Fieldwork for studies of phonological variation

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ABSTRACT

This session discusses fieldwork strategies developed mainly for dialectological and sociolinguistic research on varieties of English. Issues in sampling the community and the language are explored. Adaptations of traditional methods for work with children are also outlined. Finally, a brief assessment is made of the implications of these types of fieldwork for linguistic phonetics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Linguistic fieldwork is a means to an end. It is undertaken after prior definition of the aims of linguistic research. These aims may be purely descriptive, as in the case of recording endangered languages. More often, however, descriptions of linguistic phenomena also serve a wider purpose: they provide evidence for theoretical debate (e.g. in phonology or sociolinguistics), and/or yield reference material for practical applications of linguistics (e.g. in lexicography or speech therapy). Different research goals demand different types of data, and appropriate fieldwork strategies must be adopted to ensure adequate data are collected. Careful planning of fieldwork is therefore vital for the success of the research programme.

Any fieldwork design involves a series of key decisions about how to sample the community, and how to sample the language. In sections 2 to 5 I discuss some of the main issues in sampling. In section 6 I offer comments on fieldwork with children, to outline some of the problems of adapting established methods to new situations, and also to illustrate some solutions. For space reasons I limit my discussion mainly to work carried out on variation in English dialects. Such work falls into two main categories: (i) traditional dialectology, and (ii) variationist sociolinguistics. Examples from each will be cited. A detailed account of many of the issues is provided in [17].

2. DEFINING THE COMMUNITY

Delimiting the community of interest may seem straightforward. Sociolinguistic studies often explicitly target particular cities (e.g. [3]). Dialectological projects have been even more ambitious, as testified by the Survey of English Dialects (SED) [18]. However, difficulties may arise, such as whether to exclude particular types of speaker from the community. For example, Labov chose not to include immigrants in his New York study [11].

3. SOCIAL PARAMETERS

It is not usually possible to collect data from all members of a community. A subset must therefore be drawn, and must include representatives of those categories of speaker relevant to the research questions. In dialectology a main research goal has been the recording of conservative forms. Fieldwork has therefore sought to recruit subjects who might be the best guardians of older variants. In the case of the SED, the majority of such subjects were NORMs (non-mobile older rural males). Other speaker groups were underrepresented [18]. By contrast, sociolinguists have primarily been interested in variation within urban communities. Fieldwork designs have thus included speakers of both sexes, and a range of ages, social backgrounds, and/or ethnic groups.

All social parameters require careful definition and interpretation, often with respect to the specific community of interest [17]. I now turn to the parameters most commonly investigated, age, 'class' and sex.

3.1 Age

Chronological age has little relevance in sociolinguistics. Instead, culture-specific LIFE STAGES [6] may have a particular impact on language use, and fieldwork designs should therefore target carefully chosen age groups. In western cultures it has been repeatedly shown that language use differs markedly in childhood versus adolescence versus adulthood [6], while in a study of Palestinian Arabic [1] groups were defined with respect to major historical events such as waves of mass migration.

APPARENT TIME studies, where different age cohorts are recorded, may offer information about linguistic change if older and younger speakers show significant differences in performance. REAL TIME studies, involving longitudinal monitoring of individuals [15] or visits at regular intervals to the fieldwork site [21] are perhaps even more valuable in this regard. They are, however, much more time consuming and difficult to organise successfully.

3.2 Socio-economic background

Socio-economic background, often abbreviated as 'class', is one of the most important social influences on language use in western society. Unfortunately, class is notoriously difficult to quantify and interpret [20]. Recent studies have tended to avoid complex social class indices in favour of vaguer definitions, and a selection of disparate communities in a given location. One such example is the

Newcastle and Derby study [3, 22]. In each city two distinct neighbourhoods were chosen on the basis of census data and local knowledge to reflect differences in schooling, housing, work, and general life-style.

Our understanding of the relationship between language and social background has been further enhanced by social network studies [16]. Rather than treating social groups as homogenous, network studies investigate the correlation of linguistic features and the degree of integration of particular individuals in the larger group. Some fieldwork designs are therefore tailored to investigate the relationships between individuals in the community.

3.3 Sex and gender

Many studies have shown that males and females within a community exploit linguistic resources differently. It is therefore the norm to include both sexes in a fieldwork design. However, the social construct of gender, rather than the biological property of sex, may be more relevant in explaining linguistic variation. In a study of teenagers in Detroit, Eckert [7] found that the most marked variation occurred between different groups of girls, outweighing male/female distinctions. Proper assessment of gender roles may involve extensive fieldwork, and detailed sociological observation of informants.

4. SAMPLE SIZE

There are no fixed rules about the number of speakers to record. Some dialectological surveys, including the SED, relied mainly on one informant per location. Small speaker samples are clearly something of a necessity when large geographical areas are to be catered for. However, they result in rather limited opportunities to assess dialect-internal variation, and limit the extent of generalisation one can make. They furthermore run the risk of failing to capture the 'typical' dialect if the chosen speaker(s) display any sort of idiosyncrasies. (Similar comments can be made about the small samples used for investigating un(der)researched languages, and for the judgement-based methods typical in generative linguistics.)

Sociolinguistic studies tend to be characterised by larger samples, although these may still be much smaller than the samples made possible in corpus linguistics, or those gathered elsewhere in the social sciences. The largest samples, amounting to several hundred speakers, are found in the case of RAPID ANONYMOUS SURVEYS such as TELSUR [24]. A sample of four speakers per cell of the design is taken as the usual minimum. This was the criterion adhered to in [3, 22], as illustrated in Table 1. Note that the three social parameters in the design result in eight cells, and with four speakers per cell this yields 32 speakers. Adding other social parameters to the design can lead to exponential growth of the overall sample. Care must therefore be taken to limit the scope of the study, as the fieldwork design may quickly become unwieldy.

Researchers may face logistical problems in gaining access to the community. In Belfast in the 1970s, for example, the political and social problems of that time meant that it was crucial for the fieldworker to be a woman [16]. Similarly, cultural conventions may prevent a male fieldworker from interviewing adult women outside his immediate family [1].

working class (WC)				middle class (MC)			
younger		older		younger		older	
male	fem.	male	fem.	male	fem.	male	fem.
4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4

Table 1. Fieldwork sample design used in [3, 22].

5. SAMPLING THE LANGUAGE

Once a speaker sample has been settled upon, decisions must be made about the forms of the language to elicit, and how best to elicit them. The research aims of dialectology have included tracking the geographical distribution of lexical items and pronunciations. Fieldwork has therefore often been based on word-lists and interview questions designed to elicit specific lexical variants.

In sociolinguistics on the other hand, the most highly valued form of data is the VERNACULAR, that is, unmonitored everyday speech. The quest for the vernacular presents the researcher with what has been called the OBSERVER'S PARADOX: 'we want to observe how people speak when they are not being observed' [17, p. 49]. Various strategies have been developed to circumvent the paradox by ensuring that self-monitoring of speech is minimised. These include the use of questions from the interviewer which put the informant at ease and enable them to engage in fluent discourse [17, ch. 3]. Different questions may work for different subjects, of course. It is therefore vital that an interviewer quickly develops sensitivity to the informant's fields of interest, and remains flexible enough to allow the topics of conversation to shift in response to the informant's needs.

Most fieldworkers prepare a set of general discussion topics in advance of the recording. In one recent project [14] informants were given informal and visually stimulating questionnaires about language use in advance of the recording sessions. Interviews were then structured around the responses given by the informants. The subjects in this study were interviewed in pairs or groups, which again aids in producing a relaxed atmosphere. In [3, 22] we recorded people in self-selected pairs, encouraging them to converse with each other and bypassing the interviewer as far as possible. It may be also be helpful to position recording equipment so that it is not in the informant's immediate field of vision, although this is not always possible. (Covert recording, of course, conflicts with generally accepted ethical guidelines [17, p. 79].)

Most sociolinguistic studies have sought to compare the characteristics of vernacular interaction with those of

more formal styles. Some early studies attempted to construct fairly complex style continua [11]. It is now more common to opt for a small number of *distinct* styles in order to observe stylistic shifts in usage: the vernacular can be contrasted with a more formal register elicited in a formal interview or reading task [3, 22, 25].

How much data to record depends on many factors, including, perhaps most importantly, informant patience. Around 45 minutes of vernacular interaction is usually manageable, and is likely to yield enough data to allow investigation of most segmental sociolinguistic variables. Suprasegmentals need more controlled elicitation [25]. Studies such as TELSUR [24], which prioritise large numbers of speakers, compensate by eliciting relatively little data (perhaps only a few words) from each of them. Again, research aims must drive fieldwork decisions.

Finally, judicious choice of recording equipment is essential for the success of the fieldwork. See [12, 19] for a thorough discussion of recording equipment.

6. FIELDWORK WITH CHILDREN

Work with children inevitably demands modifications to the methods employed for work with adults. First and foremost it is often difficult to gain access to child subjects. This is increasingly the case in some parts of the UK, for example, where vetting procedures for researchers recruiting children through schools or nurseries have become extremely stringent. The solution we found to this problem in a recent study of children in Newcastle [5] was to recruit professional speech and language therapists (SLTs) as fieldworkers. The SLTs had prior clearance for work with children, and had extensive contacts in local nurseries. They were also excellent fieldworkers thanks to their experience in child-centred work. The involvement of SLTs in the project brought benefits not only to the academic research but also to the SLT community: the corpus of data collected from normally-developing children forms an excellent reference tool for therapists.

Child projects often compare the speech performance of boys and girls, as well as different age groups [5, 9, 10]. Practical problems in recruiting subjects may render it difficult to incorporate many other social dimensions in the fieldwork design. Few significant gender-based differences have been found with children under about 3 years of age, although speech from adults to children has been shown to vary according to the gender of both adult and child, including children as young as two years [5]. Age selection is particularly difficult for child subjects, and some form of linguistic development measure may be more useful for grouping children than chronological age. Children under two are generally too immature linguistically for anything more than single word elicitation. At the onset of entry into nursery or school, the influence of the peer group begins to overtake that of caregivers, the linguistic reflexes of which may be extensive, and even dramatic [9]. Because of the rapid changes typical of children's language use, studies of children are often longitudinal in design. It is common, however, to face difficulties in retaining subjects over long periods of time. Therefore, if longitudinal studies are planned, it is wise initially to recruit a larger number of subjects than the research programme needs, to cater for eventual loss of some subjects from the fieldwork [5].

Elicitation of data from children requires different strategies from those practised on adults. Young children in particular are unlikely to produce long spontaneous discourse, while reading tasks are not appropriate until literacy is established (which itself varies markedly across individuals). Elicitation therefore often centres on play-based activities such as picture books and games. The Newcastle fieldwork [5] used both, and included a bag of toys carefully chosen to encourage naming. Popular toys such as the *Teletubbies* proved an unqualified success.

Additional problems are faced by researchers working with multilingual informants, or in cross-linguistic research. It is vital that data drawn from each language are comparable. To ensure comparability of material in her study of bilingual children, Khattab [10] compiled picture books based around common activities. Specific books were developed for each language under investigation (English and Arabic), to elicit comparable phones in comparable phonological contexts. Care must also be taken to control for LANGUAGE MODE [8] when dealing with bilinguals. Multiple recording sessions with different elicitation strategies may be required, to ensure the dominance of one language over the other. Further sessions may be needed if code-switching is one of the research issues. Encouraging informants into specific modes is a tricky task, particularly in the case of children. In Khattab's study [10] the bilingual children, who were English-dominant, recognised Khattab as a fluent English speaker and insisted on speaking only English to her. To gain access to the children's Arabic and code-switching modes she had to train the children's monolingual Arabic-speaking mothers to perform fieldwork.

Decisions about recording equipment to be used with children should take special account of the curiosity of child subjects: it needs to be robust to cope with inquisitive fingers! In [5] children wore radio lapel microphones to enable them to move freely during the recording sessions. Radio mics record onto separate channels, and are therefore particularly useful where more than one subject is being recorded simultaneously.

The problem still remains in all child work, however, that children are (even) less predictable than adults. Many a fieldwork session has failed through the child having a tantrum, or showing an obsession with the toybag rather than the toys. It's all part of the fun.

7. CONCLUSION

I have attempted to provide a summary of the main stages involved in designing fieldwork for studies of variation in a community. In practice, each decision affects the others

that can be made. As a result, a part of the art is to make prudent compromises in order to render the final design workable given the time and resources available. For example, if the community is large, many informants may be needed to produce adequate data to represent the community. The logistical demands of broad community coverage may therefore force a trade-off with respect to how much language is sampled from each informant.

My final comments concern the potential role in linguistic phonetics of the kinds of fieldwork I have described. Sociolinguistic interests and methods are in some respects diametrically opposed to those typically employed in linguistic phonetics. Phonetic fieldwork has often been satisfied with a one-to-one approach, as Peter Ladefoged points out in his contribution to this symposium. Much of what we know about phonetics and phonology in general has been developed through analysis of very carefully controlled materials in laboratory conditions, usually with few subjects. Moreover, it is almost always the case that data are limited to standard language varieties and canonical speech forms. Recent interests, however, have begun to show that natural speech offers a rich and at times highly challenging testing ground for phonological and phonetic theory [2, 3, 4, 13, 23]. That testing ground is opened up by taking on board some of the insights from sociolinguistics, and viewing variation not as 'noise' but as a universal design feature of language.

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