The teacher as dialectological recorder

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Introduction

In an earlier volume of this journal we have outlined some of our results in a survey of the playground language of primary school children (Bauer & Bauer 2000). In this paper we consider the methodology used in that survey.[1] We look at both the benefits and the drawbacks of getting teachers to report the language of their students and, while recognising the limitations of the particular methodology used, suggest that the exercise can be to the benefit of all concerned.

The project

The main aim of the project was to look for evidence of regional dialects in the vocabulary of children. It was hoped that this search, in a variety of English which is often reported as being remarkably homogeneous, might provide some insights into the development of regional dialects and into the dual role of children as conservators and innovators in language change. The focus of this paper is on methodology rather than results, but it is worth reporting that a great deal of the data we elicited showed signs of regional variation, with other variation correlating with socio-economic status of the school (as measured by the decile attributed to each school by the Ministry of Education), whether the school was rural or urban and (to a slight degree only) whether or not the school was a Catholic school. Full results can be found on our website, <http://www.vuw.ac.nz/lals/lip/>.

The research took place in two phases. In the first phase a questionnaire was sent out to schools. Further details of the questionnaire and how it was answered are given below. Following an analysis of the data provided by the answers to the questionnaire, a small number of schools were visited by the experimenters, who interviewed the children in small groups. This follow-up phase was considered to be necessary in order to clarify ambiguities in the answers to the questionnaire, and in order to collect new data suggested by answers to the questionnaire. This dual-pronged approach worked well, and did indeed provide some clarification in much the way intended. On the whole, the follow-up confirmed the material collected in the questionnaire rather than adding to it significantly.

Selecting material for the enquiry

Before we began, we had little idea of what kind of vocabulary might be variable in the language of the target group in New Zealand. We thus had to make a number of guesses based on our own experience. We were, however,

[1] The research discussed in this paper was funded by the Royal Society of New Zealand through its Marsden Fund. We would like to thank the Royal Society for its financial support which made the project possible, and also the teachers and pupils who provided the answers for our (sometimes awkward) questions.

able to use the material collected by the Opies in Britain (Opie and Opie 1959) as a guide to the kind of language we might look for; we had the model of our own children's language to guide us; and we talked to a small group of children who had just passed the targeted age to gather further ideas (this was particularly valuable). This allowed us to exclude some of the things we had thought might provide suitable material. As far as possible, it was our intention to tap into the kind of language that is used outside the classroom rather than the kind of language which might be imposed by teachers, on the grounds that there was likely to be a greater level of standardisation in teacher-imposed vocabulary. While we were largely successful in this, we were not universally successful (see below).

We elected only to consider vocabulary. We judged that it would be too difficult to elicit material on pronunciation by way of a questionnaire (we take this point up again below). Where grammar was concerned, we had an excellent model in the work done by Cheshire et al. (1989), Cheshire & Edwards (1991), Edwards & Weltons (1985). However, we had no evidence to suggest that the few syntactic or morphological variables observable in New Zealand English correlate with regional differences, although they may be socially variable. We may, of course, have been wrong in this, but grammatical variation seemed unlikely to produce interesting material.

The questionnaire

The questionnaire presented a series of scenarios, and we asked the students what they thought they were likely to say in each set of circumstances. Multiple answers were expected and encouraged. Each scenario carefully avoided the vocabulary we were trying to elicit, so that answers which simply parroted back the wording of the question were of no interest. We tried to save the teacher from writing out such unhelpful answers (which were bound to arise) by providing a check box to tick if students simply repeated the wording of the question. When we piloted the questionnaire, however, it became obvious that inexplicit instructions to this effect were not easily interpreted by the teachers who had to administer the questionnaire, and in the final version of the questionnaire the expected, but unhelpful, answers for each question were made specific, and a check box was provided for the teachers to tick when such answers arose.

To make the scenarios as direct and comprehensible as possible, we tried to avoid complex syntax, overly learned vocabulary or other likely distractors in our wording. Often the easiest way to do this was to have named individuals performing certain actions in the scenario. An example is given in (1) below. Here we foresaw the danger that if the names used in the questionnaire happened to be those of children in the class, the behaviour described in the scenario would be attributed to that person (especially if bad behaviour was involved) and could cause embarrassment or awkwardness. If the name we chose happened to be the name of a teacher, the problem could be exacerbated. We overcame this difficulty by inventing phonologically plausible but (to our knowledge) actually unoccurring names, and using those for the characters who appeared in the scenarios. *Trindy* was used as a girl's name, *Jostie* as a boy's name and *Brackie* was used as an epicene name, which the children were told to interpret as being a person of their own sex.

1. You are talking to Trindy about the maths test. She thought it was really simple. How would she tell you this?

☐ It was (really/so) simple.

The final version of the questionnaire contained fifty questions (some with sub-parts), some of which — such as the description of games played — were optional. The questions covered such matters as the names of games played in the playground, linguistic rituals among children, greetings, farewells, words expressing emotion (including words for things which were excellent and things which were very bad) and similar topics.

Selecting the schools

From the Ministry of Education we obtained a list of schools in which there were year 7 and 8 students (Forms 1 and 2, 11 and 12 years of age, the last year in the primary system in New Zealand). Each school was plotted on a large-scale map of New Zealand. A grid was then drawn over the map following the lines of latitude and longitude. A grid which gave boxes approximately 30km x 37km turned out to provide an appropriate number of boxes. On average, there were about four rural schools in each box in the grid, and our aim was to involve one school from each box. In urban areas (defined for our purposes as those centres having at least four relevant schools) grids were drawn in such a way as to provide approximately one box for every four schools in each centre. Many of the rural boxes contained no schools (especially those that covered the Southern Alps and Fiordland), but in each box that contained a school, one was selected subject to the following criteria:

- single-teacher schools were avoided completely; not only would it have been a particularly large imposition to ask a teacher to spend so much concentrated time with students of the appropriate age in such schools, but many of them were so small that it would have been a matter of chance whether there were any children of the appropriate ages in the school in any given year.
- Kura Kaupapa Maaori (schools which use Maori as the medium of instruction) were avoided completely; it would have been inappropriate to have asked about English vocabulary in such surroundings.
- Year 7 to 15 schools were avoided if an alternative school was available; it was felt that since the target respondents would be the junior members of an institution whose culture was focussed on the teenage years, these schools were likely to provide answers which were distinct from those provided by primary schools, or even intermediate schools (years 7 and 8 only).

Within these constraints, a school was selected randomly from each of the boxes in our grid. That school was then approached, and asked whether it wished to participate. Where a school chose to participate, it was asked whether it would or would not be willing to be considered for a personal visit in the second phase of data-collection. When a school declined to participate, another school in the same box was approached in the same way if possible. In areas where there was a low response rate, schools were targeted with a letter which made specific reference to our lack of participating schools from that geographical area. These letters got a higher rate of positive responses than the general approach letters. Although not all the schools that agreed to

participate actually did so, and although we had to prompt some of the schools to return the completed questionnaires, in the end we got responses from 150 schools from Kaitaia to Bluff, and the only major geographical gap was in the East Cape area where there are many tiny schools, and many Maori medium schools, leaving us few possibilities. Although we did not select schools according to their socio-economic decile at this stage, we ended up, by chance, with a good spread of schools, despite the fact that schools from the lower deciles were less likely to agree to participate than higher decile ones; another effect of the targeted letters was to bring in a number of decile 1 schools.

When it came to the second phase with a personal follow-up, schools were selected from among those which had indicated interest in being participants. The individual schools were chosen to give a coverage of the regions discovered in the analysis of the questionnaire data, to give a range of deciles, and to give both urban and rural schools.

Asking the questions

We sent schools the requisite number of questionnaires (one for each participating class) along with instructions on how to collect the data and some materials suggesting ways in which the teachers could use the questionnaire experience to do further language work with the children. We did not ask for feedback on this material, and we received virtually none.

We asked that the teacher read out each question to the assembled class, and write down the offered answers. At the same time, we felt that some students might not feel confident in proffering answers in the wider group, and we suggested that each student should have a piece of paper on which they could if they wished write down words or expressions which they did not feel had been included in the general answers. Any such pieces of paper should just be sent to us anonymously along with the completed questionnaire. Similarly, in the optional questions which required rather more extended answers, the children's individual answers should be handed in.

We suggested that it might be possible or even desirable to split the questionnaire among several classes, or to do it with the same class over several days. Some schools clearly took these options, but we cannot say how many.

The benefits

There were several benefits to our methodology, some of which were practical rather than theoretical, but none the less real for that.

Spelling

Some of the children in our target age-group were such bad spellers that it could be extremely difficult to interpret what they were trying to write. This was brought home to us very forcibly when a class of children wrote down some rhymes for us as an answer to one of the optional questions. Two versions of a popular chant in this particular class went as follows:

2. hama hama hai hai hamahma wie wie hama hai hama wie hama hama hai we

3. hammer hammer had where hammer hammer wee wee hammer had hammer where hammer hammer had where

We had fifteen versions of the rhyme, none of which used the standard spelling for all of the words involved. By a process of reconstruction (and no little amount of inspiration) we were able to determine that the chant must be:

> Hammer, hammer hard, hard
> Hammer, hammer ware, ware,
> Hammer hard, hammer ware
> Hammer Hammer Hardware.[2]

Although the teachers might make the occasional slip, there was nothing on this scale, and virtually nothing that we were not able to decipher fairly readily, even though there were some forms which caused widespread problems. Some of the words used by the students are difficult to put into a standard orthography: /wʊs/, /pʌsi/, /pɪnə/, /æŋgɪs/. Even teachers even had problems with *gross*, presumably because they use the spelling pronunciation /grɒs/, and then can't spell /grʌus/ — *groce* was a favourite rendition. Not only do the children have a great deal more trouble with spelling than their teachers, they are also likely to avoid trying to write words which they think they can't spell, and this has the potential to warp the reporting of some areas of vocabulary.

Reading

Some of the scenarios were, despite our efforts to keep them simple, quite long and involved. We believe that this would have prevented children with poor reading skills from tackling the questionnaire at all, and would thus have biassed the responses. We believed that oral comprehension was likely to be superior to written comprehension, and the teachers administering the questionnaire were able to re-read the question, perhaps emphasising some part of it, if they judged from the responses that the children had not understood.

Time

In a very few schools, teachers got the children to write down their answers to the questions, and sent in the collection of individual children's answers. Such a set of answers from the individuals in the class typically took about 15 hours to process, as opposed to the 1-2 hours required for most of the questionnaires. Across 150 schools, this could have amounted to a difference of some 1950 hours of processing time (with a corresponding financial burden).

Time on a different scale was the main reason we decided to ask teachers to act as interviewers in the first place. With 150 schools taking part in the project, it would have been necessary to employ an interviewer for over six

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[2] Hammer Hardware is a chain of hardware shops in New Zealand. Note the rhythmical parallel with other playground rhymes such as:

> Double double this this
> Double double that that
> Double this, double that
> Double double this that.

months (or more people for a proportionately shorter period of time) to go round a visit all the schools. Even if we assume that these interviewers would have visited each school for a single day and made the follow-up visits unnecessary, this would have added four months or so to the life of the project (and although there is a time/money trade-off here to some extent, there is a real sense in which time is money). At the same time, most children could not concentrate for long enough to complete the entire questionnaire at a single sitting. Their own teachers were able to intersperse other activities between sessions of data collection, as necessary. Visiting interviewers would not have been able to do that to nearly the same extent, and would thus have been attempting to acquire information from increasingly bored and uncooperative children. Experience in our own school visits suggested that twenty minutes was about the longest time for which an interviewer could expect to gain maximum cooperation. It thus seems likely that better quality information could be elicited by teachers than by visiting interviewers.

Dedication

Teachers as a group are very dedicated people, and in those cases where we really managed to capture their interest, they went out of their way to be helpful, adding useful comments on the answers or even typing them out for legibility (something we certainly did not expect: or even more generous, copying them neatly by hand). Comment from people used to working with the children is often extremely helpful, and we appreciated the extra effort that some of the teachers had made.

The disadvantages

The disadvantages of our methodology are perhaps rather more self-evident, and are more theoretical than practical. Nevertheless, we feel that these disadvantages are outweighed by the advantages outlined above.

Censorship

The most obvious problem is one of censorship, which works at several levels.

First, it was made clear to us when we piloted an early version of the questionnaire that there were some questions which teachers were not comfortable about asking. Generally these were questions that asked about discriminatory language. Although we had not asked questions specifically raising sexist or racist stereotypes, we did wonder whether the children might have (regional) words for people who wore spectacles, had red hair, were very thin/fat, were narrowly academic or rejected academic goals, and so on. Teachers, understandably, felt uncomfortable in specifically requesting the children to produce terms which the teachers spend much of their professional lives trying to banish from the school. Consequently, since we did not wish to alienate our fieldworkers from the very beginning, we dropped most such questions from the final questionnaire. We did keep a few such questions by asking about both sides of the same coin (see, for example, the questions in (4)). The reaction to such questions was generally to provide words for the socially marked case but not to provide any words (or only very general words) for the unmarked case. So we got responses such as *nerd* and *geek* in large numbers, but very few schools provided words corresponding to the US *jock*.

4. A person who is really good at games and sports, but not good at schoolwork can be called:

   Some people are clever and really like schoolwork, but don't like sport. Often these people also love computers. A person like this can be called:

The second kind of censorship is deliberate censorship on the part of the teachers in providing answers. Some of this was quite open (as when teachers wrote comments such as 'and other inappropriate language') but we suspect that a great deal more was covert. Most of this did not matter for our purposes. We were not interested in children's use of 'four-letter' words or obscenities, and where these words were given they were virtually always alternatives to words which were, from our point of view, rather more interesting because they showed regional or social variation (not the case for obscenities). It is almost certainly the case that some of the students, on discovering that they were being asked about 'their words', used this as an excuse to set forth their vocabulary of 'bad words', but these words are the same as those used by the adult population and are not noticeably regionalised.

The third kind of censorship is self-censorship on the part of the students, who are very much aware that there is some language which is not appropriate in the class-room. We had hoped to overcome this type of censorship with the use of sheets of paper to be handed in anonymously to support the mainstream answers, but it is not clear that this worked. We can have no idea how important a factor this was, although there are a number of pieces of evidence which suggest that it did have an effect.

The first of these is that overall high decile schools were more likely than low decile schools to provide us with 'bad' language (obscenities in general use in the adult population) or words which bordered on 'bad' language (former euphemisms for obscenities now apparently not recognised as such — *screw up*, *stuff up*, etc.). We think this shows that high decile children felt more confident about indicating that they were familiar with such words rather than that high decile children actually use them more (but again, we could be wrong). If it is true that all students know (at least passively) this 'bad' language, then we must presume that not all participants contributed equally in the formal questionnaire situation; in particular, as we mentioned above, those from high-decile schools were less inhibited than those from low decile schools. We thus conclude that there must have been a good deal of self-monitoring or self-censorship in many cases.

The second piece of relevant (and perhaps slightly confusing) evidence comes from the follow-up interviews. Here it was very clear that students were censoring their own output, since they would start to recite a rhyme and then interrupt themselves and say things like 'I can't tell you that one: it's rude'. No pressure was put on such students to complete the recital, although it was made clear that the interviewer would not be offended by such rudeness. However, sometimes students would feel uncomfortable about reciting rhymes on these overt grounds when others were happy to provide the rhyme, and it wasn't always clear where the rudeness lay. One group, for instance, refused to recite one rhyme in its entirety because of 'rudeness', when the only line missing from their recital which was provided by other students in other schools was 'I can move my body'. Now, it is possible that

both sets provided the interviewer with a bowdlerised version, and one group were simply better than another at covering up omissions, but this was not the impression that was given. At the other end of the scale, some students volunteered words like *screw up* 'make a mess of' apparently without any inkling that this might not be a perfectly polite word. What we see here is that the students' definitions of 'rudeness' and thus the words and expressions they may feel they have to censor, do not necessarily correlate with adult standards of politeness and rudeness. That being the case, we have no way of telling what students themselves might have felt it necessary to censor, and so no way of determining how important that factor was. We suspect, but cannot prove, that while some students were uncomfortable with such words, others were perfectly relaxed about them; the words were reported, but perhaps not as widely reported as their actual usage would merit.

There is another kind of censorship (if censorship is the correct term here) which may be much more insidious. Many schools, particularly those in areas with high Maori populations, provided Maori words in answer to some of our questions (many, such as *puckeroo* 'broken' < Maori *pakaru* well-known among non-Maori New Zealanders as well). Others did not. Experience in the follow-up interviews suggested that many of these words were known (and used) even in schools from which they had not been reported. It seems unlikely that the teachers would have failed to report these words if they had been provided as answers by the children, although we could interpret the lack of data as indicating that some voices were not being heard. More likely, we think, is that the Maori children themselves failed to report it: but whether because they felt that their language was down-valued in the classroom or whether because they felt that this was only an in-group marker not for sharing in the classroom, we cannot tell.

Invention

It was clear from the pilots that some children had a great time using their wit, invention and linguistic creativity to provide us with answers they thought would be 'interesting'. During the pilots, these children were sometimes challenged by others in the group ('I've never heard anyone say that', 'You just made that up'), but we have no idea how many of these found their way into the responses. They would have had little effect on the results — any response that occurred only once was discarded from the analysis — but there were some which had this ring to them which we subsequently discovered were genuine localisms. For example, in response to the first-of-the-month protective utterance *white rabbits*, one school provided the retort *RCD to kill the rabbits*.[3] The response came from only the one school, and looked as though it might have been made up on the spot, though it emerged during follow-up interviews that the phrase had been widely used in that school for a period. Whether such answers indicated invention or localism, we had to treat them in just the same way as all others until their one-off status became apparent. We coded 4356 different answers. We analysed only 237 — the ones that showed variation!

[3] RCD (Rabbit Calicivirus Disease) was illegally introduced into New Zealand in an attempt to control the rabbit population in 1997. Our survey was carried out in 1999.

Variability

It is inevitably the case when a number of different fieldworkers are involved in a project that they will not all behave in precisely the same way in eliciting data. Where the fieldworkers are selected directly by the experimenters, this factor can, to some extent, be overcome by training. When each set of responses is, in the nature of the exercise, collected by a different and untrained fieldworker, variability of approach cannot be avoided.

The most obvious kind of variability we noticed (apart from the censorship discussed above) was the number of responses provided per question. Sometimes, particularly in small schools, the teachers felt able to report only the majority verdict; in big schools, a few teachers attempted to indicate, by providing numbers, some information on majority and minority usages, but in most cases, we had no idea whether the responses were widely used, or used by just one student. In a few cases, the teacher did little more than tick the box for the 'unhelpful' answers that we had provided, and we had no way of knowing whether the teacher had read out these answers as the range to choose from, or whether those were really the only answers that had been forthcoming. In a few cases we went as far as to note in our analysis that particular questionnaires were 'thin', so that the lack of a particular word from that school would not be taken as overly surprising in our analysis.

There are two answers to this problem. The first is that the problem was, in fact, very limited in extent. There was only one questionnaire in the 150 which was 'thin', and eight which were 'rich'. When the size of the schools was taken into account (it is to be expected that a school with 600 children in the target group will produce more variety of responses than a school with 6 children), only two were 'thin' for their size, and only three were 'rich' for their size.

The second answer is that an overly inclusive set of responses was occasionally unhelpful as well. One of the main reasons for a wide range of responses from some schools appeared to be that children who had lived outside the region in which they were resident at the time of the experiment provided their words as well as the local words. Thus there were schools in Auckland and Wellington, in areas with large numbers of mobile middle-class families, which regularly reported words which did not occur in the surrounding schools and which were more typical of the other centre. The word *nif* (for a person who has no [intelligent] friends, 'reject'), which is found mainly in Christchurch and the immediately surrounding area, was reported from two northern North Island schools (in one marked by the teacher as a 'Christchurch word'). When children in one of these schools were interviewed in the second phase, none of them claimed to know the word. Similarly, we had just one report of the British and Australian truce term *barley* from the whole of New Zealand. And although both *tiggy* and *tag* were reported from many Northern Region schools as names for the basic chasing game (*tiggy* being the Northern region name, *tag* the default), in the second phase it became clear that even in schools where both labels were known, *tiggy* was generally the preferred term in the Northern region. Thus the questionnaire gave us less clear regionalisations than are actually justified by majority usage.

In summary, therefore, although variability in procedures and in ways of dealing with the questionnaire presents a theoretical problem, in practice this does not appear to have adversely affected the results to any great extent.

Inability to probe

Because some of the scenarios used in the questionnaire employed the phrase 'in your school' (something which had been uncontroversial in the pilot testing), we sometimes got unexpected non-responses. For example, when we asked what the basic chasing game was called 'in your school', it was sometimes denied in intermediate schools that the game was played. In the second phase it was easy enough to get past this and ask what it had been called in primary school, but not only could we not expect teachers to do this when asking our questions for us, in some ways it would have been contrary to the spirit of the questionnaire for them to have done so. In other instances, in any case, it would not necessarily have been clear to a teacher in a particular school that there was anything to probe further about: it was only when we saw the overall pattern of responses that we were surprised by the absence of a particular word from one school or the presence of another. It was for precisely such reasons that the follow-up interviews were built in to our experimental method; while they did not allow elucidations to be sought at every point at which it might have been desirable (since not every school could be visited), they certainly permitted a great deal of clarification, and generally showed that where things were out of line with the expectations set up by the overall patterns in our data, the patterns were confirmed and we had an accidental gap or misleading report in the data collected.

Inaccurate perceptions

The dangers of hearing what one expects to hear as opposed to what is actually there are well-known. Given the variability in the pronunciation of the short front vowels in New Zealand English, differences between *pigs*, *pegs* and *pags* (all attested as variants of an original *pax*) can be extremely hard to hear anyway, and if the hearer is expecting one version, it can be virtually impossible to hear another.

While this is certainly a problem in principle, it is not clear that it is easily solved. Similar perception problems exist even for trained observers, and some of the teachers were obviously listening closely enough to draw our attention to the variation between *first the worst* and *first the worse*[4] — a

[4] The line arises when a child racing back to the classroom arrives second or third rather than first. To make the point that arriving first is not necessarily the optimal result, children use the rhyme

> (Zero the hero)
> First the worst,
> Second the best,
> Third the {golden eagle, golden princess, nerd, ...}

In some schools the rhyme may be extended (usually in *ad hoc* ways) as far as the number twenty. It is not clear whether renditions with /wɜs/ arise simply through a process of consonant-cluster reduction (where *first* would be expected to be similarly affected), or whether there is genuine confusion between *worse* and *worst*. The most likely origin is the first of these options — especially given that at the interviews, children who said *worse* frequently showed cluster reduction on *first* — though this may lead to the second becoming true in the

distinction which even the interviewer had difficulty in perceiving consistently. While we did have a couple of examples of things like *tig* in the *tag* area which turned out to be a misconstruction, the problem does not appear to have been great nor was it easily avoidable.

Teachers sometimes commented on the unexpected, for example those who expected *doubling* for two children riding on a one-seater bicycle but were told it was *dubbing* by the children commented on the lack of /l/ and vice versa, one presented with *rugged* as a term for a damaged bicycle, thinking it was spelt *ruggered* (the two are not distinct in New Zealand English) commented that the initial consonant was <r> and not <b>!

Insufficiently detailed data

Because we asked for class responses to our questions, we had no information about the ethnicity, gender or socio-economic background of the children who provided individual words. In most cases this did not matter; in some it did. For instance, some decile 5 schools appeared to be made up largely of people from a decile 5 socio-economic background, while others had both low and high decile background children. In many cases we came to recognise which words had been produced by which group, on the basis of parallels with other schools, but we were aware that the vocabulary was probably more clearly socially layered than we could detect from the data we had. Similarly, with ethnicity, we became convinced that some words were being used predominantly by Maori speakers, without being able to prove this directly (Bauer & Bauer in press.). There were certainly gender differences as well — we found several potential examples in the follow-up interviews — but we could not detect these in the data. We simply had to accept this as a limitation of the research method. Again, it is difficult to see how this could have been overcome: the teachers would not have wanted to draw attention to the ethnicity/gender/socio-economic background of the individual children in the classroom situation in order to note whether a particular term had been offered by a particular group, even if it had been practicable for them to do that at the same time as writing down the relevant vocabulary.

Discussion

In the experiment reported in (amongst other places) Cheshire et al. (1991), the teacher was merely a facilitator, while the children collected the data. In our experiment the teacher was the actual recorder of the data. This was a very different role, and there could easily have been questions about how successful teachers were likely to be in this role and whether we were making unreasonable demands on them. We believe that we came out of this experience relatively well, although we do not have any quantifiable results we can point to to argue this case.

What can teachers report?

In the experiment reported in Cheshire et al. (1991), teachers were asked to collate linguistic material collected by their students. We asked the teachers to

longer run. This, of course, makes its own comment about perception: we tend to perceive distinctions only when they are important in our own language. The difference between /fɜs/ and /fɜst/ is not distinctive; that between /wɜs/ and /wɜst/ is.

record words provided by the students. In both cases the students are the source of the data. We believe that this is important. While there are no doubt many instances where teachers are aware of the language that children use, our own observation shows us that there are times when teachers believe students to use a particular word or expression when the children do not themselves report it, and times when students use and report words which are unknown to the teachers. There are several possible reasons for the first state of affairs:

- the teacher may be right, and the failure of the students to report the particular expression is an accidental gap in the data;
- the teacher may be right but out of date, reporting on the usage of an earlier generation of students while that usage has changed — sometimes words may change in the course of a single school year;
- the teacher may have moved from one region to another and be reporting on the usage of a different region, making the presumption that the same expression is used in the new region;
- the teacher may have mis-heard or mis-remembered the expression in question.

It should be noted, however, that there is a cline of difficulty for teachers in reporting various types of material. Vocabulary is presumably the easiest type of material for them to report (and this is a large part of the reason why we sought only vocabulary items in our questionnaire). Where teachers as representatives of the communities of which they are part have normative notions about vocabulary, they can nevertheless note that these expectations are not being met, and present the non-standard vocabulary in use. Grammar is the next easiest type of material for them to report. Normatively incorrect morphological forms can easily be reported, but it is much harder to report some grammatical structures which are not familiar. Not only can it be difficult to remember unfamiliar structures, they can be difficult to write down. For example, given a construction such as /aɪ wɪʃ jud əv tʌuld mi ðæt/ any one of *I wish you would have told me that, I wish you had have told me that, I wish you would of told me that, I wish you had of told me that, I wish you'd have told me that, I wish you'd of told me that* might be a reasonable report of the construction. Yet at the same time, some speakers seem to distinguish between *had* and *would* in such constructions, and the distinction could be important.

When it comes to matters of pronunciation, however, things can become really difficult, and this is why we reported above that we considered it impossible to ask teachers to record pronunciations. Certainly, useful information such as the degree of openness of the short front vowels could not be recorded by people untrained in phonetics, because we know that people perceive what they hear in phonemic rather than phonetic categories. Without information about the listener's own accent, any such information would be useless. An observer may even have difficulty in answering a question such as 'Do *beer* and *bear* sound just the same or are they different?' because observers may only be able to hear differences along parameters they themselves use. Such a question can even be difficult for an untrained person to answer in relation to their own usage, because they may be unaware of phonetic differences which are not indicative of phonemic difference. In all of

these areas, normative prejudices make matters even more difficult to cope with.

Nevertheless we feel that there are some pronunciation questions which it might have been possible to ask, had we thought that these were likely to be relevant:

- stress in relatively simple words: 'where does the stress fall in *anchovy*?' is probably possible, while 'where does the stress fall in *agriculture*?' might not be. Even better would be 'Do you say *ANchovy* or *anCHOvy*?' with a binary choice being presented.
- questions based on lexical-incidental phonemic differences which can be accessed through rhymes and respellings: 'Does *trait* rhyme with *ray* or with *rate*?', 'Does *appreciate* have an "s" sound or a "sh" sound in the middle?', 'Do you pronounce the first two letters of *pasta* as in *pat* or *part*?' (see Peters 1994, 2000).

Unreasonable demands

We tried to reduce the probability that we would be seen as imposing unreasonable demands in three main ways. First, we asked schools to volunteer to take part in the survey. However, it is perfectly possible that the individual teacher who ended up with a questionnaire to fill in had not been consulted in the decision-making process, so this helped only in some percentage of instances. Second, we tried to indicate ways in which the kind of material we were interested in could be built into the language programmes of the classes involved, and indeed, of other classes. We have no way of knowing how many teachers made use of our suggestions, or how valuable they might have been. There is the problem that they would all have involved working up new lesson plans, something for which there is little time in the day-to-day work of the busy teacher. Third, we undertook to provide feedback to all participating schools.

More generally, we had to hope that the fact that we were dealing with language matters directly involving the children taught by the relevant teachers would bring its own intrinsic interest with it. While in some ways this is a very weak argument, where we did manage to engage the teachers it provided the strongest possible motivation to help. Again we have no way of quantifying how many teachers reacted in what way, but we did get communications from a surprisingly large number of teachers who had found the experience enlightening, valuable or just fascinating. Comments we received from teachers included comment on the fact that different social groups within the same classroom could show quite different vocabulary-use; comment that the teacher had become aware of how well the students manipulated different levels of language, using some types of language only in the playground, others in classroom; comment on the differences between the language of the teacher and the class; and some comment on the entertaining nature of the exercise. In such cases we felt that we had possibly been educating not only the students but also the teachers in ways that were likely to have rewards for many years into the future.

While we know that some of the teachers who filled out the questionnaire for us did feel imposed upon, the number of positive comments we received made us hopeful that this had not been the general feeling about the project.

Conclusion

While the methodology employed in this study has many intrinsic problems, we believe that they had remarkably little effect on the results we were interested in. Any form which is strongly regionalised or strongly marked in social terms will be visible in the results. However, it is clear that the methodology has severe limitations: it would be impractical for aspects of language other than vocabulary; it would not be suitable for a study where the primary focus is on social variation; it did not allow us to distinguish any ethnic or gender differences, though there were hints that such differences were important. On the positive side, it enabled us to achieve wide coverage of the country with a very small financial outlay.

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