Yod-dropping and the Low-Back Vowel Merger in Vancouver: Evidence from three Survey Methods

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The present paper is based on three different data elicitation techniques in three surveys of Vancouver English (2008/09): postal questionnaires, fieldwork questionnaires, and sociolinguistic interviews. While, historically, the postal questionnaire (since Wenker in 1870s Germany) was superseded by fieldwork data (since Guilliéron in 1890s France) – and is used mostly for lexical variables today (e.g. Boberg 2004) –, some sociolinguists have argued that these two survey types are less distinct than suggested (Chambers and Trudgill 1998).

The current paper aims to probe further the reliability of both the postal and fieldwork questionnaires for phonetic and phonological variables, by comparing their results with acoustic analyses of sociolinguistic interviews across eight age cohorts (14-80+). Chambers’ (1998: 244) shows that the postal questionnaire can be employed for pronunciation variables, if “judiciously chosen as tokens of phonologically relevant subgroups”. The questionnaire data come from a survey of Metro Vancouver English and are based on 423 postal questionnaires and 167 field work questionnaires from all eight age cohorts. Four questions concern yod-dropping in varying contexts, while one question elicits data on the low-back vowel merger. The interview data come from 12 Vancouver English speakers from three cohorts (20s, 40s, 70s).

Preliminary findings show a solid match between the postal questionnaire and sociolinguistic interview data for yod-dropping and the low-back vowel merger, while fieldwork data shows surprising inconsistencies (cf. Bailey and Tillery 1999). All in all, the postal questionnaire proved again “in some ways more reliable than field-worker interviewing” (Chambers 1998: 244, cf. Bailey and Tillery 1999: 399), if, and only if, a number of restrictions are met, above all, avoiding eliciting stigmatized forms (cf. Labov 1972: 209, Feagin 2002). This finding suggests that the postal questionnaire might have its rightful place in certain studies of variationist phonetics, either as a useful pre-survey diagnostic or in contexts where judgement samples are not feasible and bigger random samples needed.

References