

Chapter 19

The Study of Language by
George Yule

LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL VARIATION

Sociolinguistics: The study of the relationship between language and society.

- This can be done by using research from **anthropology** through the study of language and culture, **sociology** through the role of language in social groups, and **social psychology**.

- The study of **regional dialects** focuses on the speech of people in rural areas, while the study of **social dialects** focuses on speakers in towns and cities.
- **Social Dialect:** Language of a certain group of people from a certain social class.
- **Types of class involved:**
 1. Middle Class
 2. Working Class

Types of Class

1- Middle class: (Upper and lower [economically])

They are people with more years of education performing non-manual work.

2- Working class: (upper & lower)

They've spent few years of education, performing manual work.

- In **studying social dialects**, features of language pronunciation, words and structures are studied.
- Therefore, we can have “upper-middle class speech” which is a type of a **social dialect** or a **sociolect**.
 - **Note:** Each person has a personal dialect or idiolect, but we generally sound like those with **similar** educational backgrounds or occupations.

Labov (1966)

- **Labov** studied **occupation** and **socio-economic status** by looking at the **pronunciation** of **salespeople** in **3 department stores** in **New York, USA**: **Saks**, **Macy's** and **Klein's**.
- He asked questions so that the salespeople answer: **“fourth floor”**.
- This expression contains two opportunities for the pronunciation of **postvocalic /r/**.
 - **i.e.** /r/ after a vowel.

Studies by Labov and Trudgill

Labov found out that: (A study on American English)

○ There was a **regular** pattern:

1- The **higher** the **socio-economic** status, the **more** **/r/** sounds were produced.

2- The **lower** the **socio-economic** status, the **fewer** **/r/** was produced.

○ There was a similar study in reading on **BRITISH ENGLISH** in (England) by **Trudgill** (1974). Results were **Different**.

Trudgill found out that: (A study on British English)

1- **Middle-class** speakers **pronounced** the **postvocalic** **/r/** **fewer than** working-class speakers.

2- **Upper-middle class** speakers **didn't** **pronounce** the **postvocalic /r/** **at all**.

- **Social markers:** Certain speech sounds that define the social group the speaker belongs to.
 - **Examples of social markers:**
 1. Postvocalic /r/.
 2. Pronunciation of –ing [n] (lower class) or [ng].
 3. [h] dropping, associated with lower class and less education.
 - **Example:** Head as /ed/.

- **Speech style: A social feature of language use.**
 1. **Formal: careful style**
 2. **Informal use: casual style**
- We do not talk in one style all the time. We change our speech styles according to the social factors.
 - **Style-shifting: A change from one style to another by an individual.**
 - **Labov** also studied **style-shifting**: After getting an answer **'fourth floor'**, he would ask **'excuse me?'** so that they would **repeat** the answer, which was pronounced with more attention to being clear.

Labov's Conclusion

- When speakers repeated the phrase '**fourth floor**', the frequency of **postvocalic /r/ increased** in **all** groups, especially in the Macy's group (**middle class**).
- In general, **middle-class** speakers are much more likely to **shift in their style** of speaking significantly in the **direction of the upper middle class** when they are using a **careful** style.

- People change their styles when speaking according to the accommodation style:
- **Speech Accommodation:** It is our ability to modify our speech style toward or away from the style of the person we are talking to.
 - 1- **Convergence:** The use of forms that are similar to those of the person we are talking to. It attempts to reduce social distance.
 - 2- **Divergence:** The use of forms that are different from those of the person we are talking to. It attempts to increase social distance.