Eliciting ethnicity in the sociolinguistic interview: Comparing three methods

Variationist sociolinguists have tended to regard a speaker’s ethnicity as a trait that is relatively easy to determine. This traditional view assumes that “individuals possess (or belong to) cultures that are relatively discrete, homogeneous and static” (Harris and Rampton 2003: 5). Now, however, we are beginning to think that that ethnicity might be more complex than a demographic category into which each individual fits. We are coming to see that speakers strategically construct ethnic identities in discourse (Bucholtz and Hall 2005). This increased reflexivity about what we mean by ethnicity brings with it the need to reconsider the ways in which we are eliciting information about speakers’ ethnicity in the sociolinguistic interview.

In this presentation, I report on a study of how people talk about their ethnicity in 103 sociolinguistic interviews conducted in Pittsburgh, PA. I compare the three ways in which the topic of ethnicity arises: (1) when the interviewer directly asks what the interviewee’s ethnic background is; (2) when the interviewer asks the interviewee to suggest two or three terms that best define herself; (3) at moments when the interviewee’s ethnicity arises in discourse for other reasons. I show that ethnicity is not always relevant to the same degree and that different formulations of ethnic identity arise in different parts of the interview. For example, it may be important to distinguish between an interviewee who answers the direct question by saying she is Irish and never mentions her Irishness again, an interviewee who answers the direct question by saying she is Irish and suggests “Irish” as a term of self-identification but makes no other references to her Irishness throughout the interview, and an interviewee whose Irishness arises repeatedly throughout the interview.

When the interviewee has multiple national-origin backgrounds, the direct question may be an especially insufficient way of grasping ethnic identity fully. For example, a man who answers the direct question by saying that his father is Polish and his mother is Czech later narrates a story in which he refers to himself as a “poor Polish kid from Lawrenceville.” This phrase might evoke a different socioeconomic identity than would “this poor kid,” “this poor Czech kid,” or “this poor Polish-Czech kid.”

By treating ethnicity simply as a static demographic category, we risk missing aspects of identity that are important in accounting for sociolinguistic variation. People may bring different ethnic identities to bear in different tasks or on different topics, and ethnicity may be tied to class and locality in different ways at different moments in the interview. This study’s findings suggest that ignoring the ways in which ethnic identity arises in discourse may lead to an overly simplified perspective on ethnicity that may impoverish rather than enrich our understanding of variation.

References