



Commentary

Benedikt Szendrői

Lost in space? The many geographies and methodologies in research on variation within languages¹

1. Introduction

The five papers in this section differ markedly in terms of (i) how geography is conceptualized, (ii) the type of data that is being drawn upon, (iii) the way in which the interplay between language and geography is approached analytically, and (iv) how the findings are interpreted. This commentary aims to scrutinize these differences in turn.

2. »Geography«

By and large, the papers feature three different notions of how geography interacts with language structure, use and perception:

- **PLACE, LABELING, AND SOCIAL IDENTITY:** Barbara Johnstone is interested in how »place« is an ideological construct that emerges in social interaction. She thus focuses on the enregisterment of »Pittsburghese« as a regional variety that appears to be more real folk-linguistically than dialectologically (in the traditional sense). Along similar lines, Paul Kerswill explores geographical, social, and ethnic divisions in London to establish how young people label urban language varieties – either their own variety or those of others.
- **AREALITY AND BOUNDARIES:** Bernd Kortmann draws on a conceptualization of geography that is inspired by the customary way of thinking in areal linguistics: to what extent are particular structural features characteristic of varieties of English in particular anglophone world regions? Elvira Glaser's contribution is likewise – though on a much smaller geographic scale – interested in area formation and in the diffusion of linguistic fea-

¹ I am grateful to David Britain for inspiring this title.





Lost in space? The many geographies and methodologies in research on variation

tures in Swiss German dialects; her paper puts particular emphasis on borders, boundaries, and isoglosses.

- **GEOGRAPHIC DISTANCE:** Areality and dialect areas also play an important role in John Nerbonne's contribution. Nerbonne, however, is additionally concerned with the extent to which geographic distance (in km) between German dialect locations predicts linguistic distance, or difference, between these locations. The predictive power of geographic distance, a measure which is seen as a proxy for the likelihood of social contact, is subsequently compared to that of areality.

Notice that the contributions by Johnstone and Kerswill highlight the social nature of space, which is why the contributions exhibit a certain affinity to the Perceptual Dialectology Paradigm (e.g. Niedzielski and Preston 1999): what matters is the ideologies and map labels that language users have in their mind, and not so much »objective« maps as created by geographers. By contrast, Kortmann's and Glaser's interest in areality and boundaries follows a venerable tradition in typology and dialectology that goes back at least to Schleicher (1863). Their approach is beholden to non-linguistic notions of geography and geographic map space, as is Nerbonne's take on geographic distance as a gradient exploratory factor, which ultimately goes back to Schmidt's (1872) »wave theory« (*Wellentheorie*) of linguistic change and diffusion.

We note, finally, that all of the geography- and map-based papers in the section (Kortmann, Glaser, Nerbonne) consider space essentially a two-dimensional plane. That is to say, unlike Johanna Nichols (this volume), none of the authors in the section takes altitude, in addition to latitude or longitude, into account.

3. Data

In terms of data sources, the papers in this section fall into two groups:

- Johnstone and Kerswill analyze **NATURALISTIC DISCOURSE** – narratives (Johnstone) and interviews (Kerswill) – to address issues of (regional) identity construction by exploring how speakers *talk about* language and space, rather than how speakers *talk as a function of* geographic space.
- Kortmann, Nerbonne, and Glaser explore **SURVEY AND ATLAS MATERIAL**, which maps the occurrence or non-occurrence of linguistic features in geographic space: *The World Atlas of Varieties of English* (Kortmann), the *Kleiner Deutscher Lautatlas – Phonetik* (Nerbonne), and e.g. the *Syntaktischer Atlas der deutschen Schweiz* (Glaser).

This is another way of saying that Johnstone and Kerswill rely on **USAGE-BASED DATA** (although they of course also address matters of perception and





attitudes), while Kortmann, Nerbonne, and Glaser draw on STRUCTURED DATA (tabular data) created by atlas/survey compilers, fieldworkers and/or expert informants. In this endeavor, Kortmann and Glaser are interested in morphosyntactic variation, while Nerbonne explores accent variation.

4. Analysis

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that the name of the game in the contributions by Johnstone and Kerswill is DISCOURSE ANALYSIS. The paper by Johnstone, which is the most qualitative contribution in the section, offers a genuinely qualitative analysis, while Kerswill also marshals some quantitative techniques (such as keyword analysis). The contribution by Glaser is fairly programmatic in nature: to the extent that empirical issues are addressed, the paper focuses on feature selection, dataset creation, and mapping. Kortmann marshals FREQUENCY ANALYSES and VARIOUS EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES (such as phenograms and Grammar Genome maps) to gauge the relative importance of areality in the dataset under analysis. Nerbonne's contribution is the most quantitative paper in the section, which uses REGRESSION DESIGNS to disentangle the explanatory power of geographic distance and areality.



5. Interpretation

Given that the contributions ask different research questions, operate on different notions of space, and use different data sources and analysis techniques, it is hardly surprising that the ways in which findings are interpreted likewise differ in many ways. It seems to me that the overall most crucial distinction on the interpretational plane is that between rather DYNAMIC APPROACHES (Johnstone, Kerswill), which focus on the emergence of regional identities and naming preferences, and more STATIC APPROACHES (Kortmann, Nerbonne, Glaser), which analyze synchronic snapshots of dialect and variety landscapes, although matters of diffusion are of course also addressed.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the five contributions are characterized by the following contrasts:

- *Geography*: less geographic, more social and identity-based (Johnstone, Kerswill) versus less social, more geographic and map-based (Kortmann, Nerbonne, Glaser).





Lost in space? The many geographies and methodologies in research on variation

- *Data*: usage-based (Johnstone, Kerswill) versus atlas/survey material (Kortmann, Nerbonne, Glaser).
- *Analysis*: qualitative (Johnstone, Glaser) versus quantitative (Kortmann, Nerbonne); Kerswill covers the middle ground.
- *Interpretation*: dynamic (Johnstone, Kerswill) versus static (Kortmann, Nerbonne, Glaser).

Given these substantial differences, are we truly lost in space then? I believe we are not so much lost but rather faced with an exciting tangle of language, society, and space. The papers in the section explore different but equally real facets of this entanglement. The lowest common denominator is that all authors are in agreement, implicitly or explicitly, that geographically conditioned variation and variationally conditioned perceived geography are ultimately social phenomena.

References

- Niedzielski, Nancy A. & Dennis Richard Preston 1999: *Folk Linguistics*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Schleicher, August 1863: *Die Darwinsche Theorie und die Sprachwissenschaft. Offenes Sendschreiben an Herrn Dr. Ernst Haeckel, o. Professor der Zoologie und Direktor des zoologischen Museums der Universität Jena*. Weimar: Böhlau.
- Schmidt, Johannes 1872: *Die Verwandtschaftsverhältnisse der indogermanischen Sprachen*. Weimar: Böhlau.

