5.1 Introduction

It is challenging to provide an account of methods associated with sociolinguistic fieldwork, as the field of sociolinguistics is extremely heterogeneous. Researchers who identify as sociolinguists may be asking questions about the relationship between language and power (e.g. 'What kinds of honorific forms does this group of speakers use when addressing or referring to some other group of speakers?'—cf. Okamoto 1997). They may equally be interested in the functions of and structural constraints on switches between different languages or dialects in a polylectal speech community ('What does the switch from stylized Asian English to local vernacular forms signify in the speech of British teenagers?'—cf. Rampton 2005). Or they may be concerned with identifying and accounting for the distribution of the different variants that realize a linguistic variable in a speech community ('In what linguistic contexts do speakers reduce the final consonant in words like [wɛst] and [dɹæɸgd]? Do all groups of speakers reduce the cluster equally often?'—Guy 1980).

p. 122 The latter approach is associated with the work of William Labov (1972a; 1972b; 2001), and generally uses quantitative methods at some point in the analysis. It is often referred to as 'quantitative' or 'variationist sociolinguistics', and for many people this study of synchronic variation in a speech community as a window on the diachronic processes of language change epitomizes the field. The tendency for 'variationist' to describe the methods of data collection and analysis associated with Labovian social dialect work is perhaps unfortunate: arguably, at some level all the sociolinguistic research questions outlined above are concerned with variation in how people use language to social and interpersonal effect.

Sociolinguists have always been heavily influenced by anthropology, not least in their methods, and this means that a lot of sociolinguistic research reports qualitative results, in addition to the quantitative results of the Labovian social dialect survey. Researchers adopting this synthetic approach (e.g. Eckert 2000; Sankoff and Blondeau 2007; Mendoza-Denton 2008) argue that it enhances the explanatory power of their accounts of variation. In this chapter we will review two of the dominant approaches in sociolinguistic fieldwork: the sociolinguistic interview and participant observation. This dichotomy is an idealization, but it is a useful heuristic around which to structure the chapter.

Since many of the methodological issues that sociolinguists have to deal with in their fieldwork overlap with those of any other linguist, we will not review all technical and procedural aspects of sociolinguistic fieldwork (see instead the chapters by Rice (18), Thieberger and Berez (4), and Margetts and Margetts (1) in this volume).