

Sociolinguistics: What is it?

- Language does not exist in a vacuum.
- Since language is a social phenomenon it is natural to assume that the structure of a society has some impact on the language of the speakers of that society.
- The study of this relationship and of other **extralinguistic factors** is the subfield of **sociolinguistics**.
- We will look in this section at the ways in which languages vary **internally**, and at the factors which create/sustain such variation.
- This will give us a greater understanding of and tolerance for the differences between the speech of individuals and groups.

Dialect

Any variety of a language characterized by systematic differences in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary from other varieties of the same language is called a **dialect**.

Everyone speaks a dialect – in fact, many dialects at different levels. The people who speak a certain dialect are called a **speech community**.

Some of the larger dialectal divisions in the English speaking world: British English vs. American English vs. Australian English (along with others). Northern American English, Southern American English, etc.

(1) *Brit/American: lay by/rest area, petrol/gasoline, lorry/truck, minerals/soft drinks*

A dialect spoken by one individual is called an **idiolect**. Everyone has small differences between the way they talk and the way even their family and best friends talk, creating a “minimal dialect”.

Language Variation

What Factors Enter into Language Variation?

- It's clear that there are many systematic differences between different languages. (English and Japanese, for example).
- By “systematic” we mean describable by rules. But what is not as obvious is that languages also contain many levels of **internal variation**, related to such variables as **age, region, socioeconomic status, group identification**, and others.
- These various dimensions of variation are systematic in the same way as the variation between different languages is.

Accent

- An **accent** is a certain form of a language spoken by a subgroup of speakers of that language which is defined by **phonological features**.
- *Everyone* has an accent, just as *everyone* speaks a dialect. It's not a question of “having” or “not having” an accent or dialect, it's a question of *which* accent or dialect you speak with.
- Note that you can speak the same dialect as someone else while using a different accent (though frequently the two vary together). Thus people from Boston and Brooklyn use about the same dialect, but their accents are radically different.

Speech communities

A **Speech community** is a group of people speaking a common dialect. The group may be defined in terms of **extralinguistic factors**, such as age, region, socioeconomic status, group identification.

It is very rare, however, that a speech community defines a “pure” dialect. There is always some overlap between members of that group and other dialects.

Thus, there is no dialect of English identified with all and only Clevelanders, for example. For this to be so, we would have to assume **communicative isolation**, i.e., that Clevelanders have little to no contact with people from any other city, since this would lead to outside influences on the dialect.

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More examples

Czech & Slovak: Mutually intelligible, different histories. → two languages.

Dutch/German: continuum.

Dutch/Flemish: same language, one spoken in The Netherlands, one in Belgium.

Danish/Swedish: one-way intelligible (Danes can understand Swedes more or less, but not vice-versa.)

Brazilian Portuguese/Spanish: one-way intelligible

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How Do We Tell a Language From a Dialect?

This is not always easy. The clearest definition would seem to be that speakers of the same language can understand each other

→ The Principle of **mutually intelligibility**: If two speakers can understand each other, then they speak two dialects of the same language; if they cannot understand each other, then they speak two different languages.

But this doesn't capture everything. There is a continuum between the two in many cases.

Examples

Chinese: different parts of country mutually unintelligible, but very cohesive cultural history → one language, various dialects.

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What Kinds of Variation Are There in Language?

Languages exhibit internal variation at almost all levels of structure:

• Phonetic:

1. [t,d,n,s,z] are dental in some New York City dialects.
2. Scottish people and some British people have trilled [r].

• Phonological:

1. difference between *caught* and *cot* for some Americans, not others.
2. Standard British English and Bostonian English do not allow V-r-C or V-r-# (park the car)

• Morphological:

1. some rural British English dialects have no genitive marking for nouns. (Tom
2. “hissel” for “himself”, “theirselves” for “themselves”.
3. Appalachian English – different division of weak/strong verbs. (climb - clumb, heat - het)

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• **Syntactic:**

1. done [+aux] : she done washed the dishes already. (southern American English)
2. right (adv) : This is right delicious. (Appalachian English)
3. compound auxiliaries: might could, might would, may can, useta. Function as single constituents.
4. need + past part.: "The crops need watered".

• **Semantic** (Vocabulary Choice)

1. Knock up: British English "wake up by knocking", American English "impregnate"
2. pop, soda pop, coke, soft drink, "dope" in parts of South.
3. car park = parking lot, vest = undershirt (British English)

The Linguistic Viewpoint

- Standard English is just a variety or dialect of English. It cannot even legitimately be considered better than other varieties.
- All languages and all dialects are equally "good" as linguistic systems.
- All varieties of a language are structured, complex, rule-governed systems which can adequately meet the needs of their speakers for communication.
- It follows that value judgment of languages are social rather than linguistic. Attitudes toward non-standard varieties are attitudes which reflect the social structure of the society.

The difference one wishes to capture when labeling dialects as "standard" or "nonstandard" is this: a dialect is "standard" if it fulfills some general guidelines, such as being used in schools, being taught to foreigners learning the language, being used by the media, etc.

Standard Versus Nonstandard Dialects

Standard dialects or language (Standard American English — SAE for example) is a dominant *dialect* used in school, print, mass media, taught to the non-native speakers as a foreign language, and associated with wealth, education, literature, political leadership and high social status.

Misconceptions

Standard English	Non-standard English
<i>good, correct, pure, nice, superior</i>	<i>bad, wrong, ugly, corrupt, inferior</i>

These characteristics all have in common the concept of **prestige**. That is, the standard dialect is the dialect which is associated with those who hold prestige and power in the society it is spoken in.

Reasons for the misconceptions:

The people who speak standard English are usually of high social status, especially in England.

Standard American English

"Standard" dialects are **idealizations**, not actual well-defined dialects of a given language. Nobody actually speaks, for example, Standard American English (SAE). Many people almost speak it.

For the particular case of SAE we are more interested in grammar than we are in accent (pronunciation) features. The reason is social – regional pronunciation variation is not considered in the US to be very important socially (within limits), so people with a large range of accents can still be considered to be speaking the standard dialect. Contrast this with *England*, where societal divisions correspond rather closely to pronunciation.

Examples: Senators, governors, presidents, and other high-ranking government officials are generally considered to be prime examples of SAE, yet they exhibit a huge amount of variation in pronunciation.

Dialectology

- **Dialectology** is the study of **regional dialects**, or dialects defined by geographical regions.
- This was done originally by traveling around a country and asking the people living in various locales what words or phrases they use for particular objects and concepts.
- The most famous American study was performed by Hans Kurath in the second quarter of this century, and covered most of the east 1/4 of the U.S.
- What Kurath (and all dialectologists) looked for were **isoglosses** (**iso**=same **gloss**=speech) – boundaries separating regions of a country which uses different words or constructions to describe the same things.

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Sources of Regional Variation

- Since the US was originally colonized mainly by the British, and since Britain has major variation in its regional dialects, these dialects came to have an effect on the US “linguistic landscape”.
- People from different parts of Britain settled in different parts of the US, planting different “dialect seeds” which later had great impact on the development of US regional dialects.
- **Geographical boundaries** also play a part.

If a group of people are more or less isolated or are prevented from freely mingling with nearby populations due to mountains, rivers, forests, etc., then those populations will develop unique linguistic characteristics which will eventually become distinguishing elements of their dialects.

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- What Kurath found in some parts of the country were that the isoglosses for several unrelated words fell in practically the same locations, forming **bundles of isoglosses**.
- These bundles were significant discoveries, as they indicated the existence of a real correlation between speech patterns and region. These bundles also provided a living linguistic reminder of the patterns of migration of Americans moving Westward.

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Example: Appalachian English (isolated due to mountains). LF p. 316-317 has lots of info **phonological**, **morphological**, and **syntactic** differences.

- In addition to the original British influence Native American languages, Spanish, German, African languages, French and others have had significant effects on the dialects of American English. This leads into the more general topic of **language contact**.

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