Small Scale Dialectology- possibilities and challenges

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In an attempt to better understand perceptual areas involved in dialect perception, Preston pioneered perceptual dialectology in 1989, whereby participants draw perceived boundaries onto the outline of a map and label them according to their own perceptions (Preston 1989). It has since been used in various countries (e.g. Stell 2018; Montgomery & Stoeckle 2013) and even States (Bucholtz et al. 2007; Golitschek Edle von Elbwart 2020) with varying methods of analysis, be that through grids or with the help of ArcGIS software. This research demonstrates that map tasks are useful not only to investigate dialects and dialect boundary perception, but also the social meaning attached to perceived boundaries. While map labeling tasks have been used successfully, there are several aspects of the method that have rarely been addressed this far. How applicable is the method in diverse communities, where boundaries include both dialects, sociolects and languages due to high multilingualism? How big does the community need to be and how large should the geographical area covered be to make use of this method? And lastly, how can we cope with the fact that not all participants may have an affinity for maps?

To address some of these questions, I will present dialectology research from the 87 km² Caribbean island of St. Martin. This is a unique approach to dialectology, because this island is the smallest island in the World that is divided into two parts: one a French Collectivité d'outre mer and the other part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. While English is considered the native language of both parts of the island, French is a further prominent first language on the French side, while Dutch retains only administrative value on the Dutch side.

First results from the analysis of 50 map tasks indicate that some participants perceive nuanced differences both between the Englishes spoken in the cities of the island as well as the -lects and languages spoken by immigrants from other Caribbean islands, Europe and North America. These results show that map tasks are a fitting method to research diverse communities, even if they are as small as 72.000 inhabitants. However, few studies report how difficult it can be to get participants to complete the map task. I will therefore also discuss the problems encountered with a good third of participants, who did not wish to connect their perceptions of social groups to places on the map. First analyses of non-responders indicate that these issues may be based on islander identity, unification ideologies and lack of interest in spatial knowledge. Based on these factors, I will introduce possible coping strategies to alleviate the problem.

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