Betsy Sneller*

COVID-era sociolinguistics: introduction to the special issue

<https://doi.org/10.1515/lingvan-2021-0138>

Received November 19, 2021; accepted November 24, 2021; published online March 7, 2022

Abstract: In the 18 months that have passed since COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic, linguists around the world have had to grapple with the practical and ethical issues that arose from trying to collect data in a safe and remote way while participants are experiencing an acute disaster. The current collection presents insights from a number of sociolinguistic research projects that were either initiated in response to the pandemic or that adjusted their research methods mid-trajectory. A concluding discussion article underscores that the honest reflections and concrete suggestions in this collection will remain relevant beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. They will be of value to any (socio)linguist who is navigating the ethics of fieldwork in uncertain or traumatic contexts, who is recruiting and retaining participants via remote means, or who is figuring out how to rapidly change their data collection methods.

Keywords: COVID-era sociolinguistics; ethical considerations; linguistic fieldwork; remote research

In March 2020, COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic. The world went into various degrees of lockdown, with many countries shutting down in-person schools and prohibiting in-person work for all but essential workers. These robust social distancing measures put in place in response to the pandemic meant that all in-person linguistic research also was shut down. While it was not possible to predict in the spring of 2020 how long the pandemic would last, it was clear that researchers needed to adapt their methods to work with these new remote requirements. Linguists in the middle of in-person data collection projects needed to find a way to pivot to comparable socially distanced methods. Since March 2020, a number of studies have tackled different aspects of remote data collection, from providing insight into the acoustic quality of different remote recording setups (Bleaman et al. 2021; Kang and Nycz 2021; Sanker et al. 2021; inter alia) to harnessing smartphone apps as a method of data collection (Hilton and Leemann 2021). It is encouraging to see this work as setting the stage for future remote research.

In addition to questions about the validity of acoustic data collection in remote research, a natural disaster like COVID also raises other serious and novel practical concerns for linguists. The papers in this collection provide an honest view into these challenges, like how to recruit participants remotely, how to work with a remote research team, how to provide informed consent to children without a researcher present, and how to stretch thin budgets for projects that can not wait for the long turnaround associated with most external grant funding.

Importantly for data collection conducted during a widespread crisis, the papers in this collection also foreground the ethical considerations involved in collecting linguistic data during a time of crisis. The severity of the pandemic meant that potential participants were likely experiencing loss, grief, and prolonged anxiety. As highlighted by several papers in this collection, COVID-19 hit already vulnerable or otherwise marginalized communities the hardest, exacerbating existing social inequalities and ongoing traumas. For any researcher in linguistics conducting fieldwork, it is essential to understand and center the needs of the community (see, e.g., Wolfram 1993). While COVID is (we hope) a once-in-a-generation scale natural disaster, it is nevertheless not the first major disaster to impact communities during linguistic

*Corresponding author: Betsy Sneller, Department of Linguistics, Languages, and Cultures, Michigan State University, East Lansing, USA, E-mail: sneller7@msu.edu. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2112-3064>

research broadly speaking (e.g., Cadwell and O'Brien 2016; McKee 2014; *inter alia*) or sociolinguistic research specifically (e.g., Carmichael 2017; Clark et al. 2016; Lewis 2019; Uekusa 2019). As highlighted by this previous work and by the papers in the current collection, it is essential for linguists working with speech communities experiencing trauma to consider ethics as central to the research.

However, the projects represented in this collection also needed to contend with specific challenges that arose from the *interaction* of remote data collection and speech communities experiencing an ongoing crisis. Each individual contribution provides honest and valuable insight for other linguistic researchers faced with developing or adjusting their research projects in response to a disaster in their speech community of interest. Similarly, the collection as a whole has been written with a particular focus on the ethical considerations that arise during research with communities experiencing disasters; my hope is that the collection may serve as a foundation for centering ethical considerations in linguistic research design and implementation.

1 The articles in this collection

The articles in this collection are the output of a panel workshop at the virtual Linguistic Society of America (LSA) meeting in 2021, on COVID-era sociolinguistics. It represents a range of sociolinguistic research impacted by the pandemic, from newly emerging research projects to existing projects that needed to rapidly pivot methodologies in response to the pandemic. Each project represented here had unique practical concerns specific to their research goals and community. As the pandemic developed, new ethical concerns emerged as well. Both are examined in detail in the individual contributions. These presentations and subsequent thoughtful conversations with attendees at the LSA workshop grew into the collection you are now reading.

The collection begins with a paper by Betsy Sneller, Suzanne Evans Wagner, and Yongqing Ye on a new research project in Michigan, “MI Diaries”. This project was developed in March of 2020, and was designed to collect regular “audio diaries” from participants throughout the course of the pandemic, in order to document real-time changes to participants’ social lives and language use. The research team developed a simple app for mobile devices to collect weekly or monthly audio diaries from participants. This innovative diary method has broad value for longitudinal research projects in linguistics and related fields, as it offers an easy way for participants to engage with the project on their own schedules. The self-recorded diary method also offers a way to potentially mitigate the concern in longitudinal projects that the changing relationship between researcher and participants may impact the data. The paper highlights a number of false starts, and outlines why some potential solutions did not work in the specific context of Michigan State University, as well as describing the resolutions to these specific challenges. It also includes a section on how the project leveraged small starts into bigger ones: for example, a hastily created and visually unattractive website nevertheless drew interest from individuals with design skills who then participated in the research team, and provided subsequent ideas for improvement. The supplementary materials also include many details that may be useful to any linguists who are conducting remote fieldwork.

In the second paper, “The Lothian Diary Project”, Lauren Hall-Lew, Claire Cowie, Catherine Lai, Nina Markl, Stephen Joseph McNulty, Shan-Jan Sarah Liu, Clare Llewellyn, Beatrice Alex, Zuzana Elliott, and Anita Klingler discuss an emerging research project in Scotland. This project collects self-recorded audio and video recordings of people’s experiences during the pandemic in and around Edinburgh, Scotland, and is part of the broader Edinburgh Speaks collection of research projects. It was designed from the outset to be interdisciplinary and community-centered. This community-centered focus can be seen in the project’s innovative payment scheme, which recognizes that social inequalities have been amplified by the pandemic, and therefore provides higher compensation rates to more vulnerable participants. The payment scheme also provides options for participants to send their compensation money to a local business impacted by the pandemic or to a local charity (non-profit) instead. These project design choices provide an ethical example for any future linguistic research conducted with vulnerable participants or in response to a disaster within the speech community. The audio and video data collected by the Lothian Diary Project will provide the basis for a

number of interdisciplinary research questions, such as analyzing COVID narratives as a specific genre of narrative and the multimodal aspects of style within these video diaries.

The third paper, “Disruptions due to COVID-19”, by Maya Abtahian, Naomi Nagy, Katharina Pabst, and Vidhya Elango, provides a look into the language practices of multilingual and heritage language-speaking students in a broadly English-dominant setting during the pandemic. This research project, *Disruptions due to COVID-19*, was developed out of a recognition that social distancing measures were creating new linguistic environments for participants. Abtahian and colleagues collected survey data from multilingual and heritage language-speaking students at the University of Toronto and the University of Rochester, to document how changes to daily interactions and language use may impact short- and long-term language maintenance and language shift. The paper includes qualitative content analysis from their open-ended survey questions, as well as the ethical underpinnings of this type of survey design. As a research project without any targeted funding, Abtahian and colleagues faced a very practical concern that many other rapidly conceived research projects will also face: how to provide non-monetary value to participants when a project does not have funding for participant compensation. Abtahian and colleagues outline the care they took in their survey design to make the task short and enjoyable for participants.

In the fourth paper, “Socially distanced but virtually connected”, Monica Nesbitt and Akiyah Watts discuss an ongoing in-person research project that needed to rapidly shift to remote methods in response to the pandemic. Originally designed to collect in-person sociolinguistic interviews with African American English speakers in Boston as part of the broader Eastern Massachusetts Language and Life project, Nesbitt and Watts needed to redesign their participant recruitment and data collection to fit the restrictions of the pandemic. The team pivoted from ethnographic data collection and in-person sociolinguistic interviews in the Boston area to sociolinguistic interviews conducted via Zoom. Like the other papers in this collection, Nesbitt and Watts features a number of ethical considerations around conducting research with marginalized participants during a disaster. This paper pushes the discussion even further, highlighting the importance of supporting marginalized project personnel as well. The project’s innovation in remote participant recruitment, harnessing the native features of Instagram and the expertise of young research personnel to make connections with Black Bostonians, will also provide a critical starting point for any linguistic fieldwork project aiming to make the most of social media recruitment.

The collection ends with a rich discussion from Katie Carmichael, Lynn Clark, and Jennifer Hay. The paper, “Lessons learned: The long view”, provides a retrospective view 10 years on from researchers who have conducted sociolinguistic projects in response to or during an ongoing disaster. Carmichael conducted fieldwork in New Orleans in the aftermath of the devastating Hurricane Katrina, in the midst of Hurricane Isaac in 2012. Clark and Hay conducted research in Christchurch, New Zealand, after two earthquakes five months apart in 2010 and 2011 caused hundreds of deaths and injuries and destroyed much of the infrastructure of the city. Both research groups took great care to protect their research participants: Carmichael discusses the importance of allowing participants to pause and even stop their sociolinguistic interviews, and Clark and Hay’s QuakeBox setup provided a quiet recovery space for any participants who needed some time before re-entering the public after telling their story. In a section on researcher burnout and well-being, the authors remind us that ethical research also includes protecting project personnel. A major theme emerging from both sets of researchers is the widespread public acceptance of the importance of collecting disaster narratives; the paper discusses some ways that this kind of research can provide broader value to the community, whether through giving participants copies of their recordings or a more publicly available collection of stories. The paper concludes with a set of major takeaways, which provide both logistical insight and human-focused reminders. As a long view, the paper provides immense value to any linguistic fieldworkers working in the midst of or in the aftermath of disasters.

While conducting sociolinguistic research during the natural disaster of COVID-19 was the original impetus for the LSA workshop and the present collection, many of the issues raised throughout the collection are not specific to COVID, nor even specific to research with communities experiencing a disaster. Linguistic research of all types should consider ethical treatment of marginalized research subjects and project personnel. Many linguists likewise must grapple with finding ways to compensate participants and personnel

in the absence of dedicated funding; the various solutions presented in this collection provide some creative and concrete ways to provide value to participants and personnel. The practical considerations raised by remote research – including remote team management, data collection, and compensation – are likewise likely to remain relevant even after the worst of the pandemic is behind us, as many linguists are likely to continue doing at least some remote research. So while COVID has brought many of these practical and ethical issues to the fore, my hope is that the current collection will remain a valuable reference for years to come.

References

- Bleaman, Isaac L., Katie Cugno & Annie Helms. 2021. Increased intelligibility (but not formality) in Zoom interviews. Paper presented at New Ways of Analyzing Variation 49. Austin: University of Texas at Austin, 19–24 October.
- Cadwell, Patrick & Sharon O'Brien. 2016. Language, culture, and translation in disaster ICT: An ecosystemic model of understanding. *Perspectives* 24(4). 557–575.
- Carmichael, Katie. 2017. Displacement and local linguistic practices: R-lessness in post-Katrina Greater New Orleans. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 21(5). 696–719.
- Clark, Lynn, Helen MacGougan, Jennifer Hay & Liam Walsh. 2016. “Kia ora. This is my earthquake story”: Multiple applications of a sociolinguistic corpus. *Ampersand* 3. 13–20.
- Hilton, Nanna Haug & Adrian Leemann (eds.). 2021. *Linguistics Vanguard* 7(s1): *Special issue on using smartphones to collect data for linguistic research*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Kang, Yoojin & Jennifer Nycz. 2021. *The sociophonetics of video-mediated vs. in-person interactions*. Paper presented at New Ways of Analyzing Variation 49. Austin: University of Texas at Austin, 19–24 October.
- Lewis, Thomas D. 2019. *“Before the storm, there wasn’t much of a thought. When Katrina happened, that changed everything”: Social network geometry, discourses of threat, and English usage among Latinxs in post-Katrina New Orleans*. New Orleans: Tulane University PhD Dissertation.
- McKee, Rachel. 2014. Breaking news: Sign language interpreters on television during natural disasters. *Interpreting* 16(1). 107–130.
- Sanker, Chelsea, Sarah Babinski, Roslyn Burns, Marisha Evans, Juhyae Kim, Slater Smith, Natalie Weber & Claire Bower. 2021. (Don’t) try this at home! The effects of recording devices and software on phonetic analysis. *Language* 97(4). e360–e382.
- Uekusa, Shinya. 2019. Disaster linguicism: Linguistic minorities in disasters. *Language in Society* 48. 353–375.
- Wolfram, Walt. 1993. Ethical considerations in language awareness programs. *Issues in Applied Linguistics* 4(2). 225–255.