

## Basic Research Methods in Sociolinguistics in Search of the Realities around us

Zahra Jamaledin<sup>1\*</sup>, and Anita Lashkarian<sup>1</sup>

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1. English Department, Maybod Branch, Islamic Azad University, Maybod, Yazd, Iran

\*Corresponding Author's Email: zizijamali@yahoo.com

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**Abstract** – The present paper examines the methods, some tools for doing research, in sociolinguistics an empirical science that is going to reveal the realities that surround us. A successful research depends on an appropriate research method. Quantitative research methods usually provide data in numerical statistics and tend to reply to the question of how the identity of a person relates to the way that s/he uses that language. Qualitative research methods strive to analyze the quality of the human experience and explain why people act differently in different contexts. Some researchers have to use a method which combines the two, called, a mixed or triangulation one, where researchers utilize multiple sources of information. There are some similarities and differences between them. They have some features in common as they rely on observable facts, but they differ in data collection, data analysis, and nature of collected data.

**Keywords:** quantitative research, qualitative research, triangulation

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Sociolinguistics is defined as the study of language in society so as to know how language fulfils in our lives, Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015) consider it as a way that we view the world and also a collection of facts and Marvasti (2004) maintains people tend to reexamine whatever surrounds them and response to crucial questions like "how can we stop all the violence in the world?" or one of the subcategories of sociolinguistics , critical discourse analysis, makes an attempt to analyze "the relationships of dominance, discrimination, power, and control in text and talk (Blommaert & Bulcaen 2000, Fairclough 1995, 2013, Wodak & Meyer 2001, van Dijk, 1993b, 2003, cited in Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). The gradual growth of sociolinguistics has begun in the 1950s, with a constant progress in both theoretical and also methodological and its disciplinary directions in the study of language and society (Hernandez-Campoy, 2014). The persons who built underlying sociolinguistics formation as "founding fathers" are: William Labov who tries to find variation in language in relation to variation in social class, gender; Basil Bernstein, whose view was influenced by Whorf's theory, that believes structure of language has effect on how we view the world and claims language and culture as two inseparable parts that influence each other and we learn our role in society through communication by two different codes: elaborated code, an accurate grammatical and complex sentences, and restricted code , short grammatically simple and unfinished sentences; Dell Hymes, whose view was influenced by Jakobson's theory, posits the role of ethnography of communication and introduces communicative competence, that is, the knowledge which enables us to use language effectively, and then Swain proposes four subdivisions: grammatical competence, discourse competence, strategic competence and

sociolinguistic competence so interestingly enough, one of the subdivisions of communicative competence is sociolinguistics; Gumperz the founder of interactional sociolinguistics and Charles Ferguson and Joshua Fishman (cited in Wodak et al.,2010). They all investigate the complex relations between language and society and reject Chomsky's view of language as a system of phonological, syntactic and lexical rules and his lack of interest in meaning. In contrast to sociolinguistics Chomskyan linguistics always tries to search for a homogeneous speech community or a homogeneous competence without any interests in social variation (Erfanian Jalali, 2013). The mentioned persons as sociolinguists and other sociolinguists believe in a system of phonological, syntactic and lexical rules, but they add another system called rules of use, rules of the production of utterances appropriate in a given situation, in other words they claim that language exists and is interpreted in contexts (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Sociolinguistic researchers strive to collect valid and reliable data about the problems in relations to society fields. There are three methods of research in sociolinguistics: quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods. When meeting new people, we can distinguish which social group they belong to or to some extent where they are from, their geographical location. Sociolinguistics as an empirical science and a subcategory of linguistics tries to analyze the correlation between language and society. For example quantitative sociolinguistics makes an attempt to find out how the identity of a person or a social group relates to the way that that person uses language. How social variables such as age, gender social class and level of education impact on language use but qualitative sociolinguistics are interested in replying why people behave in this way in this context (Bayyurt, 2013).

## 2. QUANTITATIVE METHODS

One of the first branches of sociolinguistics is variationist sociolinguistics that applies quantitative approach to data analysis. Earlier variationist studies were not concerned with statistical methods and tend to relate two or more variables, for instance certain linguistic forms and social class as well as focusing on social variation in language than in regional variation. Correlational studies attempt to show how linguistic variable as a dependent variable that exists at all levels of language from phonology, syntax to discourse is affected by social structure or variable such as social class, gender, age and ethnicity (Tagliamonte, 2006). Giles et al. (1980) illuminate that class variation is a more salient trait than gender in the studies of sociolinguistics. Labov (1972) aimed to identify linguistic variables such as alternative pronunciations, equivalents grammatical constructions, and synonymous words among different social classes. Labov (1966) found that the likelihood of pronouncing /r/ following vowels was directly related to the socioeconomic status of speakers in New York City. Labov also found that the pronunciation of /r/ was related to age, with younger speakers being more likely to pronounce /r/ than older speakers in the upper middle class, but with older speakers being more likely to pronounce /r/ than younger speakers in the lower middle class"(cited in Grieve, 2011). Grieve (2011) analyzes the letters to the editor of 200 cities from across the United States that is a kind of study of regional linguistic variation and a variety of written standard English contains 154,269 letters between 2000-2008. *Not* contraction of auxiliary *be, do, have* and *modals* are analyzed. He concludes that the western United States shows a higher use of *not* contraction than the eastern United States and previous study indicates a larger

difference between the south and the north. These studies demonstrate regional linguistic variations. Words and language that people use are suitable criteria for psychologists so as to understand and translate people's intentional thoughts and emotions (Tauszczik & Pennebaker, cited in Schwartz et al., 2013). Sometimes it can be predicted personalities and some characteristics of people from their language use in social media that cause individuals unique in society. In other words language can be used as an instrument which uniquely describes similarities and differences among people in terms of their differential language use. Schwartz et al. (2013) have conducted a study on the relationship between language and personalities of people in social media and believe a social medium like Facebook is a valuable source for the study of people since contrary to questionnaires and surveys, researchers can observe people as they express themselves in their words freely. They have examined 700 million words, phrases and topic instances from Facebook of 75000 volunteers. They administered standard personality tests to them and found interesting variations in language in accordance with personality, gender and age, for instance males used the possessive 'my' when mentioning their wife or girlfriend more often than females used 'my' with husband or boyfriend.

One of the branches of quantitative research is computational sociolinguistics which focuses on statistical analysis to reveal the distribution of sociolinguistic variables. A study of the relationship between language and age shows striking and interesting facts how individuals change their language use during their life, for example adolescents utilize more non-standard forms than adults because of the importance of social advancement (Nguyen et al., 2015). Nguyen et al. (2015) state that speakers have the capacity to choose between some choices the one which is appropriate to achieve social goals. Quantitative research begins with a hypothesis and the researchers are going to testify its truth and theory is the result of testing a hypothesis (Mackey and Gass, 2005, cited in Yamini & Rahimi, 2007).

### **3. QUALITATIVE METHODS**

The process of each and every research commences with a research question and a research design. Based on this research design, researchers consider what kind of data they need, how data will be collected, who are involved and taken part and finally how they analyze the data. As mentioned earlier, sociolinguistics makes an attempt to interpret various aspects of the world by a systematic approach. Contrary to quantitative research that examines to report on how often and how many of a certain behavior happens, qualitative research tends to have a deep understanding of why people treat and behave in this way and "how things come to be the way they are in our social world" ( Hancock et al, 2009). Qualitative researchers are inclined to uncover how people feel and think about whatever surrounds them without making judgements about whether those thoughts and feelings are valid (Thorne, 2015). Dörnyei (2011) discriminates between the stages of quantitative and qualitative methods and maintains that the former can be divided into two stages of data collection and data analysis, which follow each other, but the latter contains two phases that often overlap and coincide. He continues that different ways of gathering data in qualitative research method are: ethnography, interview, grounded theory, focus group interview, and case study. Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015) add other approaches such as 'discourse analysis' that aims to unveil conversational structure and its underlying principles and 'interactional

sociolinguistic' that is defined by Gumperz (2003), its founder in this way " the search for replicable methods of qualitative analysis that account for our ability to interpret what participants intend to convey in everyday communicative practice" (cited in Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). Ethnography has frequently been used as a synonym for qualitative research and it has roots in anthropology and aims to describe beliefs and cultures, in other words it has a tendency to interpret the processes and products of cultural behavior, kinship patterns and ways of living. Mendoza-Denton (2008) in an ethnographic approach decided to compare and contrast two rival gangs, two groups of students, Nortenas and Surenas, a sociolinguistic study of Latina identity. This high school is located in San Francisco Bay area. She became a member of them and described that the Nortenas were northern-oriented and spoke English, wore red accessories and red lipstick, feathered their hair, and listened to Motown Oldie music. The Surenas were southern-oriented, spoke Spanish, wore blue accessories and brown lipstick, and favored Mexican music. She provided some information about two groups and how they express and reveal their identities through different practice and genres, for example certain linguistic features of Spanish vary based on strength of commitment to the gangs. She made an effort to depict a comprehending sociolinguistic analysis of language and variation and also an anthropological analysis of the relationship between language and behavior and even their objects that are representative of their historical and cultural interest (Bird, 2010). Another example is a study by Belaskri (2012), from Algeria that has a complex situation of multilingualism and French is the official language, she assumes that poor communication between the patients who are not proficient in French and with different backgrounds and dialects who come from different regions of Algeria and the doctors that use French in healthcare settings decreases the quality of patients' care and results in anger and lack of trust among the patients. Ineffective communication can lead to misdiagnosis, delayed or inadequate medical treatment. The researcher uses a mixed research approach, but she believes that the research tends to be to a large extent an ethnographic approach and she uses a set of research tools such as questionnaire, interview, online social networking services, and observation. She concludes that there is a correlation between patients' proficiency in French, their education and socioeconomic status and satisfaction with doctor-patient communication. Grounded theory is a common term in qualitative research literature that approaches the meaning by putting the available information together in lieu of dividing interactions into units and analyzing them separately (Belaskri, 2012). Also, Cho and Lee (2014) define grounded theory as "the discovery of theory from data – systematically obtained and analyzed in social research." The most important characteristic of grounded theory is that researchers can group the phenomenon holistically. The difference between qualitative research and grounded theory is that qualitative research can be used in communication and linguistics but grounded theory can be applied in the field of sociology (Cho & Lee, 2014). Another example of qualitative method is to study how older adults conform to living in a nursing home environment by ethnographers who study in the healthcare field (Thorne, 2015). Qualitative research is not going to test a hypothesis, actually it concentrates on understanding social phenomena (Mackey & Gass, 2005, cited in Yamini & Rahimi, 2007).

#### **4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Studying language in relation to society has been with us probably as long as mankind has had language, but it has recently been as an academic discipline and a field of study. The study of how language varies in social context and how it can be explained are the goals of sociolinguistics (Tagliamonte, 2006). Three methods, that is, quantitative, qualitative and triangulation or mixed ones are applied in sociolinguistics. Quantitative measures are employed so as to test some hypotheses and also to determine the relationship between variables. The researchers of this field use statistical procedures and regard the world as made up of observable and measurable facts. Qualitative researchers utilize the approaches to be able to comprehend phenomena in some specific milieux. They need not apply statistical procedures of quantification (Golafshani, 2003). Hopf (1997) states the critical differences between quantitative and qualitative analyses as follows: "unlike quantitative researchers who seek casual determination, prediction, and generalization of findings, qualitative ones seek instead illumination, understanding and extrapolation to similar situations", on the other hand the researchers of both methods concur that social research depends on interactions, interviews, documents and observation, that is, features of the world (cited in Golafshani, 2003).

A successful research depends on an appropriate research method, for instance both of these methods are used to solve problems that arise in education in order to add something new to body of knowledge in this area. A lot of second language acquisition (SLA) researchers apply ethnographic techniques to study the process of SLA in a natural or instructed contexts. Through ethnography, one of the subdivisions of qualitative analysis, the researchers intend to study real people in real settings. These methods are used in other fields including the disciplinary domain of nursing in order to answer many questions relevant to nursing science that results in progress in health science (Thorne et al., 2004). A research must have important traits, that is, it should add something new to the body of knowledge of human, lead in a novel question and solve problems. As already stated, a research is the study of an event, problem or phenomenon using systematic methods in order to understand it better and to develop principles and theories about it. Quantitative research that uses procedures that gather data in numerical form which is analyzed primarily by statistical methods like survey research using a questionnaire that is analyzed by statistical software such as SPSS, testing the various hypotheses it formulates. Qualitative research uses procedures that make use of non-statistical data such as interviews, case studies, or observations and gathers data in non-statistical methods. Qualitative methods aim to reply to some questions about complexity of human life and every day experience. Multimethod or triangulation is described as a mixed method that is a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods within a single research project. The most critical trait of this method is that it can increase the best features of the two methods and eliminate their weaknesses.

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