

*New Perspectives in Iberian Dialectology /  
Nouvelles perspectives en dialectologie ibérique*

**David Heap, Enrique Pato, and Claire Gurski (eds.)**

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**Selection of informants and its impact on data collected  
in Spanish linguistic atlases**

Enrique Pato  
University of Western Ontario

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### **1. Introduction**

The type of informant selected (known as *NORMs* ‘nonmobile, older, rural males’, cf. Chambers/ Trudgill 1998) is the general feature shared by the majority of linguistic geography projects. In case of Spain it seems that informant selection has been based always on *the single informant principle*. Nevertheless, a detailed study shows us that the above mentioned selection is not so uniform.

This work, focused on problems of methodology informant selection and its impact on data compilation, can be used for the comparison with information from other linguistic atlases. The ultimate goal is to examine working methods and to facilitate a judgment on the value of Spanish linguistic atlases.

### **2. Background**

The very first survey method, from Abbé Rousselot, disciple of Gilliéron, grants the greatest importance to the informants’ selection: Place of origin, age, social condition, habits and precedents (long absence, complete abandon of the *patois* for long time, residence in several places, etc.). In ‘social condition’ he distinguishes between *peuple y messieurs*:

*Il faut bien se garder de les confondre. Le patois des messieurs donne l’explication de certaines anomalies qui se rencontrent dans le langage du peuple; il montre aussi de quel côté viennent les influences étrangères qui agissent sur le patois. Mais il n’est pas le patois du pays (1887:20).*

#### **2.1. Atlas linguistique de la France (ALF)**

[J. Gilliéron / E. Edmont]

639 points. 700 informants. At 550 points there is an only one informant

When there are two informants: man and woman, or the same family

In a few points the informant is not indicated

Pop (1950: 126-128) grouped the informants according to their occupation by level of education: elementary (farmers and labourers, workers, cobblers, etc.) and secondary (teachers, notaries, insurance agents, press correspondents, etc.)

Sex: 640 Men and 60 Women (ca. 30 as second informant)

Ages, from 12 to 85:

12-30: 49.7%

30-50: 23.7%

+50: 25.1%

Rural communities 86 vs. urban communities 553

Some of them are not natives of the locality surveyed (ca. 20), or they are surveyed in another point (12)

Author-informant: Edmont in Saint-Pol-sur-Ternoise (Nord, Pas-de-Calais).

## **2.2. *Atlas Linguistique et Ethnographique de l'Italie et de la Suisse Méridionale* (AIS)**

[K. Jaberg / J. Jud, 1929-1948]

*Information*: name, address, place of birth, parent's origin, age, job, level of education and emigration.

*[...] des hommes qui ont les yeux ouverts et l'oreille fine et aiment la langue et les traditions de leur pays natal* [Scheuermeier 1932:103].

## **2.3. *Sever Pop (1950). La dialectologie***

The 'wrong' informants:

Old people: with little patience, lack of spontaneity, scanty memory and possible physical faults (hearing, dentition, etc.)

Very young people and children: with a dialect influenced by the standard language and the school

Slet people: syntactic structures are very simple

Educated people: they do not represent the local dialect

Those who defend the dialect

Those who have lived outside of the locality

Those whose parents are not natives of the locality

## **3. Regional atlases of Spain**

### **3.1. *Atlas Lingüístic de Catalunya* (ALC)**

[A. Griera, 1923-1939]

Griera introduced Linguistic Geography in Spain

85 Informants

ONE Informant by point: born and lived always in it

EDUCATION LEVEL: Intelligent people "with illustration": students, attorneys, pharmacists, notaries, etc.

SEX: 84 Men (only 1 woman, "because they cannot withstand a long survey session and have a limited knowledge of some agricultural terms, names of plants, etc.")

AGE: 10-30 (23 informants); 30-50 (27 i.); + 50 (35 i.)

Author-informant: Data from Sant Bartomeu del Grau

### **3.2. Atlas Lingüístico y Etnográfico de Andalucía (ALEA)** [M. Alvar *et al.* 1961-1973]

In ‘Nota preliminar’ there is nothing about informants.

Map 2. *Points with secondary / review surveys* (with 2 or 3 fieldworkers):

Huelva 4 - Sevilla 1 - Córdoba 4 - Cádiz 1 - Málaga 3 - Granada 9 - Jaén 4 - Almería 4

= 30 points (from 230) with secondary or review surveys.

In provincial capitals they interviewed 5 different people from different neighbourhoods, social strata and cultural level.

When there is more than one survey, they take the first informant baseline data.

### **3.3. Atlas Lingüístico y Etnográfico de las Islas Canarias (ALEICan)** [M. Alvar 1975]

Map I.5

92 informants

SEX: 75 Men (81.5%) + 17 Women (18.5%)

EDUCATION LEVEL: Educated, Primary, No Education

AGE: No data (??)

No. Informants in each point: from 1 to 5

Secondary informants (Lz 1, Lz 4, Fv 2, GC 10, GC 12, Tf 41 and Go 3)

Surveys in different places (Lz 10, Fv 2 and Tf 50)

### **3.4. Atlas Lingüístico y Etnográfico de Aragón, Navarra y Rioja (ALEANR)** [M. Alvar *et al.* 1979-1989]

Vol, 1, p. 8 & Map 2:

“cuando las circunstancias lo requerían hicimos encuesta con más de un informante”

*When the circumstances required it we did surveys with more than one informant*

### **3.5. Atlas Lingüístico y Etnográfico de Cantabria (ALECant)** [M. Alvar 1995]

Vol. I, pp. 17-25

171 Informants

SEX: 138 Men (80.7%) + 33 Women (19.3%)

OCCUPATION: Farmers, ranchers, fishermen and sailors

AGE: from 13 (#406) to 88 (#402)

[-45]: 14 informants, [+45]: 157 informants

3 informants by point. In some places 5 (#406), 4 (#107, #200, #306), 2 (#403, #600) and 1 (#407)

**3.6. *Atlas Lingüístico de Castilla y León (ALCyL)***  
[M. Alvar 1999]

It is the last of the regional atlas published by Alvar and there is no information at all about the surveyed informants.

**3.7. *Atlas Lingüístico (y etnográfico) de Castilla-La Mancha (ALeCMan)***  
[P. García Mouton / F. Moreno Fernández, in press]

One informant: born in the locality, they noted the cultural standard, socioeconomic level and occupation. Secondary informants when there is linguistic generational or sex differentiation, or when the informant does not know the specialized lexicon. In provincial capitals:

- 8 informants for the lexical surveys: 4 men and 4 women from 20 to +55.
- 20 informants for the phonetic and morpho-syntactic surveys.

The informants receive an economic compensation and signed a letter of consent.

#### **4. Atlas Lingüístico de la Península Ibérica (ALPI) Linguistic Atlas of the Iberian Peninsula [www.alpi.ca](http://www.alpi.ca)**



*Atlas Lingüístico de la Península Ibérica (ALPI)* [Vol. I, 1962 & [www.alpi.ca](http://www.alpi.ca)]

The ALPI is and will be the only large scale atlas in Spain

-Innovation (1930) > surveys realized by professional linguists and teams

-The characteristics of the informants were supposed to be listed in an additional volume.

527 points

543 Informants (Cuaderno I): 454 Men (83.5%) + 90 Women (16.5%) + 8 Not identified

More women in Asturias, León, Zamora, Palencia, Burgos and Navarre. Compared to Orense, Alava and Huesca.

AGE: from 30 (#324) to 86 (#321). Average: 40-60

No. Informants by point (Cuaderno I): ONE informant at 498 points (94.3%), >ONE at 22 points (4.1%), + 8 informants N/Id.

OCCUPATION: Peasants, shepherds, labourers...

Literacy: Yes / No / A bit

In the ‘Introducción’ (cf. Navarro Tomás 1962):

- Natives of the locality, also their parents and spouses
- Limited travel
- Illiterate or minimally educated, without the influence of standard language
- Mature age, avoiding the very old, with dental problems

Almost always with two informants and two transcribers. Initially they work together and then separately. Later the answers are verified and the missing answers are completed with other complementary informants, especially for the lexicon of traditional trades. Indirect questions, with an album of drawings, a small book of plants and boxes with insect samples.

## 5. Discussion

The informants are chosen depending on the fieldworkers’ decision, those that can offer a positive result. On occasion there are difficulties to find informants who fulfill certain criteria

Without statistical technologies > population representativity is doubtful

Biological Factors: sex and age

Social Factors: origin, social group, degree of literacy and residence in urban or rural community

### 5.1. *The size of the sample*

An unresolved problem: still today it depends on the volume of information that can be dealt with.

- |                        |   |                        |
|------------------------|---|------------------------|
| In phonetics studies   | > | from 1 to 3 informants |
| In grammatical studies | > | a higher number        |

In general, the less homogeneity there is the larger number of speakers necessary, and vice versa, the greater homogeneity will guarantee the appearance of dialectal regularities with a smaller sample. From Labov (1972) one supports that in a community stratified with certain extra-linguistics factors is enough to take 0.025 % of the whole in a community of 100.000 inhabitants in order for the sample to be representative.

The skill of the speaker to deal is a function of reasoning, maturity and language, for it is necessary to adapt the questions to the capacity of the informant. It is a responsibility of the investigators to insure that the subject has understood the information.

## 5.2. Age

The informant must have developed the social and stylistic perception to use variants. The most frequently by the age of 18, before which linguistic development is not clear. Delimiting age groups: they must be homogeneous and if they are not, we have to offer a social explanation. On occasions the speech of one point is represented by a 20-year-old individual and at the neighbouring point by a man of 75. The whole community is represented by only one speaker.

## 6. Conclusions

Atlas users want to consider the materials published as a true image of the linguistic conditions of a territory. Can the results obtained be generalized: When sampling is representative, generalizations can be extrapolated to the rest of the population. An unrepresentative sample, on the other hand, leads to incorrect conclusions. Everything depends on the fieldworkers' skill: the use of the questionnaire and the transcription of the data.

When the dialect studied does not vary throughout the point, the testimony of a single individual can stand for all the members of the community. But, it is necessary to admit also that any deficiency in their data can lead to erroneous maps. The change of informants during the survey does not usually change the final results.

The only way of correcting these problems is completing the information with another person, checking dubious responses: usefulness of the secondary informants. That is to say, one informant's responses are used, but the help and the alterations of another one are allowed. It is accepted that the best response is the first one, as the first reaction to the question.

Informants have the most important role in the survey because depends on them the quality of the research. There are no fixed criteria for the selection of a good informant (cf. Pop 1950, etc.), it depends on the intuition and the good experience of the fieldworker, and on the aims of the project.

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