Reviews of Barbara Johnstone, Qualitative Methods in Sociolinguistics

Barbara Johnstone
REVIEWs


Reviewed by Timothy C. Frazer, Western Illinois University

This textbook introduces students to the ‘qualitative’ side of methodology in sociolinguistics. While quantitative methods involve counting and, often, fairly sophisticated statistical tests to determine the significance of data, qualitative methods involve close observation of a linguistic community. A quantitative study of any given language community might involve a count of how many individuals use variety X or Y, with the numbers broken down according to such variables as sex, age, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity. A qualitative study of the same community might closely examine the behavior of a few individuals to determine the uses they might make of one variety or another. Qualitative sociolinguistics also involves both the researcher’s personal familiarity with the community and her use of introspection and intuition. While these resources must obviously not be the sole source of data, they can and often have greatly enriched our understanding of the use of language.

An introductory chapter explains that the book will discuss ‘four phases of research methodology’ (4): developing research questions, field methods, analytical methods, and writing. Ch. 2, ‘Methodology in historical context’, reviews the methods of the linguistic atlas projects in North America and Europe and the ‘discovery procedures’ of descriptive linguists. This chapter emphasizes the role of interpretation, as shown by the various treatments of linguistic atlas data. Ch. 3, ‘Thinking about methodology’, walks the student through the process of getting from selecting the community that interests her to forming the questions that will direct the study, especially in narrowing the focus of the topic. A case in point is a study of a Bengali-Malaysian community. A first draft of a dissertation proposal offered to ‘collect data and analyze language use in a multicultural polyglot community and to test whether notions about language and society . . . remain valid here’ (26). This original proposal, rejected as too broad, was later narrowed with a series of questions: ‘Is language used as a device for negotiating identity in this community?’ ‘Does peer pressure affect language choice?’ ‘Is codeswitching valued in this community?’ (26–27). Eventually a single question emerged which structured both the collection and analysis of data: ‘How do different women in this multilingual Malaysian-Bengali immigrant community use the Bengali language to negotiate identity?’ (27).

This same chapter also discusses the case of a student who worked as a volunteer with Alzheimer’s patients in a nursing home. Only through beginning actual interaction with a single Alzheimer’s patient did the student begin to focus her study to the point that she knew how to formulate questions. Both of these cases point up the value Johnstone places on the researcher’s familiarity with and good instincts about the communities to be studied.

Ch. 4, ‘Some legal and ethical issues’, focuses on the problems of surreptitious recording and of interview subjects’ right to some benefit from the study. Ch. 5, ‘Standards of evidence’, examines the terms reliability, validity, random, and significant. An important section for students is a list of characteristics of inadequate evidence.

Ch. 6, ‘Thinking’, is an excellent examination of the role played by intuition and introspection, using Lakoff’s 1974 Language and woman’s place as a case study. While not all of Lakoff’s assertions may be valid, her work nevertheless became the focal point of ensuing discussions of language and gender, shaping the direction of research.

Ch. 7, ‘Looking’, examines the role of ethnography in sociolinguistics. Here again, close involvement in and familiarity with the community studied becomes as important a part of drawing conclusions as does the collection of data. Actually, both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ researchers can make a contribution. I notes that in a study of Texas speech she conducted with Judith Bean, ‘as a Texan with an obviously Texan way of talking and interacting, Bean made the Texas women we interviewed feel as if they would be understood and sympathized with; as a non-
Texans with a more reserved style, I... could ask dumb-sounding questions whose answers Texas might assume to be obvious to other Texans' (87-88). This chapter also points out that the notion of 'speech community' is often an idealized creation of the researcher, one which may not be shared by the participants. For example, many people in Texas who would unquestionably be identified by linguists as 'Spanish-English bilinguals' themselves deny that they speak Spanish, since 'Spanish' for them means standard, written Castilian or Mexican Spanish' (85).

Ch. 8, 'Reading and listening', covers what is normally thought of as 'discourse analysis', that is, the study of chunks of language larger than the sentence, be it conversation or written texts. Nuts-and-bolts problems are addressed here: how to record discourse (audiotape? video?), how to get 'natural' conversation from people who know they are being recorded and studied, what kinds of discourse to record, how to transcribe. Included as well is a section on written discourse and another on types of analysis.

The final chapter ('Writing') tells students how to write a research article, what parts to include (abstract, introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, discussion), and how to submit it to a publisher. An important section here is one on 'The grammar of particularity', remembering that such things as choices of tense can imply findings that our data do not support. 'Mr. Blair used nonstandard forms rarely' suggests that Mr. Blair does this all the time, whereas 'Mr. Blair used nonstandard forms rarely' suggests that all we know is that he did it during our interview (140, emphasis mine). In particular, this chapter addresses the assumed audience of graduate students in linguistics who are going to be looking for jobs in academia and who will need to publish their research in order to find employment. For this reason, we find suggestions on how to write and publish a research article: 'anyone who needs the standard kinds of scholarly credentials for employability or tenure needs to be able to write articles' (138). But this emphasis is found throughout the book as well. The discussion of legal and ethical issues mentioned above, for example, also treats the pros and cons of working on a research project with a senior professor who will have a big share of the authorship of an eventual publication even though graduate students may do most of the actual work.

This text's emphasis on intuition, familiarity with the community, and close observation in understanding speech communities is very welcome. If anything, I wish that Ch. 2 had examined the problems of interpreting linguistic atlas data at greater length. As J reminds us, Lee Pedersen, the editor of the Linguistic atlas of the gulf states, believed that interpretation required 'the hands of a craftsman' (33). In American linguistic geography, discussion continues over interpretation of linguistic atlas field records collected, for the most part, more than half a century ago, and interpretation of atlas field records continues to demand an ethnographer's or insider's perspective. A good example of one of the first cases of qualitative analysis in dialectology is Raven I. McDavid's 'Post-vocalic /l/ in South Carolina' (1948). Linguistic Atlas field records from South Carolina showed that vocalization of post-vocalic /l/ had penetrated well into the Up-Country, where settlement history would not predict its appearance. The solution to the problem lay in McDavid's own 'insider' experience as an 'l-less' Up-Country native, which enabled him to explain the peculiar prestige of tidewater vocalization (and the negative prestige, or 'cracker', association with /l/ constriction) which led to imitation among socially ambitious Up-Country people.

As McDavid showed in South Carolina, atlas records need to be used in combination with a qualitative knowledge of the speech areas they represent and should not be analyzed in isolation. I am glad that J has stated the value of qualitative study explicitly.

REFERENCES


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ofessional lexicographers who explored this territory most where ranked taxonomically. The knowledge has been reaffirmed” (p. 352). This book, as often been called into a Hunn, Jane and William it provides a useful list of ways of referring, phrasological evidence, "var," deals with reflexives and learning categories have discrete position that is shared by discussions of semantic in unusual theory of conceptual universals. She grammatical categories, and descriptions of cultural But in my view, the pun in English) have only elevated with Wierzbicka’s innate primes, I would then experience properties as mediated by the assumption of similarities and identity.

# Book Reviews


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This book is a clearly written, practically oriented, introductory textbook on qualitative sociolinguistic methods. Given this focus, *Qualitative Methods in Sociolinguistics* would be appropriate as reading in an undergraduate sociolinguistics methods course, particularly for a course based outside an anthropology department. Johnstone’s primary frame of reference is linguistics rather than sociology or anthropology, and she explicitly places sociolinguistics outside of these two fields (p. 3).

*Qualitative Methods* has nine chapters, with all but one chapter followed by suggestions for further reading. Chapters 2-9 are each followed by several discussion questions that Johnstone describes as possible bases for student assignments or projects. Chapter 1 is an introduction that describes sociolinguistics (“Sociolinguists are people with training in linguistics and a primary interest in questions about what language is like, how it works, and what its functions are” [p. 1]), and outlines the four phases of research methodology covered in the book: research questions, field methods, analytical methods, and writing. Chapter 2 briefly describes the research methodologies of the three precursors to sociolinguistics within the field of linguistics. Chapter 3 introduces the notions of research and methods in clear, concise terms that undergraduates would find engaging and useful, and it traces the development and execution of three sociolinguistic research projects (two dissertations and a multi-authored article). Chapter 4 addresses legal and ethical issues in sociolinguistic research, particularly regarding electronic recording of subjects, and it gives examples of informed consent forms. Chapter 5 discusses standards of evidence in qualitative research, describing procedures that encourage rigor.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 address three particular methodologies: intuition/introspection, ethnography, and discourse analysis. Johnstone defines intuition both in terms of the Chomskian sort regarding linguistic acceptability, as well as in terms of “informal, unsystematic, unconscious reasoning; the sense that you know what is going on without being able to say exactly how you know” (p. 76). Chapter 7, on ethnography, gives some theoretical bases for participant observation, then gives instructions on how to do it. This instructional section is strongest when relating issues faced by the author herself in doing specific research projects, e.g., with Texas women (pp. 87-88, 91) and weakest when giving laundry lists of ethnography how-to’s (p. 95) or covering components of Hymes’s SPEAKING acronym (pp. 96-99).

Chapter 8 describes recording, transcribing, and analyzing data, all in 25 pages. In some senses, this chapter could form an entire volume, as these processes are at the heart of qualitative sociolinguistic methods. Practical instructions for recording and transcribing in this chapter are at an appropriate level for a low-level undergraduate course. The section on analytical methods is short and disappointing.
It emphasizes a list of constraints, adapted from A. L. Becker (1995), that shape the forms and functions of texts. Chapter 9, "Writing," is a guide to academic article writing at a level that would be useful to intermediate or advanced-level graduate students, but not useful for the great majority of undergraduates.

With introductory textbooks there is often a trade-off between readability and complexity/specifcivity, and this book opts for the former. It is most vivid and engaging when describing specifics of actual research projects, but such examples are too few and far between. Rather than showing how academics conduct actual research, the book repeatedly tells undergraduates how to do it in general terms (this emphasis results in some ironic discrepancies: while the book exhorts students to "Number the lines of the transcript" [p. 117], none of the transcripts in the book has line numbers).

The book would be appropriate (with the exception of chapter 9) as a practical guide to field research in an undergraduate class. If read during the first part of the semester, it could help students to formulate and carry out semester-long field research projects. With its general and practical orientation, this book would be well complemented by numerous case studies of actual research, for example, from journal articles, as the author suggests. Examples of actual studies would help students to see the complex and holistic relationships between research problems, methods, theories, and results in ways that would not be clear to them from this practically oriented volume alone.

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The publication in 1953 of The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education by UNESCO signaled a new role for vernacular languages in programs of literacy acquisition. Over the last 50 years, this document has served to shape, perhaps more than any other, international policy (and critical inquiry) with respect to vernacular languages and literacy. Vernacular Literacy: A Re-Evaluation is the result of a collaborative effort between members of the International Group for the Study of Language Standardization and the Vernacularization of Literacy (IGLSVL) to assess the changing status of vernacular literacy since the publication of the UNESCO document, providing both an overview of critical and ideological trends and a timely reframing of important questions.

In a series of chapters that address the issue of vernacular literacy from a variety of perspectives, Vernacular Literacy provides excellent insight into the continuing
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SOCIOLINGUISTICS

Volume 5, Number 2

2000

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REVIEW

Barbara Johnstone. Qualitative methods in sociolinguistics

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NOTES ON SOCIOLINGUISTICS
Book Review


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In *Qualitative Methods in Sociolinguistics*, Barbara Johnstone has provided us with a useful textbook on qualitative research methods for data collection and analysis. The book is aimed at introductory level courses in sociolinguistic research and field methods and at others (e.g. researchers from other scientific disciplines) who are unfamiliar with social science research more generally, and sociolinguistic research specifically. The publisher’s description of the book (on the back cover) asserts that: “[It] is the only book on qualitative research methods designed especially for readers doing research on language and society.” Though only 164 pages, the book covers a lot of ground and has several chapters that are especially useful to SIL fieldworkers. Chapter titles are:

1. Introduction
2. Methodology in Historical Context
3. Thinking about Methodology
4. Some Legal and Ethical Issues
5. Standards of Evidence: How Do You Know When You’re Right?
6. Thinking: Introspection and Intuition,
7. Looking: Participant Observation,
8. Reading and Listening: Discourse Analysis
9. Writing.

The book is well-documented and researched with eleven pages of bibliography and has a very adequate index. The volume is also well-edited—I detected only one typographical error (p. 123 “ethographically”)—and is easy to read with an interesting, relaxed, but professional, style.

I especially appreciated the good, clear, definitions of sociolinguistics in the Introduction. Sociolinguistics is not a well understood discipline in
SIL, so I appreciated seeing the field described comprehensively and well. The Introduction also clearly distinguishes sociolinguistics from its sister disciplines (linguistics, anthropology, sociology) by comparing and contrasting the core content of these fields and their research methodologies. The Introduction also lays out the primary organization of the volume: developing research questions, field methods, analytical methods, and writing (here referring to the production of the research report).

The discussion of the historical roots of sociolinguistic research methods is another very helpful contribution to the volume. It compares and contrasts the methods of traditional dialectology, descriptive linguistics, and historical and comparative linguistics. Johnstone’s contrastive framework here is very insightful, showing how dialectology concentrated on field methods and practically omitted concerns for the analysis of the collected data (much of which remains unanalyzed or only partially analyzed today). Descriptive linguistics, and particularly the structuralist versions with their strong data orientation, focused on both field methods and on analytical methods (discovery procedures), while historical linguistics has generally focused almost entirely on analysis, with no single clear methodology for data collection.

The preliminary discussion of research design and the identification of research questions is a good introductory overview to a very large topic that is handled in greater depth in other volumes (and other courses). It serves to provide a larger context for the treatment of the specific methodologies that follow in this volume as well as introducing the novice researcher to some of the basics of sociolinguistic research.

 Similarly, the chapter on legal and ethical issues provides an initial orientation to matters that are increasingly important for researchers working alongside language communities and local partners. This topic is also more adequately covered in other books and articles and Johnstone’s suggestions for further reading point the way to many of those.

As indicated by the other chapter titles, Johnstone looks at the more commonly practiced qualitative approaches to sociolinguistic data collection and analysis (introspection, observation, and discourse analysis) and discusses the data collection methodology (field methods) as well as the data analysis methodologies that predominate in each. This treatment is quite helpful as it places the approaches within a taxonomic framework which enables the novice sociolinguist to grasp the significant features of each.

The chapter on discourse analysis may be of most interest to SIL members as it demonstrates several alternate approaches to that topic that have not been part of the traditional SIL training. Johnstone’s list of “constraints” on discourse is excellent.

The final chapter, on writing, is one that I believe will be very helpful to novice sociolinguists as they attempt to find their “voice” in reporting the results of their research. Johnstone has done a good job of laying out the components of a good research report and throws in some helpful mentor-like advice from an experienced academic.

The weaknesses of the book are those that beset any introductory text: the introduction of themes and topics which cannot be discussed in sufficient enough depth to provide readers with a sense that they understand the issues, if not all of the details and arguments around those issues.

Perhaps the most distracting of these are the allusions to postmodernism and its implications for the philosophy of science without providing a very satisfying resolution to the questions that are raised. That shortcoming is as much a shortcoming of Science in a postmodernist age as it is a shortcoming of the book or the author. Nevertheless, Johnstone returns to it several times throughout the volume and almost undermines her own efforts with reminders that some investigators do not believe that investigation can ever really be fruitful. (If any text can have any meaning, what point is there to attempt to discover meaning at all?) Johnstone’s solution seems more despairing than helpful. She suggests that in spite of the fact that truth may be unknowable, we prefer to act as though it is knowable, and so carry on our investigations hoping against hope that “on some level, the experience of two people who hear the same utterance is the same” (p. 23).

Obviously this is not a trivial question, going deep to the roots of the philosophy of contemporary scientific endeavor, and thus well beyond the scope of this introductory textbook on research methods. The topic does need to be (and is) brought up early in the book (p. 3), but it should be left as one of those topics which will not be delved into in any more depth. The topic resurfaces, however, in chapter 2 (p. 23), and again in chapter 5 (p. 60). I would have been less distracting if Johnstone had raised the issue in the discussion exercises at the end of each of those chapters rather than in the main body of the text.

Similar comments could be made about the discussion of research design, the nature of data, validity and reliability, etc. Certainly all of these are important topics but their introduction into the book comes at the expense of more expansive coverage of the qualitative methodologies themselves. It is a bit surprising that out of the nine chapters in the book, only three actually deal with specific qualitative research methods. The rest provide background, introduce research concepts and concerns, and describe academic writing. While the examples of research projects and their methodologies that Johnstone has chosen are good ones and clearly illustrate her points, they are relatively few. A greater variety of both successful and
unsuccessful research attempts using the various methodologies would be
more helpful to the inexperienced researcher trying to get a feel for what
works and what does not work in the field.

The book is clearly aimed at an academic audience (those who will be
practicing their art in a university setting) with references to tenure, univer-
sity funding, grantsmanship, etc. These topics are mostly irrelevant for the
SIL reader but do not detract from the usefulness of this volume in SIL
training courses.

Johnstone has very helpfully provided discussion questions and exercises
at the end of each chapter. In addition, she provides suggestions for further
reading, a measure that ameliorates somewhat the "mention without ade-
quate treatment" problem I raise above. Indeed, the bibliographic richness
of this volume is one of its strengths.

In spite of my complaints, I like this book. More accurately, I like the
chapters of this book. Each chapter deals with a useful topic and provides
helpful information, illuminating exercises, and valuable references and
bibliographic pointers. As a whole, the book might better have been enti-
tled Research and Sociolinguistics given its rather broad coverage of the
nature of research and the comparatively low page-count given to the
qualitative methods.

The publishers suggest that this volume would make a good supplementary
text in a variety of sociolinguistic courses. Within SIL, I would suggest
that many, if not all, of its chapters could very profitably be used to sup-
plement our Language and Society course as an introduction to the defini-
tion and history of sociolinguistics as a field and its connection to the other
more data-oriented subfields of linguistics. It would also introduce, at an
early stage in our training, the important notions of social science research
methodology. This would provide a general orientation for the SIL field-
worker which necessarily would be more adequately covered in advanced
courses (e.g. the Language Survey course) later on. The book might also be
useful as supplemental readings to provide a (now missing) sociolinguistic
component in our Field Methods courses. For more veteran SIL members
who have never had a course in sociolinguistics, this would be a good vol-
ume to use as an entry point, a first reader, in the discipline.

(Received 06 June 2000)