Sociolinguistic Involvement in Community Perspective: Opportunity and Obligation

1. Framing Relationships with the Community
   • Traditional Principles of (Socio)linguistic Involvement
     
     **Principle of Error Correction**
     A scientist who becomes aware of a widespread idea or social practice with important consequences that is invalidated by his own data is obligated to bring this error to the attention of the widest possible audience. (Labov 1982:172)
     
     **Principle of the Debt Incurred**
     An investigator who has obtained linguistic data from members of a speech community has an obligation to use the knowledge based on that data for the benefit of the community, when it has need of it. (Labov 1982:173)
     
     **Principle of Linguistic Gratuity**
     Investigators who have obtained linguistic data from members of a speech community should actively pursue ways in which they can return linguistic favors to the community. (Wolfram 1993)

   • Researcher-Researched Relationships
     
     **Ethics**
     In ethical research, then, there is a wholly proper concern to minimize damage and offset inconvenience to the researched, and to acknowledge their contribution. But the underlying model is one of ‘research on’ social subjects. (Cameron, et al. 1992:14)
     
     **Advocacy**
     ...the ‘advocacy position’ is characterized by a commitment on the part of the researcher not just to do research on subjects but research on and for subjects... a researcher is asked to use her skills or her authority as an ‘expert’ to defend subjects’ interests... (Cameron et al. 1992:15)
     
     **Empowered Research**
     We understand ‘empowered research’ as research on, for and with. One of the things we take that additional ‘with’ to imply is the use of interactive or dialogic research methods, as opposed to the distancing or objectifying strategies positivists are constrained to use...
     (a) ‘Persons are not objects and should not be treated as objects.’
     (b) ‘Subjects have their own agendas and research should try to address them.’
     (c) ‘If knowledge is worth having, it is worth sharing.’ (Cameron et al. 22-24)

   • Rationale for Involvement
     The fundamental rationale for getting involved in application, advocacy, and empowerment is that we owe it to the people whose data fuel our theories and descriptions; but these are good things to do even if we don’t deal directly with native speakers and communities, and enacting them may help us to respond to the interests of our students and to the needs of our field. (Rickford 1999:315)
2. Sociolinguistic Partnerships and the Southern Community

- The Southern context of community
- Local speech and community consciousness
- Language and heritage
- Sociolinguistic goals and community interests

3. Products for the Community

- **Trade books and articles**
  

- **Local vocabulary pamphlets**
  
  e.g. Ocracoke, Harkers Island, Lumbee

- **Video/TV documentaries**
  
  e.g. *The Ocracoke Brogue* (Blanton and Waters 1997); *Indian by Birth: The Lumbee Dialect* (Neal Hutcheson 2000) *Hyde Talk: The Language and Land of Hyde County, North Carolina* (Benjamin Torbert 2002; *Mountain Talk* (Neal Hutcheson 2004); *Voices of North Carolina* (forthcoming 2004); *Celebrating Princeville* (Neal Hutcheson 2004); *Princeville Remembers the Flood* (forthcoming 2005 Drew Grimes); *Celebrating Muzel Bryant* (forthcoming Drew Grimes, Walt Wolfram, and Jeffrey Reaser)

- **Dialect curricula for K-12**
  

- **Compact discs**
  
  e.g. *Ocracoke Speaks* (Becky Childs and Walt Wolfram 2000); *An Unclouded Day* (Neal Hutcheson 2004)

- **Museum exhibits**
  
  e.g. “The Brogue Exhibit” at the Ocracoke Preservation Society; “The Lumbee Dialect” at the Museum of the Native American Resource Center

- **Commemorative T shirts**
  
  "Save the Brogue" T-shirt with the Ocracoke Preservation Society (1996)

- **Local, regional, and national media coverage**
  
  e.g. features on dialect death, dialect history and culture, dialect curricula, sociocultural dialects; radio show on North Carolina NPR “The State of Things”; TV features on “North Carolina Now”, etc.

4. A Mini-Case Study of an Emerging Community Partnership: Princeville Remembers the Flood

Ryan Rowe and Drew Grimes report on Princeville
5. Critical Consideration of Dialect Awareness and Preservation Programs
(from Wolfram 1998 and Wolfram 2004)
Notions such as “partnership,” “gratuity,” “collaboration,” and “benefit” are ideologically laden notions. Working out the everyday details of gratuity and negotiating community-based partnerships can often be complicated and controversial. Some of the issues that arise are:

- **Issues of Power and Authority**
  Although the members of a research team may assume a variety of situated roles and relationships as visitors, researchers, and friends, the initial and primary status in these communities was framed by our role as university-based language experts. This specialized language expertise sets up an asymmetrical relationship of authority with respect to language matters.

- **The Ethics of Persuasion and Need**
  The sociolinguistic focus on language differences is typically viewed as an oddity in most local communities. Language issues are usually not essential to local community identities, whose primary concerns are more likely to be economic and social.

- **The Commodification of Vernacular Speech**
  Sociolinguists tend to package an idealized, basilectal version of the language in their presentations of the community dialect. This representation often defies the sociolinguistic reality of language variation within the community.

- **The Issue of Socioeducational Change**
  Most sociolinguists promote an agenda of social and educational change that is at odds with mainstream language ideology. The “sociolinguists-know-best” agenda may be antithetical to the community’s desired goals with respect to language, particularly in cases where language is perceived as a weapon of oppression.

- **The Profit Issue**
  Sociolinguists profit professionally from the communities they have researched, including recognition for proactive involvement and partnerships with local communities. In what ways do communities profit from their involvement with sociolinguists?

6. Persistent Struggles in Sociolinguist-Community Relations

- **Dominant and local language ideology vs. sociolinguistic premises**
  The most persistent challenge for sociolinguists working with local communities continues to be the widespread application of the principle of linguistic subordination. Mitigating the effects of the dominant ideology involves long-term, formal and informal re-education on both a local and broad-based level.

- **Community service vs. linguistic self-interest**
  Community goals and sociolinguistic intentions may not be aligned. At best, they may be complementary; at worst, they may be in conflict. Community empowerment with respect to language is an elusive goal, if at all attainable.

- **Sociolinguistic honesty vs. community authenticity**
  It is often difficult to provide a genuine profile of a linguistically subordinate variety that the community will endorse. To what extent is it possible—and ethical—to portray a unified picture of a vernacular variety? Is it a realistic goal, and if not, what is the alternative?
References