CALL FOR PAPERS:

But What if They Exaggerate Their Age?
Language, Culture, and Language-Based Knowledge in Large Dataset Collection
A Workshop

University College London (London UK)
December 5-7, 2013

We call for collaborative efforts between sociocultural anthropologists, language specialists, demographers, and mathematicians in a highly interdisciplinary effort to bring these disciplines together in a more integrated inquiry into how language shapes quantitative datasets and their collection across divergent cultures. The central question of the workshop is how local knowledge, attending to socio-linguistic practices, and local cultural ideas and norms informs – or rather, should better inform – contemporary large dataset collection for quantitative disciplines, whose findings is so often given priority whenever policy makers seek to regulate what is representative of society. Across ethnographic settings, examples abound how local socio-linguistic and cultural logic works to challenge, undermine, or escape demographic and quantitative measurement in ways which are often not given enough attention. In the former Soviet sphere, for example, a widespread distrust (and subsequent evasive answers) towards any personal data collection reminiscent of the totalitarian control of the Soviet regime is easily seen through ethnographic encounters but is rarely acknowledged or problematized in statistics-based work. Elsewhere, the rich, complex expressive traditions, sociolinguistic practices, the norms and forms of talk intricately intertwined with larger cultural specificities – such as exaggeration, ambiguity, the use of categories which are not easily quantifiable or translatable in another language, or the inability or prohibition to name a social phenomena – are similarly marginalized as quantitative methodological concerns.

Approaching the above phenomena from a language perspective, the workshop does not seek to point out the slippages of modernity and modern measurement, quantification, and objectification, nor to tackle what is a ‘fact’ from positivist or postmodern perspective. Rather, the workshop will actively explore how their tensions may be useful in gathering much-needed large datasets for various policy-oriented endeavors. Equally, we are interested in charting the limitations of such interdisciplinary data collection methods.

We call for papers which examine these still under-explored slippages, frictions, and interstices of language-based approaches to demographic inquiry. While we are interested in papers which provide a sociological and ethnographic critique of the objectification of social processes in quantitative practice from a language-based perspective, we are especially keen to read about new creative ways which bridge traditional disciplinary divides and push against old impossibilities to explore new interdisciplinary approaches to data collection in which the attention to sociolinguistic practices and realities is central -- not necessarily a statistical obstacle of little relevance, but indeed an exciting opportunity to diversify the existing methods and settings of data collection. Thus, we hope we will see qualitative social scientists who are willing to suspend the all too oft-levied critique of quantitative social science that it is too positivist and,
in turn, we hope to receive papers from quantitative social scientists who will not be quick to dismiss language-based, qualitative research as either not ‘representative enough’ or ‘bad data.’

The purpose of the workshop is to contribute to anthropological demographic scholarship. Several important arguments which strongly implicate the connections between language and data collection and presentation have been made already (e.g. Arel 2002; Randall and Koppenhaver 2004; Sana and Becky 2012; Weinreb and Sana 2009; Weinreb 2006), but we seek to explore and illuminate even further the role of language-based knowledge and research in large data set collection and quantitative research and social practice.

An indicative, but non-exhaustive list of suggested topics include:
- Trust and distrust in surveys and census collection
- Translation and commensurability of concepts
- Insider data and outside data (and its meanings)
- Silence; non-response
- False data
- Demolinguistics
- Language and migration; language and integration of migrants
- Questionnaire and survey development, logic, and translation
- Exaggeration and understatement
- What can be said and what cannot be said (and to whom) and how it can be measured
- Local categories and how they can be used in demographic work
- New theoretical frameworks on the way social scientific practice quantifies qualitative data.

Collaborative papers are welcome, and so are empirical examples from any geographical and linguistic area. All papers will be circulated a month in advance not only to the discussants but also to the other participants, in order to provide more thorough and thoughtful feedback on the papers than would be the case with regular conference papers. An edited volume is envisioned.

The workshop is sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon Programme at University College London ((http://www.ucl.ac.uk/mellon-program/)) and the UCL Centre for Humanities Interdisciplinary Research Projects ((http://www.ucl.ac.uk/chirp)). Some funding is therefore available to help towards travel and lodging, although applicants are strongly advised to identify and seek other sources of funds as well.

Please send an abstract between 250 and 300 words, together with name, title, institutional affiliation, research interests, and a short comment on whether you will need financial support and to what extent. The materials should be sent to Dr. Lora Koycheva (lora.koycheva@ucl.ac.uk).

**The deadline for abstract submission is September 15, 2013.**
Notifications on decision will be sent out by September 17, 2013.

Papers will be due on November 5, 2013.
Organizing Committee:
Dr. Lora Koycheva, Andrew W. Mellon Fellow (UCL)
Dr. Chris Gerry (UCL SSEES)
Prof. Sara Randall (UCL Anthropology)

References:


