

'Observer's Paradox' in Linguistic Research

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Introduction

If a fieldworker requests an interview with a native speaker and proceeds to ask questions and record the responses, the informant will be aware that everything they say is to be observed and analysed by a linguist. Also, the informant is likely to adopt the fieldworker's speech, make the answer more correct, use a higher register while speaking and so on. This inevitably leads to hypercorrection in the realms of phonology and vernacular. These challenges and methodological problems to collect samples of authentic casual speech faced by sociolinguists in linguistics research are referred to as 'Observer's Paradox'. William Labov first described this term in the late 1960s (Labov, 1972). Therefore, the methodological problem in linguistics is how to observe and record natural speech from informants, when they are not being observed.

Methodology

This paper is mainly based on literary survey and personal observations. A critical analysis is done to certain research methodologies, which tries to overcome the observer's paradox. Major works that have been done in the field of sociolinguistics throughout the past 30 years have been taken into consideration for this study.

Analysis and discussion

First of all, this paper explains how dialectological data was being collected from informants by traditional dialectologists and modern dialectologists. Secondly, this paper explains how the data collection methods generate errors in data. Thirdly, this paper deals with explaining how modern researchers in western countries have set up many new ways to overcome the observer's paradox. It examines selected research done by western scholars in the field of linguistics, and through this it focuses on how researchers themselves reveal their own way of overcoming the

observer's paradox. Research done by Labov (1972), Trudgill (1974), Milroy (1980), Blom and Gumperz (1986), Coates (1986), Preston (1989), Johnson (1995) and Cameron (2005) were taken into account to explain how researchers have set-up new ways to overcome the observer's paradox.

Conclusions

This paper concludes that it is difficult to create a set of methods and principles to remove the ethical and philosophical constraints and to overcome the observer's paradox. Therefore, Labov is indeed correct in referring to the problem as a paradox.

References

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