Participants, purpose, and process: An interactive workshop on data collection in variationist sociolinguistics

This interactive workshop examines methodological issues that may arise during data collection in variationist sociolinguistic research and methodological adaptations used to address them. Authors will provide an overview of key points and lead critical discussion, and participants will discuss their own opportunities, successes, and challenges related to sociolinguistic data collection. Graduate students, early-career scholars, or those using a new methodology in their research may find this workshop especially useful.

Although variationist sociolinguistic research has often employed multiple methods of data collection, the “sociolinguistic interview” remains a primary research tool (Labov 1972). This type of interview is a purpose-built solution to a persisting set of problems related to the observer’s paradox – how to access participants’ vernacular language when the interview context, participants, and even research questions often trend the other way. In Part 1 of the workshop, we focus on data collection concerns and underlying assumptions surrounding the sociolinguistic interview, including:

- that researchers are most interested in variation between stigmatized and standard forms;
- that non-standard speakers behave unnaturally when recorded;
- that researchers are outsiders in a community, and are unfamiliar with the workings of the community;
- that non-linguists rarely talk about language; and,
- that discussing language naturally leads to guarded, non-vernacular speech.

Similar concerns over the relationship between data collectors and research participants also arise in other methods of data collection in variationist sociolinguistics. Accordingly, some sociolinguists have re-imagined the interview process in ways that mitigate concerns surrounding the collection of language data and/or used other methodological approaches to adapt to social and technological changes. In Part 2 of the workshop, we discuss some of these adaptations, including:

- ethnographic interviews that obtain language data informed by relatively long-term participant observation within a community (e.g., Eckert 1989, Hymes 1974, Mendoza-Denton 2008)
- interviews that differ by structure, as when community members are interviewers, participant-recorders, or otherwise co-participants (e.g., Gumperz 1982, Kretzschmar et al. 2007, Macaulay 2006, Zepeda and Hill 1998)
- interviews that differ by topic, as when data are collected for non-language oriented purposes, whether research driven or not (e.g., Harrington 2006, Mallinson and Kendall 2009, Van de Velde 2002)
- speaker-generated online data produced in contexts where linguists have not been involved (e.g., Angermeyer et al. 1998, Childs and Mallinson 2006, Kendall and Van Herk forthcoming, Van Herk 2004)
Each of these methodological approaches relates in different ways to key variationist concerns surrounding attention paid to speech; style, register, and genre of language data; and comparability of language data collected using different procedures. Technological advances in instruments of data collection and analysis may also affect the quality, type, and scope of language data that sociolinguists can collect and the attitudes and participation of interviewees, who may be increasingly comfortable with technology, access to media, and self-publication and self-revelation. Authors and attendees will discuss the strengths and limitations of these and other approaches to data collection, in comparison to the sociolinguistic interview and in relation to research design and data analysis procedures in variationist sociolinguistics.

References


Mallinson, Christine, and Tyler Kendall. 2009. ‘The way I can speak for myself’: The social and linguistic context of counseling interviews with African American adolescent


