

A day in the life: What self-recordings reveal about “everyday” language

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For decades, variationists have relied upon the *sociolinguistic interview* for eliciting the “practiced automaticity of everyday language” (Labov 1972, p. 112) valued for analysis. But how accurate a reflection of “everyday” language is it? This study compares discursive, syntactic, lexical, and phonological data between a sociolinguistic interview and one full day of self-recorded speech for one individual. Overall, the self-recorded data provide a comparatively wider range of variation across an array of variables and illuminate new variables not found in interview data, revealing the limitations of an interview for documenting truly “everyday” speech.

Both the interview and the self-recordings come from a larger project investigating the full range of an individual’s stylistic linguistic production. The speaker, “Pearl,” is a young female lifelong Californian. With a high-quality audio recorder and microphone affixed under her clothing, Pearl recorded herself every waking minute over a two-week period. This study analyzes one full day (~13 hours). Because of its unobtrusive set-up, Pearl and her interlocutors were generally not actively aware of the recording. Thus, these self-recordings comprise a corpus largely untouched by the observer effect.

Compared to the relatively uni-dimensional interview, the self-recorded data covered many contexts, interlocutors, and discourse functions. Despite these differences, some linguistic variables patterned similarly; for example, speech rate for both was 4-5 syllables-per-second and syntactic complexity (clauses-per-sentence) averaged about 1. At the same time, these variables differed in variation range. The speech rate standard deviation for self-recordings was 4 syllables-per-second, compared with 2 for the interview. Self-recorded sentences were significantly shorter than interview sentences. Lexical frequency analysis revealed both having a first-ranked (~6% of total words) filled pause/discourse marker, yet the precise lexical item for each differed: *um* for the interview and *like* for the self-recordings.

For phonetic variables like pitch (F0) and voice quality (e.g., H1-H2 and *cepstral peak prominence*), the self-recordings differed significantly from the interview, both in means and variance, exhibiting wider pitch, intensity, and voice quality ranges. One prominent feature of the self-recordings (not in the interview) was *false alto*, or ultra-high-frequency pitch. As a sociolinguistic variable, female false alto is as-yet unstudied, likely due to its relative scarcity in interviews.

Finally, a significant difference was observed in vowel quality. As a young female Californian, Pearl participates in the California Vowel Shift (CVS). TRAP and TOE (i.e., post-coronal GOAT)—two CVS-implicated vowels known to carry salient regional and stylistic meanings (D’Onofrio 2016; Podesva 2011)—show contrasting patterns. In the interview, TRAP is relatively retracted (consistent with the CVS) while TOE remains relatively high and back (inconsistent with the CVS). The self-recordings, however, have TRAP significantly more retracted, while TOE lowers/fronts; both display comparatively wide F1/F2 distributions. These findings accord with Boyd et al. (2015): self-recorded data exhibit more advanced variation than interview data.

Altogether, this study demonstrates interview speech to indeed be more “regular in its structure” (Labov 1972, p. 112) than comparatively unmonitored self-recorded data. Yet, it is artificially constrained, extremely circumscribed, and decidedly not “everyday” in terms of the scope of variation.

(497 words)

References

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