

## **The Anatomy of a Sociolinguistic Interview**

Feagin (2002) terms the sociolinguistic interview the “classic method of sociolinguistic research”; Milroy and Gordon (2003) call sociolinguistic interviews “traditionally...the most common approach to data collection among sociolinguists”. Given the ubiquity of this research tool, it is important and relevant for all researchers who utilize this tool to gain a better understanding of the nature of such specialized types of interviews and the ways in which our data may be affected.

Additionally, there is still concern over the Observer’s Paradox (Labov 1972) and whether the sociolinguistic interview is like “natural speech” (if such exists in a speaker’s repertoire (Schilling-Estes, 1999)). How much like ordinary conversation is any given sociolinguistic interview? How much like more traditional interviews (as studied, for example, in Biber 1988) are sociolinguistic interviews? Is it possible to some have some aspects of these two speech genres intertwined with others? Are there any kinds of patterns intrinsic to sociolinguistic interviews themselves? This study investigates these queries.

In order to explore the genre characteristics of sociolinguistic interviews, I conducted a pilot study of the grammatical feature patterning in sociolinguistic interviews utilizing the same features and the Multi-dimensional corpus-based analysis method pioneered by Biber in the 1980s to investigate written and spoken texts. Multi-dimensional analysis examines functionally-motivated lexical and syntactic co-occurrence and has been effectively applied to many discourse analyses, including Connor-Linton (1988), Kim and Biber (1994), Biesenbach-Lucas (1995), Russell-Pinson (2002), and Csomay (2002).

The current study uses four sociolinguistic interviews, two from my research in North Alabama, and two from different researchers conducted in Smith Island, MD. After texts were tagged for features and tagsets concordanced using Perl computer programs, “factor scores” of each text were found by adding normalized frequencies of features significant to a particular (computer-generated) “dimension” and subsequently computing z-scores for graphical placement. Using these data, I examined these sociolinguistic interviews’ places among Biber’s 23 genres, using Biber’s dimensions.

While results for sociolinguistic interviews on Biber’s Dimension 1 were intriguing, this study may also give general insight into some clustering patterns of this dimension. The use of Biber’s second dimension addresses Wolfson’s (1976) remarks that assumptions cannot be made that sociolinguistic interview narratives are comparable with those in everyday conversations and that we should more empirically analyze differences. Dimension 2 interestingly proved to be a poor fit for the types of narratives sociolinguistic interviews tend to elicit, particularly for a type I have termed “habitual narratives”. Results from Dimension 3 suggest the interviewee may interact with the interviewer as though they are both “insiders”.

Analysis via Biber’s method is not intended as an end-all statement of the nature of sociolinguistic interviews, but instead should be used on the sociolinguistic interview like a prism applied to light. The fragmentations of light allow us a closer examination of the otherwise invisible components which make up the whole. In this way, methods of this study can illuminate various aspects of sociolinguistic interviews and be a valuable complement to ongoing qualitative discussions and explorations of the tool itself.

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