

Language and Dialect

For many people there can be no confusion at all about what language they speak. For example, they are Chinese, Japanese, or Korean and they speak Chinese, Japanese, and Korean respectively. It is as simple as that; language and ethnicity are virtually synonymous (Coulmas, 1999). A Chinese may be surprised to find that another person who appears to be Chinese does not speak Chinese, and some Japanese have gone so far as to claim not to be able to understand Caucasians who speak fluent Japanese. Just as such a strong connection between language and ethnicity may prove to be invaluable in nation-building, it can also be fraught with problems when individuals and groups seek to realize some other identity, e.g., to be both Chinese and American, or to be Canadian rather than Korean-Canadian. As we will see (p. 368), many Americans seem particularly reluctant to equate language with ethnicity in their own case: although they regard English as the 'natural' language of Americans, they do not consider American to be an ethnic label. The results may be the same; only the reasons differ.

Most speakers can give a name to whatever it is they speak. On occasion, some of these names may appear to be strange to those who take a scientific interest in languages, but we should remember that human naming practices often have a large 'unscientific' component to them. Census-takers in India find themselves confronted with a wide array of language names when they ask people what language or languages they speak. Names are not only ascribed by region, which is what we might expect, but sometimes also by caste, religion, village, and so on. Moreover, they can change from census to census as the political and social climate of the country changes.

While people do usually know what language they speak, they may not always lay claim to be fully qualified speakers of that language. They may experience difficulty in deciding whether what they speak should be called a *language* proper or merely a *dialect* of some language. Such indecision is not surprising: exactly how do you decide what is a language and what is a dialect of a language? What

criteria can you possibly use to determine that, whereas variety X is a language, variety Y is only a dialect of a language? What are the essential differences between a language and a dialect?

Haugen (1966a) has pointed out that *language* and *dialect* are ambiguous terms. Ordinary people use these terms quite freely in speech; for them a dialect is almost certainly no more than a local non-prestigious (therefore powerless) variety of a real language. In contrast, scholars often experience considerable difficulty in deciding whether one term should be used rather than the other in certain situations. As Haugen says, the terms 'represent a simple dichotomy in a situation that is almost infinitely complex.' He points out that the confusion goes back to the Ancient Greeks. The Greek language that we associate with Ancient Greece was actually a group of distinct local varieties (Ionic, Doric, and Attic) descended by divergence from a common spoken source with each variety having its own literary traditions and uses, e.g., Ionic for history, Doric for choral and lyric works, and Attic for tragedy. Later, Athenian Greek, the *koiné* – or 'common' language – became the norm for the spoken language as the various spoken varieties converged on the dialect of the major cultural and administrative center. Haugen points out (p. 923) that the Greek situation has provided the model for all later usages of the two terms with the resulting ambiguity. *Language* can be used to refer either to a single linguistic norm or to a group of related norms, and *dialect* to refer to one of the norms.

The situation is further confused by the distinction the French make between *un dialecte* and *un patois*. The former is a regional variety of a language that has an associated literary tradition, whereas the latter is a regional variety that lacks such a literary tradition. Therefore *patois* tends to be used pejoratively; it is regarded as something less than a dialect because of its lack of an associated literature. Even a language like Breton, a Celtic language still spoken in parts of Brittany, is called a *patois* because of its lack of a strong literary tradition and the fact that it is not some country's language. However, *dialecte* in French, like *Dialekt* in German, cannot be used in connection with the standard language, i.e., no speaker of French considers Standard French to be a dialect of French. In contrast, it is not uncommon to find references to Standard English being a dialect – admittedly a very important one – of English.

Haugen points out that, while speakers of English have never seriously adopted *patois* as a term to be used in the description of language, they have tried to employ both *language* and *dialect* in a number of conflicting senses. *Dialect* is used both for local varieties of English, e.g., Yorkshire dialect, and for various types of informal, lower-class, or rural speech. 'In general usage it therefore remains quite undefined whether such dialects are part of the "language" or not. In fact, the dialect is often thought of as standing outside the language. . . . As a social norm, then, a dialect is a language that is excluded from polite society' (pp. 924–5). It is often equivalent to *nonstandard* or even *substandard*, when such terms are applied to language, and can connote various degrees of inferiority, with that connotation of inferiority carried over to those who speak a dialect.

We can observe too that questions such as 'Which language do you speak?' or 'Which dialect do you speak?' may be answered quite differently by people

who appear to speak in an identical manner. As Gumperz (1982a, p. 20) has pointed out, many regions of the world provide plenty of evidence for what he calls ‘a bewildering array of language and dialect divisions.’ He adds: ‘socio-historical factors play a crucial role in determining boundaries. Hindi and Urdu in India, Serbian and Croatian in Yugoslavia [of that date], Fanti and Twi in West Africa, Bokmål and Nynorsk in Norway, Kechwa and Aimara in Peru, to name just a few, are recognized as discrete languages both popularly and in law, yet they are almost identical at the level of grammar. On the other hand, the literary and colloquial forms of Arabic used in Iraq, Morocco, and Egypt, or the Welsh of North and South Wales, the local dialects of Rajasthan and Bihar in North India are grammatically quite separate, yet only one language is recognized in each case.’

Standardization refers to the process by which a language has been codified in some way. That process usually involves the development of such things as grammars, spelling books, and dictionaries, and possibly a literature. We can often associate specific items or events with standardization, e.g., Wycliffe’s and Luther’s translations of the Bible into English and German, respectively, Caxton’s establishment of printing in England, and Dr Johnson’s dictionary of English published in 1755. Standardization also requires that a measure of agreement be achieved about what is in the language and what is not. Once we have such

a codification of the language we tend to see it as almost inevitable, the result of some process come to fruition, one that has also reached a fixed end point. Change, therefore, should be resisted since it can only undo what has been done so laboriously. Milroy (2001, p. 537) characterizes the resulting ideology as follows: ‘The canonical form of the language is a precious inheritance that has been built up over the generations, not by the millions of native speakers, but by a select few who have lavished loving care upon it, polishing, refining, and enriching it until it has become a fine instrument of expression (often these are thought to be literary figures, such as Shakespeare). This is a view held by people in many walks of life, including plumbers, politicians and professors of literature. It is believed that if the canonical variety is not universally supported and protected, the language will inevitably decline and decay.’

Once a language is standardized it becomes possible to teach it in a deliberate manner. It takes on ideological dimensions – social, cultural, and sometimes political – beyond the purely linguistic ones. In Fairclough’s words (2001, p. 47) it becomes ‘part of a much wider process of economic, political and cultural unification . . . of great . . . importance in the establishment of nationhood, and the nation-state is the favoured form of capitalism.’ According to these criteria, both English and French are quite obviously standardized, Italian somewhat less so, and the variety known as African American Vernacular English (see chapter 14) not at all.

Haugen (1966a) has indicated certain steps that must be followed if one variety of a language is to become the standard for that language. In addition to what he calls the 'formal' matters of codification and elaboration, the former referring to the development of such things as grammars and dictionaries and the latter referring to the use of the standard in such areas as literature, the courts, education, administration, and commerce, Haugen says there are important matters to do with 'function.' For example, a norm must be selected and accepted because neither codification nor elaboration is likely to proceed very far if the community cannot agree on some kind of model to act as a norm. That norm is also likely to be – or to become – an idealized norm, one that users of the language are asked to aspire to rather than one that actually accords with their observed behavior.

Selection of the norm may prove difficult because choosing one vernacular as a norm means favoring those who speak that variety. It also diminishes all the other varieties and possible competing norms, and those who use those varieties. The chosen norm inevitably becomes associated with power and the rejected alternatives with lack of power. Not surprisingly, it usually happens that a variety associated with an elite is chosen. Attitudes are all-important, however. A group that feels intense solidarity may be willing to overcome great linguistic differences in establishing a norm, whereas one that does not have this feeling may be unable to overcome relatively small differences and be unable to agree on a single variety and norm. Serbs and Croats were never able to agree on a norm, particularly as other differences reinforced linguistic ones. In contrast, we can see how Indonesia and Malaysia are looking for ways to reduce the differences between their languages, with their common Islamic bond a strong incentive.

The standardization process itself performs a variety of functions (Mathiot and Garvin, 1975). It unifies individuals and groups within a larger community

while at the same time separating the community that results from other communities. Therefore, it can be employed to reflect and symbolize some kind of identity: regional, social, ethnic, or religious. A standardized variety can also be used to give prestige to speakers, marking off those who employ it from those who do not, i.e., those who continue to speak a nonstandard variety. It can therefore serve as a kind of goal for those who have somewhat different norms; Standard English and Standard French are such goals for many whose norms are dialects of these languages. However, as we will see (particularly in chapters 6–8), these goals are not always pursued and may even be resisted.

It still may not be at all easy for us to define *Standard English* because of a failure to agree about the norm or norms that should apply. For example, Trudgill (1995, pp. 5–6) defines Standard English as follows (note his use of ‘usually’ and ‘normally’ in this definition):

Standard English is that variety of English which is usually used in print, and which is normally taught in schools and to non-native speakers learning the language. It is also the variety which is normally spoken by educated people and used in news broadcasts and other similar situations. The difference between standard and nonstandard, it should be noted, has nothing in principle to do with differences between formal and colloquial language, or with concepts such as ‘bad language.’ Standard English has colloquial as well as formal variants, and Standard English speakers swear as much as others.

Historically, the standard variety of English is based on the dialect of English that developed after the Norman Conquest resulted in the permanent removal of the Court from Winchester to London. This dialect became the one preferred by the educated, and it was developed and promoted as a model, or norm, for wider and wider segments of society. It was also the norm that was carried overseas, but not one unaffected by such export. Today, Standard English is codified to the extent that the grammar and vocabulary of English are much the same everywhere in the world: variation among local standards is really quite minor, being differences of ‘flavor’ rather than of ‘substance,’ so that the Singapore, South African, and Irish varieties are really very little different from one another so far as grammar and vocabulary are concerned. Indeed, Standard English is so powerful that it exerts a tremendous pressure on all local varieties, to the extent that many of the long-established dialects of England and the Lowlands English of Scotland have lost much of their vigor. There is considerable pressure on them to converge toward the standard. This latter situation is not unique to English: it is also true in other countries in which processes of standardization are under way. It does, however, sometimes create problems for speakers who try to strike some kind of compromise between local norms and national, even supranational, ones.

Governments sometimes very deliberately involve themselves in the standardization process by establishing official bodies of one kind or another to regulate language matters or to encourage changes felt to be desirable. One of the most famous examples of an official body established to promote the language of a country was Richelieu’s establishment of the Académie Française in 1635. Founded

at a time when a variety of languages existed in France, when literacy was confined to a very few, and when there was little national consciousness, the Académie Française faced an unenviable task: the codification of French spelling, vocabulary, and grammar. Its goal was to fashion and reinforce French nationality, a most important task considering that, even two centuries later in the early nineteenth century, the French of Paris was virtually unknown in many parts of the country, particularly in the south. Similar attempts to found academies in England and the United States for the same purpose met with no success, individual dictionary-makers and grammar-writers having performed much the same function for English. Since both French and English are today highly standardized, one might question whether such academies serve a useful purpose, yet it is difficult to imagine France without the Académie Française: it undoubtedly has had a considerable influence on the French people and perhaps on their language.

Standardization is sometimes deliberately undertaken quite rapidly for political reasons. In the nineteenth century Finns developed their spoken language to make it serve a complete set of functions. They needed a standardized language to assert their independence from both Swedes and Russians. They succeeded in their task so that now the Finnish language has become a strong force in the nation's political life and a strong marker of Finnish identity among Germanic tongues on the one side and Slavic tongues on the other. In the twentieth century the Turks under Atatürk were likewise successful in their attempt to both standardize and 'modernize' Turkish. Today, we can see similar attempts at rapid standardization in countries such as India (Hindi), Israel (Hebrew), Papua New Guinea (Tok Pisin), Indonesia (Bahasa Indonesia), and Tanzania (Swahili). In each case a language or a variety of a language had to be selected, developed in its resources and functions, and finally accepted by the larger society. As we have seen, standardization is an ideological matter. Williams (1992, p. 146) calls it 'a sociopolitical process involving the legitimisation and institutionalisation of a language variety as a feature of sanctioning of that variety as socially preferable.' It creates a preferred variety of a language, which then becomes the winner in a struggle for dominance. The dispreferred varieties are losers.

The standardization process is also obviously one that attempts either to reduce or to eliminate diversity and variety. However, there may well be a sense in which such diversity and variety are 'natural' to all languages, assuring them of their vitality and enabling them to change (see chapter 8). To that extent, standardization imposes a strain on languages or, if not on the languages themselves, on those who take on the task of standardization. That may be one of the reasons why various national academies have had so many difficulties in their work: they are essentially in a no-win situation, always trying to 'fix' the consequences of changes that they cannot prevent, and continually being compelled to issue new pronouncements on linguistic matters. Unfortunately, those who think you can standardize and 'fix' a language for all time are often quite influential. They often find ready access to the media, there to bewail the fact that English, for example, is becoming 'degenerate' and 'corrupt,' and to advise us to return to what they regard as a more perfect past. They may also resist what they consider to be 'dangerous' innovations, e.g., the translation of a sacred book into a modern idiom or the issue of a new dictionary. Since the existence of internal variation is one aspect of language and the fact that all languages keep changing is another, we cannot be too sympathetic to such views.

The Study of Language

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Introduction

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."

The standard language

When we talked about the words and structures of a language in earlier chapters, we were concentrating on the features of only one variety, usually called the [standard language](#). This is actually an idealized variety, because it has no specific region. It is the variety associated with administrative, commercial and educational centers, regardless of region. If we think of Standard English, it is the version we believe is found in printed English in newspapers and books, is widely used in the mass media and is taught in most schools. It is the variety we normally try to teach to those who want to learn English as a second or foreign language. It is clearly associated with education and broadcasting in public contexts and is more easily described in terms of the written language (i.e. vocabulary, spelling, grammar) than the spoken language. If we are thinking of that general variety used in public broadcasting in the United States, we can refer more specifically to Standard American English or, in Britain, to Standard British English. In other parts of the world, we can talk about other recognized varieties such as Standard Australian English, Standard Canadian English or Standard Indian English.

Accent and dialect

Whether we think we speak a standard variety of English or not, we all speak with an **accent**. It is a myth that some speakers have accents while others do not. We might feel that some speakers have very distinct or easily recognized types of accent while others may have more subtle or less noticeable accents, but every language-user speaks with an accent. Technically, the term “accent” is restricted to the description of aspects of pronunciation that identify where an individual speaker is from, regionally or socially. It is different from the term **dialect**, which is used to describe features of grammar and vocabulary as well as aspects of pronunciation.

We recognize that the sentence You don’t know what you’re talking about will generally “look” the same whether spoken with an American accent or a Scottish accent. Both speakers will be using forms associated with Standard English, but have different pronunciations. However, this next sentence – Ye dinnae ken whit yer haverin’ about – has the same meaning as the first, but has been written out in an approximation of what a person who speaks one dialect of Scottish English might say. There are differences in pronunciation (e.g. whit, about), but there are also examples of different vocabulary (e.g. ken, haverin’) and a different grammatical form (dinnae). While differences in vocabulary are often easily recognized, dialect variations in the meaning of grammatical constructions are less frequently documented.

Dialectology

Despite occasional difficulties, there is a general impression of mutual intelligibility among many speakers of different dialects of English. This is one of the criteria used in the study of dialects, or **dialectology**, to distinguish between two different dialects of the same language (whose speakers can usually understand each other) and two different languages (whose speakers can’t usually understand each other). This is not the only, or the most reliable, way of identifying dialects, but it is helpful in establishing the fact that each different dialect, like each language, is equally worthy of analysis. It is important to recognize, from a linguistic point of view, that none of the varieties of a language is inherently “better” than any other. They are simply different. From a social point of view, however, some varieties do become more prestigious. In fact, the variety that develops as the standard language has usually been one socially prestigious dialect, originally associated with a center of economic and political power (e.g. London for British English and Paris for French). Yet, there always continue to be other varieties of a language spoken in different regions.

Regional dialects

The existence of different regional dialects is widely recognized and often the source of some humor for those living in different regions. In the United States, people from the Brooklyn area of New York may joke about a Southerner's definition of sex by telling you that sex is fo' less than tin, in their best imitation of someone from the Southern states. In return, Southerners can wonder aloud about what a tree guy is in Brooklyn, since they have heard Brooklyn speakers refer to doze tree guys. Some regional dialects clearly have stereotyped pronunciations associated with them. Going beyond stereotypes, those involved in the serious investigation of regional dialects have devoted a lot of survey research to the identification of consistent features of speech found in one geographical area compared to another. These dialect surveys often involve painstaking attention to detail and tend to operate with very specific criteria in identifying acceptable informants. After all, it is important to know if the person whose speech you are recording really is a typical representative of the region's dialect. Consequently, the informants in the major dialect surveys of the twentieth century tended to be **NORMS** or "non-mobile, older, rural, male speakers." Such speakers were selected because it was believed that they were less likely to have influences from outside the region in their speech. One unfortunate consequence of using such criteria is that the resulting dialect description tends to be more accurate of a period well before the time of investigation. Nevertheless, the detailed information obtained has provided the basis for a number of Linguistic Atlases of whole countries (e.g. England) and regions (e.g. the Upper Midwest area of the United States).

Isoglosses and dialect boundaries

We can look at some examples of regional variation found in a survey that resulted in the Linguistic Atlas of the Upper Midwest of the United States. One of the aims of a survey of this type is to find a number of significant differences in the speech of those living in different areas and to be able to chart where the boundaries are, in dialect terms, between those areas. If it is found, for example, that the vast majority of informants in one area say they carry things home from the store in a paper bag while the majority in another area say they use a paper sack, then it is usually possible to draw a line across a map separating the two areas, as shown on the accompanying illustration. This line is called an **isogloss** and represents a boundary between the areas with regard to that one particular linguistic item. If a very similar distribution is found for another two items, such as a preference for pail to the north and bucket to the south, then another isogloss, probably overlapping the first, can be drawn on the map. When a number of isoglosses come together in this way, a more solid line, indicating a **dialect boundary**, can be

drawn. In the accompanying illustration, a small circle indicates where paper bag was used and a plus sign shows where paper sack was used. The broken line between

The dialect continuum

Another note of caution is required with regard to dialect boundaries. The drawing of isoglosses and dialect boundaries is quite useful in establishing a broad view of regional dialects, but it tends to obscure the fact that, at most dialect boundary areas, one dialect or language variety merges into another. Keeping this in mind, we can view regional variation as existing along a **dialect continuum** rather than as having sharp breaks from one region to the next. A very similar type of continuum can occur with related languages existing on either side of a political border. As you travel from Holland into Germany, you will find concentrations of Dutch speakers giving way to areas near the border where “Dutch” may sound more like “Deutsch” because the Dutch dialects and the German dialects are less clearly differentiated. Then, as you travel into Germany, greater concentrations of distinctly German speakers occur. Speakers, who move back and forth across this border area, using different varieties with some ease, may be described as **bidialectal** (i.e. “speaking two dialects”). Most of us grow up with some form of bidialectalism, speaking one dialect “in the street” among family and friends, and having to learn another dialect “in school.” However, in some places, there are different languages used in the street and in school. When we talk about people knowing two distinct languages, we describe them as **bilingual**.

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 threwed 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.

Social markers

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 workingclass 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 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

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. Zanoxyn 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.

Vernacular language

The form of AAE that has been most studied is usually described as **African American Vernacular English (AAVE)**. The term “vernacular” has been used since the Middle Ages, first to describe local European languages (low prestige) in contrast to Latin (high prestige), then to

characterize any non-standard spoken version of a language used by lower status groups. So, the **vernacular** 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 the “standard” language (see **Chapter 18**). As the vernacular language of African Americans, AAVE shares a number of features with other nonstandard varieties, such as “Chicano English,” spoken in some Hispanic American communities. Varieties of what has been called “Asian American English” are also characterized by some of the pronunciation features described in studies of this vernacular.

The sounds of a vernacular

A pervasive phonological feature in AAVE and other English vernaculars is the tendency to reduce final consonant clusters, so that words ending in two consonants (left hand) are often pronounced as if there is only one (lef han). This can affect the pronunciation of past tense -ed forms in certain contexts, with expressions such as iced tea and I passed the test sounding like ice tea and I pass the tess. Initial dental consonants (think, that) are frequently pronounced as alveolar stops (tink, dat), with the result that the definite article (the) is heard as [də], as in You da man!. Other morphological features, such as possessive -’s (John’s girlfriend) and third person singular -s (she loves him), are not typically used (John girlfriend, she love him). Also, when a phrase contains an obvious indication of plural number, the plural –s marker (guys, friends) is usually not included (two guy, one of my friend).

The grammar of a vernacular

It is typically in aspects of grammar that AAVE and other vernaculars are most stigmatized as being “illogical” or “sloppy.” One frequently criticized element is the double negative construction, as in He don’t know nothin or I ain’t afraid of no ghosts. Because the negative is expressed twice, these structures have been condemned as “illogical” (since one negative supposedly cancels the other). Yet, this feature of AAVE can be found in many other English dialects and in other languages such as French: *il ne sait rien* (literally, “he not knows nothing”). It was also common in Old English: *Ic naht singan ne cuðe* (literally, “I not sing not could”). There is nothing inherently illogical about these structures, which can extend to multiple negatives, allowing greater emphasis on the negative aspect of the message, as in He don’t never do nothin. The “sloppy” criticism focuses on the frequent absence of forms of the verb “to be” (are, is) in AAVE expressions such as You crazy or She workin now. It may be more

accurate to say that wherever are and is can be contracted in the casual style of other varieties (You're, She's), they are not articulated in AAVE. Formal styles of Standard English require are and is in such expressions, but many regional varieties do not. Nor do many other languages such as Arabic and Russian require forms of "to be" in similar contexts. This feature of AAVE speech can't be "sloppy" any more than it would be "sloppy" in normal Arabic or Russian speech. While AAVE speakers don't include the auxiliary verb is in expressions such as She workin now, to describe what is happening currently, they can use be (not is), as in She be workin downtown now, as a way of expressing habitual action. That is, the presence or absence of be distinguishes between what is a recurring activity or state and what is currently happening. To talk about a habitual action that started or happened in the past, AAVE uses bin (typically stressed), not was, as in She bin workin there. In effect, the use of habitual be or bin, and the absence of forms of "to be" in present state expressions, are all consistent features in the grammar of AAVE. The negative versions of these verbs are formed with don't (not doesn't) and the verb is not used with a contracted negative. So, in AAVE, She don't be workin is grammatical, whereas *She doesn't be workin and *She ben't workin would be considered ungrammatical. In this discussion, we have focused on the linguistic features of social dialects. Yet, the groups who use those dialects are not only distinguished by the language they use, but by more general factors such as beliefs and assumptions about the world and their experience of it. This is usually discussed in terms of "culture,"