

Pre-Workshop Project: A Questionnaire Survey

Questionnaire surveys have a long history in the study of linguistic variation particularly within the field of dialect geography. Some questionnaires are designed to be filled out by fieldworkers who pose a set of questions to respondents and record their responses. Other questionnaires are designed to be filled out by the respondents themselves who simply read the questions and write in their responses. The questionnaire methodology, particularly in the form of the written survey, provides a relatively efficient way of quickly gathering useful data from a large number of people. Nevertheless, there are limitations about the kinds of linguistic phenomena that can be profitably investigated with a questionnaire instrument. These limitations stem mostly from the fact that the data are gathered through self-reports and, thus, are influenced by psychological/perceptual and ideological effects.

This exercise offers you an opportunity to explore the use of questionnaires by designing a written survey of your own and testing it out on some respondents. Specifically you are asked to do the following:

1. Come up with a list of some linguistic variables that are likely to show some variation among the population you will sample. Try to come up with phonological as well as lexical variables, and you might also include grammatical variables. If you're stumped, I've listed some suggestions below.
2. Design survey questions to examine each linguistic variable for which it is feasible to gather data in a written questionnaire (see Milroy and Gordon 2003 for further guidance). You should write your questions in a style that makes them readily understood by a range of readers with no special training in linguistics. Also, take care to avoid biasing your results by favoring one variant over others (e.g. "What's your word for *pop*?").
3. Assemble a short questionnaire from your best ten or so items. At the top of your survey you should include some questions to gather basic demographic information about your respondents (e.g. sex, age, hometown, etc.).
4. Convince at least ten people to fill out copies of your survey. Try to get responses from as diverse group a group as you can. If possible, you should be present when your volunteers are filling out the questionnaire so that you can observe their reactions (and keep them from cheating).
5. Collate your responses and search for patterns in the data.

During the workshop we will discuss the designs of your surveys and your experiences administering them. We'll talk about which questions seemed to work well and which failed and why. Also we'll consider how your respondents approached the task in general.

Suggested linguistic variables (please don't limit yourself to these):

Lexical

- *pop* vs. *soda* etc.
- *bag* vs. *sack*
- *shopping cart* vs. *buggy*, etc.
- *teeter-totter* vs. *see-saw*
- *woodchuck* vs. *groundhog*
- *lightning bug* vs. *firefly*
- *goosebumps* vs. *goosepimples*, etc.
- *restroom* vs. *washroom*, etc.
- 10:45 =quarter *till* vs. *to* vs. *of* eleven

Phonological

- merger of /hw/ and /w/ (e.g. *which* = *witch*)
- merger of /ɑ/ and /ɔ/ (e.g. *cot* = *caught*) [NB: not likely among native Chicagoans]
- /u/ vs. /ʊ/ in *route*
- /u/ vs. /ʊ/ in *roof* or *root*
- /æ/ vs. /ɑ/ in *plaza*
- /ɔ/ vs. /ɑ/ in *on*
- /ɔ/ vs. /ɑ/ in *Chicago*
- presence vs. absence of /l/ in *palm*, *calm*, etc.
- presence vs. absence of /t/ in *often*

Grammatical

- positive *anymore* (e.g. *Most bottles are twist-off anymore.*)
- choice of past tense of *dive*
- choice of past tense of *drag*