Including older adults in variationist sociolinguistics via mobile self-recording

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Abstract. Variationist sociolinguistics has made significant contributions to linguistics and allied fields in the study of language variation and change. Yet within this paradigm, older adults remain understudied. There are non-trivial methodological challenges to collecting language data from the old age population. However, the Covid-19 pandemic led to increasing use of remote data collection methods that could fruitfully be employed with older adults. The MI Diaries project's rich and growing collection of self-recorded 'audio diaries' via a custom mobile app demonstrates the success of this technology. An open-source version of the app, currently in development, will be adaptable to older users. For individuals who feel isolated, sending regular self-recordings to a responsive research team could be socially beneficial. As for variationist sociolinguistics, remote technologies could allow for greater engagement with outstanding research questions about older adults' sociolinguistic identities and their participation in language change.

The primary goal of variationist sociolinguistics is to explain why language changes over time in a speech community (Tagliamonte 2012). In recent years, attention has also been paid to language change within the individual lifespan, to better understand how individual trajectories accelerate or retard community-level change (Buchstaller and Wagner 2018). Yet relative to other life stages, notably adolescents (Kirkham and Moore 2013), older adults remain understudied in the variationist paradigm.

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In particular, there is a dearth of information about how older adults employ and interpret the socio-indexical fields of linguistic variants (Eckert 2008b). Again, we have plenty of studies of social meaning that foreground (pre-)adolescents (Eckert 2008a; Lawson 2011), not to mention young or middle-aged adults (D'Onofrio 2018) and even children (Vaughn and Becker 2022). But we lack the answers to the questions posed below:

"[H]ow do older adults linguistically construct and constitute their age-based identities? How are intersections between their age-based and other identities (e.g., sex, class, ethnicity, community of practice) indexed by patterns of linguistic variation? How are linguistic variants produced by older adults perceived and evaluated by listeners of different social backgrounds and ages? And how do older adults attend to sociolinguistic variation, as it is produced by both contemporaries and others?" (Pichler, Wagner, and Hesson 2018, 6)

Further, my colleagues and I argued that when answering these questions, "[variationists] should foreground older speakers' own experiences of their lives" and "know what dimensions of their social identities and what aspects of age and ageing speakers themselves find meaningful" (Pichler, Wagner, and Hesson 2018, 6). Ideally, these insights will come from long-term participant-observation (Rose 2006), yet the practical constraints on working with older adults make this approach quite difficult.

A methodological direction to consider is remote self-recording. This technology can help us learn how older adults use language, in a relatively unmonitored way, without the need for a co-present researcher or healthcare professional. It centers the participant and gives them agency, allowing for a new and complementary way to uncover older adults' engagement with linguistic social meaning. Remote recording methods such as video calls and mobile apps saw a surge in popularity and technological development during the Covid-19 pandemic (Hilton and Leemann 2021; Sneller, Wagner, and Ye 2022). A minority of researchers turned to self-recording (Hall-Lew et al. 2022), including myself and Betsy Sneller. Since April 2020, we have been collecting self-recorded 'audio diaries' from children, youth, and adults in the US state of Michigan (Sneller 2022). Participants receive weekly prompt questions such as: *What are you grateful for this week?*; *Have you ever been caught in a lie?*; *Tell us about a time when you were really cautious about making a decision!*. They record their responses on a custom mobile app (Michigan State University, version 1.18). Recordings are passed through automatic speech recognition, then hand-corrected and anonymized for linguistic analysis. The app's code is now being re-developed for open-source publication (College of Arts & Letters 2022, NEH Grant to Develop Open-Source Code for Self-Recording Mobile App 2022) so that researchers across disciplines can adapt the self-recording app for a wide range of purposes. The advisory board, of which I am a member, includes representatives from the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (Fund 2021). They are providing input on how the app can be made maximally intuitive, simple, and lightweight for users in geographically remote and/or economically impoverished places, where access to reliable (if any) internet may be limited, and familiarity with mobile technology may be low. Due to the nature of its mission, ELDP is particularly engaged with eliciting recordings from community elders. They are providing

feedback that will ensure that older adults –perhaps with some initial help from younger community members—can easily make recordings on the app.

As this and other mobile technology grows in sophistication and availability, it will be exciting to see whether language and aging researchers can make use of it with older age populations. An early adaptation of the MI Diaries app to a religious studies project, Shtisel Diaries (Yares and Avni 2021) found that participants were unusually open about their religious prejudices and their knowledge blindspots, as well as their enjoyment in learning about new cultures (Laura Yares, p.c.). Likewise, in the MI Diaries project, we have found that participants will talk in remarkably candid ways. There is something apparently liberating about being able to pick up your mobile device whenever the desire to talk arises, and to sit, alone, and speak your thoughts. At the same time, we can tell from participant comments that there is also something comforting about knowing you are being heard, even if the researchers are not in front of you to react in real time. For older adults who may be socially isolated, a regular self-recording practice could be an attractive and meaningful activity.

Pichler, Wagner, and Hesson called for renewed efforts to understand how older adults are placed with respect to variationist theories of language variation and language change (Pichler, Wagner, and Hesson 2018). Like the MI Diaries app project, these efforts will require interdisciplinary input. The new *Journal of Language and Aging Research* is a timely and welcome venue for this kind of cross-pollination. I hope variationist sociolinguists will learn from its original research output, and that they will contribute to its multidisciplinary conversation.

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