

INTD0111A

The Unity and Diversity of Human Language

Lecture #19
April 20th, 2009

Announcements

- Assignment 3 due today.
- Assignment 4 will be available on Wednesday.
- I hope things are going well with your LAP.

Summary from last week

- Sociolinguistically, a language is a collection of dialects that are mutually intelligible, but which systematically differ lexically, phonologically, morphologically, and syntactically.
- Dialects are rule-governed systems. Whatever features they have follow from general rules and principles that regulate human language in general.

Linguistic Egalitarianism

- There's no sense of speaking of a "better" or "worse" dialect.
- After all, there is no set of objective criteria that we can use to compare languages, dialects, accents, or any speech varieties.
- As we have seen, regional dialects like Appalachian English and social dialects like African American English or Chicano English are all rule-governed systems in the same way other dialects of English are.

Popular myths about language

- As we have seen, denigration of particular dialects (or languages for that matter) is based on prejudices and false (though, unfortunately common) beliefs.
- For one thing, "standard" dialects are typically associated with the rich and powerful in society.
- Standard is also tied with 18th-century purism and so-called prescriptive grammar.
- Attitudes against certain dialects may also be based on the bizarre idea that language change is corruption and decay.

So, ...

- It all comes down to *prestige*, a totally nonlinguistic concept.
- Linguistically, no dialect is inherently better or worse than another.
- Dialects are just *different* language varieties. And this is just another instance of diversity.

Unfortunately, though, most people just “don’t get it”

- That said, linguists are quite a minority, and people who take linguistics courses are much fewer in number than those who do not.
- Bottom line: The majority of people in human societies do not understand what we said here. For them, there is indeed a “better” dialect.
- As a result, whether we like it or not, certain sociolinguistic patterns evolve, and are worthy of studying.

Standard = Success

- One pattern of sociolinguistic behavior arises as a result of stigmatization of nonstandard dialects.
- Speakers of these nonstandard varieties are told that their dialects are wrong and inferior and that they have to learn the standard variety in school to become successful.

Standard = Success

- That makes children who come from homes where nonstandard varieties are spoken at a disadvantage in school, because they need to make adjustments from the language they speak to the standard varieties they learn in class (an adjustment unnecessary for children who come from homes where standard varieties are spoken).

Standard = Success

- Some make these adjustments and they become *bidialectal* speakers.
- Others become more or less fluent in the standard, but they retain their nonstandard dialect still.
- And yet some others master the standard dialect and reject the nonstandard altogether.
- Which adjustments are made depends on a number of factors, one of which is *prestige*.

Prestige: Overt

- In sociolinguistics, a distinction is often made between **overt prestige** and **covert prestige** in the use of language varieties.
- Overt prestige is the one attached to a particular variety by the society-at-large, which defines how people should speak in order to be successful and gain status in society.

Prestige: Covert

- Covert prestige, on the other hand, is what makes speakers of nonstandard varieties retain their dialects as a means to maintain their “belonging” to a particular community.
- Nonstandard varieties, despite being stigmatized, still persist, because their speakers use them as a marker of *group identification*.

Studying how social factors cause speech variation.

Labov's study of Martha's Vineyard

- Speakers on the island varied in their centralization of the diphthongs /aj/ and /aw/ in *why* and *now* to [əj] and [əw], respectively.
- The centralization feature was characteristic of people living on the island (as opposed to summer tourists), hence it was a *regional* feature.

Labov's study of Martha's Vineyard

- But within the island population, some residents centralized, while others didn't. Why?
- Labov investigated the factors that might be involved in this variation. His study showed that several variables were at play here.

Labov's study of Martha's Vineyard

- People who lived Up-Island (strictly rural) centralized more than those who lived Down-Island.
- Centralization increased with age, peaking between 31 and 45 years.
- Going to college with the intention of coming or not coming back mattered.
- Ethnicity did matter as well.

Labov's study of Martha's Vineyard

- Centralization on Martha's Vineyard thus seemed like a marker of *group identification*.
- How closely speakers identified with the island, wanted to enter into the mainstream, saw themselves as Vineyarders and were proud of it, was positively correlated with the degree of centralization.
- This became obvious when Labov partitioned his informants in terms of their attitude towards the island.

Centralization and attitude towards Martha's Vineyard

Persons	/aj/	/aw/
40 (Positive)	63	62
13 (Neutral)	32	42
6 (Negative)	8	9

Further aspects of sociolinguistic diversity

Styles (aka Registers)

- Style or register refers to the kind of language that one uses in a particular situation. It is a kind of “situation dialect”.
- This is another instance of language variation: situation-based language variation.
- One can distinguish two major styles of speech: **formal** and **informal**, with a range of styles in between forming a continuum.

Style

- Formal style is typically used in formal contexts, e.g., written language, speeches, the media, educational institutions, etc.
- Informal style is typically used in daily conversations with family and friends for example.

Informal style

- Informal style is characterized by deletion, contraction, simplification of some syntactic rules, and the use of certain words that would not occur in formal styles.
- Notice, however, that “informal” does not mean “without rules”. Informal use of language is still rule-governed and does not mean that “anything goes”.

Informal style

- For example, question-formation can be shortened in informal registers by deletion of both the subject and auxiliary or the auxiliary alone, but never the subject alone:

Are you running the marathon tomorrow?

Running the marathon tomorrow?

You running the marathon tomorrow?

**Are running the marathon tomorrow?*

Informal style

- Other aspects of variation in casual speech include saying “*Where’s it at?*” for the more formal “*Where is it?*”
- By contrast, the subjunctive is pretty much confined to formal contexts.
- Also, passive constructions are more likely to be used in formal, rather than informal styles.

Formal vs. informal address terms

- Many languages have rules for register. For example, the *tu-vous* and *du-sie* distinction in French and German, respectively.
- French even has a verb *tutoyer* and German has *duzen*.
- Japanese also has a system of honorific marking.

How do you say “eat” in Thai?

- Thai has a lot of “eat’s”:
 - kin*, used with intimates, and about criminals and animals
 - thaan*, used with nonintimates informally.
 - rabprathaa*, used with dignitaries on formal occasions.
 - Chan*, used only for Buddhist monks.

Labov in New York City: [r]

- Another classic study by Labov was that of NYC’s [r].
- New Yorkers vary in their use of [r].
- The use of [r] is associated with high prestige, while lack of [r] is associated with low prestige.
- Hypothesis: [r] is linked to social status.
- How did he test this?

Labov in New York City: Interviews

- Interview salespersons at three departmental stores: Saks 5th Ave, Macy’s, and S. Klein.
- Interview format:
 - Labov: Where’s X?
 - Salesperson: Fourth Floor.
 - Labov: Excuse me!
 - Salesperson: FOURTH FLOOR.

Labov in New York City: Results

Percentage of [r]s produced	
Store	
Saks	62
Macy’s	51
S. Klein	20

Labov in New York City: Results

Percentage of [r]s in <i>floor</i>		
Store	Casual	Careful
Saks	63	64
Macy’s	44	61
S. Klein	8	18

Slang

- Certain words used in informal styles are called *slang*, e.g.,
barf, flub, rave, ecstasy, pig, fuzz.
- Some slang words originate in the underworld:
crack, sawbuck, to hang paper (to write 'bum' checks), *con, brek* (from breakfast), *burn* (tobacco), *screw* (prison officer).

Slang

- Some slang words gain acceptance over time, e.g.,
dwindle, glib, mob, hang-up, rip-off, fan, phone, TV, blimp, hot dog
- But some do not, e.g.,
beat it, pig

Jargon

- Jargon or argot refers to the technical language used in a particular domain.
- For example, in this course we used a lot of linguistic jargon, e.g., *head, complement, parameter, AUX, morpheme, constituent*, etc.
- Computer jargon: *PC, CPU, RAM, ROM, modem, hacking, virus, download*, etc.

Taboo or not taboo? That's the question

- Some words are considered *taboo* and are not to be used, at least not in the presence of "polite company."
- F-words in English. Names of sexual organs. That's why you have to star (*****) them in writing or bleep them on TV.

Euphemisms

- The presence of taboo words leads to the creation of so-called *euphemisms*, expressions that are used to avoid a taboo word.
"pass away" or *"pass on"* for *"die"*
"funeral directors" for *"morticians"*
- Other instances of taboo words are those that have "racist" associations, e.g., *kike, wop, nigger, towelhead, slant*.

Code-switching

- Another pattern of sociolinguistic behavior is *code-switching*, where bilingual speakers typically move back and forth between two languages in their speech.
- Code-switching is common in places where more than one language is used. We see it in certain parts of Canada where speakers code-switch between English and French. The Swiss also switch between French and German. In the US, this is common among bilingual speakers of English and Spanish.

Code-switching is rule-governed

- Code-switching does not produce “broken” English. There’s no such thing as Spanglish or TexMex.
- The process is still governed by the rules of each language.

Code-switching is rule-governed

- In Spanish NPs, for example, the adjective usually follows the noun (unlike in English NPs):
My mom fixes green tamales. Adj N
Mi mamá hace tamales verdes. N Adj
 - In a code-switching situation a bilingual Spanish-English speaker may produce:
My mom fixes tamales verdes.
Mi mamá hace green tamales.
- but not:
- *My mom fixes verdes tamales.
 - *Mi mamá hace tamales green.

Language and gender

- Language use may also reflect certain attitudes or expectations about sexes in society.
Compare:
My cousin is a professor.
My cousin is a nurse.
- As with racism, language use can reflect sexism in society, e.g., compare the connotation of *spinster/old maid* with that of *bachelor*.

Language and gender

- Dictionaries often give us clues to social attitudes. Examples in the 1969 edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary* include examples such as “*manly courage*” and “*masculine charm*”
but
“*womanish tears*” and “*feminine wiles*”
- In Webster’s *New World Dictionary of the American Language*, “*honorarium*” is defined as
“*a payment to a professional man for services on which no fee is set or legally obtainable.*”

Language and gender

- Perhaps “man” has two meanings: “male” and “human”.
- But:
“If a woman is swept off a ship into the water, the cry is *Man overboard*. If she is killed by a hit-and-run driver, the charge is *manslaughter*. If she is injured on the job, the coverage is *workmen’s compensation*. But if she arrives at the threshold marked *Men only*, she knows the admonition is not intended to bar animals or plants or inanimate objects. It is meant for her.”
A. Graham: “*How to make troubles.*”

Language and gender

- In many languages, terms referring to males are also used generically to refer to “mankind” or to everyone in a group:
All *men* are created equal.
Every student should do *his* best.
- A. A. Milne wonders;
“If the English language has been properly organized ... then there would be a word which meant both ‘he’ and ‘she’, and I could write, ‘If John or Mary comes, heesh will want to play tennis,’ which would save a lot of trouble.”
(*The Christopher Robin Birthday Book*)

Language and gender

- Some of the gender-biased aspects of language are changing, however, under the influence of the feminist movement and a common desire to avoid bias and stereotypes, and more general terms are used:

*Every student should do **their** best.*

chair (not chairman)

police officer (not policeman)

firefighter (not fireman)

Language and gender

- Language variation may also relate to the gender of the speaker. In some languages, this variation may actually be linguistic.
- In Koasati, spoken in Louisiana, words that end in /s/ when spoken by men, end in /l/ or /n/ when spoken by women, e.g.,
lakawhol (for women) and lakawhos (for men)
(= “lift it”)

Language and gender

- Sociolinguistic studies on the speech of men and women showed also that both genders differ in their usage of language.
- For example, women have been noted to use more standard forms than men.
- Why? We discuss that on Wednesday.

Next class agenda

- Pidgins and Creoles: Read the relevant section in Fromkin *et al*'s chapter.
- Also read the chapter on Pidgins and Creoles in David Crystal's Encyclopedia on reserve in the library (pp. 334-339).
- I also put an electronic copy of a chapter from Ray Jackendoff's book *Patterns in the Mind* on the syllabus table on the class website.