

Perthites wanted for study on the Aussie lingo

July 23 2014, by David Stacey

We all know that Australians speak English differently from the way it's spoken in the UK or the US, and many of us are aware that Perth people have a slightly different version of the language from, say, Melbournians - but a young French linguist is hoping to recruit 120 Perthites to discover exactly how people in WA's capital use the Queen's English.

PhD candidate Sophie Richard, in The University of Western Australia's Discipline of Linguistics, has recently started recording participants in interviews and is hoping to have more volunteers join her project. She is after people who were born in Perth or arrived here before they were four years old and who are aged from 13 to elderly. She will analyse their speech to determine patterns in Perth English and see whether the trends can be linked to age, sex and/or socio-economic background.

Sophie studied English and English linguistics at The Sorbonne University in Paris. She undertook student exchanges in London, Boston and Perth itself, before coming back to UWA in May 2013 for her PhD.

She has loved the English language ever since she started learning it at school and enjoys the surprises that its many varieties hold in store. She was floored on first arriving in Perth when a woman at a supermarket check-out said to her, "Airsyerdaybin?"

"I had to ask her to repeat her question a few times," Sophie said. "I thought she was saying 'How's Debbie?' and I kept on thinking, but 'Who's Debbie?' It was as if I couldn't understand English!"

Sophie said that language is like a footprint. It's something that we use to differentiate ourselves and to mark our identity. So she is interested in the English language and what Perth speakers make of it. "There is a lack of data about the English spoken in Australia," she said. She also explained that language is constantly changing and that it is something she would like to document for Perth.

Sophie is building on research started by her UWA supervisors Professor Marie-Eve Ritz and Assistant Professor Celeste Rodriguez Louro. She is creating the first contemporary collection of oral narratives by Perthites. Her study will be the largest of the type of English spoken by people native to this city.

In particular, Sophie is interested in the way some speakers jiggle their tenses - the form of verb used to indicate time - when telling stories. Talking about events that happened in the past, people typically use the past tense ("I did") but Australian speakers also use other forms to make their stories more vivid. "That's an innovative way of using the language," Sophie said. "But how frequent is this? Who are the people jiggling their tenses in narratives? And is this leading to a change in the grammar of the language? That's what I'm hoping to find out!"

Provided by University of Western Australia

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