

Week 2: Language Variation and Dialects

An Advanced Overview

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- 1 Language Variation: The Core of Sociolinguistics
- 2 Dialectology: From Geography to Society
- 3 Models of Language Change
- 4 Social Significance of Dialect Differences
- 5 Discussion and Application

Levels of Variation

- **Phonological/Phonetic Variation:** The classic level of analysis. Includes variation in the realization of phonemes (allophones) and prosodic features (intonation, stress).
- **Lexical Variation:** Differences in vocabulary. This can reflect historical settlement patterns (e.g., *pail* vs. *bucket*) or modern slang.
- **Morphological Variation:** Differences in word formation (e.g., past tense of *dive*: *dived* vs. *dove*).
- **Syntactic Variation:** Differences in sentence structure (e.g., "needs washed" vs. "needs to be washed").
- **Discourse-Pragmatic Variation:** Variation in how language is used in interaction (e.g., use of discourse markers like *like* or *y'know*).

Key Concepts: Variable, Variant, and Constraint

- A **linguistic variable** is a linguistic unit with two or more variants (e.g., the variable (ing) has the variants [] and [n]).
- The choice of variant is not random but is **constrained** by linguistic and social factors.
- **Linguistic constraints** include the phonetic environment of the variable.
- **Social constraints** include factors like age, gender, social class, and ethnicity.

Traditional vs. Modern Dialectology

Traditional Dialectology

- Focused on rural, geographically isolated areas.
- Aimed to document "pure" dialects before they disappeared.
- Often used older, male informants (NORMs: Non-mobile, Older, Rural, Males).
- Key method: Dialect atlases (e.g., *Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada*).

Modern Dialectology (Sociolinguistics)

- Focuses on urban areas and includes all social groups.
- Interested in ongoing language change.
- Uses quantitative methods to analyze variation.
- Recognizes that social factors are as important as geography.

Case Study: The Northern Cities Vowel Shift

- A chain shift in the vowel sounds of speakers in the Inland North region of the United States (e.g., Chicago, Detroit, Buffalo).
- The shift involves the fronting of /ɔ/ to /æ/, the raising and fronting of /æ/ to /i/, and so on.
- This is a major feature of the Inland Northern American English dialect and a classic example of a change in progress.
- The shift is most advanced among working-class women.

- The study of folk perceptions of language variation.
- Asks non-linguists to draw dialect boundaries on a map and to label the regions.
- Reveals people's stereotypes and attitudes about different dialects.
- Dennis Preston is a key figure in this field.

The Wave Theory vs. The Tree Model

- **Wave Theory (Schmidt):** Language changes spread gradually from a center, with decreasing effects over distance. Good for modeling contact-induced change.
- **Tree Model (Schleicher):** Represents language divergence from a common ancestor. Good for modeling genetic relationships, but poor at handling dialect continua and borrowing.
- These models are not mutually exclusive and can be used to explain different aspects of language change.

Lexical Diffusion (Wang)

- Argues that sound change does not affect all words at the same time.
- Instead, it spreads gradually through the lexicon, from word to word.
- This can lead to a period of synchronic variation, where both the old and new forms coexist.
- The spread of the change can be affected by factors like word frequency.

Gravity Model (Trudgill)

- A modification of the wave theory.
- Predicts that linguistic innovations are more likely to spread between large, populous centers than to smaller, more remote areas.
- The influence of one urban center on another is proportional to their populations and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them.

Language Attitudes and Ideologies

- **Language attitudes:** The feelings and beliefs people have about their own and others' language varieties.
- **Language ideologies:** The beliefs about language that are used to justify social and political arrangements. Often serve the interests of a dominant group.
- The "standard language ideology" holds that there is one correct, superior form of a language.

Case Study: African American Vernacular English (AAVE)

- A rule-governed, systematic variety of English spoken by many African Americans.
- Often stigmatized and misunderstood by the mainstream.
- Key features include copula deletion ("he tall"), habitual "be" ("he be working"), and negative concord ("he don't know nothing").
- The 1996 Oakland Ebonics controversy brought national attention to the educational implications of AAVE.

Case Study: Mock Spanish

- The use of Spanish-like phrases and words in a humorous or derogatory way by non-Spanish speakers.
- Jane Hill argues that this is a form of covert racism.
- It creates a congenial, "cool" persona for the speaker while simultaneously denigrating Spanish speakers.

Advanced Discussion Questions

- ① How can we distinguish between a "dialect" and a "language"? What role do social and political factors play in this distinction?
- ② Peter Trudgill has argued that the concept of "idiolect" is not useful for sociolinguistics. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- ③ How might a sociolinguist use the gravity model to predict the spread of a new slang term?
- ④ Is it possible to have a society without a standard language ideology? What would such a society look like?

Questions?

Conclusion

- Language variation is not random but is systematically structured by both linguistic and social factors.
- The study of dialects reveals much about social history, social structure, and the cognitive processes of language change.
- Understanding the social significance of variation is crucial for addressing issues of inequality and discrimination.