

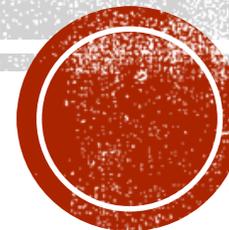
HOW TO DO AN ORAL HISTORY

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ORAL HISTORY

- Oral history is a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events.
- Oral history is both the oldest type of historical inquiry, predating the written word, and one of the most modern, initiated with tape recorders in the 1940s and now using 21st-century digital technologies.
- Oral History collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews
 - Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*
 - <http://www.oralhistory.org/about/do-oral-history/>



WHAT IS AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW?

- “A well-developed strategy” (Labov 1984)
- A series of hierarchically structured sets of questions, referred to as conversational modules or ‘resources’
 - Demography
 - Neighbourhood
 - Family
 - Social practises
 - School days
 - Work life
 - Folk remedies ... etc. etc.



SCHOOL DAYS

- Did you go to one of the schools in this neighbourhood?
 - How far was it from your house?
- Did you have any teachers that are really tough?
 - What made them really mad?
 - What would they yell at a kid for?
 - What was the worst thing you ever saw a teacher do to a kid?
 - Or a kid do to a teacher?
- **Did you ever get blamed [punished] for something you didn't do?**



SCHOOL DAYS

- Did you ever have a teacher that was a real creep?
- Did you ever have a teacher that was really unfair? That you liked?
- Did you ever pass notes in school?
 - Did a teacher ever catch you passing notes?
 - **What happened?**
- What kind of group did you have in your school?
 - Do [Did] you have jocks? Nerds? Goths? Thugs?
 - What is/was your group like?
 - What sorts of clothes do they wear? Haircuts? Earrings?
 - Could a guy [girl] from one group go out with a girl [guy] from another?
- How do the kids of different backgrounds/colours get along in your school?



METHOD

- Modules and Questions within the “Interview Schedule” are not ordered randomly.
- The aim is to progress from general, impersonal, non-specific topics/questions to more specific, personal ones.
- Importantly, ‘**narratives of personal experience**’
- Once engaged in this type of discussion speakers tend to produce **vivid recollections rich in vernacular features** (Labov, 1984: 34)



WHY?

- Tapping vernacular culture
- “Observing, yes, but being engaged in the process – curious and brave”
 - Tagliamonte (2016:89)
- Getting to know people in their own words. Embracing human nature!
 - **Walking into people’s lives is just fabulous, you know? It’s something we get to do and most people don’t. ... But you know when I go there all my troubles disappear, you know? You’re just completely taken up in these other people’s lives and suddenly your crap seems like nothing.**
 - Penny Eckert, Stanford University



WHY?

- The experiences of history and culture are alive, living inside us, with the imprint of ages emblazoned in vocabulary and expressions.
 - Tagliamonte (2016:91)
- The words and expressions we use tell a story greater than our conscious knowledge of ourselves.
- Oral histories get that out into the open.



A TYPICAL 'INTERVIEW'

- About an hour, but sometimes much longer
- A ramble down memory lane.
- A sharing of experiences and thoughts, ways of being, understandings events, things that are on top of the mind or close to the heart or even buried secrets left long unsaid.
- The conversation begins with an apparently innocent question, such as: ***“Where were you born?”*** or ***“Who was your first friend?”*** but it can end up just about anywhere ...
 - Tagliamonte (2016:93)



IS IT DIFFICULT?

- **I thought to myself, “Oh, people won’t want to talk to you.” But if you stress how important they are to your research not only do they want to talk to you but, you know if you’ve got the time and the patience and you can have the right flow of questions, they’ll talk to you for a long ass time, as you know, right?**
 - John Baugh, University of St Louis



THE INTERVIEWER

- The interviewer him or herself can have a major impact on the nature of the data in any interview situation.
- Create rapport and relax into the situation.
 - Be personable: try to be the most social version of yourself
 - Be polite, respectful, and conscientious
 - Be adventurous
 - Be flexible



PRACTICALITIES

- **Co-ordination**
- **Scheduling**
- **Persistence**
 - Some people don't want to talk! Some people avoid interviews.
- **Context**
 - Indoors, with carpets, no fridges, ticking clocks or televisions!
- **Ethics and Consent**
 - Explain the project
 - Ask for consent, e.g. *I give permission to audio-record this interview...*
 - Each person should sign the consent form and receive a copy of it



HOW TO'S

- **Be informal**

- Create an environment of casual conversation such that the informant forgets that they're being formally interviewed and feels like they're just chatting with you.

- **Be flexible**

- If you introduce a topic which the informant isn't interested in, don't force it – just drop it and move on.
- Follow the informant's lead if they are particularly interested in a certain topic. Passionate speech from an informant about a topic that you didn't anticipate discussing or that you find boring is better than bored speech from an informant about a topic that you are interested in.
- Have your next conversation point in mind in case a given topic fizzles out or a change of topic is required.



HOW TO'S

- **Let the interviewee talk**

- Use nonverbal cues of agreement and engagement on the part of the interviewer (nodding, eye contact) are extremely useful in that they allow the informant space to talk.

- **Ask open ended questions**

- Prompt recollections of particular experiences rather than discussions of generalities.

- **Be mindful**

- It can be more comfortable for informants to answer questions that do not directly implicate them.



THE RIGHT KIND OF QUESTIONS

- The questions you ask in a sociolinguistic interview are key to tapping the most natural form of speech
- Tailor your questions to the person and the place
 - Questions which ask a speaker where they were, or what they were doing at a momentous time in history are excellent in tapping personal stories
- In Nova Scotia, Canada
 - **Do you remember the Halifax Explosion? (1917)**
 - **The sinking of the Titanic? (1912)**
 - **Did you ever get caught out in a storm? (Fishing stories)**



HOW TO ASK QUESTIONS

- Instead of asking, “Is it true that...” it’s better to say, **“I’ve heard that...”** or, **“Some people say that ...”**, or **“I’ve noticed that ...”**
- Instead of saying, “Do you like/hate ...” it’s better to say, **“What do you like/hate about...”** **If someone answers “Yes/No”, ask “Why? Why not? What? What for?”** etc.
- *Ask how a person felt about things and what they thought about things.*
- *Ask a person to give an example or tell you about one time they did/heard/said/say something. For example, “Do you remember the day that...” or “Where were you when...”*



HOW TO ASK QUESTIONS

- Rather than asking, “Were your school days the best years of your life?”, it can be better to say, ***“A lot of people say that their school days were the best years of their lives. What do you think? Was it like that for you?”***
- Neutralize questions that impose a value judgement – don’t ask informants questions in such a way that implicitly communicates a negative appraisal of that topic. For example, rather than asking, “Do you believe in X?” or, “Do you still believe in X?”, it’s better to say something like, ***“A lot of people I know believe in X, what do you think?”***
- Tailor your questions to the person, but don’t ask things that are overly personal or sensitive (e.g. serious violence, abuse, sexuality, etc.).



THE GOLD

- Incredible stories filled with heart and soul



THE FAMILY COW

WILLIAM LANDON, 80's, c. 1982

- Well, you'd make whatever deal you could make with them (inc) I was running the mail out here one winter ... and when I was coming back, there was a fella out there at the Tallyhoe Road with a cow. He was getting- he had two cows and the feed was getting scarce. And he come out there. He owed me a bill and- and turned it in on the- on the bill, you see. Well, I just tied it to the horses' collar and brought it home and put it in the stable. That's that one we kept- we kept her. She was only three year old. We kept her there for ten or fifteen years, you know. Oh yeah. Keep the calf in the barn, you see. In the summertime, and she just went where she liked. And most of the time it was down the railroad track. ...And ah, you know, you took a chance of her getting killed on the railroad track. ... But ah, she didn't- she never walked on the track. .. (inc) She seemed to have ah- ah- just down long the side of the track. And the trains runnin' past here all the time and everything. But you needed milk. So, the only way you could have fresh milk was to have a cow. And if she got killed, well, that was just too bad. You'd have to get another one. But she never got touched. Run up and down there all her life.



WHAT DO YOU NOTICE?

- Cultural practice:
 - What does it mean “to turn something in for a bill”?
 - *stable, barn ...*
- Historical situation
 - “The only way you could get milk was to have a cow.”
 - “Well, I just tied it to the horses’ collar and brought it home ...”



WHAT DO YOU NOTICE?

- Words
 - *fella, stable, (railroad)*
 - *tracks*
 - *long* instead of *along*
- Pronunciations
 - *gettin'*
- Sentence endings and expressions
 - *or something, and everything*
 - *you see, you know*
 - *oh yeah*



WHAT DO YOU NOTICE?

- Verbs:
 - **come** and **run** used for past tense
 - And he **come** out there...
- Passives
 - And if she **got** killed; she never **got** touched
- Zero subjects
 - But she never got touched. **Ø** Went up and down there all her life.
- Verbal *just*
 - I **just** tied it to the horses' collar



NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

- Set the scene
 - One winter I was coming back,
 - there was a fella out at Tallyhoe Road with a cow.
 - He had two cows
 - and the feed was gettin' scarce.
 - And he come out there.
 - He owed me a bill
 - and- and turned it in and ah, turned it in on the bill, you see.



NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

- What happened?
- A series of actions in order that the events actually occurred
 - Well, I just **tyed** it to the horses' collar
 - and **brought** it home
 - and **put** it in the stable
 - ...
 - In the summertime, she just **went** where she liked.
 - **Went** up and down there all her life.



NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

- Why is the story tell-able?
 - And ah, you know, you took a chance of her getting killed on the railroad tracks.
 - ...
 - But you needed milk.
 - So, the only way you could have fresh milk was to have a cow.
 - And if she got killed,
 - well, that was just too bad.
 - You 'd have to get another one.



THE INTERVIEWEE

- For the interviewee, having someone who is interested in what he or she is saying – all that reminiscing and remembering and recounting of tales – is a highly enjoyable and indeed cathartic experience.

- Tagliamonte (2016:105)

- **I apparently like to be interviewed. I couldn't stop talking.**

- Gunnel Tottie, emerita University of Zurich



- **I can only hope that some of the people we interview for sociolinguistic interviews enjoy it as much as this.**

- Ralph Fasold, emeritus, Georgetown University



STORIES...



“He had it hid outside”

11. Maude Schiff age 78, b.1904, female, Parry Sound Historical
(recorded 1982) (*a foiled robbery attempt*)

.....

MS: But he was up there and he'd sell cattle. And he had quite a lot of money but he wouldn't keep it in the house. He, no, he didn't put it in the bank. He kept it. And one night- and he didn't keep it in the house. He hid it outside. And one night robbers come. People come to get that money and this, and they tore his house all apart and he didn't tell them where it was and they didn't get it. It wasn't in the house. They thought he had none, you see. In the couch- table drawer was thirty five cents. They took that. But he had money, but he had it hid outside.



“I was very angry with him”

17. Melba Renea Busch age 77, b.1977, female, Christie Twp.
(recorded 2016) (*father accidentally broke her record*)

MB: So, and then I had records. Uh, I was very angry with my father the one time because we'd come out home from Parry Sound. I'd bought this record. I couldn't tell you what one it was now, and it was in the back of the car, up at the back. And the fire had gone out at the house. We had coal stove in the living room and wood in the kitchen. And the- nothing, no heat at all. And he went out to the car and he put his hand down right on the record I bought. And me being a spoiled little brat, I was- I was very angry with him. But what could you do, eh? It was- it was broken. Yeah.



THANK YOU!



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