

CHURCH STREET: FINAL REPORT

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1. THE GROUP MEMBERS

Julia is a first year graduate student in the Linguistics Department at Penn. She was born in rural Long Island, New York. Before becoming interested in linguistics, Julia studied painting and photography in Kansas City and New York. While later pursuing a liberal arts degree with Skidmore College University Without Walls, Julia took her first course in linguistics. This experience led Julia to change her major and she eventually wrote her undergraduate thesis on the topic of language change rather than holding an art exhibition. She is now pursuing sociolinguistic research as a continuation of her interest in language change.

Caitlin is a second year graduate student in the Penn Linguistics Department. She is originally from the suburbs of Detroit, Michigan, and did her undergraduate degree at the University of Michigan in German, English, and Linguistics. Although her research focuses on syntactic change and its study using parsed corpora, she realizes that sociolinguistic variation and linguistic change are intimately connected, and thus considers this study to be an important step in her graduate education.

Satoshi is a second year graduate student in the Penn Linguistics Department. He is from Mie, Japan, and his native language is (non-standard) Japanese. He has stayed in the United States for one year. He started studying linguistics in a graduate school in Japan, and he got MA degree there. Because his thesis is about language variation and change using sociolinguistic method, he is interested in observing actual use of linguistic variables in speech community.

Lauren is a first year graduate student in the Penn Linguistics Department. She is from a suburb of Chicago, Illinois, and has lived in Ann Arbor, Michigan and Paris. She received her undergraduate degree in Linguistics and French from the University of Michigan. Her interests are currently linguistic change, particularly a link between acquisition and syntactic change, as well as other sociolinguistic factors in language change.

Lydia is a first year Linguistics graduate student at Penn. She did her undergraduate degree in Cognitive Science at Johns Hopkins University. Her research interests are in first and second language acquisition and language change. She is pursuing this study to learn more about how language works in its natural community setting.

2. SELECTION OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD AND INITIAL CONTACTS

The group members were interested in studying an Italian neighborhood, preferably one with a mix of Italians and other ethnicities in order to observe linguistic interactions between groups. We initially used Google Maps Street View (www.maps.google.com) to browse blocks in South Philadelphia for those which had high potential for being a tight community: narrow streets holding houses close together with entrances directly on the street, with the street having some sort of community institution on one end. We selected the area bounded by Broad, Wharton, 10th, and Morris for further investigation and explored it on foot to choose two blocks for initial observations.

For the initial observations, our group split in two. Lauren and Lydia observed “Park Street” while Satoshi, Caitlin and Julia observed “Church Street.” Our observations follow.

Park Street, 9/21/08

“Park Street” is a long, diagonal-cutting street slightly west of the Italian Market area. There is an Italian luncheonette and a park at one end of the block. The houses are two-story row homes with varying levels of care taken of them. Some have had their original straight stoops replaced with side-turned stair sets. Many of these had plants or decorations on them. Some of the fronts and cornices have been replaced while others appeared to be original. One house was for sale, although it appeared to be occupied, and one house in the middle of the street was boarded up. Lauren and Lydia began observing the street at about 2:45 pm on a sunny Sunday afternoon.

For the most part, people were not outside, but a handful of people were seen waiting around and either leaving or arriving at their homes. There was an Eagles game going on, which could be heard from a few houses.

Signs of social behavior on street:

- One man sitting on his stoop
- Two men going in and out of a house and speaking
- Some residents greet each other, even when just passing by, by first name
- Observed more than one person standing on top step
- Couples having short conversations between getting out of a car and going into a house or vice versa
- Many people were leaving and entering houses
- Some people stayed on their top step or behind a screen door, looking outside

Verbal Interactions Observed:

One man, who seemed middle aged and dressed in jeans and a worn button-down shirt, had multiple interactions. He spent most of the time on his top step. Initially, he was sitting on the step in a relaxed posture with his hands folded and empty. He appeared to signal availability by looking outward and around. When a police officer that lives on the block walked to his car (not a patrol car), the man approached him and they talked for about a minute. They were not on a first name basis, as the man called out “officer” before walking

over.

Next, a woman walked by the man on his stoop and they had a thirty-second conversation. It seemed like they knew one another from the tone they were talking in. Next, another man walked to the steps and the two men had a conversation for about 30 seconds before they both walked inside to watch the football game (the TV was loud enough to hear from across the street).

Much later, these two men approached Lauren and Lydia to ask what their purpose was for being there, to which they responded that they were students who were observing neighborhoods and talked about the block we were on. The men kept asking why we were observing that block in particular. They asked what Lauren and Lydia thought of the block and they replied that it seemed friendly and that people took care of their homes. "Not everyone," the men replied.

Another man had been sitting on his stoop, holding a cane and looking outward, when we arrived on the block and had greeted us briefly. Later, he stood in the sidewalk and spoke for a few minutes with a woman who came out of the same house. They walked across the street to get into a car together. The man was using the cane to walk and had white hair; they both seemed older.

Next, a young couple (either in their late 20s or early 30s) parked and walked to the other end of the street while talking quietly to each other before entering one of the houses on the street.

Another middle-aged man walked down the street and greeted an elderly woman across the street that was standing just inside her screen door. She replied, "Hi, honey." The woman was holding a flyer and seemed to have come out to get the mail. They appeared to know each other and were on a first name basis. The woman was wearing a long dress and the man was wearing jeans and a large t-shirt. The woman remained in her doorway for a few minutes more and the man began spraying something on the wall of his house across the street from her. Several minutes later, he noticed Lauren and Lydia on the curb with their notebooks and said, "Young artists, eh?" He volunteered that he had been an art director for thirty years and gave a general invitation to see his garden in back of the house, noting that that was where the real visual interest was on the street.

A young, well-dressed couple exited a house, spoke for maybe 15 seconds, then walked away in different directions.

General Observations:

The younger people didn't greet each other as much as those of middle age or older. In one case, a young man and a young woman walked down the street with about 10 feet between them and entered houses that were separated by only a single house, yet they didn't say a word and didn't seem to acknowledge the other. It seemed that many of the older people were Italian, but that the residents in their twenties or thirties were of mixed European ancestry.

Complicating Factors:

Next time, we will be sure to check sports schedules before visiting the neighborhood, as it seemed that many of the residents were inside watching the game. There

was also a festival going on a few blocks away to honor St. Pio. The luncheonette at the end of the block was closed, and there was a large poster in the window advertising the festival. We were also interested in the comment the man made regarding gardens, and suspect that a significant amount of neighborhood social interaction may take place in the backyards. Despite these events, however, we were able to observe a reasonable number of residents outside and to see how they interacted (or chose not to interact) with their neighbors.

Church Street, 9/20/2008

‘Church Street’ is a diagonal street a few streets over from ‘Park Street’ and running parallel to it. On one corner is a busy-looking café that seems to be a male-oriented hang out. On the other side is a hardware store. The street appears to be slightly less affluent than ‘Park.’ The house fronts on ‘Church’ are relatively uniform, many with the same plain, vinyl siding; while on ‘Park,’ the houses are markedly distinct from each other, with more extensive alterations to the house fronts. On ‘Church,’ the improvements are focused mainly on the stoops, many of which have been altered from their original form. Great care has been taken in decorating most of the stoops on ‘Church.’

Signs of social behavior on street:

- People sitting outdoors at a café at the end of the block
- People looking out of window
- Woman waving at group from window
- Doors left open
- People standing in doors
- At least one person sitting on stoop
- Man sitting on a bench at the front of his house and smoking
- Many interactions around cars
- Children playing outside
- Everybody discussing the same festival: ‘Did you go to *the* festival? ‘How was *the* festival?’
- People organizing for party happening that night
- Brief, first-name-basis encounters

Verbal and Social Interactions Observed:

Caitlin, Satoshi, and Julia began an observation of ‘Church Street’ at approximately three in the afternoon on a sunny Saturday. There was a general air of activity in the neighborhood.

As we arrived around 2:40, there were two women and one man, all older, walking along the street to a house. The man and one woman, clearly a couple, went up to the door and lingered there for a long goodbye before going inside. It was clearly the end of a casual conversation; afterwards, the second woman also went to her home.

At about 2:50 pm a young woman, probably in her twenties, was dropped off by a taxi in front of a house near the corner. The driver helped her unload numerous shopping bags and some flowers from the taxi onto the sidewalk near her door. She was hip, wearing a

short jean skirt, boots, and a hobo bag. Her ethnicity was hard to determine due to her bleached hair and sunglasses. She spoke loudly on her cell phone, apparently unconcerned with being overheard scolding someone (her boyfriend?) harshly in a personal tone. The exterior of her home was relatively unadorned and she seemed not to have curtains. However, her outfit, shopping bags, and the fact that she took a taxi home suggest that this is not due to lack of wealth. The group discussed the possibility that the place was a rental.

Later, two young guys, probably in their twenties, pulled up in their car and parked on the sidewalk near the house of the woman mentioned above. Parking on the sidewalk in this way seems to indicate some feeling of 'ownership' or comfort with the ways of the block, or at least a feeling of impunity. They were wearing baseball caps, 'wife beater' tank tops, and had tattoos. They were probably Italian. They exited their car loudly discussing reasonably expensive video games and consoles that they owned. They eventually entered the girl's residence. The two are later seen with the girl on a roof patio above her/their apartment.

A woman exited her home with a baby in a stroller. She was probably in her late twenties or thirties. She was dressed neatly and conservatively. It was difficult to discern her race, but she looked Caucasian due to her light skin and blonde hair. She lingered on the sidewalk for five or ten minutes before being joined by a man (her partner presumably), wearing neat, casual clothes. While she was still on the sidewalk alone, she glanced at the group a few times. She seems to be generally at ease. Note that she waited outside for her partner without seeming to be in any hurry, simply pushing the stroller in front of her home.

Two guys (20-30, perhaps one was younger) pulled up in new, sporty, brightly colored Subaru. They spent a good deal of time parallel parking. They appeared Italian and wore muscle shirts and sunglasses. They weren't in a hurry to enter the building, but finally entered together.

At around 3:11, two males and one female driver idled their Mazda on the street to unload boxes of beers. They did not care about keeping another car behind them waiting, but 1 or 2 minutes later they moved their car and parked on the sidewalk for a while. In and around the car, they chatted about planning a party while they carried the boxes. When they parked their car on sidewalk, a woman (probably 50s) whose house is across the street from the car came out from her house and watched what happened from outside the front door.

Around 3:20 pm, after exiting his home, one older man (possibly in his seventies) paused to talk to another older man that he crossed paths with in the street. Both men were dressed neatly, one was wearing khakis and a gold chain and one had cataract sunglasses on. They seemed to be Italian. The men seemed to know each other. They began a discussion on the weather. Notably, one asked the other if he had gone to *the* festival yet. *The* festival is mentioned at least three times as an event that is assumed that everyone is going to. This suggests that there may be a cohesive community of common interests and lifestyles. The men talked for a few minutes and then went on. Later, one of the men asked the group, pointing to a car, if this was our car. We said no. He said something like 'well, OK then' and walked away.

The lengthiest series of verbal interactions began around 3:20 as well, when two boys, maybe ten or eleven-years-old, began playing baseball in the street (Their bat and ball were plastic). This made for a tight 'field,' with certain parked cars defined as 'bases.' One of the boys was hit in the eye by the ball. An older woman came out from her house to see what was going on. It's possible that she is related to one of the boys and this is his own home. She asked them 'How was *the* festival?' She also asked them about how they liked

school. One of the boys complained about his Italian teacher. That he is learning Italian as a second language is noteworthy. The woman wanted to know from one boy if his Mom knows that he's hanging around. This sort of concern could be interpreted as a sign of a close-knit community.

Eventually, the woman learns that one boy was hit by the ball. She calls for a man to get the boy ice for his eye. She calls the boys inside. She tells the man a number of times to get the boys water and then to take them to the park. There was another woman also involved in this interaction, also coming from inside the house. At one point, the boys were on the stoop and all the adults had congregated on the stoop that had a wrought iron railing. The boys sat at the bottom of the steps in a bricked-in area that had once been part of the sidewalk.

There was also an event in the middle of this interaction when a woman from farther down the block called to the boys and asked them to come talk to her. The boys went down the street to hold a discussion with this woman before returning to play. It is possible that these two houses were the houses of the two boys, and they were thus interacting with both their families.

There were also several conversations on the block between people that we could not be sure were residents of the block. For example, around 2:42 a few men chatted in Italian around their cars, having just left the corner cafe, before driving away. They were clearly friends who hung out here a lot. There was also a pair of young women with two little boys at one point, who walked down the block together. The boys had apparently learned how to curse, and were loudly swearing and laughing. One of the women seemed amused, while the other seemed annoyed (she swatted at the boy with a piece of paper). It was an extremely casual and personal interaction to see on the street. They walked on down the block.

General Observations:

The group's general impression was that this block shows positive signs of social cohesion. The observation also demonstrated a good amount of verbal interactions within the block.

Choosing a Block and Making Contacts

The group discussed our experiences on the blocks and decided to pursue our research on Church Street. We agreed that it seemed more social and coherent than Park Street, and that the younger people especially seemed more integrated into the neighborhood. We returned the week of September 29th to make initial contacts on the block. A report of our experiences follows.

STAN Moretti:

Stan Moretti was sitting on a chair on the top of the modified stoop of his home on September 29th around 5 p.m. when Julia made her initial contact with him. She asked him for help and he immediately told her to take a seat on the stoop and made himself completely available. When it became apparent that he was willing to talk at length, Julia introduced the recorder. When she stated that only group members would hear the recording, he indicated no concern. He said he had nothing to hide. Although Stan seemed hardly aware of the microphone and didn't seem self-conscious in his speech, his demeanor remained relatively

formal. This was probably a reflection of the question and answer style of the conversation. The quality of the sound in the recording is good.

Although Stan was eager to provide any information that was needed, he volunteered information in only about four instances out of approximately thirty-five responses during the interview. One independently introduced topic concerned the days when he used to drag race. This is a topic that could be useful to return to.

Stan welcomed visits from the group and promised to introduce them to other key people on the block. He followed through with this promise and accompanied group members to various residences, helping to explain what we were doing to new contacts. He seemed to be signaling, in his introduction of the group to new contacts, that the group has positive intentions. Stan will be a great resource for future contacts.

MIMI Mancini:

As the group walked down Church Street on October 5th, they ran into Stan, who was near or at his door. He offered to help introduce the group to more people and he decided to try Mimi Mancini, who lives a few doors down from him. Mimi seemed apprehensive at first, but relaxed as Stan explained what the group was doing. It seemed that she was a little reluctant letting us in, but was very happy to introduce us to her cats.

Stan worked to ease some of the awkwardness by continuing to explain what the group had been doing. Mimi warmed to the group members quickly; the cats served as a great ice-breaker and continued to provide points of interaction throughout the conversation. After a few minutes of questions and answers about the neighborhood in general, the conversation transitioned to stories about Mimi's life and the recorder was introduced. She spoke about her husband and family and her cats; the sound quality of the recording is good. Mimi indicated that she was willing to talk to us again, and that "earlier" (ie before dinner) would be better next time. She did not specifically suggest others to talk to, but she mentioned that her next-door neighbor was in her 90s and had lived on the block for a long time. Also, her husband, "Jon the cop," who Stan had mentioned previously, had lived in the neighborhood for a long time and would hopefully be home from the hospital in a few weeks.

LIZ Costa:

On October 5th, some group members were looking for somebody to interview in the late afternoon, and ended up chatting with a couple of children playing outside on their grandmother's stoop. When the mother stuck her head out the door to check on them, the group asked if it was okay to talk to the children, which led eventually to a discussion with the grandmother, Liz, who has lived on the block for 32 years, and grew up around the corner. She also seems to be one of the central characters on the block, considering people have asked her to be block captain over the years. The block currently does not have an appointed block captain.

Liz stood on her stoop during the conversation, but clearly away from the front door, while the group stood near the foot of the steps. Understanding that we were interested to learn about Italian culture in her neighborhood, she recommended a number of the older residents of the block to talk to, especially Mimi Mancini and Stan Moretti's parents. She

spoke of the changes on the block since many young people had moved in, many of whom are not Italian (she mentioned some Asian families, and a neighbor that she thought might be Jewish). Although she was not opposed to increased diversity on the block, she worried that events related to Italian culture had decreased, and also said that it had been a long time since they held block parties or anything of that sort. Because she was also keeping an eye on her grandchildren, we did not introduce the recorder.

Liz said she'd be willing to talk to us again, and called across the street to Stan to try and set up a meeting with his parents. She recommended we visit the festival at the local (Italian) Catholic Church that Sunday, and also told us about other events going on that weekend. Most of Liz's family still live nearby, and her grandchildren visit frequently and play with children on the block, which may also be useful in the future.

MIKE, AL & BEN:

Returning to the block on Sunday afternoon, the group split between interviewing Mimi and continuing to explore the block, so that she would not be overwhelmed by the full group of five. The two who remained outside found few people sitting or lingering on the street, because of the festivities at the local church and elsewhere in the neighborhood. They ended up heading to the corner Cafe, where a group of men were at a table outdoors. One, Mike, hailed them and asked what they were looking for, hence initiating a conversation. Mike is an African American who has been living in Philly all his life, explaining that he lives "on the other side of Oregon Avenue, by the K-mart." With him were two men from Albania, both of whom had moved to Philly several years ago. The three of them do not live on the block, but frequently spend time at the Cafe, where they socialize and watch European soccer (as well as games of local teams like the Phillies and Flyers). They reported that people from the neighborhood frequently stop at the Cafe for lunch or after work, and that residents in this area are friendly and sociable. They agreed to introduce us to any locals that they might know, if we see them again. These three may not be the most useful contacts in getting to know people on the block; but meeting them allowed us to learn something about external views of the area, and about local social spots.

TOM:

Tom was standing at the corner of the block, going in and out the hardware shop on October 3rd. Satoshi talked to him and asked him about the block. He said he has lived on the block for 64 years since he was born. He lives with his elder sister and her son. Because he was willing to answer when Satoshi asked a couple of questions, Satoshi introduced the recorder and started recording on the street, sitting down on the stairs in front of a house where his house is very close. At the end of the talk, he said he was happy to help us when we visit him next time, though he seemed to be so to a lesser extent. The quality of the sound in the recording is good.

CATHY Rizzo:

On Oct. 3, Members of the group were sitting on the stoop of the vacant house on the end looking for people to contact when Stan stepped outside of a house for a cigarette. He

recognized us and beckoned us over, saying he had someone for us to talk to. We entered the house, which turned out to be Cathy's, and Stan called Cathy downstairs. She was eager to talk, and the recorder was introduced early. She had no problem with being recorded, but did hesitate briefly and gesture to the mic before telling about some minor illegal activity in her youth. Otherwise, she spoke freely about growing up a few blocks away as well as living on this block for 25 years. The recording was clear and she talked at length about each of the topics, especially dating and her family. She often elaborated on topics or went off on a new topic with minimal interviewer prompting. She suggested a number of people on the block we might like to talk to, including Mimi, Carmella, Gino and Jeannie, Liz and Danny, and Bob and Jason, and said the group was welcome back to talk to her at any time. She gave us her phone numbers and suggested we call before coming, so she could make us food.

CARMELLA Bruno:

On Oct. 3, Group members observed an interaction between Stan, Cathy, and Carmella from a seemingly vacant stoop. When Stan and Cathy went inside, they approached Carmella, who was standing on her porch while interviewers stood on the sidewalk next to it. After a short explanation of the project, she willingly gave a summary of her family's history on the block. The conversation was short and the recorder was not introduced. However, she shared a few pieces of key information about the block: her daughter lives two houses down and many of the older residents frequent the senior citizens' center around the corner to play cards and bingo. Although she is 75 years old, she still works twice a week and therefore differentiated herself from the other elderly residents who are not as mobile. The conversation was cut short because she needed to return to her cooking.