

## Handout 2: Preliminaries to the study of synchronic variation and dialects

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### 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). A variety can be defined by *linguistic features* (e.g. rhotic varieties) or *extralinguistic criteria* (e.g. geography, gender, age, social class, etc., or a combination: working class London English).
- **Variable:** a feature of grammar, phonology or lexis that is subject to variation. 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 and variation

- **Regiolect** (=regional variety) a variety particular to a geographically defined space (see also below on the partly related terms *dialect* and *language*). Variation between regiolects is also called **regional variation** or **diatopic variation**.
- **Sociolinguistic variation:** Variation according to social criteria. Often this concerns **sociolects** (varieties associated with a particular social classes, i.e. a status defined by socioeconomic criteria like wealth, education, profession).
  - Linguists speak of *high/low sociolects* WITH NO VALUE JUDGMENTS INTENDED.
  - Sociolectal variation is also called *diastatic* variation (*social strata*=classes).
  - Features specific to a sociolect are **sociolectal/sociolinguistic variables**, 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.
    - (5) In Australian the letter ‘h’ is pronounced [hɛɪtʃ]. This is often said to be characteristic of Roman Catholics. (Since this pronunciation is not confined to particular social classes, (h) would be called a *sociolinguistic* rather than a *sociolectal* variable.)

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 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.
  - Women use more specialised colour terms: *mauve, rose, paisley, herringbone*.
- **Idiolect:** the variety used one individual.

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

- **Age-related variation:** Since diachronic change never ceases, 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:** Variety of language used by the same speaker according to the (extralinguistic, social) 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.
- **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.

- **Ethnolect:** Variety used by (or perceived as typical of) members of particular ethnic or cultural group. Its distinct characteristics are usually the result of contact with other languages (e.g. the native language of a group of immigrants).

#### 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. a text in Standard English might betray the nationality of the writer, but not what town(s) they have lived in).
  - 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, and sometimes by special regulatory authorities that impose legally binding norms). Consequences:
    - Normativisation 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 can have various historical sources. They often **derive historically from prestigious regiolects**. 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 closely associated with **the written medium**, while non-standard varieties are often not used in writing. Hence standards are often thought of as being based on writing (cf. *Sie spricht Schriftdeutsch*).
- Standards may be exploited to the ends of national cohesion.
- **Standard accent** vs. **standard grammar** need not correlate. A speaker might use one but not the other. In English, *General American* and *Received Pronunciation* are standard accents.
- The contrast *non-standard* 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 12<sup>th</sup> century England.
- The term **dialect** is used in more than one sense by linguists:
  - =non-standard regiolect (i.e. the sense of the term used by non-linguists)
  - =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*.
- **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 connected to different standard languages might be seen as belonging to separate languages, since the standards provide different technical vocabulary, writing systems, TV shows etc. Examples:
    - o Dutch and Plattdeutsch thus belong to different languages, even if mutually intelligible. Similar: Danish, Norwegian, Swedish dialects.
    - o 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).
  - Sometimes ideological factors or feelings of group identity can influence lay decisions about whether two varieties belong to the same language. Examples:
    - o Some speakers of African American Vernacular English say it is not a dialect of English, but a separate language (called *Ebonics*).
    - o Political boundaries might be taken as criteria: "A language is a dialect with an army and a navy." (Max Weinreich)

## 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 *hypercorrect/overcorrect*, i.e. use certain variables in ways that native speakers of the prestige variety would never use them:

(6) *Politicians whom do not understand economics sufficiently well enough*

(7) *butcher* as [bʌtʃə] instead of [bʊtʃə] 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

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:nʊ/, /tsve:ə/, /be:n/  
*drei, Wein*      /drɛrə/, /va:n/  
*in Leipzig einsteigen*      /ɪn laipf amʃtaɪʃən/
  - b. Two types of *w*-sounds (some Scottish, Irish, Nth. American dialects [w] (voiced labial-velar approximant) vs. [ɹ] voiceless labial-velar approximant *wine/whine, wet/whet, weather/whether, wall/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:
  - a. 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.*