One question that is by now famous in its own right is the 'danger of death' question: 'Have you ever been in a situation where you nearly lost your life? When you thought this is *it*?' Answers to this question usually require some emotional engagement, and it may trigger stories with an abundance of vernacular features (Labov 1972a; 1984). However, it does not necessarily work in all speech communities and for all individuals. Milroy and Gordon (2003) review a couple of studies where the 'danger of death' question seemed unsuitable for various reasons. In a North Carolina study (Butters 2000), the question was often commented on as being 'too scary', and some interviewees refused to answer it, while in Milroy and Milroy's (1978) study in Belfast during the Troubles, the question was treated with minimal emotional involvement, and usually answered in a dry, matter-of-fact way. One of the speakers who contributed to the Bequia corpus (Meyerhoff and Walker 2007) started to cry after answering this question, a telling reminder that good interviewers need to have a wide range of social skills (including knowing how and when to conclude an interview).

In addition, what makes a successful interview topic may be very particular to the community being investigated. The most emotional (and also fun) stretches of speech in Strycharz's (2011) Osaka fieldwork were provoked by questions about the differences between Osaka and Tokyo. Due to the long-standing rivalry between the two cities, people in Osaka for the most part are not very fond of Tokyo, and they are willing to talk about the numerous differences between the two cities and their inhabitants, recollecting funny encounters and misunderstandings between them and Tokyoites.

p. 135

The precise topics of a sociolinguistic interview will therefore be flexible; its main goal is to uncover areas of interest which speakers feel comfortable talking about. So a good approach is to be observant and act as we normally do in conversations with people we don't know well (or indeed don't know at all). Having some kind of structure prepared is important, but it is perhaps even more important to be flexible and willing to change the plan.

5.4.5 Setting and roles

One of the issues arising from gathering data by means of an interview is precisely that—the fact that we are 'conducting an interview'. For instance, in a classic interview, it is rare to elicit questions *from* the interviewee—that's simply not part of the interviewee role. The interviewer might therefore have to come up with a way to counterbalance the dynamic that may be automatically introduced when we set up an interview.

One good way to counterbalance this is to put oneself in the position of a learner (as in Hazen 2000; see also Labov 1984, and Briggs 1986, who discusses the fact that interviewees may perceive the interaction as one of apprentice/expert). Paying attention to the information obtained feeds into the next question, and being genuinely interested in the interviewee helps to build a less distant relationship than might otherwise be associated with interviewer/interviewee.

5.4.6 Disclosure in fieldwork

Problematizing the role of the researcher in sociolinguistic fieldwork raises questions about how much people should be told about the purposes and goals of the research. Schilling-Estes (2007) argues that researchers do not have to explain in detail what they are studying and why they are studying it. There are at least two reasons for this. First, unless you think you can explain linguistics and sociolinguistics in a wholly non-technical and inclusive way, explanations about vowel raising, object deletion, or the social construction of identity through code-switching may not be terribly informative to the people you are working with, and might be best saved for other audiences (see Barnes 1980 and Besnier 2009 on the problematic notion of 'informed consent').