Collaborative Podcasting as a Participatory Research Method in Linguistics

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In an address to the Linguistic Society of America, Charity Hudley et al. (2018) set a challenge to the discipline of linguistics, that 'we should work towards models that more explicitly aim to empower (not just describe and value) voices'. Traditionally, within variationist sociolinguistics, speakers' own perceptions of their language use have been side-lined in pursuit of 'natural' speech data. Often there are good reasons for this, (i.e., 'the observer's paradox': Labov 1972: 209), but we also risk disenfranchising speakers and undervaluing their perspective. In recent years, a growing number of linguists have begun working towards methodologies which empower participants by valuing non-academic knowledge about language, and employing participatory methods (e.g., Rymes and Leone 2014; Svendsen 2018; Moore and Spencer 2021).

However, only a handful of previous studies (in any field) have used collaborative podcasting as a participatory research method (e.g. Day et al. 2017; Kincaid et al. 2020; Smith et al. 2021), and, to our knowledge, it has not been used in the field of linguistics. This is perhaps surprising given the clear suitability of the medium for exploring issues relating to speech. In their evaluation of the podcasting as a research method, Day et al. (2017: 216) write that one of its advantages as a form of collaborative research communication is that it has the potential 'to move beyond the limitations and privileging of written text in academia, allowing listeners to encounter the subtle dynamics and texture of the speaker's voice through intonation, emphasis, narrative rhythm, and timing'. In a study focusing on, e.g., how subtle changes in speech style relate to a speaker's identity, audio is an ideal participatory medium. For these reasons, we present in this paper an introduction to this method, a reflection on our experiences, and a set of recommendations as to how it might be used in linguistics.

Specifically, we discuss our experience of running a podcasting workshop and competition for Greater Manchester teenagers, as well as our plans for a more expansive project using podcasting in a participant-led participatory project about working-class youth language. We take this approach because youth language use is frequently debated by adults, but the voices of young people are rarely included in public discussions on the subject. Within sociolinguistics, teenagers are a frequent object of study, but methodologies which value their knowledge and empower them as co-researchers are still unusual. Through a quantitative analysis of self-recorded data from a group of young people, we aim to collaboratively explore how they alter their language use across different social situations and with different people. This exploration will be used to open discussions about the politics of language and identity. We will then work with the young people to co-create a podcast episode about their language use, which will become part of the public communication of the research, alongside more traditional research outputs.

This research will provide an important insight into how marginalised young people understand their own language use. In tandem, a major draw of using this participatory approach is that the young people taking part will gain immediate and tangible benefit from their participation. Our intention is for the participants to leave this project with new audio

production skills, a new understanding of linguistic research, and enhanced confidence in the value of their own ideas and opinions and their place in public discourse.

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