Elements in Sociolinguistics
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CONVERSATIONS
WITH STRANGERS

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DOI: 10.1017/9781009340922
First published online: July 2023

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Abstract: This Element documents the evolution of a research program that began in the early 1960s with the author’s first investigation of language change on Martha’s Vineyard. It traces the development of what has become the basic framework for studying language variation and change. Interviews with strangers are the backbone of this research: the ten American English speakers appearing here were all strangers to the interviewer at the time. They were selected as among the most memorable, from thousands of interviews across six decades. The speakers express their ideas and concerns in the language of everyday life, dealing with their way of earning a living, getting along with neighbors, raising a family – all matters in which their language serves them well. These people speak for themselves. And you will hear their voices. What they have to say is a monument to the richness and variety of the American vernacular, offering a tour of the studies that have built the field of sociolinguistics.

Keywords: sociolinguistics, Labov, dialect, speech style, recording

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ISBNs: 9781009340939 (PB), 9781009340922 (OC)
ISSNs: 2754-5539 (online), 2754-5520 (print)
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