

# Using and creating oral history in dialect research

by Natalie Braber and Diane Davies

**Abstract:** This article considers the use of recorded oral history and how existing collections can be used and supplemented in regional dialect research. We consider what was learned from one joint and two independent sociolinguistic projects carried out by the authors in the East Midlands region of England. The joint study used mainly archival oral history, while the others collected data in part from oral history interviews undertaken with local community groups. We explore the strengths and limitations of oral history collections within sociolinguistic research and discuss how some of the methodological challenges (including ethical issues in secondary use of archival data) were met in our own studies. We argue that closer collaboration between oral historians and sociolinguists, particularly in the sharing of data collection and analysis methods, would benefit both fields.

**Key words:** Re-using oral history archives; sociolinguistics; dialect; methodology; East Midlands Oral History Archive; collaboration

The Oral History Society website states that, among other things, oral history is ‘a living history of everyone’s unique life experiences’ and ‘an opportunity for those people who have been “hidden from history” to have their voice heard’.<sup>1</sup> Recordings available in oral history collections can be used by social scientists, historians, but also linguists – in this case, specifically sociolinguists – to investigate language change as well as local language usage.

A recent article by Katja Roller in *Oral History* discusses the use of historical narratives in linguistics and describes several available oral history collections, some of which have been used for linguistic analysis.<sup>2</sup> Perks and Robinson<sup>3</sup> draw attention to the advantages of using oral history recordings to illustrate regional dialects. They comment on how the oral history-led project *The Way We Speak* has allowed researchers to examine how the English language has changed over the last fifty years, as well as allowing us to ‘reflect on

the way in which the project has encouraged us to reconnect oral history with sociolinguistics, accents and dialects, restoring an awareness of the essential oracy of our source through new technology’.<sup>4</sup> Noting the challenges of ensuring ethical use of the data, they welcome the opportunity that archival oral history gives us to map changes in dialect through time by comparing older and younger voices from the same areas. They also point out that, given the centrality of spoken language and the influence of speech styles within the oral history field, a focus on dialect can be of benefit to oral historians as well as linguists.

It is also recognised by sociolinguists working in the digital age that certain spoken materials created as part of dialect projects can be regarded as potential legacy materials of interest to non-linguists, for example, oral historians.<sup>5</sup> Thus the fields of oral history and sociolinguistics have shared interests and intersections that, we would argue, warrant more research

collaboration. This is also becoming more pressing since, as Perks and Robinson point out, oral history and dialectology worked closely together in the past but 'for reasons which are not entirely clear English oral history has drifted away from folklore and dialectology, and moved closer to the postmodernism of sociology, social science and psychology'.<sup>6</sup>

Widening the interdisciplinary use of oral history would appear to be in line with a number of commentators concerned with the type of access available to research data in this field. For example, High quotes Frisch, who comments that the 'Deep Dark Secret of oral history is that nobody spends much time listening to or watching recorded and collected interview documents'.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Frisch states that the shift from voice to text is controlling how we enable people to listen to our speakers,<sup>8</sup> and Portelli comments that many oral historians concentrate solely on the transcript and that the very presence of a transcript turns the source from an aural into a visual one.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Shopes observes that transcripts themselves can be flawed and that researchers should listen to the original interviews.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, in sociolinguistic research, the original speech is the primary focus for analysis and thus necessitates both accurate and consistent methods of transcription.<sup>11</sup>

In our joint research since 2011 on the regional dialect of the East Midlands, we have found oral history archives to be a rich source of data for sampling the accents of different generations from the area, which is partly due to the way the oral historian is trained to successfully interview participants.<sup>12</sup> Clear recordings of extended speech on a topic the interviewee recalls from personal experience can reveal the speaker's accent and dialect in a remarkably fluent and spontaneous way. Speaker attitudes and emotions can also be realised through language by examining, for example, tone of voice.<sup>13</sup> This contrasts with the fieldwork typically used in traditional dialectology, where questionnaires are often the main tool used to collect data on phonological, lexical and grammatical forms.

The Survey of English Dialects (SED), the first systematic investigation of dialects of English in England, collected a wealth of data from informants across rural areas of the country, but used highly structured interviews based on a questionnaire rather than recording more natural conversation. Interestingly though, Stanley Ellis, the main fieldworker for the SED, did acknowledge the advantages of allowing interviewees to talk more freely about themselves and highlighted the significant effects of reminiscence when he wrote of the typical (male) informant that 'those topics about which he spoke most freely were his own life, his work and family, and particularly his early years when his memories appeared to prompt a more natural flow of local dialect'.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, perhaps the key advantage of oral history for dialect research, as well as for other linguistically oriented research, is the relationship between reminiscence, narrative and identity. Oral history does not merely give us personal but also shared

narratives. It helps us link the personal to the social and historical, setting a speaker's use of language and dialect within the wider cultural context.

In this article we discuss some of the challenges of using and creating oral history within sociolinguistic study, as encountered in three studies carried out since 2011. The first ('An investigation into dialect through oral history: The East Midlands', funded by the British Academy)<sup>15</sup> was a joint study by the two authors and collected a large proportion of its data from existing archives held in the region. The second ('Village Voices'), carried out by Diane Davies in collaboration with Colin Hyde, director of the East Midlands Oral History Archive (EMOHA), and Liz Blood, Heritage Support Officer at Leicestershire County Council,<sup>16</sup> trained heritage wardens as volunteer fieldworkers to collect interview and other data from villages in Leicestershire with the aim of comparing the speech of three generations of people from the same places. The third ('Pit Talk'), a project run by Natalie Braber with Christopher Dann and Alice Cope, two students from Nottingham Trent University, undertook interviews with miners and ex-miners around the East Midlands in order to describe and help to preserve 'pit talk' in the region. Essentially, these studies were all undertaken to learn more about the dialect of the East Midlands, a variety which has been relatively neglected in sociolinguistic research.<sup>17</sup> Principally in the authors' joint study, the aim was also to examine to what extent existing oral history archives could provide sufficient data for effective research into regional dialect and how any gaps could be filled through the addition of some new recordings, for example where there was a need for samples from speakers of a younger generation (who might be expected to feature less frequently as interviewees in oral history collections).

Whether we use existing or create new oral history recordings for dialect research, there are important and parallel issues to consider, among them the ethical questions of how recordings should be accessed and used, and how they can be preserved for future use, in addition to methodological issues. There are, of course, issues with using oral history archives for secondary analysis and some of these concerns will be discussed in the following section.

### **Challenges when using archival oral history**

There are certain potential pitfalls which have to be considered when using for sociolinguistic purposes data originally collected by others for oral history projects. The question of whether the interviewee's dialect is affected by the dialect of the interviewer is an issue worth considering. Amongst others, the sociolinguist Peter Trudgill has carried out research examining the role of the interview, in particular how the interviewer, as well as interviewee, might accommodate and make their language more similar to each other during the interview.<sup>18</sup> Within the field of sociolinguistics it is commonly understood that participants may modify their linguistic variety to one closer to the standard because of the

perceived formality of an interview situation. This may be the case if the interviewer is a Standard English speaker.<sup>19</sup> However, even using non-Standard speakers to carry out interviews can be problematic. Using an interviewer with the same dialect as the interviewee could make the interviewee exaggerate their own dialect (albeit subconsciously), while a different dialect speaker might cause greater self-consciousness on the part of the interviewee. Other factors might also influence the way they converse, such as age, social class, ethnicity, gender and level of education.

Oral history interviews can be very long, and too lengthy to be examined in their entirety for many sociolinguistic studies (this was a factor in our joint project, for example<sup>20</sup>). While corpus linguistic approaches<sup>21</sup> enable large datasets to be analysed, they may not be suitable in terms of fulfilling the precise research aims, and the alternative of analysing the same amount of data without corpus tools, such as specific computer programmes designed to look for word frequency or word patterning, is often impractical because of the time and support needed to carry out such a task.

So the sociolinguist is likely to make use of extracts rather than full recordings, which creates its own difficulties. It can be difficult to select extracts to accurately reflect the language of the speaker. Careful consideration must be used to select sound criteria. There are dangers of 'cherry-picking' suitable interviewees, or extracts from interviews. If the 'strongest' dialect speaker, or part of an interview which contains most examples of local dialect, is used to represent a dialect or a speaker, then the characteristics of that speaker may be over-generalised. Extracts might misrepresent the frequency of a specific feature or the choice of extracts might simply favour the more marked features of the dialect because they are more striking and possibly easier to find. Other features of language might be more or less common in an interview situation which may skew results, for example the past tense which is frequently used in such narratives may be much higher than in normal language usage.<sup>22</sup>

Certain aspects of language or dialect cannot be analysed at all as they may simply not occur during the extract, although this does not mean that the speaker does not use these features. Furthermore, oral history interviews do not allow for all potentially relevant aspects of a dialect to be analysed; for example, the interviewee is usually less likely to be formulating questions or using certain grammatical structures (the passive, such as 'the ball was thrown by the boy' rather than 'the boy threw the ball' being less likely to appear in spoken than written language) unless prompted. The words used will inevitably be influenced by the topic being discussed, which may or may not naturally prompt the use of dialect words.

Consequently, if the focus is on lexical features, a word or expression not being used during the interview does not mean that the speaker would never use it. For this reason, we would argue that elicitation tasks, such as the reading aloud of word lists, should ideally be

used as a supplementary source of data if the research focus is on specific linguistic items. This would ensure that particular linguistic features were available for full analysis where needed. For example, the researcher might be interested in the pronunciation of the vowel in a word such as 'price', and so would need to elicit sufficient examples of how words with different spellings but sharing this vowel sound to ensure that such an analysis could be carried out. Such elicitation tasks can highlight the contrast with oral history practice approaches to data collection.

Given all these factors, the key point here is that, from oral history recordings alone, we cannot control for the linguistic output, we can only analyse what happens to occur in the recordings and, where necessary, supplement data from this source with evidence from less natural but more structured data collection methods such as the use of word lists or direct questioning. Such recordings do not allow us to control whether the interviewer and interviewee know each other, or how similar linguistic and social backgrounds could potentially influence the language used. Many sociolinguistic studies try to make sure that the interviewer and interviewee know each other to make the recordings as relaxed and informal as possible, or at least that they are of similar backgrounds to ensure compatibility.<sup>23</sup>

Portelli comments that dialect is likely to crop up in anecdotes, the personal involvement of the narrator or with the intrusion of collective memory.<sup>24</sup> Other studies have groups of two or three people talking to each other, while the interviewer leaves the room to ensure that their language use is as natural as possible. If people who know each other are recorded together, it reduces the chance that one of the participants uses a different linguistic variety than normal. These methods are used to try to reduce the 'observer's paradox', a term coined by William Labov, who states that 'the aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain these data by systematic observation'.<sup>25</sup> A real strength of using oral history is that it allows for comparison with contemporary language data where linguists can examine which language features have changed over a period of time and hypothesise how changes were introduced into a region and how speakers adopted such features.

The 'secondary' use of oral history archives for a purpose for which they were not originally intended is, in itself, a potentially problematic area. This can be important because of a number of factors. We may, for instance, be limited by incomplete or inconsistent information related to an archive; and practice can vary from institution to institution, with some being more reliably documented than others. One institution we would have liked to have worked with on the first project did not have full metadata on all participants nor permission to use extracts for further research, although all interviews had been videoed and transcribed. Some lacked contact details, so interviewees

or their families could not be contacted to check whether such permission would be given. Because of such problems, many potentially rich data sources cannot be utilised by sociolinguists.

On a different level, using data for a different purpose to that for which it was originally collected has been the focus of discussion. Bornat comments that different disciplines may reveal different insights about data,<sup>26</sup> and the passage of time may add new angles to previous interviews.<sup>27</sup> She also questions whether there are ethical issues which need to be considered.<sup>28</sup> Especially considering new digital ways of presenting recordings, such concerns must be taken into account by all researchers. In all our projects, we carefully considered ethical issues, both for previously collected and new data, and this will be discussed in the following section. Gallwey also discusses problematic issues with secondary analysis, and suggests that some researchers feel that it is flawed because subsequent users do not possess the same knowledge as those who collected the data.<sup>29</sup> However, what can be argued for linguists is that although the metadata about the participants is important, as was stated above, the actual subject material of the interviews is frequently not as important as the language itself as the focus is mainly on the language used.

### Investigating East Midlands dialect

Before describing our joint study, it is worth pointing out that all of the projects described in this paper which required new recordings to be made followed similar ethical procedures to inform participants of the research aims and methods to ensure that they all understood what the projects were about and what the data would be used for.

Participants were given information sheets about the project and were asked to sign consent forms to confirm that the data they provided could be used (anonymously) as part of academic research. These forms explained that such academic research could include conference papers, journal articles or extracts from the interviews being published on websites. Participants had the chance to ask questions about the project, if so desired, and were informed that they could withdraw from the projects and remove their recordings from the projects if they wished to do so at any time without needing to give any explanation. This ensured that all participants were aware of the aims of the projects and that their recordings could be used in future projects. The ethics of the oral history archives will be considered in the following paragraph, but issues around re-analysis were considered and it was decided that, as our analysis would be concerned with linguistic features, such recordings would be suitable.<sup>30</sup>

Our first project, which was funded by the British Academy (see figure 2), aimed to address the lack of a systematic survey of dialect in the East Midlands by examining vernacular speech in the region using data primarily from the East Midlands Oral History Archive (EMOHA).



Figure 1: East Midlands Oral History Archive leaflet.

EMOHA was originally funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund to establish the first large-scale archive of oral history recordings for Leicestershire and Rutland. This includes the collections of the former Leicester Oral History Archive; the Mantle archive from north-west Leicestershire; the Community History archive of Leicester City Libraries; the Market Harborough Museum collection; and the sound archive of BBC Radio Leicester, along with smaller collections donated by local organisations or individuals. New collections of oral testimony are continually added, covering a wide range of different communities and themes across the region.

EMOHA (see figure 1) now holds more than one thousand oral history interviews which date from the early 1980s onwards. The collections cover Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. However,





Figure 2: Locations of speakers (see [www.lc.ac.uk/emoha/community/dialect/home.html](http://www.lc.ac.uk/emoha/community/dialect/home.html)).

there is not an even spread across the region, and there is less material from Rutland, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire than from Leicestershire. The interviews are all catalogued so, for the most part, there is an indication of family background and circumstances of the interviewee.

The oral history recordings we used were principally from archives dating back to the 1980s, though supplemented with some new data from interviews with younger speakers to facilitate comparison between different generations of people from the region. In this study we used recordings from several archives: 'Landshapes' (four samples recorded in 2005), 'Taking Part' (three samples, recorded in 2008-2009), 'Natural Heroes' (two samples recorded in 2007), 'Lincolnshire Village Archives' (two samples recorded in 2006), 'Migration Stories' (two samples recorded in 2012), 'Aviation History of Lincolnshire' (one sample from 2012) and 'Nottinghamshire Voices' (four samples recorded in 1982; this last collection is not in EMOHA but is based in Nottingham Central Library).

It was advantageous to us to have discussions first of all with Colin Hyde, director of EMOHA, who was able to give us an overview of archives available in the region and where they were housed. A crucial factor, though, was not just locating the archives, but establishing who we would need to consult to request access to them for our purposes. It was also important to have reliable metadata for any recordings selected, which meant that we would need to know the age of the speaker, date of recording and enough about their background to be sure that they were born and brought up in the East Midlands. At the same time, we had to assure anyone giving us permission to use the data that we would not make speakers identifiable beyond age

and gender and the place they came from in the region. This would be done by means of a coding system.

In summary, access (where granted) involved the following stages: the archivist or holding librarian was given a 'participant information' form telling them about the aims of our research and how we would store the data; proof was provided to them that ethical approval had been granted from our respective university ethics boards. It was agreed that a careful choice of extracts would be made from the chosen recordings (again, not inadvertently identifying the speaker) and acknowledgement of the original archives would be given in our research and any follow-up publications or talks, for example. We had to keep in mind and be sensitive to the fact that our speakers were no longer able to give permission themselves for their voices to be used in our research; and that in many cases it was less than clear that they had in any case given permission regarding possible future uses of their recordings to the original interviewer or archivist. This meant it was all the more important to follow sound ethical procedures to ensure anonymity.

In terms of data preservation and accessibility for the joint study, we had the advantage of university support in ensuring that the recordings we used would be kept safe for the future in EMOHA. However, our funding application had been granted partly on the basis that we would also make some data available to others, both researchers and the general public. As a result of this, a project website was created (hosted by EMOHA) and the extracted recordings are now available there as well as additional files which give information about interesting language features of the speakers involved. These can all be accessed online (see figure 2).

On this website, it is not possible to identify the speakers except by age, gender and the place in the East Midlands where they were from. Any parts of the extract which would have allowed speakers to identify names (of schools, for example) were blanked out to ensure anonymity. As stated above, EMOHA did not include the full geographical or age range we needed for this project, so we had to carry out some additional interviews to ensure representativeness of age and region. Therefore, we included some younger speakers in the research for purposes of accent comparison. These individuals were interviewed by us and followed the same ethical procedure and coding systems as were applied to the EMOHA recordings.

We selected extracts of interviews from the archival recordings with people born and brought up in the East Midlands who had spent most of their lives in the region, the oldest born in the first decade of the twentieth century and the youngest in the early 1990s. In total, we collected thirty recordings (eight each from Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, and six from Lincolnshire). The corpus comprises sixteen older (over forty-five years) and fourteen younger speakers (under thirty-five years).

Our speakers fall naturally into these two groups because we have a near twenty-year gap between the date of birth of the youngest speaker in the older group (1943) and the oldest speaker in the younger group (1971). This gap seemed to us to provide the logical dividing line, so we did not create a third group for middle-aged speakers. Indeed, only three speakers would have been classed as (just) middle-aged in 2012 (the year of the project), namely the one born in 1971 and two born in 1974. We acknowledge therefore that the older group spans over forty years (speakers born between 1896 and 1943) while the younger group spans twenty-four years (speakers born between 1971 and 1995). We also attempted to have a balance in terms of gender and, as far as possible, urban and rural location. From our data, we and (in the future, other researchers) will be able to explore features of interest.

We selected extracts on the basis of several criteria. We needed, first of all, extracts of good audio quality in which the interviewee could be heard clearly, but also where they seemed to be at ease with the interviewer and the recording situation; so, generally, extracts were not taken from the very earliest parts of the interviews. It was possible in all cases for us to find a point where the interviewee was talking about a particular memory, often giving a narrative account of an event or activity in the past. While we did not limit ourselves to monologues, we avoided those parts of the recordings in which the interviewer played too prominent a role, or where it might be difficult to establish who was saying what. In the case of a few interviews conducted with more than one interviewee – for example, where there were several family members present – we chose extracts where our target interviewee was the main person heard. Below is an extract from one of these interviews. The website allows users

to listen to the recording while reading the transcript and beneath this any interesting features are discussed concerning the pronunciation of words typical (or not) of the region, specific local words and grammatical constructions used by the speaker.

I was married in thirty-four and that's when probably I think it's called public utilities what electric came [...] I think it was called public utilities I used to remember it but I'm sure that's it [...] and so course the whole village then sort of got electricity up to then you had candles and paraffin lamps and we had batteries you know coz we'd been in that sort of business my husband knew what to... I don't know what make but half the time we were starved to death because we... well you could have a fire but I mean [laughs] you couldn't see half the time they didn't work if you know what I mean but anyway we got over that and we were there just over a year [...] we got it finished and went lived there and Pauline was my daughter my elder my elder daughter was born there.<sup>31</sup>

### **The 'Village Voices' project**

This study took advantage of the existing heritage warden scheme run by Leicestershire County Council to collect spoken data in a number of villages across the county with the aim of comparing the dialect of older, middle-aged and younger speakers from the same places (see figure 3). This was what could be described as an outreach project, taking sociolinguistic research directly into the communities targeted, an approach that has gained favour in recent years. As Wolfram notes, from the beginning of project planning the sociolinguist should 'consider how linguistic research might have a strategic public outreach dimension'.<sup>32</sup>

The fact that most of the heritage wardens had some prior experience of undertaking projects in their own communities was an obvious advantage, as this meant they were quite well known in the local area and therefore not seen as outsiders. On the other hand, it could not simply be assumed that they would be able to carry out the data collection for a dialect project without specific training.

Therefore, a dedicated training day was run for the volunteers, both to introduce them to the project and to ensure that they would all follow the same methods for data collection.<sup>33</sup> This event proved enormously valuable to all involved, allowing the volunteers to raise questions which had not necessarily been anticipated by the project team. The opportunity to address their main concerns carefully at this point reduced the risk of later errors. An introduction to accent and dialect, advice on oral history interviewing and on the handling of the digital voice recorders were the key topics included in the training. For volunteers unable to attend, the training material was sent out as a pack, ensuring that, while a face-to-face meeting was clearly preferable, no fieldworker would be omitted from an

The screenshot shows the 'Village Voices' webpage. At the top, there is a navigation bar with 'Home', 'A to Z of Council Services', and 'Listen to our site with'. Below this, the page is titled 'Village Voices' and 'A project on local accent and dialect'. A central image shows two people, one with a microphone. To the right of the image, there is a list of 'What's Involved' which includes recording speakers, collecting data on words and expressions, and conducting oral history interviews. The page also features a 'Feedback on this site' and 'Email page to a friend' section.

Figure 3: 'Village Voices' webpage.

induction process merely because they volunteered later than others or were not available on the training day. The timing for joining the project was approached quite flexibly to encourage maximum participation, and in fact the project remains open to possible additional villages. The villages that have already taken part are Coleorton, Thringstone, Frisby-on-the-Wreake, Moira and Lubenham, involving a total of twenty-two local informants (fourteen male and eight female).

The methods used in this project were as follows. The volunteer fieldworkers were asked to recruit, if possible, six people from their respective villages, ideally two of them aged seventy or over; two aged between forty and sixty; and two much younger speakers, preferably aged below twenty. Each participant was required to fill in a written questionnaire asking about their connection with the village and attitude towards it, as well as their feelings about their own accent and the accents they heard generally in the village. The questionnaire also included an exercise to elicit the words or phrases they might use for different concepts, such as words to mean 'attractive', 'tired', or 'left-handed'. To acquire some examples of careful speech, they were then recorded reading aloud a short passage which would reveal regional pronunciation differences. Finally, to collect examples of more fluent, conversational speech, each fieldworker was asked to conduct a short oral history interview on the theme of a 'sense of place' with two or three participants of different generations.

The following extract is from an interview with a middle-aged woman from the village of Coleorton:

We used t'ave a mine in the village as well – the ol' *Bug and Wink* – which was down Pit Lane.. there was also different societies in the village as well

such as the Toc H and we also 'ad a Conservative Party in the village as well at one time...the Home Guard... oh there's lots o' stories... but I enjoy livin' in the village 'cos it's nice peaceful calm place to be... and I wouldn't 'ave it any other way.<sup>34</sup>

With regard to data preservation and access in the future, the original recordings are stored in EMOHA, and the county council provides access to sample recordings from the 'Village Voices' project via their heritage warden website.<sup>35</sup> It is possible, on the basis of preliminary enquiries only at the time of writing, that some of the recordings could eventually be incorporated into the British Library's dialect collection, where the material would be accessible alongside data from other regional dialect projects, making comparison easier for researchers and the general public alike.

There is also a less formal way in which some data from the project will be preserved – and, just as importantly, used – as a cultural and educational resource for the original village communities involved. A few of the volunteer fieldworkers are members of local history groups and were permitted, subject to gaining the permission of the speakers chosen, to retain some recordings for potential use by these groups. Of course, this required a certain degree of flexibility on the part of the researcher. There is no way the individual sociolinguist can police this kind of use into the future, which potentially introduces a risk in terms of ethical use of the data. On the other hand, it is arguable that too rigid a hold on data generated by volunteer fieldworkers, especially those attached to local societies with an obvious interest in extending their own knowledge of the area, will only have negative consequences in making them feel unrewarded and discouraging others from assisting sociolinguistic research in this way. So we think a balance needs to be struck in projects of this kind between the aims of the researcher and the preferences of the local communities involved.

It is also important that engagement with the community through a dialect project should be reasonably sustainable and allowing some clearly defined local use of selected data is one way to ensure that it is. Sustaining the interest of volunteer fieldworkers after the end of a project may not be an easy task, but this goal can at least be supported by follow-up meetings with the volunteer groups after submission of all or most of the data to discuss preliminary findings. In the case of 'Village Voices', a workshop was organised at which the volunteers were given a presentation by Diane Davies on the preliminary findings, and could listen to and discuss extracts from their recordings that highlighted specific points of interest about accent and dialect in the county. Events of this kind are an important stage in the process of reciprocity needed to engage effectively with community participants.<sup>36</sup>

### The 'Pit Talk' Project

This project aimed to gather data about the disappearing language of miners in the East Midlands. For

centuries, coal mining formed a crucial part of the local economy and many were employed in the mines. However, pit life and the language used as part of it is disappearing with the closure of the coal mines; in fact, the last East Midlands mine closed in the summer of 2015. Therefore, it is crucial to preserve this important way of life through recording miners and their families, not only to gather information about it but also the language used for such work. A Nottingham Trent University bursary enabled two undergraduate students, Christopher Dann and Alice Cope, to work on this project alongside Natalie Braber during the summer of 2013.

This project aimed to bring together the words spoken by miners and examine how they relate to the wider vernacular of the region and its literature of story and song. It wanted to bring together its words, jokes, stories and songs that are disappearing and help attest to the remarkable vitality of the region's dialect. There is some recognition in the region that the pit talk used by East Midlands miners may be different to the language used by miners in other parts of the United Kingdom.

There are some studies of pit language, also known as 'pitmatic' in the north-east England coalfields, and some lists of mining terminology (for example on the Coalmining History Resource Centre website),<sup>37</sup> but many of these are generic and not specific to a particular region. In other cases, different words are used for the same meaning; for example, a person who hauled the wagons or tubs might be known as a 'waggoner', 'hurrier', 'drawer', 'putter' or 'haulage man' in different parts of the country. A study on pit talk in County Durham states that: 'The miner's "language", however strange it appears to the outsider, is an inevitable part of him. The language of the miner, regardless of what dialects it embraces, is an intricate and inseparable part of his whole culture'.<sup>38</sup>

Local interest in this project was very high and news of it spread quickly. After slots on the local TV news and BBC Radio Nottingham, the project was inundated with miners and ex-miners wanting to take part. Furthermore, one of the students working on the project was the daughter of an ex-miner, living in a tight-knit mining community, so plenty of local links (through this village specifically and local mining groups throughout Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Leicestershire) were used to engage participants (see also figure 4).

A number of oral history interviews have been carried out as part of this project and work is still ongoing with the addition of a recent British Academy grant which started in May 2015. The students taking part in the project had been trained by Natalie Braber to ensure similar topics were covered in all recordings, such as daily life in the mines, names for tools, jobs and roles, equipment and different names for types of coal, to name but a few. Although the interviews followed these topics, it was very important to allow the interviewee to introduce their own topics of interest

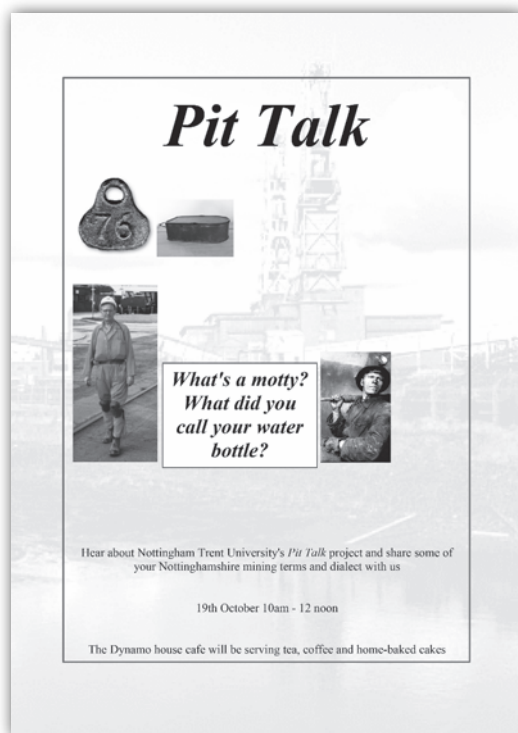


Figure 4: An information poster for the 'Pit Talk' project.

as they could differ, as well as for the type of work carried out by the miner.

Many told stories about friends in the mines; specific occurrences, such as the 1984-1985 strikes; ghosts; nicknames and sayings; and explained their work and training. At the end of the interview, all interviewees were asked to read a word list to allow for linguistic analysis to be carried out on individual pronunciation, which is of interest to sociolinguists concerned with regional variation. The miners were also asked to fill in and think about words local to the East Midlands; for example, names for family members, parts of the body, moods and attributes of people and local food terms. Such questions are a common feature of linguistic studies and allow participants to think about dialect words which may be relevant for the region.<sup>39</sup>

The analysis of the interviews looked for areas of agreement and disagreement between the miners. Most of the men interviewed (the project currently includes only one woman so far, who worked in one of the canteens on a pit site) were very happy to talk at length about their life, memories and the language of the mines. The research team has tried to ensure coverage of the different counties so that it includes miners from Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Leicestershire.

One of the first things that all miners interviewed for this project said is that there were considerable differences in the terms and language used by different miners and that it was hard to understand those who



came from other pits. The language that a miner would use there was usually confined to the pit and he would use words there that he would not use at home. One of the men comments that language used in the mine, particularly swearing, was left 'behind in the shower' and not used at home, as it was seen to be inappropriate in front of women and children. The use of a different language in the mines emphasised and strengthened the brotherhood which existed amongst miners.

The following example emphasises the difference miners perceived between themselves and management:

An under-manager, making his way up through management had to learn the ropes. Now forget university you're talking about the university of real life now. People acting like they are. A meeting at pit was going nowhere after the best part of an hour, an hour and a bit, so he was in the meeting. He then goes to the toilet and at the toilet this incident happened. Two charge men were at the urinals and he comes out to the khazi, you know the khazi? For a better term of reference, the shit house. So he come out, the two charge men turn round and look at him, he looks back and one charge man says to the other well we should get an agreement when we are re-convened 'cos best part of management has just gone.<sup>40</sup>

Another miner comments that, although work down the pit has given him a large range of health problems, these days were some of the best of his life and he would return tomorrow if he could.

Here we have an example of linguistic research that not only examines language variation in the region, but aims to preserve the relics of a disappearing dialect in order to educate future generations about this important language variety. This project involves community engagement and participation and it is hoped that future work involving a larger number of participants will result in a long-lasting legacy project as part of conservation of this crucial aspect of East Midlands heritage.

Such linguistic projects can also be of use to oral historians as they form a collection of interviews with people who participated in past events and ways of life which can be preserved for future generations. As coal mines close down, and those remaining open are using

more modern technology, these interviews record a former way of life which is in danger of disappearing and local knowledge that will be lost forever. Many mining associations contacted as part of this project have relics of old equipment and souvenirs of closed-down mines, but very few have recordings with former miners discussing traditional methods of mining or vocabulary used down the pit.

## Conclusions

These projects have used oral history archives or contemporary data (or both) to learn more about language variation and change in and around the East Midlands. We have argued that oral history is a potentially rich resource for dialect research, and that dialect research can in turn be an alternative source of oral history. In methodological terms the two fields can also learn from one another and both would benefit from working together more closely.<sup>41</sup>

The oral historian's interviewing style is a technique that the sociolinguist could adopt more frequently to help put interviewees at ease and to encourage fluent speech; while the key conventions used by linguists when orthographically transcribing speech, which are fairly stable despite minor variations, could be used more by oral historians to capture the characteristics of speech more precisely. This would reduce the extent of reliance in the oral history field on often 'tidied-up' transcriptions of interviews, to the detriment of a focus on the actual spoken testimony with all it may reveal about a speaker's feelings and attitudes, a problem discussed in a recent article by Anne Karpf.<sup>42</sup>

A sociolinguistic perspective on oral history can therefore encourage more attention to the speech styles of interviewees, helping to show that *how* something is said can be as important as *what* is said, encouraging researchers to use the actual data, rather than rely on transcriptions or descriptions, as well as supplying accompanying metadata to support researchers.<sup>43</sup> If researchers could be encouraged to put their data online, bearing in mind the ethical discussion earlier regarding anonymity and secondary analysis, other researchers could use this rather than having to collect new data.

All in all, collaboration between sociolinguists and oral historians is both timely and mutually beneficial, in our view, and more joint projects and research should be undertaken.<sup>44</sup>

## NOTES

1. Accessed online at [www.ohs.org.uk](http://www.ohs.org.uk), 1 April 2015.

2. Katja Roller, 'Towards the "oral" in oral history: using historical narratives in linguistics', *Oral History*, vol 43, no 1, 2015, pp 73-84.

3. Rob Perks and Jonnie Robinson, "'The way we speak": web-based representations of changing communities in England', *Oral History*, vol 33, no 2, 2005, pp 79-90.

4. Perks and Robinson, 2005, p 79.

5. Tyler Kendall, 'Data preservation and access', in Christine Mallinson, Becky Childs and Gerard Van Herk (eds), *Data collection in sociolinguistics: Methods and applications*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2013, pp 195-205.

6. Perks and Robinson 2005, p 88.

7. Steven High, 'Telling stories: A reflection on oral history and new media', *Oral History*, vol 38, no 1, 2010, pp 101-112.

8. Michael Frisch, 'Oral history and the digital revolution', in Rob Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, Abingdon: Routledge, 1998, pp 102-114.

9. Alessandro Portelli, 'What makes oral history different', in Perks and Thomson, 1998, pp 32-42.

10. Linda Shopes, 'Oral history and the study of communities', in Perks and Thomson, 1998, pp 261-270.

11. See also Stacey Zembrzycki,

'Bringing stories to life: using new media to disseminate and critically engage with oral history interviews', *Oral History*, vol 41, no 1, 2013, pp 98-107.

**12.** Joanna Bornat, 'A second take: revisiting interviews with a different purpose', *Oral History*, vol 31, no 1, 2003, pp 47-53.

**13.** Portelli, 1998, pp 35-36.

**14.** Stanley Ellis, 'The Survey of English Dialects and social history', *Oral History*, vol 2, no 2, 1974, pp 37-43.

**15.** 'An investigation into dialect through oral history: The East Midlands'. Grant reference number: SG110642. Website available at [www.le.ac.uk/emoha/community/dialect/home.html](http://www.le.ac.uk/emoha/community/dialect/home.html).

**16.** Website available at [www.leics.gov.uk/villagevoices](http://www.leics.gov.uk/villagevoices).

**17.** For more details on this neglect, see Natalie Braber 'The concept of identity in the East Midlands', *English Today*, vol 30, no2, 2014, pp 3-10; and Natalie Braber 'Language perception in the East Midlands', *English Today*, vol 31, no 1, 2015, pp 16-26.

**18.** Peter Trudgill, *Dialects in Contact*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1986. For more recent references, see also Alan Bell, *The Guidebook to Sociolinguistics*, Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014; Sali Tagliamonte, *Analysing Sociolinguistic Variation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

**19.** Standard English is a social rather than regional dialect and is the variety taught in schools. It can be spoken in any accent, but is associated with the most well-educated people and used in institutional contexts, formal writing and print. Although not superior to a regional dialect linguistically, it is regarded socially as having higher prestige and influence.

**20.** Using extracts rather than entire

interviews is also discussed by Perks and Robinson, 2005, p 83.

**21.** Corpus linguistics is the study of language through analysing corpora or large collections of electronically stored texts, using software designed for this purpose. See Roller, 2015 and Alison Sealey, 'Probabilities and surprises: a realist approach to identifying linguistic and social patterns, with reference to an oral history corpus', *Applied Linguistics*, vol 31, no 2, 2009, pp 215-235, for more details on methods.

**22.** For more details and discussion of other studies which raise these issues, see Roller, 2015.

**23.** See for example, the Milroys study in Belfast, which used the 'friend of a friend' technique. James Milroy and Lesley Milroy, 'Belfast: change and variation in an urban vernacular', in Peter Trudgill (ed), *Sociolinguistic Patterns in British English*, London: Arnold, 1978, pp 19-36.

**24.** Portelli, 1998, p 35-6.

**25.** William Labov, *Sociolinguistic Patterns*, Oxford: Blackwell, p 209.

**26.** Bornat, 2003, pp 47, 50.

**27.** Joanna Bornat, Parvati Raghuram and Leroi Henry, 'Revisiting the archives – opportunities and challenges: a case study from the history of geriatric medicine', *Sociological Research Online*, vol 17, no 1, 2012, pp 1-38.

**28.** Bornat, 2003, p 51.

**29.** Gallwey, 2013, p 38.

**30.** See also Bornat, Raghuram and Henry, 2012, p 4.

**31.** Female speaker, born 1914, lived in Dry Doddington, Lincolnshire. For full extract and transcript, see: [www.le.ac.uk/emoha/community/dialect/Audio%20Record%20Forms/LVAGKB.pdf](http://www.le.ac.uk/emoha/community/dialect/Audio%20Record%20Forms/LVAGKB.pdf).

**32.** Walt Wolfram, 'In the profession: connecting with the public', *Journal of*

*English Linguistics*, vol 40, 2012, pp 111-117.

**33.** Such training is also discussed in Rob Perks, 'The Century Speaks: A public history partnership', *Oral History*, vol 29, no 2, 2001, pp 95-105.

**34.** [Village Voices – COL\_002i\_F\_50\_ER]

**35.** Accessible at [www.leics.gov.uk/index/environment/naturalenvironment/heritagewardens/heritagewardens\\_projects/villagevoices.htm](http://www.leics.gov.uk/index/environment/naturalenvironment/heritagewardens/heritagewardens_projects/villagevoices.htm).

**36.** Christine Mallinson, 'Sharing data and findings', in Mallinson, Childs and Van Herk, 2013, pp 254-257.

**37.** See also Bill Griffiths, *Pitmatic: The talk of the North East coalfield*, Newcastle: Northumbria University Press, 2007; W Forster, *Pit-Talk. A Survey of Terms used by Miners in the South Midlands*, Leicester: University of Leicester, 1969.

**38.** Dave Douglas, *Pit Talk in County Durham*, Oxford: TRUExpress, 1973.

**39.** For more information, see Carmen Llamas, 'A new methodology: data elicitation for social and regional language variation studies', *Leeds Working Papers*, vol 7, 1999, pp 95-119.

**40.** Interview with DA A, Nottinghamshire miner, interviewed by Chris Dann (a student at NTU at the time), July 2013.

**41.** Perks and Robinson, 2005, p 89.

**42.** Anne Karpf, 'The human voice and the texture of experience', *Oral History*, vol 42, no 2, 2014, pp 50-55.

**43.** See Gallwey, 2013, p 44.

**44.** In fact, Roller, 2015, pp 74-76, gives information about exactly which archives are available for linguistic and other research.

Addresses for correspondence:  
natalie.braber@ntu.ac.uk  
dd146@leicester.ac.uk