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Review of *Research Methods in Linguistics*

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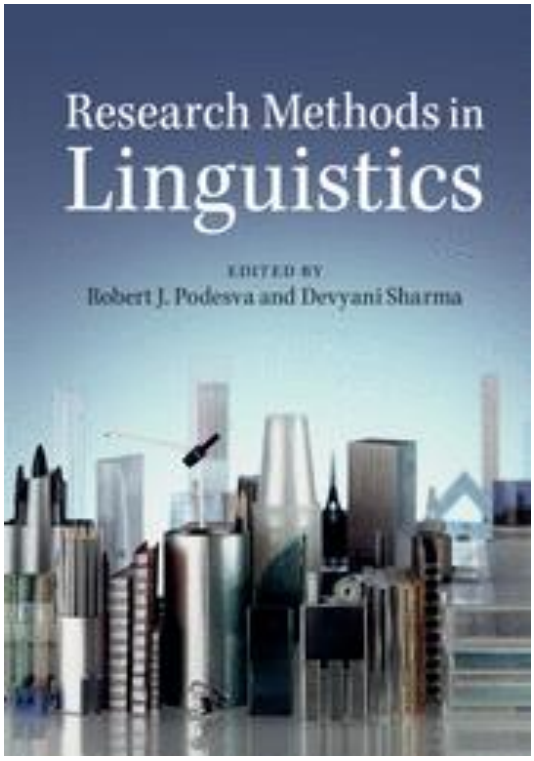

Podesva, R. J., & Sharma, D. (Eds). (2013). *Research methods in linguistics*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

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The scope of research methods available to linguists is prodigious. As Sharma and Podesva (2013) explain at the outset of their new research guide, linguistics "represents a single discipline to the extent that it broadly shares a single object of analysis, but little else can be said to be uniform in terms of epistemology and method" (p. 1). Indeed, the field's heterogeneity is complex, split not just by theoretical, descriptive, and applied approaches, but also by divergent research interests related to form, meaning, and context. To compile a volume on linguistic methods seems an understatedly difficult task and most likely the reason why this book, meant for advanced undergraduate and graduate students, is one of the first of its kind.

In *Research Methods in Linguistics*, Podesva and Sharma, along with their selected 29 contributors, provide readers with a much-needed glimpse into the prevalent methodologies used by linguists across the field. Their interdisciplinary approach, which should prove most appealing to those interested in linguistics but not yet established in a specialized area of study, is both practical and timely. With a recent surge in method-borrowing within the field and a heightened advocacy for establishing partnerships beyond the field (see ISLE Conference, 2014), the book certainly has a place in modern language study. While the bulk of the book caters to those interested in variationist sociolinguistics, any language researcher, novice or not, will benefit from its discussions about design, collection, and analysis. Following a general introduction by the editors, the book is divided into three sections that follow the stages of a research project: Part I: Data Collection, Part II: Data Processing and Statistical Analysis, and Part III: Foundations for Data Analysis. This organization draws attention to issues that may surface across the field while simultaneously introducing users to methodologies they may not normally encounter once working within a particular school of thought. It is important to note, however, that while Podesva and Sharma remind readers of the epistemological differences across the field, this volume is not meant to address the various intellectual traditions within linguistics. Readers with previous theoretical and methodological understandings of where to situate particular research practices will have an advantage in reading the volume given the breadth of methods covered (e.g., knowledge of Universal Grammar that posits all languages as sharing particular structural properties).

Indeed, the methodological range of this collection is admirable. In 22 chapters, Podesva and Sharma take readers from practices involving the collection of single syntactic and phonological variables to practices involving the collection of complete sets of discourses embedded in social and cultural contexts. The book is consequently multi-voiced, highlighting very different research methods, some of which lie in stark contrast with one another epistemologically and ontologically (e.g., generative practices which involve hypothesizing about underlying linguistic structures versus functional practices which involve examining language as a system of choices). Most of the chapters, however, contribute to a larger conversation about interdisciplinary applicability, which is what we will focus on in the remaining paper.

While some chapters are too specific to their subdiscipline for non-specialist readers (e.g., Ch. 2 "Judgment Data," Ch. 8 "Experimental Paradigms in Psycholinguistics," Ch. 11 "Using Historical Texts," the majority of Part III), most chapters serve to expand readers' methodological knowledge and skills "by sharing best practices relevant to shared challenges" (p. 4) across linguistic disciplines. For example, Part I, the largest section of the volume, is devoted entirely to a discussion of the most common types of linguistic data and the design and collection practices associated with each. Before delving into data types, however, Eckert very fittingly opens the section in Chapter 2 with a powerful discussion of research ethics. Instead of offering a set of guidelines for piloting a study with human subjects as one might expect in a how-to guide, Eckert adopts a critical lens and challenges readers to examine the effects their own research practices might have on not just the language of study, but the participants who produce it. The relationship between knowledge and power is thus a predominate theme of this chapter, as is self-reflection, which comes as little surprise considering several references to

Cameron et al. (1992), whose book on institutional inequity in sociolinguistic research is foundational for those working in the social sciences. Drawing attention to these themes from the start is important, as respect for participants and reflexivity should be a prominent part of every research project regardless of methodology.

Chapters 5 and 6, "Population Samples" and "Surveys and Interviews," also have interdisciplinary clout. Buchstaller and Khattab provide clear definitions of foundational terminology (e.g., population sampling, representative sample, sampling frame), integrating quotes from major resources (e.g., Tagliamonte, 2006) to help readers comprehend different sampling types and subdisciplines. Graduate students using sociolinguistic methods, for example, could be encouraged to use a stratified random sample when distributing email questionnaires about dialectal variation. Chapter 6, on the other hand, speaks to the challenges of gathering data on natural speech, ending with Schilling contending "it may be better to dispense with the Observer's Paradox rather than trying to overcome it, and to admit that there is no such thing as non-observed language data … or any one 'best' method for obtaining it" (p. 112). In other words, language use under scrutiny by researchers is just as valid as it is in a non-research setting where it is also, in its own way, always observed, always contingent on the situation, a view that many researchers should find useful.

In addition to dealing with the Observer's Paradox, many linguistic researchers, regardless of epistemological alignment, will need to gain entry into a community, or at least establish working relationships with their participants. Informed by a critical perspective, Chapter 10 is appealing because it explores field collection methods such as participant observation, field notes, and artifact accumulation while simultaneously considering the ethical implications of these methodological decisions. Since Levon's chapter helps bring Part I full circle, a recommendation would be to place the final Chapter 11 elsewhere as it is specific to studying historical data.

Part II, which is half the size of the previous section (5 chapters as opposed to 11), is geared towards data processing and statistical analysis, and integral in upholding the volume's interdisciplinary approach. Young researchers may wonder why a quantitative aspect is included in the section given that the analytic phase is reserved for Part III, but it should become clear by the section's end that to process data, whether qualitative or quantitative, one must organize and manipulate it. Only once this has been done can researchers begin to make inferences about what that data might mean. This tightly knit section is thus an asset to the volume as the featured chapters are undoubtedly useful and applicable to a wide array of scholarly endeavors.

To begin Part II, Nagy and Sharma offer their insights on the transcription planning process, which is often a necessary step across the field for mining data to analyze. Chapter 13, on the other hand, is concerned with the creation and use of corpora, an increasingly popular practice in linguistics research, and again, applicable to many areas of inquiry. While Gries and Newman are careful to note differences in range and type of corpora, the strength of their chapter is saved for last, as they explain how to study premade corpora, which is a much more likely scenario for the book's targeted audience.

The following three and final chapters of Part II are quite dense and may prove difficult to those without a background in statistics. However, the authors are effective in introducing key terminology, bearing in mind that not all readers have a working knowledge of quantitative analysis, yet assuming they have taken away information from the relevant discussions in Part I. All three chapters would serve as excellent supplementary readings in any research course designed around quantitative analysis, which is a regular and often foundational practice in many branches of linguistics.

The third and final section of the text deals with data analysis and is equally as short as the previous section. The difference, however, is that the chapters are dissimilar from one another and must be paired with supplementary readings in order to be fully understood. In fact, the volume would not have suffered if the third section were excluded. While Podesva and Sharma make the claim that "the analytic process is itself a method that should be

taught systematically" (p. 4), the accompanying chapters detract from the interdisciplinary nature of the text as there is not enough discussion about how the analytic methods inform design, collection, and processing practices. Certainly, their reasoning is sound in that they select analytical methods in major areas such as speech acoustics (Ch. 17), argumentation (Ch. 18), computational modeling (Ch. 19), variation analysis (Ch. 20), discourse analysis (Ch. 21), and language change analysis (Ch. 22), but the link to chapters in previous sections is not always clear or even available. Omitting this section and going into more depth in the first two parts would have resulted in a more cohesive text.

A book that claims to be comprehensive, however, is, by default, unguarded against criticism, but Podesva and Sharma, as well as the 29 other contributors, leave little room for grievances with their interdisciplinary approach and organizational tactics. The shortcomings mentioned sporadically above are minor, especially when compared to the volume's merits. Currently, there are not any comparable texts, or at least none that cover such a wide range of methods.

One major benefit of this volume is the extensive list of references at the end of each chapter available for follow-up reading. An index of subjects can also be found, which should prove especially useful given all of the cross-referencing that takes place. Any graduate student in linguistics wanting a basis for designing and collecting data will certainly profit from studying this text, especially the first two parts, making the volume as a whole a must read for researchers who have yet to find their niche in the field. However, our overall recommendation is that the volume be used one or two chapters at a time to supplement other readings since most linguistics programs do not feature a research course that is as methodologically comprehensive as this text. More expert linguists would benefit from traversing the book's contents in succession, if not on the first read, the second, as it is quite impressive to see how coherent the volume actually is.

References

Cameron, D., Fraser, E., Harvey, P., Rampton, B., & Richardson, K. (1992). *Research language: Issues of power and method*. London & New York: Routledge.