

Experiment – Condir

Description: an adapted version of a sociolinguistic interview with one speaker.

Objectives: elicit spontaneous, natural, free speech in large utterances in a large discourse with a certain degree of thematic control; elicit linguistic resources for the expression of pragmatic movements such as correction, insistence, surprise, etc.

Participants:

Speakers: 1 (or more)

Researchers: 2 (“technician” + “moderator”)

For this experiment, it is necessary that the moderator really has absolute command of the language under investigation. It’s highly recommended to give this role to a local consultant who understands the research objectives and who has an established relationship of mutual trust both with the researchers and with the speakers of the local community. Before starting, the researchers instruct this person in how to conduct the interview with the speaker during the experiment (see below).

Materials and preparation

Together with the local consultant(s), a list of topics and questions are prepared that may be made use of in the open interview. Thematically, these can concern local matters that are of interest to the speakers, such as their life history and that of their family, their daily routine, their work, their recreational activities, important recent events, the history of their community/village/town, local cultural activities (festivities, recurrent events, etc.), and/or cultural traditions (e.g. typical foods and their preparation, traditional medicines and remedies, local techniques of arts and crafts, etc.). The questions should be adapted to each locality and each individual speaker, in accordance with the experience and knowledge of the local consultant and the moderator. Nevertheless, the questions should be open, in such a way as to invite long and freely spoken responses. The first objective of the interview and the function of the moderator is not at all to obtain information about the interview topics in a controlled fashion, but instead to create a conversation in which the speaker feels comfortable so that they may express themselves freely and with confidence, in the way that comes most naturally to them. The second objective is the spontaneous elicitation of linguistic resources for the expression of discourse pragmatic moves. In order to do that, the researchers explain to the local moderator their objectives and ask them to occasionally ask them questions with false premises. For example, the moderator could ask the speaker “You were born in Italy, right?”, knowing that it is not at all the case that the speaker was born in Italy, but asking in order to elicit a contrary reaction that might express a correction, surprise or insistence. The local knowledge and experience of the moderator are crucial here for determining when and how (for example, in a more or less humorous fashion) it might be appropriate to ask questions in this way, and the moderator should do this at their own discretion. It remains nonetheless very important that a comfortable interview situation can be established and maintained for the speaker, in which they can feel free to speak naturally.

How to do it

The local moderator interviews the speaker according to the guidelines given above. Depending on the situation, the interview can last from 10-45 minutes, and it is recommended to leave the decision when to finish at the moderator’s discretion. Everything is recorded, from beginning to end.

If after the first few times the interviews don’t seem to yield satisfying results, it is possible to tweak not just the (types of) questions, but also the constellation of participants: it has been shown that in

different communities, different communicative situations are more comfortable for the speakers than others (cf. Schilling 2013). For example, some speakers converse more freely when not in a one-on-one interview situation. Because of that, we can play around with reducing or increasing the number of researchers present (although they will just be silent observers in any case), or that of the speakers (who in this case might then be interviewed together or converse amongst themselves).

References / further reading:

Labov, William. 1972. Some principles of linguistic methodology. *Language in Society* 1(1). 97–120.

Hoffman, Michol. 2014. Sociolinguistic Interviews. In Janet Holmes & Kirk Hazen (eds.), *Research methods in sociolinguistics: A practical guide*, 25–41. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell.

Schilling, Natalie. 2013. Surveys and interviews. In Robert J. Podesva & Devyani Sharma (eds.), *Research methods in linguistics*, 96–115. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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