

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/229711234>

Interviews and Questionnaires

Chapter · March 2009

DOI: 10.1002/9781444301120.ch9

CITATIONS

33

READS

23,302

1 author:



[Eva Codó](#)

Autonomous University of Barcelona

42 PUBLICATIONS 336 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Multilingual policies and practices in the Catalan education system [View project](#)



Teaching non-linguistic courses in English [View project](#)



9 Interviews and Questionnaires

Eva Codó

9.1 Introduction

This chapter considers in detail the use of interviews and questionnaires as data-collection techniques for studies on multilingualism and language contact. The suitability of one or the other instrument will depend on the specific goals of our research project.

Questionnaires are useful for collecting biographical information on speakers, and quantifiable data on language abilities, practices, and attitudes. Survey research can thus provide an overview of the language situation of a given population. In community studies, for example, questionnaires are helpful to get an idea of who, when and where the different languages are spoken and of attitudes towards them. In migrant group contexts, they may be used to investigate the extent to which family languages are maintained. If, by contrast, researchers want to acquire in-depth knowledge of particular bilingual contexts or speakers and they seek to answer complex questions, such as what it means to be bilingual in a given setting, they will need to use interviews.

Interviews produce extended accounts from informants. Although interview data can also be subject to quantification (one can count, for example, how many times a speaker switches from one language to another), the interview is not as efficient a technique as the questionnaire for collecting discrete pieces of information; besides, it is much more costly and time-consuming. But the interview does not only enable researchers to collect declarative data on language use. As a verbal event, the interview is also an authentic communicative situation in which naturally occurring talk is exchanged. Interviews may thus be studied as forms of social interaction and as sources of real language data. This is a specific use of the interview in linguistics which has no parallel in the social sciences.

This chapter is organized in two main parts. In section 9.2, I focus on the interview as a research tool (see also Nortier, chapter 3 in this volume). This section examines the two main ways in which interviews can be used, i.e. as sources of information and as instances of real language use. A number of issues connected with the conduct of interviews are discussed, more specifically, the planning stage, the phrasing and organization of questions, and the practicalities of



interviewing. In the second part of the chapter I focus on survey research. Different types of questionnaires and modes of administration are described. In addition, a list of themes about which a questionnaire designed to gather information on a multilingual situation can enquire is provided. By way of conclusion, a final comparison of the two methods is presented. The chapter ends with a resource section which contains further bibliographical references on the use of interviews and questionnaires as data-gathering procedures.

9.2 Interviews as Sources of Data on Language Contact

The interview is a fairly versatile technique for gathering data on multilingualism. It can be employed to obtain both linguistic productions from bi-/multilingual speakers and content data. In this second case, researchers aim to gather biographical and other relevant contextualizing information from language users together with their views, values, and attitudes towards their own and others' linguistic practices. As will be discussed later, self-report data, that is, data in which speakers assess and comment on their own language practices is a type of linguistic data, which should, however, not be used as a substitute for naturally occurring speech. Self-report data can yield interesting insights, especially into multilingual language use, but researchers should be aware of the multiple conditionings shaping speakers' expressed opinions and of their contextually situated nature. The analysis of speakers' real verbal productions may show them to be rather different from what actors reported them to be.

It must be highlighted that the two types of data that may be elicited from interviews, i.e. content and language use data, are not mutually exclusive. Interviews primarily designed for gathering speech samples are often also used to obtain contextualizing biographical and language-related information from respondents. The opposite case is less likely but also plausible. Pujolar (2001), for example, uses the talk produced in group discussions to analyze the code-switching practices of working-class youngsters living in Barcelona.

9.2.1 Interviews for linguistic and conversational analysis

The advantages offered by the interview as a method for gathering samples of spoken data are two. First, it is generally easier to set up an interview with selected informants than to get permission to record naturally occurring talk; secondly, the interview offers a more controlled environment for researchers looking for specific language forms (e.g. instances of past simple use by Spanish-English bilinguals) than naturally occurring social interaction. However, the semi-spontaneous nature of interviews may also limit the appearance of certain forms of bilingual speech, especially in communities where they are highly stigmatized. A possible solution is to conduct group interviews. In some contexts, peer group interaction may facilitate



the appearance of language alternation phenomena. However, it is also true that in some other contexts, and depending on the social composition of the groups, the production of bilingual speech forms may be inhibited. That means that it is very important for researchers to get to know the social context they intend to investigate and to be aware of the connections between power issues and socially appropriate forms of language use.

The technique for using sociolinguistic interviews to collect natural speech data was developed by Labov and his associates (for further details see e.g. Wolfram & Fasold, 1974; Wolfson, 1976; and Labov, 1984). A basic requirement of this type of interview is that the data obtained must be as similar as possible to spontaneous talk. It is important to build a rapport with informants so that they feel comfortable talking to the researcher and become less self-conscious about their speech. Otherwise, respondents may not switch between languages, or they may not use socially stigmatized linguistic varieties or forms. The code employed by the researcher, or even just the kind of person the researcher is taken to be, can also constrain the degree of linguistic alternation in informants' speech. In that case, the choice of a community member interviewer may solve the problem.

Language alternation can also be facilitated by choosing topics that connect with the use of a specific language spoken by the interviewee, like memories of a previous life in a foreign country, the description of a past way of life, or stories from one's childhood (for further details on how to alleviate the tension created by the interview situation see sections 9.2.2 and 9.2.3.1). If, after conducting an interview, researchers feel that informants got more relaxed as time went by, one possibility is to discard the data recorded during the initial stages and concentrate on the most spontaneous parts. Alternatively, more conscious and less conscious modes of talk may be used for comparison purposes. To encourage informants to talk extensively, interviews must be designed in ways that facilitate the elicitation of longish pieces of discourse, such as narratives, descriptions, or accounts of some kind.

Researchers working on the lexical and syntactic aspects of language mixing (see Treffers-Daller, 1994; Backus, 1996; Eppler, 2004; Gardner-Chloros, chapter 4 in this volume) have traditionally employed the interview situation to collect samples of bilingual speech for analysis. Likewise, interview data has been used by variationist researchers studying the borrowing/code-switching distinction (cf. the papers in the special issue of the *International Journal of Bilingualism* edited by Poplack & Meechan, 1998).

Apart from formal linguistic traditions, interactivist schools have also been interested in the study of the interview as a speech event. Interviews of various kinds where the interviewer acts as a *gatekeeper*, that is, controls access to important socioeconomic resources, have been the favorite object of study of many interpretive sociolinguistics works (Roberts & Sayers, 1987; Sarangi, 1996; Kerekes, 2006). This research has focused both on global aspects of interview management, like schemata and role relationships, and on specific details of talk, like conversational inference, contextualization cues, register, and style. From strict conversational perspectives, the interview has also been a fruitful interactional space to investigate processes of identity construction and group affiliation (Widdicombe, 1998).

**Section summary: Interviews for linguistic and conversational analysis**

- Group interviews may facilitate the production of bilingual speech forms in contexts where they are stigmatized, but they may also inhibit certain language alternation practices. It is essential for researchers to have a deep understanding of the social context they want to investigate.
- Interviewers should avoid informants becoming too self-conscious about their speech. It is essential that a rapport is built so that interviewees feel comfortable talking to the person conducting the interview.
- A community member interviewer and the choice of certain topics may facilitate the production of bilingual speech forms.
- The types of questions asked should facilitate the production of longish pieces of discourse.
- Interviews as sources of real language data have been studied from structural, variationist and interactionist perspectives.

9.2.2 Interviews for content analysis

This is the most common purpose of interviews in bilingualism studies. Interviews are employed either to obtain information which may otherwise be very difficult to gather (like certain biographical details, which may not become available even after long and intensive involvement in the field) or to explore issues that can only be accessed indirectly if interactional data is considered (such as language attitudes and ideologies). For examples of how content analysis can be used, (see Blackledge, chapter 17 and Pavlenko, chapter 18, in this volume) In fact, the interview is a very efficient research tool in that it allows investigators to gather fairly large bodies of data in relatively little time.

There are two types of content information researchers may obtain from interviews. One is factual details, like age, years of schooling, and employment situation; the other is what Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) refer to as “perspective” information, that is, subjects’ understandings of the value and meanings of their bilingual speech practices. In both cases, the type of data gathered is declarative. The interview format can, additionally, be employed to discuss extracts of interactional data with informants.

It must be pointed out that, although useful in its own terms, declarative data can never be employed as a substitute for data on speakers’ actual linguistic behavior. Self-or other-reports of bilingual language practice may not match observed conduct, since many phenomena related to performance, like code-switching, operate on a subconscious level. Mismatches can also have a language-ideological component. Speakers of varieties with low social prestige may want to claim that they do not use them, though in fact they do. In any case, these are very interesting sites of analysis (Pujolar, 2001) because they point towards the many conflicts and contradictions that inform linguistic practices in contexts of multilingualism.



In qualitative studies, the data obtained in interviews are often employed for triangulation purposes (see Heller, 1999). The opinions expressed by speakers are put side by side with other types of data, such as participant observation and electronically recorded interactions, to throw new light on the bilingual phenomena observed. The beliefs and attitudes expressed by interviewees are essential to researchers' interpretive processes, whether to change their understanding of the meaning and value of speakers' bilingual productions, or to validate their interpretations. Finally, interview data may also be conceptualized as a means to open up research to the researched and give them a voice (Pujolar, 2001). Influenced by critical ethnography, the current tendency is towards devising ways of allowing interviewees to have more control over the interpretation process and to retain authorship over the final text (see Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004a).

One of the difficulties often mentioned in connection with the use of interview data for content analysis is the issue of "truth." Researchers often fear that informants' responses may differ from their "actual" opinions on certain themes, because they either want to please the researcher, feel constrained by the interview situation from expressing their views, or aim to project a given image for themselves and their community. Subjects' "untrue" responses, it is claimed, may lead researchers to draw inaccurate conclusions about the bilingual context or speakers investigated. Although, as we shall see later, there are ways in which interviewers can try to make interviewees feel comfortable so that they voice their opinions freely, researchers should be aware that there is no external "truth" to be sought, and that people's knowledge and opinions are always constructed in the course of situated communicative events.

One important weakness of interviews is that there may be limits to the amount and kinds of details the researcher is able to gather. This can be due to a number of reasons. To start with, using direct questioning to find out information is standard practice in Western societies but may not be so in other cultures (see Eades, 1982; Briggs, 1986). Thus, researchers should not take the usefulness of direct interviewing for granted, as information gathering may be more efficiently carried out through other means (e.g. through engaging in pedagogical discourse with community elders, as exemplified by Briggs, 1986). Familiarizing oneself with alternative practices for collecting information, however, requires intensive fieldwork in order to acquire a basic understanding of the communicative norms and patterns of the society investigated; this is very time-consuming. Secondly, asking questions can be considered inappropriate in certain contexts, or perceived as threatening by some informants. In the fieldwork I undertook at an immigration office, a very sensitive institutional context, I realized state officials were reluctant to provide "insider" institutional information if asked directly. Especially at the beginning, they were unsure about my presence in the office, and so direct questioning was felt to threaten my position as a fieldworker (for further details see Codó, 2003). Thirdly, the types of aspects researchers on bilingualism seek details on, like values, attitudes, beliefs, and motivations, tend to be difficult to verbalize. Besides, rarely do speakers reflect on these issues in an explicit manner unless awareness of language is heightened (Heller, 1988). As regards the nature of what is said, the format of the interview may limit the amount and types of details provided (Briggs,



1986). The question–answer turn structure imposes important relevance constraints on informants’ talk.

9.2.2.1 *Overcoming difficulties*

There are different ways to overcome some of the drawbacks discussed above. Undertaking fieldwork in the setting investigated and spending time with the researched will work to overcome their initial reluctance to open up and will probably make them stop worrying about the image of themselves and their communities they are trying to project. Researchers’ practical knowledge of the context investigated will also help them to search for alternative, less intrusive means of information gathering, which may be more efficient than the interview.

If it is not possible to meet informants beforehand, interviewers should make every effort to create a relaxed and friendly atmosphere at the outset of the interview and build a rapport with informants. As is well known, there is a range of factors that contribute to enhancing solidarity among speakers, such as speech variety and tone, and conversational and interviewing style, but also age, ethnicity, dressing style, and general demeanor. Some of these factors can be modified, like interviewing style, while others cannot, like gender and ethnicity. If the latter are perceived to have an obvious negative influence, it is better to ask somebody else to do the interview for us.

Another technique mentioned earlier which may help alleviate the tension generated by the one-to-one interview is group interviews. Interviewees may feel freer and be more forthcoming among peers. Group interaction may facilitate the appearance of bilingual forms, indigenous speech activities, or key themes of which the researcher was not aware. Additionally, speakers’ divergent opinions on certain issues (like speakers’ motivations for language choice) may encourage participation and force interactants to refine arguments. By contrast, the problems associated with group discussions are poor quality of recordings, difficulty in identifying speakers and/or languages, the dominance of certain interactants, and the lack of participation of others. Group discussions and face-to-face interviews need not be mutually exclusive. It is possible to integrate both in a single piece of research (see Pujolar, 2001).

Although the above recommendations may help facilitate the exchange of ideas, researchers should not be deluded into thinking, as we mentioned above, that they can get to respondents’ “real” thoughts. This claim, typical of positivist approaches, rests on two erroneous assumptions. First, it is often assumed that knowledge exists independently of its expression. This may be true of factual information but certainly not of other kinds of knowledge, typically investigated in bilingualism research, like ideologies, beliefs, and attitudes. These are often constructed in the course of their verbalization and are shaped by the associations of ideas and thoughts generated as the interview unfolds. The second false assumption concerns the issue of reactivity, that is, the idea that it is possible to elicit talk that does not in some way or other react to the presence of the researcher. This is not feasible. The interview is a co-constructed event between interviewer and interviewee. Silverman (1993) refers to interview data as “situated narratives”; Briggs (1986)



claims that interview discourse is highly “indexical” of the social and sequential context in which it is produced. Interview talk is always produced for a particular audience and shaped in ways that are considered appropriate by speakers according to their definition of the situation. What researchers can do is try to modify interviewees’ perception of the event as more or less formal and of the relationship with their interlocutor, but they cannot elicit talk which is acontextual. The most honest position to take is to acknowledge the ways in which the conditions of production of the interview may have shaped the data and interpret them accordingly.

Evident influences on the talk need not be conceptualized as a disturbance. They may prove a very interesting locus of research. For example, the use in the interview of a particular language or speech variety by the researcher may lead the interviewee to understand the event as related to a specific social domain (for example, the school), where this language is dominant or preferred. Switches from and into this language in the construction of the interview will index the social functions and values associated with each of the languages of the bilingual community researched (see Cots & Nussbaum, 2003).

Section summary: Using interviews for content analysis

- Interviews can be employed to obtain factual and/or perspective information, and to discuss data extracts with informants.
- Interview data are best employed in combination with other types of data (triangulation).
- Researchers should aim to get as close as possible to informants’ “true” responses, though they should be aware of the constructed and situated nature of knowledge.
- The interview situation imposes constraints on the information provided.
- Face-to-face interviews may be combined with group discussions to facilitate the exchange of ideas.
- Contextual influences on informants’ responses may constitute an engaging locus of research.

9.2.3 *Planning the interview*

The first thing researchers need to do in the planning stage is reflect on the need, usefulness, and feasibility of collecting interview data. For technical details see Clemente (chapter 10 in this volume). Logically, it is necessary to have first-hand knowledge of the multilingual speakers or community investigated to get an accurate picture of how suitable and/or feasible collecting interview data might be. Researchers may even want to conduct a few preliminary interviews before making a final decision (Redmond, 2000). When doing research on societies other than one’s own, it is necessary to take into account that asking questions may not be



considered appropriate in certain social situations, that it may be better not to enquire about certain topics, that there might be restrictions as to who can have access to information, and that only “knowledgeable speakers” may be able to provide certain types of information (Eades, 1982; Briggs, 1986). These are all things researchers need to consider in the planning stages.

Another aspect that merits some thought is the type of interview researchers plan to administer and the format they want to give to their questions. This will of course depend on the goals of the research, the intended target group, and the analytic treatment they want to give to their data.

Interview formats may range from unstructured, non-directive questioning to fairly directive modes. Any one interview can contain both format types. It may start by being fairly directive (by asking, for example, specific questions about language use) and progressively become transformed into a less structured event, or vice versa.

Researchers need to bear in mind that the more interviewees participate in defining the content and pace of the interview, the more varied and numerous will be the details provided. In fact, unstructured interview formats are preferred in ethnographically oriented language research. The problem is that the data obtained from different interviews may not be easily comparable. For this reason, even if questions are not formulated in a standard manner, it is always advisable to have a list of topics to cover so that at least some points of comparison can be established. If responses are to be quantified, then standardization is absolutely necessary. In that case, the multiple-choice format might be the most appropriate one (see subsection 9.3.2 for details).

Closely connected with unstructured interview formats are life histories and stories. They are special kinds of interviews centered on the self (see Pavlenko, chapter 18 in this volume). Their advantage over interviews is that tellers are allowed more freedom to organize the “stories that shape their lives” (Linde, 1993) thematically and chronologically, to identify significant life stages, and to pin down crucial events (the turning points, or “epiphanies” as Denzin (1989b) calls them). Life narratives are used to investigate who informants are, how they have come to be the people they are, and what events and experiences have shaped their lives. As language plays a fundamental role in self and other-construction, biographical narratives are a good technique for exploring the experiences of bilinguals in contexts of migration and displacement (see, for example, Hoffman, 1989; Dorfman, 1998; Pavlenko, 2004).

When deciding on a format, researchers must also take into account their relationship with interviewees. With strangers, for example, it is easier to conduct directive than non-directive interviews, as open formats may cause bewilderment. The socio-cultural expectations associated with the interview as a speech event are that interviewers ask questions about the topic(s) they are interested in and that interviewees respond. The role of the interviewers is thus expected to be fairly directive. As Wolfson (1976) notes, if they relinquish this cultural prerogative without a previous explanation, informants may feel puzzled or annoyed, produce hesitant talk, or, in the worst-case scenario, start wondering about the researcher’s hidden intentions. This is why it is essential to discuss the format and goals of the interview with informants before starting.



In assessing the suitability of a given format it is important to consider the familiarity of the interviewee with the interview as a speech event. For instance, migrant school children are regularly asked to engage in semi-formal interviews, as assessments of linguistic and academic competence are often made on the basis of their performance in interviews (Cots & Nussbaum, 2003). It is surely easier for them to participate in these events than for other population groups. This is something researchers need to bear in mind during the planning process.

The third issue to be thought about is at which stage in the research project researchers will want to administer the interview. As with format, this depends on the type of research that they are carrying out. If they intend to answer a quantitative research question using interview data, and plan to interrogate a fairly large population sample, a few introductory sentences explaining the nature and goals of their research may be enough. Interviews can be carried out straight away bearing in mind the recommendations outlined in subsection 9.2.4. If, by way of contrast, researchers intend to integrate the use of interviews with the analysis of real-life interactional data and ethnographic observations, the administration of interviews should be delayed until later stages. In those cases, interviews are often used to explore themes that emerge from the analysis of the talk and to check preliminary interpretations of sociolinguistic behavior with informants. It is thus best for researchers to first analyze small samples of interactional data so that they have a clearer idea of what it might be relevant to focus on. In addition, if formal interviewing is postponed until the researcher has conducted ethnographic observations and is fairly familiar with the setting and the social actors investigated, she or he can make more informed decisions as to which participants must be interviewed and what sorts of questions need to be asked.

This leads to the fourth aspect researchers need to consider, namely the type and number of informants they will need. Informant selection is a fundamental issue. If interviewees are not carefully selected, the data may be misleading. For a detailed discussion of informant selection see Lanza, chapter 5 in this volume. A final aspect concerns decisions on the organization and formulation of questions. These will be considered in detail in the following section.

9.2.3.1 *Phrasing and organizing questions*

The first obvious thing researchers on multilingualism need to think about is the language(s) in which the questions will be formulated. Language is a key factor, because it sends messages about the interviewer's ethnolinguistic affiliation and educational background, and the formality of the speech event, among other things. These aspects will define the interviewee's understanding of the context of the interview and shape responses in multiple ways. If researchers want interviewees to speak unconstrained, it is often best to let them choose the language of the interaction. In migrant contexts, this may entail enlisting the help of a community member, both to carry out the interview, and to transcribe and translate the responses provided. This complicates the process of data collection and analysis but certainly enhances the value and depth of the responses provided.



As was mentioned earlier, direct interviewing may not be effective or even advisable in certain social contexts. Likewise, standard question formats may elicit little information. In the Aboriginal societies studied by Eades (1982) in Australia, for example, explanations or stories are best elicited through “triggering,” which consists in the information-seeker stating something known about the desired topic and then pausing for the knowledgeable speaker to start talking about the topic. A similar function is accomplished by interjections and repetitions of preceding talk. Briggs (1986) attested comparable behavior in his study of *Mexicano* society, where information on traditional knowledge may be elicited by taking up parts of elders’ talk and using final rising intonation. These two examples show how important it is for researchers to acquire knowledge of native ways of information seeking first and not just take the Western-based question-answer format for granted.

Another relevant aspect for researchers to consider is that the way questions are worded directs respondents’ thoughts. This is something that they will presumably want to avoid. In Erill, Farràs, et al. (1992) informants are asked to answer a question on the status of Catalan which is phrased in the following terms (my translation): “Just as Spanish is the only official language of Spanish-speaking territories, do you believe that it would similarly be natural for Catalan to be the only official language of Catalan-speaking territories?” By framing the question against the backdrop of the situation of Spanish, respondents are more inclined to answer “yes” than if the question were phrased in more neutral terms, like “Do you think that Catalan should be the only official language of Catalonia?”

Varying the type and format of questions makes the interview less monotonous and serves to maintain the interest of informants. As a general rule, yes-no questions should be avoided, as we want interviewees to provide extended accounts. Another aspect to consider is that questions should be short and easy to understand (taking into account the target population is essential here too). Special attention must be paid to avoiding double meanings, vagueness, and ambiguity. This is particularly important if researchers and/or respondents are second or foreign language speakers of the linguistic code employed. The goal is to establish a “common referential frame” (Briggs, 1986) in which interviewer and interviewee agree on the type of information being sought.

A method of easing comprehension is to try to bring questions close to interviewees’ real-life worlds. This can be done in two ways. First, the researcher can use a linguistic style, variety, or code to which respondents can quickly relate, and avoid jargon. This makes comprehension easier and enhances rapport. Secondly, the researcher can show interviewees pictures and/or texts, and ask them to discuss specific events, actions, or speakers rather than hypothetical ones. So, instead of the question “What language would you speak to a stranger?” it is preferable to ask “What language do you speak to strangers?” Another interesting example is provided in Treffers-Daller (1994). She asked her Brussels informants to think of six individuals to whom they talked regularly and specify their names. Obviously, the names were of no interest to the researcher but the question helped interviewees to focus on real-life individuals rather than groups of people like friends or neighbors.



A relevant aspect linked to the wording of questions is how to formulate sensitive questions. The basic rule is that they should never be asked right away. It is fundamental that an atmosphere of trust is created before sensitive issues are introduced. It is also better not to leave these questions to the final stages of the interview. The best place is towards the middle of the interaction. This way, if the interviewer perceives that sensitive questions have strained his or her relationship with the interviewee, he or she can repair the damage as they move along. One technique for phrasing sensitive questions is to allow the interviewee to distance him- or herself from the themes discussed. Using formulae like “There are people who say/think that . . . ,” “Do you know of anyone who . . . ?” may be useful. Finally, the researcher must not forget to make explicit at the outset of the interview that the interviewee may opt out of any of the questions if she or he does not feel comfortable with them.

There are different ways of organizing questions in interviews depending on the type of interview, the research goals, and the relationship between participants. As a general rule, questions should be grouped by themes. The first ones within each theme should be relatively easy to answer. They are meant to pave the way for subsequent queries which the researcher might actually be more interested in.

The second aspect to be taken into consideration is the breadth of questions, that is, whether they ask for specific information or are relatively open. There are two types of organization. In the first type, the interviewer moves from the general to the specific, whereas in the second type it is the opposite. When researchers use the first mode, they seek specific information but want to avoid influencing respondents’ opinions. If they use the second type, they are more interested in subjects’ reflections, accounts and understandings of the world. The way questions are ordered may vary at different stages in the interview depending on the theme tackled.

Section summary: Planning the interview

- Before starting, researchers need to assess the feasibility and suitability of conducting interviews in a particular multilingual context.
- They should be aware of culture-specific restrictions on who, what, and when to ask.
- The less directive an interview, the more prone respondents will be to provide details.
- The language(s) of the interview frames the event in significant ways. It is best to allow interviewees to choose what language(s) to speak.
- Interviewers should avoid asking yes–no questions or channeling informants’ responses.
- Varying the format and type of questions makes the interview less monotonous.
- Questions should be short, easy to understand, and unambiguous.
- Sensitive questions should be not formulated right away and researchers should allow interviewees to distance themselves from the themes discussed.



9.2.4 *Conducting the interview*

Before conducting the interview, it is essential to pilot it. The more feedback researchers get the better. It may be the case that the interview is too long, that questions are ambiguously worded, or that they do not focus interviewees' responses on the desired themes.

A time and location for the interview must be chosen. Usually, it is left up to informants to decide. They may prefer the safe environment of their homes, or they may choose a less private location, such as a public park, a cafeteria, or a room in a library. If a public place is chosen, it might be a good idea to visit it beforehand, especially if researchers are planning to record the interview (it may be too tiny or too noisy, or have no sockets to plug their recording equipment into).

Once the day comes, researchers should think about how they are going to dress. They need to remember that interviewees should feel comfortable in their presence. So, they should choose a way of dressing which harmonizes with their informants' but does not conflict with the image they want to project. For instance, wearing very informal clothes can, in some contexts, raise doubts as to their seriousness as researchers and the extent to which they are to be trusted. This may shape responses in undesired ways.

One key issue to consider before conducting the interview is ethics. This refers not only to the need to gain informed consent from informants, but also to questions that have to do with the researcher's moral conduct during the interview. That is, apart from ensuring that participants' anonymity is guaranteed, we need to ensure that we deploy ethical interviewing practices. That means avoiding damaging informants in any conscious way, but also being aware of the potential for distress that some of our questions may have.

The initial words exchanged in an interview are important in terms of the definition of the communicative event and its general tone. Researchers should take advantage of the opening turns to start building rapport. But most importantly, they must make all efforts to explain how the event will unfold and what kinds of answers they expect. Logically, they should avoid determining respondents' behavior, though some influence is unavoidable, due to, as we said, the contextually situated nature of spoken data.

Researchers' demeanor is also important throughout. They must show that they are attentive to the talk exchanged, as significant themes may arise that were not expected. Researchers need to pick up on informants' cues if they want to pursue them. Researchers' responsiveness is also important for interviewees. The latter may want to know whether they are being understood and whether what they are saying seems to be relevant for the researcher.

One way of displaying interest is by taking notes. Yet note-taking may work to direct respondents' talk towards certain themes if they infer that these are what researchers are after. If the interview is being recorded, note-taking can take place afterwards. Making notes on the interview is always recommended, especially if the interview is not video-recorded. But even if it is, researchers can use notes to



write down interesting topics they may want to pursue later on in the interview, or any ideas that come to mind during the interaction and that may become relevant during the process of analysis. It is also advisable for researchers to note down impressions about the interviewee and the way the interaction unfolded. Listening to – and if possible transcribing – the interview right afterwards helps the recall process. If content recordings are not possible, note-taking is facilitated by having a form with preallocated spaces for the pieces of information researchers want to gather.

9.2.5 *Analyzing the data*

The interpretation of data elicited in interviews must take into account its deeply contextual nature, that is, the fact that it is produced in the framework of a particular speech event and that it stands in a sequential relationship with preceding talk (see Heller, chapter 14 in this volume). Interview talk is also situated temporally, spatially, experientially, and socioculturally, that is, it is produced at a particular time and place by specific speakers, who have specific background experiences, and who operate within particular sociocultural systems. This is especially significant in terms of the researcher's assessment and understanding of the information provided (Briggs, 1986).

With regard to the presentation of data, researchers may opt to gloss over respondents' talk, or they may decide to furnish longish quotes. The first option makes it difficult for readers to assess the accuracy of researchers' interpretations. The second option enables readers to "hear" speakers' voices (for an example see Mills, 2004), which is particularly interesting when, for example, code alternation is employed. Yet this entails a risk, namely, that researchers shy away from interpretation, the assumption being that the data speaks for itself. This is erroneous, as interview data – like any data – is not transparent to the observer, but requires careful and informed interpretation.

Section summary: Conducting the interview and presenting the data

- Piloting is essential to detect possible flaws in the design of the interview.
- Researchers must think about their dress style and the image they want to project.
- Researchers must be attentive to the talk exchanged and engage with interviewees.
- The data must be interpreted in its context of production.
- Providing extracts from interviewees' responses enables readers to check on the accuracy of interpretations and gives the researched a voice.



9.3 Questionnaires

Questionnaires are an efficient tool for gathering quantifiable information on bilingual speakers or communities rapidly and systematically. Like interviews, questionnaires are useful for collecting declarative data but not data on performance; besides, the directive mode of questioning and the close-ended nature of the answers constrains severely the depth of the knowledge to be acquired. If contextually rich accounts of bilingual phenomena are desired, questionnaires are best employed in combination with other types of data, such as participant observation, recordings of social interaction, ethnographic notes, and interviews.

Survey research procedures are the most appropriate ones if the goal of the project is to obtain quantifiable data on languages and speakers from a large population sample. An interesting example is the Multilingual Cities Project (Extra & Yagmur, 2004), conducted in six European cities, whose objective is to gather data on the linguistic profiles of ethnic minorities in Europe in order to determine the degree of vitality of native languages and make cross-national comparisons.

The knowledge gained through a questionnaire survey can be put to different uses. It may be employed to obtain a general picture of language use in a given community to plan further research; it may serve as contextualizing information on the social actors investigated (cf. Boix, 1993; Treffers-Daller, 1994); it may be used to identify target subjects from a large population sample (e.g. multilingual school children). In the latter case, the information gathered constitutes the first step in data collection. The information obtained enables researchers to identify target informants. Instances of this type of research are provided in Deprez (1999) and Vilardell (1998). When the number of questionnaires to be processed is high, it is useful to have a *screening question* to discriminate between informants.

Most of the considerations regarding the phrasing, organization, and piloting of questions that were discussed in relation to interviews apply equally to questionnaires and will not be discussed in the sections that follow.

9.3.1 Planning the use of questionnaires

The first thing researchers need to decide on is sampling and data collection mode. Sampling is crucial as it will condition the types of claims they will be able to base on the data (see chapter 5 in this volume for a detailed explanation of sampling procedures). Sampling will also affect administration mode. For instance, if random-digit dialing is employed, the survey will be most easily carried out by phone. Different modes of data gathering offer different advantages and disadvantages (for further details see Fowler, 1984), but they all have an influence on the format and number of questions to be asked.

Questionnaires can be self- or interviewer-administered. Self-administered questionnaires are filled in by informants in writing; they can be completed in a group or



individually, and can be returned immediately after completion or mailed to the researcher. Because they place a lot of emphasis on reading and writing, self-administered questionnaires are not a suitable procedure when the population investigated may have literacy difficulties (e.g. migrant community members who are not literate in their own language(s) and/or the language(s) of the host country). Another major difficulty concerns the official status of some written questionnaires (like those designed to gather census information). This may make informants reluctant to cooperate. An additional difficulty with self-administered questionnaires that are not filled in “on site” is that researchers have no way of knowing who completes them, which may bias the results. Finally, in multilingual contexts it is necessary to have questionnaires translated into the different languages spoken, even if these are dialects or varieties different from the standard. This will enhance closeness with informants and encourage participation.

As regards positive aspects, self-administered questionnaires are less costly than interviewer-administered ones, and may be more efficient for enquiring about sensitive issues, since interviewees may be less reluctant to admit to negatively evaluated behaviors than in the presence of an interviewer. Yet there is no general agreement on this (Fowler, 1984). If they are to be useful, it is essential for self-administered questionnaires to be user-friendly and short. Enclosing a cover letter explaining the objectives of the research and the instructions for filling in and returning the questionnaire is important to increase motivation and response rates. If mailed, follow-up procedures must be established to ensure that questionnaires are returned. High response rates are best obtained by administering questionnaires “on site,” usually in groups (at a school or factory, for example).

As mentioned previously, questionnaires can be administered verbally by an interviewer. The event can be conducted face to face or over the phone. Phone surveys can be carried out to identify target informants, with whom a more in-depth interview can later be arranged. In interviewer-administered survey procedures, the event resembles an interview but questions tend to be closed and interviewers must follow standardized interviewing procedures to avoid biasing the results. The advantage of having interviewers is that they can clarify questions for informants and may increase motivation. It is also possible to combine the use of an interviewer with some self-administered parts. The feasibility of using interviewers will depend on sampling procedures and available funds.

9.3.2 *Format of questions and answers*

An important thing to bear in mind is that the questionnaire must not be too long (four pages maximum) and should not take more than 30 minutes to complete (Dörnyei, 2003). Otherwise, our informants will get tired and start answering randomly, which reduces the reliability of the instrument. Another fundamental consideration has to do with the way questions are phrased. Generally speaking, it is advisable that they are short and easy to understand, but the most important thing is that they are adequate for the population group we intend to survey.



Because of the analytical treatment given to questionnaire data, it is essential for questions to be close-ended. Yet including some open-ended questions is also advised, as they may provide insights into unexpected significant themes and categories. To facilitate quantification, the multiple-choice format is advised. Researchers must be careful to offer a choice of categories which is in tune with respondents' reality. For example, when asking whether bilingual speakers would employ language A or B in a particular situation or to talk to specific interlocutors, possible answers might be "a mixture of languages A and B," or "neither A nor B but C." So, those categories have to be offered in the questionnaire. Researchers must also be aware of local ways of referring to certain language varieties and refer to them in the same way in their questionnaires. One possibility is to conduct pilot research with open questions and then use the information collected to create closed questions.

A variation on the multiple-choice format is the ranked scale, where the response requested is a matter of degree. The five-point scale covers a broad enough range of answers. For example, to the question "How good is your understanding of informal conversations in language A?," the response options could be "very good – quite good – good – quite poor – poor." Bear in mind that, if numbers are employed, it is essential to indicate what each number stands for (5=very good, 4=quite good, 3=good, 2=quite poor, 1=poor). Another thing that must be made clear at the outset is how many responses will be accepted per question, that is, in the case of multiple-choice answers, whether it is possible to tick two boxes at the same time.

Nowadays it is possible to use commercial software packages to handle the data obtained in automatic ways (see Extra & Yagmur, 2004, for details). This facilitates the researcher's task enormously. The design of the questionnaire must take into account the technical requirements of the programs to be employed.

The items on a questionnaire can be formulated in three different ways: as interrogative sentences ("Which kind of school did you attend as a child?"), as directives ("Indicate three radio stations you listen to") and as declaratives ("Speaking Basque helps people get a better job"). Varying the format of questions makes the questionnaire less monotonous. The first two types of formats are meant to gather factual information, while the third one requires respondents to state their degree of identification with the statement. It is geared towards investigating the beliefs, values, and attitudes of speakers, as these are better asked about indirectly. Another way of investigating language attitudes is by providing verbal stimuli to the researched. A well-known method is the matched-guise technique, devised in French Canada and employed, for example, by Woolard (1989) in Catalonia. Bilingual speakers are recorded reading the same text in the two languages. The idea is to investigate linguistic attitudes by keeping all variables constant (gender, age, ethnicity, tone and quality of voice, and text) and modifying only the language in which the text is read.

The types of questions that might be pertinent for a study on bilingualism will depend on the nature and goals of the project. Table 9.1 shows a list of possible themes, which is of course not meant to be exhaustive.



Table 9.1: Possible themes for a questionnaire on bilingualism

Themes	Subthemes
Biographical information (on informants but also parents, partner and children)	age place of birth place of residence (current/previous) schooling (how many years, type of school(s), language(s) of instruction, level attained) occupation (current/previous) leisure activities (membership of clubs, associations, etc.)
Language use and choice	languages spoken to different interlocutors (father, mother, partner, children, friends, workmates, neighbors, government officials, strangers) languages spoken by other people to the interviewee languages spoken by different groups of people among themselves language spoken in particular social situations/social domains reasons for language choice newspapers habitually read favorite radio station(s)/TV channel(s) favorite TV programs use of foreign languages
Language proficiency	declared competence (written and oral comprehension, written and oral production, specific genres) knowledge of foreign languages
Language dominance	languages spoken/read/understood/written best reasons for dominance
Language acquisition/learning	time and mode of acquisition/learning motivations reactions in social environment reasons for and types of acquisition/learning difficulties factors facilitating/hindering learning
Language attitudes/preferences	attitude towards: speakers of a given language; norms of linguistic conduct; promotion of languages; types of linguistic attitudes; use of languages in specific social domains degrees of identification with languages and cultures preferred languages (for speaking, reading, listening to, writing in).
Social status and value of languages	languages with low/high social prestige negative/positive individual consequences of language choice measures to promote knowledge/use of languages



9.3.3 Administering the questionnaire

Before conducting a large-scale survey it is essential to pilot the questionnaire to see how effectively it meets the researcher's objectives. The piloting stage will provide crucial information on what needs to be improved.

When handing out the questionnaire, it is very important to explain clearly to informants what kinds of responses are expected from them and to give them a chance to ask any questions they may have. If questionnaires are not completed "on site" it is essential to have clear instructions at the beginning on how to fill it in and procedures for returning it. Thanking respondents for their help is also recommended (Sebba, 1993).

Section summary: Questionnaires

- Questionnaire surveys are useful for collecting information on a large number of speakers.
- The depth of the knowledge obtained through questionnaire survey is limited.
- Careful planning of sampling and delivery mode is necessary.
- Questionnaires should be short.
- The way questions are phrased should take into account the target group. As a general rule, they should be clear and easy to understand.
- Response options in multiple-choice formats must match existing categories in bilinguals' real contexts.
- Precise instructions for filling in questionnaires must be provided.

9.4 Comparing and Contrasting Interviews and Questionnaires

This chapter has presented the main characteristics of interviews and questionnaires and the ways in which they can efficiently be employed in bilingualism research. Interviews and questionnaires have a common core goal, which is to obtain information about bilingual individuals and/or communities, including self- or other-report data on language use. They differ in the type and depth of the information collected and the ways in which this information is most appropriately handled (quantitatively in the case of questionnaires, qualitatively in the case of interviews). Questionnaires can be administered in writing or orally. In the latter case, they are actually directive interviews involving interaction between interviewer and respondent. What we have referred to as interviews in this chapter are less structured events that tend to elicit fairly extended responses from informants.



The “extended” interview event is also a naturally occurring interactional situation which can be used to gather samples of real-life bilingual speech.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the editors, Melissa Moyer and Li Wei, for their insightful comments on the various drafts of this chapter. Any remaining shortcomings are, of course, my own. The course “Research Methods in Sociolinguistics” taught by Joan Pujolar at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona provided inspiration for many of the ideas in this chapter.

Further reading and resources

On the interview as a research technique

- Briggs, C. L. (1986) *Learning How to Ask: A Sociolinguistic Appraisal of the Role of the Interview in Social Science Research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gubrium, J. and J. Holstein (eds.) (2002) *Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Labov, W. (1984) Field methods of the project of linguistic change and variation. In J. Baugh and J. Sherzer (eds.), *Language in Use: Readings in Sociolinguistics*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, pp. 28–54.
- Redmond, M. V. (2000) *Communication: Theories and Applications*. Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin, chs. 8 and 9.

On biographical narratives and bilingual identities

- Pavlenko, A. and A. Blackledge (eds.) (2004) *Negotiation of Identities in Multilingual Contexts*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

On the questionnaire as a technique

- Dörnyei, Z. (2003) *Questionnaires in Second Language Research: Construction, Administration and Processing*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

An interesting example of a recent large-scale language survey using questionnaires

- Extra, G. and K. Yagmur (2004) *Urban Multilingualism in Europe*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.