

15 Sharing Data and Findings

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The chapters and vignettes in Part IV, “Sharing Data and Findings,” address concepts, decision points, and techniques related to collecting sociolinguistic data from various populations as well as to sharing sociolinguistic data and/or findings with the public. Language is often central to the rights and privileges that are afforded by social institutions, including education, the legal system, and the media. As a result, many sociolinguists have addressed issues of language-related concern and promoted social justice by applying findings from sociolinguistic research to public issues and by engaging with the public in specific outreach endeavors.

Many linguists have argued that seeking ways to apply our knowledge should be a central concern of the broader scholarly enterprise. In “The Socially Minded Linguist,” Bolinger (1979, p. 404) enjoins linguists not to “stay aloof” from concentrations of power and inequality that are often also “questions of language.” Similarly, Wolfram (2012, p. 111) notes that while linguistics has a reputation as being an esoteric and abstract field, “linguistic research ranging from neurolinguistic imaging studies to studies of language variation in the community should be of interest into the public”; he goes on to say that linguistic research would indeed be of more interest “if the public knew how connected linguistic research was to their everyday life.” But this burden of communicating about linguistic research does not rest on the public; it rests on linguists, who must make engagement with the public a priority. Indeed, Wolfram says, we owe it both to the public and to our profession (p. 111).

Sociolinguists who recognize a scholarly responsibility and even an obligation to engage with the public point out that public engagement should be guided by theoretical and methodological principles that form a comprehensive, ethically grounded approach to the methods of engagement. A series of principles well known to most sociolinguists are Labov’s (1982) principle of error correction and principle of debt incurred, and Wolfram’s (1993) principle of linguistic gratuity; Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, and Richardson’s (1992) three models of research—ethical, advocacy, and empowering—have also been influential in sociolinguistics.

More recently, Wolfram (2012) makes several methodological and practical recommendations for sociolinguists who are seeking to connect with the public. He asserts that, not at the end of a project but rather “from the outset,” sociolinguists should “consider how linguistic research might have a strategic public outreach dimension” (p. 112). In other words, principles of engagement should not be adopted ad hoc or post hoc but rather outlined in advance and revisited throughout a research project. Wolfram also recommends that sociolinguists “be visionary and entrepreneurial” in how we consider the public dimension of our work (p. 114). To achieve maximal impact, we should also seek to foster long-term and sustainable public engagement endeavors, such as producing media and curricular materials (p. 115); to do so, we must not work in a solitary capacity

but rather collaboratively, with non-linguists, including journalists, artists, educators, students, and community partners (p. 116).

Sociolinguistic data collection is therefore not merely a discrete phase in the research process, disconnected from questions of engagement and application. Rather, as the chapters and vignettes that appear in Part IV make clear, all manner of data-related considerations are relevant and interrelated concerns, including the types of data that are collected, the manner in which data are collected, and whether and how data are disseminated and to which academic and public groups. Just as it is crucial to plan in advance how to effectively and efficiently collect reliable and valid data, it is also crucial, as we prepare to collect our data, to consider whether and how our research goals and our methods of data collection can best align with our goals for engagement and application.

Questions of ethics are also central when working with public groups and when applying sociolinguistic knowledge to public- and/or community-specific concerns. How can we best initiate, foster, and sustain ethically sound collaborations with various communities? How can we maximize our efforts for the public good? Underlying these types of questions, according to Roberts (2012), a professor of Public Engagement, must be a rejection of a deficit model in which the public is seen as needing to be educated and, instead, the implementation of a model of public engagement that centers on and privileges dialogue. The best people to engage with the wider public about science are scientists, Roberts states, but we need to arm ourselves with the ability to communicate in order to be most effective.

The chapters and vignettes in Part IV explore how effective dialogue between sociolinguists and the public can take place. The chapters provide deep theoretical grounding in how to conceptualize, plan, and implement methods of public engagement, including data collection and dissemination of data and findings. The vignettes provide real-world scenarios of sociolinguistic engagement, exploring successes and challenges. Together, these chapters and vignettes provide guidance as well as food for thought when considering how to apply sociolinguistic knowledge and build connections with the public in various domains, including communities, schools, and the media.

Community and Educational Engagement

In Chapter 16, “Community Activism: Turning Things Around,” Arapera Ngaha describes connections between community activism and sociolinguistics, particularly with respect to linguistic rights and language planning. Describing the Māori people’s struggle to save *te reo Māori* (the Māori language), Ngaha explores ethics in language research in relation to community activism and provides recommendations that center on limiting the power differential between researcher and researched. With a focus on transparency and reciprocity, she calls upon scholars to collaborate with community members to determine the purpose and methods of linguistic work, allow community activists to make most decisions unless linguists are called upon, and actively search for ways to repay the debts of time and insights that community participants provide.

In Chapter 17, “Sociolinguistic Engagement in Schools: Collecting and Sharing Data,” Anne H. Charity Hudley surveys various approaches that sociolinguists have taken to integrate linguistic research with educational outreach and social activism. Turning toward application, she explores models of sociolinguistic engagement for those who seek to collect data from and share data with those in schools. In order to collect reliable, valid, and relevant data in and for schools, Charity Hudley compels linguists to read widely in the field of education and related disciplines and to work collaboratively with scholars in these fields to share insights and methods. As early scholars of language and

education have pointed out, including Hymes (1980, p. 139), “part of what we need to know in order to change is not known to anyone; teachers are closer to part of it than most linguists.” Charity Hudley makes the case for linguists to collect data from schools and students in ways that address issues of mutual concern, to work with research participants not merely as subjects but as partners, and to paint a comprehensive sociolinguistic picture that places language use within broader social contexts. Case studies and practical strategies highlight how sociolinguists can design research to be maximally useful to scholars as well as schools and communities, so that people who contribute data for research purposes can directly benefit from having shared it.

Vignette 17a, “Beyond Lists of Differences to Accurate Descriptions,” by Lisa Green, and Vignette 17b, “Linguistic Flexibility in Urban Zambian Schoolchildren,” by Robert Serpell, both provide examples of some of the types of data that can be collected in schools, from students. Each author calls for collecting data from students in ways that accurately report on their patterns and norms of language use. Without data that take into account speakers’ range of variation, as Green notes, our measures can lead to false assumptions, both about them and about our research models. Instead, comprehensive and holistic assessments of students’ linguistic and communicative competence can ensure more accurate student assessment, which is particularly important for students from historically underserved groups. As illustrated in Serpell’s vignette, the accurate collection and interpretation of a range of sociolinguistic data are also crucial to the design of an effective literacy curriculum and therefore to establishing educational policy that supports and serves a multilingual society.

In Vignette 17c, “Engagement With Schools: Sharing Data and Findings,” Donna Starks emphasizes some of the unexpected difficulties of collecting data in schools, recalling the Pasifika Languages of Manukau Project, in which she worked with a school as an entry point into a multilingual Pacific and Māori community in South Auckland, New Zealand. At the beginning of the project, the principal, who supported bilingualism, provided access for the research and promoted acceptance for it in the community. But the following year, when a new principal took over and the school lost most of its funding for bilingual programs, some of the materials that Starks and her colleagues produced were used in ways that supported a very different political agenda. Even if sociolinguists are unable to plan for the unexpected, Starks’s vignette makes clear the importance of anticipating the fact that micro-level research endeavors can have serious macro-level implications.

Engagement With the Media

Following these discussions on community activism and educational engagement, Chapter 18, “Sociolinguistics in and for the Media,” by Jennifer Sclafani, introduces the topic of engagement with the media. Sclafani points out the importance of viewing the media not simply as an object of study but as a conduit for communication between sociolinguistics and the public. Two case studies from the United States are explored in depth: the 1996 Ebonics controversy and the more contemporary situation of terminology applied to immigrants working without proper authorization. The media can also be used by linguists to disseminate linguistic knowledge, such as through films and documentaries, or in other ways that make contributions to schools and communities. Sclafani concludes that we must remain aware of how the media amplify and mute certain voices, create spaces in which dominant language ideologies may be perpetuated and also contested, and share linguistic data and findings with other researchers as well as the public.

Four vignettes also engage with questions of media engagement, including the collection of sociolinguistic data from media sources and the dissemination of sociolinguistic findings through media outlets. In Vignette 18a, “Media Interest in Sociolinguistic Endeavors,” Scott F. Kiesling discusses his experiences with media coverage of popular academic topics, focusing on his work on the word *dude* and the dialect of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He notes the importance of embracing and even seeking out publicity for one’s research: not only does media coverage heighten awareness of linguistics as a science and of language as an important topic of professional inquiry, but it also helps scholars connect with laypeople who may share valuable information about language and language use. Media coverage can also help dispel language ideologies; therefore, Kiesling says, it is worth trying to shape public perceptions about language, even if given only a soundbite during which to do so.

In Vignette 18b, “Sociolinguistics on BBC Radio,” Clive Upton reports on the BBC Voices Project (2004–2007), in which 60 journalists interviewed groups of speakers across the United Kingdom and collected local and personal words for 38 different everyday concepts; a website also allowed the public to contribute data and discuss language-related matters. In addition to being used for academic research, the large amount of data that were collected yielded sociolinguistic findings that were discussed on BBC radio and television. In Vignette 18c, “Media, Politics, and Semantic Change,” Andrew D. Wong explores the semantic change of the Chinese term *tongzhi* (‘comrade’), which in the late 1980s came to refer to sexual minorities. Wong built a corpus of articles from the *Oriental Daily News* between 1998 and 2000 to examine how *tongzhi* is used, while grappling with the selectivity with which print media present and represent certain voices and texts. Sharing his findings with *tongzhi* activists, Wong realized that his work speaks to issues surrounding how power is exercised and contested through language. Thus, sociolinguists can analyze language that is used in the media in ways that also contribute to public understanding of its political and societal implications.

In Vignette 18d, “Engaging Local and Mass Media on Issues of Language Policy,” Phillip M. Carter closes out this section with a discussion of how to engage local and mass media on issues of language policy, with his work in Miami, Florida, serving as a case study. On the one hand, the myriad public ideologies and discourses about language and immigration that circulate in Miami enable popular misconceptions about language issues to form and take root, often with damaging cultural and educational consequences. On the other hand, such circumstances provide an ideal opportunity for sociolinguists to inform the public on issues of language, especially as they relate to policy matters, through such channels as high-impact op-eds and interviews through local and national news outlets. As Carter and the other authors in this section convey, it is incumbent upon sociolinguists not only to share important academic findings with the media, but to do the hard work of engagement to make sure that our messages are clearly heard, understood, and applied to issues of pressing public and educational concern.

Conclusion

Within Part IV, “Sharing Data and Findings,” the chapters and vignettes make clear that sociolinguists can do both research and outreach, but that we should plan carefully and strategically in advance. If we conduct research that has an engagement component, we must set clearly outlined goals in which we consider questions of ethics, ownership, relevancy, responsibility, and resources. As we study research methods, we must also study methods of engagement, addressing such issues as how to communicate with various publics, how to collect data from and share findings with them, how to establish and

manage a public persona in addition to one's scholarly persona, and how to navigate outreach-related challenges that may arise. As the authors in Part IV suggest, rather than being wary of engagement or viewing it as an add-on that comes only after the scholarly research has been completed, sociolinguists have much to gain and much to contribute when we weave public engagement into our research. Being part of the public conversation depends on making use of the skills of discourse and communication—skills that are manifestly at our disposal as sociolinguists to activate and employ.

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