Review of "Qualitative Methods in Sociolinguistics"

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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 specific 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 going over 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/specificity, 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 do 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