5.3.5 Cultural constraints on making contacts

Feagin (2004) discusses some of the problems that arise when the fieldworker is a foreigner, of different ethnicity, or not a native speaker of the language; these factors can have an effect on how likely people will be to make time for an interview, how they will construct or understand the fieldwork relationship (Briggs 1986), and how much a researcher can infer from patterns of language use that they observe.

On the other hand, doing fieldwork as an outsider can be an advantage. Hazen's (2000) fieldwork in a small town in North Carolina was facilitated in several ways by his liminal status. Because he had married into the community, he had family networks he could tap into, but as an outsider he was not as well acquainted with the speech community as his in-laws, and this also allowed him to assume the role of a 'student', asking questions that only an outsider could ask. Sociolinguistic fieldwork requires the researcher to accept some form of social role, and very often hybrid or new identities enable successful study of language use (Hazen 2000).

As noted above, a sociolinguist's preparation for going into the field (like any other linguist's) requires research into the community and the larger social and cultural context in which fieldwork will take place. In some places, rather conservative ideologies about the role of research and researchers can represent a
p. 130 further obstacle to undertaking sociolinguistic fieldwork. Haeri (1994; 2003) discusses ↳ some of the challenges of positioning yourself as a researcher in this sort of cultural context, and reviews some of the techniques by which she overcame outsider status (and some inflexible limits on who she could do fieldwork with) in Egypt.

5.4 The Sociolinguistic Interview and Addressing the Observer's Paradox

5.4.1 What is a sociolinguistic interview?

One of the most common ways of gathering natural spoken data is the so-called 'sociolinguistic interview'. This method was developed and later modified by William Labov in his Martha's Vineyard and New York studies (1972a), and has since been used in various forms, by a number of researchers.

The classic sociolinguistic interview consists of four parts: (i) reading a list of minimal pairs, (ii) reading a list of words in isolation, (iii) reading a short narrative, and (iv) talking with the interviewer.

The first three parts are not what we would consider natural or casual speech—the purpose of the various reading tasks is to elicit a wide range of speech styles (defining 'style' is the subject of an entire sub-field in sociolinguistics: see Coupland 2007; Jaffe 2009; Meyerhoff 2006). When combined with free conversation, these tasks are treated as forming a continuum in terms of the amount of attention speakers are paying to their speech. This in turn provides one source of indirect evidence about the social meaning of different patterns and preferences.

Different types of speech can also be found in the conversational part of the interview. 'Careful' and 'casual' speech are typically characterized by changes in topic (e.g. talk about childhood memories tends to be more 'casual' than 'careful'), and addressee (addressing a third person, e.g. a child or another family member, is more 'casual', while addressing the interviewer is more 'careful'). Labov (2001) explores the impact of different topics within the interview in more detail. Thus, a sociolinguistic interview structured with some or all of these different activities elicits a continuum of styles for every speaker.