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Navigating the Observer's Paradox: Effective Strategies for Sociolinguistic Research

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Abstract: ***The Observer's Paradox, a fundamental challenge in sociolinguistic research, arises from the potential alteration of language behavior in the presence of researchers, leading to an incomplete and biased representation of natural language use. This abstract provides an overview of strategies for mitigating the Observer's Paradox, drawing on recent developments in the field. By exploring innovative methods such as sociolinguistic interviews, remote data collection, and participant observation, researchers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of language variation and social dynamics. Additionally, this abstract emphasizes the importance of reflexive and ethical considerations in addressing the paradox, encouraging researchers to adopt a holistic approach that combines multiple strategies to obtain more accurate and authentic sociolinguistic data. Successfully navigating the Observer's Paradox can ultimately lead to richer insights into language variation and its societal implications.***

Keywords: Sociolinguistic, Observer's Paradox, Language, Researcher.

1. INTRODUCTION

Though observer's paradox is largely a methodological matter than a theoretical one, it is appropriate that one locates it within its larger theoretical base. Hence, this piece puts it within the borders of sociolinguistics as a branch of functional linguistics. Hudson (2001:1) succinctly describes sociolinguistics as "the study of language in relation in society". Holmes (2013:1) provides a more extensive discussion of sociolinguistic thus: Sociolinguists study the relationship between language and society. They are interested in explaining why we speak differently in different social contexts, and they are concerned with identifying the social functions of language and the ways it is used to convey social meaning. Examining the way people use language in different social contexts provides a wealth of information about the way language works, as well as about the social relationships in a community, and the way people convey and construct aspects of their social identity through their language.

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The objectives of sociolinguistics include explications of differences in speech patterning both on the temporal and spatial planes, individual and group identity marking through language, differences among speech communities, patterns of societal and individual bilingualism, role of language in social conflicts escalation and de-escalation and the relationship among researchers, data collection and sources of data (Coupland and Jaworski, 2002:482). Scholars have identified two broad branches of sociolinguistics: microsociolinguistics and macrosociolinguistics. Microsociolinguistics explicates the subjects of language variation, language change and language contact phenomena. Microsociolinguistics accounts for the range of social and cultural factor which undergird language variation, change and contact. Some of the factors determining language variation include region and ethnic affiliation, social class, gender, age, occupation, identity, ideology etc. Regional or geographical varieties are studied under the armpit of regional dialectology while the intersection between social correlate like class, gender, age, occupation, identity and ideology get explicated within the borders of social dialectology (Haynes, 1980).Macrosociolinguistics delves into the domain of language use within institutional frameworks; it is contains subjects such as diglossia (the assignment of role to languages in speech communities), social stratification, group relations, language planning, language standardisation, language codification, language modernisation, language attitude, language shift, language death, language maintenance, language policy and related matters (Hartig, 1980).

A number of theoretical perspectives exist within the borders of sociolinguistics. The major ones include ethnography of communication, interactional sociolinguitics, deficit hypothesis, Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and variationist sociolinguistics. Ethnography of communication responded directly to the Chomskyan formalist and mentalist conception of linguistics in the 1960s and 1970s as a function-oriented approach to language studies. In response to the idea of linguistic competence in Chomskyan grammar, Dell Hymes developed the notion of communicative competence. Communicative competence encompasses linguistic competence, social appropriateness of linguistic expressions, pycholinguistic limitations and actual language use (Coupland and Jaworski, 2006:22). Dell Hymes goes further to state that language users display their communicative competence by adapting their language use to the context. This made him to conceive the three units of analysis: speech situation, speech event and speech act. Speech situations refer to communicative events not necessarily governed by rules of speaking, speech events are communicative activities which are primary governed by communicative rule while speech acts mean the units of actions performed in a speech event. Speech event is the central unit of analysis and every speech event comprises situation, participants, ends, acts, key, instrumentalities, norms of interaction andgenres (Coupland and Jaworski, 2006:22-23).

Interactional sociolinguistics, which foundational ideas came from Erving Goffman, John Gumperz and Dell Hymes concerns itself with analysing moments of language use and takes the social constructivist view social meanings are constructed in discourse. The central stance is that “sociocultural knowledge does not exist simply in values and judgements that are outside interactions but that such knowledge is contained within interactions themselves and

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are signified through contextualisation cues" (Baker and Ellece, 2011:61). The central concepts in interactional sociolinguistics are miscommunication, contextualisation cues and conversational inferencing. Basil Beinstein's deficit hypothesis holds that the socio-economic backgrounds of children determine their language facilities and eventual success in school (Grainger and Jones, 2013).

Locating Observer's Paradox in Variationist Sociolinguistics

The idea of observer's paradox is essentially located in William Labov's variability theory or variationist sociolinguistics.One can trace the history of the variationist approach to sociolinguistics back to the 1960s when William Labov and Uriel Weinreich developed a theory of language change through such notable publications as Labov (1966), Labov (1972), Wolfram and Fasold (1974) etc. Citing Weinreich, Labov and Herzog (1968:17),Tagliamonte(2006:2) presents the nexus of variationistsociolinguistic by asserting that the "The normal condition of the speech community is a heterogeneous one … Moreover, this heterogeneity is an integral part of the linguistic economy of the community, necessary to satisfy the linguistic demands of every-day life". This branch of sociolinguistics emerged as a reaction to the formal theories of language that attempted to determine the structure of language as a fixed set of rules or principles. On its own, variationist sociolinguistics looks at the way linguistic forms are organized while "simultaneously gazing the other way at their social significance" (Guy 1993:223).Tagliamonte (2006:5) aptly defines variationist sociolinguistics as "… the branch of sociolinguistics which studies the foremost characteristics of language in balance with each other- linguistic structure and social structure; grammatical meaning and social meaning- those properties of language which require reference to both external (social) and internal (systemic) factors in their explanation".

Labov (1972:17) identifies three notions that form the basis of variationist sociolinguistics: inherent variation, constant change and pervasive social meaning. Labov recognizes an inner kind of heterogeneity in every language. A speaker has a continuum of choices ranging from one level of language analysis to the others. But he and his colleagues underscore the orderly form of such heterogeneity. It is not just random but structured. The idea of constant change is based on the idea of language being in a constant state of flux. Language keeps changing along both the temporal and the spatial axes. By language expressing pervasive social meanings, variationistspoints attention to the fact that every speaker uses language to assert and negotiate their identity. Patterns of language usually convey important extralinguistic information abouta speaker's age, sex, social stratum etc.

There are a number of key concepts in variationist sociolinguistics. One of such theoretical constructs is the vernacular. Labov (1972:208) defines it as ''the style in which minimum attention is given to the monitoring of speech". It is essentially the real language in use, the kind of "spontaneous speech reserved for intimate or casual situations'' (Poplack, 1993:252, cited in Tagliamonte, 2006:8). Speech community is another construct in the theory. Since, variationist sociolinguistics values the unmonitored speech behaviour of subjects in its researches; the analyst is expected to immerse herself in the speech community so as to get

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the best of vernacular forms. It is recommended that he enters it both as an observer and as a participant.

Form/function asymmetry constitutes another concept in variationist sociolinguistics. This conceptrecognises the existence of instability between linguistic forms and their functions. Different forms may be noticed to have the same function. The drive of variation analysis is to pinpoint the form/function interfaces and explain how and why they come into existence.One other very central construct in variationist sociolinguistics is the linguistic variable. It is built on the observation that language is inherently variable. "Some variation is accidental and transitory; it may arise from the mechanical limitation of the speech organs … and may not be fully under the speaker's control. Other more systematic variations represent options speakers may consciously or unconsciously choose" (Llamas 2005, cited in Llamas et al. (2007:224)). A choice between two or more variants represents the existence of a linguistic variable. A variable houses variants.As an example, if speakers of a dialect of English variously realize [o] as [əu], [ɒ], [ɔ:] and [uə], [o] is the variable while the rest are the variants.

Linguistic variables are never selected arbitrarily.Labov (1966:166) gives four criteria for selecting a linguistic variable. A selected variable must be high in frequency, have certain immunity from conscious suppression, be an integral point of a larger structure and be easily quantified on a linear scale. Linguistic variables are the dependent variables, and as dependent variables, they must consist of a choice between two or more specified sounds, words or structures, and the choice must recur repeatedly in discourse. The principle of accountability, as discussed in Labov (1966), complements these conditions for the choice of a linguistic variable. The principle of accountability dictates that every variant that is part of the variable context, whether the variants are realized or unrealized in the system, must be taken into account. Hence, an analyst does not just study novel or unusual variants. It is imperative for them to consider any chosen variants in the context of the subsystem of which it is apart. It is only through this they gain access to the function of such a variant within the language's grammar.

Even when the following conditions have been strictly observed; the variationist approach still goes further to ensure a systematic exploration of linguistic variation with the idea of circumscribing the variable context. Tagliamonte (2006:13), citing Labov (1969a:728-729), states the procedure for circumscribing the context of a variable. An analyst must identify the total population of utterances in which the feature varies and decide on how many variants can be reliably identified.

Linguistic variables are not entirely homogeneous. The theory recognizes different levels of salience for any variable. There are indicators, markers and stereotypes. Indicators are variables of which only the linguist is aware. The speakers are unaware of such, and they are not subject to style shifts. Stereotypes are variables that all members of the speech community are aware of.The point of difference in the awareness is just that such are archaic

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and often given wrong perceptions.Markers are mostly recognized as variables by speakers and are subject to style shifts (Llamas 2007:6).

Certain aspects of the social or linguistic context constrain the variable. In the literature of variationist sociolinguistics, these are called factors. These factors influence the choice of linguistic variables and are equally considered in the reading of such. The internal or linguistic factors exist within the structures of the language. Examples of such internal factors in relation to phonological variation are the effects of sequential articulations on the production of segments and the effect of their positions within words or syllables. Even the interaction of the phonological component with other aspects of the grammar of a language and instances of interference where a speaker has access to grammars of more than one language or dialect bring about grammatical constraints on phonological variation

Apart from the language-internal factors that constrain variation, geographical and social backgrounds of the language users also limit it. Speakers usually use the geographical variety of the area in which they live. Apart from the geographical location, social indices like gender, social class, age, speaking style, etc. condition language variation. Tagliamonte(2006) provides a comprehensive review of these factors. Since it is the mechanisms which link the extra-linguistic with patterned linguistic diversity which are the goals of social understanding, Labov'svariabilityconcept links the observed linguistic patterns with prevailing social patterns.

Since variationist sociolinguistics locates the connection between social class and language use, it is expedient to briefly discuss the notion of social class. Social classes refer to broad groups into which people can be categorized. Theorizing social classes started with Karl Marx about 150 years ago. Marx found the nexus between social structure and the position of individuals in relation to the means of production. Capitalists own the means of production while proletariats sell their labour to the capitalists. This theory adequately picture the circumstances in the mid-Victorian industrial Britain. After Marx's classic conflict model came Weber's idea on social stratification and functionalism. Weber agrees with Marx's position but goes further to note that some forms of economic disparities have nothing to do directly with property ownership. Rather, the differences are occasioned by differences in skills, education and qualifications. These indices in turn determine an individual's status which itself is marked by housing, dress, manner of speech, occupation etc.

In correlating linguistic variation with certain social indices,variationist sociolinguistics has developed ageneral procedure. They observe variation in language use; select the linguistic variable for study; determine the points of variation; make a systematic exploratory observation to determine the inventory of forms, the patterns of forms, their time of occurrence and the circumstances in which they occur, the group of speakers that use the variants and how; test hypotheses and interpret the social and linguistic variable patterns (Tagliamonte 2012). At the point of data collection, it is important to ensure that the utterances are natural. Recording devices should be out of sight, the informant should be allowed to lead the discussion, and the researcher needs to display a relaxed demeanour.

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Apart from these general tips on the methodology of the variationist approach, another important point is the use of quantitative analysis. The quantitative means make it possible to statistically assess the relationship between the dependent variable and the independent variables. Variationist sociolinguists usually use the statistical tool of logistic regression using such software packages as the VariableRuleProgram (VARBRUL), Goldvarb 2.0 and Goldvarb X. The one to guide our quantitative analysis in this study will be the latest version of VARBUL, which is VARBRUL 3M. This latest model makes it possible to account for multinomial choices. Sankoff (1988c:984), cited in Tagliamonte (2006:131), gives the three pre-requisites for variable rule analysis. The analyst must perceive that there is a choice between two or more specified sounds, words or structures during performance, the choice must be seemingly haphazard based on known parameters and the choice must occur repeatedly in discourse. Without these conditions, it may be difficult to make the required statistical inferences.

Theoretical Framework

Interactional Sociolinguistics: This theory focuses on the study of language in context and emphasizes the importance of understanding how language is used in real social interactions. Researchers employing this approach often conduct detailed analyses of conversations and examine how language is influenced by social factors.

2. METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative and descriptive work. And the methodology involves the detailed examination of naturally occurring conversations to understand the organization and structure of talk. It can be useful in addressing the Observer's Paradox as it often relies on recorded interactions that can be analyzed later.

Strategies for Overcoming Observer' Paradox in Sociolinguistic Research

William Labov formulated the observer's paradox (otherwise known as the 'experimenter effect') in his argument that what was most important was for sociolinguists to observe and study was 'unobserved' data. Llamas et al. (2007:224) describes it as "The fact that the presence of a researcher will change the language data that are produced in the context being observed".Unobserved data refer to natural speech which has not been tainted by research participants' reticence or reluctance as a result of the presence of the researcher. In the citation below from Labov (1972:86), 'unobserved data' is otherwise referenced as 'casual speech' or 'spontaneous speech': By casual speech, in a narrow sense, we mean the everyday speech used in informal situations, where no attention is directed to language. Spontaneous speech refers to a pattern used in excited, emotionally charged speech when the constraints of a formal situation are overridden. We do not normally think of "spontaneous" speech as occurring in formal contexts: yet, as we will show, this frequently happens in the course of the interview. Spontaneous speech is defined here as the counterpart of casual speech which does occur in formal contexts, not in response to the formal situation, but in spite of it.

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This section examines some techniques that have been tested in the literature which one can deploy to overcome observer's paradox in a sociolinguistic research such as determining social dialects using social stratification in the United States of America and the United Kingdom.

First, in some previous studies which explicated social varieties, researchers have left their recording instruments with their research participants with the request that they should record themselves when discussing certain subjects. In such an instance, the researcher, who is a field worker, is absent. This has been found to have reduced the observer's paradox as attested to in Docherty et al. (1997) and Stuart-Smith (1999.) The major disadvantage of this technique is that the participants still live with the awareness of recording themselves and this may affect their discourse contributions.

Second, others have also introduced the sociolinguistic interview which may in the forms of loosely structured interviews or questionnaire on a particular topic meant to elicit informal or casual speech from the respondents or informants. A sociolinguistic interview is in-depth but nor formal; it is stripped of informality so that the level of power asymmetry between the researcher and the informant is minimised or almost erased so that the interviewee engages in less monitoring of their own speech and styles. One encounters the usage of this technique in Labov (1972).

Third, just as in Labov (1972), scholars have suggested lessening the rate of formality of sociolinguiticinterviews through the introduction of emotionally-charged topics. Such topics must be affectively absorbing enough for the respondents to the extents that they would be momentarily emotionally involved in the discussion that they forget being observed.Labov (1972) is a Lower East Side study in which William Labov used questions on the danger of death to elicit unmonitored responses from the interviewees. In this study, the interviewees were made to recount their near-death experiences. Other kinds of topics that have been used include recounting childhood memories and discussing while playing favourite games. Some other studies like Wolfram and Fasold(1974) and Labov(1984) were cited in Llamas (2007) as having used elicited information on attitudinal dispositions to things and events and feelings about identities, ideological orientations andaffiliations.

Another contemporary method which can be used is giving an informant the possible contents of a sociolinguistic interview before the actual interview. This has the effect of lessening feelings of unease which may impact the interviews' contents. One instrument which can deployed before the actual encounter is the Sense Relation Network (SRN) which contains words or expressions for which an informant is expected to provide the local variants and their attendant connotative meanings, social motivation for variation, etymologies, geographical extent of usage and collocation patterns.

Peer group interview has also been suggested as strategy for controlling observer's paradox. A more contemporary tag for this is Focus Group Discussion (FDG). An FDG is usually constituted by five to ten members that engage in a group interview for a defined length of time. The researcher joins the group as a moderator but is careful enough not to interject too

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often or dominate the interaction. Before an FDG, a pre-interview is done with the group to assess the challenges that may arise in the course of the interview, share the focus of the interview and the possible benefits the interviewee will derive from the interview. When well-organised, FDGs stimulate or activate the informality of everyday conversations since the discussants are peers and there is no defined unequal power distribution among them. However, some other scholars like Cheshire (1986) slanted the use of FDG slightly by not setting up any peer group but locating natural peer groups and recording their spontaneous interactions, of course, with permission.

Another possible technique one can utilise was used in Cukor-Avila and Bailey (1995). In the course of their sociolinguistic fieldwork at Sprinville, Central Texas, they developed an approach that shifted attention away from the field workers to the sites of interactions. They recorded interactions at certain sites and did not focus on the individual interlocutors. In addition, they engaged in shifting their own roles as interlocutors in the speech events to becoming auditors and overhearers so as to exterminate their own influence on the data collection process. Following Bell's (1984:159) definition of interlocutor's roles, an auditor is ratified, present and known in a speech event but not directly addressed but an overhearer is known but not ratified.

Finally, to reduce observer's paradox, researchers can deeply triangulate the collected data in the process of data analysis and interpretation. Patton (1999) conceives triangulation to represent the deployment of multiple means of data collection so as to achieve a more comprehensive construal of a phenomenon. There are four types of triangulation: method triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation and data source triangulation. Two of the four can be applied in sociolinguistic research; they are method and data source triangulation. For method triangulation, multiple methods can be used; for investigator triangulation, more than one participant can be engaged in the data collection process; for data source triangulation, data can be collected from different participants.

3. CONCLUSION

This essay has examined the methodological subject of observer's paradox mainly in terms of the strategies used in overcoming it. The first two sections lays the background for the discourse by locating the mater in the field of sociolinguistics and a particular branch of it, William Labov'svariationist sociolinguistics. The concept is defined and the strategies that can be used are highlighted, one after the other. References are even made to the previous studies which have used them. On a final note, it is imperative to call attention to the intersection of the subject of observer's paradox and ethical considerations in research. Questions of ethics in humanities' research indicates researchers' responsibilities to the people they research. The argument for minimizing observer's paradox is grounded in the notion positivist assumption that a reality exists outside the researcher's perception and all scientific endeavours should strive to locate this (Cameron et al., 1997:152).

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