

On the Importance of Standardized Word List Data in Dialectology Research

Word list citation data in modern sociolinguistics has been disfavored because they are claimed to heighten a speaker's attention to their language, thereby detracting from "natural" speech (Labov, 1972). However, word list data serve several major functions that render its collection vital to the methods of phonetic dialectology.

For example, word list data provide a base-line standard across all speakers in a study. Since phonetic features show sensitivity to, and vary by, surrounding phonetic context, word list citations are one way to obtain an equally representative sample of the features under investigation (a notion supported by, e.g., Habick, 1980; Kerswill, 1994; Gordon, 2001). Additionally, since word list data often contain multiple repetitions of the same words (e.g., Peterson & Barney, 1952), possible systemic changes can be partially disentangled from cases of lexical diffusion.

Furthermore, the premise that word list citations heighten a speaker-subject's attention to his or her speech allows their use as *ipso facto* perceptual tests of phonological categories. This provides an especially important source of data when considering mergers of phonological categories or the occurrence of intermediate varieties (mixed, fudged, or scrambled lects in Chambers & Trudgill, 1980) in cases of dialect contact.

This talk presents data from emerging adult speakers (Arnett, 2000) in a dialect contact setting (Trudgill, 1986) at a U.S. university. The THOUGHT and LOT vowels (Wells, 1982), as produced by speakers of the South Midland and Northern Cities American English dialects, are considered. These vowel categories are often merged in South Midland speech, but remain distinct in Northern Cities speech (Labov, 2001).

The data show that, when considering "natural" (i.e., conversational) speech only, the merger pattern appears to be "undone"—LOT and THOUGHT seem to partially unmerge—among South Midland speakers as contact with Northern Cities speakers increases. However, when word list data are considered, we see that the apparent category targets of LOT and THOUGHT remain merged and that the phonetic details that distinguish LOT from THOUGHT for Northern Cities speakers are absent for South Midland speakers.

References:

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