5.5 Group Recordings: Natural Interaction and Language Socialization

As we have noted already, recording people in small group interactions is another way of addressing the observer's paradox and of obtaining more naturalistic, spontaneous speech. Group recordings may reduce some of the awkwardness associated with overt recording, as they allow the speakers to self-select topics and self-select who speaks when. Participants may also feel more relaxed with familiar faces. This method has been used since the inception of sociolinguistics—Labov et al.'s (1968) study in South Harlem involved interviewing groups of friends, and more recent sociolinguistic work influenced by the traditions of ethnography continues to use it. This is particularly true of researchers interested in the process by which social meaning is assigned to variation in highly local interactions, sometimes conceptualized in the framework of communities of practice (Wenger 1998; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992; Bucholtz 1999; Mallinson and Childs 2007).

Indeed, some research questions can *only* be answered by recording self-selecting groups of speakers that reflect everyday patterns of interaction. For example, language socialization (how children acquire the norms of their speech community in context) is best studied by observing multiple, familiar interactants—something that is not really feasible to study through interviews. Schieffelin (1990) and Ochs (1992) (cf. Schieffelin and Ochs 1986; Ochs and Taylor 1995) have led this research field for some time—Schieffelin's (1990) work on the linguistic socialization of Kaluli children (in Papua New Guinea) has been especially influential (cf. Makihara 2005; Garrett 2005; Riley 2007). This approach to sociolinguistic fieldwork documents how children learn to use language and acquire socially loaded linguistic routines (this methodological approach is shared by ethnomethodologists and many sociologists, e.g. Goffman 1971; Drew and Heritage 1992). In Kaluli society, for example, use of the phrase *ɛlɛma* (‘say like this’) is an important routine in socializing children, but these corrections of a child's prior formulation are most likely to occur in everyday speech. Socialization is clearly a process that takes place over a considerable period of time
p. 138 (perhaps throughout the lifespan), so ↳ sociolinguistic work of this nature involves not only group recordings but extended periods in the field.

Another area of (socio)linguistic interest that rewards study of a range of naturally occurring speech events in the speech community is the effects of language contact. It is certainly possible to document instances of code-switching and individual features that suggest contact-induced change in the semi-formal speech of interviews (either sociolinguistic interviews or radio), but arguably the study of variation provides a more subtle picture of how contact effects take hold among speakers and how they diffuse through a language and a community. That is, by studying recordings of people's everyday chat, we can document how switches from e.g. Rapanui to Spanish and vice versa have interpersonal and social functions—constructing speakers as competent members of the community, or softening teasing between interlocutors (Makihara 2004; cf. Blom and Gumperz 1972).

Furthermore, there is a growing body of evidence documenting how language contact may have an impact on the realization of sociolinguistic variables across languages or varieties. For example, Buchstaller and D'Arcy (2009) explore the similarity and differences in constraints on the use of quotative *be like* in different varieties of English. Meyerhoff (2009) evaluates arguments for and against the transfer of variation from substrate languages into the creole Bislama. A number of articles in Meyerhoff and Nagy (2008) test hypotheses of contact-induced change in individual speakers’ performance or in a speech community as a whole by comparing the details of variation in input varieties and output varieties (Blondeau and Nagy 2008).

This work documents the manner in which induced change diffuses through a linguistic system and through a speech community, thereby addressing questions of linguistic and sociolinguistic importance. It is simply not possible to elicit this kind of detail through direct question and answer routines (typical of traditional