The *BBC Voices* website

BBC Voices [Online]. BBC. Available from the World Wide Web: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/voices>

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The *BBC Voices* website will probably already be familiar to those involved in English Language teaching and research. Along with local and national radio programmes about English that were broadcast in the UK in 2005, this site is one of the outputs of *Voices*, a large collaborative multi-platform project undertaken by the BBC and the University of Leeds in 2004 and 2005. Members of the public were asked to submit to the site the different words they use for a range of concepts, and to air their views on English and language use around the UK. In parallel, regional radio journalists who had been trained by Leeds linguists conducted over 300 sociolinguistic interviews with small groups of speakers, discussing the same set of concepts as the online questionnaire, and similarly eliciting opinions on English and language use.

The website itself contains a wealth of content that sits loosely in two categories. Firstly, the dialectological part: a large scale survey of British English speakers, with high quality field recordings of natural spontaneous speech, including the naming and discussion of interviewees' usual terms for the 39 lexical prompts ('your word for COLD', 'your word for MAIN ROOM OF THE HOUSE', etc.). The same notion words were used for the online survey. A sample of the online contributions is included on the site in the form of interactive maps which show the geographical distribution of some of the words that were elicited.

The second category of materials engages with the public's (or rather, the website audience's) attitudes towards current vernacular English and linguistic behaviours in a wider sense. It demonstrates popular interest in differences across local varieties, and also illustrates some of the underlying discourse and ideology about 'grammar' and notions of correctness. This part of the site incorporates a large set of specially commissioned articles written by academic linguists and the BBC team. It now also archives a substantial body of online comments about language, variation, prescriptivism, and so on, that visitors were invited to add while the site was live.

Although the site has not been modified or curated since the main media broadcasting phase of the project in the mid 2000s (a large and slightly intrusive banner states this at the top of each page) the only consequences of this are that a few of the outbound links refer to URLs that have moved or been deleted, and the audio clips are given in the now less used RealAudio (.ram) format which some browsers may quibble with at first: this is quickly resolved by updating the plug-ins.

In the main area of the site (bbc.co.uk/voices/recordings/) the streamable clips are accessed through a point and click map interface that works well and allows quick browsing of the large quantity of audio data presented here. The sociolinguistic interviews are not uploaded in full; rather the clips are 'star moments' that were selected by the recordists/journalists to highlight salient discussion points raised by the groups, or localised pronunciations, grammar and lexis. The star moments are described accurately using non-technical terms to make them accessible to a general audience. The views and insights of the participants include many staples and stereotypes such as perceived language decay, for example, or the disrespect of the young, who swear too much and glottalise their Ts: 'I says eh, there's two Ts in "settee"!' as one Yorkshireman puts it in his interview — see British Library (2010). However in many cases the interviewees reveal a sophisticated take on their own and others' language use, including insights about the growing multilingualism of the British population, how linguistic change can reflect social change, or how all speakers style-shift to some extent, and so on.

The next main area of the site accessed from the homepage (bbc.co.uk/voices/results/wordmap/) contains



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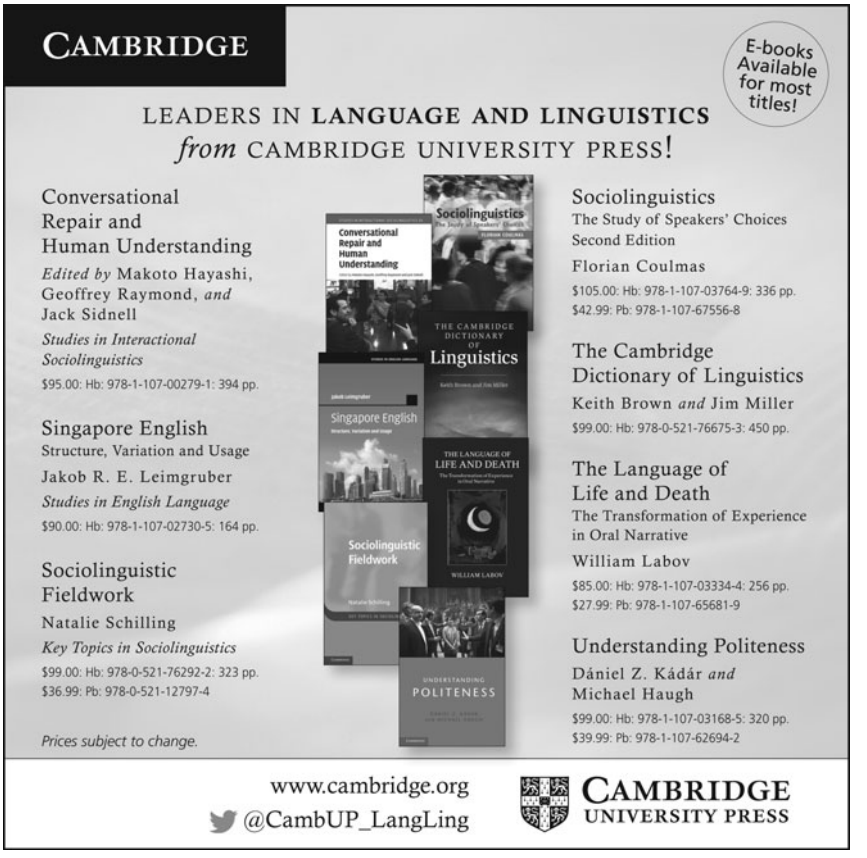
some of the results of the online lexical variation survey (only a selection of the 39 prompt words with a sample of responses are presented in this way on the Word Maps). They are viewed via another neat graphical interface, where you are invited to select a semantic sub-field ('how you feel' or 'what they wear') and then select one of the notion words ('cold', 'child's soft shoes worn for PE') leading to a clickable list next to a map. On clicking one of the variants in the list (e.g. SANDSHOES or SNEAKERS) the regional distribution of the term is shown with red-amber-green squares or blank areas on the UK map, representing high to low (or no) frequency.

One section that might be less well known to academic linguists is Your Voice (bbc.co.uk/voices/yourvoice/) which contains over twenty mini-essays on topics ranging from multilingualism (including the UK's indigenous minority languages), language and class and gender, to historical linguistics and language change; from accents, stigmatisation, punctuation and prescriptivism, to endangered languages and so on. Written to appeal to all, but keen to challenge a few language myths, the section is also greatly enriched by the inclusion of archives of many of the online comments and responses to the articles that were invited during the main live phase of the *Voices* project.

In summary, the *BBC Voices* website, which was developed and executed in the early days of Web 2.0, is still an innovatively designed and data-rich educational resource. Furthermore, it is also an interesting record of how a public service broadcaster collaborated with an external academic team. As a result, both parties were able to work towards remits that they probably could not have achieved alone: for the BBC, to entertain its audience while informing and engaging with it about language; and for Leeds, the chance to bring its research to an audience beyond students and academic peers (just as the notion of 'impact' beyond the academy was emerging on the agenda of those allocating research funding in the UK).

Reference

British Library. 2010. *Sounds*, London: British Library. Online at <http://sounds.bl.uk/Accents-and-dialects/BBC-Voices/021M-C1190X0035XX-0201V0> (Accessed January 23, 2013).



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