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21 Language, society and culture

When the anchorwoman Connie Chung was asked a fairly insensitive question by a new co-worker about the relationship between her position as an Asian-American woman and her rapid rise in the field, her response was both pointed and humorous: "I pointed to the senior vice president and announced, 'Bill likes the way I do his shirts.'" **Regina Barreca (1991)**

We have already noted that the way you speak may provide clues, in terms of regional accent or dialect, to where you spent most of your early life. However, your speech may also contain a number of features which are unrelated to regional variation. Two people growing up in the same geographical area, at the same time, may speak differently because of a number of social factors. It is important not to overlook this social aspect of language because, in many ways, speech is a form of social identity and is used, consciously or unconsciously, to indicate membership of different social groups or different speech communities. A speech community is a group of people who share a set of norms, rules and expectations regarding the use of language. Investigating language from this perspective is known as **Sociolinguistics**.

Sociolinguistics

In general terms, sociolinguistics deals with the inter-relationships between language and society. It has strong connections to anthropology, through the investigation of language and culture, and to sociology, through the crucial role that 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. All these connections are needed if we are to make sense of what might be described as 'social dialects'.

Social dialects

In modern studies of language variation, a great deal of care is taken to document, usually via questionnaires, certain details of the social backgrounds of speakers. It is as a result of taking such details into account that we have been able to make a study of **social dialects**, which are varieties of language used by groups defined according to class, education, age, sex, and a number of other social parameters.

Before exploring these factors in detail, it is important to draw attention to one particular interaction between social values and language use. The concept of 'prestige', as found in discussions about language in use, is typically understood in terms of **overt prestige**, that is, the generally recognized 'better' or positively valued ways of speaking in social communities. There is, however, an important phenomenon called **covert prestige**. This 'hidden' type of positive value is often attached to non-standard forms and expressions by certain sub-groups. Members of these sub-groups may place much higher value on the use of certain non-standard forms as markers of social solidarity. For example, schoolboys everywhere seem to attach covert prestige to forms of 'bad' language (swearing and 'tough' talk) that are not similarly valued in the larger community. It is, nevertheless, within the larger community that norms and expectations are typically established.

Social class and education

Two obvious factors in the investigation of social dialect are social class and education. In some dialect surveys, it has been found that, among those leaving the educational system at an early age, there is a greater tendency to use forms which are relatively infrequent in the speech of those who go on to college. Expressions such as those contained in *Them boys throwed somethin'* are much more common in the speech of the former group than the latter. It seems to be the case that a person who spends a long time going through college or university will tend to have spoken language features which derive from a lot of time spent working with the written language. The complaint that some professor "talks like a book" is possibly a recognition of an extreme form of this influence.

The social classes also sound different. A famous study by Labov (1972) combined elements from place of occupation and socio-economic status by looking at pronunciation differences among salespeople in three New York City department stores, Saks (high status), Macy's (middle status) and Klein's (low status). Labov asked salespeople questions that elicited the expression *fourth floor*. He was interested in the pronunciation (or not) of the [r] sound after vowels. There was a regular pattern: the higher the socio-economic status, the more [r] sounds, and the lower the socio-economic status, the fewer [r] sounds were produced. So, the difference in a single consonant could mark high<u>er</u> versus low<u>ah</u> social class. That was in New York.

In Reading, England, Trudgill (1974) found that the same variable (i.e. [r] after a vowel) had the opposite social value. Upper middle class speakers in that area tended to pronounce fewer [r] sounds than lower/working class speakers. You may have encountered individuals who seem to have no [r] sound in "Isn't that mahvellous, dahling!"

Actually, a more stable indication of lower class and less education, throughout the English-speaking world, is the occurrence of [n] rather than [ŋ] at the end of words like *walking* and *going*. Pronunciations represented by *sittin'* and *drinkin'* are associated with lower social class.

Another social marker is [h]-dropping, which results in *'ouse* and *'ello*. In contemporary English, this is associated with lower social class and less education. For Charles Dickens, writing in the middle of the nineteenth-century, it was one way of marking a character's lower status, as in this example from Uriah Heep (in *David Copperfield*).

> *'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 umble.'*

Age and gender

Even within groups of the same social class, however, other differences can be found which seem to correlate with factors such as the age or gender of speakers. Many younger speakers living in a particular region often look at the results of a dialect survey of their area (conducted mainly with older informants) and claim that their grandparents may use those terms, but they do not. Variation according to **age** is most noticeable across the grandparent–grandchild time span.

Grandfather may still talk about the *icebox* and the *wireless*. He's unlikely to know what *rules*, what *sucks*, or what's *totally stoked*, and he doesn't use *like* to introduce reported speech, as his granddaughter might do: *We're get-*

ting ready, and he's like, Let's go, and I'm like, No way I'm not ready, and he splits anyway, the creep!

Variation according to the **gender** of the speaker has been the subject of a lot of recent research. One general conclusion from dialect surveys is that female speakers tend to use more prestigious forms than male speakers with the same general social background. That is, forms such as *I done it*, *it growed* and *he ain't* can be found more often in the speech of males, and *I did it*, *it grew* and *he isn't* in the speech of females.

In some cultures, there are much more marked differences between male and female speech. Quite different pronunciations of certain words in male and female speech have been documented in some North American Indian languages such as Gros Ventre and Koasati. Indeed, when Europeans first encountered the different vocabularies of male and female speech among the Carib Indians, they reported that the different sexes used different languages. What had, in fact, been found was an extreme version of variation according to the gender of the speaker.

In contemporary English, there are many reported differences in the talk of males and females. In same gender pairs having conversations, women generally discuss their personal feelings more than men. Men appear to prefer non-personal topics such as sport and news. Men tend to respond to an expression of feelings or problems by giving advice on solutions, while women are more likely to mention personal experiences that match or connect with the other woman's. There is a pattern documented in American English social contexts of women co-operating and seeking connection via language, whereas men are more competitive and concerned with power via language. In mixed-gender pairs having conversations, the rate of men interrupting women is substantially greater than the reverse. Women are reported to use more expressions associated with tentativeness, such as 'hedges' (*sort of, kind of*) and 'tags' (*isn't it?, don't you?*), when expressing an opinion: *Well, em, I think that golf is kind of boring, don't you?*

There have been noticeable changes in English vocabulary (e.g. *spokesperson*, *mail carrier* instead of *spokesman*, *mailman*) as part of an attempt to eliminate gender bias in general terms, but the dilemma of the singular pronoun persists. Is *a friend* to be referred to as *he or she*, *s/he*, or even *they* in sentences like: *Bring a friend if _____ can come.* In some contexts it appears that *they* is emerging as the preferred term (but you can be sure that somebody will complain that *they* don't like it!).

Ethnic background

In the quote that introduces this chapter, both the gender and the ethnicity of an individual are alluded to. The humorous response plays on the stereotyped image of how a female member of one ethnic minority might succeed in society. In a more serious way, we can observe that, within any society, differences in speech may come about because of different **ethnic backgrounds**. In very obvious ways, the speech of recent immigrants, and often of their children, will contain identifying features. In some areas, where there is strong language loyalty to the original language of the group, a large number of features are carried over into the new language.

More generally, the speech of many African-Americans, technically known as **Black English Vernacular (BEV)**, is a widespread social dialect, often cutting across regional differences. When a group within a society undergoes some form of social isolation, such as the discrimination or segregation experienced historically by African-Americans, then social dialect differences become more marked. The accompanying problem, from a social point of view, is that the resulting variety of speech may be stigmatized as "bad speech". One example is the frequent absence of the copula (forms of the verb 'to be') in BEV, as in expressions like *They mine* or *You crazy*. Standard English requires that the verb form *are* be used in such expressions. However, many other English dialects do not use the copula in such structures and a very large number of languages (e.g. Arabic, Russian) have similar structures without the copula. BEV, in this respect, cannot be "bad" any more than Russian is "bad" or Arabic is "bad". As a dialect, it simply has features which are consistently different from the Standard.

Another aspect of BEV which has been criticized, sometimes by educators, is the use of double negative constructions, as in *He don't know nothing* or *I ain't afraid of no ghosts*. The criticism is usually that such structures are 'illogical'. If that is so, then French, which typically employs a two-part negative form, as exemplified by *il NE sait RIEN* ('he doesn't know anything'), and Old English, also with a double negative, as in *Ic NAHT singan NE cuðe* ('I didn't know how to sing'), must be viewed as equally 'illogical'. In fact, far from being illogical, this type of structure provides a very effective means of emphasizing the negative part of a message in this dialect. It is basically a dialect feature, present in one social dialect of English, sometimes found in other dialects, but not in the Standard Language.

Idiolect

Of course, aspects of all these elements of social and regional dialect variation are combined, in one form or another, in the speech of each individual. The term **idiolect** is used for the personal dialect of each individual speaker of a language. There are other factors, such as voice quality and physical state, which contribute to the identifying features in an individual's speech, but many of the social factors we have described determine each person's idiolect. From the perspective of the social study of language, you are, in many respects, what you say.

Style, register and jargon

All of the social factors we have considered so far are related to variation according to the user of the language. Another source of variation in an individual's speech is occasioned by the situation of use. There is a gradation of **style** of speech, from the very formal to the very informal. Going for a job interview, you may say to a secretary *Excuse me. Is the manager in his office? I have an appointment.* Alternatively, speaking to a friend about another friend, you may produce a much less formal version of the message: *Hey, is that lazy dog still in bed? I gotta see him about something.*

This type of variation is more formally encoded in some languages than others. In Japanese, for example, there are different terms used for the person you are speaking to, depending on the amount of respect or deference required. French has two pronouns (*tu* and *vous*), corresponding to singular *you*, with the first reserved for close friends and family. Similar distinctions are seen in the *you* forms in German (*du* and *Sie*) and in Spanish (*tu* and *usted*).

Differences in style can also be found in written language, with business letters (e.g. *I am writing to inform you ...*) versus letters to friends (*Just wanted to let you know ...*) as good illustrations. The general pattern, however, is that a written form of a message will inevitably be more formal in style than its spoken equivalent. If you see someone on the local bus, eating, drinking and playing a radio, you can say that what he's doing isn't allowed and that he should wait until he gets off the bus. Alternatively, you can draw his attention to the more formal language of the printed notice which reads:

> *The city has recently passed an ordinance that expressly prohibits the following while aboard public conveyances. Eating or Drinking. The Playing of Electronic Devices.*

The formality of expressions such as *expressly prohibit*, *the following*, and *electronic devices* is more extreme than is likely to occur in the spoken language.

Variation according to use in specific situations is also studied in terms of **register**. There is a religious register in which we expect to find expressions not found elsewhere, as in *Ye shall be blessed by Him in times of tribulation.* In another register you will encounter sentences such as *The plaintiff is ready to take the witness stand.* The legal register, however, is unlikely to incorporate some of the expressions you are becoming familiar with from the linguistics register, such as *The morphology of this dialect contains fewer inflectional suffixes.*

It is obvious that one of the key features of a register is the use of special **jargon**, which can be defined as technical vocabulary associated with a special activity or group. In social terms, jargon helps to connect those who see themselves as 'insiders' in some way and to exclude 'outsiders'. If you are familiar with surfing talk, you'll know whether the following answer to an interview question was 'yes' or 'no'.

> Q: *Would you ride a bodyboard if a shark bit off your legs?*
> A: *Hey, if you can get tubed, nobody's bumming.*

The answer means, 'Yes, of course!'. Even when dictionaries are created for certain activities, the entries often explain jargon with other jargon, as in this example from *The New Hacker's Dictionary* (Raymond, 1991), compiled from the expressions used by those who spend a lot of time with computers.

> ***juggling eggs***. *Keeping a lot of state in your head while modifying a program. "Don't bother me now, I'm juggling eggs", means that an interrupt is likely to result in the program's being scrambled.*

You may actually feel that this idiom could apply equally well on many occasions in your daily life!