Sociolinguistic Methodologies at a Crossroads: Innovations from the Postgraduate Community

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ABSTRACT

At this particular juncture in academic scholarship, prompted in part by the global Covid-19 pandemic, we are rethinking methodological approaches in sociolinguistics. This Special Issue, then, includes cutting-edge contributions from the postgraduate community that explore novel ways of applying research methods in a rapidly evolving research climate with the objective of bringing various groups into dialogue around ways in which scholars can become actively involved in advancing sociolinguistic methodologies. The issue opens the floor to new and interesting debates about innovative ways to address contemporary methodological research problems and questions.

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At this particular juncture in academic scholarship, prompted in part by the global Covid-19 pandemic, we are rethinking methodological approaches in sociolinguistics. This Special Issue, then, includes cutting-edge contributions from the postgraduate community that explore novel ways of applying research methods in a rapidly evolving research climate with the objective of bringing various groups into dialogue around ways in which scholars can become actively involved in advancing sociolinguistic methodologies. The issue opens the floor to new and interesting debates about innovative ways to address contemporary methodological research problems and questions.

The collaborative issue includes five articles from postgraduate students at the University of Liverpool (Department of Languages, Cultures and Film) and Lancaster University (Department of Linguistics and English Language) from across sub-fields of sociolinguistics (minority languages, linguistic landscapes, ethnography, social media discourses, sociophonetics, sociolinguistics and forensic application). Postgraduate research students are at the centre of this project. However, the methodological challenges that they will address in their articles are of key importance for the wider academic community in linguistics, modern languages, and cognate fields such as sociology, history and politics.

The Special Issue is intended to advance postgraduate careers in a meaningful way, allowing for dissemination and knowledge exchange, with a particular focus on methods, in a time when such opportunities have been limited (or non-existent) for the postgraduate community post-2020. In addition, this collaborative project will foster the acquisition of professional skills and the deployment of academic skills while maximizing dissemination of postgraduate students' work as it unfolds and is integrated into individual projects. Both editors and contributors benefited from close exchanges during the drafting of the articles. Mutual learning was facilitated through refreshing interactions that reinvigorated inquisitive approaches towards established disciplines and the topics in hand and adopted a critical stance towards the nature of data and the way that it shapes, and is shaped by, our interpretation. The choice of an open access platform such as *Modern Languages Open* was in keeping with the intention of encouraging wide dissemination of contributions from early career academics who are operating in a highly competitive environment that expects competent performances upon completion of an important milestone such as a PhD.

While the Special Issue will focus on sociolinguistics (in its broadest sense), it paves the way for the potential for enhanced and participatory interdisciplinary discussions which will mean that participants will have the opportunity to make new connections which otherwise would not have been possible, exploit cross-fertilization and enhance opportunities for collaboration. The innovation represented by cutting-edge research will be coupled with an emphasis on collaboration—a key desideratum and a necessity for far-reaching academic research.

SUMMARY OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

Aiston explores how the loose network of anti-feminist men's websites and social media communities known as the "manosphere" is receiving increasing attention in academia and the mainstream media. However, research into this phenomenon brings notable challenges. For example, because some manosphere communities are known for hostility or even harassment towards women, common guidance for social media research such as gaining informed consent and sharing results with the community may not be viable. In her article, she reflects on some of the major methodological and ethical challenges she has faced during the course of her PhD research into the manosphere and the ways in which her positionality as a female, feminist linguist has impacted her work. She discusses the discourse-historical approach to critical discourse studies and argues that it is a valuable, useful framework for a study of online misogyny due to its principles of triangulation and interdisciplinarity and its empowerment of the researcher to take a critical, even feminist, stance on controversial issues.

Dewhurst explores how research into nasal voice quality can be seen to split itself quite neatly into two streams. In one, we find sociolinguistic studies of nasality, based on impressionistic analyses and the perceptions and opinions of non-expert listeners. These studies form the basis of what we know about the social attitudes and motivations behind nasal voice, but often do not clearly define the empirical boundaries of what is and is not nasal. On the other side lies

the phonetic study of nasalization. This stream of research has focused on the articulatory and aerodynamic realities of nasalization, developing methods to directly measure airflow through the mouth and nose during speech, and later turning to finding acoustic correlates to accurately represent this ratio of airflow using less intrusive means. Many of these methods are quite robust but have seldom been used to observe non-laboratory speech. Crossover between the aforementioned streams of nasality research is rare but could be extremely beneficial. In this article, established approaches to studying nasal voice in sociolinguistics and phonetics are outlined and evaluated. Existing examples of research combining the two approaches are discussed and suggestions made for future study.

Fairclough presents an overview of third wave sociophonetics and forensic phonetics, aiming to point out areas of methodological and conceptual crossover, as well as discussing the prospects for applying third wave sociophonetic methods and concepts to forensic-based research and vice versa. By finding links between previous studies in the two disciplines, suggestions for collaboration are discussed, alongside relevant concerns surrounding the ethical implications of such work. Themes are also raised regarding the difference between forensic phonetic research and forensic casework, while emerging trends in both fields are presented in relation to the potential for collaboration and prospective evolution. The discussion also considers points of caution in relation to the use of sociophonetic data in forensic phonetic research. This work opens a conversation for third wave approaches in sociophonetics to be applied in forensic research and casework, while also presenting ways to bridge the gap between sociophonetic and forensic research.

Hampton, using reflections on research conducted on the speech communities of Esperanto and Emilian, focuses on methods of data collection and participant recruitment in studies on minoritized languages whose vitality partly depends on the attitudes and ideologies embodied in the community. The article is divided into two self-contained yet closely related sections. In the first part, a model for triangulation as a methodological framework for language attitude research is outlined as a theoretical contribution to the toolbox of methodologies used in the field. The model proposes a research design that includes a qualitative/quantitative method at the micro level, a qualitative/quantitative method at the meso level, and an ethnographic dimension at the individual, subjective level. The second part of the article is a discussion of the practical and theoretical implications of using Instagram and its Story function as strategies for participant recruitment, dissemination, and data collection when travelling and fieldwork are not possible, such as in times of Covid-19. The social media platform is here presented as an opportunity to reach people aged 20–30 and as therefore apt for data collection for studies interested in language attitudes.

O'Neill draws on personal experience of undertaking a Master of Research Linguistic Landscape project building on her undergraduate dissertation by investigating the impact of Covid-19 on the Linguistic Landscape of Liverpool. The article explains that, while we need to acknowledge the challenges brought about by the pandemic, the restrictions could stimulate the creation of new methodological approaches by exploring the application of autoethnographic approaches and the use of archival and remote sources. Restrictions on movement and measures to reduce potential risk for researchers and participants imposed as a result of the pandemic made the use of physical surveys and face-to-face ethnographic approaches in Linguistic Landscape research more challenging. The research community has stepped up to address these difficulties, collaborating to share suggestions including the use of online resources and interviews. However, many researchers perceive these as an unsatisfactory compromise, particularly in time-constrained projects. The article argues that these innovations may democratize Linguistic Landscape research by removing barriers created through difficulties with physical access, while the use and analysis of images in the Virtual Linguistic Landscape could create new insights into how we make meaning of place. The discussion highlights the potential for researchers to undertake unexpectedly detailed research created by this period of significant and unforeseen disruption. The article concludes by suggesting that addressing difficulties created by the pandemic may have allowed researchers to be actively involved in advancing methodological approaches.

CONCLUSION

In this Special Issue we see how Dewhurst and Fairclough advance the discussion on the desirability of bringing together combined approaches to the study of sounds, both in terms of cross-fertilization of different linguistics subfields, and in terms of synergies between linguistics and forensic research respectively. An integrated view of methodology and mediation practices characterizes both Aiston's article about the "manosphere" and Hampton's contribution about data collection and participant recruitment in the time of Covid-19. Inspired by the issues directly experienced while conducting fieldwork during lockdown, O'Neill's article discusses methodological fluidity as a necessity during lockdown, and the implementation of change in the making. While focusing on diverse research projects, this collection of articles brings to the fore key methodological issues encountered by the wider research community in the time of the pandemic and beyond, and proposes novel approaches to the study of language that advance current debates about methodologies, inter- and multidisciplinarity, and collaborative research.

FUNDING INFORMATION

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