

“Methodological Issues in the Sociolinguistic Application of Written Surveys”
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The written questionnaire has a long history as an instrument in the study of language variation. Beginning with Wenker in 1876, several dialect geographers have adopted this technique as an efficient means of surveying a large number of people across a wide area. However, sociolinguists, with their traditional interest in “natural,” conversational speech, have generally been less enthusiastic about written surveys. Nevertheless, recent studies such as the Golden Horseshoe Project (Chambers 1998) and the McGill – New Hampshire – Vermont Dialect Survey (Nagy 2001) have demonstrated that this method can provide valuable sociolinguistic insights, particularly as regards the process of language change. With these indications of a renewed interest in survey data, the present paper examines various methodological issues related to this approach to data collection.

The observations are based on an ongoing study of speech patterns in the state of Missouri. The primary data examined here are the responses to a written questionnaire from some 1,100 Missourians. Owing to its traditional blend of Midland and Southern influences as well as to the importation of more recent innovations, Missouri is rich in sociolinguistic variation. The survey used in this study gathered data on phonological (e.g., the low back vowel merger), lexical (e.g., *pop* vs. *soda*), and grammatical (e.g., positive *anymore*) variables. Demographic information was also gathered to allow for the examination of correlations with age, sex, and ethnicity.

Much of the reluctance to rely on questionnaire data seems based on the metalinguistic nature of the task; i.e., the fact that respondents are asked explicitly about their usage. Essentially, the concern is that respondents will offer what they think they should say rather than what they in fact do say. This paper addresses this issue from various perspectives. I describe certain items that can be included on the survey as a way of checking the reliability of the responses. For example, the Missouri survey includes a “vowel matching task” that is designed to augment the picture of vowel mergers available from the more common minimal pair question. Interestingly, responses to this task are found to vary according to the type of merger examined, and I discuss the implications of this finding related to the phonological perception of mergers.

The paper also explores how surveys may (unintentionally) provide insight into language attitudes. For example, even though the Missouri survey asks only about what form one uses, some respondents add comments to justify their choices. More indirectly, the data give evidence of the influence of prescriptivist ideologies as, for example, in reactions to the minimal pair task. Some respondents seem hesitant to identify any pair of words as sounding the same. For example, nearly 20% of respondents indicate a difference in the sounds of *hole* and *whole*, a pair that, in my experience, is homophonous for all Missourians. This finding seems to reflect a belief that orthography serves as an accurate guide to pronunciation; thus, if words are spelled differently, they must be pronounced differently. This notion is discussed in relation to the standard language ideology (Milroy and Milroy 1999).

In sum, this paper provides practical suggestions for researchers designing written surveys and also addresses a broader range of issues related to this useful methodological tool.

References:

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