

Handout 1: Preliminaries to the study of varieties

Seminar *Native varieties of English beyond the British Isles and North America*, A. McIntyre

1. Basic concepts in linguistic variation

- **Variety/Lect:** any form of a language that is systematically distinct from others (e.g. in terms of lexical, grammatical, phonological features), whereby the definition as a variety is determined by *extralinguistic* criteria (i.e. things outside language: geography, gender, social class, occupations etc.).
- **Variable:** a feature of grammar, phonology or lexis that is different in two varieties. E.g.
 - (1) pronunciation of *dance* with [a] or [ae] in British vs. American varieties.
 - (2) *different from* (e.g. British) vs. *different than* (American)
- Variables are noted in parentheses. E.g. a linguist talking about the distribution of rhotic pronunciation (/r/ at end of syllable) might write “these two varieties differ regarding (r)”.

1.1. Types of varieties (criteria for classifying varieties)

- **Regiolect** (=regional variety) a variety particular to a geographically defined space (see also below on *dialect, language*).
 - Variation between regiolects is also called **regional variation** or **diatopic variation**
- **Sociolect:** of a particular social class (=status defined by wealth, education, job).
 - Linguists speak of *high/low sociolects* WITH NO VALUE JUDGMENTS INTENDED.
 - Sociolectal variation is also called *diastratic* variation.
 - Features specific to a sociolect are **sociolectal/sociolinguistic variables**¹, e.g.:
 - (3) In Australian English *youse* (=plural of *you*) is confined to working classes
 - (4) The form *whom* and the indefinite pronoun *one* are mostly confined to high sociolects.

A. Name two other sociolinguistic variables in English or German.

- **Genderlect:** a variety specific to a gender. Examples of *gender-preferential variables* (so-called, because they are tendencies rather than hard-and-fast rules):
 - Women use more specialised colour terms: *mauve, rose, paisley, herringbone*.
 - Women ask more questions.
 - Women use positive minimal responses (*uhum, yes*) to show they are listening. In men’s speech they are less frequent and indicate agreement, not just attention.
 - Women interrupt less and change the subject less.

- **Idiolect:** the variety of one particular person.

B. Can you name examples of idiolectal variation between members of your family?

- **Age:** Since diachronic change happens constantly, old and young people speak differently. E.g. possessive *have* as an auxiliary is confined to older British speech.

C. Can you name lexical or grammatical age-based variables in German/English?

- **Register:** Variation of language used by the same speaker according to the (extralinguistic) situation. Some ways of subclassifying register are given below.
 - **Jargon:** language associated with specific topics/activities (say biology, tennis, Buddhism, techno). Some linguists reserve *register* for what we call ‘jargon’ here.

¹ The term *sociolinguistic variable* is not confined to sociolectally relevant matters. E.g. the pronunciation of the name for the letter <h> with initial [h] is thought to be characteristic of Catholics in e.g. Ireland and Australia. This is a sociolinguistic, but not a sociolectal variable.

- **Style level:** variation according to social context (e.g. formality of occasion, age/status of addressees). Levels include elevated - formal – informal/colloquial – slang – vulgar. (Some linguists use *register* only for what we call ‘style’ here.)
 - Variables confined to lower style levels (=vernacular):
 - increased use of taboo words (*f*ck*), fewer euphemisms (*pass away*)
 - faster speech; more contracted forms (*it’s, doesn’t*)
 - certain lexemes (*yeah; kick the bucket*).

D. Name three other English expressions characteristic of either high or low style levels.
E. Can you think of cases where a feature could be called either a stylistic variable or a sociolectal variable, depending on the person and/or the context?

- **Speaker relations:** intimate/distant; subordinate/equal. These facts are reflected in address forms (given name/surname, *du/Sie*).

- **Medium/mode:** spoken vs. written.

F. Name two English or German variables that are sensitive to the medium used.
G. How does the medium used affect the choice of style level?
H. What do the following examples tell us about the relation between jargon and style level?
1. a. The final syllable undergoes deletion b. The last syllable gets dropped
2. a. I did not obtain sufficient sodium chloride. b. I didn’t get enough sodium chloride.

1.2. Standard, dialect, language (and related distinctions)

- **Standard varieties** (=standard languages, standards) have the following properties (the first three are definitional):
 - Not region-specific, or specific to larger regions (e.g. *General American*)
 - Standard varieties are more likely to be used in public, official communication (e.g. news broadcasts, politics, courts, education) while non-standard varieties are used in informal situations (e.g. with friends, family).
 - Standard varieties are subject to more *normativisation* (rules about ‘correct’ grammar, pronunciation, spelling enforced by dictionaries, grammars, schools). Consequences:
 - This makes standard languages more stable than local regiolects
 - Standard has more **prestige** (= is seen as intrinsically “better” by non-linguists)
 - Often **stigmatisation** of non-standard varieties, causing problems for speakers of non-standard varieties differing greatly from standard.
 - Standards are often mastered/used only by relatively educated speakers (which may lead to ignorant dismissals of users of some regiolects as “stupid” etc.)
 - Standards often derive historically from prestigious regiolect(s)
 - Often such regiolects are connected with politically / culturally / commercially important places (London, Paris).
 - This socio-cultural importance may help standardisation by attracting people from other regions, resulting in influences from various regiolects.
 - Standard varieties are more likely to be used in the written medium, while non-standard varieties are often not used in writing.
 - Standards are often (thought of as) based on writing (cf. *Sie spricht Schriftdeutsch*)
 - Standards may be exploited to the ends of national cohesion.
- The term **dialect** has different definitions (confusingly):
 - = regiolect (usually opposed to standard variety).
 - = variety (not necessarily regionally defined, cf. expressions like *social dialect, standard dialect*). We will not use the term this way here, but it is quite common.

- Hughes/Trudgill (1996) distinguish *dialect* (variety with particular grammatical or lexical features) from *accent* (variety with particular phonological features), while other linguists don't define *dialect* this narrowly, and may write e.g. *the phonology of the Yorkshire dialect*. We follow the latter use here. **Caveat**: variation in grammar, lexis and phonology are not necessarily dependent on each other. E.g. a British speaker's grammar and lexis may not show region-specific characteristics, but their pronunciation may be regionally coloured.
- The contrast *dialect* vs. *standard* is an instance of a contrast between **H(igh)-varieties** and **L(ow)-varieties**. H-varieties have properties of standard languages, except that an H-variety need not belong to the same language as its corresponding L-varieties. E.g. Norman French vs. Anglo-Saxon in 12th century England.
- **Language vs Dialect**: It is often hard to decide whether two varieties are dialects of the same language or distinct languages.
 - Mutual intelligibility and national borders are not the only relevant aspects.
 - Two dialects associated with different standard languages will often be seen as dialects of those languages, since the standards provide different technical vocabulary, writing systems, TV programmes etc.
 - Dutch and Plattdeutsch dialects thus belong to different languages, even if mutually intelligible. (Likewise for Danish, Norwegian, Swedish dialects.)
 - Swiss German dialects are seen as German dialects (even if many Germans find them as hard to understand as Dutch) because they share more or less the same standard. Similar: Arabic dialects (unified by Standard Arabic).

2. Prestige

- **Prestige**: Some varieties or sociolinguistic variables may have high prestige, i.e. they are regarded as intrinsically 'better' by non-linguists (sources of prestige include a body of respected literature, normative regulations, use by educated speakers...).
- The opposite of a prestige variable/variety is a **stigmatised** one.
- Prestige varieties may or may not be standard varieties.
- **Covert prestige**: use of lower prestige varieties/variables to signal solidarity or honesty.
- **Overt prestige**: use of higher prestige varieties/variables to sound educated, to distance oneself from others.
- **Hypercorrection**: When speakers try to use prestige varieties/variables foreign to their own native varieties, they might *overcorrect*, i.e. use certain variables in ways that native speakers of the prestige variety would never use them:
 - (5) *Politicians whom do not understand economics sufficiently well enough*
 - (6) *bucher* as [batʃə] instead of [botʃə] by speakers of British dialects lacking [ʌ].

3. Terms associated with the use of more than one variety

- **Code Switching**: changing varieties/languages because the situation demands/ enables it. E.g.: dialect speakers code-switch to standard when a foreigner enters room.
- **Code Mixing**: like code switching, but not caused by a change in the situation.
- **Accommodation**: code-switching in order to make one's language intelligible (or not intelligible) to certain people.
- **Diglossia**: The phenomenon whereby speakers in a community use two varieties or languages, a socially 'high' variety (H-variety) and a 'low' one (L-variety, vernacular). The H-variety is learnt in school, is more standardised, is used in official, formal situations, or in writing. E.g. Switzerland (Swiss German dialects vs. Standard German)

4. Myths about dialects (and other varieties)

- A. "The pronunciation in that dialect is a simplified (or bad) version of the correct (=standard) pronunciation." This is incorrect for several reasons, e.g.:
- (1) Children may acquire dialects before hearing the standard language.
 - (2) Dialects often make phonological distinctions not present in the standard language.
 - a. **Standard German** **Leipziger Sächsisch**
eins, zwei, Bein /e:nə/, /tsve:ə/, /be:n/
drei, Wein /drɑ:ə/, /wa:n/
in Leipzig einsteigen /in laipf' amʃta:ʒən/
 - b. Two types of *w*-sounds (some Scottish, Irish, Nth. American dialects [w] (voiced labial-velar approximant) vs. [ɱ] voiceless labial-velar approximant *wine/whine, wet/whet, weather/whether, wail/whale, wear/where, witch/which*)
 - (3) Speakers differ on what sounds are simpler to pronounce.
- B. "That dialect is grammatically simpler than the correct (=standard) language."
 A dialect may lack some grammatical distinctions found in the standard (e.g. since prescriptivists (who are generally against simplification in grammar) do not usually have less influence on dialects than on the standard). But sometimes the situation is reversed:
- (4) *you* (singular) vs. *youse* (plural) (e.g. Irish)
 - (5) *er ertrank* vs. *er war am ertrinken* (*wurde aber gerettet*) (e.g. Cologne)
 - (6) African American Vernacular English:
 - i. *She married* "She is married."
 - ii. *She been married* "She is married and has been for a long time."
 - b. i. *She working* "She is working."
 - ii. *She be working* "She works (habitually, usually)."

C. "That dialect has no grammar". This is a very ignorant version of Myth B. What people mean by this is that some grammatical device (e.g. an affix, a case) present in their own variety is missing in the dialect they are talking about. In point of fact, grammar is the mental ability which all humans have to manipulate lexemes in such a way as to create a structure whose meaning is greater than the sum of the parts. If a dialect had no grammar, it would be unable to make distinctions like the following (which any human language can make):

- (7) *The dog bit the cat.* vs. *The cat bit the dog.*
- (8) *Die Katze biss den Hund.* vs. *Den Hund biss die Katze.*

5. Other concepts useful in discussing varieties

- **Isogloss**: line on map indicating where a particular linguistic feature occurs. Bundles of isoglosses are often understood as major boundaries between dialects.
- **Dialect continuum** a number of distinct non-standard dialects A B C D E... spreading over a geographical area with neighbouring dialects being quite similar (e.g. B & C) but non-neighbouring ones (e.g. B & E) not.

John of Trevisa (1387): "...Mercii [=Mercians], that beeth men of myddel Engelond, as it were parteners of the endes, understondeth bettere the side langages, northerne and southerne, than northerne or southerne understondeth either other."
- The notion *dialect continuum* is also meant to reflect the fact that dialects do not normally have clear boundaries.
- **Barriers and Distance**: Regional-dialect boundaries often coincide with *geographical barriers* (rivers, mountains, etc.); the greater the *geographical distance* between two dialects the more dissimilar they are linguistically. Also: *social* barriers and distance.
- **Traditional dialects**: dialects not significantly affected by contact with a standard language or other dialects/languages. In English, these are assumed only to exist in certain areas of the UK.