

A Quantitative Approach to Speech Communities: Fieldwork Strategies

Rajaa Sabbar Jaber (Corresponding author)

Department of Modern Languages

College of Arts and Sciences, University Utara Malaysia

0106 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia

Tel: 60-17-498-9817 E-mail: rajaasabbar@yahoo.com

Hariharan A/I N. Krishnasamy

Department of Modern Languages

College of Arts and Sciences, University Utara Malaysia

0106 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia

Tel: 60-19-572-4666 E-mail: hn1084@uum.edu.my

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Abstract

There are various quantitative approaches that a sociolinguist may use while undertaking a research study. This paper aims at enabling researchers to identify and understand these quantitative approaches for effective data collection. These approaches which are simply referred to as fieldwork strategies are meant to give headway into the research. Fieldwork strategies help a researcher in data collection and eliciting of the right information from the sample population. Action research, surveys, case studies and experiments are used by sociolinguist researchers in research studies. The importance of these approaches in fieldwork studies differs from one another hence a researcher must choose the most appropriate approach, one which will result in the best results possible. It is undeniable that while undertaking a research work, a researcher will face several problems which may affect the valid and reliability of the research results. Some of these problems are inaccessible information resources, cost constraints, ethical, and theoretical challenges. Therefore a researcher needs to find ways of mitigating these problems, for instance properly constructed budgetary planning, or looking for funding of research work is one way of dealing with cost constraints. The quantitative approaches are however deemed central in the successful completion of research study, and hence the fieldwork strategy chosen by the researcher will be helpful in mitigating these problems.

Keywords: Speech community, Quantitative approach, Research methods, Fieldwork

1. Defining Speech Community

The human aggregate of any kind that is characterized by regular and frequent interactions through a means of a body of shared verbal signs and set off from aggregates that are similar by significant differences in the usage of language is a speech community. Most groups of any permanence whether they are small bands that is bound by face to face contact, modern nations that are divisible into smaller sub-regions, occupational associations or even neighborhood gangs may be viewed as speech communities as long as they depict peculiarities that warrant a special study (Ahearn, 2011).

The definitions of what a speech community is are many and diverse. The concept of speech community has been central in the development of empirical linguistics and has often been used as a theoretical tool by several authors. Peter Patrick in the article "Speech Community" for instance analyses the history of the speech community concept and its diverse use in linguistics, and identifying the origin of many of the problems of the concept at the linguistic intersection with social history as the communities of speech framing often stresses or

hides ideologies behind certain models of societies. Historically Leonard Bloomfield is considered as the father of the concept of speech community from his concept of utterance as an act of speech and the assumption that utterances within communities are partly alike. Other authors such as Gumperz, Duranti, Labov have expanded on this concept within the sociolinguistics field. If caution is exercised, the idea of a group of people sharing the way they speak can be useful even though these definitions may defer. When there is a strict normative position implying too much rigidity in a social structure then looser definitions should be preferred. Romaine for instance has one such definition where a speech community is defined as a group of people not necessarily sharing the same language yet sharing a set of rules and norms for the use of language. Here speech communities have boundaries between them that are more social rather than linguistic. What this definition shows is that a speech community may be diverse socially and it is not mandatory that its members share a main language but communication with each is for special purposes (Tosca, 2002)

The concept of speech community therefore implies that the significance of local knowledge and communicative competence is bound in discursive activities in that members can easily identify outsiders from insiders, those living in borderlands and contact zone, and those passing as members. There have been suggestions that the main issue of modernity is no longer identity but citizenship. This is a statement of significance especially in the study of speech communities as it immediately puts into perspective the notion of standard language and as a proof of citizenship together with the ideological, social and political forces at work that cause individuals to refuse or claim membership. The implication here is that the notion of the unconnected and isolated autonomous speech community will only be present within the confines of the most rigid linguistic science of the past. In future the linguistic science will be indebted to speakers whose existence will tie them to others in ways that will be validating their social lives at every turn. The concept of speech communities thus introduces both old and new political theories, arguments, and ideologies. This in turn introduces changes within the speech community as the implicit knowledge becomes involved in active discourse and the speech community and the subjects within it become changed by it (Duranti, 2008).

When a sociolinguist decides to research on a speech community, they must comply to the general research techniques of carrying out a research project. Therefore a speech community is no different from any other sample population under study and hence must use all tools of research to elicit the right data from the participants for a successful research project. Correct use of data collection techniques and research methods will help to minimize problems and difficulties a researcher faces when undertaking a research project.

2. Fieldwork Strategies

Any sociolinguist must use fieldwork strategies while undertaking fieldwork study and research of a given subject. Fieldwork research being an outdoor activity comes with many challenges and hence a researcher must have well laid out strategies to effectively accomplish the research work. Quantitative research is empirical as data is usually in the form of numbers and it constitutes relatively large scale and representative data sets and is commonly perceived as being about gathering of facts. Fieldwork is the process of going out for research data collection. The data collected is described as empirical or original and cannot be found without the researcher engaging in some form of expedition. Data collection in the fieldwork may involve for instance visiting a place say and interviewing specific group of individuals, handing out questionnaires to a specific target group of individuals or even observing the behavior of a given target group (Blaxter et al, 2006).

3. Approaches to Research

There are four identified approaches, or designs for researching in sociolinguistics and the social sciences. These approaches play a major role in eliciting data from the target population and they are; action research, surveys, case studies and experiments.

3.1 Action Research

This is a complex and dynamic activity which involves the best efforts of members of the institutions or communities under study and the professional researchers. It simultaneously entails the co-generation of information and analysis coupled with actions which are intended at transforming situations in directions democratically. Action research is holistic and context bound resulting in new knowledge and practical solutions as part of an integrated set of activities. Action research can therefore be summarized as a way of finding tangible and desired results for those individuals involved and is also a process of knowledge generation that gives insights for both the participants and the researchers (cited in Blaxter et al, 2006, p. 67). Action research is variously referred to as a term, enquiry, process, cyclic, and as a flexible spiral process. It lays emphasis on practical solutions of problems. Action research is carried out by individuals, educators and professionals and it entails systematic, research, critical reflection and action

Action research has distinctive characteristics that clearly set it apart from traditional research. First action research is practice based and it is known that practice is action and research. Since it is done by practitioners who consider themselves as researchers, action research can also be referred to as practitioner research, practice based research, practitioner based research or practitioner led research and sometimes it is referred to as action enquiry (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009).

Another action research characteristic is that it is about research and creation of knowledge and goes beyond professional practice. Action research goes beyond finding solutions for problems but entails finding reasons for the action concerning values, and data gathering and interpretation of the researcher so it shows the values and reasons were justified and fulfilled. This is more than just good professional practice which puts emphasis on the action yet does not raise questions for the reasons and motives of the action (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009).

Action research being collaborative with a focus on the co-creating knowledge of practices is a characteristic showing that action research is never solitary as individuals who find ways of improving what they do collaborate with others. When these individuals claim improvement of what they were doing they have to test the validity of their claims against the feedback of others that is usually critical (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009).

Another characteristic of action research is that it demands the highest order of questioning. What this means is that when the processes of reflective and dialectical critique are started by researchers they must question the underlying assumptions of their practices and social situations. It therefore implies problem posing by opening up an enquiry and not accepting things as they appear. This entails questioning at various levels often referred to as first and second order questioning. First order questioning is concerned with learning about a situation while second order questioning is about questioning the learning outcome (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009).

Action research also has a characteristic of being intentionally political, interrogating existing situations and taking action towards improvement amount to a political act. This is because what a single person invariably does will be consequential to someone else, action researchers must therefore understand that the scenarios they usually are in are potential political contests (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009).

However action research should not be used inappropriately. First it is wrong to use action research to drive through a policy or an initiative that is unpopular. Second action research should not be used in experimenting with several solutions without a careful evaluation of their soundness. It is also inappropriate to use action research in manipulating practitioners or employees to think they participated in decision making when the decision has already been made. Action research should not be used to assemble a dysfunctional team together or bolstering a flagging career as action research quickly exposes weaknesses (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009).

3.2 Case Studies

A case study is the preferred method when the phenomenon under study is not easily distinguishable from its context. A researcher in a case study will typically observe the characteristics of individual units for example a child, a class, a clique, or a community. Such observations are aimed at deeply probing and intensively analyzing the phenomena constituting the life cycle of the units with a view of establishing generalizations concerning the wider population in which these units belong. Case studies usually concentrate on special cases. Proper care should be observed when handling generalizations arising from cases studies. For case studies to serve as generalizations foundation, they should be related to a theoretical framework which may be adjusted in turn as new evidence is provided in case study results. Case study generalization can be increased by strategically selecting critical strategies (cited in Blaxter et al, 2006, p. 72).

There are several advantages associated with the use of case studies as an approach to a population under study. Case studies are seen as realities since they are data drawn from the real experiences and practices of people. They also allow generalizations from a given situation to a more general issue. Case studies also allow the researcher to depict the complex nature of social life. Furthermore extended analysis can be done on the data source provided from case studies and hence can be kept for future research work. Insights from cases studies contribute to changing practice as case studies are based on actual experiences and practices and are linked to action (cited in Blaxter et al, 2006, p. 74).

3.3 Experimental Research

Another approach to a population under study is through the use of experiments. An effective experiment must closely approach certainty in a research study about the relationship between the dependent and the independent variables. The purpose of carrying out an ideal experiment is basically to establish whether conclusions can be drawn from the findings that the independent variable is not or is the only cause of a change in the dependent

variable. However it is noteworthy that some research studies do not have independent variable (Grinnell & Unrau, 2008).

Since an ideal experiment attempts at establishing a cause and effect relationship by showing how a change in one variable is responsible for a change in the other variable, it can only accomplish this through its four elements. Manipulation is one element of an experimental study where one variable is manipulated by the researcher by changing its value so that two or more sets of treatment conditions are created. The second element is measurement where for a group of participants a second variable is measured to get a set of scores for each treatment condition. The third element of experimental study is comparison where the scores of one treatment condition are compared to the set scores of another treatment condition. The fourth element is control, this call for control of all other variables so that they do not influence the variables under study (Gravetter & Forzano, 2011). Using experiments has many advantages. First through the randomization of extraneous variables there is minimal risk of the extraneous variables confounding the results. Another advantage is that controlling the introduction and variation of the variables helps in clarifying the direction of cause and effect. The modern design of experimental studies is advantageous as it allows for more flexibility, efficiency and powerful manipulation of statistics. Experimental research is perhaps the only research design which in principle yields causal relationships (cited in Blaxter et al, 2006, p. 77).

3.4 Survey Research

There are several definitions of what a survey is a survey is simply a description of a population as it involves the counting and describing what is out there in the field (Sapsford, 2006).

Other comprehensive definitions of survey put it as a systematic way of information gathering from a sample of entities aimed at collecting quantitative descriptors of the larger population's attributes in which the entities are members. The use of the word systematic is deliberate and meaningful in distinguishing surveys from other ways of collecting information (Groves et al, 2011).

There are four basic developments forming the core of the modern method of sample survey. Sampling is one such development where representative samples are drawn from the human populations whose observed behaviors provide estimates without bias of the behaviors of those populations. The second is inference which allows sample statistics to be generalized within calculable margins of error to estimate population parameters. The third is measurement which is about asking questions and strategies of writing questionnaires to elicit answers that are both valid and reliable concerning a wide variety of subjects. The fourth is analysis where data analysis techniques enable complex statistical relationships within several variables be easily estimated (Marsden & Wright, 2010).

Survey in early times was mainly done for the reason of gaining an understanding of a social problem (Groves et al, 2011). However with the several advantages associated with survey research researchers are bound to continue carrying out survey. Advantages of survey research include though not limited to the following; first is that with appropriate samples, surveys produce generalized results as they may aim at representation. A second advantage is that administering surveys is relatively easy and usually does not require fieldwork. They can be repeated in future or they can be done in a different setting so that comparison can be made. The fourth advantage is that surveys can generate a lot of data quite easily and quickly (Blaxter et al, 2006).

4. Problems faced when collecting data

It is noteworthy that the quantitative approaches discussed above pose a dilemma to the researcher in terms of which is the most suitable approach that will ensure effectiveness and efficiency in collecting valid and reliable data. However the actual concerns are the problems researchers face when collecting data for research.

One major problem faced by researchers is that of being unable to access of information resources such as digital, print or other forms of resources. The main reasons why such problems arise are electronic unavailability of particular volumes and back files of particular journals. There is also the case of the library not being licensed to access the content probably due to limited funds to purchase the license or because it could not meet license acquisition criteria. There are also technical limitations like authentication problems/log in or off site access and proxy server problems. The of problem information resources inaccessibility negatively impacts researchers as they cause delays in research are inconvenient and disruptive to workflow. Researchers might lose their thread hence must revisit to adjust research later and there are instances where they forget to adjust the research (Research Information Network, 2009).

Information may also be inaccessible because of restrictions on intellectual property due to copyrights, information held by public corporations may not be readily available to the public, corporate bodies may also

restrict access to information they possess due to information sensitivity for commercial or other reasons. An individual's information may also in some cases be subject privacy restrictions.

There is also the problem of time wastage faced in retrieving research material. Valuable research time may be spent on the materials rather than the relevant information. This may be heightened by several factors like poor library management and functionality in easily availing materials forcing researchers to use their time and efforts to trace out books, journals and reports instead of tracing out the relevant material from them. Secretarial incompetence in adequately and timely providing assistance to researchers causes unwarranted delays in research studies completion (Kothari, 2008).

Another major problem that may be faced by researcher is of cost constraints, it is widely known that research is very often expensive and if a research has a small budget yet desires high quality research work then the research may have to be funded. Take an example of interview or questionnaire administering. There are costs incurred that require the research to be well funded and strategized to minimize costs. Multi mode methods of administration may be used when recruiting suitable sample. Researchers may use the internet to administer interviews and questionnaires to minimize the costs of face to face interviews, while telephone or postal surveys could be used to reach respondents widely scattered to save on travel costs (Vaus, 2002). When writing a budget plan for the research project most costs are estimates, as the actual research cost will depend on how complex the desired sample, how long the research will take to conclude, and what time of the year the research is being conducted and together with a variety of other factors the projected budgetary allocations may be exceeded (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). This may be problematic to the researcher as it may limit the researcher's ability to fully carry out a comprehensive research study that will be conclusive and whose results will be valid and reliable.

Another problem faced by researchers is about research ethics. The participants in research studies have a right to informed consent. The informed consent principle entails the implication that individuals should be fully informed concerning the research process even if the individuals know they are being requested to participate in the research (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Researcher participant may jeopardize research results especially when they realize they are being studied when they change their usual behaviors. The principle of informed consent has it that if a participant is harmed in the course of research without prior consent then the researcher is more liability than if the participant was informed fully about the research. This is problematic to the researcher as consent jeopardizes the reliability and validity of research findings while non-disclosure may bring unforeseen problems in form of claims of damages from participants (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

There is also the issue of theoretical challenges. As soon as the first data are collected, a researcher engages in data analysis in grounded theory which helps in direct on-going sampling. Where fieldwork trips are intensive and working on a timeline there may be difficulties in data collection and fully analyzing the data. Sometimes due to mix-ups a researcher may not have sufficient time to fully cover fieldwork studies and do data analysis almost simultaneously (Somekh & Lewin, 2011).

5. Conclusion

It is therefore imperative that when researchers embark on a research project they choose approaches that are appropriate / relevant to their speech communities. It is from the approach chosen that will determine how valid and reliable the research outcome will be. As discussed each research approach has different techniques of eliciting data from sample populations, and hence each approach has its own shortcomings too. Therefore, the best approach should be chosen to lessen the problems that a researcher may likely encounter during the research study.

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