Polls, Surveys, and the English Language

By Howard Schuman

Public opinion is ordinarily investigated through two vehicles: polls and surveys. Polls are typically carried out by commercial organizations such as Gallup and Harris. Surveys are usually administered by academic institutions, for example, the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center and the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center, the latter best known for its General Social Survey.

A Poll or a Survey?

What is the distinction between a poll and a survey? If pressed, students of public opinion can doubtless suggest differences. Organizations that carry out surveys continue to maintain greater emphasis on face-to-face interviewing, with full probability sampling and a fair amount of attention to reporting detailed response rates. Polling organizations are increasingly limited to telephone interviewing, probably more often introduce an element of quota sampling, and are less likely to have time to maximize response rates. However, all organizations, academic and commercial, have moved heavily into interviewing by telephone, and the development of various forms of random digit dialing has decreased what was once a large distinction between different types of sampling.

Another point of separation concerns a focus by polls on single questions, compared to the scales constructed from sets of items that surveys often develop to increase reliability and construct validity. Indeed, the traditional distinction between "opinions" and "attitudes" is sometimes made largely in these terms[1], though other writers have been less sure that a profound difference is really involved.[2] Still another distinguishing feature of survey research is a long-term and increasing emphasis on multivariate analysis, whereas reports of polls more often concentrate on marginal percentages and bivariate relations. Yet this would seem to be more a matter of how data are used than of the vehicle itself: the skilled secondary analyst can apply sophisticated multivariate procedures to Gallup items, while the academic survey investigator under pressure to respond to a grant or contract deadline may produce a report that is little more than a summary of marginals and simple relationships.

> “*It is doubtful whether the difference between high and low quality can or should go hand-in-hand with the distinction between surveys and polls.*”

Origins

Of course, these and other differences in quality are of importance when judging whether the results from a social investigation deserve one's confidence. But it is doubtful whether the difference between high and low quality can or should go hand-in-hand with the distinction between surveys and polls. An alternative hypothesis worth considering is that the distinction tells us as much about the relation of language to social structure and social status as it does about intrinsic technical differences of method. It may really be largely a question of the origin of words and their current use in appealing to different parts of the population.

> “*A poll is therefore an expression with appeal to a wider public, the intended consumers of results from Gallup, Harris, and other polls. The second —survey— fits the needs of academicians in university institutes who wish to emphasize the scientific or scholarly character of their work.*”

Our English vocabulary is generally recognized as having two major sources: its original Old English or Anglo-Saxon base dating from the first millennium after Christ, and the infusion of new words that followed the Norman Conquest in 1066. The earlier period connects English to Germanic roots; the latter derives from Latin, at first indirectly through French and then more directly as scholars and scientists went purposefully to the classical languages in search of new terms.

The two lexical sources often lead to duplication in a literal sense, but with differences in connotation and usage that we all recognize, whether consciously or not. Thus our food comes from cows, pigs, and sheep, words of Anglo-Saxon origin; but once prepared it is transformed into the French beef, pork, and mutton (*boeuf, porc, mouton*). The barnyard character of the first three words reflects the fact that the conquered Anglo-Saxons tended the farms, while the culinary suggestion of the latter comes from the tables of the conquering Normans.

Similarly, we have a set of everyday Anglo-Saxon words for parts of the body—mouth, eye, ear, and the like—and parallel but fancier terms from Latin, such as oral cavity. Perhaps the most divergent connotations of all appear when one considers the four-letter words that make up our store of vulgar expressions. Many of these are Old English words, whereas their polite equivalents are generally and obviously Latinate in character.

Poll or Survey—A Matter of Refinement

As these last examples suggest, words of Anglo-Saxon descent tend to be shorter, often blunter, and seem more ordinary in the sense of mass usage. Words coming from French or Latin convey greater refinement and have more appeal to the educated ear.[3]

My hypothesis about the distinction between polls and surveys should now be apparent. "Poll" is a four letter word, generally thought to be from an ancient Germanic term referring to "head," as in counting heads. The two-syllable word "survey," on the other hand, comes from the French *survee*, which in turn derives from Latin *super* (over) and *videre* (to look).

The first —poll— is therefore an expression with appeal to a wider public, the intended consumers of results from Gallup, Harris, and other polls. The second—survey—fits the needs of academicians in university institutes who wish to emphasize the scientific or scholarly character of their work. Moreover, since the academic investigators perceive themselves to be regarded with some suspicion by their colleagues in the traditional sciences and humanities, it is especially important for them to differentiate their work from the transient poll reports that appear in the mass media. As in many other social contexts, a distinction in names is called upon to help maintain the difference.

Of course, there may be other factors that differentiate the terms as well, such as the link between the polls, in the sense employed here, and the prediction of "polling" (that is, of elections). The present hypothesis is simply that divergent social meanings play a strong role in maintaining the poll/survey distinction even when all other differences vanish.

"*Words of Anglo-Saxon descent tend to be shorter, often blunter, and seem more ordinary in the sense of mass usage. Words coming from French or Latin convey greater refinement and have more appeal to the educated ear.*"

Moreover, a test of this hypothesis may be close at hand, for recently some commercial organizations have begun to refer to their products as surveys rather than as polls—an effort at social mobility through renaming, much as occurs in other areas of life. This may make academic researchers somewhat uncomfortable, however, and it will be interesting to see if social necessity leads to new words—or to translate into Latinate English—additional refinements in terminology.

Endnotes:

[1] Jean M. Converse, *Survey Research in the United States: Roots & Emergence 1890-1960* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987). Also see C. A. Moser and G. Kalton, *Survey Methods in Social Investigations* (NY: Basic Books, 1972).

[2] William J. McGuire, "Attitudes and Attitude Change" in Gardner Lindzey & Elliot Aronson (eds.), *The Handbook of Social Psychology*. Vol. II (NY: Random House, 1985), pp. 233-346.

[3] Joseph M. Williams, *Origins of the English Language: A Social and Linguistic History* (NY: Free Press, 1975).

Howard Schuman is research scientist and professor emeritus, University of Michigan, though now living on the Maine coast. His continuing research draws on both polls and surveys.