

Variationist sociolinguistics and verbatim theatre: co-producing entertaining and impactful public engagement

A core mission of variationist sociolinguistics is to improve the public's understanding of language variation, and to apply sociolinguistic research findings for social benefit (Labov 1982; Wolfram 1993). In this paper, we introduce an innovative research and arts collaboration developed to expand the public reach of variationist research and to promote the linguistic equity and social inclusivity of adults aged 70+.

Using stories collected from adults aged 70+ during sociolinguistic interviews, we co-created a research-based play about older adults' language use and lived experiences. The verbatim performance, where the actors re-tell research participants' stories in their real words and accents, offers a real-time illustration of language variation in the older adult community. The four scenes are interpolated with audience-directed monologues in which actors advocate the linguistic legitimacy of the staged characters' linguistics choices. Pamphlets provide supporting explanations. By illustrating, validating and explaining later-life language variation in this way, the performance serves to improve audience members' understanding of linguistic diversity and to promote sociolinguistic equity and respect.

The play uses sociolinguistic interview content to share research participants' experiences of growing up in post-war Britain and growing old in post-millennial Britain. Four actors play thirteen research participants to provide an authentic account of older adults' lived realities. The shared materials illustrate the social and educational inequalities experienced in the post-war era, and challenge potentially harmful audience assumptions about older adults' social, psychological and biological uniformity. By sharing older adults' lived realities in this way, the performance serves to raise empathetic awareness of their diverse experiences and to promote social respect and inclusivity.

Because the theatre experience is associated with pleasure and because shared stories evoke empathy, key messages conveyed in research-based drama are retained longer and attitude changes are more effective (Leavy 1996; Dupuis et al. 2011). Our research-based, verbatim play thus offers key advantages over more conventional strategies for affecting language attitudes and promoting social change.