10 Ethnography and recording interaction

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1 Introduction

Shortly after I arrived in Israel to begin fieldwork on language among Israeli lesbian and gay activists, I went out for a drink with three of my male informants. As we waited for the bartender to bring us our beers, Roee, one of the men I was with, leaned over to me and, indicating the bartender with his head, said wai, eize birz hu, naxon? (‘Wow, he’s a birz, isn’t he?’). Though I could tell that he was commenting on the bartender, I had to admit that I did not understand the word birz, and I asked Roee to translate it for me. Roee began to laugh, and then explained that the word birz meant ‘handsome man’ in an Israeli gay slang variety called oxtchit. My interest was immediately piqued. I had never heard of an Israeli gay slang variety before, and I was eager to know where the variety came from and how it was used. The men I was with that evening explained to me that oxtchit was a variety predominantly used by a specific kind of effeminate gay man in Israel, called oxtchot, though it was also sometimes used by other gay men as a “secret” variety.

Taking this explanation at face value, I spent the next few weeks finding out all that I could about oxtchit. Yet the more I looked into it, the more my understanding of oxtchit contradicted what I had originally been told. For example, I never saw oxtchit being used as a “secret” variety, a way to hide what one says from prying ears. Instead, I only ever heard it being used in a joking manner between friends. In addition, I noticed that only some of my male informants ever used oxtchit at all – and that the ones that did were the polar opposite of the effeminate gay men I had been told were the variety’s primary users. As I spent more time in the field and got to know my informants’ worldview better, I came to realize that the reality of oxtchit was very different from what had been described to me previously. Oxtchit was not spoken by oxtchot, nor was it a secret or “identity-affirming” variety. Rather, I came to understand that oxtchit was an enregistered voice (e.g., Agha 2005), a linguistic materialization of gendered alterity that is used exclusively as a form of mockery (Goffman 1974) by certain gender-normative gay men in Israel (see Levon 2012).

I describe my experience with oxtchit in Israel in order to demonstrate how my analysis of the variety – both in terms of its function and its distribution – was only possible because I was able to develop an understanding of the variety’s meaning within the community in which it was used. In other words, successfully analyzing
oxitch required the kind of insight that only ethnographic fieldwork could provide. In this chapter, I describe how we go about achieving this kind of insight in linguistic research. I go through the various steps involved in conducting ethnographic fieldwork, including planning an ethnographic project, accessing a community of speakers, collecting both audio- and video-recorded data, and processing and writing up findings. My goal is to describe ethnographic methods in a way that is both useful and relevant to as wide a linguistics readership as possible, and, as a result, to demonstrate that the underlying precepts of ethnography form the foundation of “best practices” in linguistic field research more broadly.

Ethnography is a term that is very often used, but not always clearly defined. Its origins lie in research by sociocultural anthropologists in the first decades of the twentieth century, and particularly in the “participatory observation” method advocated by Malinowski (1922). For Malinowski, the goal of social science research was to understand how the behavior observed within a community is linked to the beliefs and interpretive practices characteristic of that group. In order to achieve this, Malinowski claimed that researchers must work to develop an insider’s perspective, which would allow them to interpret the behaviors they observe in light of the social context in which those behaviors are located. Yet at the same time, Malinowski argued that the scientific analysis of behavior requires more than simply seeing the world through an informant’s eyes. It necessarily also relies on a researcher’s ability to keep one foot outside of the goings-on of a community so that she can extrapolate the larger social forces that are in play and so come to refutable generalizations about social structure. In other words, according to Malinowski ethnography is about generating a theory of social behavior that is based on both an insider and a more outsider perspective (sometimes also called emic and etic views, respectively; see Pike 1967). The difficulty in ethnographic research often lies in finding the right balance between the two. This point is succinctly summarized by Geertz (1983: 57, cited in Duranti 1997: 86):

The real question . . . is what roles the two concepts [insider and outsider] play in [ethnographic] analysis. Or, more exactly, how, in each case, ought one to deploy them so as to produce an interpretation of the way a people lives which is neither imprisoned within their mental horizons, an ethnography of witchcraft as written by a witch, nor systematically deaf to the tonalities of their existence, an ethnography of witchcraft as written by a geometer.

A belief in the importance of an ethnographic approach to the study of language also has a long history in linguistics. Sakel and Everett (2012: 156), for example, cite Boas’ (1917) critique of the then available documentation on Native American languages as “one-sided and incomplete . . . because we hardly have any records of daily occurrences, everyday conversation, descriptions of industries, customs and the like.” For Boas, it was impossible to fully describe the form of a language without taking into account the cultural viewpoint of those who spoke it. In making this point, Boas echoes Malinowski’s view, essentially arguing
for the centrality of ethnographic knowledge to linguistic theory. And while our conceptualization of language as an object of study has certainly changed since Boas’ time (particularly with the advent of both the generativist and the variationist paradigms), many linguists would nevertheless still agree with the basic premise of Boas’ claim: that rigorous theorizing is not possible without adequate description, and that, in turn, adequate description often requires knowledge about how speakers themselves understand the phenomenon in question. This suggests that ethnographic methods are not restricted to sociolinguistics. Everett (1985, 2005), for example, argues that understanding Pirahã phonology requires intricate knowledge of culturally specific discourse “channels” (or registers), knowledge that it is only possible to obtain through prolonged ethnographic observation. Even in less “exotic” linguistic locations, ethnographic observation often provides highly useful information regarding variation in optionality and/or gradient grammaticality that speaks directly to the interest of all linguists (e.g., Vaux and Cooper 1999; Newman and Ratliff 2001). Finally, it has always been a central tenet of sociolinguistic research that understanding patterns of language variation and language change is impossible without also understanding the social matrix within which those patterns are embedded (e.g., Labov 1963). The point here then is that the foundational argument of ethnography – that speakers’ own interpretations of their behavior also matter – is relevant across the discipline of linguistics, even for those researchers who may not normally think of ethnography as a part of what they do.

2 Planning your project

All research requires advance planning, and ethnography is certainly no exception. In fact, there are a variety of additional things to consider when preparing an ethnographic field project that go above and beyond the standard concerns for linguistics research.

As in all projects, the first thing a researcher needs to consider is what the focus of the project is. While in other research traditions initial planning is often formulated as a series of research questions to be resolved, ethnography tends to adopt a more inductive, data-driven, bottom-up approach in which relevant social and linguistic phenomena emerge over the course of ethnographic observation. According to Blommaert and Jie (2010: 12), “this is what makes ethnography a demanding approach: it is not enough (not by a very long shot) to follow a clear, pre-set line of inquiry and the researcher cannot come thundering in with pre-established truths.” That being said, it is nevertheless important to have at least a preliminary idea of a social phenomenon in mind. As you proceed through your fieldwork, this idea will become refined, and it is entirely possible that your focus will shift over time. A key principle of ethnography is that while you may plan for any eventuality before you begin your fieldwork, the real trick is to be prepared for the fact that your need to adapt in the field will be ever-present. Nevertheless, it
is often helpful to begin planning your project by delineating a series of workable questions that your research will potentially address.

The “workability” of ethnographic research questions is judged primarily on the same grounds as for any other kind of project. In particular, you want to ensure that your questions are:

- **Relevant** – Would your research go beyond being simply a description of a case study and (i) fill an empirical gap and/or (ii) contribute to the development of relevant (social and linguistic) theory?
- **Original** – Does your research represent a new contribution to knowledge? How does your research build on and improve previous work in this area?
- **Methodologically sound** – Is your study practically and ethically feasible (i.e., can you actually do what you set out to do)? Will you be able to answer the question that you set? Is the scope of your research too large or too small?

Determining the extent to which an ethnographic project is methodologically sound requires some careful consideration. One of the biggest challenges in this regard is determining whether you will actually be able to answer the questions that you set. Put another way, are your research questions operationalized such that you can state what kinds of evidence you would need to collect in order to provide an answer for the question? Again, even though much ethnographic work is focused on broader social forces and how those forces may be reflected and/or constructed through language, it is important to ensure that the questions you ask have empirical answers. For example, say you are interested in examining issues of gender and power in mixed-sex interactions. A question like “Do men have power over women in conversation?” is going to be a very difficult one to provide any sort of answer for since it depends on what is meant by “power” and how one determines who is more powerful in a conversational interaction. You can, however, rephrase this question in a more empirically focused way: “In mixed-sex interaction, what function do men’s uses of simultaneous speech (e.g., interruptions and overlaps) serve, and to what extent does this use allow men to achieve conversational dominance over women?” This second question is a more “operationalized” one in that you can immediately determine what will be investigated (i.e., simultaneous speech in mixed-sex interaction) and what conclusions that investigation will lead to (i.e., that men do or do not achieve conversational dominance). In a real ethnographic project, even finalized research questions will most likely not be as specific as this example, but it is nevertheless important to bear the question of operationalizability in mind.

Very closely linked to this is the issue of whether you can practically and ethically investigate the topic (for a detailed discussion of ethical issues in linguistics research, see Chapter 2). One of the first things to consider in this regard is whether you can identify an appropriate and accessible population of speakers that allows you to address the question. In certain instances there may be
practical impediments to your achieving this goal (e.g., you want to study monolingual speakers of Amharic, for example, and are unable to be in contact with them) or there may be ethical impediments (e.g., you want to study language-in-interaction during parent–child arguments). You should also consider whether the population you have in mind is adequate for addressing your question. If you want to study language and gay men, for example, do you need to compare gay men’s practice to that of other speakers in order to obtain a valid result? In this case, research has demonstrated that such a comparison is not always necessary (e.g., Podesva 2007), but it is nevertheless a question worth asking. Related to this is the issue of how you plan to assess community membership to begin with. Membership criteria for certain communities (e.g., work colleagues) are more clearly delineated than others (e.g., friendship groups), and it is important that you know in advance what you take being a community member to entail and how you plan on determining that on a case-by-case basis. (Note that certain theoretical perspectives have well-defined criteria for inclusion. For example, the Communities of Practice approach [Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992] defines membership in terms of joint engagement in a mutual endeavor. For those working within a Communities of Practice approach, devising your own inclusion criteria is therefore less of an issue.)

Another common concern with respect to the practicality of your research has to do with the scope of your project. There is often a temptation for researchers to make projects too big (e.g., “I’m going to study young British men”), as a way of trying to ensure their work is relevant. The problem with this is that if a research question is too large in scope it becomes unanswerable. Recall that ethnographic research entails spending large amounts of time interacting with your informants and getting to know them on a relatively personal level. It would be impossible to do so for a population as large as “young British men.” It is also not clear that such a population actually represents the kind of “community” for which ethnography is designed, since ethnography tends to focus on smaller, more locally meaningful groups, rather than those based on large, demographic categories (e.g., Hymes 1974; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992). When planning an ethnographic project, it is therefore important to identify a bounded and internally cohesive group of speakers that you would be able to interact with on a regular basis and whose observed behavior would allow you to fully address your research goals (see Chapter 5).

A final, yet very important, point to consider when selecting a community is whether you would be able to gain access to it in the first place. This is different than the actual mechanics of gaining access to a community, which I discuss in Section 3. What I have in mind here is a more preliminary question regarding whether access is even possible and, if so, the quality of access that could be achieved. In all interaction-based research projects, it is crucial to be mindful of cultural and other sensitivities – even those that you may not necessarily be aware of (see Chapter 2). Whether you are planning on conducting elicitations with a single informant, doing a series of one-off interviews, or spending a prolonged
period of ethnographic observation within a community, you need to bear in mind that how your informants relate to you and your social positioning (in terms of your race, sex, sexuality, social class, nationality, etc.) could have an impact on the kinds of information they provide you with (and whether they grant you access in the first place). Could I, for example, as a white man, gain access to conduct an ethnography of language as it is used in an African American women’s beauty parlor? Perhaps. Though even if I did there would be a very real question regarding the extent to which I would be able to achieve genuine “insider” status. In saying this, I do not mean to imply that research can only ever be conducted in communities of which you are already a member. But this question of positioning deserves careful attention throughout the life of any ethnographic project, including in the initial planning stages. (There is extensive discussion in the anthropological literature of this issue; see, e.g., Kulick and Wilson 1995; Murphy and Dingwall 2001.)

Once you have a suitable community in mind, the next steps in planning your project include enhancing your background knowledge of the community in question and preparing any preliminary data collection materials. In terms of background knowledge, you obviously want to read as much as you can about the community and the topic you will soon begin studying. Primarily, this will include academic research on the subject, though it is also important to seek out popular sources, such as news stories, films, and other media products. In addition, you want to ensure that you review relevant academic outputs in related disciplines if they exist (psychology, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, etc.) and that you collect whatever specialist technical information (e.g., census results and other statistics) that is available. It is also always a good idea to get in contact with other researchers who have worked on your or a related topic. They are normally happy to help and will be able to provide you with valuable insight and practical tips for your work. Finally, if it is possible it can also be a good idea to talk informally with people in the community and to spend some time there. All of these activities will help to prepare you before you embark on your own research. At the same time, however, collecting this kind of background information can cause you to develop certain preconceived notions about the community you study. As an ethnographer, you need to train yourself to leave these kinds of assumptions behind and to be open to developing your own, sometimes incompatible, interpretations of community dynamics.

Finally, the advance preparation of any data collection materials will help relieve the amount of work you have to do once in the field. These could include things like recruitment materials (e.g., flyers, texts of emails) and preliminary schedules of questions for interviews (both of these are also normally required for IRB review). In addition, you want to make sure that you have acquired, learned how to use, and tested all recording devices, and that you have all the necessary peripherals (e.g., microphones, batteries, cables; see Chapter 9 for details of sound recording in linguistics research; see also Chapter 1 for a discussion of preparing research instruments). Some projects also require acquiring specialist linguistic
knowledge (up to and including learning a new language). While it is certainly possible to learn a language while in the field, it will vastly reduce your future workload to at least begin the process beforehand.

3 Accessing a community

Gaining access to a community is both the first and one of the most crucial components of ethnographic research. This is because the way you gain access will often shape your positioning within that community, and hence the direction that your research is able to take. There are a variety of different ways in which ethnographers gain access, and it is important to consider which of the options available is right for you and your project (see Chapter 5 on different population sampling techniques in linguistics research).

Perhaps the most common method for gaining access in ethnographic research today is the **friend-of-a-friend technique** (e.g., Milroy and Gordon 2003), where the researcher is brought into a community by a mutual friend or acquaintance. This mutual friend is already a member of the community herself, and so introduces the researcher to other community members. The benefit of the friend-of-a-friend method is that it allows you to enter a community as something other than a stranger. This normally means that other community members will be less wary of you than they might have been, and may even feel encouraged to participate in your research and help you to establish a more personal connection. At the same time, entering a community with the status of “friend” can also carry with it certain obligations. As Schilling-Estes (2007: 180) notes, “if one capitalizes on one’s friendships, it is typically expected to give something back in return.” Being known in a community as a friend can also make it somewhat awkward to begin data collection in earnest, especially if you are not immediately forthright about your reasons for being there (more on this last issue below).

Another way of avoiding entering a community as a complete stranger is to make use of a **broker** (Schilling-Estes 2007), or a recognized and semi-official gatekeeper of a group. Brokers include people like local teachers, government or religious officials, or even former researchers who have worked with the community in question. These people normally have a certain degree of authority in a community, and are thus able to encourage community members to participate. In certain cases, working with a broker may be required because of the structure of a given community (it may be a closed community that is suspicious of outsiders) or because of certain ethical regulations that are in place (working in schools or with minors normally requires the use of brokers, as does working with certain sensitive populations that have been subject to ethical abuses in the past; see Chapter 2). The benefits of working with a broker are largely the same as for the friend-of-a-friend method, though it is important to realize that the aura of officialdom that comes with brokers may impact upon the relationships you establish with community members. Because brokers carry a certain amount of
power and authority within the community, researchers who are introduced by brokers can also be perceived as being in positions of power, which can in turn affect your ability to establish personal connections with informants. Finally, as guardians of their community’s image, brokers often want to portray their community in the best possible light. This may mean that they will only introduce you to some community members and not to others. As a researcher working with a broker, it is therefore important not to let your fieldwork be governed by a broker’s idea about the community (while remaining grateful of the access you have been granted and respecting your broker’s wishes).

In certain cases, gaining entry to a community is not an issue because you are studying a group of which you are already a member. In these instances, you will normally already have a personal relationship with community members and require no additional introductions. The difficulty in this type of research, however, is making the transition from “regular community member” to “researcher” as smooth as possible. This involves careful consideration of how you plan on establishing an adequate analytical distance from the community, and how you intend to explain to other members the new identity of “participant observer” you will be assuming. We discuss the issue of explaining your project to community members below.

Finally, you may find that you have no choice but to enter a community as a stranger. You could, for example, have no acquaintances who are themselves community members and know of no official gatekeepers (or wish to avoid gatekeepers) to the community you want to study. This is perhaps the most difficult way to gain access to a community, but it is sometimes necessary. If you are in this situation, the best way to proceed is to somehow make a “friend” within the community, who will then be able to introduce you to other community members. In other words, create a “friend-of-a-friend” situation from scratch. You can do this by trying to attend any organized meetings or activities the community may have (if they are open to the public) or simply to frequent places where you know that community members will be, in the hope of striking up a conversation with one of them. In his work on the ‘yan daudu in Nigeria, for example, Gaudio (2009) describes how he began to attend various public ‘yan daudu events on his own. After having seen him at a number of such events, some community members came over and began to chat with him, which eventually led to Gaudio gaining access to the group. You can also try adopting a particular role within the community that will grant you access to community members. Mendoza-Denton (2008), for example, worked as a teaching assistant in a Northern California high school in order to gain access to the Latina gang girls she eventually studied. Similarly, Josey (2004) worked as a babysitter in Martha’s Vineyard so as to gain access to families in the local community. An advantage of this kind of approach – essentially creating a position for yourself within the community – is that you can potentially have multiple access points to different parts of the community in question.
No matter which of the mechanisms for gaining access you use, it is always important in ethnographic research to think about your eventual positioning within a community. As mentioned above, different access techniques have different implications for how researchers may be viewed in the community being studied and, relatedly, for the kind of data and participants you are going to get. The important thing is to be aware of these issues, and to try to mitigate any concerns that your positioning may create. Sometimes there is very little that you are able to do. Informants may react to things about you that you have no control over (your ethnic identity, for instance, or your sex). The effects of these reactions can be both positive and negative. Kulick (1998), for example, discusses how when he first began studying transgendered prostitutes, or travesti, in Brazil, the fact that he is not himself Brazilian made it much easier for his travesti informants to feel comfortable with him, since they assumed that he was not aware of the negative stereotypes regarding travesti that circulate in Brazilian society. In other cases, it may be to your advantage to cultivate a certain amount of distance between yourself and your informants, even if your informants do not perceive there to be one at the start. In my own work in Israel (Levon 2010), I found that strategically insisting on my “American-ness” was at times very helpful and allowed me to gain access to a wider variety of informants (including lesbians, Palestinians, and gay Orthodox Jews) than would have been possible otherwise. Both because my name is recognizably Israeli and because I was able to interact with all of my informants in Hebrew, I was initially “read” by many of my future informants as an Israeli gay man, with all of the ideological baggage that such a perception implied. Gaining access to a diverse population therefore required me to try to downplay my “Israeliness” to certain informants, and I did so by presenting myself as an American academic. The point is that the issue of finding the right balance between insider and outsider status is ever present in ethnographic research, and sometimes the factors that determine whether you are viewed as an insider or an outsider may be beyond your control.

One of the key ways in which you can attempt to manage your informants’ perceptions of you is in how you introduce and explain your project (and your presence in the community) in the first place. Again, the kind of access mechanism you employ could have consequences for how you end up explaining your work. Brokers, for example, tend to want a more formal explanation of your project, complete with verification of your institutional backing. Research in your own community, in contrast, often entails a more informal and prolonged process of explanation until your informants actually understand that your position within the group has shifted from simply being a member to also being an analyst (though even here unobtrusive reference to institutional backing – on an information sheet or a consent form, for example – can also be useful at times). In all cases, the thing to remember is that people are not normally used to being observed in their everyday interactions, and this may make some people uncomfortable. For example, I had certain informants who, particularly at the beginning of my fieldwork, told me that they felt like rats in a maze with someone (i.e., me) watching their
every move. How you mitigate these kinds of concerns will depend very much on the kind of relationship you have with your informants and how comfortable you feel talking to them about the details of your project. On the whole, informants are normally much more willing to accept a situation, even a somewhat uncomfortable one, if they know what they are getting themselves into, and can at times react very negatively if they are only later made aware of what your research is actually about. Obviously, it is important to balance the needs of your project with your responsibility to your informants (see Chapter 2), but a researcher should never forget that ultimately it is the informants who are being generous with their time and granting you privileged access to their lives. It is a researcher’s obligation to respect this.

A key point in all of the preceding discussion is that your own self-awareness as an ethnographer in a community cannot be emphasized enough. Any ethnography is always the product of that particular researcher. It is precisely because you are who you are that you are interested in what you are interested in. This means that the things that you will notice over the course of your ethnography are also a product of who you are, how you have been trained and how you relate to the community you are studying. Your job as an ethnographic researcher is to articulate precisely how you and your positioning affect the environment you are studying. To borrow Duranti’s (1997) terminology, your task is to integrate three voices in your analysis—your voice as a researcher, the voice of the community you are studying, and the voice of your disciplinary tradition. While this often means that ethnography can be difficult, slow, and personally disorienting, it is precisely this messiness that allows you to develop a nuanced understanding of your community.

4 Data collection

There are a variety of ways of collecting linguistic and social information once you have gained access to a community. In ethnography, these include:

- participant observation
- ethnographic interviews
- self-recordings
- collection of community artifacts.

This section discusses each of these data collection methods in turn, focusing primarily on those that are not discussed elsewhere in this volume.

4.1 Participant observation

Participant observation is the primary data collection method of ethnographic research, and serves to distinguish it from other kinds of interaction-based linguistic field methods. In participant observation, your goal is to become both an active member of the goings-on of a community and to observe those activities as they unfold. It is by achieving this dual status of active member and
external observer that ethnography is able to achieve the kinds of analytical insights into the workings of a community that are described at the beginning of this chapter.

In practical terms, this means that as a researcher you need to participate in as many of the group’s activities as you can. What activities there are will depend largely on the unique properties of the group you are studying, but could include a mixture of both more “formal” events (e.g., meetings, parties, lectures, work activities) and more informal encounters (e.g., lunch breaks, coffee among friends, bumping into people on the street). In all types of group activities, you want to focus on a set list of properties or characteristics that will inform your future analyses of the community. According to Richards (2003), ethnographic observation of social interactions should focus on the following areas:

- the physical settings of events
- the systems and procedures that are followed at these events
- the people who take part in the events
- the practices (including language) that are observed at these events.

As in all kinds of research, your goal in paying attention to these components of interaction is to identify systematic patterns of behavior that are socially meaningful within the community. Eckert (1989), for example, details how the salient divisions among social groupings in the high school she studied were evident in the places students chose to eat their lunch. In other words, the physical setting of eating lunch was not without social meaning, and helped to structure the other social practices in which her informants engaged. In participant observation, it is important to be sensitive to details such as these, and to cast your analytical gaze as widely as possible, since you never know what may end up being meaningful.

Geertz (1973) describes the process of ethnography as “thick description,” or a description that is sensitive to the potentially meaningful nature of different activities and events. Geertz’s classic example, which he borrows from Ryle (1971), is of two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes. For one of these boys, the movement is an involuntary twitch. For the other boy, however, the movement is a wink, an action that carries social meaning. According to Geertz, the goal of ethnography is to distinguish between the twitches and the winks, and to come to understand the social function of the winking. Doing this, however, can be very challenging. Agar (1996) suggests that a good place to start is by staying alert to what he calls “rich points,” or the gaps in understanding that inevitably occur when you observe a community other than your own. For Agar, unexpected events – events that you do not understand and that may even conflict with your own assumptions about the world – are the primary unit of data for ethnographic analysis, since they force you to step outside of your own worldview and try to understand the perspective of others. In other words, an ethnographer’s job after encountering a rich point is to develop an understanding of the system of beliefs within which the rich point makes sense. This will then help you to distinguish between events that are socially meaningful and those that are not.
4.2 Field notes

Because ethnography is essentially a process of stepping outside of your own perspective and coming to understand the perspective of others, it is a highly reflexive practice. In other words, ethnography requires you to be thinking constantly about your own awareness of events and activities in the field as you progress from confusion to understanding. Keeping detailed field notes is the principal method used by ethnographers to document this voyage. Part personal diary, part record of rich points encountered in the field, your field notes are the place for you to reflect on the process of conducting your research and to record your misapprehensions, your feelings of vulnerability, and your moments of insight and breakthrough. In addition to the various data points you collect, your own personal story of your ethnography as chronicled in your field notes will comprise a major part of the ethnographic analysis you eventually write. For this reason, it is important to develop the habit of writing field notes on a very regular basis (i.e., at least daily) throughout your time in the field. Even if you have nothing concrete to report, the act of writing about your ongoing experiences will force you to reflect on the process of your research and to question ideas, beliefs, and interpretations that you might otherwise take for granted.

In addition, field notes serve a very practical purpose of providing you with a single space for recording all of your impressions and observations. Since you will also be participating in community events, it may not always be possible to take notes during interactions. You should then jot down your memories as soon as possible afterwards, since details tend to be the first thing we forget. In order to help you make sure that you have captured all of the potentially relevant pieces of information, it is a good idea to structure your notes according to a template that you use (with minor modifications) for all events you observe (that will also aid in the analysis of your observations further down the line). Sakel and Everett (2012: 102) provide a list of “meta-data” that should be collected for language elicitation projects, which I have adapted here to suit ethnographic studies:

- type of event observed (formal/informal, meeting/conversation, etc.)
- file names/numbers of any recordings of the event (see discussion of recording below)
- date and time of the event (both in absolute terms, e.g., July 18, and also in relative ones, e.g., in the afternoon immediately following a group meeting)
- community members involved in the event and their degree of participation in the event (e.g., Mary and Jane having a conversation, with Jack sitting nearby and eavesdropping)
- location of the event, including a physical description of the built environment
- languages used (if you are studying a multilingual community)
Keeping track of a set list of characteristics like this will help you to compare and cross-reference your observations in the future. In order to do so, you also need to make sure that you write your notes as clearly and transparently as possible, to ensure that you can access the relevant information in the future (while you may know who “Mr. A” is at the time of observation, for example, you may have completely forgotten by the time you get around to doing your analysis). Also, be sure to create back-ups of all your notes (e.g., handwritten notes and electronic files) that you save in multiple locations.

4.3 Making recordings

Because of the difficulties of noticing everything while also participating, it is often a good idea to record interactions (in audio and, if possible, video formats) where you can. If you plan on analyzing patterns of language use in interaction, recording becomes essential. Recording unstructured interactions is somewhat different than recording more structured tasks (such as interviews). To begin, while informants will generally accept the idea that events like interviews are normally recorded, they may show a bit more reticence in having their daily (and seemingly uneventful) interactions recorded. If this is the case, you need to be able to calm your informants’ concerns and ensure that interactions take place with as little disturbance as possible. A good tactic is to tell your informants that the recordings are really for you, to help you remember what occurs. You can also try to get blanket consent for recordings at the start of your fieldwork (i.e., that your informants agree to be recorded whenever you are present) and that way you do not need to indicate that you have begun recording each time you do. It is nevertheless crucial that your informants are aware that any recordings you make could end up being used as part of your data for analysis, and that they have consented to this beforehand (see Chapter 2).

As in sociolinguistic interviews (see Chapter 6; Labov 1984), when recording interactions you should try to minimize any overt observer effects. You do this by trying to make the recording equipment as inconspicuous as possible and ensuring that the act of recording impedes the progression of whatever event or activity you are observing as little as possible. These two concerns (inconspicuousness and versatility) will inform the kinds of recording equipment you use (and hence the types of recording you ultimately make). Before turning to some detailed considerations of things to think about when planning recordings, it is important to note that recording equipment will normally comprise a substantial part of your research budget. While it is of course possible to record both audio and video

- notable linguistic characteristics of the event (e.g., topics, perceived use of particular linguistic forms)
- notable social characteristics of the event (e.g., clothing, behavior, emotional responses).
on a variety of widely available consumer electronics (e.g., mobile phones, Dictaphones), in some cases recordings made with this type of equipment may not be of a sufficiently high quality for linguistic analysis. It is always a good idea to use state-of-the-art commercial-grade equipment when conducting academic research, if at all possible.

When thinking about audio equipment (see also Chapters 4 and 9), you probably want to use a device that is small and relatively portable. This will allow you to move the equipment out of open view, which may help to alleviate unwanted observer effects.

If it is possible, video-recording is also an excellent idea in ethnographic fieldwork. In addition to the information you can capture in audio, video recordings of interaction provide you with a rich record of the myriad social practices your informants are engaged in and can provide insight into the ways in which attitudes and social ideologies can become physically embodied (Grimshaw 1982; Bourdieu 1991). Moreover, video is often instrumental in helping you to determine who precisely is speaking (and to whom), and can provide valuable clues as to the intended and perceived meanings of particular statements or actions (by giving you information about people’s facial expressions when speaking, for example). Finally, video also provides you with an array of non-linguistic information (including things like gaze, bodily disposition, and gesture) that can be very useful to your research (Goodwin 2007). Goodwin (2000), for example, analyzes a dispute between two young girls, Carla and Diana, during a game of hopscotch. Carla accuses Diana of cheating in the game, and uses a range of semiotic tools to express her displeasure. In addition to certain conventionalized linguistic forms (including a lexico-syntactic frame and a particular prosodic contour), Carla also makes uses of certain hand gestures and a specific bodily disposition. More than simply reinforcing the semiotic message carried in language, Goodwin argues that these gestural and bodily practices serve as a tool for engaging Diana’s attention and ensuring that Carla’s objection cannot be overlooked. For Goodwin, an analysis of this interaction that only considered the linguistic channel would be incomplete, since crucial social action is also being performed via what he calls “embodied stances.”

Video recording has many of the same technical requirements as successful audio recording does. You should ensure that any recording equipment is as inconspicuous and/or unobtrusive as possible, and it should be portable enough for you as the researcher to transport on your own. As with audio recordings, you should also plan to use external microphones when recording video, as the microphones built into most video equipment are not suitable for linguistic analysis. Unlike audio, in video you have additional factors to take into account. One of these is where the video camera will be positioned, and thus who will be in the camera’s field of vision. It is normally considered best practice to have the camera on a tripod to reduce unnecessary movement in the image, so you have to decide whether you want the camera to capture the entire scene of whatever action you are observing, or some more limited frame (you can also consider using...
multiple cameras to capture different angles). There are both strengths and weaknesses to both of these options, and this topic is discussed in great detail in the literature on visual anthropology (e.g., Pink 2007). It would be a good idea to familiarize yourself with the issues discussed there if you plan on doing video recordings for your project. You may also need to acquire and familiarize yourself with basic video-editing software in order to make the most of the material you collect.

Another thing to consider when making video recordings is the issue of confidentiality of your informants. While it is fairly easy to guarantee confidentiality when you are recording audio only, recording images of people raises a host of additional ethical concerns (this is by virtue of the fact that it may be easier to identify someone from a video image than from an audio recording). While a full discussion of the ethics of video recording is beyond the scope of this chapter (though see Chapter 2), the same basic principles of ethical research apply. Most importantly, you must ensure that your informants are aware of the risks of video recording and that they provide informed consent to being recorded in this way. As a way of managing confidentiality issues, it may be appropriate to offer your informants the option of providing staged consent whereby they consent to certain activities (e.g., audio recordings), but not others (video recordings), or even consent to being audio- and video-recorded, but not to having those recordings played in public (e.g., at conferences).

For both audio and video recordings, it is imperative that you label all of your recordings immediately after making them. It is also a good idea to cross-reference the file names of recordings in your field notes, and to make multiple copies of recordings that you store in different locations (e.g., laptops, external drives, portable media). Finally, be sure to organize your recordings in such a way that you will be able to access your raw data easily in the future.

A final point in relation to participant observation more generally is the amount of data you can expect to collect. There are two things that can help in this regard. The first, already mentioned above, is to structure the empirical materials you collect in a simple and transparent way. This includes keeping detailed lists of your informants (complete with all relevant social information), as well as continually annotating and cross-referencing field notes and transcribing recordings. There are a number of software packages available to help you to do all this. The second way in which you can try to reduce the information overload of ethnography is to begin analyzing your findings along the way. Unlike some other data collection methods, ethnography is an explicitly reflective endeavor and researchers are encouraged to think about the implications of the data they are gathering throughout their time in the field. Doing so will help you to identify the direction that your research is taking, and allow you to focus more closely on a subset of the data you collect. At the same time, it is crucial not to narrow your analytical focus too early and to remain alert to “rich points” (see Section 2; Agar 1996), where your assumptions about the community, its language, or its speakers may be shown to be under-informed.
4.4 Ethnographic interviews

Interviews done as part of an ethnography are similar in format to semi-structured sociolinguistic interviews, though they often do not have the requirement of strict comparability and elicitation of a style range (see Chapter 6). The only issue I would like to highlight here is deciding when during your field research to hold interviews. It is normally not common practice to conduct interviews right away, since you will presumably not have had enough time to acquire sufficient information about the community, nor will you yet have established a personal rapport with your informants. At the same time, holding interviews after having spent a great deal of time in the field can be somewhat awkward, and could mean that you have to adapt any standardized interview schedule you may have developed beforehand to suit the level of intimacy you will have developed with the interviewee (this awkwardness is similar to the one experienced if you try to conduct a formal interview with your best friend, for example). One way around this issue of how to time interviews is to commit from the start to holding multiple interviews with the same informants throughout your time in the field. Doing so would allow you to collect a large and diverse body of both social and linguistic information, and may help to establish the interview setting as one of the “genres” in which you interact with your informants. Of course, your ability to conduct multiple interviews may be constrained by the amount of time you have and your progress in other types of data collection. Nevertheless, the question of when to conduct an interview is always a pertinent one.

4.5 Self-recordings

In addition to recordings and observations when you as the researcher are present, the use of self-recordings (or “non-participant observation”) is becoming more and more common in sociolinguistic ethnography. Self-recordings allow you to obtain data from a wider variety of social contexts than is normally possible, and have the added benefit of engaging your informants more concretely in the research process (by self-recording, informants in a certain sense become research assistants, which can provide them with an empowering sense of ownership of the project). At the same time, using self-recordings can also mean that you may not be able to understand the dynamics of a particular interaction as well as you would have if you had been present. There is a trade-off, then, in using self-recordings, between obtaining a broader and more diverse sample of speech contexts and the potential loss of insider knowledge that such diversity can imply.

The mechanics of self-recordings are fairly straightforward, and normally just involve providing (some subset of) informants with recorders and microphones and asking them to record a certain number of interactions, potentially in certain specified contexts. What is difficult about using self-recordings is that you as the researcher relinquish control over this portion of your data collection. For this
reason, it may be helpful to provide informants with detailed instructions about what to do and when to do it. These instructions could include such seemingly obvious details as “make sure the recorder is turned on” and “plug the microphone in.” It could also be a good idea to be as specific as possible about what information you would like to obtain. If you are interested, for example, in determining how a particular informant speaks while at work, while at home with her partner, and while out with friends in a bar, you could ask that informant to try and make recordings in those specific locations. The point is that your informant cannot read your mind and will never be as invested in the details of your project as you are. While it may be possible to provide your informants with nothing more than a general request to record themselves in as many different contexts as possible, in doing so you may not get the results that you need. In some situations, you may need to reveal more detail regarding your research interests than is usually shared, in order to clearly guide your collaborating informant. Fieldworkers in sociolinguistics tend not to specify the detailed linguistic focus of their studies to participants, as this can introduce unwanted distortions in the form of hypercorrection or hypocorrection. Fortunately, the use of self-recording with semi-informed collaborators does not necessarily lead to significant performative shifts, possibly because the exigencies of the actual interaction tend to dominate (e.g. Sharma 2011). In addition, you should always agree on a time period in which self-recordings will be completed (with the knowledge that informants may not necessarily stick to your agreement). Finally, while it is important to trust that your informants will take good care of your equipment, you should be prepared for any eventuality, including possible damage and/or loss of the equipment you loan out.

4.6 Community artifacts

The final type of data usually collected in ethnography is a record of any artifacts of the community’s cultural life that you encounter. By artifacts, I mean the physical materials, images, broadcasts, and other media products that are relevant to your informants’ lives. Which community artifacts surface as important will become clear over the course of your ethnography, but could include things like the films and other media that your informants like to watch, the music that they listen to and the websites they frequent. It could also include the cars they drive and the food they eat. Finally, it is also a good idea to collect any news broadcasts or other popular stories that may mention the community, as a way of developing a better understanding of the broader context in which the community is situated. These artifacts, very much like the remnants of ancient civilizations we find in museums today, will help you to paint a broader picture of the social life of the community you study, including the ideologies about that community that circulate, and could help support your interpretations of observed linguistic practice in the future.
4.7 Leaving the field

A common question in ethnography is how to know when you are ready to stop observing your community – that is, when you have enough data to be able to conduct your analysis. While it is difficult to provide precise guidelines for this (and while there may also be practical constraints that come into play), many ethnographic researchers talk about what gets called a “saturation point,” or the point at which you no longer seem to be collecting any new information. Anthropologist Don Kulick once described this to me as “knowing what your informants will say before you ask them the question.” While I was at first skeptical that I would ever reach such a moment in my own research, it did eventually come, and it was at that moment that I knew I was ready to leave the field. That said, it is important to remember that leaving the field does not mean that your ethnography is complete; your interpretations of what you observed will continue to change and develop over time.

5 Follow-up and writing

Although the write-up of an ethnography is an individual process that goes beyond the scope of this chapter, two points related to the analysis and presentation of ethnographic data are worth mentioning.

The first has to do with how to go about organizing and processing your data. I mentioned in Section 4.3 that it might be helpful to use qualitative data analysis software to help you to structure and organize your data. Whether you use software to help you or not, the first step in preparing for analysis is always to read through all of your data carefully and repeatedly. During this initial reading phase, it may be a good idea to write yourself analytical memos (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006), or sketches of the potentially meaningful patterns that you think are emerging. After familiarizing yourself with your data in this way, you should then proceed to code it. The process of coding ethnographic data is very similar to the one used for coding quantitative data (which you may also do), and essentially entails assigning “codes” or categories to small chunks of your data (e.g., portions of transcripts, discourse events) to allow for future comparison. Throughout this reviewing and coding process, you may find it helpful to work with one or more consultants from within the community. This can be done more formally, such as in playback sessions (e.g., Rampton 1995) or by hiring a consultant, or it can be done through more informal follow-up with community members. In both cases, continued contact with community members means that you have people with intimate knowledge of your research context that you can bounce your ideas and interpretations off of. For researchers working in languages other than their own or in multilingual environments, native consultants are often an invaluable analytic resource.

The second point relates to writing up the findings of an ethnography. Unlike many other forms of social science inquiry, ethnographic analyses are often
presented as a kind of narrative of the people and experiences you encountered. The goal of this narrative is to tell the story of the community in question, and to describe your observations and interpretations in such a way that a reader comes to understand the inner workings of a potentially unfamiliar culture or community. Certain techniques, such as producing vignettes of important events or portraits of emblematic people, are commonly used to give life to ethnographic descriptions, and to provide the necessary empirical support for analytical claims. What this means is that during the analysis process, you should be thinking about how you ultimately plan to present your findings and ensure that you have the materials necessary (e.g., the right quotations, the good anecdotes) to do so.

6 Conclusion

Through this chapter, I have attempted to provide a brief overview of the basic precepts and methods of ethnographic research. While ethnography may not be appropriate for all linguistics projects, the principles which underlie ethnographic approaches, including a sustained respect for research participants and a detailed attention to the social context of speech, ultimately apply to all forms of linguistics field research.

References


