Sociolinguistic research in the time of COVID: Methods, Ethics, Theory
Friday, January 8
9:00 – 10:30 AM PST

Organizer: Betsy Sneller (Michigan State)

Participants: Lauren Hall-Lew (Edinburgh University)
                Claire Cowie (Edinburgh University)
                Nini Fang (Edinburgh University)
                Catherine Lai (Edinburgh University)
                Sarah Liu (Edinburgh University)
                Betsy Sneller (Michigan State University)
                Suzanne Evans Wagner (Michigan State University)
                Yongqing Ye (Michigan State University)
                Monica Nesbitt (Dartmouth College)
                Jim Stanford (Dartmouth College)
                Akiah Watts (Dartmouth College)
                Georget Stain (Dartmouth College)
                Maya Abtahian (University of Rochester)
                Naomi Nagy (University of Toronto)
                Katie Carmichael (Virginia Tech)
                Lynn Clark (Unviersity of Canterbury)

In this workshop, we bring together researchers collecting sociolinguistic data during the COVID-19 crisis to discuss the challenges, goals, and ethical concerns surrounding this type of data collection. As COVID-19 has drastically affected data collection and research goals in a very short period of time, it has also drastically affected speakers' lives in ways that are of both personal and theoretical interest to the study of language variation and change.

We will bring together research projects from across the world (Michigan, Boston, Edinburgh and The Lothians, Toronto), working on naturalistic data during the time of COVID-19 and social isolation. Because traditional sociolinguistic methods are not possible during social distancing, new methodological approaches must be taken. The projects here range from self-recorded audio (MI-COVID Diaries; Our Languages Our Lives) and video (Lothian Video Diary Project) entries, to video conference live interviews (Eastern MA Life and Language) and survey methodology (Our Languages Our Lives). We will discuss challenges and benefits to each of these data collection methods, as well as to participant recruitment in this time. We will also discuss ethical issues involving data collection during this pandemic, both from a physical and mental health perspective for participants and researchers. The social upheaval brought about by the COVID-19 lockdowns also speaks to a number of theoretical interests: how stylistic practices during the lockdown reflect differences in participants' lockdown experiences (Lothian Video Diary), how longitudinal language change is impacted (MI-COVID Diaries), how heritage language maintenance and shift is impacted (Heritage Language Project), and how digital technology might expand traditional sociolinguistic interview techniques (Boston Metro Project).

This will be a largely discussion-based workshop, broken down into three thematic components: (1) Methodological issues with data collection during social distancing; (2) Ethical issues involving data collection during a disaster that disproportionately affects already disadvantaged and vulnerable populations, and (3) Theoretical interests and goals. Discussion will be led by discussants (Carmichael and Clark) who have expertise in data collection during and after a time of crisis (Hurricanes Katrina and Isaac; Christchurch earthquakes).

MI-COVID Diaries
(Betsy Sneller, Suzanne Wagner, Yongqing Ye; Michigan State University)

This project is collecting regular self-recordings from Michigan residents during and after the pandemic. Collecting data from the same participants at regular intervals over the span of this crisis will enable us to document changes to participants' language in real time. We are particularly interested in the effect of a prolonged period of social isolation on language changes currently ongoing in Northern Cities English (Wagner et al 2016; Nesbitt et al 2019), particularly for youth (ages 10-16) developing their sociolinguistic repertoire and adults likely to exhibit lifespan change. Through longitudinal analysis of individuals, we aim to document (1) whether disruptions in face-to-face interactions likewise disrupt language changes in progress (2) whether these effects are long-lasting or are easily reversible. We will additionally discuss the challenges of rapidly assembling a team, gathering informal speech data remotely, and publicizing a project at a time when the news space is very crowded.

The Lothian Video Diary Project
(Lauren Hall-Lew, Claire Cowie, Nini Fang, Catherine Lai, and Sarah Liu; The University of Edinburgh)

This project uses sociolinguistic methodology to investigate how residents of Edinburgh and the Lothians (Scotland) experienced the COVID-19 lockdown. We draw on individuals' video self-recordings and survey responses submitted during Scotland's stay-at-home order. We investigate how stylistic variation indicates different ways of experiencing the lockdown, by examining how moments of stance-taking construct performances of social personae (Kiesling 2009), and connect to macrosocial categories (Moore & Podesva 2009). Previous variationist work in Edinburgh documented correlations with speaker ethnicity (Clark & Schleef 2010; Lawrence 2013; Elliott 2018) or social class (Esling 1978; Speitel & Johnston 1983; Lawson, et al., 2011; Dickson & Hall-Lew 2017). Others studies in Edinburgh have considered only one ethnicity or one social class (Johnston 1985; Schleef 2013; Schleef & Ramsammy 2013; Schützler 2015). The video diaries provide a highly diverse speech corpus and rich, intimate, and nuanced representation of speaker's social identity and experience.

Eastern Massachusetts Life and Language in the COVID-19 Era
(Monica Nesbitt, James N. Stanford, Akiah Watts, George Stain; Dartmouth College)

This project explores ethnic diversity and English language use in the Eastern Massachusetts metropolitan area, with a focus on sociophonetic features of African American Language. We

are learning how COVID-19 has impacted life and language for different ethnic and class groups in the Boston area. Due to the pandemic, we have replaced traditional face-to-face sociolinguistic interviews with online video conferencing interviews. The video conferencing approach will enable us to conduct "face-to-face" live interviews in the heart of Boston even though most of the fieldworkers themselves are located in New Hampshire and beyond. The methodology pivot will also allow us to examine the impact of video conferencing on language use, as we plan to re-interview our participants when face-to-face fieldwork becomes possible again. The results of this portion of the study will inform our theory of the sociolinguistic interview, providing new knowledge about strengths and weaknesses of online interview technologies.

Our languages, our lives, and the global pandemic
(Maya Ravindranath Abtahian, University of Rochester, and Naomi Nagy, University of Toronto)

This project examines principles of language shift and maintenance in the context of the COVID-19 lockdown for multilingual university students, to understand how this pandemic affects sociolinguistic interview data. Using a survey and audio self-recordings, we ask: (1) Given the importance of intergenerational transmission and interaction for language maintenance, and the importance of peer-to-peer interaction for language shift, how will the abrupt disruptions in those interactions during lockdowns affect individuals' language use, and what long-term effect will this have on language maintenance and shift? (2) How has the lockdown affected young people's language ecologies, and how do their speech patterns reflect these shifts?

Moreover, we know that pandemics disproportionately impact vulnerable populations, including those from low socio-economic backgrounds, those who work in casual employment, and people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds. We document these experiences, focusing on shifts in young people's perceptions of language use and ethnic identity.