

Democratising dialect fieldwork and research: desirable, doable, or doomed?

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Despite widespread criticism (Chambers and Trudgill 1998, Wells 1978), the Survey of English Dialects (1950-61) is still considered one of the benchmarks of English dialect study, and its findings are an invaluable resource for modern dialectologists (Jansen et al 2020, Britain 2009). Its emphasis on ‘traditional dialect, genuine and old’ (Orton 1960: 332), its preference for non-mobile older rural males (‘NORMS’) and its focus on rural life and communities are deeply unfashionable nowadays. A long, onerous oral survey designed to elicit individual words, pronunciations and grammatical forms rather than spontaneous connected speech, administered by trained fieldworkers, and transcribed in real time might be dismissed as methodologically outdated and problematic. The policy of interviewing a few selected individuals in each locality and then aggregating their responses to form one village return raises questions of representativeness. And yet its influence persists.

Seventy years on, the Dialect and Heritage Project is a National Lottery Heritage-funded initiative with interconnected research, public engagement, and impact goals including (but not limited to) the digitisation of original SED materials and the gathering of new present-day dialect data. Its partnership with five folk life museums spread across England offers interesting opportunities for new, collaborative data collection methods, including:

- A distributed fieldwork model in which volunteers are trained to conduct oral history/dialect interviews in their communities
- Simultaneous data collection and public engagement activities at ‘dialect roadshow’ events using a specially designed pop-up dialect kit
- Dialect reminiscence sessions (held both virtually and in-person)
- A new dialect survey
- Reconnecting with original SED informants via their descendants

The project aims to investigate:

- Similarities and differences between dialect use past and present, and across different areas of the country
- The role of family intergenerational relationships in dialect maintenance/transmission (‘inherited’ words)
- ‘Adopted’ dialect words that people take on as they move around the country, develop new friendships and relationships
- The link between dialect, heritage and identity

Its distributed fieldwork approach, equipping and empowering members of the public to become fieldworkers, transcribers, and project ambassadors, is designed to embed knowledge and ownership within local communities and to create a lasting legacy — but it is methodologically risky. By involving the public as co-researchers, co-creators and co-custodians of knowledge, and by conducting research alongside public engagement activities open to all, we lose some of the control. And we must do our research in ways that are enabling, meaningful and fulfilling for our co-creators. This paper summarises the project’s successes and challenges thus far, previews early results from the new present-day dialect research, and asks whether such methodological innovations are doomed. It argues that democratising research brings its own challenges but also rich and unexpected rewards.

References

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