

Minority Report

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In this study we attempt to assess the existence of biases arising from the geographical locations of research institutions, and their effect on empirical study in the field of language variation and change (LVC). A consequence of such biases is that the literature on variation and change tends to be clustered around particular varieties (Trudgill and Watts, 2002). Bias like this can lead to gaps in the data and hence casts doubt on broader conclusions drawn about the principles of LVC. This paper sets out a novel methodology, aiming to understand some of the possible biases present in our research, beginning with varieties of English spoken in England.

Our research question is: which of the following factors affect a variety's likelihood of being studied?

- geographical distance from a university with a Linguistics department
- presence of a locally focussed corpus
- association with higher or lower social/income status
- whether the area it is associated with is suburban, metropolitan, or rural

To answer this question, systematic literature searches (Lefebvre et al., 2019) are used to estimate the frequencies of studies on different varieties of English (dependent variable). Independent variables are measured using systematic online searches and online geographical measurements (more methods and analysis details can be found at: <https://osf.io/bp3es>). Studies returned from searches are coded for date, content, and methods, and only studies published between 1982 (Wells, 1982) and 2019, assessing sociophonetic change in apparent time, are included, so that we are assessing bias in studies that use similar methods and theoretical approaches.

This study will allow researchers in LVC to assess the existence of bias in current datasets, and will aid the direction of future research efforts towards a better understanding of the principles of language variation and change.

References

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