

The Study of Language

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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 [heim], 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. *Zanaxyn 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.

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

Crystal, D. (2003) *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (chapter 21) (2nd edition) Cambridge University Press

Spolsky, B. (1998) *Sociolinguistics* Oxford University Press

More detailed treatments

Holmes, J. (2008) *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (3rd edition) Pearson

Romaine, S. (2000) *Language in Society* (2nd edition) Oxford University Press

Speech style

Eckert, P. and J. Rickford (eds.) (2001) *Style and Sociolinguistic Variation* Cambridge University Press

Speech accommodation and register

Downes, W. (2001) “Register” In R. Mesthrie (ed.) *Concise Encyclopedia of Sociolinguistics* (259–262) Elsevier

Giles, H. (2001) “Speech accommodation” In R. Mesthrie (ed.) *Concise Encyclopedia of Sociolinguistics* (193–197) Elsevier

Slang and adolescent speech

Eble, C. (2004) "Slang" In E. Finegan and J. Rickford (eds.) *Language in the USA* (375–386) Cambridge University Press

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African American English

Green, L. (2002) *African American English* Cambridge University Press

Smitherman, G. (2000) *talkin that talk* Routledge

Other references

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