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20 Language varieties

Da history of da word pigeon is li'dis – Wen da French-speaking Normans wen conquer England in da year ten-six-six, dey wen bring along wit dem da word pigeon, for da type of bird it was. Da resident Anglo-Saxons used da word dove, or D-U-F-E, as dey used to spell'um, to mean da same bird. It just so happened dat terms in Norman-French wen blend wit Old English sentence structure, to form what we know as Middle English. In da process, da French word became da one dat referred to da pigeon as food. Today in England, if you look for dem, you can find recipes for pigeon pie.

Food for taught, eh – Even back den, da word pigeon wen blend with pigeon for get some moa pigeon.

So now days get pigeon by da zoo – get pigeon on da beach – get pigeon in town – get pigeon in coups – and no madda wat anybody try do, dey cannot get rid of pigeon – I guess wit such a wide blue sky, everyting deserves to fly.

Joseph Balaz (1988)

In many of the preceding chapters, we have treated languages, such as English, as if all speakers of the particular language used that language in a uniform way. That is, we have largely ignored the fact that every language will have more than one variety, especially in the way in which it is spoken. Yet this variation in speech is an important and well-recognized aspect of our daily lives as language-users in different regional and social communities. In this chapter we shall consider the type of variation which has been investigated via a form of 'linguistic geography', concentrating on regional varieties, and in the following chapter we shall consider the factors involved in social variation in language use. First, we should identify that particular variety which is normally meant when the general terms English, Italian, Japanese, Spanish, and so on are used.

The Standard Language

When we described the sounds, words and sentences of English, we were, in fact, concentrating on the features of only one variety, usually labeled **Standard English**. This is the variety which forms the basis of printed English in newspapers and books, which is used in the mass media and which is taught in schools. It is the variety we normally try to teach to those who want to learn English as a second 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. There is no reason why other national varieties such as Standard Australian English, Standard Canadian English and Standard Indian English should not be recognized also.

Accent and dialect

Whether or not you think you speak a standard variety of English, you will certainly speak with an **accent**. It is a myth that some speakers have accents while others do not. Some speakers may have distinct or easily recognized types of accent while others do not, but every language-user speaks with an accent. The term accent, when used technically, is restricted to the description of aspects of pronunciation which identify where an individual speaker is from, regionally or socially. It is to be distinguished from the term **dialect** which describes features of grammar and vocabulary, as well as aspects of pronunciation. For example, the sentence *You don't know what you're talking about* will generally 'look' the same whether spoken with an American or a Scottish accent. Both speakers will be using Standard English forms, but have different pronunciations. However, this next sentence – *Ye dinnae ken whit yer haverin' aboot* – 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, of course, differences in pronunciation (e.g. *whit*, *aboot*), but there are also examples of different vocabulary (*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. Here is an example, quoted in Trudgill (1983), of an exchange between two British English speakers (B and C), and a speaker from

Ireland (A), which took place in Donegal, Ireland:

A: *How long are youse here?*
B: *Till after Easter.*
(Speaker A looks puzzled)
C: *We came on Sunday.*
A: *Ah. Youse're here a while then.*

It seems that the construction *How long are youse here?*, in speaker A's dialect, is used with a meaning close to the structure *How long have you been here?*, rather than with the future interpretation (*How long are you going to be here?*) made by speaker B.

Despite occasional difficulties of this sort, there is a general impression of mutual intelligibility among many speakers of different dialects, or varieties, of English. The important point to remember is that, from a linguistic point of view, no one variety is 'better' than another. They are simply different. From a social point of view, however, some varieties do become more prestigious. In fact, the variety which develops as the Standard Language has usually been one socially prestigious dialect, originally connected with a political or cultural center (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. Thus, in the United States, someone from Brooklyn may joke about the Southerner's definition of *sex* by telling you that *sex is fo' less than tin*, in his best imitation of someone from the Southern states. The Southerner can, in return, wonder what a *tree guy* is in Brooklyn, since he has heard Brooklyn speakers refer to *doze tree guys*. Some regional dialects clearly have stereotyped pronunciations associated with them.

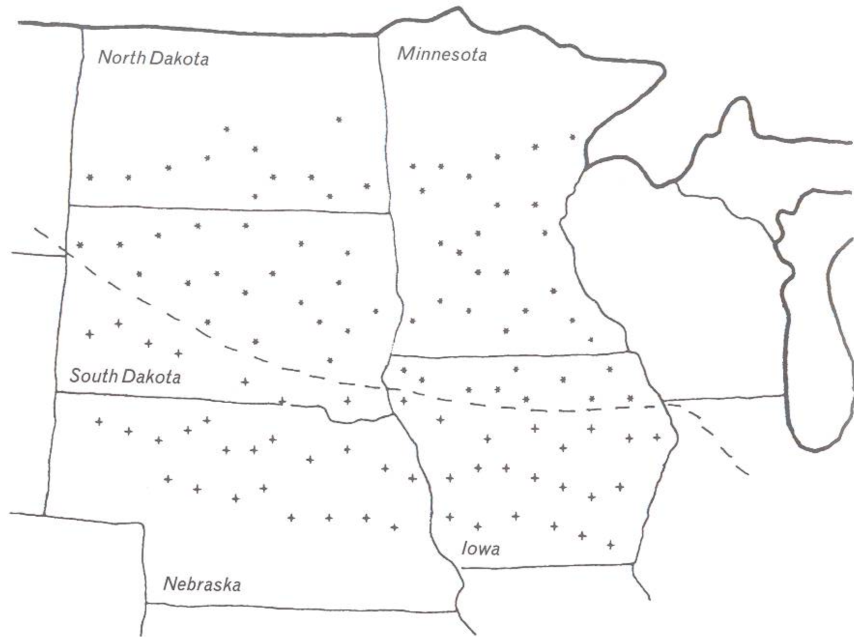
Those involved in the serious investigation of regional dialects are fairly uninterested in such stereotypes, however, and have devoted a lot of research to the identification of consistent features of speech found in one geographical area rather than another. These dialect surveys often involved painstaking attention to detail and tended to operate with very specific criteria in identifying acceptable informants. After all, it is important to know if the person whose speech you are tape-recording really is a typical representative of the region's dialect. Consequently, the informants in many dialect surveys 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 dialect description which results is probably 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) or of regions (e.g. the New England area of the United States).

Isoglosses and dialect boundaries

Let us take a look at some examples of regional variation found in one survey, that which resulted in the Linguistic Atlas of the Upper Midwest of the United States. One of the aims of such a survey 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 take their groceries home 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 for *bucket* to the south, then another isogloss, probably overlapping, can be drawn in. 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, the small circles indicate where *paper bag* was used and the plus sign (+) shows where *paper sack* was used. The broken line between the two areas represents an isogloss. Using this dialect boundary information, we find that in the Upper Midwest of the USA, there is a Northern dialect area which includes Minnesota, North Dakota, most of South Dakota, and Northern Iowa. The rest of Iowa and Nebraska show characteristics of the Midland dialect. Some of the noticeable pronunciation differences, and some vocabulary differences, are illustrated here:

	('taught')	('roof')	('creek')	('greasy')	
Northern:	[ɔ]	[ʊ]	[ɪ]	[s]	
Midland:	[a]	[u]	[i]	[z]	
Northern:	*paper bag*	*pail*	*kerosene*	*slippery*	*get sick*
Midland:	*paper sack*	*bucket*	*coal oil*	*slick*	*take sick*



So, if an American English speaker pronounces the word *greasy* as [grizi] and takes groceries home in a *paper sack*, then he is not likely to have grown up and lived most of his life in Minnesota. It is worth noting that the characteristic forms listed here are not used by everyone living in the region. They are used by a significantly large percentage of the people interviewed in the dialect survey.

The dialect continuum

Another note of caution is required. 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 variety merges into another. Keeping this in mind, we can view regional variation as existing along a **continuum**, and not 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 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, 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' and having to learn another dialect 'in the school'. However, if we want to talk about people knowing two distinct languages, we have to describe them as being **bilingual**.

Bilingualism

In many countries, regional variation is not simply a matter of two dialects of a single language, but a matter of two quite distinct and different languages. Canada, for example, is an officially bilingual country, with both French and English as official languages. This recognition of the linguistic rights of the country's French speakers, largely in Quebec, did not come about without a lot of political upheaval. For most of its history, Canada was essentially an English-speaking country, with a French-speaking minority group. In such a situation, bilingualism, at the individual level, tends to be a feature of the minority group. In this form of bilingualism, a member of a minority group grows up in one linguistic community, primarily speaking one language, such as Welsh in Wales, Gaelic in Scotland or Spanish in the United States, but learns another language, such as English, in order to take part in the larger, dominant, linguistic community.

Indeed, many members of linguistic minorities can live out their entire lives without ever seeing their native language appear in the public domain. Sometimes political activism can change that. It was only after English notices and signs were frequently defaced or replaced by scribbled Welsh-language versions that bilingual (English–Welsh) signs came into widespread use in Wales. One suspects that many *henoed* never expected to see their first language on public signs like this one, photographed recently in Wales. (But why, you might ask, are we being 'warned' about them?)

Individual bilingualism, however, doesn't have to be the result of political dominance by a group using a different language. It can simply be the result of having two parents who speak different languages. If a child simultaneously acquires the French spoken by her mother and the English spoken by her father, then the distinction between the two languages may not even be noticed. There will simply be two ways of talking according to the person being talked to. However, even in this type of bilingualism, one language tends eventually to become the dominant one, with the other in a subordinate role.

Language planning

Perhaps because bilingualism in Europe and North America tends to be found only among minority groups, a country like the United States is often assumed to be a single homogeneous speech community where everyone speaks English and all radio and television broadcasts and all newspapers use Standard English. It appears to be a **monolingual** country. This is a mistaken view. It ignores the existence of large communities for whom English is not the first language of the home. As one example, the majority of the population in San Antonio, Texas, are more likely to listen to radio broadcasts in Spanish than in English. This simple fact has quite large repercussions in terms of the organization of local representative government and the educational system. Should elementary school teaching take place in English or Spanish?

Consider a similar question in the context of Guatemala where, in addition to Spanish, there are twenty-six Mayan languages spoken. If, in this situation, Spanish is selected as the language of education, are all those Mayan speakers put at an early educational disadvantage within the society? Questions of this type require answers on the basis of some type of language planning. Government, legal and educational bodies in many countries have to plan which varieties of the languages spoken in the country are to be used for official business. In Israel, despite the fact that Hebrew was not the most widely used language among the population, it was chosen as the official government language. In India, the choice was Hindi, yet, in many non-Hindi-speaking regions, there were riots against this decision.

The process of language planning may be seen in a better light when the full series of stages is implemented over a number of years. A good modern example has been provided by the adoption of Swahili as the national language of Tanzania in East Africa. There still exist a large number of tribal languages as well as the colonial vestiges of English, but the educational, legal and government systems have gradually introduced Swahili as the official language. The process of 'selection' (choosing an official language) is followed by 'codification' in which basic grammars, dictionaries and written models are used to establish the Standard variety. The process of 'elaboration' follows, with the Standard variety being developed for use in all aspects of social life and the appearance of a body of literary work written in the Standard. The process of 'implementation' is largely a matter of government attempts to encourage use of the Standard, and 'acceptance' is the final stage when a substantial majority of the population have come to use the Standard and to think of it as the national language, playing a part in not only social, but also national, identity.

Pidgins and Creoles

In some areas, the Standard chosen may be a variety which originally had no native speakers. For example, in Papua New Guinea, most official business is conducted in Tok Pisin, a language sometimes described as Melanesian Pidgin. This language is now used by over a million people, but it began as a kind of 'contact' language called a Pidgin. A **Pidgin** is a variety of a language (e.g. English) which developed for some practical purpose, such as trading,

among groups of people who had a lot of contact, but who did not know each other's languages. As such, it would have no native speakers. The origin of the term 'Pidgin' is thought to be from a Chinese Pidgin version of the English word 'business'.

There are several English Pidgins still used today. They are characterized by an absence of any complex grammatical morphology and a limited vocabulary. Inflectional suffixes such as *-s* (plural) and *-'s* (possessive) on nouns in Standard English are rare in Pidgins, while structures like *tu buk* ('two books') and *di gyal pleis* ('the girl's place') are common. Functional morphemes often take the place of inflectional morphemes found in the source language. For example, instead of changing the form of *you* to *your*, as in the English phrase *your book*, English-based Pidgins use a form like *bilong*, and change the word order to produce phrases like *buk bilong yu*.

The origin of many words in Pidgins can be phrases from other languages, such as one word used for 'ruin, destroy' which is *bagarimap* (derived from the English phrase "bugger him up"), or for 'lift' which is *haisimap* (from "hoist him up"), or for 'us' which is *yumi* (from "you" plus "me"). Original borrowings can be used creatively to take on new meanings such as the word *ars* which is used for 'cause' or 'source', as well as 'bottom', and originated in the English word *arse*.

The syntax of Pidgins can be quite unlike the languages from which terms were borrowed and modified, as can be seen in this example from an earlier stage of Tok Pisin:

Baimbai	*hed*	*bilongyu*	*i-arrait*	*gain*
(by and by)	(head)	(belong you)	(he-alright)	(again)

'Your head will soon get well again'

There are considered to be between six and twelve million people still using Pidgin languages and between ten and seventeen million using descendants from Pidgins called **Creoles**. When a Pidgin develops beyond its role as a trade language and becomes the first language of a social community, it is described as a Creole. Tok Pisin, for example, would more accurately be described nowadays as a Creole. Although still locally called 'pidgin', the language spoken by large numbers of people in Hawai'i is also a Creole. A Creole develops as the first language of the children of Pidgin speakers. Thus, unlike Pidgins, Creoles have large numbers of native speakers and are not restricted at all in their uses. A French-based Creole is spoken by the majority of the population in Haiti and English-based Creoles are used in Jamaica and Sierra Leone.

The separate vocabulary elements of a Pidgin can become grammatical elements in a Creole. The form *baimbai yu go* ('by and by you go') in early Tok Pisin gradually shortened to *bai yu go*, then to *yu bai go*, and finally to *yu bigo*, with a grammatical structure not unlike that of its English translation equivalent, *you will go*.

The Post-Creole continuum

In many contemporary situations where Creoles evolved, there is usually evidence of another process at work. Just as there was development from a Pidgin to a Creole, known as 'creolization', there is now often a retreat from the use of the Creole by those who have greater contact with a standard variety of the language. Where education and greater social prestige are associated with a 'higher' variety, used as a model (e.g. British English in Jamaica), many speakers will tend to use fewer Creole forms and structures. The process, known as 'decreolization', leads, at one extreme, to a variety that is closer to the external standard model and leaves, at the other extreme, a basic variety with more local Creole features. The more basic variety is called the **basilect** and the variety closer to the external model is called the **acrolect**. Between these two extremes may be a range of slightly different varieties, some with many and some with fewer Creole features, known as **mesolects**. This range of varieties, evolving after (= 'post') the Creole has been created, is called the **Post-Creole continuum**.

Thus, in Jamaica, one speaker may say *a fi mi buk dat* (basilect), another may put it as *iz mi buk* (mesolect) or yet another may choose *it's my book* (acrolect). It is also common for speakers to be able to use a range of features associated with different varieties and appropriate to different situations.

It is predictable that these differences will be tied very much to social values and identity. In the course of discussing language varieties in terms of regional differences, we have excluded, in a rather artificial way, the complex social factors which are also at work in determining language variation. In the final chapter, we shall go on to consider the influence of a number of these social variables.