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Regional variation

Unit 5



1. Regional variation

1. *The topic of this unit:*

The present unit discusses a form of variation in language: regional variation. Variation in sociolinguistics means that people use one and the same language differently depending on who they are (younger or older, males or females, highly educated or not, etc.).

Regional variation reflects where a person comes from: which part of the language area. The study of regional variation is the oldest way in which variation has been studied: systematic study of regional variation by dialectologists began in the 19th century, first in Germany, then in France, and then in the English speaking world, the UK and the US.

2. *What is regional variation?*

In addition to social and stylistic variation, regional variation is a major aspect of variation in language. Regional variation is geographically based and shows which part of the language area a person is from.

Many factors contribute to regional variation (see the section on *Why do languages have dialects?* below), but the main reason is the same why language families develop over time from one ancestor language: some speakers of a language start to communicate less with each other (due to geographical separation, for instance), and so any new features of speech they develop will not spread to those speakers that they do not communicate with, and this will make their speech different from that of others in the long run. The first step in the divergence process is the development of regional dialects, which can grow into separate languages in time, if the separation continues and the number of features that differentiate the dialects grows.

Average people (non-linguists) are usually aware of regional differences to some extent. They are usually aware of other people's dialect features, but not of their own: basically, everyone takes their own regional dialect to be "normal", "featureless", and the default way to speak. People are often surprised when dialectologists want to study their speech, since they honestly think it is unremarkable, and the speech of other people (in the next village or town) is what should be studied since those who speak it really have "an accent".

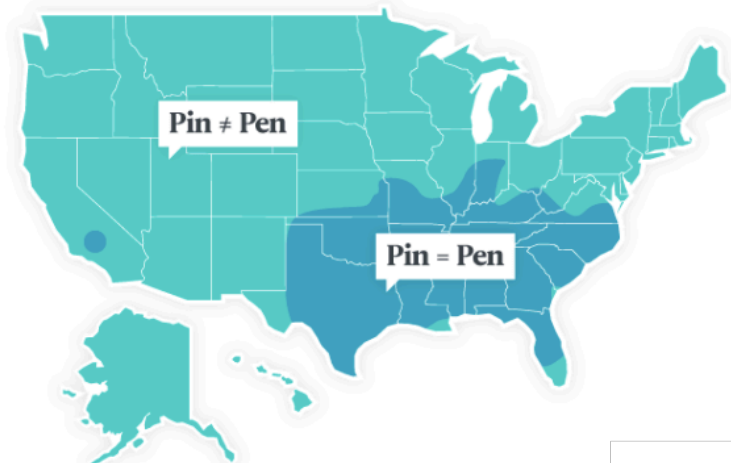
2.1. The study of regional variation

When linguists want to study regional variation, they collect data from a great range of places in the given language area, and about all subsystems of language: pronunciation, grammar, and the lexicon. Then they enter the results on maps, usually about one feature per map. The line that separates the occurrences of two variants of the same linguistic variable (basically, a linguistic feature that has variation) on a map is called an isogloss.

Maps 1 and 2 below show variation in two features of American English: how American English speakers refer to a second person plural subject (*y'all* is used in the South, and *you guys* everywhere else), and how they pronounce the vowel in *pin* vs. *pen* (again, in the the two vowels are pronounced identically, with the vowel in *pin*, whereas everywhere else there are two distinct vowels). The latter feature is usually called the “*pin* vs. *pen* merger” by linguists, since the two vowels merge in the pronunciation of the speakers.



Map 1. Plural you address in the United States



Map 2. The *pin* vs. *pen* merger in the United States

The dotted line is the isogloss in Map 1, and the line separating the turquoise areas from the blue areas is the isogloss in Map 2. The variability of address forms *you guys* vs. *y'all* is a lexical variable, whereas the *pin* vs. *pen* merger is a phonological variable. An example of a grammatical variable in US English is the non-standard use of the past participle with verbs like *need*, *want*, and *like*, e.g. *my car needs fixed*, *babies like cuddled*, *the dog wants fed* instead of the standard *my car needs fixing* or *my car needs to be fixed* etc. The construction involving the past participle is sometimes referred to as a feature of Pittsburghese, but in reality this feature is used more widely: in addition to Western

Pennsylvania (where Pittsburgh is), it is also used in eastern Ohio and northern West Virginia, the states to the west and to the south of Pennsylvania, respectively.

When several isoglosses coincide in what linguists call a “bundle” of isoglosses, this marks a dialect boundary. For instance, in Maps 1 and 2 above the isoglosses pretty much coincide and further isoglosses also fall in the same place, marking the boundary of Southern US English.

2.2. Dialect atlases

Information about regional dialects is traditionally collected and published in dialect atlases. The best known dialect atlas for American English is DARE, the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (<https://dare.wisc.edu>).

Traditional dialectology studies primarily lexical variation and regional phonological features. A recent project, the Yale Grammatical Diversity Project, however, studies grammatical variation in American English (<https://ygdp.yale.edu>), including very recent features such as drama SO (<https://ygdp.yale.edu/phenomena/drama-so>) and what all (<https://ygdp.yale.edu/phenomena/what-all>). You can also read about the *need* + past participle construction here, <https://ygdp.yale.edu/phenomena/needs-washed>.

2.3. Methods of dialectology

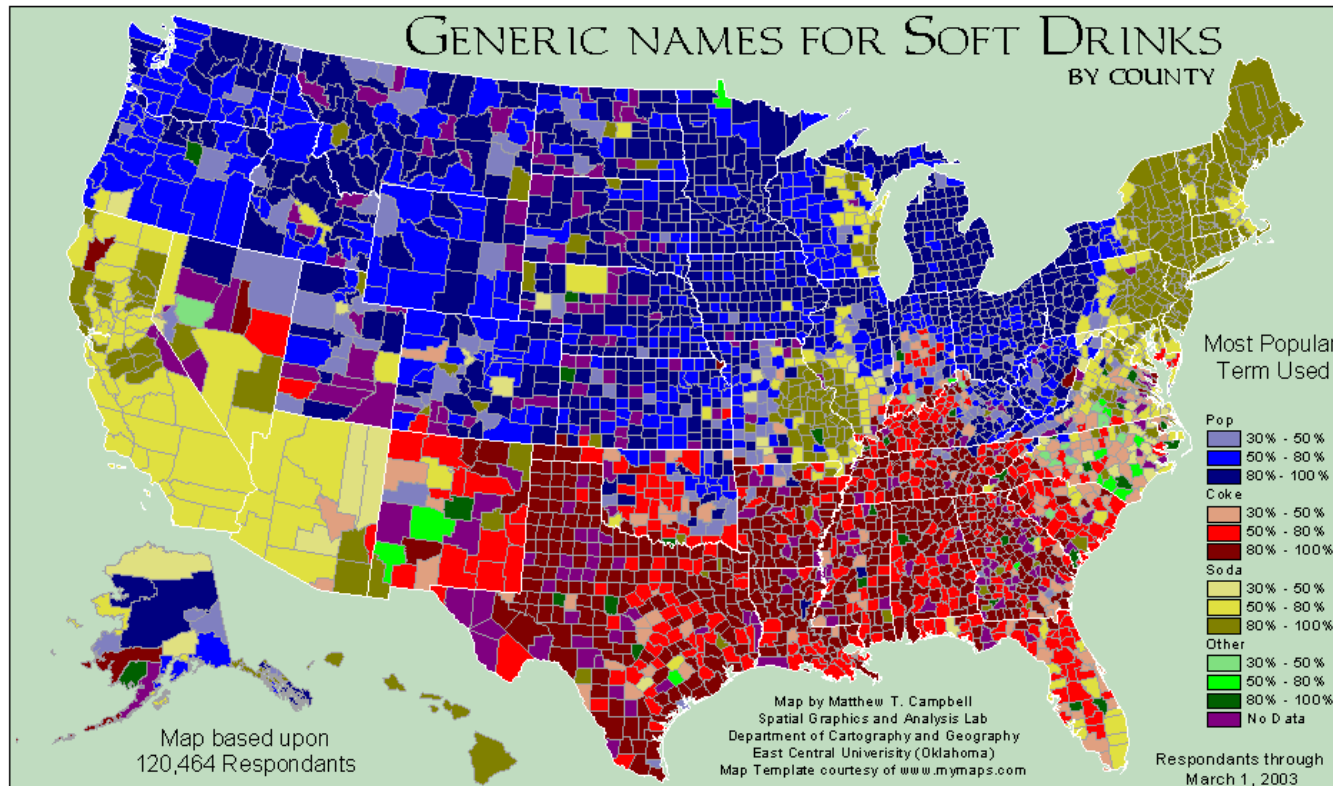
Traditionally, dialectologists collect data from the oldest speakers at a particular town or village, driven by the assumption that it is these speakers that best preserve the oldest features of the local dialect. Very often it is little educated and socially non-mobile people, often males, that are used as subjects for dialectological research.

The sociolinguistic critique of such selection of subjects is, however, that it produces data from a very small segment of the population: elderly, uneducated, non-mobile males. Due to the advance of sociolinguistics and sociolinguistic considerations in the past half a century, modern dialectologists select their subjects differently, giving equal attention to all social groups in society.

Question to think about:

In a lot of cases regional variation is very complex. Examine Map 3 below, showing variation in what Americans call a “carbonated soft drink”:
soda, pop, or coke.

1. In what ways is this map more complex than the cases discussed above?
2. What conclusions can you draw from this map regarding the nature of lexical variation in real life?



Map 3. What do Americans call a “carbonated soft drink”?

(https://www.reddit.com/r/coolguides/comments/97bpjn/names_for_generic_soft_drinks_by_us_county/)

3. Why do languages have dialects?

The basic social/historical idea about the reason for dialect differences, recognized by historical linguists before dialectology even existed, is that when speakers communicate more with some speakers of their language more than with others the slight changes that occur in people's speech will not spread to those with whom the speakers in question do not communicate. This, in time, gives rise to dialects of the language, and, given more time, to the development of related but separate languages.

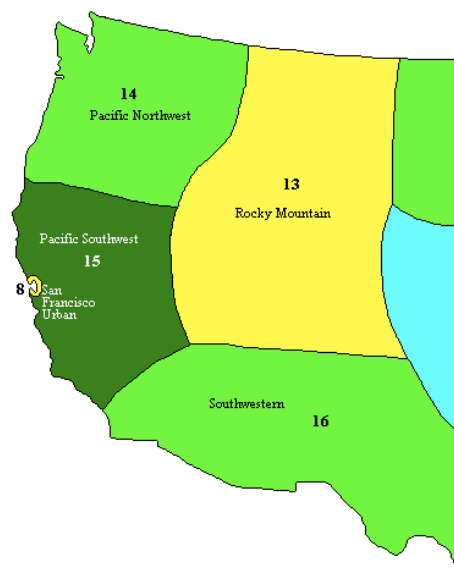
What is it then that impedes communication between people? It is geographical boundaries, first, and various social boundaries second.

3.1. Geographical boundaries

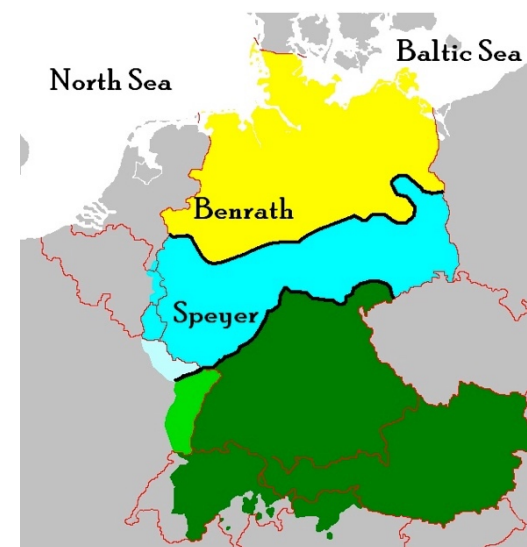
It is easy to see how geographical boundaries – mountain ranges, rivers, or even oceans – make communication more difficult: it is easier to *not* cross them than to cross them, and so more communication takes place on one side of them than across them. Gradually, this will result in changes on one side not spreading to the other and giving rise to dialect differences. Because of this, geographical boundaries are often the bases for dialect boundaries as well.



Map 4. Dialects in the eastern US



Map 5. Dialects in the western US



Map 6. German dialect boundaries

For instance, the US, the dialect boundary between the Upper South and Lower South dialects runs along the Appalachian Mountains (Map 4 above), and the dialect boundary between the Rocky Mountain dialect and the Pacific Northwest dialect runs along the Rocky Mountains (Map 5 above). The river Main in Germany (in Map 6 above, the line separating the dark green vs. turquoise colored areas) is the basis of a major German dialect boundary called the Speyer line.

Geography also plays an indirect role in the development of dialect boundaries: it often affects settlement patterns and migration routes, which, in turn, affect dialectal differentiation. In Map 4 above you can see that all the major dialect areas of the eastern United States (Upper North, Lower North, Upper South, and Lower South) extend from the east coast, the original settlement area, towards the middle of the continent, reflecting the way the migration and settlement continued later.

Political and religious boundaries can also serve as the basis of dialect boundaries. For instance, the big division between northern and southern dialects in the US (again, see Map 4, for the line between Lower North and Upper South) corresponds roughly to the Mason–Dixon line which separated the slaveholding south from the non-slaveholding north in the 19th century United States, an important political and social boundary.

3.2. Language contact

Contact with other languages can also contribute to dialect differences. Again, American English provides a good example. Because speakers of some immigrant languages have been living in certain parts of the US but not in others, there are lots of borrowed words in dialects of American English that are not used in other dialects. For instance, due to mass immigration of East European, Yiddish speaking Jews to New York City in the early 20th century, there are numerous words of Yiddish origin in New York and New Jersey speech which are not widely (or sometimes not at all) known in other parts of the US: *schmooze* “gossip”, *schmutter* “clothing; rubbish”, *schlep* “carry”, *schmaltz* “excessive sentimentality”, *schlock* “cheap material”. In the same way, there are lots of Slavic loanwords in Pennsylvania (*pierogie* “stuffed dumplings”, *kolbassi* “sausage”), French loanwords in Louisiana (*bayou* “outlet of a river”, *levee* “embankment”), Spanish loanwords in the southwest US (*barrio* “district”, *serape* “shawl, blanket”). In Hawaiian English, many loanwords originate from Hawaiian, the indigenous language of the island: *lanai* “verandah”, *ahi* “tuna-like fish”, *muumuu* “a woman’s loose and colorful dress”, *haole* “non-Hawaiian, white”.

3.3. Economic factors

Economic factors also contribute to the development of differences between dialects, especially in terms of differences between urban vs. rural areas. More language change and innovation stems from urban areas – especially big cities – for a variety of reasons: economically, urban centers attract people from various dialect backgrounds (they often find jobs more easily), resulting in some dialect mixture; and they

also serve as sources of social prestige, which means that people outside the cities will start to imitate the speech of the big city. Rural areas, on the other hand, are more socially stable and, therefore, less prone to innovation and various types of language change.

The urban vs. rural difference is also compounded by educational differences between urban vs. rural people: the former tend to be more educated and, therefore, more standard in their speech, whereas the latter are less educated and more likely to use regionalisms.

Research task:

1. Read this description of the Pittsburgh dialect: <https://www.pbs.org/speak/seatosea/americanvarieties/pittsburghese/>. Note any geographical, social, and economic reasons as well as language contact issues that likely contributed to the development of a dialect in the city.
2. Watch the video lecture by Prof. Barbara Johnstone about Pittsburghese: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8ihyTbi2Kw>. What other reasons for the development of the Pittsburgh dialect does she talk about?

3.4. Mechanisms of change

The reasons for the development of dialect differences are always social. However, linguistically speaking there are certain patterns in which dialects change that eventually result in dialect differences. These linguistic patterns are well known from historical linguistics and involve processes like leveling of paradigms, (ir)regularization, and grammaticalization, and a range of phonetic, phonological, and semantic changes.

Leveling of paradigms occurs, for instance, in several non-standard dialects of English, where *was* is the past form of the verb *to be* in all persons and numbers (*I was, you was, he/she/it was, we was, etc.*), or, in other non-standard dialects, where *were* is the only such form (*I were, you were, he/she/it were, we were, etc.*).

Regularization is the change of irregular forms to regular (as in some dialects, where *bringed* is used instead of the more usual *brought* for the past tense form of the verb *to bring*), whereas irregularization is the opposite process (the use of some dialects of American English where *dove* and *snuck* are the past tense forms of *dive* and *sneak*, instead of the usual and standard *dived* and *sneaked*).

Grammaticalization is the development of lexical words into grammatical words over a long period of time in a language. The modern English auxiliary verbs *can, shall, and will* developed from full verbs meaning “know”, “owe”, and “wish, want”, respectively. Today the verb *go* is undergoing such a process in American English in the construction *go + lexical verb*, as in *go see Mom! or go do your homework!*

4. Modern dialectology

Modern dialectology is truly sociolinguistic in its approach to regional dialects. In the selection of subjects, dialectologists no longer limit themselves to including only older, less mobile, uneducated speakers but all speakers of a community. They also do not just focus on rural speech in their research but on urban speech as well, and not only on archaic forms of speech but new dialects, too. Such new dialects are, for instance, the dialect of Milton Keynes in England, or new Englishes, such as New Zealand English.

4. Questions to think about:

1. Why do you think sociolinguists are skeptical of the traditional methods of dialectology, where only the older, uneducated, and socially immobile people were studied?
2. American English is fairly unique in the various language contact effects it has undergone due to the various immigrant languages spoken in the US and their effect on English. Think about your own native language: has language contact even played a role in the development of its dialects?

Research task:

1. Read this description of the Pittsburgh dialect: <https://www.pbs.org/speak/seatosea/americanvarieties/pittsburghese/>. Note any geographical, social, and economic reasons as well as language contact issues that likely contributed to the development of a dialect in the city.
2. Watch the video lecture by Prof. Barbara Johnstone about Pittsburghese: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8ihyTbi2Kw>. What other reasons for the development of the Pittsburgh dialect does she talk about?
3. Now read the description of California speech here: <https://www.pbs.org/speak/seatosea/americanvarieties/californian/#>. Make a listing of the various factors that played a role in the development of this dialect, just like you did in (1) for Pittsburgh.

5. Summary

Regional variation is the aspect of variation in a language due to geographical divisions. Virtually all languages have regional variation and regional dialects, which is manifested in all subsystems of language: the pronunciation and sound system (phonetics and phonology), the grammar (morphology and syntax), and the vocabulary (lexicon and semantics). Regional variation has traditionally been studied by dialectologists, who record their findings in dialect atlases.

Review questions:

1. What are the three aspects of variation in language?
2. What are the main reasons languages have dialects?
3. What social reasons contribute to regional dialectal variation?
4. Can you think of examples of language contact contributing to regional dialectal differentiation?
5. What are some regional dialect features of Pittsburgh speech in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary?

Glossary of terms:

Dialect atlas: an atlas (a collection of maps) showing the occurrence of variants of linguistic features (pronunciation features, points of grammar, or vocabulary items) of a language on the map.

Dialect boundary: a bundle of isoglosses, that is, the line where several isoglosses coincide and mark the boundary of two neighboring dialects.

Grammaticalization: the historical development of lexical words into grammatical words. E.g. in English modal auxiliaries developed from full verbs.

Irregularization: language change that results in a regular form being replaced by an irregular form.

Isogloss: the line separating areas where different variants of the same linguistic feature occur.

Leveling of paradigms or paradigm leveling: a type of language change involving the generalization of a form across the whole paradigm.

Regional variation: a mixed language that is used for very limited purposes (trade) and has very limited grammar and vocabulary.

Regularization: language change that results in an irregular form being replaced by a regular form.

Quizzes:

see separate files

Further reading:

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