

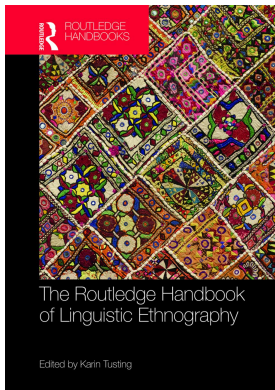
This article was downloaded by: 10.2.97.136

On: 28 May 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Handbook of Linguistic Ethnography

Karin Tusting

The ethnographic interview

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315675824-12>

Anna De Fina

Published online on: 20 Sep 2019

How to cite :- Anna De Fina. 20 Sep 2019, *The ethnographic interview from: The Routledge Handbook of Linguistic Ethnography* Routledge

Accessed on: 28 May 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315675824-12>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

The ethnographic interview

Anna De Fina

Introduction

Interviews are among the most widely used research tools in the social sciences in general and a very widespread method for collecting data in ethnographic research in particular, especially in combination with other instruments. Indeed, according to Denzin and Lincoln, “the interview is the favourite methodological tool of the qualitative researcher” (2004, p. 353). Interviews have been an important alternative to anonymous surveys and questionnaires since they represent moments of direct contact between researchers and informants, and provide occasions to investigate people’s perceptions of and reactions to issues in greater depth than when using quantitative tools. And yet the combination of the interview with ethnographic methods has historically raised a host of issues that stem from different conceptions of what ethnography is and which research methods can be regarded as ethnographic.

According to Heyl (2001, p. 369), ethnographic interviews are:

those projects in which researchers have established respectful, ongoing relationships with their interviewees, including enough rapport for there to be genuine exchange of views and enough time and openness in the interviews for the interviewees to explore purposefully with the researcher the meanings they place on events in their worlds.

However, this characterisation merely describes one form of interview and does not resolve the problem of its relation with ethnography. In his review of the way in which ethnography has been defined, Martyn Hammersley (2018, p. 4) points to the fact that there is little agreement amongst researchers. Even though most ethnographers would subscribe to the idea that this theoretical methodological frame concerns the study of people and their cultures, puts the accent on people’s behaviour and perspectives rather than on the researcher’s own views, employs in-depth, longitudinal observation of naturally occurring situations, is holistic in nature and favours the collection of a variety of data, each of these assessments is itself not unproblematic and is open to interpretation. He goes on to contrast a thick version of ethnography, which requires a clear definition of acceptable and unacceptable techniques and assumptions, with a thin one, which regards ethnography just as one method that may

be employed with a variety of others in order to carry out a particular type of research. Of course, in the case of a thin conception of ethnography, the use of interviews as data collecting tool and source of data would not raise particular concerns. However, within a thick conception, particularly one in which stress is put on participant observation, non-intrusiveness of the researcher and collection of data basically generated by the participants in 'natural' situations (see Papen, this volume), the interview does constitute a potential departure from the canonical approach.

As we will see, debates over the acceptability of interviews as a method altogether and over different aspects of them have punctuated the history of ethnographically inspired linguistics and anthropology, precisely because they involve epistemic questions such as the meaning of the terms *culture* and *community*, what constitutes knowledge and, more generally, the role of the researcher in the construction of that knowledge. In this chapter, I first provide a description of types of interview, then briefly go through the history of qualitative and ethnographic interviews, then introduce some of the major debates and dilemmas that have been discussed in relation to interviews in linguistics, anthropology and related fields. I then point to recent developments and current methodologies and end the chapter with some concluding remarks.

Types of interviews

Different scholars have proposed more or less specific classifications of interviews and we will start from describing some of these types in order to make the discussion of issues related to the methodology of interviewing clearer. There is a general consensus on a broad division of interviews into three main categories: *structured*, *semi-structured* and *unstructured*, of which only the latter two are usually considered part of the toolkit of qualitative research methods (see Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 29). Structured interviews are based on sets of predetermined questions that are asked to interviewees with minimal adjustments on the part of the researcher, both in terms of accommodating to the interviewee's reactions and/or needs, and in terms of altering the sequence or form of the questions. Structured interviews usually focus on objectivity and maximal neutrality on the part of the interviewer and are aimed at obtaining comparable data from the greatest number of subjects. That is why these instruments are typically associated with surveys and quantitative research in general.

Semi-structured and unstructured interviews are instead associated with qualitative research, as they allow for flexibility and for the development of rapport between interviewer and interviewee. In semi-structured interviews, researchers have not only a specific topic in mind but also a set of questions that they want to ask on that topic. However, questions may be modified according to the response and interest of interlocutors; researchers allow for digressions and topic changes and for some flexibility in terms of whether or not all the prepared questions are asked and how long responses on each topic may take. Examples of semi-structured interviews are interviews focussed on eliciting positions about social issues such as ethnicity, gender, linguistic ideologies, etc., or interviews aimed at establishing the nature of cultural and linguistic taxonomies and practices. Also within the domain of semi-structured interviews are life story, biographical and oral history interviews, in which interviewees' opinions and experiences in particular domains of life are elicited through questions that may either be partly prepared or consist of a single elicitation devised to get the interviewee to talk about a particular topic. Fontana and Frey (1994) add focus-group interviews (first introduced by Merton et al., 1956) to the semi-structured category. Those are occasions in which the researcher meets with a group of people to elicit a discussion, poses

some questions (that can be more or less specific) and basically acts as a mediator in order to give some direction to the conversation.

Unstructured interviews are closer to conversations than to formal encounters between a researcher and an informant in that they do not follow sets of questions even though they may be focussed on particular events or practices. Unstructured interviews are used by ethnographers to make sense of linguistic categories and practices and as a tool for immersing themselves in the culture and the way of thinking of a group of people being studied. Fontana and Frey (1994) refine these distinctions adding other different types of unstructured interviews such as *gendered* interviews and *poststructuralist* ones. In the first case, interviews are designed to maximise opportunities for dialogue and rapport, while in the second case, they are thought of as moments of critical awareness. We will go into details about the different ways of doing interviews that have been proposed when we come to discuss dilemmas and debates on ethnography and ethnographic methods.

Historical perspectives

Interviewing as a method of data collection has a long history. According to Fontana and Frey (1994, p. 362), the first interviews were used by sociologists studying urban populations such as Londoners (see Converse, 1987) or inhabitants of American cities such as African Americans in Philadelphia (Du Bois, 1899; Lynd & Lynd, 1929). However, in these early attempts, interviews were described as embedded into visits to the homes of members of the community, not as qualitative instruments. And indeed, interviewing in most of the sociological tradition until the 1960s became increasingly associated with survey research, which was basically quantitative (see Merton & Lazarsfeld, 1950). As we will see, a great deal of reflection on qualitative interviews between the 1980s and 1990s was devoted precisely to the critique of survey research.

Even though the general trend in sociology reflected this shift towards quantitative methodologies, we find early uses of the qualitative interview in the works of members of the so-called Chicago School, whose proponents carried out a number of studies of diverse communities through a combination of instruments that involved observation and informal interviews (see Anderson, 1926; Thrasher, 1927). Qualitative, ethnographic interviewing has also been one of the most important tools for anthropologists and indeed the interview has been used by anthropologists dating back from the early work of founding figures such as Margaret Mead (1928), Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) and Clifford Geertz (1972, 1983). The interview was seen by anthropologists as a complement to participant observation, ethnographic note taking and collection of documents, artefacts and other data. It was seen as one of the means for reaching the objective of ethnography, which, according to Malinowski, was “to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world” (1922, p. 25). The interviews that early anthropologists used went from informal conversations with “natives” to more structured sets of questions on particular aspects of the cultural and linguistic practices observed. But the basic idea was that the interview would allow researchers to grasp the emic perspective of participants, i.e. their own way of understanding their social world and the relationships within it. Different kinds of qualitative interviews were widely employed in the 1970s and 1980s both by linguistic anthropologists and linguists who used them to understand particular linguistic and discursive genres in different non-Western cultures. Classical examples from linguistic anthropology are Duranti (1981) for Samoans, Hill and Hill for Mexicanos (1986), Hymes (1976) for Native Americans, and Scollon and Scollon (1981) for Athabaskans. Linguists, on the other hand, mostly used

interviews as techniques to elicit samples of naturally occurring speech in order to study social stratification and differentiation in language use. This was the case with the classic sociolinguistic studies of urban vernacular by William Labov (1972) in the US or Milroy and Milroy (1977) in the UK.

Qualitative interviews experienced a boom during the so-called “interpretive turn” (Rabinov & Sullivan, 1987) of the late 1980s and 1990s in the social sciences when researchers started to question the positivistic trends that dominated many disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, linguistics and anthropology. Scholars in this period aligned themselves with both recent and older theories that rejected the idea of neutrality and objectivity of the researcher. They dismissed the mantra of the superiority of investigation techniques that emphasised hypothesis testing and required the collection of sizable, comparable and strictly controlled data sets. There was a general movement from a view of reality as something external and given, that existed out there to be grasped by the researcher, towards a conceptualisation of the process of knowledge creation as shaped by subjectivity (including the subjectivity of the researcher) and of reality as open to different interpretations. Within the interpretive process, special significance was given to language as a site for the construction of interpretations of cultural practices (see Giddens, 1976) and to interaction as the domain where such interpretations are shared and negotiated. Thus, the semi-structured or unstructured interview became a central tool for research in all the social sciences, including linguistics and anthropology.

Critical issues and debates

Debates around the interview as one of the tools of ethnography have centred around the role of the interviewer in the process of data collection and interpretation, the relationship of the interviewer with informants and the community to which informants belong (including related ethical issues), and the legitimacy of interviewing in general in approaching the study of human behaviour. These topics are often so related to each other that it is hard to treat them separately. Indeed, underlying these main questions are different views of what ethnography is, but also differences on fundamental epistemological questions having to do with the nature of knowledge and role of the researcher in the generation and circulation of that knowledge. Thus, positions within those debates have been deeply influenced by the historical moment in which they developed and the kinds of challenges that different disciplines in the social sciences have been facing at particular moments.

Theorists of qualitative research have pointed to such connections between research paradigms and directions of research. For example, Denzin and Lincoln (2004) delineated eight important historical moments in the development of qualitative research: from the positivistic outlook that dominated the beginning of the century until the 1920s, to the “crisis of representation” of the 1980s, to the postmodern trend of the 1990s, to the “post-experimental” and “contestation” approaches from the mid-1990s to the beginning of the new century. Positivist paradigms are characterised by a stress on objectivity, separation of researcher from the object of study and insistence on rigour in formal procedures. The crisis of representation is connected to the emergence of different interpretative perspectives including feminist and structuralist ones and to the acceptance of a variety of research methods. In the postmodern era, researchers take critical stances that reject any kind of universalistic and generalised vision of social categories and underscore how not only social reality but even the categories used by researchers to understand it are socially constructed and therefore push investigators towards critical awareness. The sixth and seventh periods they identify (post-experimental

and contestation) see a stress on autobiography and personal narrative as a form of knowledge, a more widespread eclecticism and interdisciplinarity, but also greater emphasis on activism and social responsibility.

Although the authors claim that these developments cannot be read as a simple chronology, what can be seen is nonetheless a gradual departure from positivist frameworks that stressed objectivity and reliability towards a greater focus on researcher involvement and reflexivity; a critical appraisal of the process of knowledge generation but also of its embedding into power struggles and relations. Interview research and the way it has been used in ethnography have been deeply influenced by these trends. This is a reason why authors who have proposed taxonomies of interviews (see, for example, Edwards & Holland, 2013; Heyl, 2001) characterised the debates going on amongst ethnographers and qualitative researchers as at least in part deriving from the researchers' alignment with trends such as feminism, postmodernism, etc. Here, I will concentrate on the issues related to the three topics introduced earlier – the role of the interviewer, their relationship with informants and the legitimacy of interviewing – which I hope will allow for capturing some key positions in past and current debates.

The role of the interviewer

Let us take as a starting point the metaphor proposed by Kvale (2007, p. 48) opposing the interviewer as a miner to the interviewer as a traveller. According to this author, “these two contrasting metaphors of the interviewer (...) illustrate the different epistemological conceptions of interviewing as a process of *knowledge collection* or as a process of *knowledge construction*, respectively.” In the first case, the researcher is looking for an object that can be brought home and polished until it comes to light, while in the second case, the researcher gathers experiences that have been constructed together with others.

It can be said that in classical early ethnographies within anthropology and linguistics, interviewers were seen as miners rather than as travellers. Foundational figures like Malinowski and Mead used interviews and conversations as ways of eliciting the perspective of ‘natives’ on specific cultural constructs, on the social organisation of groups and on their customs and life philosophy. Thus, the anthropologist was immersed in the life of a particular group and wrote diaries and conducted observations that were complemented with interviews and unstructured conversations. As we have seen, linguists and anthropological linguists asked members of particular cultures to explain linguistic systems or taxonomies in their own words (Gossen, 1974) or conversed with them to elicit particular speech genres such as narratives and poems (Hymes, 1976). In this early work, the stress was on the object of knowledge and on how to justify the ethnographer's interpretations about that object, but there was little open discussion on the way the researcher had obtained such knowledge. Indeed, the possibility of observing human behaviour was directly related to ‘being there’ and therefore the multiple ways in which the researcher made her presence felt were not a focus of attention.

In the decades following these early works, the lack of attention to the interaction of the researcher with the object of research came more and more under fire, as scholars pointed to the many ways in which the identity of the interviewer and the context of the event can shape the data collected and highlighted the need to put subjectivity and reflexivity on the map. Some early reflections on the role of interviewers in different kinds of interviews came from Aaron Cicourel and Charles Briggs, respectively, a sociologist and a linguistic

anthropologist, within the frame of their critique of quantitative approaches to interviews and of their call for researcher reflexivity.

Both Cicourel (1964) and Briggs (1986) started from a rejection of the positivist framework. They saw the idea of researcher neutrality as an illusion and pointed to the inevitable problems that derive from standardisation of interviews (see De Fina & Perrino, 2011 on this point). They noted that as each interview is unique, so are the roles and relationships between each interviewer and each informant, and therefore trying to impose a uniform procedure is a violation of ‘naturalness’. Cicourel (1964, p. 87) openly criticised the concept of comparability between data, which he deemed unattainable under the conditions of the interview as a real communicative encounter. In his own work, Briggs highlighted how fruitless debates on the interview as a method are, unless there is a recognition of the fact that the interview is an interactional event in and of itself, and proposed the importance of examining the implicit communicative mechanisms that operate in such events. In his study about Mexicano speakers in Northern Mexico, he focussed on the meta-communicative repertoires (i.e. the set of implicit shared norms that govern communication) underlying both the interview and the communicative practices of the target group. Briggs argued that meta-communicative norms between native ‘informants’ and interviewers often diverge, leading to communicative blunders, or worse, to the unilateral exercise of power by the interviewer. He drew attention to the importance of reflexivity, which he defined as the ability of “speech, whether contained in interviews, myths, or ‘natural’ conversations”, to provide “an ongoing interpretation of its own significance” (Briggs, 1986, p. 106). So while making explicit the ideological stances that underlie the myth of objective, qualitative research, Cicourel and Briggs also contributed to a reflection on the role of the researcher vis-à-vis the informant which is still one of the most central elements of debate amongst ethnographers who use interviews.

A second issue concerns whether the role of the researcher should be to act as a kind of ‘voice of informants’ or as someone who steps out of the fieldwork to provide their own interpretation. As we discussed, one of the fundamentals of ethnography is the idea that at its centre is a concern “with the meaning of actions and events to the people we seek to understand” (Spradley 1979, p. 5). In terms of the interview for example, does this centrality of local understanding mean that the ethnographer’s role is basically to make sense of those emic perspectives and organise them into a coherent picture? How are the materials that ethnographers collect in interviews to be used in the final analysis? While the quote by Spradley would indicate that interpreting the results of ethnographic observation means simply explaining local cultural parameters, others have argued that eliciting the point of view of informants is only a step in the process of interpretation. Thus, there has been much discussion on the limits of cultural relativism, i.e. the idea that all knowledge is socially constructed and therefore the interpretation of cultural phenomena needs to coincide with the interpretation of the participant in the culture. According to Hess (2001, p. 237) for example,

ethnographers in the anthropological/feminist/cultural studies tradition are careful to distinguish the moment of cultural interpretation in the research from the complete analysis. Analysis may begin with local interpretations and meanings, but it does not end there. In the process, the second wave of ethnographers tends to distinguish cultural heuristics from epistemological or moral relativism. Failure to engage in the ‘stepping in’ and ‘stepping out’ process constitutes ‘going native’ which is usually rejected as a departure from complete analysis.

Relationship of the interviewer with informants in the communities

Many debates have surrounded the role of the interviewer in the community observed. Scholars questioned, for example, whether it is possible for ethnographers to really immerse themselves into the lives of people who belong to a different culture; whether the many aspects of their identities such as their nationality, gender, skin colour, class and other variables may constitute insurmountable barriers to achieving full comprehension and trust with their interviewees. Indeed, since the times of Malinowski, ethnographers have maintained that one of the fundamental elements of ethnography is the ability to become part of the culture observed through a constant process of familiarisation. But what does this ‘being part’ of a group entail? For example, is it necessary to learn the language of the people whose group is being studied or is it acceptable to work through interpreters? Amongst many others, Keesing and Strathern (1997, p. 7) argued, for example, that fieldwork “most essentially,... entails a deep immersion into the life of a people. ... One learns their language and tries to learn their mode of life”, therefore excluding the use of interpreters. But others have openly discussed the complexities that really knowing a language entails and have argued that issues of linguistic competence have been brushed aside by many ethnographers. In a critical review of this issue, Borchgrevink (2003) quotes many cases in which anthropologists accused others of compiling authoritative monographs about foreign cultures without demonstrating that they had real knowledge of the languages spoken by those populations, and other cases in which language knowledge had been assumed by authors of cultural studies but not demonstrated. He quotes (p.100) a discussion between Margaret Mead, who argued that “native languages” should be used as “fieldwork tools” and that such use did not require an in-depth competence, and Lowie (1940) who counter-argued that ethnographers use interpreters because it takes a long time to learn a language and so there is no other choice for them. And although Duranti (1997, p. 112) states that ethnographers should move as quickly as possible towards using the language of the community they are studying, he admits that “things get more complicated when a community has more than one native language or when children are not learning the same language their parents learned as children.”

Besides language competence, many other aspects of the ethnographer’s identity that may have a fundamental influence on the level of credibility and trust achieved in interviews have received attention. Debates around these topics are often subsumed under the question of the ‘insider/outsider’ dilemma (see Naples, 1996; Smith, 1999; Coloma, 2008; Al-Natour, 2011). Indeed, as noted by Prus (2007, p. 19), “the practices of unstructured, in-depth interviewing and participant observation are contingent on the researcher’s ability to gain access to those involved ‘in the life’”. But what aspects of the researcher’s identity or methodology may hamper that ability? Class, race and gender, amongst other identity characteristics, have been at the centre of attention. For example, Young (2004, p. 190) noted how there has been a growing assumption in these debates that interviewers whose gender and/or race differ from that of their informants are automatically classified as ‘outsiders’ and therefore have little hope of gaining access to the worlds of their interviewees. In his view, such assumption leads to undesirable dichotomisations.

Although most recent discussions point to the need to overcome simple oppositions and understand the outsider/insider question in more complex and nuanced ways, the dilemma still persists. Indeed, many researchers using ethnographic methods have commented on how their identities as insiders/outsiders affected their ability to relate to members of the community they were studying. For example, De Fina (2003) talks about how she realised in the course of her project that she needed to reveal her nationality to her informants, who were

Mexican undocumented migrants, in order to gain their trust. Al-Natour (2011) recounts how difficult it was for him as a non-local, male researcher of Arab descent to interview people in a neighbourhood where incidents around the construction of a Muslim school had occurred. Ganga and Scott (2006) talk about how their class position influenced their ability to gain access to informants in ethnographic studies of migrants in Europe. More generally, issues related to the identities of interviewers and their reciprocal relations with interviewees have been conceptualised as questions of positionality (Creswell, 2013). This concept encompasses the wider issue of the researcher's position not only in relation to informants, but also in relation to the research topic, the context and the process of the research. In that regard, ethnographers have offered further reflections on the many ways in which being positioned or positioning oneself in each of these domains may also affect the possibilities of interaction with informants and ultimately also the kinds of data collected.

Another important aspect of the relationship between interviewers and informants concerns the ethics of interviewing (see Copland, this volume). Mishler pointed to the fact that "in the mainstream tradition the interviewer-interviewee relationship is marked by a striking asymmetry of power" (1986, p. 117). Indeed, in most cases, the researcher has control not only of the interview and observation methods used in general, but also of the processes of data selection and interpretation and of the circulation of results. Mishler suggested that interviewers often treat interviewees as mere sources of information rather than as informants, that is, traditional interviewing methods imply a de-humanisation of interviewees through questions that are standardised and divorced from local contexts and experiences. In order to redress this imbalance, he proposed several ways in which interviewees can be empowered, for example granting them control over topics and timing of interviews, including them as research collaborators, asking feedback on research instruments and transcripts obtained, and becoming advocates for their plight.

Dilemmas related to power asymmetries surface not only in the interview itself but throughout the ethnographic research process. Even though research procedures are regulated by ethical committees in most countries, researchers still face questions about privacy and confidentiality, their role in obtaining sensitive information, in supporting/hindering the interest of informants, in fairly representing their needs, and so forth (see Caplan, 2003 for a review of issues in anthropology). Interviewers often find themselves in a position in which they have to ask difficult questions and receive very personal, intimate responses. That, in turn, puts them in a dilemma over what they can reveal without damaging their informants, especially when dealing with at risk populations (see Howell, 2004). They also face dilemmas in terms of how they position themselves in relation to political issues and ideologies both in terms of how their world view may influence their questions and the interpretations of their data and in terms of how they should give back to the individuals and communities that they have interviewed.

Further ethical issues for interviewers derive from their need to comply with IRB (Institutional Review Board) or ethical committees' procedures, such as the imperative of obtaining written informed consent. Indeed, it has been argued that in some cases, obtaining formal consent may hinder the researchers' access to informants (see Silverman, 2003 on this point) by creating an artificial formalisation of relationships that may have been informal or even intimate up to the moment of consent request. Advice on how to cope with these dilemmas is often incorporated into guides on interviewing. For example, in his volume on this topic, Spradley (2016, pp. 34–39) lays out a list of ethical principles for interviewers to follow. He invites researchers to consider the informant first, to safeguard informants' rights, interests and sensitivities, to communicate research objectives, to protect the privacy of informants, not to exploit them and to make reports available to them.

The legitimacy of interviewing in general

Although, as we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, qualitative interviews are a very widely used method amongst ethnographers from different disciplines including anthropology and linguistics, they have also been the object of heated critiques from many sides. Such critiques must be put in the context of the extreme variability and diversity of research paradigms and traditions that appeal directly or indirectly to ethnography and to the different degree of reliance on interviews in these different disciplines. Thus, for example, qualitative interviews are quite central to narrative research (see De Fina, 2009; De Fina & Perrino, 2011 on this point), interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982) and different branches of discourse analysis (see Hammersley, 2005). Researchers in these disciplines often work within the frame of ethnography or claim that they embrace an ethnographic perspective and more often than not they base their work on a generalised use of interviews. Thus, a great deal of criticism has come from scholars who argue that the bulk of data collection and analysis in ethnographic research needs to come from direct observation of participant behaviour rather than from the elicitation of participants' perspectives or participants' language. An important distinction between conceptions of the interview has been proposed by Rapley, who opposes approaches that regard interview data as 'resource' and approaches that regard it as 'topic'. In the interview-data-as-resource approach, "the interview data collected are seen as (more or less) reflecting the interviewees' reality outside the interview", while in interview-data-as-topic, "the interview data collected are seen as (more or less) reflecting a reality jointly constructed by the interviewee and interviewer" (2001, p. 304).

Scholars in the tradition of conversation analysis and ethnomethodology point to the unacceptability of procedures that involve generating data for the specific purpose of analysing them (see Heinrichsmeier, this volume). Amongst the most vocal critics of such a position has been the discursive psychologist Jonathan Potter who asserts that research should be able to pass a (conceptual) "dead scientist test", that is, the data used should be based on an interaction that "would have taken place in the form that it did had the researcher not been born or if the researcher had got run over on the way to the university that morning" (Potter, 1996, p. 135). Similar positions have been expressed by many other CA-oriented scholars (Heritage & Atkinson, 1984; Potter & Whetherell, 1995; ten Have, 1999) in general and in connection with narratives in particular (see Goodwin, 1997; Schegloff, 1997). With regard to narratives, Atkinson and Delamont (2006) have been very vocal critics of the tendency of narrative scholars to equate narrative talk with self-expression and to equate narrative content with facts and events. Such tendency has led some to forego any consideration of the performative and co-constructed characteristics of storytelling in interview settings.

From a more general perspective, the basic argument against interviews as a method of data collection is that they produce 'unnatural' data since the interviewer influences their production (through questions, interruptions, silences, etc.), and offers ad hoc interpretations through the use of etic (i.e. non participant generated) and not emic categories of analysis. Other scholars, however, have rejected both the idea that research interviews cannot be used to gain understandings about social phenomena beyond the local event, and the notion that 'natural' and 'unnatural' data can be opposed in such black-and-white terms. In particular, they have argued against the notion that the researcher's presence in the data can be avoided just by the investigator 'not being there' (see Speer, 2002; De Fina & Perrino, 2011).

Current contributions and research areas

From the 1990s until today, ethnographic researchers in sociocultural linguistics have continued to use semi-structured or unstructured interviews in conjunction with participant observation and other ethnographic methods, but, in part due to the influence of the interpretive turn, they have moved away from the idea of studying homogeneous cultures and more towards the objective of researching language practices within communities and groups that can be defined more by common practices (Lave & Wenger, 1998) than by nationality or place of birth. Thus, more recent ethnographic studies using interviews focus on language practices and/or language ideologies in a wide variety of communities of practice defined by place of interaction, for example schools (Creese et al., 2006; Mendoza-Denton, 2008; Rampton, 2009; Bucholtz, 2011), hospitals (Davidson, 2001), urban spaces such as markets (Blackledge et al., 2017), virtual spaces (Androustopoulos, 2008), group membership such as migrants and mobile subjects (De Fina, 2008; Dong & Blommaert, 2009; Wortham et al., 2011), families (Hua & Wei, 2016) or youth (Jørgensen et al., 2011) to quote just a few. These types of studies used semi-structured interviews as a support for the interpretations and hypotheses put forth on the basis of participant observation about how languages are used, communicative practices are performed and understood, and identities are constructed and negotiated.

Interviews are essential for triangulation, that is, a technique used in ethnography which compares results and insights from different methods of data gathering and interpretation. Interviewees are asked either to comment and give their interpretations on specific episodes or fragments of talk or other units of communication that have been selected by the researcher, or to explain observed behaviour by themselves or other participants. However, interviews are also used to gather background information on various aspects of the life, beliefs and customs of group members that may illuminate linguistic and communicative practices. Scholars usually select a smaller number of participants for interviews from the total of participants in a group. It could be said that interviews nowadays are still widely used but they are overwhelmingly employed to investigate language practices, ideologies, and identity constructions versus linguistic structures and genres as it happened in the past.

Some changes have occurred in the addition of new methods. For example, scholars have used interviews through digital communication means such as Skype, interviews centred on the presentation of stimuli such as body maps and images like the ones used in linguistic portraits (see Busch, 2012), mobile interviews such as the so-called ‘walk alongs’ in which the interviewer literally walks with the interviewee, which have been used to construct spatial maps of the life of interviewees (Sabaté Dalmau, 2016), or to elicit people’s reactions to linguistic landscapes (Aiestaran et al., 2010).

A very important aspect in interviewing today is the centrality accorded to reflexivity (see Patiño-Santos, this volume) and therefore to conscious reflection on ways in which the interviewer contributed to the construction of data, on the relationship between interviewers and participants, on the ethical implications of using interviews and on the rights of interviewees. Thus, researchers tend to always see research interviews as co-constructed rather than as simply conveying the point of view of the interviewee and many stress the fact that research interview is an interactional event in its own right (see De Fina, 2009 and papers in De Fina & Perrino, 2011 for a discussion of this point). Stress on reflexivity has also implied greater consideration of the role of emotions and empathy in interviewing, a point very much emphasised by feminist researchers (see, for example, Oakley, 1998). However, debates about the role of the interview in ethnographic research have not ceased, particularly since a great deal of investigations, especially in identity and narrative research, are still heavily based on interviews.

Conclusions and future directions

In this chapter I have traced the history of interviewing and its emergence as a central tool in ethnographic research mostly in the fields of sociocultural linguistics and anthropological linguistics. I have described the main kinds of interviews, discussed the most important debates in the different disciplines in which interviews are used and traced a brief view of current work based on interviews. I think that future directions will see an increased awareness of ethical issues in interviewing and a continuation of the current trend towards researcher reflexivity. The future will also witness greater development of new types of interviews, such as those conducted through the mediation of technology or those that include mobile components.

Further reading

- Elliott, J. (2005). *Using narrative in social research: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. London: Sage. (This book presents a discussion of narrative interviewing in the social sciences.)
- Gubrium, J., & Holstein, J. (Eds.). (2002). *Handbook of interview research: Context & method*. London: Sage. (This book presents a variety of reflections on qualitative interviews in the social sciences.)
- Riessman, C.K. (2015). Entering the hall of mirrors: Reflexivity and narrative research. In A. De Fina & A. Georgakopoulou (Eds.), *Handbook of narrative analysis* (pp. 219–238). Malden, MA: Wiley. (This chapter presents a discussion of reflexivity in interviewing.)

Related topics

Participant observation and field notes; Ethics; Reflexivity.

References

- Aiestaran, J. Cenoz, J., & Gorter, D. (2010). Multilingual cityscapes: Perceptions and preferences of the inhabitants of Donostia-San Sebastián. In E. Shohamy, E. Ben-Rafael, & M. Barni (Eds.), *Linguistic landscape in the city* (pp. 219–234). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Al-Natour, R. (2011). The impact of the researcher on the researched. *MC Journal*, 14(6). Available from <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/428> (Accessed 10th October 2017).
- Anderson, N. (1926). *The hobo*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Androustopoulos, J. (2008). Potentials and limitations of discourse-centred online Ethnography. *Language@internet*, vol. 5. Available from <http://www.languageatinternet.org/articles/2008/1610> (Accessed 5th October 2017).
- Atkinson, P., & Delamont, S. (2006). Rescuing narrative from qualitative research. *Narrative Inquiry*, 16(1), 173–181.
- Blackledge, A., Creese, A., & Hu, R. (2017). Everyday encounters in the marketplace: Translanguaging in the superdiverse city. In A. De Fina, D. Ikizoglu, & J. Wegner (Eds.), *Diversity and superdiversity: Sociocultural linguistic perspectives* (pp. 97–116). Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Borchgrevink, A. (2003). Silencing language: Of anthropologists and interpreters. *Ethnography*, 4(1), 95–121.
- Briggs, C.L. (1986). *Learning how to ask: A sociolinguistic appraisal of the role of the interview in social science research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bucholtz, M. (2011). *White kids: Language, race and styles of youth identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Busch, B. (2012). The linguistic repertoire revisited. *Applied Linguistics*, 33(5), 503–523.
- Caplan, P. (Ed.) (2003). *The ethics of anthropology*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Cicourel, A.V. (1964). *Method and measurement in sociology*. New York: Free Press of Glencoe.

- Coloma, R.S. (2008). Border crossing subjectivities and research: Through the prism of feminists of color. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 11(1), 11–27.
- Converse, J. (1987). *Survey research in the United States: Roots and emergence, 1890–1960*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Creese, A., Bhatt, A., Bhojani, N., & Martin, P. (2006). Multicultural, heritage and learner identities in complementary schools. *Language and Education*, 20, 23–43.
- Creswell, J.W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Davidson, B. (2001). Questions in cross-linguistic medical encounters: The role of the hospital interpreter. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 74(4), 170–178.
- De Fina, A. (2003). *Identity in narrative. A study of immigrant discourse*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- De Fina, A. (2008). Who tells the story and why? Micro and macro contexts in narrative. *Text and Talk*, 28(3), 421–442.
- De Fina, A. (2009). Narratives in interview – The case of accounts: For an interactional approach to narrative genres. *Narrative Inquiry*, 19(2), 233–258.
- De Fina, A., & Perrino, S. (Eds.) (2011). Interviews vs. ‘natural’ contexts: A false dilemma. Special Issue. *Language in Society*, 40(1), 1–11.
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (Eds.) (2004). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dong, J., & Blommaert, J. (2009). Space, scale and accent: Constructing migrant identity in Beijing. *Multilingua*, 28(1), 1–24.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. (1899). *The Philadelphia negro: A social study*. Philadelphia, PA: Ginn.
- Duranti, A. (1981). *The Samoan fonofono: A sociolinguistic study*. Canberra: The Australian National University, Pacific Linguistics Monograph B80.
- Duranti, A. (1997). *Linguistic anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Edwards, R., & Holland, J. (2013). *What is qualitative interviewing?* London and New York: Bloomsbury.
- Fontana, A., & Frey, J. (1994). Interviewing: The art of science. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 361–376). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ganga, D., & Scott, S. (2006). Cultural “insiders” and the issue of positionality in qualitative migration research: Moving “across” and moving “along”: Researcher-participant divides. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 7(3). Available from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/134/289#g2> (Accessed 30th September 2017).
- Geertz, C. (1972). Deep play: Notes on the Balinese cockfight. In *The interpretation of cultures* (pp. 412–54). New York: Basic Books.
- Geertz, C. (1983). ‘From the native’s point of view’: On the nature of anthropological understanding. In *Local knowledge: Further essays in interpretive anthropology* (pp. 55–72). New York: Basic Books.
- Giddens, A. (1976). *New rules of sociological method: A positive critique of interpretative sociologies*. Berkeley, CA: Hutchinson.
- Goodwin, M.H. (1997). Towards families of stories in context. *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 7(1–4), 107–112.
- Gossen, G. (1974). *A green tree and a dry tree*. New York: Macmillan.
- Gumperz, J. (1982). *Discourse strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hammersley, M. (2005). Ethnography and discourse analysis: Incompatible or complementary? *Poli-fonia*, 10, 1–20.
- Hammersley, M. (2018). What is ethnography? Can it survive? Should it? *Ethnography and Education*, 13(1), 1–17.
- Heritage, J., & Atkinson, J.M. (1984). Introduction. In M.J. Atkinson & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis* (pp. 1–16). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hess, D. (2001) Ethnography and the development of science and technology studies. In P. Atkinson et al. (Eds.), *Handbook of ethnography* (pp. 234–245). London: Sage.
- Heyl, B. (2001). Ethnographic interview. In P. Atkinson, A., Coffey, S., Delamont, J., Lofland, & L., Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of ethnography* (pp. 369–383). London: Sage.
- Hill, J., & Hill, K. (1986). *Speaking Mexicano: Dynamics of syncretic language in Central Mexico*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Howell, J. (2004). Turning out good ethnography, or talking out of turn? Gender, violence, and confidentiality in Southeastern Mexico. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 33, 323–352.
- Hua, Z., & Wei, L. (2016). Transnational experience, aspiration and family language policy. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 37(7), 655–666.

- Hymes, D.H. (1976). Discovering oral performance and measured verse in American Indian narrative. *New Literary History*, 8, 431–457.
- Jørgensen, J.N., Karrebæk, M.S., Madsen, L.M., and Møller, J.S. (2011). Polylinguaging in superdiversity. *Diversities*, 12(2), 23–37.
- Keesing, R., & Strathern, A. (1997). *Cultural anthropology: A contemporary perspective* (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Kvale, S. (2007). *Doing interviews*. London: Sage.
- Labov, W. (1972). *Language in the inner city*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lowie, R.H. (1940). Native languages as ethnographic tool. *American Anthropologist*, 42(1), 81–89.
- Lynd, R.S., & Lynd, H.M. (1929). *Middletown: A study in contemporary American culture*. New York: Harcourt, Brace.
- Malinowski, B. (1922). *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An account of native enterprise and adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Mead, M. (1928). *Coming of age in Samoa*. New York: William Morrow and Co.
- Mendoza-Denton, N. (2008). *Homegirls. Language and cultural practice among Latina youth*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Mass.
- Merton, R., Fiske, M., & Kendall, P. (1956). *The focused interview a manual of problems and procedures*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- Merton, R.K., & Lazarsfeld, P.F. (Eds.) (1950). *Continuities in social research: Studies in the scope and method of "The American Soldier"*. New York: The Free Press.
- Milroy, J., & Milroy, L. (1977). Speech community and language variety in Belfast. *Report to the SSRC*.
- Mishler, E.G. (1986). *Research interviewing: Context and narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Naples, N. (1996). A feminist revisiting of the insider/outsider debate: The 'outsider phenomenon' in rural Iowa. *Qualitative Sociology*, 19(1), 83–106.
- Oakley A. (1998). Gender, methodology and people's ways of knowing: Some problems with feminism and the paradigm debate in social science. *Sociology*, 32, 707–731.
- Potter, J. (1996). Discourse analysis and constructionist approaches: Theoretical background. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of qualitative research methods for psychology and the social sciences* (pp. 125–40). Leicester: BPS Books.
- Potter, J., & Wetherell, M. (1995). Natural order: Why social psychologists should study (a constructed version of) natural language, and why they have not done so. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 14(1–2), 216–222.
- Prus, R. (2007). Respecting the human condition: Pursuing intersubjectivity in the marketplace. In S. Grills (Ed.), *Doing ethnographic research. Fieldwork settings* (pp. 21–47). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rabinov, P., & Sullivan, W. (Eds.) (1987). *Interpretive social science: A second look* (2nd ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rampton, B. (2009). *Language in late modernity. Interaction in an urban school*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rapley, T.J. (2001). The art(fulness) of open-ended interviewing: Some considerations on analyzing interviews. *Qualitative Research*, 1(3), 303–323.
- Sabaté Dalmau, M. (2016). Migrant narratives of dis/emplacement: The alternative spatialization and ethnicization of the local urban floor. *Text & Talk*, 36(3), 269–293.
- Schegloff, E.A. (1997). 'Narrative analysis' thirty years later. *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 7(1–4), 97–106.
- Scollon, R., & S. Scollon. (1981). *Narrative, literacy, and face in interethnic communication*. Norton, OH: Ablex.
- Silverman M. (2003). Everyday ethics: A personal journey in rural Ireland, 1980–2001. In P. Caplan (Ed.), *Ethics in anthropology* (pp. 115–132). London and New York: Sage.
- Smith, L.T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. Dunedin: University of Otago Press.
- Speer, S.A. (2002). 'Natural' and 'contrived' data: A sustainable distinction? *Discourse Studies*, 4(4), 511–525.
- Spradley, J.P. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. New York: Holt Reinhart and Winston.
- Spradley, J.P. (2016). *Participant observation*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.

- Ten Have, P. (1999). *Doing conversation analysis: A practical guide*. London: Sage.
- Thrasher, F. (1927). *The gang: A study of 1,313 gangs in Chicago*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Wortham, S., Mortimer, K., Lee, K., Allard, E., and Daniel White, K. (2011). Interviews as interactional data. *Language in Society*, 40, 39–50.
- Young, A. (2004). Experiences in ethnographic interviewing about race. In M. Bulmer & J. Solomos (Eds.), *Researching race and racism* (pp. 187–202). London: Routledge.