CHUCOL project 2

Linguistics podcast

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1 Description of the project

My final CHUCOL project is a two-part podcast on the public perception of linguistics and the conception linguists have of the role and reception of their research. It is based on interviews I conducted specifically for this project with several people from in- and outside the field. The first part brings together the views expressed by my non-linguist interview partners, while the second part is dedicated to presenting some of the responses of my linguist colleagues.

2 Methodology

My interview partners were selected by a semi-randomized algorithm – i.e. I interviewed people I knew that were willing to talk to me and that I was able to arrange a meeting with. This means that the interviewees are all acquaintances of mine and there can be no claim that the results would be representative.

I conducted three interviews with non-linguists – two in Greek, one in German – and four interviews with linguists, in particular syntacticians, three of them in English and one in German. After each interview, I asked my interview partner for their signature on the relevant Consent Release Form, in order to be able to use the recorded data. Recordings were made with a ZOOM H4n recorder.

The interviews were semi-structured, my guiding questions for the non-linguists were as follows:

- Are you interested in language(s)?

- Do you know what linguistics is? Do you have an idea of what linguists are doing?

- Do you expect any relevant findings from linguistic research? How is this relevant to you?

For the linguists I used the following questions:

- Could you tell me (some reasons) why you are interested in linguistics? What got you interested in linguistics?

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- What do you think non-linguists know about what linguistics is or what linguists are doing?

- Is the way linguistics is currently publicly perceived ok, or at least moving in the right direction?

- If not, do you have any ideas as to how this could be changed?

- (Is there a future for linguistics?)

- Do linguists have a responsibility towards the linguistic communities they are working with and build their careers on? (in particular for endangered languages)

This resulted in about 20 minutes of material from the non-linguists and about 145 min from the linguists. Processing of the data as well as the final cut and compression were done with the GPL-licensed Audacity ® software (`http://audacity.sourceforge.net/`).

I subsequently listened to the recordings, selected what appeared to be the most interesting or relevant parts of my interviewees' responses and tried to conceive of a somewhat consequential narrative. On that basis I wrote a rough script for my moderation, which I then proceeded to record.

Moreover, I translated the non-English interviews and recorded myself reading out the translations. For the first part, I produced two versions: one with the translation simply following the original, in order to allow people to listen to the original in full; and one with the translation overlayed on the original using Audacity's Auto-Duck filter. For the second part I decided to stick to dubbing only, since I feel that this makes more obvious the fact that the translation is a translation, it saves time and, probably, it is also less confusing (annoying) to people who do not speak the dubbed language.

After applying equalising and normalising filters, I exported the final version into the mp3 and ogg-vorbis formats.

3 Problems encountered

There were some technical issues with recording. For example, it turns out that when recording outside a wind-blocker would indeed be useful: large parts of one of my interviews were not usable because of the wind blowing into the microphone. Some of my recordings were also very quiet. I used Audacity's amplification, but that may have had a slight impact on the sound quality. On the other hand, one interview I had recorded with higher volume settings turned out to overdrive on some occasions, so there is probably a trade-off either way.

In terms of conducting the interviews, I have noticed that I found it not trivial to follow my interview partner's train of thought while at the same time keeping in mind where I wanted to go, so as to try to adapt the way I would pose the next question to fit the context. This led to some rather long-winding explanations which make listening to the full recordings slightly excruciating (at least to myself). This might be the main obstacle to subsequently publishing some of the interviews in full or only slightly edited (see section 4). For the purpose of using excerpts from the interviews, it would also have been nice had I not talked over my interview partner in some occasions.

Selecting the snippets I would use from the various interviews was somewhat difficult and, more significantly, it proved rather tantalising to come up with a moderation narrative that would manage to bind them together in not too clumsy a way.

During the editing the question arose of how much to streamline the responses, i.e. to what extent it makes sense to remove hesitations of *eh...*-type fillers. In the interest of making the recording dynamic I was somewhat rigid in my editing, except when the hesitations were instrumental to understanding the following discourse. On several occasions, the speakers interleaved their words with the gap fillers, leading to lengthened final syllables followed up by *eh...* and similar phenomena. Where the delays were only minor I sometimes kept them as they were, but when they were followed by a slightly longer period of looking for the right word I often decided to stream line them. In a few cases, this may have lead to audible cuts, e.g. because the pitch of the speakers voice suddenly changes. I used my best judgement in weighing the benefits of a record untampered with against the benefits of a more concise discussion.

Finally, when recording my bits I came across another little problem. If I was not able to do the recording in the same recording as the surrounding recording, obviously the acoustics would be different, which would occasionally be clearly audible. But sometimes even if recorded in the same spot, it was difficult to recreate the same recording situation. So in most cases I ended up having to re-record the complete bit of moderation instead of just one or two sentences. However, there are still a few places in the recording that give away that they were edited.

4 Outlook

Although the experience was quite interesting and the format may be useful for outreach purposes, I could not currently afford to commit to producing a regular podcast of this sort. However, I am considering uploading these two to the University's media service (`http://sms.cam.ac.uk/`) – currently, they are accessible on my website only (see `http://people.ds.cam.ac.uk/gfkh3/chucol.html`). Moreover, I still have quite interesting material from my interviews with the linguists, so I am considering either releasing one or two of them in full, only slightly edited, or producing one more part of the podcast when I find some time. Realistically, the former option seems the more likely one, but who knows...

Finally, I also put some additional questions to those of my interviewees that work on my research project (ReCoS) and might conduct brief interviews with the remaining project members so as to produce a little outreach/promotion-style podcast for the project at some point in the future.