Towards Best Practices in Sociophonetics (2006)

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Our goal in this workshop will be to continue the discussion on best practices in sociophonetics begun at the NWAVE33, Ann Arbor, Sept. 30, 2004 and continued last year at NWAV 34 at NYU, taking up some specific issues of general interest, which have still not been covered. The previous NWAV33 and 34 sessions were very well attended. Twenty-five of those who attended the first year asked to be put on an email list at the workshop itself, and more people signed up the second year. The session at NYU was presented to an overflow audience. The general consensus has been that the group would like to meet at least once a year face-to-face at NWAV. We will now provide a rationale for a discussion on best practices in sociophonetics and end with the format we are proposing for the NWAV 35 workshop and a discussion of specific issues that we will address at that session.

The interdisciplinary nature of sociophonetics makes it difficult, especially for researchers at institutions with fewer financial and collegial resources, to keep up with technical and theoretical advances in acoustic phonetics, speech perception, and recording technology; and theoretical advances in social structure and, of course, in linguistic theory. At the same time, there are a growing number of researchers who are interested in engaging in sociophonetic projects. The field as a whole will benefit from our providing quick access to methodological/technical/procedural information from the best labs to researchers at other institutions.

While there currently are resources available, they probably reflect the practices of specific labs and may not be available, at least not obviously so, to others. In addition, a single lab is less likely to provide the same level of review of its practices than a relatively independent group charged with producing state-of-the-art critical reviews at a remove from any one specific research project.

The lively discussion at the earlier workshops made it very clear that many active researchers wonder how their own laboratory practices compare to those of others. The size of the audience suggested that even those who are not actively working in sociophonetics want information on best practices.

As was done for NWAVE 34, to make it more likely that the discussions will be productive, the workshop organizer, Marianna Di Paolo, will send this abstract out to the email list compiled at the last two sessions and to others who we hope will join the discussion. She will also put up a webpage with materials from the previous sessions.

The 2004 session focused on vowel analysis to the exclusion of other problems, and the 2005 analysis focused on acoustic and perceptual cues for variation in (r) production, variation in stop consonant production, and the need for accurate and detailed reporting of procedures. This year will focus on two other `problem' areas for acoustic and perceptual study.

The first of these is Malcah Yaeger-Dror's presentation on another liquid, this time (l). Until recently most work on this variable in sociophonetics was based on auditory coding. Yaeger-Dror will discuss current methods for measuring and issues to consider when collecting data on (l).

Second, Bartlomiej Plichta's segment focuses on two articulatory-phonetic aspects of vowel production and perception: voice quality and nasaliztion. As we continue to study language variation, we struggle with the inevitable limitations of computer-aided vowel analysis based on Linear Predictive Coding (LPC). Steady-state, LPC-based formant analysis offers only a partial account of vocalic variation. Until recently, there have been no off-the-shelf software tools that enabled automated, detailed, and accurate analysis of voice quality and nasalization of large speech corpora.

Akustyk 1.7.4 (http://bartus.org) offers such tools at virtually no extra computational cost, as they are built into the standard vowel analysis module. An important advantage of this methodology is that it does not require any additional instrumentation, such as the use of a nasometer, to derive these acoustic parameters. Sociolinguists can use their regular digital (or digitized) audio recordings.