30 years of (mostly) successful funding bids: a sociolinguist’s experience

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My linguistic interests

• Variationist sociolinguistics
  – Language and migration
  – Dialect formation
  – Youth language
  – Relationship between social structure, linguistic variation and language change
    • Language and social class
    • Sociolinguistic typology

• My virtual mentors: William Labov, Lesley Milroy, Peter Trudgill
Starting point: Cambridge 1980s


- July 1988–June 1991 (Cambridge): ESRC; held jointly with Francis Nolan and Susan Wright [Susan Fitzmaurice]: *The interaction of sociophonetic features and connected speech processes.* Amount awarded: £59,530
Four ESRC projects on dialect change in England, 1990–2010


- September 1995–May 1999 (Reading): CIs Ann Williams (Reading) and Jenny Cheshire (Queen Mary & Westfield College): *The role of adolescents in dialect levelling*. Amount awarded: £144,178. Evaluation: Outstanding


*Personnel:* Paul Kerswill (PI), Ann Williams, Jenny Cheshire, Eivind Torgersen, Sue Fox, Arfaan Khan
Areas we’ll cover today

1. AHRC or ESRC?
2. ESRC’s schemes
3. Success rates – analysis and commentaries
   – Quality of applications
4. The research questions: examples from the *City of York* and *Linguistic Innovators* applications
5. Methodologies: must match RQs precisely and explicitly
6. Integrating impact
7. Institutional internal review: how we rewrote the Case for Support for the *City of York* application
8. ESRC assessment: responding to the anonymous reviews
AHRC or ESRC?

Joint AHRC/ESRC Statement on Subject Coverage

• Linguistics. AHRC supports research into the structure, history, theory and description of language and languages. This includes the development and exploration of theories of language, the elucidation of the historical development of languages and the production of descriptions of languages or features of languages. ESRC supports research in areas of computational linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and interdisciplinary social science research involving linguistics. Both Councils also fund research into phonetics and applied linguistics relating to the areas for which they are responsible.
ESRC schemes

• Special calls (12 are ‘live’ at the moment)
• Centres and Large Grants
• Research Seminars Competition (annual)

We will focus on:

• Standard grants £350,000–£1m full Economic Cost (fEC) (ESRC pay 80% of the fEC):
  – [http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/funding-opportunities/](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/funding-opportunities/)
Process

• ESRC operate a rolling submission policy – applications can be submitted at any time
• Grant Assessment Panels meet in March, July and September
• They make recommendations based on reviewers’ reports (3 or 4) to the Grants Delivery Group
• Decisions on ‘the majority’ of applications by 26 weeks of submission
## Success rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Success</th>
<th>Awarded/applications</th>
<th>£</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011-2</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>108/779</td>
<td>27m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-3</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>84/315</td>
<td>28m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-4</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>82/334</td>
<td>36m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014-5</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>53/420</td>
<td>24m</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Demand Management Policy, June 2011

• Policy to increase quality and reduce number of applications

• Universities now have arrangements to advise on and vet grant applications
  – At York: Departmental Research Committees must provide feedback and finally approve the application to go forward for subject-area review – in our case Arts & Humanities.

• The policy has greatly reduced the number of applications
  – But after a fall in 2012-3, a rise in 2014-5
Success rates by subject area 2014–5
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary discipline</th>
<th>Applications</th>
<th>Awards</th>
<th>Success rate %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Science and International</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Geography</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management and Business Studies</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Policy</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistics</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio Legal Studies</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and Technology Studies</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic and Social History</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area and Development Studies</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Anthropology</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Planning</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demography</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Statistics, Computation and Methods</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistics, Methods &amp; Computing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand total</td>
<td><strong>420</strong></td>
<td><strong>53</strong></td>
<td><strong>13</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2014–5

• Psychology 29% of all applications and 34% of all awards
• Linguistics 4% of all applications and 2% of all awards
  – Figures for Linguistics too small to draw conclusions about low success rate
  – Overall, number of grants awarded across subjects is in line with number of applications made
Success rates by subject area 2013–4
## Applications and awards by discipline 2013–4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary discipline</th>
<th>Applications</th>
<th>Awards</th>
<th>Success rate %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demography</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development studies</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental planning</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human geography</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law and legal studies</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistics</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management and business studies</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical and health interface</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political science and international studies</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and technology studies</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social anthropology</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social policy</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social work</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tools, technologies and methods</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>334</strong></td>
<td><strong>82</strong></td>
<td><strong>25</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2013–4

• Psychology 26% of all applications and 32% of all awards
• Linguistics 3% of all applications and 6% of all awards
• Top 5 submitters (Psychology, Sociology, Education, Management, Political Science): 243 applications, 57 awards
  – Success rate 23%
• Bottom 10 submitters (including Linguistics, 9 or fewer): 49 applications, 19 awards
  – Success rate 39%
• Can we conclude that making fewer applications reflects greater care, and hence a greater success rate?
More information and commentaries

• ESRC *Annual Report and Accounts*
• Article by James Brooks in *Research Professional*
• *ESRC 2014-5 success rates: a quick and dirty commentary* by Adam Golberg
The Case for Support

• The core of the proposal
• ESRC provides guidelines, both on their own website and through Je-S
• 6 pages, 2cm margins, 11pt font (I suggest Garamond, as it’s a smaller font than Arial, and it’s used by the ESRC)
• The short guidelines, as they appear in the Je-S help pages (abridged by PK):
The Case for Support should include the following [abridged]:

- The **introduction** should set the aims and objectives of the study in context.
- The **detailed research questions** to be addressed should be clearly stated.
- Give a full and detailed description of the **proposed research methods**.
- You must demonstrate that you have carried out a **datasets review**.
- The **data, materials or information to be collected** should be clearly stated, and the **methods for achieving this explained**. Where sampling is involved, the **sampling frame**, population and sample sizes [and] the sample should be specified.
- Any **potential problems such as access** should be clearly stated.
- Clearly state the **framework and methods for analysis**, and explain the reasons for their choice.
The process

• Ensure a long lead time before submission
  – Use part of a sabbatical

• Get to grips with Je-S:
**Project Details**

**Scheme:** Research Grants

**Project Title:** Language change and social change: The city of York 1917-2017

**Organisation:** University of York  
**Department:** Language and Linguistic Science

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**Submitting Organisation**

(note: searches will appear in a new window)

**Organisation:** University of York

**Department:** Language and Linguistic Science

**Your reference:**

language change

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**Project Title**

Language change and social change: The city of York 1917-2017

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89 character(s) remaining (maximum 150) including spaces
Ensure maximum impact of Case for Support

Emphasise the importance and novelty of the bid at the beginning of Case for Support (2004 Linguistic Innovators):

– Writing about London in 1982, Wells asserted that ‘its working-class accent is today the most influential source of phonological innovation in England and perhaps in the whole English-speaking world.’ (p301). This claim is in line with the ‘gravity’ model of geographical diffusion (Britain 2002a). Yet it remains an article of faith: while there have been accountable sociolinguistic studies of several British cities, all of which claim to detect the influence of London, none has dealt with the English of the capital itself. This project fills this gap. Besides its documentary intent (i), it addresses five further sets of research questions (ii–vi) …
• Make sure your research questions are absolutely watertight:

– Every RQ must be demonstrably covered by an aspect of the methodology.

– No hostages to fortune (wishful thinking, vague formulations).
RQs from 2015 *City of York* application

**Overarching research questions**

Our aim is to investigate a range of pronunciation, grammatical and discourse features across the population of York, addressing the following overarching questions:

1. What generational trends in linguistic variation and change are observable in York?
2. How is linguistic variation and change reflected in social class and changes in class structure, as modelled by GBCS in comparison with other class schemes?
3. As people age and move between social classes, what happens to their language?
4. What subjective social evaluations are associated with linguistic features which are socially differentiated in York, and how do these link to change?
City of York detailed RQs 1 & 3

1. What generational trends in linguistic variation and change are observable in York?
   a. To what extent have changes apparent in 1997 been continued or modified?
   b. Are there differences in the speed or nature of change across linguistic features, for example between phonological, grammatical and discourse features?

3. As people age and move between social classes, what happens to their language?
   a. Using GBCS and other models as measures, to what extent do individuals change their class positions through their lifetimes? Is this shift generally in one direction?
   b. Is there a correlation between individuals’ social class changes and linguistic changes across their lifetimes?
Comparison of the social characteristics of the 1997 and 2017 samples will enable us to assess societal change [RQ2.2, 2.3]. We expect strong trends, but we do not expect all individuals to have followed these. We will therefore carry out qualitative case studies, linking these back to the large-scale trends [RQ3.1, 3.2, 3.3].
We will collect data from 16–19 year olds to provide a comparison with our existing project [RQs 2, 5, 6, 7]. As before, the 16–19 year olds will be contacted through a local college. We will also collect data from 4–5, 8 and 12 year olds [RQ 2]. The 4–5 and 8 year olds will be contacted through primary schools and 12 year olds through their secondary school. (See attachment for details of schools and colleges.) The primary caregivers of the children will also be contacted to give a cross-generational picture within a household [RQs 2, 3]. …
Integrating impact

• Impact should be integral to the project, envisaged at the outset and informing its direction.

• Excerpt from the Impact Summary in the City of York application:
• Because of its central focus on ways in which language interacts with social change, social mobility and social class, this project is well placed to provide information of use and interest to a range of non-academic beneficiaries. Some of the benefit is direct, in that a number of teachers and school students will be involved in training and learning events, while teachers and school students across the country will benefit from new, research-based, professionally-produced materials relevant to A-level English Language.
Responding to internal reviews

• “Reads like a scholarly article. It has too much background and review.”

• “The structure of the case for support made it difficult in some cases to find the information we were looking for. For example, details about the project's methods seemed to be placed throughout the text, in the introduction as well as the methodology sections, whereas it is often more effective to locate this in one place.”

• “Programme of Research or Research Plan: This is the most important bit of your case for support and should be the largest section of the document (up to half or more).”
The original draft

• Only 4 RQs, with no detailed sub-questions
• No specific link to methods – they were implicit
• Programme of research only explicitly discussed on page 6
• Long critique (with many references) and defence of some of the theoretical assumptions and models – which are controversial
The submitted version

• The 4 RQs acquired sub-questions
  – Total of 13 sub-questions, to be addressed directly by the project’s methods
• Programme of Research begins on page 4 and covers most of the remaining 3 pages
• More explicit about project management
• Much of the literature review was ditched
  – The critiques were removed – hostage to fortune
• We should have learnt from our successful 2004 and 2007 bids!
And finally

• Show evidence of meticulous preparation
  – Contingencies covered, e.g. document that you have prior agreement of data sources (schools, etc.)
  – Name staff if you can, and say why they’re the right ones

• Write the Data Management Plan with care
  – Take advice, and show that you have done so

• A big consumer of time for us was the preparation of the impact portions of the bid
  – This should not be underestimated, nor should shortcuts be taken

• Take anonymous reviews very seriously
  – Get the right balance of self-justification and honesty. Get other people to read your response