

5.4.2 How many speakers is 'enough'?

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Usually sociolinguists who intend to do quantitative analyses of variation try to collect corpora that sample (relatively) evenly across the most relevant social categories in the community where they are working. It's hard to give one answer to 'How many speakers is enough?' because it depends on two things: what linguistic features you are interested in investigating, and what kinds of generalizations you hope to be able to make in the end.

For example, some phonetic features occur very frequently, and you can obtain a lot of data that is linguistically quite rich in even a relatively small sample of speakers. If the researcher's primary interest is to be able to make generalizations about linguistic structure, a small sample will probably suffice. Conversely, some syntactic variables occur rarely, and hardly at all in interview contexts. For instance, interviewees seldom question an interviewer, so a study of spontaneous interrogatives is unlikely to be well served by recordings of one-on-one sociolinguistic interviews. Recording multi-party conversations among friends and family members is likely to be a more useful source of data. Another strategy for ensuring that plenty of tokens of a low-frequency linguistic feature are collected is to record a large number of speakers for as long as possible. It is common for sociolinguists to repeatedly record the same people (repeat interviewing or recording is another means for reducing the observer's paradox, since speakers tend to be more relaxed in later encounters with recording equipment).

If you want to be able to generalize about the trends or preferences among groups of speakers, it is useful to have five or six speakers that fit into each of your target social categories. So if your primary interest is whether or not there is a change taking place in the speech community, a sample of speakers stratified by age is needed. Typically, sociolinguistic fieldwork will involve recording five or six younger, five or six middle-aged, and five or six older speakers. However, if the primary interest of the project is level of education (perhaps it is hypothesized that certain variants are used as markers of prestige or authority), the research might involve recording five or six speakers with primary education (or less), the same number with secondary education, and the same again with some post-secondary.

Of course, if the research questions hypothesize that there is an interaction between age and level of education, then the number of people that have to be recorded increases factorially. For example, to ask the question 'Do people with more education in today's community (i.e. younger speakers) talk like people with less education in the past (i.e. older speakers)?' requires a structured sample of five or six speakers in each of subgroup representing those intersections, i.e. six younger primary educated; six middle-aged primary educated; six older primary educated, etc. If gender is added into the picture (e.g. 'Do younger men with more education in today's community talk like men with less education in the past?'), then the sample size needs to be even larger, e.g. $2 \times 3 \times 2$ (education, age, gender).

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5.4.3 Overcoming the 'observer's paradox'

The observer's paradox is triggered in an interview situation by: (i) the presence of someone in the role of fieldworker, (ii) the presence of the recording device, and (iii) the task itself. For these reasons, sociolinguistic fieldwork uses several methods for mitigating the effects of the observer's paradox in an interview. These include modifying the number of people in an interview, the kinds of topics discussed, and the activity.

Fieldwork frequently attempts to avoid the formality of a one-to-one interview by increasing the number of interviewees. In fieldwork in Osaka, Strycharz (2011) usually invited more than one person to participate in a conversation. This meant there was more interaction between participants themselves rather than between the interviewer and the participants, and hence more casual speech. This was perhaps particularly important since Strycharz is an obvious outsider to the community, and (though fluent) is a non-native