Research Methods in Sociolinguistics

A Practical Guide

Edited by Janet Holmes
and Kirk Hazen

WILEY Blackwell

Research Methods in Sociolinguistics

Guides to Research Methods in Language and Linguistics

Series Editor: Li Wei, Birkbeck College, University of London

The science of language encompasses a truly interdisciplinary field of research, with a wide range of focuses, approaches, and objectives. While linguistics has its own traditional approaches, a variety of other intellectual disciplines have contributed methodological perspectives that enrich the field as a whole. As a result, linguistics now draws on state-of-the-art work from such fields as psychology, computer science, biology, neuroscience and cognitive science, sociology, music, philosophy, and anthropology.

   The interdisciplinary nature of the field presents both challenges and opportunities to students who must understand a variety of evolving research skills and methods. The *Guides to Research Methods in Language and Linguistics* addresses these skills in a systematic way for advanced students and beginning researchers in language science. The books in this series focus especially on the relationships between theory, methods, and data – the understanding of which is fundamental to the successful completion of research projects and the advancement of knowledge.

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Jannis Androutsopoulos is Professor in German and Media Linguistics at the University of Hamburg. His research interests are in sociolinguistics and media discourse studies. He has written extensively on linguistic variability and style, multilingualism and code-switching, and media discourse and diversity. He is co-editor of the volume *Orthography as Social Action: Scripts, Spelling, Identity and Power* (2012) and editor of the Special Issue *Language and Society in Cinematic Discourse* (*Multilingua* 31:2, 2012). He serves on the advisory boards of the journals *language@internet*, *Pragmatics*, *Discourse Context & Media*, and *International Journal of Computer-Assisted Language Learning and Teaching*.

Paul Baker is Professor of English Language at the Department of English Language and Linguistics, Lancaster University where he researches discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, and language and identities. He has authored or co-authored 11 books including *Using Corpora in Discourse Analysis* (2006), *Sexed Texts: Language, Gender and Sexuality* (2008), and *Sociolinguistics and Corpus Linguistics* (2010). He is commissioning editor of the journal *Corpora*.

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Paul Drew is Professor of Conversation Analysis at Loughborough University, UK, having for many years taught at the University of York. His research covers the basic processes and practices of mundane social interactions, as well as research in more applied settings, including legal, social welfare, and especially medical settings, in which he currently has a number of projects including seizure and memory clinics. He is co-editor (with John Gumperz and others) of the Cambridge University Press series *Interactional Linguistics*. His recent publications include a four-volume collection, co-edited with John Heritage, *Contemporary Studies in Conversation Analysis* (SAGE, 2013).

Gregory R. Guy has been Professor of Linguistics at New York University since 2001, following previous appointments at Sydney, Cornell, Stanford, and York. His research interests include language variation and change, language and social class, and theoretical models of linguistic variation. He has done original sociolinguistic research in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, the Dominican Republic, New Zealand, and the United States. He is the co-author of *Sociolingüística Quantitativa* (Parábola, 2007), and the lead editor of *Towards a Social Science of Language* (John Benjamins, 1996), and has published in such journals as *Language*, *Language Variation and Change*, *Diachronica*, and *American Speech*.

As Professor of Linguistics at West Virginia University, **Kirk Hazen** researches language variation and change in American English, primarily writing about Southern US varieties and English in Appalachia. He promotes sociolinguistic goals by presenting dialect diversity programs to numerous communities. Since founding the West Virginia Dialect Project in 1998, he has secured funding from state and federal sources (NSF and NEH) for linguistic research and outreach. His publications include articles in *Language Variation and Change*, *Language*, *English World-Wide*, and *American Speech*. He has written a forthcoming book entitled *An Introduction to Language*, designed for non-linguistic majors and published by Wiley-Blackwell.

Michol Hoffman is Associate Professor in the Department of Languages, Literature, and Linguistics at York University in Toronto. As a sociolinguist, she is interested in ethnicity, identity, language and dialect contact, language attitudes, historical linguistics, phonetics, and phonology. Her recent work focuses on variation and change in Spanish and English in Toronto, and her publications include articles in *Language Variation and Change*, *American Speech*, and the *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*.

Janet Holmes is Professor of Linguistics at Victoria University of Wellington where she directs the Language in the Workplace Project and teaches sociolinguistics at undergraduate and postgraduate level. She has published on a wide range of topics including New Zealand English, language and gender, sexist language, pragmatic particles, compliments and apologies, and most recently on aspects of workplace discourse. Her most recent books are the 4th edition of the *Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (Pearson, 2013), *Gendered Talk at Work* (Blackwell, 2006), and *Leadership, Discourse, and Ethnicity* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

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Carmel O'Shannessy is Assistant Professor in Linguistics at the University of Michigan. She documents Light Warlpiri, a newly emerged mixed language spoken in a Warlpiri community in northern Australia, focusing on the role of children in the development and stabilization of the new code. She approaches her study of the children's continuing multilingualism using a variety of methods, including ethnography, naturalistic and elicited production, and experiments. Key publications include papers on code-switching in *Linguistics*, on grammatical patterns in multilingual acquisition in the *Journal of Child Language*, and on language variation in a Warlpiri community in a recent edited collection.

Erik Schleef is Lecturer in English Sociolinguistics at the University of Manchester, UK. His research focuses on discourse, phonetic and phonological variation and change in dialects of the British Isles, the acquisition of variation, sociolinguistics and perception, and language and gender in educational settings. He has recently published the Routledge *Sociolinguistics Reader* with Miriam Meyerhoff, and he is co-editor of the *Edinburgh Textbooks in Applied Linguistics*.

Erik R. Thomas is a Professor of Linguistics at North Carolina State University, where he co-directs the linguistics program and teaches a variety of linguistics courses. He has published on various aspects of sociophonetics, ethnic dialects, and dialect geography. He is author or editor of four books, including *Sociophonetics:*

An Introduction (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) and, with Malcah Yaeger-Dror, *African American English Speakers and Their Participation in Local Sound Changes: A Comparative Study* (Duke University Press, 2010).

Kevin Watson is a Lecturer in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, where he teaches sociolinguistics and sociophonetics at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. He has research interests in language variation and change, with a particular focus on the accents of northwest England and varieties of English spoken in New Zealand. He is the current editor of the *New Zealand English Journal*.

Acknowledgments

This book has been great fun to produce, largely due to the enthusiasm and cooperation of all those who have contributed in a variety of ways. We wish here to express our appreciation to them all.

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Symbols for Vowels Used in This Volume

Keyword	Vowel	Phonetic transcription
FLEECE	i	[bi]
KIT	ɪ	[bɪt]
GOOSE	u	[bu]
FOOT	ʊ	[bʊk]
FACE	e, eɪ	[bet]
DRESS	ɛ	[bɛt]
COMMA	ə	[bət]
GOAT	o	[bot]
THOUGHT	ɔ	[bɔt]
BATH	æ	[bæt]
LOT	a	[bat]
PRICE	aɪ	[baɪ]
CHOICE	ɔɪ	[bɔɪ]
MOUTH	aʊ	[haʊs]

Articulatory Position of Vowels Used in This Volume
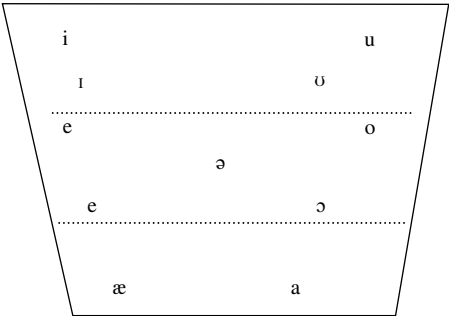
Introduction

Janet Holmes and Kirk Hazen

We developed this book to help students conduct high-quality sociolinguistic research. It is a book about sociolinguistic methodology, and it encompasses a wide range of methodologies. The goal of each chapter is to provide students with a solid understanding of how to conduct different kinds of sociolinguistic research. Before we describe how we have organized the book, and what is covered, a few words about the scope of current sociolinguistic research may be helpful.

The study of linguistics itself is a young field, with its modern roots dating back to about 1850. The term *sociolinguistics* is even younger, and the collection of activities associated with it have been pulled together as an academic field only in recent decades. Many different research goals and different methodologies can be found under the label "sociolinguistics." Some sociolinguistic research relies on experimental and quantitative data, with those researchers using statistical tests on abstracted data. Other sociolinguistic research adopts a more sociological or anthropological approach, conducting qualitative analysis while striving for ecological validity. Across this breadth of research, the authors and editors of this book have striven to connect their different areas of research through clearly explained methodologies. As indicated by the wide scope of this book's research interests, the field of sociolinguistics is steadily maturing and developing disciplinary strengths from the rich soils of many diverse academic fields.

How the Book Is Organized

We have organized the book into two major sections. The first section focuses mainly on identifying the different types of data used in sociolinguistic research, and explains how to collect them. The second section demonstrates the many different ways in which sociolinguistic data can be analyzed. The second section is further divided into (i) chapters which examine what a sociolinguistic approach can tell us about the way language is structured, and (ii) chapters which consider what language can tell us about the way people use language to create their social identities in society. As Kirk Hazen describes in the first chapter, this latter division reflects a well-established difference in focus which can be traced back to the birth of sociolinguistics as a distinct discipline in the 1960s. Labov's linguistic research began by grouping people into social categories and then examining the linguistic features in the speech of different social groups. He searched for patterns in the linguistic and social heterogeneity. Dell Hymes, on the other hand, began by identifying languages and examined who used them for what purposes and in what kinds of sociocultural contexts. While there is inevitably some overlap in the methods, the writers of each chapter have oriented their discussion in one of these two directions.

The chapters are mainly aimed at budding sociolinguists and their teachers. In general, the authors do not assume familiarity with sociolinguistics, although there is much here that will be valuable to more senior students and even experienced researchers. Some chapters are more technical than others, and some assume a greater familiarity with linguistics terminology than others: for example, Erik Thomas's discussion of acoustic analysis assumes a sound knowledge of phonetics. Another distinction between the chapters is the material used for exemplification. Researchers tend to draw on material from the regions most familiar to them, and this familiarity allows them to authoritatively account for the social context. Thus the book includes illustrative material from the very wide range of geographical regions from which our contributors hail (nine countries on four continents).

Summary of the Content of the Different Chapters

The first chapter sets the historical scene for the rest of the book. Kirk Hazen's chapter explains how different kinds of research questions lead researchers in different directions to find answers which focus more on linguistic features or more on social identity. Both areas of study serve to further the goals of sociolinguistics, as he points out, but each researcher needs to choose which aspect of sociolinguistics they wish to focus on – the study of language or the study of society.

The four chapters that follow comprise the section of the book which deals with collecting different types of data. Between them, the four authors cover the most common methods of data collection in sociolinguistic research.

In Chapter 2, Michol Hoffman describes in detail what is involved in undertaking sociolinguistic fieldwork, from project conception and design, through preliminary

reconnaissance about and within communities, to ethnographic fieldwork methods, including the challenge of conducting successful interviews. While offering practical advice, she illustrates with examples from classic and recent studies. Dealing with one of the most widely used and important methods of sociolinguistic data collection, Hoffman's advice should assist any student who wants to conduct sociolinguistic interviews.

Erik Schleef describes in Chapter 3 how to construct and administer a questionnaire. Using examples from a number of relevant sociolinguistic studies, he describes the importance of careful preparation, discusses how to write good questions, and provides an overview of the main question types. He exemplifies the standard structure of successful questionnaires and concludes with advice on testing and administering a questionnaire.

In Chapter 4, Katie Drager leads students through experimental design in sociolinguistics, a rapidly growing area. She notes that a range of different experimental designs are available, depending on the sociolinguistic issue being researched. Her chapter provides a step-by-step guide to two of these: a matched-guise task, which can be used to investigate the social characteristics attributed to people who speak different varieties, and an identification task, which can be used to determine the degree to which expectations about a speaker affect how their speech is processed. She usefully outlines the advantages and disadvantages of different methodological decisions in the experimental process.

Chapter 5, the last chapter in this section, extends the definition of what counts as a research site and as appropriate data. Jannis Androutsopoulos helps readers explore data collection in the areas of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and linguistic landscapes (LL). Covering a wide range of both quantitative and qualitative data collection procedures, he illustrates CMC with text-based interpersonal communication via digital media, including e-mails, texts, social network sites, and discussion forums. Similarly, he illustrates LL research with data on language use in public space and data from the owners, creators, and consumers of such linguistic landscapes.

The next section of the book explores methods of analysis, and the first part of this section takes a more linguistic focus. Chapter 6 opens with Terttu Nevalainen writing on sociohistorical analysis. Her chapter provides background, tools, and ideas for the study of historical topics. She evaluates the advantages and disadvantages of engaging with historical data by looking at how language change can be observed in real time. Her case studies represent both variationist and sociopragmatic approaches.

Paul Baker provides a succinct description and evaluation of the benefits of corpus analysis in Chapter 7. He describes how advances in computer software make it possible to pursue new research issues, identify unexpected patterns, and confirm hypotheses. In the chapter, he describes some of the main analytical techniques and outlines the basic principles behind building corpora. He also illustrates the sorts of research questions most appropriate to this method and demonstrates its potential with a small study comparing age differences in language use.

In Chapter 8, Erik Thomas describes how to go about sociophonetic analysis. Sociophonetic analysis is an essential method for any sociolinguist working with sound variation. It does involve technical details, but Thomas's chapter leads readers through some of the most foundational techniques in a straightforward fashion. In

the chapter, he also explains basic terms like *formants*, provides advice on how to avoid common sources of measurement errors, and points toward other readings for additional techniques. The chapter provides a solid starting point for any researcher conducting a sociophonetic analysis.

In Chapter 9, Paul Kerswill and Kevin Watson discuss phonological concerns when analyzing variation in sound. Covering a range of different phonological variables (e.g., consonantal/vocalic, systemic/allophonic) and different methodologies from both production and perception studies, they illustrate with case studies how the phonological system constrains the variation of linguistic features.

In Chapter 10, changing linguistic levels, Julia Davydova describes procedures for conducting sociolinguistic analysis on morphosyntactic variation. She explains how to identify potential influencing factors, the effects of other linguistic levels, and the methodological choices facing researchers of morphological variation. She also provides advice on considering diachronic variation and the nature of the language's lexicon. To help the reader, Davydova delivers examples from different languages to illustrate the range of morphosyntactic variation.

Michael Adams describes how sociolinguistic analysis can illuminate lexical studies in Chapter 11. From a social perspective, words are often informative markers of linguistic identity, and may also provide interesting clues to immigration, settlement patterns, and intergroup contact. Adams discusses ways of collecting lexical evidence, including observation, surveys, questionnaires, and text analysis. He also illustrates ways of representing sociolinguistically interesting data, such as mapping. Additionally, this chapter discusses what the study of names can tell us about processes such as language change, and accommodation or resistance to pressures from other social groups.

Chapter 12 illustrates the value of discourse analysis in examining social interaction. Janet Holmes first describes a number of theoretical frameworks, and then takes a step-by-step approach to analyzing spoken discourse, from developing research questions through data collection to data analysis. Using workplace humor for exemplification, she illustrates the value of both qualitative and quantitative approaches to the analysis of discourse, presenting these as usefully complementary.

Chapter 13 is the last chapter in this section. In it, Gregory Guy provides a clear account of what statistics has to offer the sociolinguist and demonstrates why quantitative analysis remains an important component of sociolinguistics. He emphasizes that speakers and speaker groups do not differ categorically; they differ in the frequency with which they use certain linguistic variables. This chapter illustrates for readers why such phenomena require quantitative and statistical techniques. Guy explains some of the most relevant methods commonly used in sociolinguistic work.

The final section of the book begins with Chapter 14 and focuses on the sociocultural information that sociolinguistic analysis can provide. With her detailed analysis of a classroom interaction in a multilingual context, Alexandra Jaffe illustrates what an anthropological approach offers. She discusses the crucial roles of *context* and *indexicality* in linking the details of interactional practice with wider cultural, ideological, social, and political frameworks and processes. The analysis illustrates in detail the types and levels of contextual information needed to answer the question, "What is going on here?," and shows how different categories of data can be used to explore hypotheses and provide evidence for analytical claims.

In Chapter 15, while explaining its sociological roots, Paul Drew provides a valuable discussion of the features which distinguish conversation analysis (CA) from other kinds of discourse analysis. He clearly outlines the principal stages in the CA research process and then identifies and exemplifies three elements on which that process rests – social action, turn and turn design, and sequence organization. Using examples from mundane social interaction, as well as medical and other institutional interactions, this chapter illustrates the central significance of these concepts in CA.

David Britain details in Chapter 16 the ways in which dialect geography has developed as an area of sociolinguistics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As an aid to the reader, Britain presents a critique of different geographical dialectology methods. He describes examples from speech communities and languages from around the world, including Norway, the United States, and East Anglia, identifying strengths and weaknesses which can help guide a new researcher in this area. As readers consider their own dialectological research, Britain's advice should steer them smoothly through the available literature and the wisest research methods.

Robin Dodsworth's Chapter 17 will appeal to those readers struggling to define the distinguishing qualities of speech communities, social networks, and communities of practice. As she notes, these three frameworks offer complementary units of analysis. Using examples from classic sociolinguistic studies, Dodsworth argues that the speech community is useful for comparing linguistic practices across demographic categories, and the social network approach is valuable for exploring how language changes spread. The community of practice framework foregrounds the social meanings of linguistic variables in everyday social contexts. The chapter offers readers the opportunity to explore which terms will prove most useful in their own research.

Chapter 18 turns the spotlight on multilingual communities. Rajend Mesthrie describes how to analyze variation in multilingual societies from the perspectives of language variation and change and language contact. Advice for analyzing variation in multilingual communities includes areas of phonetic and syntactic variation within a single language, mutual influences between two or more languages, code-switching, and issues of endangered languages. Any reader working on sociolinguistic variation in a multilingual community will need to study this chapter.

Style and social identity have both attracted increasing attention from sociolinguists in the last decade, and Nikolas Coupland explains in Chapter 19 why they hold such a central place in qualitative analytical approaches within sociolinguistics. Coupland argues that style researchers work to establish the ecological validity of their research, investigating and explaining social meanings at work in local environments. Style researchers hope to model how social actors themselves develop meaning in speech events. Coupland's chapter models examples of style analysis for readers to follow.

Finally, in Chapter 20, while reflecting on the huge range of sociolinguistic information which competent members of a speech community possess, Carmel O'Shannessy describes how to analyze the processes involved in acquiring sociolinguistic competence. Reaching across several linguistic fields, she emphasizes why children's development of sociolinguistic knowledge is important to the development of language skills. O'Shannessy clearly explains several research strategies needed to build a complete account of children's speech environments and children's competence. She illustrates for readers both qualitative and quantitative methods for

gathering social information and other details of children's language development. The chapter offers practical, field-tested methods for creating playful contexts to elicit language data from children. From this chapter, readers will be able to develop a successful research project on sociolinguistic acquisition.

Readers will find that all chapters have broadly similar structures, with a number of features in common. Our authors have all provided a brief opening summary box previewing what their chapter covers. Most include text boxes with interesting information such as further examples, explanations, clarifications, definitions, or elaborations. Every chapter provides positive advice for the new researcher, often in the form of bullet points, as well as identifying potential quagmires. Most suggest ways of avoiding potential pitfalls and hazards, and offer strategies for resolving typical problems. In each chapter the reader will also find ideas for projects which are stimulating and doable, as well as suggestions for further reading on the topic. The result is a collection of chapters which have greatly excited us. We hope they excite you too and stimulate you to make your own contribution to sociolinguistic research.

1 A Historical Assessment of Research Questions in Sociolinguistics

Kirk Hazen

Summary

Understanding the history of sociolinguistics will help students to ask better sociolinguistic research questions. Especially in the early days of sociolinguistics, but also today, scholars who work in the realm of sociolinguistics come from different academic backgrounds, and they pose different kinds of research questions. This chapter illustrates how some scholars ask research questions more focused on language, while others ask research questions more focused on society. Both areas of study serve to further the goals of sociolinguistics, but the researcher must choose one as primary in order to create a focused and coherent research project. This chapter highlights a selection of studies from the 1960s onward to explain some of the changes in sociolinguistics research questions, and illustrates some of the choices all researchers must make.

Introduction

Sociolinguistics has been a diverse academic field since its start in the 1960s. In this early period, scholars from linguistics, anthropology, and sociology came together because of their collective interest in the study of language in its social context (Bright, 1966). Yet, their collective interest did not translate into a single set of goals and methods. These scholars rarely thought of themselves as sociolinguists, and they tended to focus their research on select facets of language and society. The linguists used information about society to better explain how language works, while the sociologists and anthropologists used language variation to better explain how society works.

Many of the research questions that these scholars asked and the lines of research they followed are still important today. To demonstrate their continued validity, I

Multiple negation

The study of language variation in sociolinguistics often analyzes patterns which used to be normal but fell out of regular use in some populations. Multiple negation is a good case in point.

Consider this line from Chaucer's translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*:

"so manye and diverse and contraryous parties, <u>ne</u> myghte <u>nevere</u> han ben assembled in o forme."

Some other of Chaucer's lines from the same text were even more involved in their multiple negation:

"Certes," quod I, "<u>ne</u> yet <u>ne</u> doute I it <u>naught</u>, <u>ne</u> I <u>nyl</u> <u>nevere</u> wene that it were to doute."

Multiple negation has been a normal component of English since the first Germanic invaders brought their various dialects to Britain's shores. Negation in Old English was preverbal (e.g., *ne doute*), but this pattern only survives in modern English forms like *never* (*ne ever*), *none* (*ne one*), and *neither* (*ne either*). The *nyl* from the second quote would be modern English *won't*. Multiple negation became stigmatized around the end of the Middle English period as its use declined in some areas of England. Prescriptive self-help books subsequently dispensed whimsical advice as both etiquette and natural law, and multiple negation has become a shibboleth for formal education ever since. Yet, vernacular dialects all over the world still use it. As its patterns vary between speakers, styles, and social groups, it has become a useful sociolinguistic variable. Over its 1500-year history, its status has transitioned from the norm to the stereotype.

focus in this chapter on the history of sociolinguistic research questions. Research questions are important because they guide the researcher's time, and time is a valuable, vanishing resource. The primary object of study for most sociolinguistic studies will either be a language variation pattern, such as multiple negation, or a social attribute, such as gender, created by a group or individual. Making clear the project's object of study is a foundational part of developing a good research question. As basic as it may seem, it will help the project overall to lay out in detail the object of study. To be sure, empirical data from both language and society are used in many studies, but students need to explicitly decide which way they are going to lean prior to tackling their research projects.

The choice of research question determines the kind and amount of data you need, and it determines the need for qualitative methods only or for quantitative methods as well. The question of quantification versus non-quantification is no longer a quarrelsome issue. It used to be that some studies were deemed qualitative and others were both qualitative and quantitative (since to quantify anything, it had to be first qualitatively assessed). In modern scholarship, all fields have quantification available to them as needed, depending of course on the research question. With regard to types of data, sociolinguists in general greatly favor language resulting from human interaction (versus data constructed by linguists themselves). Such language is open to a multitude of analysis methods to achieve many different research goals, as the chapters in this book demonstrate.

The technology used within sociolinguistic studies has become much more sophisticated over the last four decades. In some ways, the results of these changes should be very obvious, but it is worth considering that with increased analytical powers, students can now ask research questions once reserved only for advanced scholars. In the 1960s, reel-to-reel recorders were used, to be replaced by audio cassettes, to be replaced by digital mini-disc recorders, to be replaced by solid-state and flash memory recorders and laptop computers. Students can now easily record audio and video data (for study of body signals and sign languages). Collecting perceptual information used to involve only paper surveys (not an obsolete idea even now), but with psycholinguistic studies of eye tracking and measurements of response time on computer-mediated software, many more kinds of perceptual information can be studied. Large corpora can be searched in either an exploratory way to develop research questions or in a research-directed manner after crafting a research question. Changes in technology alone, however, provide no guarantee that the quality of the research will improve. The research question is still a paramount step to conducting high-quality research. Researchers at all levels typically face more data than can be reasonably analyzed, and a well-designed research question is necessary to lead you through the labyrinths of data.

What makes a well-designed research question? First, it should be based on previous research. When the student situates the research project in a specific field of study, this decision provides guidelines for the project and puts it on a solid scholarly foundation. Second, the research question should extend the knowledge of the field in some way. The student researcher does not have to work miracles; even if older methods are applied to new contexts, knowledge of the field will be enhanced. Third,

it should be practical. Create a research question that is doable in the allotted time frame. Fourth, it should be simple. Everyone should easily understand where the project is headed.

When setting up their research projects, students must keep in mind that research questions shepherd their methodology. They are the guiding factor for all methodological choices. For methodologies focused on linguistic questions, innovations over the last few decades have altered what are possible research questions. These changes can be attributed to improvements in technology for recording language, for collecting perceptual information (e.g., eye tracking and response time software), for conducting statistical tests, and for analyzing sound. For methodologies focused on social questions, there have been similar improvements in collecting data (e.g., web-based surveys), but the most notable changes to those research questions involve refined definitions of the objects of study. For example, whereas early work focused on how women and men speak differently, later work focused on how people use their sociolinguistic resources to construct gender. These kinds of changes to research questions are a good sign for any developing field, and sociolinguistic research has grown in many ways since the 1960s. Early research questions yielded high-quality results, but students will profit most by crafting their own research questions while understanding their historical underpinnings. Within the context of this development, changes to both linguistic and social research questions are illustrated in this chapter.

Remember, a good research question:

• builds on what has been done before;
• adds to what we know about the topic;
• is practical and doable;
• is clear and simple.

Implementation

Linguistic research questions

In the early years, the linguists who focused on synchronic and diachronic language variation were sociolinguistic variationists. These scholars primarily explored linguistic questions using both linguistic and social variables, although much was also said about social categories using those data. For example, sociolinguists debated to what extent the origins of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) were British or African, and these scholars heavily relied on quantitative results (Rickford and Rickford, 2000). Sociolinguistic variationists have also used their results in debates about social inequalities in education (see Hazen, 2007a for examples). A major concern for early variationists was the analysis of real data from real people and not just the analysis of an academic's own constructed data. From the earliest period, sociolinguistic variationists observed and collected language samples from a wide variety of social groups, but initially not all linguists were convinced of the value of this approach.

In recent times, more linguists than just variationists use a wide range of empirical data to examine synchronic and diachronic variation, and it is clear that over the last few decades variationists have convincingly sold their program of study to other linguists. Variation is no longer seen as a by-product of language processing, previously seen as the periphery of study, but instead is part and parcel with the lexicon and the mental grammar. It is true, however, that sociolinguistic variationists continue to use social factors much more often than other linguists as part of their research: they still hold the assumption that the social system in the mind is tightly intertwined with the linguistic system (most likely through the lexicon, but possibly in other areas also).

Since the 1960s, the main focus of most research questions has been the linguistic variable, a set of language forms (variants) alternating with each other, such as [ei] and [a] in *tomato*, or the -ing/-in' of *walking*. Sociolinguistic variationists examine these variants of the linguistic variable to answer their research questions. The linguistic variable is the set of variants which could occur in a certain linguistic environment: A lexical variable would include all the alternative terms for a meaning, such as *wheels*, *ride*, and *car* for *automobile*; a morphosyntactic variable would include all the alternative morphemes, such as -*s* and -*th* for the third-person singular verbal suffix, as in *The pig sitteth*. The linguistic variable is often the primary object of study for variationists, and crafting the variable is a necessary step in designing a research project. Students have to choose how many variants to distinguish for a variable. The student's goals and the nature of the language variation pattern will determine if the variable should be analyzed using two variants or, perhaps, five.

Choices: Variables

When studying language patterns, the researcher has to choose what should be in the study and what should be outside of the study. If the study is on [θ/f] variation, where in the words should it be studied? It depends on the community being studied. Some areas only have variation word finally and word medially, as in *baf* vs. *bath* and *brofel* vs. *brothel*. Others have it word initially, as in *free* vs. *three*.

Beyond the context, researchers have to decide how many variants should there be. For a vowel merger between the historical vowels in *caught* and *cot*, the researcher could decide on an auditory study, perhaps selecting three variants, an [ɔ], [ɑ], and [a]. Another auditory option would be to have the study focus on read pairs of words, so that the variants would be merged, close, and unmerged. An acoustic study would take a completely different approach, measuring acoustic qualities of the vowels. Novice researchers should look to the relevant literature to see what methods researchers choose.

To do this work, researchers generally adhere to some basic steps. First, find out which linguistic and social factors might influence the language variation patterns. For example, does the following sound or the formality of the context make a difference to how often [t] alternates with [ʔ] in a word like *kitten*? Second, which

factors are most important? Third, what is the order of their relative influence? These kinds of concerns have been part of the sociolinguistic analysis of language for decades, allowing researchers to provide quantitative, empirical evidence contributing toward a descriptive and explanatory analysis. For the linguistic research questions, the social factors have been included to assess their influence on language variation patterns.

As an example of how changes in technology have allowed for a wider diversity of research questions, consider that the earliest language variation studies relied on auditory analysis as their primary analytical tool. Labov (1963), in data from his MA thesis, examined whether the first parts of the PRICE and MOUTH vowels were raised up to where the STRUT vowel is in the mouth. Labov's research question employed discrete, auditorily assessed variants for these two vowels. With acoustic analysis software, researchers can now make more comparable and replicable analyses, asking research questions about specific qualities of vowels and consonants. As Thomas and Kerswill & Watson discuss in this volume, these possible research questions have proliferated.

The research of the 1960s and 1970s was innovative because it asked different kinds of research questions than previous linguistic studies. For example, Labov's dissertation (1963, 2006) was the first work to study dialect patterns in an urban area on a large scale. This study of the Lower East side of New York City redeveloped methods of sociology and dialectology in order to explore the interaction of language variation and social factors, such as socioeconomic class. The research questions about linguistic variables in an urban setting were a major switch from the focus on rural speech by dialectologists with traditional methods.

Research questions of this early period were constructed to establish evidence that vernacular language variation patterns appear in all communities, and that they are part of the systematic production of the human mind. Researchers interested in the study of language variation were attempting to establish it as a legitimate field within linguistics. Now that concepts such as inherent variability are a common assumption among many linguists, these kinds of research questions rarely appear in scholarly work. In addition, changes to research questions on the linguistic side of sociolinguistics are connected to changes in linguistic theory. For example, Labov (1969) examined variable rules because such transformational rules were a primary way of thinking about linguistic information in the 1960s and 1970s. Later scholars addressed different kinds of phonological principles as phonology itself changed, including the obligatory contour principle (e.g., Guy and Boberg, 1997) and Optimality Theory (e.g., Anttila, 2002).

The standard variationist research questions of that earlier time have developed into generally accepted tenets today. Bayley (2002: 118) discusses two of them with the principle of multiple causes and the principle of quantitative modeling. The first modern assumption is that language variation is usually influenced by more than one linguistic or social motivation. Multiple factors influence language variation patterns. The second is the assertion that by looking at trends in past data, we can better predict trends in future data. With these two assumptions, researchers can ask questions about which social and linguistic factors have the most influence on language variation patterns and statistically test that likelihood. For example, whether a speaker uses *say* or *be like* to introduce a quote (e.g., *They were like, "Oh yeah!"*) has been found to be influenced by the type of

grammatical subject, the verb tense, the sex of the speaker, and other factors depending on the community (Buchstaller and D'Arcy, 2009). Not all communities follow the same trends, but sociolinguistic variation is not random and patterns emerge if the researcher looks for them.

To a growing extent, changes in research questions have developed in terms of where the variationist methodology is applied. Variationist research questions have been applied to previously under-researched languages, such as sign languages. With the linguistic components of sign language, such as phonology, language variation patterns have been found to operate much as they do with spoken languages, demonstrating variability and the influence of social factors. Lucas, Bayley, and Valli (2001: 110) found that for signs involving the 1-handshape, the variants correlate systematically according to the grammatical category of the sign, the features of the preceding and following sign segments, as well as social factors like age, social class, and regional affiliation. For other researchers, the effects of colonial languages on indigenous and little-studied languages have been the focus. Shain and Tonhauser (2011) investigated synchronically and diachronically the language variation of differential object marking of direct objects in Guaraní, an indigenous language of Paraguay. With variationist methods, they assessed whether contact with Spanish resulted in Guaraní's use of differential object marking.

Besides sign languages and little-studied varieties, language-focused sociolinguistic research questions have been applied to more realms of language. Analysis of language variation in pragmatics was a focus of research in the early days of the variationist movement (e.g., Tedeschi, 1977). More recently the work of Barron and Schneider (2009) and Pichler (2009) is forging a new direction for pragmatics and variational pragmatics. Barron and Schneider (2009: 426–427) posit that "variational pragmatics investigates intralingual differences, i.e., pragmatic variation between and across L1 varieties of the same language" and can be "conceptualized as the intersection of pragmatics with sociolinguistics …" The research questions for variational pragmatics are not focused on the linguistic and social influences of one variable, but on how linguistic and social factors affect linguistic forms, the action of interaction (e.g., a request or an apology), dialogic units (used to construct the speech interaction), the topic structure, and the organizational level. Examining language variation across five levels of pragmatics allows for many previously unasked research questions. For example, Pichler (2009) combines variationist methodology with methods from conversation analysis to craft a research question examining how local variants of "I don't know" and "I don't think" function differently from non-local variants in Berwick-upon-Tweed in the north of England. She found that non-local variants, such as *I dunno*, are bound by discourse meanings for when to use them, such as to soften the assertiveness of a comment or to state a lack of knowledge. In contrast, the local variants, such as *I divn't knaa*, are socially diagnostic in that their use correlates with social factors. She was able to craft her research question by examining the relevant branches of discourse analysis and pragmatics and becoming familiar with her community of study.

Wolfram (1991: 22) surmises that regardless of the theoretical tradition, all descriptive branches of linguistics that handle fluctuating language forms "operate with some notion of the linguistic variable," including traditional dialect studies. The linguistic variable is a tool for researchers to use in the analysis of language in its

social context. It is not necessarily an argument about how sociolinguistic variation is organized in the mind, although such questions are directly tied to the design of any sociolinguistic study. Importantly, students who focus on language variation and change should be aware that the research question will directly guide the design of the linguistic variable and its variants.

Social research questions

Only some sociolinguistic research questions focus primarily on linguistic variation. Many, if not most, other research studies examine language variation to learn more about social factors relating to societies and individuals. Earlier research questions focused on topics such as race and sex, while later ones examine the mutual influences from areas such as ethnicity and gender. Sociolinguistic studies now regularly examine style, identity, and social meaning through language analysis. This subsection details some of the research questions that have been asked in these pursuits and examines how they have changed.

Social analysis in sociolinguistics has seen dramatic changes since the 1960s. In the early days, the key method was to correlate demographic categories and linguistic variables. In most of those studies, the goal was to figure out how the social factors influenced the language variation patterns under study. This broad correlation technique is still a method used to assess dialect regions and language change in larger communities, but it is mainly employed by variationists to answer linguistic questions. Subsequently, the range and complexity of social questions have increased in recent decades. The range now reaches from broader levels of society to social networks with different levels of density and multiplexity, to communities of practice, all the way down to the individuals who contain a model of the entire social macrocosm in their heads and who (re)create sociolinguistic styles in the ebb and flow of social meaning and personal identity.

An important change for social research questions is the object of study itself. In hindsight, it may appear to modern readers that early scholars investigated seemingly monolithic categories like race (e.g., Black, White) and sex (e.g., women, men), often because the terms were cast in such a way, and scholars of the time did not explain the complexity encompassed by such terms. Modern research questions explicitly discuss the natural complexity of social constructions like gender and ethnicity. In addition, for several cultural reasons, research involving social factors such as sexual orientation went unexamined in the early days, but these factors are now an essential part of sociolinguistic research. Sociolinguistic research questions concerning the social realm of ethnicity are illustrated below, along with some discussion of the equally sweeping changes in language and gender studies. Numerous other social areas have undergone similar transformations over the last 40 years.

Early studies of ethnicity were sociolinguistic descriptions of the language variation patterns of various ethnic groups. For example, Wolfram (1969) examined the dialect of African Americans in Detroit and, then, the dialect of Puerto Ricans in New York (1974). Labov *et al.* (1968) examined the language variation patterns of African Americans and Puerto Ricans in New York City, and Fasold (1972) did the same for African Americans in Washington, DC. Linguistic

variables were front and center in these studies, and the results reflected differences and similarities between and within ethnic groups. The research questions in such studies fell along the lines of: How do African Americans speak differently from other ethnic groups? At what rates do these variable rules operate for different social classes? Awareness and respect for ethnic diversity was a fundamental part of all these studies, but ethnicity itself as a social construct was not the focus of study.

The study of ethnicity and many other social factors was enhanced by increasing attention to the interactions of social factors. Developing different angles, either in analysis or in the object of study, from previous work has been a normal mode of operation for sociolinguists. For example, Clarke (1987) conducted a sociolinguistic study of a village of Montagnais speakers (an Algonquian dialect) in order to reveal how variation is manifested in communities that are not overtly stratified along several social dimensions (such as social class). This approach, where multiple influences on ethnicity are examined, continues in recent decades. Cheshire *et al.* (2011) examine ethnic differences, but these scholars grapple with the rise of multi-ethnic dialects and the complexity of group second-language acquisition from a diverse set of first languages. They write: "Individual speakers use these features variably, and we have labeled the resulting 'variety space' Multicultural London English, in recognition of the fact that the features are only loosely associated with specific ethnicities or language backgrounds" (2011: 190). These researchers argue that new varieties are appearing in Northern Europe as a result of several conflating factors including evolving ethnic identities. The research questions needed to examine such complexity differ necessarily from those of the early days.

In more recent studies, although ethnicity is often a factor assessed while examining language variation, ethnicity itself has become a construct of identity theory. In overt moves to distance themselves from any possible essentialist claims, researchers investigate ethnicity and other social categories as indexical fields of meaning. The research questions fall more along the lines of: How do speakers represent themselves ethnically (through speech)? What stylistic choices do speakers make in constructing their ethnic identity? What ethnically indexed language features are deployed to construct gender and sexual orientation? For example, Bucholtz (1999) analyzes the narrative of interracial conflict as told by a middle-class European American boy who employs AAVE features to construct an urban, young male identity in contrast to (and in conflict with) African American youth. The study of racial discourse dovetails with research questions that examine the metalinguistic practice of racial labeling. For example, Chun (2011) examines the discourse practice of "reading race" where speakers label people and practices with racial terms. Some of the labels in Chun's (2011) study included *Oreo*, *Wannabe*, *Prep*, and *Ghetto*. The lexical items used as social labels are of interest: we should ask how they choose those labels instead of others. However, sociolinguists are primarily interested in how they are used and with what social meanings. Chun explores how gender and ethnicity interact for speakers who "drew on this sociocultural practice for ideological commentary" (Chun 2011: 403). Research such as Chun's demonstrates the interactive nature of social analysis, in that her data result from the interactions of three types of ideologies: gender, race, and language.

The essentials

Starting in the middle of the twentieth century, many branches of the humanities began to analyze and question arguments which assumed that social groups had distinct foundational qualities. Was it part of a woman's essential nature to wash more dishes or talk more (or less) often than a man? Were differences between ethnic groups a result of their essential natures? Do social groups even have an essential nature? Scholars began to question and refute these *essentialist* claims. This discussion is part of a much larger debate on the (non) existence of a basic human nature (see Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate* for a full account).

As with ethnicity, early variationist studies focused on how females and males used linguistic variables differently (with different constraint hierarchies or at different rates). The contrast between the earlier days and more modern studies is that the terms "sex" and "gender" have been recognized as separate for decades (e.g., Coates, 1993). The overt recognition of the difference between them allowed for studies of how speakers created their gendered identities. The study of language and gender is a large and growing area of scholarship, and students would be wise to familiarize themselves with the many possibilities in this research area (see, for example, Holmes and Meyerhoff, 2003).

Part of the change to sociolinguistic research questions for all social factors is what Eckert has dubbed the "third wave" of sociolinguistics (www.stanford. edu/~eckert/thirdwave.html). Research questions from the third wave of sociolinguistics examine style in the sociolinguistic construction of identity, and the basic assumption is that social categories like ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation are co-constructed between speakers and audience. Early variationist work was a branch of linguistics with close methodological connections to earlier dialectology. The earliest variationist projects were tied to sociology projects and took up demographic social descriptors (see Hazen 2007b, 2011 for the history). Researchers focused on larger sociological categories and the speech community to model language change. While researchers have asked over the last few decades what language variation patterns mean for individuals, the answers from percentages and linear regressions of demographic categories and phonological conditioning environments did not speak as loudly as many scholars would have liked. Some scholars turned to ask different kinds of sociolinguistic research questions related to the fields of anthropology and social psychology. For example, Milroy (1987) expanded the search for language change by developing methods of social network analysis in data of Belfast neighborhoods. In the speech of Michigan teenagers, Eckert (2000) examined the social meaning of vowel variation rather than examining vowel variation and its social correlates. From research questions directed at social meaning, third-wave sociolinguistic analysis began.

Whose research questions have changed the most?

At first glance, between the 1960s and the 2010s, the realm of sociophonetics may seem to take the prize for the most changed research questions. Equipment from that time period seems remarkably dated compared to modern computers. Technological innovations, and corresponding methodological changes, abound in sociophonetics. Spectrograms were measured by hand in the early 1970s using a ruler to estimate the formants that represent vowels (e.g., Labov, Yeager, and Steiner, 1972). Computers using complex mathematical formulas and programmed scripts now measure and calculate formants and many other qualities of sounds.

Yet, the realm of language and gender might have the top legitimate claim for the most changed research questions.

1970 research question: *How do women speak differently from men?*

2010 research question: *How does this speaker in this local context construct gender through language?*

For these two there is a switch between all women and one speaker plus a switch between sex and gender.

It should be noted that some language and gender studies do use sociophonetic methods, so these two realms of sociolinguistics are not antithetical to each other. Sociophonetic techniques have also been rigorously employed in studies of language and sexual orientation. Just like discourse analysis or lexical analysis, sociophonetics is a means of examining certain layers of language structure. The realm of language and gender supplies a social focus for those linguistic methods.

Whereas many previous and subsequent studies focus on a single variable to elicit social meaning out of a community, Eckert (2000: 213) argues that

> most [variables] take on interpretable social meaning only in the context of the broader linguistic styles to which they contribute, including both the inventory of variables and their use. When we view each variable in isolation, thinking of speakers as leading or lagging in the use of advanced variants, we miss the overall effect of speaker's choices. Social meaning from this perspective is a result of the creative process of style from all speakers and not a static entity attached to any one (or set of) variables.

In the dialectological, first-wave approach, the focus is on the dialect as separate from the holders of the dialect and how language changes alter the reified object (the dialect). In the third-wave approach, the question is how meaning, including identity of individuals, is composed and negotiated by different social groups.

Socially focused research questions

Consider social norms of proper language use. Researchers usually take the view that members of the same community share language norms, but with socially focused research questions, researchers could ask how norms differ within a community and why. Consider the case of a teenager in rural, southern West Virginia who refused to use the regular community form of *y'all* for plural *you*. She overtly argued against it, although everyone in her family and community used only that form. What external norms prompted her to disavow such a customary local form? What kind of social identity does she want to develop? Language-focused researchers would ask "Is *y'all* being used less often by whom?," whereas socially focused researchers would ask "Why are some speakers moving away from *y'all* and what identities and social meanings are they creating with such a move?" The answers could come from single case studies or from larger surveys.

The third wave of sociolinguistic analysis crafts its research questions on how social meaning is constructed by individuals. Moore (2011: 221) writes: "sociolinguists in the third wave attempt to answer the question of how it is that a variable might come to mean 'upper-class New Yorker' or 'rebellious adolescent girl' … this entails analyzing meaning at a level which is different from the social groups or categories considered in first- or second-wave research." This approach changes the object of study from linguistic analysis of language variation to a social analysis of how sociolinguistic style and personal identities are created.

In the social sciences, many researchers have taken up theories of identity. Previously, researchers viewed a person's identity as a stable entity, one they may have been born into, and one that individuals themselves did not change. In recent decades, researchers have come to understand identity as dynamic. With modern sociolinguistic research questions over the 2000s, the focus was between the individual, the small cultural group, and the larger society (composed of individuals and small cultural groups). For example, Coupland (2007: 107) points to Bauman and Briggs (1990) as developing the argument that culture is created through discourse, and people reaffirm themselves with cultures through the creative process of differentiating discourse. In other words, people create their identity through their active deployment of discourse. Modern socially focused research questions tend to examine how those identities are created.

Relatedly, many socially focused scholars craft research questions at the overlap of traditionally separate fields. For example, Woolard (2008: 447) argues that "by bringing linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics back into close conversation, we might eventually enable a needed account for why very particular linguistic elements get picked out, ideologized, mobilized, and iconized for social purposes by specific speakers." This argument captures the changes in the direction of research questions over the last few decades. As Bucholtz and Hall (2005) argue, identity is created through linguistic interaction. For them, identity is the product, not the source, of language variation. In this approach, the question is how meaning, including that of individual identity, is composed and negotiated through language. Similarly, Eckert (2008: 473)

remarks that research questions on "the social value of variation" must focus on social meaning in the daily exchanges of "constant local reinterpretation and repositioning." This kind of focus yields research questions aimed at how speakers apply their social knowledge to their language patterns. As Coupland (2007: xii) writes, "I think we need a sociolinguistics of variation for people and for society, as well as (not instead of) a sociolinguistics of variation for language." The research questions of modern sociolinguistics directly address variation for people and society.

Cross-references

Working in sociolinguistics requires researchers to learn a wide array of topics. In every chapter of this book, topics come up that are cross-referenced in other chapters.

For example, *communities of practice* are mentioned in this chapter, but Robin Dodsworth gives the full explanation of them in Chapter 17. Readers can probably figure out that communities of practice are groups of people. Scholars also require that groups identified as communities of practice participate in a common activity, thereby sharing some norms for that activity. Yet, this slight definition is not sufficient for researchers, and readers should peruse Dodsworth's definition to get a richer sense of the term. The concept of the community of practice is a methodological tool, and the choice of some tools over others affects the results.

Be sure to follow those cross-references for the concepts you choose to use in your research study. It helps to have a full understanding of the important concepts before writing up your final argument.

Conclusion

When scholars were first discussing the validity and stability of sociolinguistics, Bright (1966: 11) wrote, "The sociolinguist's task is … to show the systematic covariance of linguistic structure and social structure – and perhaps even to show a causal relationship in one direction or the other." Since that time, the range of potential research questions has expanded to include practically any study that can incorporate information from society and language. Some of those research questions focus more on linguistic questions while others focus more on social questions and personal identity. As students design research questions, they should be aware of the breadth of sociolinguistic scholarship and where their specific interests are located.

Quagmires and Troubleshooting

- *Don't bite off more than you can chew*. With all sociolinguistic projects, large goals exist: How do people construct gender through language? How does new language variation spread through a community? With all these kinds of questions, an entire subfield is encompassed. Make your research questions much