social animals and our ability to communicate with one another is our biggest asset.

In an attempt to provide an all-encompassing definition of this apparently problematic concept, Saville-Troike (2002: 15) highlights the need to distinguish between “participating in a speech community and being a member of it.” She further adds that speaking the same language might be enough for some degree of participation, however, membership is not based on knowledge and/or skills. Are speakers of English from England and the United States, Australia, Canada, Scotland, Ireland members of the same speech community? Given the political, religious, cultural and even linguistic differences between these countries, we would be inclined to say that they are not members of the same speech community. The main criterion for speech community should include the “ways in which members of the group use, value, or interpret language.” The plethora of research carried out in this field has usually focused on the language practices within a high school (Eckert 2000, Eisikovits 2006, Oancea 2016), different Aboriginal communities (Borgoras 1922, Bradley 2006, Ekka 1972, Haas 1944, Sorensen 1967, Stenzel 2005), a neighbourhood (Trudgill 1974, Cheshire 1982, Hornoiu 2016), so mainly on a limited segment of the population.

Once a researcher has established the community that they want to investigate, they have to immerse themselves in the speech community, to “tap the vernacular” (Sankoff, 1988: 157). This can be done in two ways: as an observer and/or as a participant. However, before immersing into the community, the researcher should get a perspective of that particular community. For instance, demographic, historical and social background information should be obtained before devising the sociolinguistic interview (Feagin, 2013: 21). Learning things about the major industries, communications, religious institutions as well as the historical development of the city/village might aid in providing a more thorough analysis and account for some of the linguistic choices of the speakers under scrutiny. By using an ethnographic approach, the researcher will also have to take into account the social and cultural backgrounds that define the community under investigation. The so-called ***stratification studies*** carried out half a century ago (Labov 1966, 1972; Trudgill 1974, among others) were concerned with identifying how social class might affect language use. Such studies, however, focused on large urban centres of the USA (New York, Philadelphia) and the UK (Norwich).

In such complex societies, individuals might be involved in several speech communities since they participate in different social situations. This means that members of a speech community have "a repertoire of social identities, and each identity in a given context is associated with a number of appropriate verbal and nonverbal forms of expression" (Saville-Troike, 2002: 17). That is why the researcher's first task is to gather information about the community under investigation, and identify the social layers in that community. Having established this will be useful in accounting for the linguistic choices of the members that pertain to that community, as well as in explaining the different strategies used in communicative situations. As a conclusion, the factors that have to be taken into account when studying a community are:

(i) Background information (e.g., settlement history, general description of the area);
(ii) Material artifacts (e.g., architecture, signs, instruments of communication like telephones, radios, books, television sets, computers and drums);
(iii) Social organization (e.g., community institutions, ethnic and class relations, social stratification, residential and association patterns);
(iv) Legal information (e.g., language-related laws);
(v) Artistic data (e.g., literary sources: newspapers, pamphlets, drama and other genres of verbal performance, web logs, etc.);
(vi) Common knowledge (e.g., formulas such as "Everybody knows…", "As they say…");
(vii) Beliefs about language use (e.g., taboos, language attitudes);
(viii) Data on the linguistic code (e.g., the first thing on which sociolinguists will focus on: units of lexicon, phonology and grammar).

(Saville-Troike, 2003: 92-95)

According to Saville-Troike (2002: 17) "the use of the speech community as a basic social unit for study has been criticized by some because of its implicit acceptance of existing social/political boundaries and categories as legitimate entities." As a solution, the concept of ***community of practice*** could be used. The term was first used by Lave and Wenger (1991) to describe groups which are united by common purposes and who engage in joint activity. Eckert (2000) also used the term in her study of a Detroit high-school. More recently, Eckert and McConnel-Ginet (2006: 490) define a community of practice as:

> An aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in some common endeavour. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short practices – emerge in the course of their joint activity around that endeavour. A community of practice is different from a social construct from the traditional notion of community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages. Indeed, it is the practices of the community and members' differentiated participation in them that structures the community socially.

Wenger (1998: 77-85) spells out three criteria which must be met in order to talk about a community of practice. These criteria are also discussed by Meyerhoff and Strycharz (2013: 429) and they illustrate them with several case studies. The first criterion is that there must be ***mutual engagement*** between the members. Wenger, however, points out that mutual engagement may be harmonious or conflictual. This means that a community of practice is not necessarily made up of a group of friends or allies. The second criterion for a community of practice is that members share some ***jointly negotiated enterprise***. The members of the community of practice get together for a reason or a common endeavour and this reason is defined through their pursuit of it. Last, but not least, a community of practice is characterized by the members' ***shared repertoire***.

The community of practice is, as previously stated, an aggregate of individuals negotiating and learning practices that amount to the realisation of a common goal. Wenger (1998: 125-6) notes that a community of practice must also be characterised by:

(i) the rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation;
(ii) absence of introductory preambles and very quick setup of a problem to be discussed;
(iii) substantial overlap in participants' descriptions of who belongs and mutually defining identities;
(iv) specific tools, representations, and other artifacts, shared stories and inside jokes;
(v) jargon and shortcuts to communication;
(vi) a shared discourse that reflects a certain perspective on the world.

A range of linguistic behaviours is characteristic of any given community of practice as long as these linguistic behaviours function in slightly different ways from one community of practice to another.

3. The sociolinguistic interview

Once the researcher has done a comprehensive background check of the community under investigation and has acquired all the information needed, the next step is to devise the ***sociolinguistic interview***. Getting to know the community under lens helps the investigator formulate adequate questions to be included in the sociolinguistic interview. It is vital to ask the right questions as the main aim is elicit a lot of data. This can only be achieved if the interviewee provides long and complex answers. Once the researcher has decided on the questions which will be included in the questionnaire, the next step is to conduct a pilot study. The aim of a pilot study is to verify whether the set of questions included in the questionnaire are well-suited and adequate. Once this is achieved, the next step is to devise a method for selecting speakers from within that community to be included in the study. It is impossible to include all the members in the study, therefore it is required to sample the population. This has to be done carefully, as you have to make sure that the people you select are representative of the community. All social layers have to be equally represented so that the results can be extended to the whole community. Tagliamonte (2006: 23) suggests that a sample should be representative on the basis of age, sex, social class and educational level, as these social variables were should to be highly significant in studies focusing on urban speech communities.

Random sampling presupposes selecting members of the community in such a way that each member has an equal chance of being selected (Schilling, 2013: 31). This can soon prove to be a daunting task, especially if you are an outsider and have no ways of “infiltrating” into the community. I experienced such a difficulty when I was collecting data for my PhD dissertation. I was interested in the phonological variable ING and wanted to see whether there were gender-related differences regarding the pronunciation of ING among British teenagers living in London. So, I contacted Professor Jenny Cheshire from Queen Mary’s College, University of London who kindly accepted to help me and she was also very interested in my research. She welcomed me at Queen Mary’s College, allowed me to attend some of her classes in Variationist Sociolinguistics and introduced me to her students. She gave me the opportunity to present myself and tell her students a few things about my research project and asked them if they are willing to take part in the research. By doing so, I gave all the students a chance to participate in the sociolinguistic interview. Some of them appeared interested and wanted to find out more. So, I organised different meetings with each of them taking into consideration their schedule and we met in the university’s cafeteria of the lobby. Professor Cheshire also told me a few things about her students (second year undergraduates, majoring in Linguistics) and even suggested some topics that I might include in the sociolinguistic interview.

Labov (1984: 32) defines the sociolinguistic interview as “a well-developed strategy” which is characterised by a number of goals, the most important being to record one to two hours of speech for each speaker interviewed. Below is an example of a set of questions, the topic being “school”.

SCHOOL

Do [Did] you go to one of the schools in this neighbourhood?
  How far is it from your house?
Do [Did] you have any teachers that are really tough?
  What would they yell at a kid for?
  What was the worst thing you ever saw a teacher do to a kid?
  Or a kid do to a teacher?
Did you ever get blamed [punished] for something you didn’t do?
Did you ever have a teacher that was really unfair? That you liked?
Did you ever pass notes in school?
  Did a teacher ever catch you passing notes? What happened?
What kind of group did you have in your school?
  Do [Did] you have jocks? Nerds? Goths? Thugs?
  What is/was your group like?
  What sort of clothes do they wear? Haircuts? Earrings?
  Could a guy [girl] from one group go out with a girl [guy] from another?

(Tagliamonte, 2006: 38)

The questions within this module are not ordered in a random way. The aim is to start from general, impersonal, non-specific questions and then swiftly move to more specific, personal ones. This way the speaker becomes more relaxed and accustomed to the interviewer and to the situation itself. In my interviews carried out at QMUL, London, I have also included, the by-now-famous ‘danger of death’ questions such as “Did you ever get blamed for something you didn’t do?’ (Labov, 1984: 34). However, this question was not as successful as I had expected. According to Labov, such questions are very effective in the sense that they put the speakers into storytelling mode and they tend to focus more on telling different stories rich in vernacular features.

The interviewer must not talk too much during the interview. Ideally, he/she should just ask the questions and then let the interviewee respond. In case the answers provided are very short, the interviewer should encourage the speaker to elaborate on the subject and ask other “helping questions”. The sociolinguistic interview is considered unsuccessful if the speaker provides very short and concise answers.

Labov's test of a good interview

1. Fast-forward an audio-record of an interview.
2. Listen. Who do you hear? The interviewee? If so, good.
3. If you hear the interviewer, go forward another five minutes into the interview.
4. Listen. Who do you hear? The interviewee? Great.
5. If you hear the interviewer, go forward another five minutes.
6. Listen. Who do you hear? The interviewee? Wonderful!
7. If all you hear is the interviewer using this technique, the interview is not so good.

(Tagliamonte, 2006: 39)

Another equally important aspect is to make sure that interviewee is aware that the audio recording will be used for academic purposes. Ask them to sign a consent form allowing you to use the recording and publish the results. Needless to say, anonymity will be granted. The duration of the interview can differ depending on the kind of data the researcher is after. Usually, an interview takes about an hour, but they can either be shorter or longer. A semi-structured sociolinguistic interview contains several parts (e.g. the questionnaire, reading passage, word list, minimal pairs):

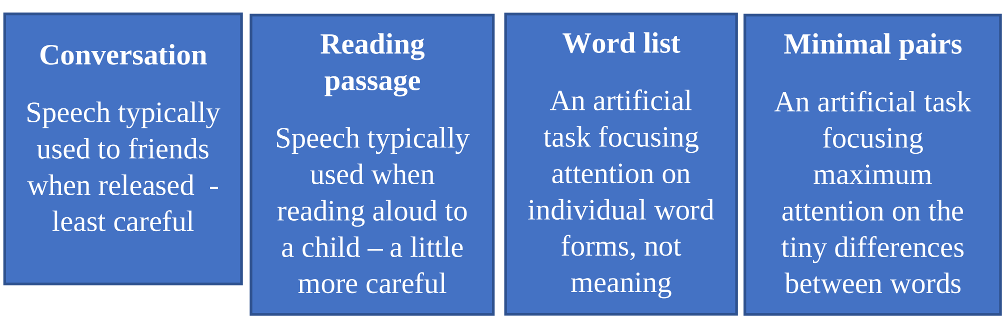

Figure 1. Semi-structured sociolinguistic interview
(*Adapted from Meyerhoff, Schleef, MacKenzie, 2015: 50*)

The aim of the sociolinguistic interview is to record the vernacular that occurs in everyday speech. However, when people are aware that they are being recorded, they strive to sound as intelligent as possible and use hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation. This phenomenon is known as the *Observer's Paradox*.

4. The Observer's Paradox and ethical guidelines

The problem of the Observer's Paradox (Labov 1972) is one of the most tackled issues concerning data collection methodology in sociolinguistics. Studies that address the use of language in social contexts have to rely on naturally-occurring, spontaneous speech rather than how people talk when they are being audio-recorded by a sociolinguist. As briefly mentioned above, the interviewees should be asked to sign a consent form thus allowing the researcher to audio-record them and publish the results/findings. Rasinger (2013: 52) highlights the importance of when to ask the interviewees for consent: before or after the audio-recorded interview. For the past four decades sociolinguists have worked on this issue trying to tackle this conundrum and have put forward various strategies to collect reliable data in an ethical way. One of the most successful approach required the fieldworker to spend time with the respondents, get to know them and earn their trust. If such a connection was established, then the Observer's Paradox decreases and "the quality of data increases" (Rasinger, 2013: 52). Such an approach is reminiscent of the studies conducted by Cheshire (1982) and Eckert (2000). This method, known as ***long-term participant observation*** requires the fieldworker to spend a considerable amount of time to get to know a pre-existing group of speakers and immerse himself/herself into the group/community. Rasinger (2013: 52) suggests the use of a "gatekeeper", a member of the group/community under scrutiny to help in the data collection process. Another strategy would be to employ the friend-of-a-friend technique, in which case the investigator need not be present during the recording sessions.

As far as the consent form that the people taking part in the research project should sign, it should contain a very brief presentation of the researcher and a few major points of the project. This might prove effective in convincing the participants to consent and to know who and what they are dealing with. One recommendation is not to offer too much information about the project as this might influence the participants' answers. Rasinger (2013: 52-53) provides an excellent inventory of what should be included in a consent form and what potential participants should know about the project they might take part in:

(i) Make participants aware of the fact that they can withdraw from the study at any time and without explanation. They are independent human beings, and, although it is annoying when participants drop out, they have a right to do so without justification.

(ii) Make participants aware of any risks – psychological or physical – that are involved. Again, participants have a right to know what to expect, and it is unethical (and illegal in many countries) to expose them to risks without their consent.

(iii) Inform them what is happening to their data, for example, where and how it is stored and who has access to it. This also includes information about how they can obtain their own data and how to withdraw it from the study.

(iv) The consent form must be signed by the participant (or their legal guardian).

If the study focuses on children or teenagers under the age of 18, then the consent form has to be signed by their parents or their legal guardian. It would be advisable to get a consent from the children/teenagers as well so that they know what to expect and also by making them “feel important” and treating them as adults you can easily gain their trust. One final, yet equally important issue regarding the ethical guidelines of a study has to do with the fieldworker itself. If your focus is a gang who are involved in or conduct illegal activities, the safety of the fieldworker should be guaranteed at all times. A good piece of advice would be not to wear expensive clothes or jewellery or even put on display or in plain sight the expensive equipment used to record to participants.

Surreptitious recordings made by hiding a recording device that will capture conversations without the knowledge or consent of the people who engage in those conversations are deemed highly unethical and illegal[1]. Such recordings are also considered pointless by many sociolinguists (Feagin, 2013: 32). A point in favour of surreptitious recordings is the elimination of the Observer’s Paradox, but practically speaking the quality of the recordings might be poor, not to mention that no background information about the speakers would be available. One serious aspect of surreptitious recordings is that someone might discover that they are being recorded without being aware of this fact and this could have perilous repercussions. However, despite all these ethical dilemmas, there are cases in which researchers performed covert recordings. Harvey (1992: 79-80), for instance, made secret recordings of drunken speech because it was of paramount importance to her research and she confessed that if faced with this dilemma, she would do it again. In her defence, she argued that covert recordings are as unethical as the researcher not being entirely honest about the scope of his/her research purposes. Bowern (2015: 170) provides several alternatives to illicit recording: (i) leave the tape recorder open and go somewhere else for some time, but let the speakers know

[1] For a discussion regarding the legal aspects of surreptitious recordings, see Larmouth, Murray, Ross Murray (1992).

and get their permission; (ii) get people to consent to being recorded at some unspecified time. However, after the recording was done, let them know and get them a change to hear the recording or read the transcription as they might want some parts of the conversation to be deleted.

5. Conclusions

This paper has reviewed some of the most important issues associated with undertaking sociolinguistic fieldwork. We started with some preliminary remarks regarding some key terms used in sociolinguistics and emphasized the need for conducting successful, reliable and safe fieldwork. We have also highlighted the methods and procedures of the classic Labovian sociolinguistic interview and pinpointed the pros and cons. The last part has tackled the concept of the Observer's Paradox, first discussed by Labov, and provided some techniques that researchers might use to overcome it. The importance of ethics has not been left out, as it is one of the most important aspects in collecting good data. In sociolinguistics research methodology has to be adapted to the community under scrutiny. One strategy that might be successfully used in one community might fail in another. That is why it is necessary to conduct preliminary research before delving into the community itself. Background information is not only vital but will also aid the researcher in devising the sociolinguistic interview and even account for the attitudes to language and society displayed in the speech of the speakers.

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