

## **Citizen Sociolinguistics and the “Accent Challenge”: Toward a New Sociolinguistic Methodology using Internet-Circulated Social Media**

Betsy Rymes & Andrea Leone (*University of Pennsylvania*)

Increasingly, everyday people are compiling detailed illustrations of and commentaries on the sounds of language via Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, or other social media. Collectively, these postings function as a participatory version of the more formal linguistic atlases compiled by professional sociolinguists (e.g., Atwood, 1963; Kretschmar, 1993; Labov et al., 2006). Like “citizen scientists” who have been enlisted to tag migrating butterflies, monitor their own cholesterol intake, or test hypotheses about animal behavior on their pets, these *citizen sociolinguists* have become collectors of sociolinguistically meaningful distinctions--meaningful because these are the distinctions that have stood out to everyday language users. This paper illustrates one genre of ad hoc citizen sociolinguist postings, the “accent challenge,” and in the process describes methodological innovations for sociolinguistic research on interactive Web environments like YouTube.

The inventory for the YouTube accent challenge originates in sociolinguistic research conducted by Bert Vaux at Harvard in the ‘80s (Vaux, nd), which draws on the early dialect studies of Karuth (1943). While the methods used by Vaux and Karuth have been largely abandoned in the field of sociolinguistics, the word lists and lexical prompts have circulated across the world via Tumblr and YouTube. Our analysis of 1) accent challenge videos; and 2) the commentary they generate illustrates two empirical points. First, unlike ideal scientific subjects envisioned by the original creators of the survey, YouTube performers never read the list through without providing background stories and frequent self-interruption. Instead, YouTubers often preface their reading with detailed biographical comments or regional specifics. Then, while reading the list, they side-comment on the significance of certain words and frequently insert their own favorite regionalisms, which had not been presupposed by the survey. In response to these performances, YouTube viewers provide voluminous commentary about the validity of any performance and its claims to regional authenticity, in turn fueling the collective relevance of certain emblematic pronunciations or lexical items.

These empirical findings have methodological implications. YouTube *citizen sociolinguistic* portraits illustrate not only regional speech samples and their phonological and lexical variation, but also, via self-interruptive side-commentary and the comments of YouTube viewers, the relative social salience of certain emblematic speech features. Thus, we are proposing a new sociolinguistic methodology that 1) draws on self-conscious portraits generated by language users themselves; and 2) assesses the validity of those portraits by examining the commentary on them posted by Internet peers.

This methodological direction emphasizes the value of second order descriptions of discrete emblematic features of talk over static totalizing descriptions of internally consistent codes. In this way, it provides a new way to gather and understand Web-circulated social media that is consistent with contemporary theory of language and context (Lucy, 1993; Moore 2011). In conclusion, we will point to how the findings from our study of web-circulated citizen sociolinguistic portraits have implications for sociolinguistic research in any context, be it on the Internet or In Real Life.