

Towards Best Practices in Sociophonetics (2010)

Organizers and discussion leaders:

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Our goal in this workshop is to continue the discussion of best practices in sociophonetics begun at NWAV33. As the number of researchers interested in engaging in this interdisciplinary area of study continues to grow, it is crucial that we make the ever-expanding range of knowledge necessary to do high quality work in sociophonetics easily available. We are cognizant of the fact that it may be difficult for researchers at institutions with fewer financial and collegial resources to keep up with technical and theoretical advances in recording technology, elicitation techniques, articulatory and acoustic phonetics, speech perception, as well as theoretical advances in social structure and linguistic theory. This annual workshop helps to provide quick access to methodological, technical, and procedural information from the best labs, so the attendees can carry out similar reliable work at their own institutions.

This year the workshop focuses on two methodological issues: the digital tools which make an increasingly robust sociolinguistic methodology possible, and the acoustic analysis of prosodic variation. Because the best practices workshops are also meant to give the participants/attendees a forum to discuss methodological issues related to any important theoretical questions in sociophonetics, we always include a long question and answer session and a few minutes planning time for next year's workshop.

The workshop will have the following segments:

1. Short introduction (Presenter: Marianna Di Paolo) (3 min.)
2. Robust, Digital, Empirical, Reproducible Sociolinguistic Methodology (Presenter: Christopher Cieri and Stephanie Strassel, LDC)

3. Prosodic variation (Presenters: Malcah Yaeger-Dror and Zsuzsanna Fagyal, UIUC)
4. Q&A (Discussion leaders: Marianna Di Paolo and Malcah Yaeger-Dror)
5. Planning for next time (Coordinator: Marianna Di Paolo)

Abstracts of the Two Methodological Issues of Focus

Robust, Digital, Empirical, Reproducible Sociolinguistic Methodology

Christopher Cieri and Stephanie Strassel

Although today's computing and human language technologies create the possibility of a robust, digital, reproducible sociolinguistic methodology, many researchers and groups still fall short of that potential.

A comprehensive methodology for the quantitative analysis of variation includes digital data collection along with a time-aligned transcription that serves as an index to the speech permitting automated search for variables of interest, possibly aided by pronouncing dictionaries and/or letter-to-sound rules. This infrastructure permits automation of some coding decisions. The remainder of the coding, still done by humans, requires explicit description of coding practice in order to permit reuse, replication, and comparison across research groups, but even within them and even by the same researcher over time. The support of databases permits the tracking of decisions back to the original recordings. Publicly accessible data, tools and specifications reduce the barriers to entry for all, but especially for new researchers.

Much (not all!) of this methodology is now available to the average researcher. This workshop will elaborate the methodology, and describe and demonstrate options for instantiating it on different computer platforms currently in use. In particular, we will discuss options for high quality sound capture, tools for time aligned transcription and search and options for analysis using sample data from the Linguistic Data Consortium.

Prosodic variation

Malcah Yaeger-Dror and Zsuzsanna Fagyal

Until recently, the systematic sociophonetic-variationist analysis of prosody was almost impossible due to the difficulty of isolating appropriate acoustic parameters for analysis. We will review methods for analysis of prosodic variation which use acoustic analytic tools at our disposal that are now adequate to permit a thorough comparative analysis. The prosody segment of the workshop this year will be limited to a discussion of rhythm.

In this segment of the workshop we will review the existing rhythm metrics --i.e. quantitative methods for calculating rhyme-type distinctions between languages and dialects. These quantitative tools require accurate measurement of segmental duration. We will review how to determine accurate points of measurement for such rhythm studies, and discuss what they can tell us about speakers who maintain a specific rhythm pattern. e.g, we will review the literature which used this method to try to isolate features of AAE and Jamaican English, and their differences from each other and from Southern koiné vernaculars.

We will also offer a short introduction to pitch and duration manipulations that can be used to stretch segments and modify pitch contours for creating and carrying out perception experiments on both rhythmic and intonational distinctions which have been discovered.