



UNIT TEN

Ethnographic Conversations/Interviewing 2

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SECTION ONE

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1. Introduction

Take the word *square*. When I first heard it, I thought it was a derogatory label for a socially acceptable, unadventurous orientation to life. That's the way I had learned it. In the next stage, I learned that as junkies used the term, it was not necessarily a derogatory label – its core meaning was 'non-heroin user'. There could be 'hip' squares. But then as time went on, I learnt more about the meaning of *square*, which derived from the contexts in which junkies encountered them. Squares were hypocrites since they often frequented the streets to obtain goods and services that they would ordinarily say were illegal or immoral. Squares were larcenous, since their desires to get something for nothing made them a seller's market for stolen goods and a likely target for confidence games. *Square* was a complicated term to learn, and my initial belief that I understood it only got in the way. (Agar 1980: 102)

This unit is a continuation from Unit 9, taking further both some of the skills needed in ethnographic conversations and interviews and some of the related theoretical, technical and ethical issues. Specifically, the assignment involves students in interviewing in a foreign language and the issues that this raises. It also introduces an approach which is at the most linguistic end of the ethnographic interviewing continuum called 'ethnosemantics'. This approach aims to find out what 'cultural models' people are using in their everyday lives by paying particular attention to their words and metaphors.

It is also a good stage in the course to pause and think about the kind of topic/research question that students will need to develop. It may be that around this time, students will have an end-of-term or end-of-semester break and that they will be collecting data for their home ethnography during this time. Guidelines on how to set about the home ethnography are produced separately but the issue of formulating a research question is included here because, as students start to collect very specific pieces of data (such as interview data), they need to start thinking about how such data help them either to further modify their original research question or how the data begin to provide evidence for answering it.

Throughout Units 8-12, it is worth repeating (perhaps to the point of tedium) that data collection and data analysis go hand in hand in doing ethnographic work. Students need to get into the habit not only of observing and listening with heightened perception but also of asking themselves about what they have observed and heard. In other words, they need to move from the raw material around them to description, possible interpretation and back again in a continuous circular movement.

N.B. Students will need tape recorders and audio tapes for the assignment in this unit.

2. Links with other units

This unit has clear links with Units 8, 9, 11 and 12 and these four units should be seen as a coherent set of units combining data collection and analysis. The discussion on developing a research question can be taken up when doing any of the conceptual units to help students get into the habit of linking notions such as 'identity' or 'reputation' with specific questions that could be explored ethnographically. Similarly, the idea of pursuing keywords among a cultural group (ethnosemantics) can be taken up in any of the conceptual units.

3. Background notes

Developing a research question out of a 'foreshadowed problem'

Although students may not be sure exactly what their ethnographic project will be about before they go abroad, and some examples of changing topics have already been given in Unit 8, it is very useful for students to practise working out what the 'foreshadowed problem' and more specific research question(s) will be. Students nearly always start with a very broad topic, which is fine, but they do not necessarily focus down sufficiently on a precise set of questions and think about *how* they can begin to answer them.

Wengraf (1992) is passionate about developing a *passionate* and well formulated research question. It is important to choose something which will 'sustain your curiosity, involvement and participation with full energy and resourcefulness over a lengthy period of time' and your question 'must be as well-formulated as possible' (Wengraf 1992:17/64). He suggests that an ethnographer has to really work on developing a question which is their own (and not somebody else's) and that by working hard on getting a question right, it can be made more interesting. One way of doing this is to ask yourself as many questions as you can about a possible topic and link them to some of the concepts/theories that you have learnt about, either on this course or on others.

Moustakas suggests the following steps in formulating a question:

1. List all aspects of particular interests or topics;
2. Cluster related interests or topics into sub-themes;
3. Set aside any subthemes that imply causal relationships and any that contain inherent assumptions;
4. Look at all the subthemes until one basic theme or question emerges;
5. Formulate it in a way that specifies clearly and precisely what it is that you want to know.

(Based on Moustakas 1990:42 quoted in Wengraf)

Students often choose a theme which involves exploring the experience of a particular group, e.g.:

- What is it like to be a blind student at Marburg University ?
- How do single mother students manage their different roles?
- How do transvestite prostitutes experience their identity?
- How do foreign students experience student life in a German university?
- Why do students dress the way they do?

It is most important to choose the words for your research question carefully and to be aware of their conceptual underpinnings. For example, Wengraf criticises the question 'Do people take drugs to escape from reality?' because 'escape from reality' is not a clear concept, especially since the idea of 'reality' is itself problematic! The examples from students' ethnographic projects given above, involved them in dealing with common-sense terms such as 'blindness' but 'making the term strange'. Other terms such as 'roles' and 'identity' are more theoretical terms and students need to give some recognition of their theoretical heritage. Ultimately, students need to find a topic which really engages them and then, fairly early on in the data collection process, they need to clarify their research question, ensuring that they can collect data which will give them the evidence they need.

Data in Context

The background notes written for the previous unit are all relevant here. In particular, this is a good point at which to take up some of the difficulties raised by Briggs, by reminding students of the notion of reflexivity (see Unit 2). In doing ethnographic projects, the students are a part of the social world they are studying (Hammersley & Atkinson 1983). It is a world constituted by meaning and their intervention in the form of ethnographic conversations/interviews is contributing to the construction of meaning which they elicit. As they should already be aware, the nature of the questions they ask, the quality of attention they give elicits information and perceptions in that particular context only.

Becker et al. in their study of medical students (1961) raise important questions about the genesis of the data they collected. For example, the kind of information/perceptions noted by the ethnographer will be interpreted in different ways depending on whether it is:

- observed
- volunteered or
- a response to a specific question

Data collected from two people overheard talking about how much work they have to do may be qualitatively different from data collected when they volunteer information about work. And in turn, it may be different from what they say in response to a direct question. These are all different contexts and the data must be treated as arising from these contexts. Agar, in a similar way, makes the distinction between 'occasioned' and 'mandated' data in which the former is observed in naturally occurring contexts and the latter is explicitly elicited (Agar 1986). 'Mandated' data is elicited data, as a result of the

ethnographer questioning the informant about the use of a particular word, utterance or aspect of behaviour.

So, students also need to be reflexive about the extent to which their presence affects the ways in which informants talk about certain topics. They must not assume, because their informant talks to them in a certain way, that that is how the topic is viewed and discussed within the informant's own group. The ability to talk to 'strangers' or 'others' about your life experiences in different ways depending on the audience is a sociolinguistic competence that practically everyone develops. Spradley calls this 'translation competence' (1979:19). We can 'translate' our experiences into something that our audience will be able to make sense of. Any student will be skilful at this when they translate their life at university into a narrative that their parents, for example, will be able to consume. This is why good ethnographic interviewing is so important. There are two kinds of 'translation' that ethnographers need to look out for: assertions about the group as a whole: for example, one student was told that religion and food were quite separate domains in Seville but she found out through PO that this was not the case. This kind of translation is often a simplification or a telling of what the informant thinks the interviewer wants to hear. (See Unit 13 for further remarks on this). The other kind of translation is a more linguistic one: the informant puts things in a way that they think the interviewer will understand. Just as a doctor may talk to a patient about their 'waterworks' rather than a 'urinary tract' so an informant may translate from their folk-term into a more mainstream one. When doing an ethnographic project in a foreign language, students need to be even more aware of the extent to which informants are 'translating' for their benefit.

Both this and the previous unit offer students opportunities to work on their conversation/interviewing practice. At this stage, they may still feel most comfortable with what Spradley calls 'the grand tour' approach in which informants range over a number of topics in a general and descriptive way. But, as outlined in the previous unit, they need to remember that the overall movement of their data collection is towards increasingly focused encounters. As areas of interest, recurring concepts and metaphors are elicited, so students need to ask increasingly focused questions.

The most focused and 'mandated' types of question will be to elicit meanings around particular key words and practices in order to understand the cultural and conceptual models of informants. This more cognitive/semantic approach to ethnography is called 'Ethnosemantics'.

Ethnosemantics

This is sometimes called ethnoscience or ethnographic semantics. It is concerned with eliciting the categories used by informants to order and make sense of their particular cultural worlds. The focus is therefore on the language of informants as a way into understanding their meaning systems. It is an approach, developed within cognitive anthropology, to capture, in as systematic a way as possible, the cultural knowledge of informants. Not surprisingly, it is an approach much favoured by linguistic anthropologists. For example, in Holland and Quinn's *Cultural Models in Language and Thought* (1987) there are a number of chapters about the cultural models that relate to gender and marriage. Holland and Skinner give a typology of male gender-types from middle-class, college-age men and women. They identify six different

types: *the jock, the chauvinist pig, the dude, the turkey, the wimp and the guy*. The American cultural model of marriage is that of something fragile and breakable which has to be worked on or fixed. This model is derived from the metaphors used in the discourses of marriage: 'break-down, 'not working', 'patch up the relationship' etc. So as well as the vocabulary and linguistic categories of informants' data, the 'metaphors we live by' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) also need to be analysed.

The guidance notes from Spradley's *The Ethnographic Interview* (see Unit 9) illustrate how the approach is realised in interviewing techniques. It requires the more formal and overtly structured end of the interviewing continuum and assumes more overt control and preparation than the 'ethnographic conversation' already introduced. So, as we have already suggested, data can be collected along a continuum from observation and jotting down scraps of interaction, through informal ethnographic conversations to formal ethnosemantic interviews.

The three key elements of ethnosemantics are:

1. recording of the informants' actual words;
2. systematic eliciting of the 'folk' terms and their relationships to each other;
3. description of informants' cultural knowledge as evidenced in the lexical/semantic fields analysed.

Before discussing these in detail, it might be useful to re-cap the arguments for why some form of interviewing is so essential for an 'emic' perspective. Werner and Schoepfle (1989) suggest that there are two types of ethnographic observer: the 'lurker' who observes from the edge and the 'soaker' who, in effect, 'goes native'. But both 'lurkers' and 'soakers' still write ethnographies from the point of view 'How I See Them', whereas through ethnographic conversations and interviews, the informants' own perceptions and concepts can be recorded: "In cognitive ethnosience, it is the internal view that human beings have of their own actions, values and feelings that is the overriding pre-requisite for understanding what they actually do" (p 77). Werner and Schoepfle suggest a progression from the lurker/soaker role to:

1. asking how a group see themselves collectively;
2. asking how the group accounts for variety within itself, and, finally,
3. asking what knowledge they need to accomplish the situations they are in.

The last of these questions is by far the most penetrating and complex since it aims to elicit all the conceptual maps in people's heads which are activated in order for them to, for example, feel part of an ethnic group or carry off a particular speech-event.

The key elements of ethnosemantics:

1. Recording informants' actual words (see below for a discussion of different ways of recording interview data). The point has already been made in the previous unit. However, it is worth stressing here again since students often fail to include enough of their informants' actual language in their projects. The use of

informants' language in a relatively unmediated way is the closest that ethnographers can come to an 'emic' view.

2. Systematic eliciting of 'folk' terms and their relationship to each other, i.e. the names and categories used by informants to describe their world. Spradley (1979) suggests a stage-by-stage process of data collection and analysis, starting with eliciting general descriptive language and finishing with a detailed analysis of the key terms and their semantic relations in an informant's language. He starts with the assumption that an informant's names for things or descriptions of people and situations relate together in complex networks of associations to give a window into their cultural world. So, for example, when a tramp talks of 'making a flop', that relates to: different kinds of flop, ways of making a flop, how the police relate to flops, etc. One of the obvious ways into the complex set of associations is to look for what Spradley calls 'cover terms'. For example, 'a flop' is a cover term which includes many different places where tramps may spend the night.
3. As well as cover terms, there are what Raymond Williams calls key words. These are concepts which are used by a group to categorise people, events and so on. Canaan (1991) looked at young men's concepts of masculinity and found that her data turned around the cover term 'hardness':

K: It's like when you're at school, you've always got a cock of the school. Or a few people who are harder than the rest. They have to fight to see who's the hardest in school.....

A: The strongest, who can lamp everybody

K: You only get about 15 guys in the whole school who are the hardest

A: ..They'll hang around together in a gang. Then you have the next hardest lot who go around in a gang, and then you get the bottoms. The ones who just stay there!....

Those who are hardest, or strongest, and most capable of 'lamping' or beating up their opponent from the top peer group. Group members fight each other to determine who is the 'cock, or the most powerful male'.

(Canaan 1991:118 quoted in Wengraf)

Agar (1991) working in broadly the same tradition as Spradley discusses the use of ethnosemantic interviewing in uncovering the layers of association in the Austrian German keyword, or what he calls 'rich point': 'Schmäh' (a rough gloss of this word would be an ironic view of the world which says things are not what they seem but much worse) (Agar 1991). He describes such keywords as 'rich', 'heavily putted' with associative meanings which make them focal items in the lexis of a particular group and not easily translatable. He investigated its meanings in Vienna by undertaking ethnosemantic interviews. The term 'schmäh' is put in a number of sentences leaving a blank for the informant to fill in. He also collected anecdotes about its use and interviewed people informally about the word.

These two approaches, either looking for a number of 'cover terms' as Spradley suggests, or taking one 'rich' item and exploring systematically how it is used, as Agar suggests, are useful ways for students to start working systematically on informants' language as a way into their cultural world.

At this stage, data collection and analysis begin to merge. The questioning technique advocated by Agar and Spradley assume that some level of analysis is taking place as part of the process of data collection. They are described in this unit in order to help students with their questioning, but equally could be discussed in the Data Analysis Units. In discussing initial techniques for eliciting informants' language and 'cover terms', Spradley suggests:

- Don't ask for the meaning of a term, ask how it would be used, e.g. if an informant said 'That would be normal', don't ask what 'normal means' but 'what else would be normal?' Or 'Would you call Y normal too?'
 - Ask what questions the informants would ask about a particular aspect of their life they were describing (see previous unit) e.g. When would you say...? What are typical sentences in which you would use the term?
 - Ask informants how they would talk about these matters with others, not the ethnographer (i.e. try to stop them "translating" into terms they know you understand), e.g. Werner and Schoepfle quote work with the Igbo in which the word 'food' was used. But after some questioning it emerged that this was not a useful category. The Igbo talked in terms of 'everything that is pounded'.
4. Description of informants' cultural knowledge as evidenced in the lexical/semantic fields analysed. Both Werner and Schoepfle and Spradley suggest a systematic approach to further analysis and questioning in order to understand the main folk terms of an informant and the meaning relationships within and between those terms. Spradley suggests a basic format:
- ◆ **Cover term** e.g. friend. Included terms e.g. close friend, bosom friend, casual friend, 'colonias' (see Spanish interview)
 - ◆ **Semantic relationship** e.g. a bosom friend is a kind of friend (relationship of inclusion).

Each of these terms triggers 'interpretive frames' (Agar 1973) in which the semantic relationships are implied and the layers of association based on structured experience are surfaced.

For example, a cover term such as *Give waitress grief* will have a semantic relationship to included terms such as *ordering separately* and *paying with large bills*. The semantic relationship would be *is a way to* as in: ordering separately is a way to give waitresses grief (Spradley 1979:102). This is a means – end relationship.

Spradley suggests there are universal semantic relations which govern the relationship of included terms to cover terms:

1.	Strict inclusion :	X is a kind of
2.	Spatial:	X is a place in Y
3.	Cause – effect:	X is the result of Y
4.	Rationale:	X is a reason for doing Y
5.	Location for action:	X is a place for doing Y
6.	Function:	X is used for Y
7.	Means-end:	X is a way to do Y
8.	Sequence:	X is a step in Y
9.	Attribution:	X is a characteristic of Y

(Spradley 1979:111)

The list is not so different from that proposed by Halliday in his functional grammar (1985). Some of these relationships are made explicit by informants themselves but in most cases the analyst will have to draw them out of the data. This is an example of a tramp informant and the beginning of Spradley's analysis. Spradley found a number of *included terms* in the idea of a *flop*, e.g. all-night laundromat, toilets, under bridge, flophouse, etc. are all *kinds of flop*. (Spradley *op.cit.* 1979:114)

The semantic relations outlined above act as a useful prompt for further structural questions, e.g:

- ◆ Are there any other kinds of.....? (inclusion)
- ◆ What reasons are there for doing.....? (rationale)
- ◆ Is X a place for.....? (location)
- ◆ What ways are there to do.....? (means-end)

An example, again from Spradley's tramps, of the 'means-end' semantic relation is about how tramps get alcohol or *ways to make a jug*. One set of ways is to make your own: *making pruno, making sweet lacy, squeezing shoe polish, mixing shaving lotion* etc (*op. cit.*: 153)

This is, as far as possible, a comprehensive taxonomy of a particular activity. It is achieved through the kind of questioning described above and is an extension of the kinds of question introduced in Unit 9 for ethnographic interviewing, e.g. description questions, contrast questions. A further development used by Agar is to prepare substitution frames in which the particular concept is placed at the centre and systematic questions are asked which illuminate frame, or semantic, relations. While doing fieldwork in India, Agar came across the saying 'You need a wife to wash your back'. From this the ethnographer can make a frame: 'You need a wife to' And ask other informants to fill in the slot in different ways. As Agar says, if nothing else, you may learn some folk wisecracks.

For language students, the approach, although quite demanding technically, may seem particularly useful and relevant. For example, students in Spain are constantly presented with the term 'alagria' as having great explanatory power. Students could use observation, conversation and more informal ethnosemantic techniques to uncover the rich associations of this term. Students studying a small group could use ethnosemantic techniques to draw up a taxonomy of particular types of people that the group interacted with. For example, one student doing a project on prostitutes in a bar in Cadiz could have drawn up a list of all the different ways the clients were labelled and the ways those labels distinguished between them.

Several linguists and anthropologists have studied the different ways in which particular groups categorise talk. This is one quite straightforward way of capturing how a particular group pays attention to and categorises different kinds of formal and informal gathering. For example, Strathern (1975) (quoted in Saville-Troike) describes how the Melpa speakers in New Guinea categorise types of oratory as:

el-ik	arrow talk or war talk
ik ek	veiled speech or talk which is bent over or folded
ik kwun	straight talk

Similarly, within academic circles, different groups may talk of 'seminars', 'colloquia', 'discussions' etc. and these mean different events across different languages. So there may be the same way of categorising talk, but with different associations or there may be different categories for talk which, for example, make certain kinds of public talk particularly salient for that group.

Students may only want to take on board the ideas of ethnosemantics in a general way, i.e. listening out for 'keywords' and documenting their use or they may like to use the approach much more systematically (see also Unit 11 on Data Analysis).

Recording interview data

The issue of how and in what form to take notes is dealt with in Unit 11. This unit only deals with recording data from interviews. There are three possible methods each with its own advantages and disadvantages:

1. Tape-recording: even though this provides the fullest and most accurate account of what happened, the tape-recording is not the interview itself, but a document based on the reality of the interview. Similarly, a transcription is always theory-driven (Ochs 1979). Even the apparently most faithful transcription is filtered through decisions made by the transcriber, for example, decisions to put in pauses or to show intonation or not affect how the transcription is read: a pause and a doubting tone may greatly modify an apparently categorical statement.

Having accepted these limitations, the tape-recording has the great advantage of capturing the actual words of the speaker and recording the questions so that responses can be set properly in context. It also means that the interviewer can concentrate fully on listening intently and encouraging a relaxed communicative environment.

The disadvantages are obvious. In many situations, tape-recording will be much too intrusive and face-threatening to use at all. Inevitably, it makes the interview a more formal and bounded activity, certainly in the earlier stages when the informant may be only too aware of it. And such awareness may affect both what the informant is prepared to talk about and the way he/she talks.

2. Taking notes during the interview: this is less face-threatening than tape-recording but still allows some of the speaker's actual words to be documented. (Shorthand is a great advantage here). People find different techniques for note-taking but whichever way is found to work best should include writing down informants' actual language and not a paraphrase of it. Key words and phrases, noted at the time, may trigger memories of the surrounding contextual information.

The disadvantages are that it is only possible to capture a partial account of the interview and that the act of note-taking can badly disrupt the relaxed and comfortable encounter that the conversation should be creating. For example, it is difficult to maintain eye-contact and show active involvement in the other when note-taking and, more generally, it will tend to make the event more like a traditional social science research interview.

3. Taking notes after the conversation/interview: this is the most commonly used technique where the ethnographic conversations are very informal, in the early stages of getting to know an informant in those settings where any kind of formal recording is perceived as threatening. The ethnographer listens as attentively as they can and remembers as much as they can. As soon as possible afterwards, notes are taken of the encounter. One former student wrote on beer-mats in the pub toilet as soon as he was able to break away from his informant. As with 2., as much of the informants' actual language as can be remembered, together with key words and themes which could be developed later, need to be written down. In this way, some of the most salient aspects of the encounter can be recorded as 'scratch notes' (see Unit 11).

Some novelists and ethnographers train their memory so that they can remember large chunks of interactions verbatim. Truman Capote, in preparation for collecting data for his novel *In Cold Blood* and other documentary novels is said to have done this. But most of us have not got the time or the capacity to do this. Students need to be aware of how difficult it is to remember someone else's words verbatim and how easy it is to misrepresent what they have said. There are other disadvantages: there is no opportunity to listen and re-listen to the data. It is also difficult to reconstruct the context in which the data was elicited so that the ethnographer can assess the extent to which the information was volunteered or mandated.

The most practical solution is to use all three different types of data collection and select the most appropriate depending on context, stage of the project, the evidence you need and what your informants are willing to go along with. Whatever techniques students use, these need to be described and reflected on in the ethnographic write-up.

Ethical issues

Issues of ethics may well have been raised by students in earlier units. Understandably, many students are concerned about 'spying' on others. They may also worry about how they should present themselves, about the kind of relationships they can establish with their informants and may have fears about exploiting them. If these issues have not been discussed yet, then it is worth helping the students to be clear about a few key principles:

- ◆ the informants and their concerns are always more important than the data. If collecting the data or using the data will have any kind of negative impact on informants, then their interests must come first and the data must be abandoned.
- ◆ the informants have a right to know why they are being studied and the right to question and challenge the study.
- ◆ all data must be anonymised and confidentiality must be respected. If the informants are unhappy about something they said having been tape recorded, then that part of the data should be destroyed.
- ◆ under no circumstances should there be any clandestine photocopying.
- ◆ the type of conversation/interview described in Units 9 and 10 is designed to be kind to and respect informants. If done well, these should make informants feel that they have not been used, nor had their time wasted.
- ◆ an important cultural principle is the notion of 'exchange' (see Unit 15). As informants have given you something, some kind of 'gift' in return would redress the balance, e.g. some specific help or information or at least a drink! (and of course you might pick up more ethnographic information this way).

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SECTION TWO

1. Outline of a session

1. Introduction
2. Developing a research question
3. Feedback from the assignment (Ethnographic conversations)
4. Ethnosemantics
5. Ethnosemantic interviewing
6. Further practice with interviewing (Goldfish bowl technique)

2. Description of a session

2.1 Introduction

Explain that the aim of this session is to take further the issues of ethnographic conversations and interviewing and to link them both to the idea of formulating a clear research question and to data analysis.

Depending on time, student motivation etc., the issues related to theory, techniques and ethics of interviewing can either be brought in here as part of the introduction or can be drawn out of the feedback item. The latter approach is likely to be more involving but it is important to make sure that all the key points mentioned in the background notes are covered.

2.2 Developing a research question

Introduce the points made in the background notes. Refer back to Unit 8 and the idea of a 'foreshadowed problem' which is what the students are likely to start with and then emphasise the need to become increasingly focused as the data collection progresses. It is worth reassuring students that most ethnographers go through a difficult period when they feel confused and frustrated and start to harbour dark feelings of hostility towards their topic! It is at this point that some friendly guidance from tutors is most needed.

Give out Handout 1 on *Critiquing research questions* and ask students to spend a short time in small groups selecting the 'best' and 'worst' questions, using the criteria given. In the whole class discussion, students need to be clear about why Qs 3,5,6,7,8 are bad questions for ethnography. This may be obvious to them. They are broad based sociological questions requiring survey-type work and analysis far removed from the cultural experiences of individuals and small groups. But they also need to appreciate that apparently better questions will also be problematic. For example, Q 10 about 'escaping from reality' is both vague and problematic (as commented on the background notes) because the whole notion of reality is difficult to conceptualise and operationalise in collecting data. Similarly, Q 2 about justifying shoplifting is difficult. The word 'justify' has many ramifications and associations and the ethnographer would need to clarify these before deciding whether to proceed. For example, the word calls up questions such as 'What is a just society?' 'To what extent do people have the

obligation or responsibility to give grounds for their actions?' Does 'justify' mean the same as 'defend yourself' and is this defence on the part of the individual or a group? Q 1 has the same set of problems both with the word 'engage' and the word 'systematic'. Qs 4 and 9 are the most doable and concrete but even they could be rewritten more precisely to link up with cultural concepts which would help the ethnographer to see broader patterns in society. In other words, the research question needs to be precise and concrete but students also need to be aware that concepts such as 'single mother' or 'foreign student' cannot just be taken for granted and that part of the process of finding the right words for the research question is trying to clarify what these terms mean. Indeed the ethnography itself may consist of the process of finding out what it means, for example, to be a student single mother at Marburg University.

If there is time, students could look back at the examples of topic titles given in Unit 1 and think about which ones are good and which could be improved. Later in the course, students will have the opportunity to work on clarifying their own research question for the year abroad. If they have the winter or spring break at this stage of the course, then they will also be thinking about the topic and the research question for their home ethnography. The exercise of clarifying their research question helps to focus on language, and particularly semantics, and this remains the theme of this unit.

2.3 Assignment feedback

This is the main item of this unit and ample time should be allowed. Split the students into groups according to the foreign language used. Make sure that they have their tapes in the right place and their transcriptions. If time is rather short, then the groups could work only from the transcriptions. Students can use Handout 2: *Interview Assignment feedback* to prompt the discussion. The ethical issues outlined in the background should be raised at this stage.

2.4 Ethnosemantics

Introduce students to this notion, using the background notes. It is worth explaining that, as language students, this approach may be particularly relevant even though it is quite difficult to collect and analyse data in this way. Use Handout 3 to give an example of how even a quite informal interview can be used to find out what specific words in the lexicon mean to informants and how these words are related to other words in the same semantic field.

2.5 Ethnosemantic interviewing

Use the background notes to explain Agar's notions of rich words and the frame elicitation technique. Then use Handout 4 to practise this technique using the rich word 'ordinary'. This is one of the keywords used by Raymond Williams to illuminate the cultural models of British society. The mass observation study based at Sussex University has also explored the use of the phrase 'ordinary people' in 'ordinary' (!) people's lives. Then think about some key or rich words in the foreign language you feel most comfortable with.

2.6 Further Practice with interviewing

This is an additional item to help students with their interviewing if time allows. It can either be done by the lecturer or one or a number of students and it involves an informant from outside the group. This may be another student or someone else.

The 'goldfish bowl' technique is used. This technique involves the ethnographer(s) and the informant acting as the 'fish' in a bowl and the rest of the group sits around the 'bowl' and observes and monitors. The same format can be used as in the task done in class in Unit 9. Half the observers monitor the interviewer and half the informant and the responses they give. Both groups should note any particular dos and don'ts to feed back later. Before the interview starts, the interviewer and the informant need to clarify what the experience is that they will be asked about. This gives student interviewers time to think about the way in which they might steer the interview.

One quite successful way of doing this exercise is for the staff member to start the interview for about 10 minutes and then hand over to different students so that each one has about five minutes. After about 20 – 25 minutes, the interview should be stopped and feedback taken along the lines of that suggested in Unit 9. It is worth spending some time on both informants' and interviewers' feelings. For example, this exercise has elicited comments such as: 'It's like a conversation – good use of 'mmms' and pauses'. Interviewers commented: 'Sometimes I felt I had to interrupt. Topics kept on getting recycled.' 'It was strange at first – asking for information as if you didn't know them'.

3. Advice and comments

Students need as much practice as possible in interviewing and if they have time to try out their ethnographic interviews again, they should be strongly encouraged to do so. The ethical issues of interviewing may lead to a broader discussion of the ethics of ethnography more generally. The ethnosemantic sections of this unit may be dealt with briefly because of a shortage of time. However, students should at least be alerted to the importance of recording informants' actual words and the need to analyse them in depth, looking out for keywords and metaphors.

Student comments

At the beginning I thought the hour was almost a waste of time but then I thought a bit deeper and I realised that we didn't search further when we did the interviews and that I had assumed that I understood exactly what they meant. For example, my informant said that she felt lonely in this country but I just assumed that she didn't know enough about living here. I should have asked her what she meant by lonely.

SECTION THREE

1. Assignment

ETHNOGRAPHIC CONVERSATIONS

The objective of this task is to continue developing your ethnographic conversation/interviewing skills.

The conversation/interview is to be done in the foreign language.

Get together with another student with the same foreign language and operate as a team, working out everything together.

Interviewing Task

Your task is to carry out an ethnographic conversation/interview with a German/Spanish/French student or other informant. The interview should last for about 20 minutes.

Purpose of the conversation/interview (Topic):

Your aim in this interview is to try and find out what it is like being a student from abroad, what it is like being a student in a foreign country. The focus should be on the cultural experience.

Identifying and Approaching a Suitable Informant

The first step is to find a German/Spanish/French student who is willing to be interviewed and to arrange a suitable venue and time. You should do this as soon as possible just in case you encounter any difficulties in finding a suitable interviewee. The same informant can only be approached by one team. Don't give up if you cannot find someone immediately. Think about where you might find them and the possible 'gatekeepers'. Persist.

Preparing for the Interview

It is essential that you think carefully about the aims of the interview beforehand and work out a checklist of items you want to raise: this will give your interview some direction. However, do not prepare fully formulated questions as it may prevent you from really listening to your informant and following up what he/she is saying.

Using a Cassette Recorder

It is important that you try out the cassette recorder beforehand, i.e. read the instructions and try it out on each other. You must be fully familiar with its operation, don't let handling the cassette recorder distract you from the interview. Check on how you can achieve a reasonable voice quality. Remember to check batteries and have a blank tape.

What to do with the recorded material

Listen to the interview and choose not more than three minutes of a passage you find interesting to transcribe. Format your transcriptions so that you can add comments later on. Divide your page into three columns, a fairly narrow column to the right and left and the central column for the transcript itself. In the left-hand column, make any comments about the content and style of the interview that you found interesting. In the right-hand column, make comments about the interview itself and any other thoughts about the event which you might wish to take up later. (Look back to the Adult Literacy interview where both types of comment were put into the one column on the right). Bring your transcription and the tape set at the point where your transcribed passage begins. If possible, put the most illuminating stretch on an OHT and be ready to discuss it in the class.

UNIT 10 – Ethnographic Conversations/Interviewing 2

HANDOUT 1 – critiquing research questions

Imagine that you are interested in doing an ethnographic project on under-16-year-old shoplifters. Look at the following questions and decide which are the two best and the four worst questions and why.

1. How do people come to engage in systematic shoplifting?
2. Do shoplifters feel the need to justify their shoplifting?
3. What are the causes of shoplifting in society?
4. How shopkeepers describe and experience the activity of shoplifting?
5. What role does advertising play in increasing or decreasing the role of shoplifting?
6. What are the effects of marrying on the practice of shoplifting?
7. To what extent are changes in the wider society responsible for the spread of shoplifting?
8. What does society think about shoplifting?
9. How do shoplifters explain why they started shoplifting?
10. Do people shoplift in order to 'escape from reality'?

Criteria for judgement

- ◆ simple, clear and concrete
- ◆ focuses on human experience
- ◆ is doable as an ethnographic study with PO and ethnographic conversations and interviewing
- ◆ has key words which are precise
- ◆ has concepts behind the words with which you could work and are connected to other linked concepts, e.g. What are the concepts and associations that lie behind the word 'justify'?

(Based on Wengraf)

UNIT 10 – Ethnographic Conversations/Interviewing 2

HANDOUT 2 – interview assignment feedback

Play back your transcribed section. Then use the following questions to guide your discussion:

The Interview

1. Who did you interview?
2. Any access problems? How were they solved?
3. How did you choose your informant?
4. Did you have a good informant (refer to the criteria)?
5. Where and when did you interview your informant? Did the setting have any particular effects on the interview?

Goal

6. What were you trying to do?
7. What headings emerged?
8. What headings did NOT emerge (against expectations)?

Transcribed Section

9. Why did you choose this section to transcribe?
10. What kind of data preceded this?
11. What would you say was the content of this section?
12. How could you interrogate this piece of data further?
13. What further data would you want to collect on this theme?
14. What kind of research question could you formulate from this section of the data?

Interview Techniques

15. How did you think the interview went?
16. What difficulties did you encounter?
17. In what ways could you have made it go (even) better?
18. Were the questions/prompts you used appropriate?
19. Did you listen well? Does this show?
20. Did you meet the criteria of a good ethnographic conversation/interview?

UNIT 10 – Ethnographic Conversations/Interviewing 2

HANDOUT 3 – ethnosemantics

The following is an example from Agar's study of drug addicts:

I: So then he grabbed his works and split, man

E: What are works?

I: Works, you know, gimmicks, outfit [is the same as]. You use them to shoot dope [used for]

E: Are there different kinds of works? [kind of]

I: Sure, there's a regular rig and then there's a gun (If the ethnographer did not know what a gun was then they would need to find out that it is a 'regulation hypodermic syringe')

E: What are works made of [part of]?

I: An eyedropper, the bulb from a baby pacifier, a spike and a thread or paper for a tight fit

(Agar 1980: 98)

UNIT 10 – Ethnographic Conversations/Interviewing 2

HANDOUT 4 – ethnosemantics: looking at 'rich' words

Ordinary People

The following are statements with empty slots in them. Think of an immediate phrase or set of words to fill the slot:

1.is the sort of paper ordinary people read.
2. Since it is a programme aimed at ordinary people
3. Ordinary people don't care much about
4. If you asked ordinary people about politics
5. Ordinary people just get on with
6. I think of myself as an ordinary person and
7. Wherever you find ordinary people you'll find
8. We shouldn't ignore the views of ordinary people but

(NB You could of course give these statements orally and either tape record or jot down the answers).

Compare what you have written down. See if you can group the responses together in any way. What sort of concepts emerge from the phrase 'ordinary people'?

Other possible keywords:

Consumer
Private
Standards
Image