The Study of Language

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18 Language and regional variation

Yesterday, I toll my dad, "Buy chocolate kine now, bumbye somebody going egg our house you know, cuz you so chang." He sed, "Sucking kine mo' bettah cuz lass mo' long. Da kids going appreciate cuz …" And befo' he could start his "Back in my days story" I jus sed, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I undahstand," cuz I nevah like hea da story again ah about how he nevah have candy wen he wuz small and how wuz one TREAT fo' eat da orange peel wit sugar on top. Da orange PEEL you know. Not da actual orange, but da orange PEEL. Strong emphasis on PEEL cuz dey wuz POOR.

Tonouchi (2001)

Throughout this book, we have been talking about languages such as English, Spanish or Swahili as if there was a single variety of each in everyday use. That is, we have largely ignored the fact that every language has a lot of variation, especially in the way it is spoken. If we just look at English, we find widespread variation in the way it is spoken in different countries such as Australia, Britain and the USA. We can also find a range of varieties in different parts of those countries, with Lee Tonouchi's account of "Trick-O-Treat" in Hawai'i as just one example. In this chapter, we investigate aspects of language variation based on where that language is used, as a way of doing **linguistic geography**. First, we should identify the particular variety that we have normally assumed when we referred to a language as English, Spanish or Swahili.

The standard language

When we talked about the words and structures of a language in earlier chapters, we were concentrating on the features of only one variety, usually called the **standard language**. This is actually an idealized variety, because it has no specific region. It is the variety associated with administrative, commercial and educational centers, regardless of region. If we think of Standard English, it is the version we believe is found in printed English in newspapers and books, is widely used in the mass media and is taught in most schools. It is the variety we normally try to teach to those who want to learn English as a second or foreign language. It is clearly associated with education and broadcasting in public contexts and is more easily described in terms of the written language (i.e. vocabulary, spelling, grammar) than the spoken language.

If we are thinking of that general variety used in public broadcasting in the United States, we can refer more specifically to Standard American English or, in Britain, to Standard British English. In other parts of the world, we can talk about other recognized varieties such as Standard Australian English, Standard Canadian English or Standard Indian English.

Accent and dialect

Whether we think we speak a standard variety of English or not, we all speak with an **accent**. It is a myth that some speakers have accents while others do not. We might feel that some speakers have very distinct or easily recognized types of accent while others may have more subtle or less noticeable accents, but every language-user speaks with an accent. Technically, the term "accent" is restricted to the description of aspects of pronunciation that identify where an individual speaker is from, regionally or socially. It is different from the term **dialect**, which is used to describe features of grammar and vocabulary as well as aspects of pronunciation.

We recognize that the sentence *You don't know what you're talking about* will generally "look" the same whether spoken with an American accent or a Scottish accent. Both speakers will be using forms associated with Standard English, but have different pronunciations. However, this next sentence – *Ye dinnae ken whit yer haverin' aboot* – has the same meaning as the first, but has been written out in an approximation of what a person who speaks one dialect of Scottish English might say. There are differences in pronunciation (e.g. *whit*, *aboot*), but there are also examples of different vocabulary (e.g. *ken*, *haverin'*) and a different grammatical form (*dinnae*).

While differences in vocabulary are often easily recognized, dialect variations in the meaning of grammatical constructions are less frequently documented. In the following example (from Trudgill, 1983) two British English speaking visitors (B and C) and a local Irish English speaker (A) are involved in a conversation in Donegal, Ireland.

A: *How long are youse here?*
B: *Till after Easter.*
(Speaker A looks puzzled.)
C: *We came on Sunday.*
A: *Ah. Youse're here a while then.*

It seems that the construction *How long are youse here?*, in speaker A's dialect, is used with a meaning close to the structure "How long have you been here?" referring to past time. Speaker B, however, answers as if the question was referring to future time ("How long are you going to be here?"). When speaker C answers with a past time response (*We came on Sunday*), speaker A acknowledges it and repeats his use of a present tense (*Youse're here*) to refer to past time. Note that the dialect form *youse* (= "you" plural) seems to be understood by the visitors though it is unlikely to be part of their own dialect.

Dialectology

Despite occasional difficulties, there is a general impression of mutual intelligibility among many speakers of different dialects of English. This is one of the criteria used in the study of dialects, or **dialectology**, to distinguish between two different dialects of the same language (whose speakers can usually understand each other) and two different languages (whose speakers can't usually understand each other). This is not the only, or the most reliable, way of identifying dialects, but it is helpful in establishing the fact that each different dialect, like each language, is equally worthy of analysis. It is important to recognize, from a linguistic point of view, that none of the varieties of a language is inherently "better" than any other. They are simply different.

From a social point of view, however, some varieties do become more prestigious. In fact, the variety that develops as the standard language has usually been one socially prestigious dialect, originally associated with a center of economic and political power (e.g. London for British English and Paris for French). Yet, there always continue to be other varieties of a language spoken in different regions.

Regional dialects

The existence of different regional dialects is widely recognized and often the source of some humor for those living in different regions. In the United States, people from the

Brooklyn area of New York may joke about a Southerner's definition of *sex* by telling you that *sex is fo' less than tin*, in their best imitation of someone from the Southern states. In return, Southerners can wonder aloud about what a *tree guy* is in Brooklyn, since they have heard Brooklyn speakers refer to *doze tree guys*. Some regional dialects clearly have stereotyped pronunciations associated with them.

Going beyond stereotypes, those involved in the serious investigation of regional dialects have devoted a lot of survey research to the identification of consistent features of speech found in one geographical area compared to another. These dialect surveys often involve painstaking attention to detail and tend to operate with very specific criteria in identifying acceptable informants. After all, it is important to know if the person whose speech you are recording really is a typical representative of the region's dialect.

Consequently, the informants in the major dialect surveys of the twentieth century tended to be **NORMS** or "non-mobile, older, rural, male speakers." Such speakers were selected because it was believed that they were less likely to have influences from outside the region in their speech. One unfortunate consequence of using such criteria is that the resulting dialect description tends to be more accurate of a period well before the time of investigation. Nevertheless, the detailed information obtained has provided the basis for a number of Linguistic Atlases of whole countries (e.g. England) and regions (e.g. the Upper Midwest area of the United States).

Isoglosses and dialect boundaries

We can look at some examples of regional variation found in a survey that resulted in the Linguistic Atlas of the Upper Midwest of the United States. One of the aims of a survey of this type is to find a number of significant differences in the speech of those living in different areas and to be able to chart where the boundaries are, in dialect terms, between those areas. If it is found, for example, that the vast majority of informants in one area say they carry things home from the store in a *paper bag* while the majority in another area say they use a *paper sack*, then it is usually possible to draw a line across a map separating the two areas, as shown on the accompanying illustration. This line is called an **isogloss** and represents a boundary between the areas with regard to that one particular linguistic item.

If a very similar distribution is found for another two items, such as a preference for *pail* to the north and *bucket* to the south, then another isogloss, probably overlapping the first, can be drawn on the map. When a number of isoglosses come together in this way, a more solid line, indicating a **dialect boundary**, can be drawn.

In the accompanying illustration, a small circle indicates where *paper bag* was used and a plus sign shows where *paper sack* was used. The broken line between

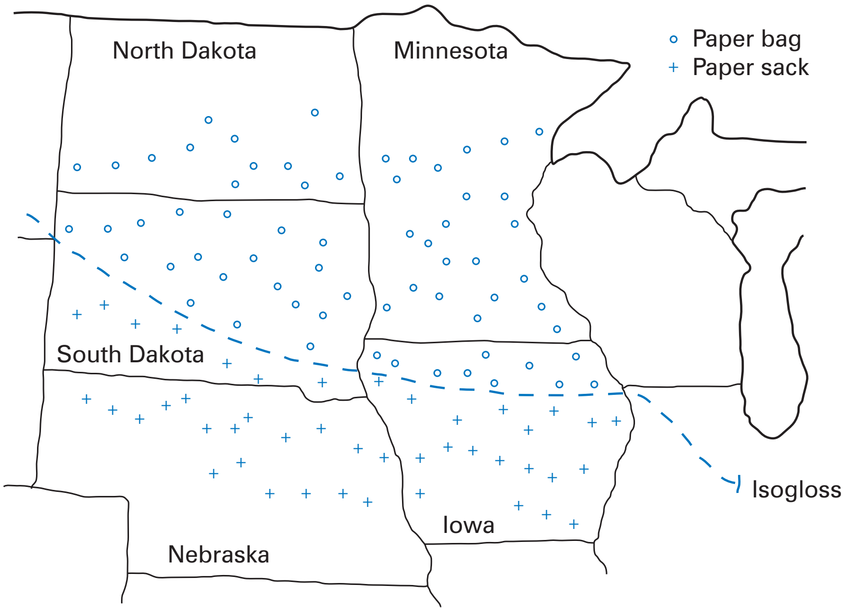

Figure 18.1

the two areas represents an isogloss that roughly coincides with lines separating several other linguistic features. Using this dialect boundary information, we find that in the Upper Midwest of the USA there is a Northern dialect area that includes Minnesota, North Dakota, most of South Dakota and Northern Iowa. The rest of Iowa and Nebraska show characteristics of the Midland dialect. Some of the noticeable pronunciation and vocabulary differences are illustrated here.

	("taught")	("roof")	("creek")	("greasy")
Northern:	[ɔ]	[ʊ]	[ɪ]	[s]
Midland:	[ɑ]	[u]	[i]	[z]

Northern:	*paper bag*	*pail*	*kerosene*	*slippery*	*get sick*
Midland:	*paper sack*	*bucket*	*coal oil*	*slick*	*take sick*

So, if an American English (male) speaker pronounces the word *greasy* as [ɡrizi] and asks for a *bucket* to carry water, then he is not likely to have grown up and spent most of his life in Minnesota. While making this general claim, we shouldn't forget that, although the characteristic forms listed here were found in the speech of a large percentage of those interviewed in the dialect survey, they won't necessarily be used by all speakers currently living in the region.

The dialect continuum

Another note of caution is required with regard to dialect boundaries. The drawing of isoglosses and dialect boundaries is quite useful in establishing a broad view of regional dialects, but it tends to obscure the fact that, at most dialect boundary areas, one dialect or language variety merges into another. Keeping this in mind, we can view regional variation as existing along a **dialect continuum** rather than as having sharp breaks from one region to the next.

A very similar type of continuum can occur with related languages existing on either side of a political border. As you travel from Holland into Germany, you will find concentrations of Dutch speakers giving way to areas near the border where "Dutch" may sound more like "Deutsch" because the Dutch dialects and the German dialects are less clearly differentiated. Then, as you travel into Germany, greater concentrations of distinctly German speakers occur.

Speakers who move back and forth across this border area, using different varieties with some ease, may be described as **bidialectal** (i.e. "speaking two dialects"). Most of us grow up with some form of bidialectalism, speaking one dialect "in the street" among family and friends, and having to learn another dialect "in school." However, in some places, there are different languages used in the street and in school. When we talk about people knowing two distinct languages, we describe them as **bilingual**.

Bilingualism and diglossia

In many countries, regional variation is not simply a matter of two (or more) dialects of a single language, but can involve two (or more) quite distinct and different languages. Canada, for example, is an officially bilingual country, with both French and English as official languages. This recognition of the linguistic rights of the country's French speakers, largely in Quebec, did not come about without a lot of political upheaval. For most of its history, Canada was essentially an English-speaking country, with a French-speaking minority group. In such a situation, **bilingualism** at the level of the individual tends to be a feature of the minority group. In this form of bilingualism, a member of a minority group grows up in one linguistic community, mainly speaking one language (e.g. Welsh in Britain or Spanish in the United States), but learns another language (e.g. English) in order to take part in the larger dominant linguistic community.

Indeed, many members of linguistic minorities can live out their entire lives without ever seeing their native language appear in the public domain. Sometimes political activism can change that. It was only after English notices and signs were frequently defaced, or replaced by scribbled Welsh-language versions, that bilingual

Figure 18.2

(English–Welsh) signs came into widespread use in Wales. Many *henoed* never expected to see their first language on public signs in Wales, as illustrated in the accompanying photograph, though they may wonder why everyone is being warned about them.

Individual bilingualism, however, doesn't have to be the result of political dominance by a group using a different language. It can simply be the result of having two parents who speak different languages. If a child simultaneously acquires the French spoken by her mother and the English spoken by her father, then the distinction between the two languages may not even be noticed by the child. There will simply be two ways of talking according to the person being talked to. However, even in this type of bilingualism, one language tends eventually to become the dominant one, with the other in a subordinate role.

A rather special situation involving two distinct varieties of a language, called **diglossia**, exists in some countries. In diglossia, there is a "low" variety, acquired locally and used for everyday affairs, and a "high" or special variety, learned in school and used for important matters. A type of diglossia exists in Arabic-speaking countries where the high variety (Classical Arabic) is used in formal lectures, serious political events and especially in religious discussions. The low variety is the local version of the language, such as Egyptian Arabic or Lebanese Arabic. Through a long period in European history, a diglossic situation existed with Latin as the high variety and one of the local languages of Europe (early versions of Modern Italian, French and Spanish) as the low variety or "vernacular" (see Chapter 19).

Language planning

Perhaps because bilingualism in contemporary Europe and North America tends to be found mostly among minority groups, many countries are often assumed to be **monolingual**. For many of those residents who are only capable of speaking one language (English), the United States would indeed seem to be a monolingual country. For others, it clearly is not, because they live in large communities where English is not the first language of the home. As one example, the majority of the population in San Antonio, Texas, will be more likely to listen to radio broadcasts in Spanish than in English. This simple fact has quite large repercussions in terms of the organization of local representative government and the educational system. Should elementary school teaching take place in Spanish or English?

Consider a similar question in the context of Guatemala, a country in Central America, where there are twenty-six Mayan languages spoken, as well as Spanish. If, in this situation, Spanish is selected as the language of education, are all those Mayan speakers put at an early educational disadvantage within the society? Questions of this type require answers on the basis of some type of **language planning**. Government, legal and educational organizations in many countries have to plan which variety or varieties of the languages spoken in the country are to be used for official business. In Israel, despite the fact that it was not the most widely used language among the population, Hebrew was chosen as the official government language. In India, the choice was Hindi, yet in many non-Hindi-speaking regions, there were riots against this decision. There were "National Language Wars" in the Philippines before different groups could agree on the name of the national language (Filipino).

The process of language planning may be seen in a better light when the full series of stages is implemented over a number of years. The adoption of Swahili as the national language of Tanzania in East Africa may serve as a good example. There still exist a large number of other languages, as well as the colonial vestiges of English, but the educational, legal and government systems have gradually introduced Swahili as the official language. The process of "selection" (choosing an official language) is followed by "codification," in which basic grammars, dictionaries and written models are used to establish the standard variety. The process of "elaboration" follows, with the standard variety being developed for use in all aspects of social life and the appearance of a body of literary work written in the standard. The process of "implementation" is largely a matter of government attempts to encourage use of the standard, and "acceptance" is the final stage when a substantial majority of the population have come to use the standard and to think of it as the national language, playing a part in not only social, but also national identity.

Pidgins and creoles

In some areas, the standard chosen may be a variety that originally had no native speakers in the country. For example, in Papua New Guinea, a lot of official business is conducted in Tok Pisin. This language is now used by over a million people, but it began many years earlier as a kind of "contact" language called a pidgin. A **pidgin** is a variety of a language that developed for some practical purpose, such as trading, among groups of people who had a lot of contact, but who did not know each other's languages. As such, it would have no native speakers. The origin of the term "pidgin" is thought to be from a Chinese version of the English word "business."

A pidgin is described as an "English pidgin" if English is the **lexifier** language, that is, the main source of words in the pidgin. It doesn't mean that those words will have the same pronunciation or meaning as in the source. For example, the word *gras* has its origins in the English word "grass," but in Tok Pisin it also came to be used for "hair." It is part of *mausgras* ("moustache") and *gras bilong fes* ("beard").

There are several English pidgins still used today. They are characterized by an absence of any complex grammatical morphology and a somewhat limited vocabulary. Inflectional suffixes such as *-s* (plural) and *-'s* (possessive) on nouns in Standard English are rare in pidgins, while structures like *tu buk* ("two books") and *di gyal place* ("the girl's place") are common. Functional morphemes often take the place of inflectional morphemes found in the source language. For example, instead of changing the form of *you* to *your*, as in the English phrase *your book*, English-based pidgins use a form like *bilong*, and change the word order to produce phrases like *buk bilong yu*.

The syntax of pidgins can be quite unlike the languages from which terms were borrowed and modified, as can be seen in this example from an earlier stage of Tok Pisin.

Baimbai	*hed*	*bilongyu*	*i-arrait*	*gain*
by and by	head	belong you	he alright	again

"Your head will soon get well again"

There are believed to be between six and twelve million people still using pidgin languages and between ten and seventeen million using descendants from pidgins called "creoles." When a pidgin develops beyond its role as a trade or contact language and becomes the first language of a social community, it is described as a **creole**. Tok Pisin is now a creole. Although still locally referred to as "Pidgin," the language spoken by a large number of people in Hawai'i is also a creole, technically known as Hawai'i Creole English. A creole initially develops as the first language of children growing up in a pidgin-using community and becomes more complex as it serves more communicative purposes. Thus, unlike pidgins, creoles have large numbers of native speakers and are not restricted at all in their uses. A French creole is spoken by the majority of the population in Haiti and English creoles are used in Jamaica and Sierra Leone.

The separate vocabulary elements of a pidgin can become grammatical elements in a creole. The form *baimbai yu go* ("by and by you go") in early Tok Pisin gradually shortened to *bai yu go*, and finally to *yu bigo*, with a grammatical structure not unlike that of its English translation equivalent, "you will go."

The post-creole continuum

In many contemporary situations where creoles evolved, there is usually evidence of another process at work. Just as there was development from a pidgin to a creole, known as **creolization**, there is now often a retreat from the use of the creole by those who have greater contact with a standard variety of the language. Where education and greater social prestige are associated with a "higher" variety (e.g. British English in Jamaica), a number of speakers will tend to use fewer creole forms and structures. This process, known as **decreolization**, leads at one extreme to a variety that is closer to the external standard model and leaves, at the other extreme, a basic variety with more local creole features. Between these two extremes may be a range of slightly different varieties, some with many and some with fewer creole features. This range of varieties, evolving after (= "post") the creole has come into existence, is called the **post-creole continuum**.

So, in Jamaica, one speaker may say *a fi mi buk dat*, using the basic creole variety, another may put it as *iz mi buk*, using a variety with fewer creole features, and yet another may choose *it's my book*, using a variety with only some pronunciation features of the creole, or a "creole accent." It is also very common for speakers to be able to use a range of varieties in different situations.

We would predict that these differences would be tied very much to social values and social identity. In the course of discussing language varieties in terms of regional differences, we have excluded, in a rather artificial way, the complex social factors that are also at work in determining language variation. In the next chapter, we'll investigate the influence of a number of these social variables.

Study questions

1 Which variety of English would you say is being used in the introductory quotation from Lee Tonouchi?
2 What is the difference between an accent and a dialect?
3 What is one disadvantage of using NORMS in dialect surveys?
4 What does an isogloss represent in a linguistic atlas?
5 What are the first two stages of language planning in the process of adopting a national language?
6 In what specific way is a creole different from a pidgin?

Tasks

A In which areas of the British Isles would we find a Brummie accent, a Geordie accent, a speaker of Scouse, the use of *bairns* (= "children"), *boyo* (= "man"), *fink* (= "think") and *Would you be after wanting some tea?* (= "Do you want some tea?")?

B Two pioneers of dialectology were Georg Wenker and Jules Gilliéron. In what ways were their methods different and which method became the model for later dialect studies?

C Consider the following statements about Standard English and try to decide whether you agree or disagree with them, providing a reason in each case for your decision.

1 Standard English is not a language.
2 Standard English is an accent.
3 Standard English is a speech style.
4 Standard English is a set of rules for correct usage.

D In the study of pidgins, what is meant by a "substrate" and a "superstrate" language? Which of the two is likely to be the source of intonation, syntax and vocabulary?

E The following examples are based on Romaine (1988), quoted in Holmes (2008). Using what you learned about Tok Pisin, can you complete the translations of these examples with the following English words and phrases: *bird's feather, bird's wing, cat's fur, eyebrow, hair, weed*?

gras antap long ai	*gras bilong pisin*	*gras nogut*
gras bilong hed	*gras bilong pusi*	*han bilong pisin*

F The following example of Hawai'i Creole English (from Lum, 1990, quoted in Nichols, 2004) has some characteristic forms and structures. How would you analyze the use of *da*, *had*, *one*, *stay* and *wen* in this extract?

Had one nudda guy in one tee-shirt was sitting at da table next to us was watching da Bag Man too. He was eating one plate lunch and afterwards, he wen take his plate ovah to da Bag Man. Still had little bit everyting on top, even had bar-ba-que meat left.

"Bra," da guy tell, "you like help me finish? I stay full awready."

Discussion topics/projects

I Peter Trudgill has noted that "increased geographical mobility during the course of the twentieth century led to the disappearance of many dialects and dialect forms through a process we can call dialect levelling – the levelling out of differences between one dialect and another" (2000: 155).

Do you think that "dialect levelling" is continuing in the geographical area you are most familiar with? Does this mean that there will eventually be only one dialect? What other forces might be at work that would cause new dialects to emerge? (For background reading, see chapter 8 of Trudgill, 2000.)

II English is not the official language of the United States, but some insist that it should be. What are the arguments for and against the "English-Only Movement"? (For background reading, see Wiley, 2004.)

Further reading

Basic treatments

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Kretzschmar, W. (2004) "Regional dialects" In E. Finegan and J. Rickford (eds.) *Language in the USA* (39–57) Cambridge University Press

More detailed treatments

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American English dialects

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19 Language and social variation

> Admittedly, it is hard to make stylistic judgements on slang from the past, but when we read a seventeenth-century description of someone as a "shite-a-bed scoundrel, a turdy gut, a blockish grutnol and a grouthead gnat-snapper" it's unlikely the writer was using the neutral or "proper" language of the time – I think we can safely assume he was using slang.
>
> Burridge (2004)

In the preceding chapter, we focused on variation in language use found in different geographical areas. However, not everyone in a single geographical area speaks in the same way in every situation. We recognize that certain uses of language, such as the slang in Kate Burridge's description, are more likely to be found in the speech of some individuals in society and not others. We are also aware of the fact that people who live in the same region, but who differ in terms of education and economic status, often speak in quite different ways. Indeed, these differences may be used, implicitly or explicitly, as indications of membership in different social groups or speech communities. A **speech community** is a group of people who share a set of norms and expectations regarding the use of language. The study of the linguistic features that have social relevance for participants in those speech communities is called "sociolinguistics."

Sociolinguistics

The term **sociolinguistics** is used generally for the study of the relationship between language and society. This is a broad area of investigation that developed through the interaction of linguistics with a number of other academic disciplines. It has strong connections with anthropology through the study of language and culture, and with sociology through the investigation of the role language plays in the organization of social groups and institutions. It is also tied to social psychology, particularly with regard to how attitudes and perceptions are expressed and how in-group and out-group behaviors are identified. We use all these connections when we try to analyze language from a social perspective.

Social dialects

Whereas the traditional study of regional dialects tended to concentrate on the speech of people in rural areas, the study of **social dialects** has been mainly concerned with speakers in towns and cities. In the social study of dialect, it is social class that is mainly used to define groups of speakers as having something in common. The two main groups are generally identified as "middle class," those who have more years of education and perform non-manual work, and "working class," those who have fewer years of education and perform manual work of some kind. So, when we refer to "working-class speech," we are talking about a social dialect. The terms "upper" and "lower" are used to further subdivide the groups, mainly on an economic basis, making "upper-middle-class speech" another type of social dialect or **sociolect**.

As in all dialect studies, only certain features of language use are treated as relevant in the analysis of social dialects. These features are pronunciations, words or structures that are regularly used in one form by working-class speakers and in another form by middle-class speakers. In Edinburgh, Scotland, for example, the word *home* is regularly pronounced as [heɪm], as if rhyming with *name*, among lower-working-class speakers, and as [hom], as if rhyming with *foam*, among middle-class speakers. It's a small difference in pronunciation, but it's an indicator of social status. A more familiar example might be the verb *ain't*, as in *I ain't finished yet*, which is generally used more often in working-class speech than in middle-class speech.

When we look for other examples of language use that might be characteristic of a social dialect, we treat class as the **social variable** and the pronunciation or word as the **linguistic variable**. We can then try to investigate the extent to which there is systematic variation involving the two variables by counting how often speakers in each class use each version of the linguistic variable. This isn't usually an all-or-nothing situation, so studies of social dialects typically report how often speakers in a particular group use a certain form rather than find that only one group or the other uses the form.

Education and occupation

Although the unique circumstances of every life result in each of us having an individual way of speaking, a personal dialect or **idiolect**, we generally tend to sound like others with whom we share similar educational backgrounds and/or occupations.

Among those who leave the educational system at an early age, there is a general pattern of using certain forms that are relatively infrequent in the speech of those who go on to complete college. Expressions such as those contained in *Them boys throwed somethin'* or *It wasn't us what done it* are generally associated with speakers who have spent less time in education. Those who spend more time in the educational system tend to have more features in their spoken language that derive from a lot of time spent with the written language, so that *threw* is more likely than *throwed* and *who* occurs more often than *what* in references to people. The observation that some teacher "talks like a book" is possibly a reflection of an extreme form of this influence from the written language after years in the educational system.

As adults, the outcome of our time in the educational system is usually reflected in our occupation and socio-economic status. The way bank executives, as opposed to window cleaners, talk to each other usually provides linguistic evidence for the significance of these social variables. In the 1960s, sociolinguist William Labov combined elements from place of occupation and socio-economic status by looking at pronunciation differences among salespeople in three New York City department stores (see Labov, 2006). They were Saks Fifth Avenue (with expensive items, upper-middle-class status), Macy's (medium-priced, middle-class status) and Klein's (with cheaper items, working-class status). Labov went into each of these stores and asked salespeople specific questions, such as *Where are the women's shoes?*, in order to elicit answers with the expression *fourth floor*. This expression contains two opportunities for the pronunciation (or not) of **postvocalic** /r/, that is, the /r/ sound after a vowel. Strictly speaking, it is /r/ after a vowel and before a consonant or the end of a word.

In the department stores, there was a regular pattern in the answers. The higher the socio-economic status of the store, the more /r/ sounds were produced, and the lower the status, the fewer /r/ sounds were produced by those who worked there. So, the frequency of occurrence of this linguistic variable (r) could mark the speech samples as upper middle class versus middle class versus working class. Other studies confirmed this regular pattern in the speech of New Yorkers.

In a British study conducted in Reading, about 40 miles west of London, Trudgill (1974) found that the social value associated with the same variable (r) was quite different. Middle-class speakers in Reading pronounced fewer /r/ sounds than working-class speakers. In this particular city, upper-middle-class speakers didn't seem to pronounce postvocalic /r/ at all. They said things like *Oh, that's mahvellous, dahling!*. The results of these two studies are shown in Table 19.1 (from Romaine, 2000).

Table 19.1 Percentages of groups pronouncing postvocalic /r/

Social class	New York City	Reading
upper middle class	32	0
lower middle class	20	28
upper working class	12	44
lower working class	0	49

Social markers

As shown in Table 19.1, the significance of the linguistic variable (r) can be virtually the opposite in terms of social status in two different places, yet in both places the patterns illustrate how the use of this particular speech sound functions as a **social marker**. That is, having this feature occur frequently in your speech (or not) marks you as a member of a particular social group, whether you realize it or not.

There are other pronunciation features that function as social markers. One feature that seems to be a fairly stable indication of lower class and less education, throughout the English-speaking world, is the final pronunciation of *-ing* with [n] rather than [ŋ] at the end of words such as *sitting* and *drinking*. Pronunciations represented by *sittin'* and *drinkin'* are typically associated with working-class speech.

Another social marker is called "[h]-dropping," which makes the words *at* and *hat* sound the same. It occurs at the beginning of words and can result in utterances that sound like *I'm so 'ungry I could eat an 'orse*. In contemporary English, this feature is associated with lower class and less education. It seems to have had a similar association as a social marker for Charles Dickens, writing in the middle of the nineteenth century. He used it as a way of indicating that the character Uriah Heep, in the novel *David Copperfield*, was from a lower class, as in this example (from Mugglestone, 1995).

> *"I am well aware that I am the umblest person going," said Uriah Heep, modestly; " … My mother is likewise a very umble person. We live in a numble abode, Master Copperfield, but we have much to be thankful for. My father's former calling was umble."*

Speech style and style-shifting

In his department store study, Labov included another subtle element that allowed him not only to investigate the type of social stratification illustrated in Table 19.1, but also **speech style** as a social feature of language use. The most basic distinction in speech style is between formal uses and informal uses. Formal style is when we pay more careful attention to how we're speaking and informal style is when we pay less attention. They are sometimes described as "careful style" and "casual style." A change from one to the other by an individual is called **style-shifting**.

When Labov initially asked the salespeople where certain items were, he assumed they were answering in an informal manner. After they answered his question, Labov then pretended not to have heard and said, "Excuse me?" in order to elicit a repetition of the same expression, which was pronounced with more attention to being clear. This was taken as a representative sample of the speaker's more careful style. When speakers repeated the phrase *fourth floor*, the frequency of postvocalic /r/ increased in all groups. The most significant increase in frequency was among the Macy's group. In a finding that has been confirmed in other studies, middle-class speakers are much more likely to shift their style of speaking significantly in the direction of the upper middle class when they are using a careful style.

It is possible to use more elaborate elicitation procedures to create more gradation in the category of style. Asking someone to read a short text out loud will result in more attention to speech than simply asking them to answer some questions in an interview. Asking that same individual to read out loud a list of individual words taken from the text will result in even more careful pronunciation of those words and hence a more formal version of the individual's speech style.

When Labov analyzed the way New Yorkers performed in these elicitation procedures, he found a general overall increase in postvocalic /r/ in all groups as the task required more attention to speech. Among the lower-middle-class speakers, the increase was so great in the pronunciation of the word lists that their frequency of postvocalic /r/ was actually higher than among upper-middle-class speakers. As other studies have confirmed, when speakers in a middle-status group try to use a prestige form associated with a higher-status group in a formal situation, they have a tendency to overuse the form.

Prestige

In discussing style-shifting, we introduced the idea of a "prestige" form as a way of explaining the direction in which certain individuals change their speech. When that change is in the direction of a form that is more frequent in the speech of those perceived to have higher social status, we are dealing with **overt prestige**, or status that is generally recognized as "better" or more positively valued in the larger community.

There is, however, another phenomenon called **covert prestige**. This "hidden" status of a speech style as having positive value may explain why certain groups do not exhibit style-shifting to the same extent as other groups. For example, we might ask why many lower-working-class speakers do not change their speech style from casual to careful as radically as lower-middle-class speakers. The answer may be that they value the features that mark them as members of their social group and consequently avoid changing them in the direction of features associated with another social group. They may value group solidarity (i.e. sounding like those around them) more than upward mobility (i.e. sounding like those above them).

Among younger speakers in the middle class, there is often covert prestige attached to many features of pronunciation and grammar (*I ain't doin' nuttin'* rather than *I'm not doing anything*) that are more often associated with the speech of lower-status groups.

Speech accommodation

As we look more closely at variation in speech style, we can see that it is not only a function of speakers' social class and attention to speech, but it is also influenced by their perception of their listeners. This type of variation is sometimes described in terms of "audience design," but is more generally known as **speech accommodation**, defined as our ability to modify our speech style toward or away from the perceived style of the person(s) we're talking to.

We can adopt a speech style that attempts to reduce social distance, described as **convergence**, and use forms that are similar to those used by the person we're talking to. In the following examples (from Holmes, 2008), a teenage boy is asking to see some holiday photographs. In the first example, he is talking to his friend, and in the second example, he is talking to his friend's mother. The request is essentially the same, but the style is different as the speaker converges with the perceived speech style of the other.

C'mon Tony, gizzalook, gizzalook
Excuse me. Could I have a look at your photos too, Mrs. Hall?

In contrast, when a speech style is used to emphasize social distance between speakers, the process is called **divergence**. We can make our speech style diverge from another's by using forms that are distinctly different. In the third line of the following example, the Scottish teenager shifts to a speech style with features that differ substantially from the first line.

TEENAGER: *I can't do it, sir.*
TEACHER: *Oh, come on. If I can do it, you can too.*
TEENAGER: *Look, I cannae dae it so …*

The sudden divergence in style seems to be triggered not only by a need to add emphasis to his repeated statement, but also by the "We're the same" claim of his teacher. This teenager is using speech style to mark that they are not the same.

Register and jargon

Another influence on speech style that is tied to social identity derives from **register**. A register is a conventional way of using language that is appropriate in a specific context, which may be identified as situational (e.g. in church), occupational (e.g. among lawyers) or topical (e.g. talking about language). We can recognize specific features that occur in the religious register (*Ye shall be blessed by Him in times of tribulation*), the legal register (*The plaintiff is ready to take the witness stand*) and even the linguistics register (*In the morphology of this dialect there are fewer inflectional suffixes*).

One of the defining features of a register is the use of **jargon**, which is special technical vocabulary (e.g. *plaintiff*, *suffix*) associated with a specific area of work or interest. In social terms, jargon helps to create and maintain connections among those who see themselves as "insiders" in some way and to exclude "outsiders." This exclusive effect of specialized jargon, as in the medical register (e.g. *Zanoxyn is a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug for arthritis, bursitis and tendonitis*), often leads to complaints about what may seem like "jargonitis."

Slang

Whereas jargon is specialized vocabulary used by those inside established social groups, often defined by professional status (e.g. legal jargon), **slang** is more typically used among those who are outside established higher-status groups. Slang, or "colloquial speech," describes words or phrases that are used instead of more everyday terms among younger speakers and other groups with special interests. The word *bucks* (for *dollars* or *money*) has been a slang expression for more than a hundred years, but the addition of *mega-* ("a lot of") in *megabucks* is a more recent innovation, along with *dead presidents* (whose pictures are on paper money) and *benjamins* (from Benjamin Franklin, on $100 bills).

Like clothing and music, slang is an aspect of social life that is subject to fashion, especially among adolescents. It can be used by those inside a group who share ideas and attitudes as a way of distinguishing themselves from others. As a marker of group identity during a limited stage of life such as early adolescence, slang expressions can "grow old" rather quickly. Older forms for "really good" such as *groovy*, *hip* and *super* were replaced by *awesome*, *rad* and *wicked* which gave way to *dope*, *kickass* and *phat*. A *hunk* ("physically attractive man") became a *hottie* and instead of something being *the pits* ("really bad"), the next generation thought it was a *bummer* or said, *That sucks!*. The difference in slang use between groups divided into older and younger speakers shows that age is another important factor involved in social variation.

However, the use of slang varies within the younger social group, as illustrated by the use of obscenities or **taboo terms**. Taboo terms are words and phrases that people avoid for reasons related to religion, politeness and prohibited behavior. They are often swear words, typically "bleeped" in public broadcasting (*What the bleep are you doing, you little bleep!*) or "starred" in print (*You stupid f***ing a**hole!*). In a study of the linguistic differences among "Jocks" (higher status) and "Burnouts" (lower status) in Detroit high schools, Eckert (2000) reported the regular use of taboo words among both males and females in the lower-status group. However, among the higher-status group, males used taboo words only with other males, while females didn't seem to use them at all. Social class divisions, at least in the use of slang, are already well established during adolescence.

African American English

In much of the preceding discussion, we have been reviewing research on social variation based mainly on examples from British English and what we might call "European" American English. Labeling one general social variety according to the historical origins of the speakers allows us to put it in contrast with another major variety called **African American English** (**AAE**). Also known as Black English or Ebonics, AAE is a variety used by many (not all) African Americans in many different regions of the USA. It has a number of characteristic features that, taken together, form a distinct set of social markers.

In much the same way as large geographical barriers between groups foster linguistic differences in regional dialects, social barriers such as discrimination and segregation serve to create marked differences between social dialects. In the case of AAE, those different features have often been stigmatized as "bad" language, following a regular pattern whereby the social practices, especially speech, of dominated groups are treated as "abnormal" by those dominant groups who are in charge of defining "normal." Although AAE speakers continue to experience the effects of discrimination, their social dialect often has covert prestige among younger speakers in other social groups, particularly with regard to popular music, and certain features of AAE may be used in expressions of social identity by many who are not African American.

Vernacular language

The form of AAE that has been most studied is usually described as **African American Vernacular English (AAVE)**. The term "vernacular" has been used since the Middle Ages, first to describe local European languages (low prestige) in contrast to Latin (high prestige), then to characterize any non-standard spoken version of a language used by lower status groups. So, the **vernacular** is a general expression for a kind of social dialect, typically spoken by a lower-status group, which is treated as "non-standard" because of marked differences from the "standard" language (see Chapter 18). As the vernacular language of African Americans, AAVE shares a number of features with other non-standard varieties, such as "Chicano English," spoken in some Hispanic American communities. Varieties of what has been called "Asian American English" are also characterized by some of the pronunciation features described in studies of this vernacular.

The sounds of a vernacular

A pervasive phonological feature in AAVE and other English vernaculars is the tendency to reduce final consonant clusters, so that words ending in two consonants (*left hand*) are often pronounced as if there is only one (*lef han*). This can affect the pronunciation of past tense *-ed* forms in certain contexts, with expressions such as *iced tea* and *I passed the test* sounding like *ice tea* and *I pass the tess*. Initial dental consonants (*think, that*) are frequently pronounced as alveolar stops (*tink, dat*), with the result that the definite article (*the*) is heard as [də], as in *You da man!*. Other morphological features, such as possessive *-'s* (*John's girlfriend*) and third person singular *-s* (*she loves him*), are not typically used (*John girlfriend*, *she love him*). Also, when a phrase contains an obvious indication of plural number, the plural *-s* marker (*guys*, *friends*) is usually not included (*two guy*, *one of my friend*).

The grammar of a vernacular

It is typically in aspects of grammar that AAVE and other vernaculars are most stigmatized as being "illogical" or "sloppy." One frequently criticized element is the double negative construction, as in *He don't know nothin* or *I ain't afraid of no ghosts*. Because the negative is expressed twice, these structures have been condemned as "illogical" (since one negative supposedly cancels the other). Yet, this feature of AAVE can be found in many other English dialects and in other languages such as French: *il ne sait rien* (literally, "he not knows nothing"). It was also common in Old English: *Ic naht singan ne cuðe* (literally, "I not sing not could"). There is nothing inherently illogical about these structures, which can extend to multiple negatives, allowing greater emphasis on the negative aspect of the message, as in *He don't never do nothin*.

The "sloppy" criticism focuses on the frequent absence of forms of the verb "to be" (*are*, *is*) in AAVE expressions such as *You crazy* or *She workin now*. It may be more accurate to say that wherever *are* and *is* can be contracted in the casual style of other varieties (*You're*, *She's*), they are not articulated in AAVE. Formal styles of Standard English require *are* and *is* in such expressions, but many regional varieties do not. Nor do many other languages such as Arabic and Russian require forms of "to be" in similar contexts. This feature of AAVE speech can't be "sloppy" any more than it would be "sloppy" in normal Arabic or Russian speech.

While AAVE speakers don't include the auxiliary verb *is* in expressions such as *She workin now*, to describe what is happening currently, they can use *be* (not *is*), as in *She be workin downtown now*, as a way of expressing habitual action. That is, the presence or absence of *be* distinguishes between what is a recurring activity or state and what is currently happening. To talk about a habitual action that started or happened in the past, AAVE uses *bin* (typically stressed), not *was*, as in *She bin workin there*. In effect, the use of habitual *be* or *bin*, and the absence of forms of "to be" in present state expressions, are all consistent features in the grammar of AAVE. The negative versions of these verbs are formed with *don't* (not *doesn't*) and the verb is not used with a contracted negative. So, in AAVE, *She don't be workin* is grammatical, whereas **She doesn't be workin* and **She ben't workin* would be considered ungrammatical.

In this discussion, we have focused on the linguistic features of social dialects. Yet, the groups who use those dialects are not only distinguished by the language they use, but by more general factors such as beliefs and assumptions about the world and their experience of it. This is usually discussed in terms of "culture," the subject of the next chapter.

Study questions

1 How would you define a “speech community”?
2 What is the difference between an idiolect and a sociolect?
3 Why did Labov try to elicit answers with the expression *fourth floor*?
4 In what way can the pronunciation of *-ing* be a social marker?
5 What is meant by a “register”?
6 In AAVE, what is communicated by the use of *be* in *He don’t be smokin now*?

Tasks

A How does “micro-sociolinguistics” differ from “macro-sociolinguistics”?

B In the study of social dialects, what is “the observer’s paradox” and how can it be overcome?

C What is the difference between style-shifting and code-switching?

D What is the origin of the term “Ebonics” and how has its meaning changed?

E Variation in language use according to social status is evident in those languages that have a system of honorifics. What are honorifics and in which languages are they most commonly used?

Using what you discover about honorifics, try to decide which speaker (A or B, C or D) in the following dialogues has superior status within the business organization in which they both work (from Shibatani, 2001: 556).

A: *Konban nomi ni ikoo ka*
(tonight drink to go question)
B: *Ee, iki-masyoo*
(yes, go-honorific)
C: *Konban nomi ni iki-masyoo ka*
(tonight drink to go-honorific question)
D: *Un, ikoo*
(yes, let’s go)

F According to Fought (2003), Chicano English is spoken in the southwestern region of the USA (from Texas to California), mainly by individuals of Mexican-American heritage. Consider the following statements about Chicano English and try to decide whether you agree or disagree with them, providing a reason in each case for your decision.

1 Chicano English is a dialect of American English.
2 Chicano English is another term for “Spanglish.”

3 Chicano English is simply ungrammatical or "broken" English, as exemplified by sentences such as *Everybody knew the Cowboys was gonna win again* and *She don't know Brenda*.
4 Chicano English is the second language learner's English of people from countries where Spanish is spoken.
5 There are no native speakers of Chicano English.

Discussion topics/projects

I According to Brown and Attardo (2005):

> If children move to an area before the age of nine, they are able to "pick up" the local dialect, which their parents do not.

Do you think this statement is true of both regional dialect and social dialect? When and how do you think people develop their social dialects?
(For background reading, see chapter 6 of Brown and Attardo, 2005.)

II From a linguistic point of view, there are no good or bad varieties of a language. However, there is a social process called "language subordination" whereby some varieties are treated as having less value than others. Can you describe how this process works in any social situation you are familiar with?
(For background reading, see Lippi-Green, 1997.)

Further reading

Basic treatments

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