

Is the sociolinguistic interview a useful tool for gathering data on everyday linguistic behavior?

Sociolinguistics is built on the assumption that the sociolinguistic interview, the primary mechanism for gathering data for the study of language variation and change, produces speech reflecting the everyday linguistic behavior of individuals in a defined population. In fact, this data-gathering technique is so common that many papers published in the field simply state that data were gathered through “sociolinguistic interviews” or “sociolinguistic interviews in the Labovian tradition” without any further elaboration. However, such statements essentially obfuscate rather than clarify the research methods used. “Sociolinguistic interviews” actually comprise a wide range of approaches to gathering data, and as we show in this paper, these approaches can have substantial consequences on the kind of data that emerges in a study.

The idea of sociolinguistic interview dates from the 1960s, when Labov (1966) provided a detailed analysis of the effects of the interview situation on the elicitation of natural speech and offered a number of techniques for producing casual speech. He used a variety of approaches (reading passages, minimal pairs) to extend the formal end of the stylistic continuum and developed a number of techniques to create situations where more casual speech occurs, including interruptions by third parties, danger of death questions, and interviews with peer groups. When researchers indicate that they did standard sociolinguistic interviews with no further elaboration, it is not clear exactly which of these techniques they have used or exactly what comprises the interviews. However, what happens in a sociolinguistic interview can have a dramatic impact on the data that emerges from that interview. In fact, in light of the research reported on in this paper, it may be problematic to assume that data from sociolinguistic interviews always represents the everyday linguistic behavior of those being interviewed.

Our data for exploring the impact of various approaches to sociolinguistic interviews comes from fieldwork in Springville, Texas, which includes both interviews using most of the techniques developed by Labov (along with a number of other techniques) and also individual, peer group, and site study interviews. A quantitative analysis of the occurrence of zero forms (copula and present 3rd singular) in the English of 67 African American residents shows that interview type affects the use of zero for some individuals but not for others, and that even the same individuals do not always use zero copula and zero 3rd singular consistently across interview contexts. Moreover, for some, although not all people interviewed, subsequent interviews provide substantially higher rates of zero. Finally, even when we account for factors such as interview context and familiarity, the total number of tokens, often a consequence of the number or length of interviews, has an impact on results. Since we cannot predict either the differing effects of various interview contexts or of multiple interviews among individuals, or which features will be affected, for the sociolinguistic interview to be a useful tool, speakers should be interviewed multiple times in a variety of contexts to ensure that results are not colored by the type of “sociolinguistic interview” used.

References

Labov, William. 1966. *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics.