Tracking language change in real time:
Challenges for community-based research in the 21st century

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Tracking language change in real time is challenging (but see Cukor-Avila & Bailey 2017; Nahkola & Saanilahti 2004; Sankoff 2017; Sundgren 2002; *inter alia*) because projects that attempt it are incredibly "difficult, time-consuming, and expensive" (Cieri & Yaeger-Dror 2017:53). Researchers who have successfully built longitudinal corpora (e.g. G. Sankoff and colleagues) report numerous problems, including difficulties tracing participants, attrition due to mortality, and a lack of resources that prohibits long-term planning (Sankoff 2017). However, we discovered that there are additional challenges in the 21st century. In this presentation, we discuss the many hurdles we faced in building a longitudinal corpus in a large North American city. Data collection took place before the Covid-19 pandemic, but the lessons we learned still apply.

Our project is based on a 1.2 million-word corpus of sociolinguistic interviews first collected in 2003-4. Of the 99 speakers we attempted to re-interview, we were able to find only 65. Traditional strategies such as contacting people via mail were not successful. The most effective strategy for tracking down participants was using their original addresses in order to find their current phone numbers. Another valuable method was to contact former interviewers who had recruited participants from their own social networks. Social media such as LinkedIn and Facebook yielded mixed results, as did strategic Google searches. Of the 65 original participants we found, only 14 agreed to participate again. This highlights the need to find ways to keep participants engaged in the research process. In order to facilitate interpretation of our panel data, we also created a trend study. This led to another challenge, finding people that matched the original speakers as they were back then and as they are now.

To date, we have learned a great deal about recent societal change, community-based corpus construction and sociolinguistic methods, leading us to make a number of key recommendations for future studies. First, make judicious use of the original interviews and interview reports to identify details (such as hobbies or workplaces) that will make it easier to find participants again and facilitate rapport when re-interviewing. Second, with regard to tracking down participants, we recommend building ways to track individuals, e.g., by asking participants to indicate their willingness to be contacted again on consent forms and what method of communication they prefer (Wagner & Tagliamonte 2017). We also suggest finding ways to stay in touch with interviewers and interviewees, such as returning to the community on a regular basis (e.g. Cukor-Avila and Bailey 2017), organizing popular interest talks that update participants on the results of the study so that they are motivated to continue to participate more fully in the future. Generally, it is important to have an outward facing component to the research program that focusses on the societal impacts of language variation and change so that the general public can appreciate the importance of the research, e.g. a dedicated website, writing press releases, etc. (see also Pichler et al. 2018).

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