

5.3 Setting the Stage and Getting Started

5.3.1 Establishing an ethical framework for your research

Like a physician, first, do no harm (as also noted by Rice in Chapter 18 below). For sociolinguists, this means framing research in an ethos of respect and a recognition of the debt owed to the speakers who invite us into their lives long enough to study language in use. Rickford (1997), Wolfram (1998), and Cameron et al. (1992) all focus on what linguists can and should give back to the community they are working with. Wolfram's 'principle of linguistic gratuity' (1998: 273) and Cameron et al.'s argument that good research will actively include the interests of the community both emphasize the moral obligation sociolinguists have to ensure that research engages with and involves the people whose language we are studying. Moreover, as the debates surrounding Ebonics in the United States demonstrated, sociolinguists should be aware of the manner in which their research feeds into public discourses about the language varieties being investigated (Rickford and Rickford 2000; Baugh 2000).

p. 127

Professional associations such as the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL)³ and the American Anthropological Association (AAA)⁴ offer extended guidelines for ethical research, and all sociolinguists should be conversant with at least one such set of guidelines (see Rice's Chapter 18 below). This is not only imperative for the conduct of their own research; it can be strategically important too. Such guidelines often provide advice for longer-term research relationships and those where the subjects and the researcher know each other well. They may be more appropriate for sociolinguists than research guidelines set down by medical or psychological associations, which are designed with experimental research in mind. There is a lot of variability in how institutional research review boards (IRBs) or human research ethics boards operate: it may be useful to be able to situate sociolinguistic work within its appropriate academic tradition when applying for research permission.

For example, written consent forms (a common feature of IRBs) may be a good way of ensuring that participants are aware of the general purpose of the research and are reassured that the data will be used solely for research (see Johnstone 2000; see also Newman, Chapter 19 below). But in some cases, personal introductions and verbal guarantees may be more appropriate (e.g. Gafaranga 2007). Paradoxically, the conventional IRB insistence on signed consent forms may clash with speakers' desire for anonymity. This was true for Nanbakhsh's (2010) work in Teheran. People only felt at liberty to talk freely about social change since the 1979 Revolution if they had personal trust in her ability to guard their privacy. Moreover, in this case signed consent is what puts the consultants in danger by creating a paper trail that leads directly back to them if the researcher's materials are confiscated.

The primary purpose of getting consent (whether written or verbal) is to ensure that participants: (i) are aware of the general purpose of the research; (ii) are reassured that the data will not be used for any other purpose but research; and (iii) know they can withdraw their consent at any time if they wish.

5.3.2 Making contacts: planning an overall approach

A number of introductory texts in sociolinguistics outline methods by which researchers have successfully made contacts and been able to begin research within a community (see Milroy and Gordon 2003; Tagliamonte 2006 for social dialect research; Johnstone 2000 for qualitative research; Schlee and Meyerhoff 2010 outline many basic questions for smaller, e.g. student term paper, projects). Tagliamonte (2006) takes a rather extreme methodological position, urging the use of only community 'insiders' for making contacts and for doing the interviews, as she argues this elicits the most vernacular forms of speech.