



19 Language and social variation



When we study language and regional variation, 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 are more likely to be used by some individuals in society and not by 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.

Speech community



- It 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.
- With **sociology** through the investigation of the role language plays in the organization of social groups and institutions.
- With **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.

- **For Example:**

‘Working-class speech’

The terms ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ are used to further subdivide the groups

Education and occupation

- A personal dialect is **idiolect**: an individual way of speaking.

However, 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.
- 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.



Education and occupation



- 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.

Education and occupation

In one of the earliest studies in sociolinguistics, Labov (1966) combined elements from place of occupation and socio-economic status by looking at pronunciation differences among salespeople in three New York City department stores.

They were:

- Saks Fifth Avenue (with expensive items, upper-middle-class status)
- Macy's (medium-priced, middle-class status)
- Klein's (with cheaper items, workingclass 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.

Social markers



- The use of this particular speech sound functions as a **social marker**.
- **For Example:**
- The significance of the linguistic variable (r) in Labove study

Speech style and style-shifting

- In his department store study, Labov included another subtle element that allowed him to investigate not only the type of social stratification, 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**'.
- Change from one to the other by an individual is called **style-shifting**.



Speech style and 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.



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.

Overt prestige



- It is when the change is in the direction of a form that is more frequent in the speech of those perceived to have higher social status, or status that is generally recognized as ‘better’ or more positively valued in the larger community.

Covert prestige



- Not changing the speech style from casual to careful as radically as lower-middle-class speakers.
- It is may be that because 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).



Prestige

- **For Example:**

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

- Our speech style is not only a function of speakers' social class and attention to speech, but it is also influenced by their perception of their listeners.

speech accommodation.



- It is 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 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.

Register

Register.

It 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)
- Topical (e.g. talking about language)

For Example:

- The linguistics register (*In the morphology of this dialect there are fewer inflectional suffixes*).

Jargon



- One of the defining features of a register is the use of **jargon**, which is special technical vocabulary (e.g. *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’.

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.

Slang

- **For Example:**

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.

- 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.



- **For Example:**

- Older forms for 'really good' such as *groovy*, *hip* and *super* were replaced by *awesome*.
- The difference in slang use between groups divided into older and younger speakers shows that **age is another important factor involved in social variation.**

Vernacular language



- It 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 a socially prestigious variety treated as the standard language.

- **For Example:**

African American Vernacular English (AAVE)

The grammar of a vernacular

- **For Example:**

The double negative construction, as in *He don't know nothin* or *I ain't afraid of no ghosts*

