Lecture 8: Language Variation II

INDV 101 -- Mind, Self and Language
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Language Variation

When linguists study language variation, they are not making value judgments about the varieties they study.

They study them to describe how they are systematically different from other varieties of the language.

Linguistic Equality of Dialects

• All varieties of languages are systematic, though the systems vary!
• All serve as important markers of identity for their speakers.
• There are no primitive or incomplete living languages.
• You may not like certain varieties, just like you don’t like certain music, but it does not make them less systematic.

Negative stereotypes of speakers of nonstandard varieties

Walt Wolfram: 1976: 131
(1) Non-mainstream varieties are simply incomplete attempts to master the standard variety
(2) Speakers of non-mainstream varieties use their language in an unpatterned, unsystematic way

More Myths

(3) Speakers of non-mainstream varieties learn their language at a slower rate than children who speak standard dialects
(4) Speakers of non-mainstream varieties are handicapped cognitively by their language system.

Attitudes about these Varieties

Our attitudes often reflect how we feel about certain groups of speakers. It is usually the varieties of minority groups that receive the most negative evaluations.
According to Rottet, 'Language is an important aspect of identity, speakers, consciously or unconsciously affirm their membership in one or more social groups by speaking like other members of the same group' (1995:10).

This is why so many of us persist in speaking varieties that are disparaged by others.

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What are the causes of dialectal variation?

1. geographic or regional: caused by geographic boundaries, including urban/rural distinctions. Also a result of immigration: any variety of US, Australian, Canadian English, Mexican Spanish etc.

Appalachian English:

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Appalachian English

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Appalachian English—examples of variation

Variation in Syntax
He's got a broken back was never set.
The relative pronoun is optional.
He's the boy (that) I saw.
The car needs washed. (loss of passive be)
I'm a fixin to go. (I'm getting ready to go.)
I might could do that. (double models)

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Phonology and Lexicon

Lax vowels get stressed:
- fish [i] dish
- put [u] push bush

LF (p.344-345)
Dialectal Variation can be …

2. temporal: all languages change over time - you don't use the same language as your grandparents.

Dialectal Variation can be …

3. social/class based: Received Pronunciation in England.

Upper class varieties of English in Boston (the Frazer Crane variety of English).

Dialectal Variation can be …

4. ethnic or racial: *Hispanic English*: controversial term

African American varieties of English including *African American Vernacular English* (AAVE), more commonly known as Ebonics.

Dialectal Variation can be …

5. stylistic

Five examples of language variation:

EX1: **Singapore Colloquial English** (Singlish)
Modern Singapore is traditionally dated from 1819, which was when Sir Stamford Raffles claimed the island of Singapore for the East India Company, with the intention of creating a trading post for Britain in a vital place.

Singapore English has its origins in the schools of colonial Singapore.

Children start nursery school at age 3, kindergarten at 4, primary school at 6. They attend secondary schools from age 12 up to 16 (when they take O-Levels) then go to junior college (where they take A-levels), or perhaps a VITB before moving on to university or polytechnic;

In Singapore people normally go barefoot in the house. They wear slippers at the beach — the same footwear which in other places is called “thongs” or “flip flops”.

**Borrowings (Malay, Hokkian, etc.)**

- habis 'finished'
- makan 'to eat, meal'
- chope 'to lay a claim to, as when putting bags at a table to indicate reservation'
- cheem 'difficult, obscure'
- ang mo 'a white person'
- rojak 'mixed, something mixed'

**Discourse particles**

- Singapore English uses about 11 particles, mostly borrowed from Hokkien or Cantonese, to indicate attitude to what is being said. They work rather like you know and you see. The three most common are ah (usually expects agreement), lah (strong assertion) and what (usually corrects something).
- There's something here for everyone lah. Otherwise, how can be considered Singaporean ah?
- No parking lots here, what.
- OK lah, bye bye.
- And then how many rooms ah?
- You see my husband's not at home lah. That's the problem, ah.
- Her price is too high for me lah.
Sounds--consonants

- Singapore English does not distinguish between voiced and voiceless fricatives in final position. This also affects the (f) and (v) sounds and the (th) and (dh) sounds. Sometimes, especially in informal speech, people do not distinguish between voiced and voiceless plosives in final position.
- HOP=HOB, BIT=BID, BACK=BAG.
- In final position (t) is often a glottal stop, and (d) is sometimes too. In words like THINK and BATH a /t/ sound is often used. In words like THEN and LEATHER a /d/ is often used. In careful speech a dental fricative is used for (th). Some speakers end words like BREATH with a /f/ sound, but this is more unusual.

Sounds--vowels

- Singapore English does not have a distinction between lax and tense vowels.

Morphology

- A lot of grammatical endings that are required in Standard English are optional in Singapore Colloquial English. Marking plurals and past tenses is a matter of choice, so may be omitted, e.g.:
  - What happen yesterday? You go where?
  - Got so many car!
  - Then bicycle go first ah. (=So the bicycle went first)
  - I just sit and everything do for me. (=it does everything)

BE is often omitted.

- She so pretty.
- That one like us.
- The first one downstairs.
- This new revision ah, REALLY new!

EX2: African American English (LF 10.5)

- Three views of the origin:
  - Dialectologist View
  - Creolist View
  - A Unified View
Structural Features (LF p.350-352)

- Monothongization
- Word-final consonant cluster reduction
- Absence of 3rd person singular –s
- Multiple negation
- Habitual BE

EX3: [g]-dropping in American English

- Running vs. runnin

EX4: R-fulness in New York

- an r-ful (or "rhotic") pronunciation: New York
  - the General American (or "Midwestern") prestige pattern

- an r-less (or "non-rhotic") pronunciation: New Yawk
  - the more local (New England) prestige pattern, at least formerly

n the 1960's, William Labov, a senior professor at UPenn, studied the speech of New Yorkers with an ear to this question. He visited three department stores that catered to different social classes.
Labov asked a clerk for the location of some previously chosen item, say shoes, that was on the fourth floor. When the clerk answered, he noted whether the [r]'s in the words were pronounced, and then asked “Excuse me?” to get a more emphatic, careful pronunciation as well. When out of the clerk’s sight, he jotted down the pronunciations and basic details about the clerk (sex, age, race, job). This technique is called a rapid and anonymous survey.

At Macy’s

Age differences too!

Older workers at Saks use [r] less, while the older workers at Macy’s use it more. (There's not much difference at Klein's.) What are we to make of this?

- The older Saks workers reflect the fact that the r-less pronunciation was previously the prestige form in New York. They are linguistically secure, and have largely maintained their pronunciation in the face of change.
- The younger Saks workers grew up as the r-ful prestige form was being established, and so have adopted it in greater numbers.
- The older Macy’s workers are upwardly mobile and linguistically insecure; they have adopted the newer prestige form, using it more than the same-aged workers at Saks. This is called hypercorrection (i.e. “overcorrection”).
- The younger Macy’s workers have less experience with (and less upwardly mobile interest in) the broader prestige pattern, and are only slowly adopting it.
- The Klein’s workers are sufficiently distant in social class from the Saks standard that they are much less likely to adopt it.

EX5: My Fair Lady
A musical adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's 1912 play *Pygmalion* that had played successfully on Broadway.

Language attitudes

In the (1914) preface to his play *Pygmalion*, George Bernard Shaw wrote that “It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman wise or degrade him.”

As the phonetician Henry Higgins says in the play’s first act, “You can spot an Irishman or a Yorkshireman by his brogue. I can place any man within six miles. I can place him within two miles in London. Sometimes within two streets.”

In a society as conscious of lower-class and regional as Shaw’s England was, to “spot” someone in this sense is an evaluation – and usually a negative or even hostile evaluation – not just an observation. As Higgins puts it,

This is an age of opinion. Men begin in Kentish Town with fill a year, and end in Park Lane with a hundred francs. They wrap up every time they open their mouth.

Higgins explains his perennial search for British dialects and his talent for knowing speech patterns and their corresponding locations: “Simple phonetics, Doctor. That’s my profession, also my hobby. Anyone can spot an Irishman or a Yorkshireman by his brogue, but I can place a man within six miles, I can place him within two miles in London. Sometimes within two streets.” And he brutally criticizes Eliza’s ugly “detestable boo-hooing” and crude pronunciations:

A woman who utters such disgusting and depressing noise has no right to be anywhere, no right to live. Remember that you are a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech that your native language is the language of Shakespeare and Milton and the Bible. Don’t sit there crooning like a bilious pigeon.

The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain.

Eliza: The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain.
Higgins: I think she’s got it. I think she’s got it.
Eliza: The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain.
Higgins: By George, she’s got it. By George, she’s got it. Now once again, where does it rain?
Eliza: On the plain! On the plain!
Higgins: And where’s that soggy plain?
Eliza: In Spain! In Spain!
Chorus: The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain!...