

Evidence of Lexical Variation in the Philadelphia Deaf Community

Heather Hamilton and Julie A. Hochgesang

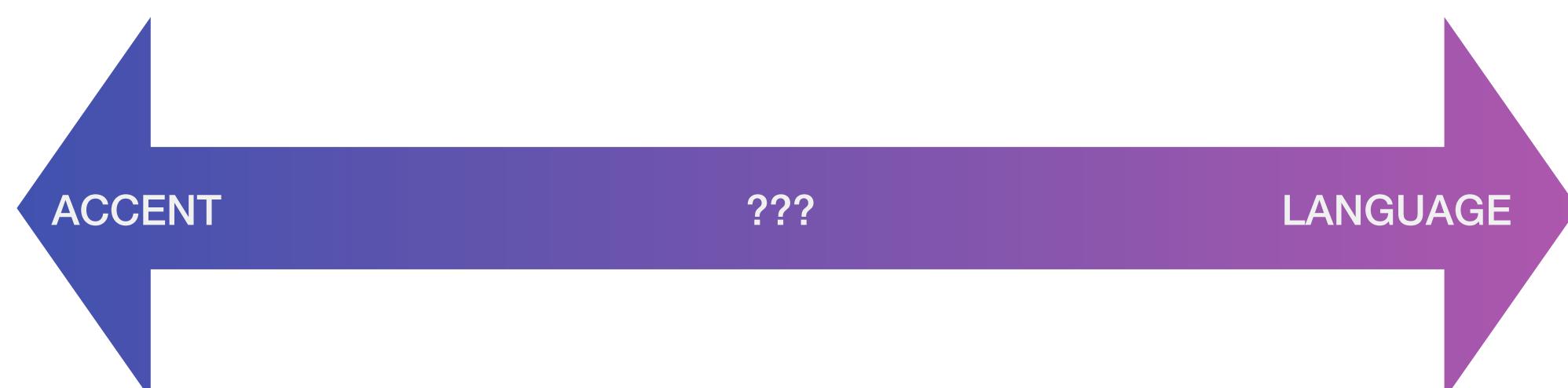


DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS

Introduction

The Philadelphia Signs Project is a language documentation of the ASL variety considered to be unique to the Philadelphia Deaf community, and is aligned with one of the main aims of the project: what distinguishes the Philadelphia ASL variety from other varieties of ASL? We start by looking at lexical variation, which has been studied for ASL across various sociological factors, such as region, race, and gender (e.g., Lucas et al. 2001 and 2003; Hill et al. 2015) as well as other signed languages (e.g., Stamp et al. 2015). This is the first ASL lexical variation study on Philadelphia signs. The goal here is not to prove that the Philadelphia Deaf community has or does not have a dialect or accent, but to examine how this accent is perceived by users of ASL and whether their perceptions can be used to quantify the accent.

Interview by Philadelphia Signs Deaf interviewer with Deaf Philadelphian participant



Accent? Dialect? Language

There is no clean-cut way to distinguish between a dialect (or accent) and a language (Wei, 2000). If a group of people use a language variety that is different from other varieties, the variation has social meaning (Coupland & Jaworski, 2009). The Philadelphia Deaf community has a language variety that has been anecdotally reported by signers from Philadelphia and from other regions as a dialect. If the community considers their language variety a dialect or an accent of ASL, then we, too, consider it a dialect or accent of ASL (Harris et al. 2009).

Questions

- * How is the anecdotally reported Philadelphia accent perceived by ASL users, both by those from Philadelphia and by those from other regions in the United States?
- * How do their perceptions inform us on the Philadelphia accent?
- * Can the Philadelphia accent be quantified?



Philadelphia ASL signs included in the online survey

Methodology

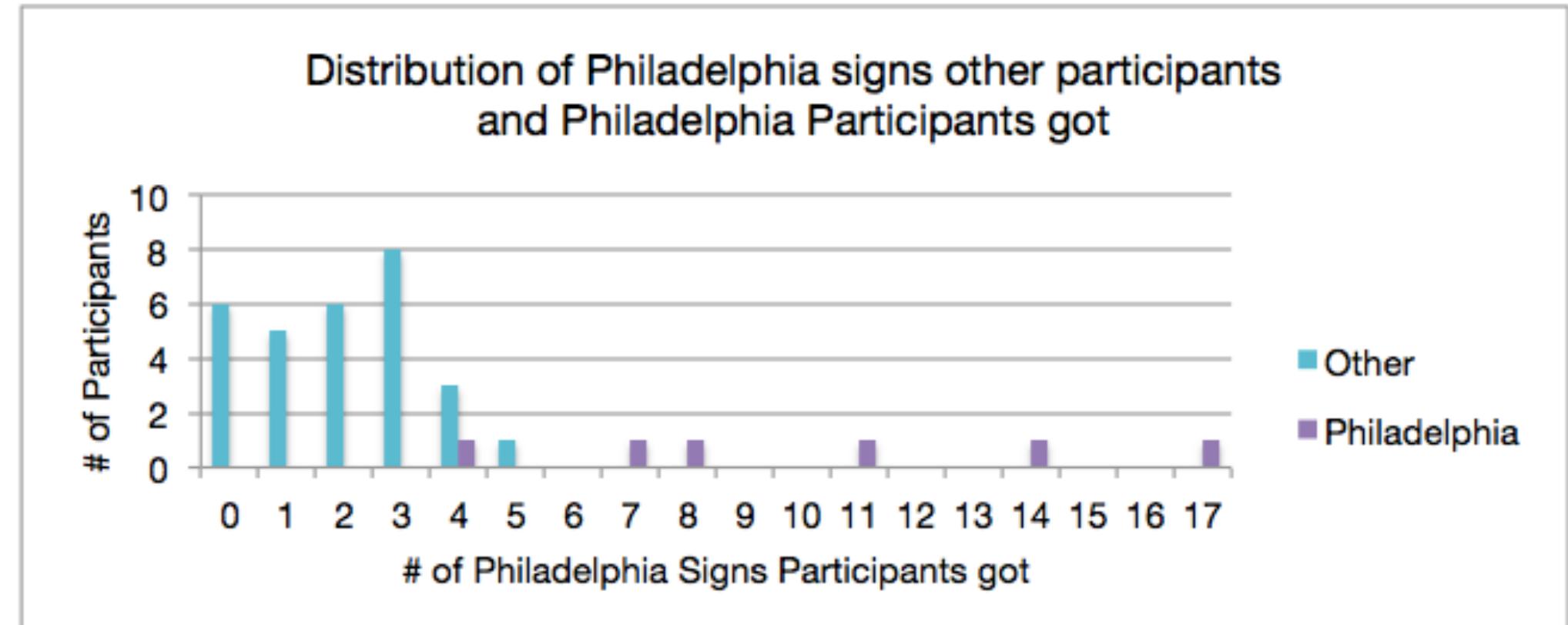
Modeled after the subjective frequency ratings used in the ASL-LEX project (Caselli et al. 2015), the first published lexical database of ASL.

Online survey showed a mix of Philly signs (taken from the Philadelphia Signs Project) and non-Philly signs

Participants were asked to rate from 1-7 for the following questions: Seen before? Know? Use? They were also asked to give a English translation.



Results



Philadelphia Signs

On average, Philadelphia participants got* 10 of the 23 Philadelphia signs while other participants got 2 of the 23 Philadelphia signs. The # of Philadelphia signs each Philadelphian participant got is significantly different ($p<0.05$) than the other participants got. No significant difference between the Philadelphia participants and the other participants for ASL signs. The majority of Philadelphia participants got HOSPITAL, TRUCK, ICE-CREAM, BOSS, APRIL, PARK, CANDY, and SPECIAL. The only signs that the majority of other participants also got were HOSPITAL and CANDY.

Non-target translations

The participants translated the sign as a phonologically similar sign. The participants translated the sign with a different meaning that does not have a similar phonological form known to the research team - suggests that the Philadelphia regional variety is not on the phonological level.

Indexing

Of the signs that the majority of Philadelphia participants got, the majority of Philadelphia participants who got them also use the sign themselves while most of the other participants who got those signs reported not using those signs themselves.

Intended Philadelphia meaning	PARK	OF-COURSE	SPECIAL	PERMIT	TRUCK
Translated as (#provided translation) * - includes Philadelphia participant(s)	PERFUME (5)*	GLAD (2)	EXPENSIVE/DEBT (2)	GROSS (2)	TRASH (2)

Conclusions

Participants from Philadelphia perceive Philadelphia signs differently than the other participants.

When other participants report recognizing but not using the sign indicates they associate that sign use with a community to which they do not belong.

Philadelphia participants recognized the Philadelphia signs significantly more and reported using those signs much more than the other participants, which is evidence supporting a Philadelphia accent at least on the lexical level.

Non-target translations suggest that the Philadelphia regional variety is not on the phonological level.