

The BBC *Voices* Project: Large-scale Interest in a Most Important Subject

The British Broadcasting Corporation's *Voices* Project, an investigation into the speech of communities across the United Kingdom, which the Corporation undertook in 2004-5 and with data continuing to accumulate to 2007, was an indication of how seriously the Corporation takes the issue of dialect differences. The project spoke very eloquently to the advertised purposes of the Corporation, these being:

- Sustaining citizenship and civil society
- Promoting education and learning
- Stimulating creativity and cultural excellence
- Representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities
- Bringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK
- Delivering to the public the benefit of emerging communications technologies and services

Voices shows the BBC seriously to be engaged in its public service role on all these fronts. In June 2011 a report was submitted to the BBC from the one of two major ongoing academic *Voices*-related projects, providing an overview of some activity in the scholarly arena to probe data which the Corporation gathered immediately for broadcasting purposes but with an appreciation of its likely worth beyond the short term.

Two major academic research projects stem from BBC *Voices*, each aiming to interpret emerging data for as wide a public as possible: their existence in itself helps to validate the 'purposes' set out above. The two research projects are *Whose Voices?*, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and ending in 2011, and *Voices of the UK*, Leverhulme Trust-funded at the British Library until 2012. The second of these is led by Jonnie Robinson, who this year addressed the Yorkshire Dialect Society AGM on the British Library's dialect research. The report to the BBC came from the former project, the Leeds-based *Whose Voices?*. Large-scale study of *Voices* outputs sees BBC promotion of education and learning in very large measure, across the educational spectrum from the interested lay-person to students of all ages. In shedding light on communication within and between communities, BBC *Voices* and its derived projects speak to a civic agenda that gives a voice to individuals and to their communities up to and including the country's constituent nations.

Whose Voices? has concentrated its efforts on the study of the content of the BBC *Voices* website (bbc.co.uk/voices) and of the vocabulary data input to the site by members of the public. There is focus especially, in Part 1 of the report, on debates about English and other languages in the national and international arenas, as exemplified in both *Voices* website construction and the discussions which it provoked. Beyond this, Parts 2 and 3 of the report rehearse something of the technological innovations required in a Humanities context in order fully to bring to life a complex dataset deriving from audience-participation broadcasting, and how the data might be used in teaching. (*Voices of the UK*, which is engaged in analysis of the sound recordings collected by *Voices* broadcast journalists, sees

the British Library merging these recordings into its Sound Archive, taking web delivery of its holdings to new levels).

It is instructive to note the distinct parallels between the BBC's purposes and the themes emerging from a pilot study conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) English Subject Panel, which is responsible for preparing for the university-sector Research Excellence Framework (the 'REF') evaluation exercise that is due to take place in 2014. According to this study, good research should:

- feed the creative economy
- preserve cultural heritage
- extend the knowledge base
- enrich and promote regional communities and their cultural and learning industries

Coincidence of BBC purpose with *Voices* research makes it no surprise that the British Academy included the work of *Whose Voices?* as one of only ten case studies selected nationally for its publication *Past Present and Future: The Public Value of the Humanities and Social Sciences* (<http://www.britac.ac.uk/news/news.cfm/newsid/364>). This publication was launched in the House of Commons in June 2010, as part of the British Academy's ultimately successful case to HM Government for steady-state funding into 2015. The aim of the publication was to illustrate how humanities and social science scholarship 'contributes to the cultural, social and economic health, wealth, and reputation of the UK'. It is most appropriate that the national Academy representing our field of endeavour should recognise as valuable to its own case the initiative of the British Broadcasting Corporation in conceiving and executing the *Voices* Project. It should also be very encouraging to those of us with a special concern for the dialects of the country that our subject is taken so seriously at an official level.

Anyone who would like a copy of the *Whose Voices?* report to the BBC is most welcome to contact me at the School of English at the University of Leeds.

Clive Upton
School of English
University of Leeds