

Community Collaboration in the Name of Sociolinguistic Engagement

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Although there is a well-established tradition of sociolinguistic application, there is little explicit discussion of the theoretical principles and the operational dynamics of working collaboratively with communities in the name of sociolinguistic engagement (Wolfram, Reaser, and Vaughn forthcoming). How do partnerships work when community members and linguistic researchers may enter into collaboration with different belief systems about cultural and linguistic diversity? How does linguist-community collaboration work on a practical level when there is an asymmetrical relationship of authority and expertise with respect to language matters? What venues, activities, and products are most effective in working *with* communities rather than *for* or *on* them? We consider issues in sociolinguist-community collaboration based on experiences over the past couple of decades with a range of communities, from broad-based regional and state-based contexts to highly localized sociocultural communities. Assumed principles for sociolinguistic engagement include (a) the inherent interest of the public in language differences; (b) the transparent connection between language differences and sociohistorical, sociocultural, and socioregional traditions; and (c) the embedding of language differences within more broadly based sociopolitical and cultural ideologies. The advantages and limitations of appropriating these principles are discussed and illustrated with examples that include both noteworthy successes and disappointing failures in the collaborative enterprise.

The implementation of collaborative, community-based programs and activities is considered in terms of the following challenges:

- 1) The definitional and relational dynamics of linguist-community partnership in sociolinguistic engagement;
- 2) Balancing linguistic expertise and community perspectives
- 3) Defining the audience and determining appropriate venues for sharing sociolinguistic knowledge and information
- 4) Practical challenges in the logistics of implementing the collaborative venture

Challenges in implementation extend from foundational ideological conflicts about language diversity to practical decisions and choices in determining what to present and appropriate formats for presentation. A variety of programs, events, and products are presented and critiqued, ranging from one-time presentations for civic groups to the development of longstanding, formal curricular materials for middle-school education in social studies and language arts (Reaser and Wolfram 2007a, b). Particular programs and activities are also presented and critiqued, including video documentaries, oral history CDs, museum exhibits, commemorative events, and formal and informal educational materials. Illustrative vignettes from TV documentaries, DVDs, and CDs produced by the North Carolina Language and Life Project show how these products can represent topics that extend from language preservation to language identity, while examples from physical and virtual museum exhibits demonstrate how these activities can be used to portray language variation in tandem with community-based social, cultural, and historical themes. We offer insight into and practical advice on how sociolinguists can partner with communities so that language diversity can be mainstreamed in non-adversarial ways when there may be conflicting language ideologies between the public and linguists. Finally, we report results that demonstrate that these programs can indeed make a difference in the public perception of language diversity for community residents and the general public.

References

- Reaser, J. & Wolfram, W. 2007a. *Voices of North Carolina. Language and Life from the Atlantic to the Appalachians. Instructor's Manual*. Raleigh: North Carolina Language and Life Project.
- Reaser, J. & Wolfram, W. 2007b. *Voices of North Carolina. Language and Life from the Atlantic to the Appalachians. Student Workbook*. Manual. Raleigh: North Carolina Language and Life Project.
- Wolfram, W., Reaser, J. & Vaughn, C. forthcoming. Operationalizing linguistic gratuity. *Linguistic and Language Compass*.