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One size doesn't fit all: Research methodologies in a language variation study of Sudanese teens.

Abstract

Sociolinguists have long advocated for greater uniformity in research methodologies in order to provide a structured analysis that can be easily replicated and compared (De Bot & Stoessel 2002; Li Wei, Milroy & Pong 1992). However, employing standardised methodologies runs the risk of privileging methodology and replicability over flexibility. As researchers examining dynamic language use, we need to determine what is to be gained in standardising methodologies. In particular, flexibility of methodology is important when concerns of data collection, such as attention span, availability, and task comprehension come into play. This issue becomes crucial when dealing with communities in which a single data collection method, such as a questionnaire, interview, or ethnographic approach, may not be the best means for encouraging complexity to emerge. One such community is refugee teens whose language use backgrounds are complex as a result of being subject to extreme changes of circumstance.

The research reported here draws on a study of five teenagers from a Dinka-speaking community of Sudanese settling in Australia. Participants were two males and three females, and four of their parents/guardians. The paper explores how the employment of a triangular research methodology, including social network analysis, domain analysis and qualitative interviews, allows for an in-depth examination of the complex interaction of variables affecting language use. In particular, it addresses the research question: Is it desirable to standardize research methods?

Results indicate that language use patterns were divergent across the sample group of teens. For example, one teen showed a strong tendency to use Arabic, a language used commonly as a lingua franca by Sudanese, as their preferred community language. Others used Dinka but with marked inclination towards English language use. In contrast to the variable patterns of language use, however, attitudes of teens to language maintenance showed a strong and consistently positive attitude towards the maintenance of Dinka.

The study draws attention to a range of factors including language proficiency, social network structure, and language attitudes that are possible causes for the variability of language use. These are examined in the discussion which illustrates how the combination of research methods was critical to developing a full understanding of the interplay of factors influencing the teens' language maintenance and shift. This paper highlights how a triangular research approach captured the complexity of the participants' language situation in a way that no single method could. Further, it shows that the employment of different methodologies allowed for flexibility in the data collection to ensure the fullest response from participants. Overall, this research suggests that for studies of non-standard communities, it is not desirable to standardise research methods.

References:

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