TEACHING SOCIOLINGUISTICS

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In August 1991, Scott Allan was chair for the first session after lunch of the Ninth New Zealand Linguistics Conference in Christchurch. The Masters student who was presenting first in the session arrived almost as early as Scott; well before the audience had drifted back from lunch at the staff club. As everyone slowly found seats and finished lunchtime conversations, Scott occupied himself with calming the nervous presenter down.

'One of the first classes in linguistics that I ever taught,' he said, 'was in a lecture theatre even bigger than this. On the first day I was teaching, I arrived just before class was due to start and confidently slapped a slide on the overhead projector. Of course, I was very nervous, but I thought if I acted like I knew what I was talking about, the students would believe it, so I launched straight into the lecture.' Seconds later, the bulb on the OHP blew. 'My insides did some weird gymnastics, but then somehow I remembered that there's a spare bulb inside a projector.' So he switched the bulbs over, and continued with the lecture, feeling a little cocky, on top of the additional nerves. Minutes later, the second bulb blew, and at this point, Scott said, he began to wonder whether there was a jinx on his fledgling career as a professional linguist. Throwing all nervousness and all pretences of authority to one side, he cast desperate eyes around the lecture theatre. Finding a reasonably clean, flat wall on one side of the hall, he wheeled the OHP over, moved the students, and began the whole lecture — his whole career, in a sense — over again.

A lecture like that is one that the students never remember and you never forget. And in many ways, it was a very Scott story, told with humour, perfect timing (he wound it up and welcomed the audience almost in the same breath), and a huge sense of the humanity of our profession. I've often remembered it as I've waited nervously for other audiences to take their seats, and how the goofy 'what-the-hell' punchline has helped me laugh off any number of technical glitches when I have been teaching. Farting sound systems, broken links in multi-media presentations, mis-aligned sound and transcription files — all of these have occurred as near fatal errors in at least one class I have taught, but at least I know what to do if all else fails: send your materials — not yourself — crawling up the walls.

* * *

I have taught sociolinguistics with many different kinds of audiences. High school students, undergraduate majors in linguistics degrees, undergraduate non-majors learning through the medium of a second language, undeclared undergraduate majors, qualified teachers looking for continuing professional development, adult learners of English, (post-)graduate students in search of a PhD topic, law students who want to know about language use, education inspectors, training and development officers in the public service. I have even been asked to do a critique of language used in Question Time at the Scottish Parliament for the in-house magazine, but since they never invited me back, we'd have to say that that foray into communicating sociolinguistics to an interdisciplinary audience was of limited success.

Most people in sociolinguistics would be able to list a range of similar audiences. It's partly a testimony to the social relevance of the linguistic issues we deal with in the field, partly a testimony to the breadth of methods and problems the field engages with, and partly a testimony to the ease with which technically forbidding content (such as potentially unfamiliar scripts (IPA) or familiarity with particular software and hardware) can be stripped away from sociolinguistics, without completely denaturing the methods and theory that we use to describe and generalise from language in use. It would be pointless, therefore, to attempt a survey of all the different ways in which you can teach sociolinguistics. Instead, I will focus this essay on outlining in some detail the structure and goals and aims of a five week, intensive unit that introduces second year undergraduates to the practicalities of analysing language variation.

I have had the very great good fortune to inherit this unit from a colleague at the University of Edinburgh (Scott's alma mater, as it happens), and I am enormously indebted to Ellen Gurman Bard, who is responsible for the overall structure of the unit. The relative balance between teacher-/tutor-led activities and student-led activities is key to the popularity and pedagogical success of this component of the course, and it was Ellen who came up with the right recipe. I have tinkered with the content to turn it into a hands-on introduction to theory and methods of variationist sociolinguistics, but in principle, the structure could be adapted to any sub-field as long as there is some messy, un-Bowdlerised data for students to analyse.

The guiding principles are that (i) students learn best by doing, and (ii) they are smart, resourceful people who will respond to the professional challenges presented by facing real data.

I outline first the background, goals and objectives of the course (both skills and content knowledge). I then break down the structure of the unit into its different activity and learning modes.

1. Ellen Gurman Bard's hands-on approach to teaching (socio)linguistics

1.1 Context and background

While the structure of the unit is extremely flexible, it helps to understand the context in which we teach it. Most of the first year students in Linguistics at Edinburgh are not majors. They are taking linguistics as an 'outside' subject, usually because it has been recommended as a complement to their principal degree subject (mostly Modern Languages, Social Anthropology, Computer Science, Psychology). In first year, they have been given 12 hours of lectures in what I would call macro-sociolinguistics (language attitudes, language vitality, multilingualism) and basic methods for discourse analysis (spoken and written).

By the time students are doing second year linguistics, the proportion of people taking the class as an outside subject has dropped, but remains significant: half are not going to complete a degree solely majoring in linguistics. So a sociolinguistics unit that focuses simultaneously on the development of transferable skills — and the transmission of information — is very important. This dual focus is important for all the usual reasons transferable skills are lauded in universities, but it is also important because of

the very local needs of our audience. Some students will never go on to take any more sociolinguistics classes at all. Aspiring psycholinguists, syntacticians and phoneticians in the department find the practical orientation of the second year sociolinguistic unit as rewarding as budding sociolinguists.

In addition, for reasons peculiar to our university's degree structure, students doing a joint major in any modern language and linguistics have to spend their third year abroad. During this time they have to write their final, undergraduate dissertation in linguistics. For these students, having a second year unit that focuses on skills is essential preparation for their dissertation the next year. As a lot of them become interested in the linguistic variation they observe around them during their year of study abroad, a focus on methods and core readings/theory in variationist sociolinguistics is of direct, practical benefit.

The sociolinguistics unit unfolds over the last five weeks of the final semester. As well as needing to serve our students' particular needs as described above, it is also the last chance we have to 'convert' people to switch into a linguistics major. Consequently, the department has a major incentive to make it an enjoyable and challenging experience.

1.2 The task

A clear analytic task is established from the outset. Students are introduced to the variable they will be working on — in recent years, we have been looking at the alternation between alveolar and velar nasals in polysyllabic English words ending in <ing>. We also explain from the outset what kinds of linguistic and non-linguistic factors they will be expected to take into consideration in their analysis. These include, grammatical category of the word, following segment, speaker and genre/style.

1.3 Activity types and modes of learning

The unit consists of FOUR types of activity:

> Lectures
> Tutorials,
> Workshops
> Workshop-Plus

The way these are interleaved through the five week unit is shown in detail in Table 1 (page 59). In this section, I discuss how the different group activities serve different learning goals.

Lectures take the (usual) form of a single speaker at the front of a lecture hall, talking to handouts and/or powerpoint. Lectures introduce theory and classic readings. As the course goes on, they are increasingly a forum for students to compare notes about problems they have encountered in workshops and they provide a forum for brainstorming treatments and solutions for those problems. Lectures have three forms of support.

Tutorials   Exercises are provided for students to work through with the help of a tutor. There is one tutorial a week. The course co-ordinator provides the exercises. The exercises are intended to establish a base line of knowledge and practical experience which students can draw on for their independent work. They rehearse some of the skills or background information students need in order to analyse their own data.

Workshops   Tutorial groups meet once a week ALONE — without the tutor present. An important task for students in the first Workshop is to organise themselves as a work group. At a practical level, they have to be responsible for collecting and returning equipment, and they have to decide who will take notes and report back in lectures. They also have to establish constructive and co-operative work patterns on their own, work patterns that will see them through this part of the course. The workshops are the place where students jointly negotiate the identification, coding and analysis of data in spontaneous speech.

Students are provided with recorded data for the course. Ideally, we might have time for the students to get some experience in making recordings of spontaneous speech (thereby experiencing all the difficulties and rewards associated with that), but this is not practical within a compressed five week time frame. In the last few years, our students have been working from excerpts of Scots English and they use this as the basis for analysis style effects on the single consonantal variable, (ing). The recordings include two short pieces of football commentary; and three recordings of Scots teenagers in conversation with a chosen friend or friends. Given the now widespread availability of various regional components of the ICE (International Corpus of English), and corpora available commercially through the Linguistic Data Consortium at the University of Pennsylvania, there's no reason why instructors working in English-speaking communities couldn't access sound files and carefully-checked transcripts for varieties similar to their students'.

We provide a full transcription of the teenagers' conversations. This

is essential because quite a few of our students are not speakers of Scots English and because the recordings were made outside the lab (so there is the inevitable background noise and frequent overlapping speech). Hence, many students would find it hard to understand the materials without a transcript. However, the transcription is fairly free: it generally conforms to Standard English spelling (but includes some standard representations of Scots, e.g. *dae* 'do', *wi* 'with', *wizna(e)* 'wasn't'), so we stress the importance of *listening* to how the speakers say a given word — that is, not relying on how a word is transcribed or what students might expect to hear in the varieties of English they are more familiar with. Crucially, the variable we are analysing — (ing) — is almost always transcribed with the Standard English <ing>, so students quickly perceive the need forget about the transcript and to listen and transcribe the variable phonetically where it occurs.

There is not a full transcript of the sports commentary as these are much cleaner and more standard-like recordings, but students are provided with a pre-prepared coding sheet on which each token of words ending in <ing> has been listed in order of occurrence on the tape.

Each week, the workshop has specific set tasks for students to work through. These progress from identifying and extracting tokens, through to coding tokens and simple quantitative methods for testing for significance (chi-square tests).

The current data set consists of recordings of spontaneous broadcast and conversational speech; in the past, the course has also used recordings of people doing the Map Task (Anderson et al., 1991). The object of investigation was not stylistic variation then, but rather the linguistic realisation of given and new referring expressions. This demonstrates two things: first, the flexibility of the overall course structure, and second, the potential in recordings of naturally-occurring speech for teaching a range of linguistic concepts.

In the final week of the unit, the tutorial and workshop periods are used to work on presentation of the final assignment. Many of the students are not very confident in writing social science-style research reports at this stage in their university career, and the course organisers provide resources that directly support this (as well as providing more individualised advice where students require it).

Workshop-Plus   Once a week, the day after the students have workshopped data alone, the tutor joins each group. This gives students an opportunity to

discuss issues and/or questions that have arisen during the workshop session and draw on the tutor's sociolinguistic experience.

We emphasise that the tutor is not there necessarily to provide 'answers'. Tutors' role in the Workshop-Plus is to guide students in making (socio)linguistically well-motivated decisions, and to help students apply their decisions systematically to all the data they encounter. Tutors can also provide useful practical help with managing record-keeping.

We have found that it is a good idea to ensure the tutors have a similar skills base to draw on. This means that students in every tutorial can draw on a certain level of practical expertise. It also helps provide a relatively consistent set of expectations for drawing up a Marking Schedule for grading the final assignment.

Staffing Implications

The course requires a somewhat heavier load than many others in terms of departmental allocations of tutoring moneys and a greater time commitment from the post-graduate students we employ as tutors, since tutors are available to their groups twice a week (instead of our usual once a week roster for tutorials). However, since the Workshop-Plus requires no direct preparation on the tutor's part, and since the exercises in the weekly tutorials are designed and ready for the tutors to take off the shelf, the time commitment has not been an issue. The implications of having a slightly higher dedicated budget for tutors on this unit is one that needs to be considered in advance.

Special Needs Students

Students are given access to the recordings via the closed course webpage. (This is on the express understanding that the recordings of the teenagers' conversations are not for further dissemination or reproduction. The football commentary is in the public domain.) This arrangement allows students more time or better listening conditions than a tutorial room for working on the materials independently.

One potential challenge lies in actively involving students with hearing problems. If a particular student has a hearing impairment that makes it difficult for them to actively participate in the workshop tasks, and if the student does not choose to disclose this problem to their tutorial, there can be some friction witin tutorials towards the end of the course. This is because the notes each tutorial takes during their discovery process constitute the basis for

the final assignment. Some students may feel reluctant to work closely with another student who (mistakenly or not) they believe to be coasting.

In practice, if a student has not participated actively in tutorials, simply having the figures will not enable them to write a good final assignment, because they don't understand the decision-making processes that went into the extraction and coding of tokens. As a result, there's a qualitative difference in the assignment which, for instance, a hearing-impaired student who has faithfully attended tutorials can write and the assignment written by someone who has blown off the entire unit and showed up in the last week for the 'results'.

I don't know if there is a uniform way of heading off this sort of problem (or misunderstanding). We try to explain that there are clear qualitative differences in final assignments between those who have actively participated (whether as leaders or as quiet support) in the analysis and decision-making, and those who have failed to take part in any of the hard yakker. We could perhaps be more open about our grading criteria from the outset of the unit.

Ultimately, we have to encourage students (a) to think the best of each other and (b) to be open with each other. Thinking the best of each other requires them to consider that different people may have different learning styles, and that people can be active participants without necessarily leading the discussion or analysis. Being open with each other requires them to trust each other, and to try and talk about problems as they begin to surface, rather than leaving them to grow unchecked.

These are both good principles for life in general (more transferable skills!), but since we don't always follow them to the letter in life, maybe it's not surprising that they don't always get followed in class.

1.5 Aims and objectives of the sociolinguistics unit

We explain to students that by the end of the unit we hope they will be more aware of variation in language, and specifically, that they will be able to:

- Describe in precise terms how linguistic variation is realised (answer questions like *What is a variable? What are variants of a variable?*);

- Give examples of different kinds of quantitative methods that can be used to study variation in spontaneous language;

- Say how patterns of variation in the group and the individual relate to broader sociolinguistic generalisations;

○ Explain what makes a study reliable;

○ Apply this knowledge in their own study of variation.

Arguably, this knowledge — on top of the 12 hours of macro-sociolinguistics and skills in discourse analysis taught in Year 1 — is the bare minimum all linguists need to know in order to understand how research in other sub-fields of linguistics informs, or can be informed by, sociolinguistics.

   In other linguistics programmes, e.g. where there is more direct training in research and experimental methods, it might well be appropriate to de-emphasise the quantitative training in our plan. As I've noted, given the structure of our third and fourth year (especially for joint degree majors), there are good reasons why we need to get basic quantitative methods into the second year.

1.6 Topics covered in the five week unit
The lectures progress through the following topics, with the principal medium(s) of learning shown in square brackets. Each of the topics is annotated to indicate what skills and key concepts are covered.

○ How sociolinguists identify what is varying in language and how they have shown that 'free variation' isn't as 'free' as it looks. [lecture; tutorial]

Quantitative methods and the study of variation
Quantitative methods are central to this unit, and the importance of relative frequencies of a variant in different (groups of) speakers is introduced very early. Some connections are made with the principles of regional dialectology (and the ways in which these initially were echoed in the research agenda of social dialectology) are discussed, e.g., the importance of relative frequencies of variants in deciding where to draw isoglosses.

○ What methods sociolinguists use for gathering data and why you can't just ask people about variation. [lecture; tutorial; workshop]

Becoming aware of variation: Students conduct small scale surveys as home-work in Week 1. Their task is to collect self-report data on one frequent phonological and one frequent syntactic variable. Respondents are asked:

'Do you say:
lib'ry or *library*?'

'Do you say:
The problem is that we simply don't know enough
OR
The problem is is that we simply don't know enough?'

Respondents inevitably offer commentary on the variables, sometimes relating to the importance of self-styling, attention to an audience, or rate of speech. So this exercises allows them to get a small taste of handling and grouping data, as well as foreshadowing issues that are developed further in the next month.

Students then use the internet as an independent source of data on the same variables. This highlights both the strengths and limitations of self-report data, and the strengths and limitations of collecting data on variation from the internet.

○   How linguistic and social factors constrain variation: words classes, style; age and sex of speaker. [lectures; tutorials; workshops]

Extracting and coding variants
The core of the unit involves practical experience in identifying, extracting and coding variants of (ing). Students are provided with datasheets that are pre-formatted and which they will complete in their workshops.

A lecture discusses previous findings on (ing) in other speech communities and introduces the linguistic factors that have been shown to be the most important constraints on the variation: grammatical class of the word; following segment. Divergent findings on, e.g., the importance of stress patterns and preceding segment are discussed. These all become open questions for coding and investigation in workshops and an introductory tutorial.

In addition, potentially relevant non-linguistic factors are discussed. Since the sound corpus includes recordings from at least two distinct speech styles/genres (commentary and conversation) students also have to decide how to classify sub-routines in discourse and how to code variants in each of these styles according to non-linguistic (social) factors. Groups differ in how they decide to handle non-linguistics factors. They may decide to code for individual speakers, or they might decide to group all speakers together by genre, or according to key within a genre — the sports commentary includes

colour and action commentary; the conversations include joking, animating other people's speech, complaints.

The students also have to decide how they will handle dialectal (Scots) and/or invariant forms. For example, *mingin(g)* and *fuckin(g)* never occur with the velar nasal, and *daen* can be analysed as an (ing) token with a final alveolar, or excluded as an invariant Scots form. In grading the assignments we are less concerned with what they decide to do with such cases than we are with **how** they motivate their decisions.

○ The effect that the social networks (or more local practice-based communities) have on the way we talk. [lecture; workshop]

Network membership and communities of practice
The Fife teenagers are all members of a local social organisation, so they can be sub-divided according to their friendship networks and/or their depth of commitment to the social organisation. In other data sets, these theoretical and analytical constructs might not be so relevant.

○ How variation may relate to language change (but doesn't have to). [lecture; tutorial]

Stable variables vs changes in progress
This important distinction between different patterns of variation is discussed very briefly. There isn't time to get into the growing literature on the relationship between individual (lifespan) change and community change/stability. The goal is to ensure that the class is familiar with the inferences sociolinguists draw from the relative distribution of variants over apparent time (different generations in one sample). Unlike most of the sociolinguistic variables that current research focuses on, the (ing) variable is relatively stable, even though different varieties of English have different input frequencies.

I personally feel that it is a good idea to look at a stable variable because I think it's important that the fundamental importance of linguistic constraints on even socially stratified variation is fully understood. I suspect it's easier to extract systematic linguistic constraints on a stable variable from even a small database (such as the one we are working on) than it is for a change in progress.

○ How to write up a small study of language variation. [lecture; tutorial]

Writing up a report on language variation
A lot of the students in this unit will not have written a social science style research report before. We provide detailed instructions on the typical structure of such reports and the kinds of questions they should be asking themselves and answering for the reader in each of the different sections.

Testing patterns for significance
Most of the data presented in the lectures is shown as frequency counts or percentages. In the last week, as students are pulling together their final assignments, we also introduce the notion of statistical significance, and show how chi-square tests can be employed as simple measures of statistical significance. The lecture is supported with some hands-on exercises, and web-based resources that students can explore themselves.

1.7 Assessment of the unit
The assessment for this unit is entirely based on a written assignment which contributes 30% to students' final mark for the entire semester. There are institutional blocks that prevent us having attendance and/or participation in tutorials contribute to students' final grades. I would prefer to have attendance at tutorials and workshops contribute a small amount towards individuals' final grade for the course. This is mainly to forestall some of the complaints there can be about members of a tutorial not pulling their weight in analysing the data.

   Tutors mark assignments done by members of their tutorial. In order to make sure there is consistency across groups, before marking starts, the tutors and course co-ordinator meet to agree on a Marking Schedule that everyone will use. The starting point for this is the university's publicised Common Marking Guide, but the descriptors for different grades in the CMG need to be anchored against specific content and skills that are appropriate to what we have covered in the course and to what students have discussed and dealt with in workshops. The course co-ordinator moderates the tutors' marking.

1.8 Summary
The overall format of the unit (at a glance) is shown in Table 1. (Full bibliographic details on the readings mentioned in the table are available from the author.)

Table 1: Unit outline showing pacing of lectures and student-led activities, also content of lecture and guided development of skills in tutorials and workshops. Readings associated with different activities or lectures are shown in plain text (recommended readings in parentheses).

Week	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1	**LECTURE** *Overview & Introduction to social dialectology* Meyerhoff Ch.1-2 (Scherre 2006)	TUTORIAL (1) *Identifying variables*	**WORKSHOP (1)** *Awareness of variables*	WORKSHOP-PLUS	**LECTURE** *Variationist methods; key concepts* Meyerhoff Ch.2; Hazen 2006
2	TUTORIAL (2) *Football commentaries: Identifying variants of (ing)*	**WORKSHOP (2)** *Fife teenagers: Identifying variants of (ing)* (Fought 2006)	**LECTURE** *Style-shifting: Individual variation* Meyerhoff Ch.3 (Fought 2006)	WORKSHOP-PLUS	**LECTURE** *Stable variables & changes in progress* Meyerhoff Ch.7; Sankoff 2006 (Labov 1989)
3	TUTORIAL (3) *Variation across individuals*	**WORKSHOP (3)** *Coding for part of speech*	**LECTURE** *Social class* Meyerhoff Ch.8 (Macaulay 2006)	WORKSHOP-PLUS	**LECTURE** *Social networks* Meyerhoff Ch.9
4	TUTORIAL (4) *Changes in progress; Social class* Meyerhoff Ch.7; Ch.8 p.175	**WORKSHOP (4)** *Coding other factors*	**LECTURE** *Testing for significance* Bayley 2002	WORKSHOP-PLUS	**LECTURE** *Incl. Writing a research report*
5	TUTORIAL (5) *Pulling things together*	No class; writing up	**LECTURE** *Tutorial reports and synthesis*	No class; writing up	Hand in assignment, 10.00am

Postscript: For Scott Allan

Scott continues to give me much joy from his 'novice-teacher-has-bad-hair day' story. I have my own old war stories now. There is a clip from the film *Finding Nemo* where Dory and Marlin swim ever deeper into the darkness in search of a clue to where Nemo has been taken, and Dory starts singing her insanely optimistic riff 'Keep swimming, just keep swimming, keep keep swimming…'. The last time I taught this unit, 'Keep swimming, just keep swimming' acquired the resonance of a Masonic handshake. As Scott knew only too well, the key to good linguistics teaching can be to 'keep swimming, just keep swimming, keep keep swimming…'

Like the anecdote that Scott shared with me, 'keep swimming' is a good way of reminding myself and my students that we're not judged on how perfect we are; we're judged on how human.

Note

1 My thanks go first and foremost to Ellen Gurman Bard who designed the interactive module for teaching quantitative methods for analysing language and who gave her blessing to my writing it up like this. I also thank Jennifer Smith, with whom I have spent many very happy hours sharing ideas about problems and successes in teaching hands-on sociolinguistics.

Reference

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