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EXPLORING SOCIAL, REGIONAL, AND ETHNIC VARIATION IN THE UNDERGRADUATE CLASSROOM

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As researchers of language variation and sociolinguistics, we are consciously aware of the extent to which variation is all around us. As teachers in the undergraduate classroom, we endeavor to deepen students' awareness and appreciation of this dimension of our language and society over the course of a few short months. Our classes serve a diverse body of undergraduates, some of whom may spend the rest of their lives studying language and others whose interests and career paths will lead them in different directions. At the same time, we also feel obligated as researchers of language variation and language diversity to address the social attitudes toward less widely accepted social, regional, and ethnic varieties of English. In doing so, we hope to foster an appreciation for these varieties, taking into consideration recent literature on the appreciation of linguistic diversity in the classroom (e.g., Curzan 2002; Smitherman and Villanueva 2003; Reaser and Adger 2008). In order to accomplish these goals, we draw on an equally diverse set of readings and activities, including different types of research and data analysis, to impress upon students the breadth of the field and of language variation itself.

In this article we discuss three different activities we have used successfully in our undergraduate courses on language variation in the United States at

Ohio State University, specifically our "Language and Social Identity in the USA" and "Language, Race, and Ethnicity" courses.[1] This range of activities helps reach different students with varying interests. More importantly, each of these activities hones a different set of research and analysis skills (e.g., hypothesis testing, quantitative analysis, and experimental design), applicable in a variety of academic contexts. In addition, the set of activities we present here encourages students to confront real-world data while developing an awareness of issues in linguistic variation and diversity.

Each of these activities has been taught several times over the past five years, and they have been refined and tweaked throughout this period. The first activity involves conducting a fieldwork project, studying the retraction of /s/ in /str/ clusters, which teaches students how to gather and analyze original data. A second activity develops skills in analyzing existing corpus data through consideration of the Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States and builds on these skills by having students consider regional variation as relevant to their own speech. Finally, the third activity encourages students' awareness of the interface of language variation, race, and identity by asking them to explore code-switching in the speech of talk show hosts Tyra Banks and Oprah Winfrey. These activities, using different types of data and different methods, aim to complement each other and class readings in an effort to broaden students' understanding of language variation and its relevance for us all.

EXERCISE 1: ANALYZING SOCIAL VARIATION USING RAPID ANONYMOUS SURVEY DATA

In this activity, students conduct a small-scale (but methodologically sound) rapid anonymous survey of Columbusites, looking for variation in the production of alveolar and retracted /s/ in /str/ clusters (Shapiro 1995; Lawrence 2000), having first hypothesized a link between the level of use of the variants and some standard sociolinguistic feature. After carrying out the survey, they must analyze their data and present it in a written paper.[2]

Students learn a number of new skills in the course of this assignment. First, it gives them experience conducting sociolinguistic fieldwork. They gain an understanding of what fieldwork actually entails, and it gives them a framework for contextualizing the underpinnings of other studies that we read in class. Second, it gives them experience formulating an experimental question. While students are assigned a variable ([str] vs. [ʃtr]), the question of what might correlate with said variable—race, sex, class, etc.—is left up to them. They are required both to specify what correlation or correlations

they wish to investigate and also to lay out an experimental plan that will show what significance—if any—that factor has for the specified variable. Last, it gives them experience analyzing and presenting quantitative data in a coherent way. Students typically have very limited experience with graphical presentation of data or even with tabulating and understanding the implications of their results. This is a valuable skill for them as they move forward in their academic careers.

There are many assignments that could teach these skills. However, we have chosen a Labovian rapid anonymous survey for both practical and pedagogical reasons. One such reason is that rapid anonymous survey is within the skill set of the average undergraduate. It requires none of the specialized knowledge or access to speakers that more involved survey or interview methods entail. Also, in the course of the class, students are required to read Labov's (1972) version of his study of *r*-lessness in New York department stores. Having them carry out a similar study requires them to fully understand Labov's work and impresses on them that this is real sociolinguistic research. It is important to explain the limitations of this technique, but students should also understand the benefits of using this method.

We have chosen this particular variable (retracted /s/ in /str/ clusters) because prior research shows that it is in variation with [s] throughout the Columbus area (Durian 2007). This makes it likely that students will find interpretable results when they do their surveys. It is also an interesting point of discussion, because many or most of our students come from the central Ohio area and were previously unaware of this variable. They typically find themselves surprised by how prevalent it is, which gives us an opening to discuss other issues, like Wolfram's (2004) discussion of MARKERS versus INDICATORS.

Students are encouraged to work on the assignment in groups and may pool data, but they must each submit a separate paper. Because they have had little experience with this sort of research, it is important to give them very specific instructions as to how to carry out the assignment. To this end, we break down the methodology into a step-by-step process. First, the students must develop specific predictions. Students discuss these predictions in their groups and with the instructor, usually during a period of class time set aside for preparing to carry out the assignment.

They must then develop a way to elicit tokens from speakers, as in Labov's "women's shoes" question (Labov 1972). We also encourage them, regardless of their other research questions, to build in a follow-up that will allow them to collect information about less/more emphatic pronunciations. Students are required to collect 108 tokens from at least 54 speakers, which is another reason why we encourage students to work on this assignment in

groups. While 54 participants is not a huge number for a rapid anonymous survey, it becomes even more manageable when split among several student researchers.

Next, students must develop a criterion for what will be considered [s] and what will be considered [ʃ], and what to do with "in between" or borderline cases, as the retraction of /s/ is best considered a gradient process. Because it is a feature of the local dialect, some students initially find the distinction between [s] and [ʃ] difficult, but they can be taught to hear it through repetition.

Students must also develop a coding scheme to allow them to take very quick and consistent notes in the field. Again, to avoid student confusion and because this sort of assignment is such a new experience for them, we are careful to include very specific examples of all components of the project. This includes possible elicitation phrases, coding schemes, and ways that the results might be represented graphically. We also clearly list our expectations for their completion of the assignment and specific rules for acceptable and unacceptable collaboration with their groups.

After they have carried out the survey, students must individually write a four-page paper detailing their predictions, methodology, and results. The paper includes a summary of results, both written and presented in a useful graphic format (a chart, graph, table, or the like), and a discussion of the results and how they relate to various concepts discussed over the course of the class. Students are also required to provide an appendix with a table showing their raw data, specific examples of their coding scheme, and any other materials relevant to the assignment.

After the assignment has been turned in, we hold a debriefing session during which we present the results of Durian (2007) and discuss how those results compare to the results students obtained from their studies. This also gives us a chance to get feedback from students and to discuss their experiences working on the project. Students typically feel that the assignment was both difficult and enlightening. They report being more aware of the speech patterns of those around them and having a better understanding of the "messiness" of fieldwork generally. Compared to students' discussion of methods and issues in Labov (1972) prior to this activity, after having completed the project, students demonstrate a more thorough understanding of rapid anonymous survey, quantitative analysis, and patterns of social dialect variation on related test questions. Furthermore, they show more capability of understanding and thinking critically about fieldwork methods in the papers they are presented with as the class goes on and of presenting data in their assignments appropriately.

EXERCISE 2: EXPLORING REGIONAL VARIATION USING THE LAMSAS DATABASE AND LOCALLY COLLECTED DATA

In this activity, students are introduced to regional variation by exploring the online database for the Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States (LAMSAS) and then conducting a small-scale investigation of the regional variation represented in their own class population.[3] The pedagogical goal of this activity is to provide a hands-on introduction to regional variation, both theoretically and methodologically. The generation of maps of linguistic features through the online LAMSAS database and creation of maps of their own usages allow students to experience firsthand the messiness of language variation and the abstraction of an ISOGLOSS. This two-part activity for the introduction of regional variation not only capitalizes on an existing resource and a wealth of data but also reinforces the relevance of regional variation in students' own lives by considering on a smaller scale students' own regional variation.

The first portion of the activity includes an exploration of the existing data either in class or as a homework assignment (or both). Students are assigned to generate maps of linguistic features with LAMSAS. In a technology classroom, the class as a whole can decide which maps they would like to create together, with the instructor displaying the results. Students then attempt to compile a series of maps that will help them infer ISOGLOSS BUNDLES.

Using this experience as an introduction to the methods of studying regional variation, for the second part of the exercise, the class is then presented with a map of Ohio divided into its most basic dialect regions as supported by previous research (Flanigan and Norris 2000). In Ohio, this is roughly the northernmost portion of the state, the middle, and the southernmost portion of the state. We ask students to divide themselves into groups according to where they would regionally identify. Methodologically, this portion of the assignment consistently raises interesting questions for the students of what a regional identity might mean given mobility and again encourages students to directly consider real questions in the study of language variation.

Of course, in most university settings, there will be students who do not regionally identify with the general area of the university; but again, this raises another interesting question of sampling. In particular, we consider how we might gather a larger sample for this type of study, whether or not to include individuals who have not spent their entire lives in the area, and the possible effects of focusing research mostly on nonmobile, older, rural males (NORMs). In the context of the classroom, students who consider somewhere other than Ohio to be home serve as important reference points, helping the class expand its picture of language variation. For instance, students often

draw connections between the usages found in southern areas of Ohio and usages found in Southern states, allowing for a more complete picture of how regional language variation often works on a continuum.

Once students divide themselves into region groups, they are given a series of prompts, including lexical items, syntactic items, and phonological items, and are asked to list the words, grammatical variants, or pronunciation variants used in their group (see appendix). Some of these items will undoubtedly be familiar, such as the *pop/coke* distinction or Northern Cities Shifted vowel realizations, while others are often less familiar, like the distinction between *needs* + past or present participle. Once students have collected all of their usages, we review them as a class and make a linguistic map of Ohio together on the board, using these features to draw isoglosses and test the previously identified linguistic regions.

Students have always enjoyed the activity, with this class period generally being filled with much lively discussion and laughter. They are not only engaged with the material but are consistently able to identify at least a few trends in regional usage. Equally importantly, they gain a new awareness of regional variation and some of the issues involved. Students also retain the material well. In previous classes, we have specifically tested for comprehension and understanding of beginning methods in regional variation. In particular, we have provided students with several maps of linguistic features, similar to the ones we generated in class, with varying levels of informativeness and relevance, and asked students either to make a case (or not) for regional variation in that area based on these maps of features. Students consistently perform very strongly on this portion of the exam, demonstrating a clear knowledge of introductory issues in regional variation, including how to deal with the messiness of the data, how to make generalizations, and how to support these generalizations with the data available.

By taking advantage of the linguistic resources already available online, a class has access not only to more data, but also more ways of considering linguistic data—which may in turn inspire and provide new and different types of activities and different ways of reaching different students. Thus, databases such as LAMSAS can serve as an excellent complement to readings, fieldwork activities, and other in-class activities.

EXCERCISE 3: INVESTIGATING CODE-SWITCHING IN THE SPEECH OF TYRA BANKS AND OPRAH WINFREY

A third activity we have used successfully is the study of CODE-SWITCHING in the speech of talk show hosts Oprah Winfrey and Tyra Banks. This activity facilitates the development of a somewhat different skill set than the previous

activities. First, it provides students the chance to investigate ethnicity as a social factor impacting linguistic diversity and variation. Second, it encourages the exploration of the ways in which an individual's life history and personal experiences may also influence linguistic diversity and variation.

In this activity, students analyze either host's variable use of morpho-syntactic, discourse pragmatic, and phonetic features of African American English (AAE) when switching between Mainstream U.S. English (MUSE) and AAE.[4] We focus on these hosts because their code-switches are typically pronounced enough that our undergraduates are able to locate them fairly easily. When first developed, this activity focused on Oprah's speech, but more recently, we have switched to using Tyra's speech.[5] In our discussion below, we focus specifically on the Tyra version of the activity.[6]

The goal of this activity is to help students better understand the nuances of code-switching, as well as the complexities of the social and linguistic motivations of speakers who code-switch. It also allows students to explore the various aspects of Tyra's identity—as a talk show host, as an African American, and as a woman—that may impact her code-switching behaviors. In addition, it helps foster collaborative skills among the students, as they are encouraged to interact during the transcription, hypothesis formation, and analysis processes. Furthermore, it provides students with an engaging activity that fosters the development of critical thinking, linguistic analysis, and hypothesis testing skills.

For this activity, we divide the work students will complete into two sections. The first involves students transcribing a portion of a *Tyra Show* episode segment. The second involves students conducting a linguistic analysis of the code-switches performed by Tyra using a database of transcriptions created by the entire class. The time frame for the entire project is usually six weeks. The first three are dedicated to students doing the transcription work, and the latter three are dedicated to students conducting the analysis of the data and writing a paper discussing the results of their analysis.

During the first part of the project, we begin by showing students several video segments in which Tyra code-switches and modeling how to identify her use of AAE features. We obtain these segments from the collection of video clips available on the *Tyra Show* Web site (http://tyrashow.warnerbros.com). Following this introduction, students choose a clip and transcribe a two-minute portion of that clip. To ensure that students and student groups produce original analyses each quarter, we have found it useful to track the clips selected by students in any given quarter and to disallow reuse of clips from a previous quarter in the next quarter's class.

Given the length of the clips student select, we have students make orthographic rather than phonetic transcriptions. We require students to indicate phonological and morphological features of AAE in their orthographic rep-

resentations. For instance, students represent cluster reduction in *test* orthographically as <tes>, while [ɪn] realization in *running* is often represented as <runnin'>. We also require that each clip contain a minimum of two distinct instances of Tyra code-switching and that students specifically indicate where they believe Tyra performed a code-switch in their transcripts.

Students submit their completed transcripts, which include their orthographic marking of AAE features and their indication of where they believe code-switching has occurred, to a group data bank, and all transcripts are made available via the Web site for the class. We usually have 15–25 students in the classes, so the available data corpus typically consists of 30–50 minutes of speech. When they first begin, students often do not realize just how much data will be available when the corpus work is completed, so we find it is good to discuss the outcomes of their transcription work when we initially introduce the project.

In the second part of the project, students are required to select at least five transcripts from the class data corpus (making for a total of 10 minutes of speech) and to find at least five features of AAE that Tyra uses while code-switching during the segments. These features can be either morphosyntactic (e.g., use of DOUBLE NEGATION, absence of POSSESSIVE-[s]), phonetic (e.g., CONSONANT CLUSTER REDUCTION, [ɪn] realization), or discourse pragmatic (e.g., MARKING, SIGNIFYING). Once they have located five features, they are asked to describe them and discuss whether any of the features might also be found in California speech, given that Tyra was born in Inglewood, California, and lived in Inglewood and Los Angeles while growing up.

For the analysis, students are required not only to locate the features of AAE that Tyra uses, but also to provide hypotheses regarding why they believe she code-switches. These include her linguistic and social motivations for doing so and the kinds of discourse contexts in which she is most likely to switch. They are also asked to conduct research on Tyra's life history, to determine how her life experiences and background may have contributed to her linguistic choices and to heighten their awareness of these factors. Conducting individual research into Tyra's biography often leads students to highlight different aspects of her personal history, with each student taking a unique stance on her as a linguistic individual. Additionally, they are asked to discuss whether the hypotheses they made at the beginning of the project were confirmed or disconfirmed by their research and why those hypotheses were confirmed or disconfirmed.

All of this information, including all transcriptions students used in their analysis, is submitted as a 7–8-page paper due at the completion of the project. Throughout all stages of the project, students are encouraged to

collaborate, with the only constraint being that all students must write and submit their own final papers. This includes collaborating on the selection of video clips to transcribe, which helps students to avoid duplicating one another's efforts.

Students usually enjoy the opportunity to analyze code-switching using Tyra or Oprah as their "informant." Many of our students watch Tyra or Oprah on a fairly regular basis, and several have said they find it fascinating that a talk show can be used to mine linguistic data for analysis. In terms of impacts on student learning outcomes, we have also found that in the two quarters during which we used this activity, students generally seemed to grasp speaker motivations for code-switching better than in a previous quarter, where exam questions were used to assess their understanding. Students performed better on the final exam in articulating a speaker's motivations for code-switching after completing this activity than when the activity was not used. Only 12% of 25 students got a B+ or lower on this portion of the exam when the activity was used. In contrast, 25% of 17 students got a B+ or lower on this portion of the exam when the activity was not used. Therefore, we feel this activity is extremely useful in helping students better understand code-switching, as well as speakers' social and linguistic motivations for doing so.

CONCLUSION

As we have now shown, each of the exercises discussed above has proven quite useful in providing students with a range of skills for analyzing linguistic data, as well as a range of practical critical thinking and hypothesis testing skills. In addition, they expand students' knowledge and awareness of linguistic diversity. Although we are of course hopeful that a number of the students in our classes will either major or minor in linguistics, we also feel that these activities serve a wider purpose of helping our students obtain skills that are generally important in social science and liberal arts courses offered by the university. Specifically, we have been pleased to learn from students with whom we have kept in touch that these activities provided them with hands-on experience with data collection and analysis that they did not receive in other courses, and that they felt better prepared to use these techniques in higher-level undergraduate and lower-level graduate courses.

Consequently, we would like to encourage other instructors of undergraduate courses to consider using the activity ideas we have presented and hope that you will find them as useful in your undergraduate linguistics courses as we have found them to be.

APPENDIX

Exercise 2: Regional and Social Variation Prompts

For each of the prompts below, write down the response of each member in your group. Note that some members may have more than one response for an item; be sure to note all responses.

Write down the word(s) you use for the following items:

1. *You, plural*
2. *Soda beverage*
3. *Athletic shoe*
4. *The gray bug that rolls into a ball when touched*
5. *The strip of grass in the front yard which is between the sidewalk and the road*

Provide a grammaticality judgment for the sentences below. If you do not find a given sentence acceptable, but think you might say something similar, given different word choice, make a note of that, as well.

6. *The car needs washed.*
7. *The car needs washing.*
8. *I might could leave early on Friday.*
9. *Anymore, I leave early on Friday.*

Use each of the following words in a sentence, and have the rest of your group write down an IPA transcription of the word. You may also consider whether you pronounce these words any other way, especially in a less formal or self-conscious setting.

10. *Bag*
11. *Pen*
12. *Hill*
13. *Wide*

Source material: Each of the types and examples of variation as illustrated above are discussed more fully in *Language Files 10*, File 10.3 [Bergmann, Hall, and Ross 2007].

Discussion Questions:

1. Evaluate how the results of your activity might be affected by the Observer's Paradox.
2. Imagine that you were going to conduct a larger scale version of this type of study, with both more informants and more time. Try to devise a different methodology which would allow you to investigate regional variation, but which might help address the problem of the Observer's Paradox.
3. Compare your proposed methods to those we discussed in class for *Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and Southern Atlantic States* and *Dictionary of American Regional English.*

4. You have just considered a small set of examples of regional variation found in Ohio. Can you think of any other regional linguistic variation (lexical, phonological, syntactic, etc.) which are represented in your local area?

Source material: Dialect map of Ohio based on a reworking of the map presented in Flanigan and Norris (2000).[7]

NOTES

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1. These courses typically have enrollments of 15–25 students. The majority of Ohio State University students are under 24 years old and come from throughout the state of Ohio, with a large percentage coming from the rural and suburban areas within and around the greater Columbus metropolitan area. Roughly 76% are European American, 7% are African American, 5% are Asian or Asian American, and 2% are Hispanic ("Ohio State University Student Profile" 2008).
2. This activity was developed by David Durian and Julia Papke. It was inspired by the rapid anonymous survey of department store clerks reported in chapter 2 of Labov (1972).
3. This activity was developed by Salena Sampson. The first portion of the activity, which relates to the LAMSAS database, was heavily inspired by a similar activity used at the University of Georgia in William Kretzschmar's undergraduate language variation class.
4. This activity was developed by Andrea Sims and David Durian. It was inspired by ideas originally suggested to us by Grant McGuire and the Hay, Jannedy, and Mendoza-Denton (1999) analysis of Oprah's speech.
5. We have adopted the convention of referring to both talk show hosts by their first names, as this is how they refer to themselves professionally.
6. For the Oprah version of this activity, we had been using clips available on her "After the Show" Web site. However, at the time of writing, these clips are no longer available.

7. The boundary modifications to the Flanigan and Norris (2000) map were initially suggested to the authors by Beverly Flanigan in 2006 for use in the conference materials for 35th annual New Ways of Analyzing Variation (Columbus, Ohio, Nov. 9–12, 2006).

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