Social and stylistic variation

Unit 6

1. Social and stylistic variation

1. The topic of this unit:

The present unit discusses two forms of variation in language: social and stylistic variation. In addition to regional variation, discussed in unit 5, these constitute the other two types of variation in language.

The study of social variation addresses the issue of how we speak differently based on who we are socially: young or old, female or male, educated or not. When sociolinguists study social variation, they look at how language is used within the same community by speakers of various social characteristics. Stylistic variation occurs along yet another parameter: how we use language differently depending on the situation we are in: in formal situations we use a much more formal kind of language than in informal situations. One and the same speaker will produce different language use depending on the situation. If we look at it from the perspective of the individual speaker: she or he speaks a particular regional dialect, is defined by who they are, but produces variable language depending on the situation. Such variation is systematic across both social groups and situations.

Both social and stylistic variation are the focus of modern sociolinguistics, and the branch of sociolinguistics that studies has several designations: it is called variationist sociolinguistics, Labovian sociolinguistics (after the founder of the field, William Labov), quantitative sociolinguistics (because the results, as we will see, are usually quantitative), or urban dialectology (because it looks at variation primarily in urban communities).

Non-linguists are usually aware of social and stylistic variation only to a limited extent: they can make correct inferences about the social characteristics of speakers based on their speech (typically about social class and education) and notice when somebody uses language inappropriately in a situation (for instance, using too informal language in a formal situation or the other way around).

2. What is social variation in language?

Social variation is the patterning of speech along social features such as age, gender, education, social class, race, religion, etc. Not all of these social features are relevant in every community, however. In order to study social variation, a sociolinguists needs to be able to observe (preferably record) and describe speakers' speech and know what social features characterize the speakers. The linguistic features that a sociolinguist studies are features of language that involve variation: these are called **sociolinguistic variables**. The social features that

characterize the speakers are the **social variables**. The point of variationist sociolinguistic investigation is to find out how variation in language use (quantified through sociolinguistic variables) relates to social differences (quantified through social variables).

2.1. The study of social variation

When linguists want to study social variation, they have a more difficult job than in the study of regional variation. While dialectologists can ask direct questions about what certain things are called when they are interested in lexical features of regional dialects, and ask speakers to pronounce words to record phonetic features, sociolinguists cannot ask such direct questions and draw speakers' conscious attention to how they speak, because sociolinguists are interested in people's vernaculars, i.e. the ways of speaking people produce when conversing "normally", when they are not observed. It is in the vernacular that people produce the most usual linguistic features that reflect who they really are socially. When people pay attention to their speech (for instance, in a formal situation, when talking to "somebody important"), they modify their speech to be more standard than what they usually produce.

This brings up a paradox that has to be overcome in the sociolinguist's work: the **observer's paradox** – first pointed out and so named by William Labov – notably that sociolinguists want to observe the kind of speech people produce when they are not observed. To overcome the observer's paradox, sociolinguists basically have to achieve that speakers do not modify their speech to be more formal but produce their usual kind of speech. This is not easy, since often the linguist doing the data collection in a sociolinguistic study is exactly the kind of person with whom speakers would modify their speech. One way of overcoming the observer's paradox is to train members of the studied community to collect the data. Another one is to put speakers into situations where they feel like "experts", where they know something that the interviewing sociolinguist does not, and have them talk about issues they have more knowledge in than the linguist. (This can be anything: how to cook, garden, bring up children. It can be something even more mundane: in one of his articles, Labov describes how he asked unemployed inner city young men he was interviewing about what constitutes a fair fight.)

Social variation also often involves stigmatized non-standard features of language, i.e. features which are commonly associated with insufficient education or low class. Thus, speakers who are aware of using these features would not readily admit to using them, or even if they did, they would not know how often and in what situations they use them – so asking them directly would not be of any use.

These issues – the observer's paradox and the fact that people are not very aware of the details of their language use – means that methodology of data collection is a crucially important aspect of variationist sociolinguistic research.

3. Methods in variationist sociolinguistics

The first very important issue in sociolinguistic methodology involves sampling, that is, the way speakers (subjects) are chosen. This is important because the sample of speakers has to be representative of the population they are part of. If the sample used is representative of the total population, the results will be generalizable to this population.

If, for instance, a sociolinguist wants to study the way people in one city speak, they need to choose their subjects such that the group of speakers they study reflect the composition of the population of the city in all the important social variables: age, gender, class or education, and possibly other, locally important variables. Choosing subjects is most often done by strict random sampling or stratified random sampling, with the latter being more frequent. Stratified random sampling means that, first, the sociolinguist figures out what proportion of their subjects need to be from which social group (age groups, gender groups, etc.) on the basis of known figures regarding the composition of the population of the city. And then, the sociolinguist calculates how many subjects they require in which 'cell' based on the total number of subjects they are planning to have in their study. For instance, if a total of 200 subjects are used in the study, and 48% of the population in the city are males and 52% are females, then the study should use 96 males and 104 females, and the composition of the gender groups should also match the composition of the population by age, class, etc.

Research task:

Let's say you want to do a sociolinguistic study of students in the Faculty of Arts (or whatever faculty you are a student of) at your university. You want your sample to be representative, but you only have resources to use 100 subjects. Make a list of social variables that you think are important: they will probably include age, gender, perhaps major of study. Anything else?

1. Find out from the Registrar's Office the most important figures regarding the student population: how many students total the faculty has; how many students are in the 1st, 2nd, etc. years, and the various majors, and what are the proportions of women vs. men among the students.

2. Make a big table using all the social variables you are using. Calculate how many of your subjects will be in the various cells based on the figures of the total population of students at the faculty.

3. What linguistic features of the students' language use would you study?

The second most important methodological issue is how the sociolinguist collects the data in such a way that they elicit the subjects' vernacular. The classic method of data collection in variationist sociolinguistics is the sociolinguistic interview: an oral and recorded interview, in which, first of all, the sociolinguist converses with the subject about everyday topics, and which typically might also involve reading tasks. The reason for using reading tasks is to be able to compare informal speech (from the conversation) with formal speech (reading style).

4. The sociolinguistic variable

The linguistic features that a sociolinguist concentrates on in their investigation are features of language that they know from their own experience that speakers in the given community use in different ways. These linguistic features are called sociolinguistic variables, and the 'different ways' in which they are used are called variants. Typically, one variant is standard, the other one(s) is/are non-standard. Some sociolinguistic variables occur everywhere in the given language area, others are regionally based. In English, the pronunciation of the -ing ending as -in' (non-standard) or -ing (standard), and the use of double (also called multiple) negation are variables that occur everywhere in the English speaking world. The absence of postvocalic (or coda) r is a feature of several US dialects, the New York City dialect among them: the absence of the r in words like car or farm is non-standard, while its presence is standard.

Results are quantified in variationist sociolinguistics, with linguists calculating what percentage of the time a speaker uses the non-standard variant of a sociolinguistic variable. For instance, in Walt Wolfram's study of Detroit black speech, the following (Figures 1 and 2) was found for the absence of postvocalic r and absence of 3rd person present tense agreement, respectively (columns indicate class, UM: upper middle; LM: lower middle; UW: upper working; LW: lower working).

So, Figure 1 shows that upper middle class black speakers do not pronounce a postvocalic r 20.8% of the time, lower middle class blacks 38.8% of the time, upper working class blacks 61.3% of the time, and lower working class blacks 71.7% of the time. The results for 3rd person present tense agreement (Figure 2) look somewhat different: there is a great difference between middle class vs. working class blacks, and not much difference between upper vs. lower strata within them.
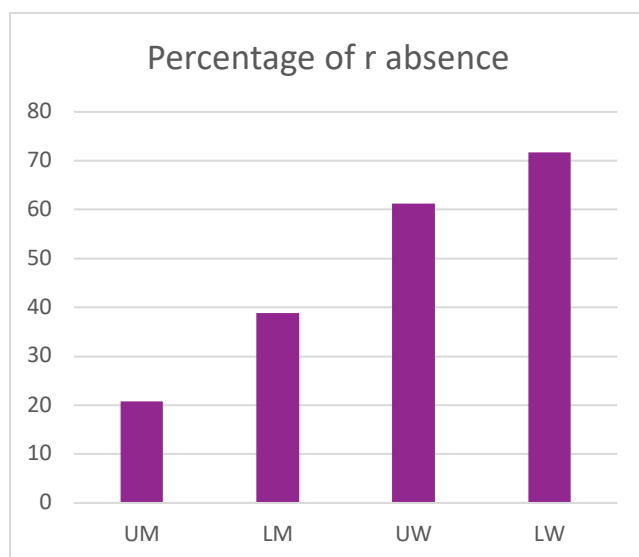
Figure 1. Percentage of r absence in Detroit black speech. (Based on Wolfram 1969: 110.)
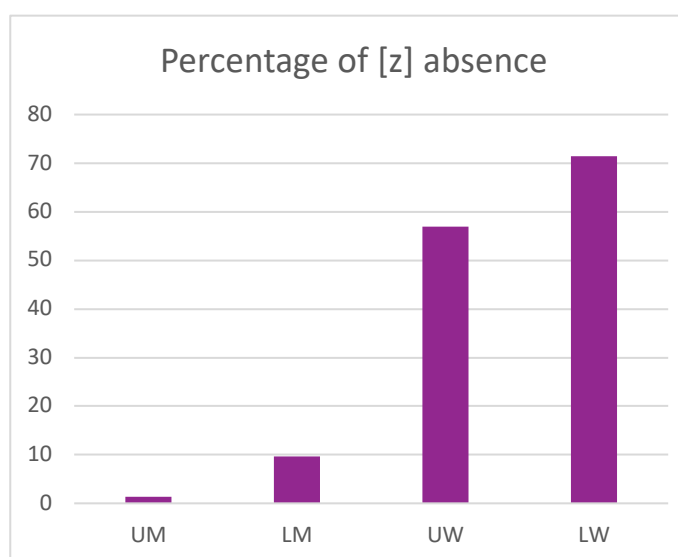

Figure 2. Percentage of 3rd person present tense agreement in Detroit black speech. (Based on Wolfram 1969: 136.)

5. Stylistic variation

Stylistic variation is the intraspeaker (i.e. 'within-speaker') variation that all of us exhibit between more formal vs. more informal styles, along a continuum which extends from the most formal to the most informal styles. Where the two endpoints are for each of us is dependent on our social characteristics: the most informal style of an upper class British speaker might be still more standard than the most formal style of a lower working class British speaker, whereas the styles of two people closer in class will be more overlapping. However, we all produce more standard speech in formal styles and more non-standard speech in informal styles.

Table 1 below repeats Trudgill's results from Unit 1, showing the differences between the speech styles of Norwich speakers regarding the pronunciation of -ing (which Trudgill calls 'the (ng) variable'). In his study, Trudgill used 4 different styles, ranging from the most informal *casual speech* through *formal speech* and *reading passage style* to the most formal *word list style*. As we can see, middle middle class female Norwich speakers produce standard forms of -ing all the time even in casual speech, whereas lower class male speakers produce nonstandard

forms of -ing all the time in three of the four styles and produce standard forms about one-third of the time only in the most formal style studied, word lists. The other types of speakers are between these two extremes.

Table 1. The (ng) variable in Norwich: percentage of nonstandard forms

Social class[a]	No.	Sex	Style[b]			
			WLS	RPS	FS	CS
MMC	6	M	0	0	4	31
		F	0	0	0	0
LMC	8	M	0	0	27	17
		F	0	0	3	67
UWC	16	M	0	18	81	95
		F	11	13	68	77
MWC	22	M	24	43	91	97
		F	20	46	81	88
LWC	8	M	66	100	100	100
		F	17	54	97	100

[a] Social class: MMC (middle middle class), LMC (lower middle class), UWC (upper working class), MWC (middle working class), LWC (lower working class).
[b] Style: WLS (word list), RPS (reading passage), FS (formal), CS (casual).
Source: based on Trudgill (1974, p. 94)

Question to think about:
1.   In your native language, what are some of the ways that stylistic variation is manifested?
2.   What do you think makes a speech situation 'formal' or 'informal'? Is it the interlocutor, the setting, the topic? A combination of these? What else?
3.   Linguistically speaking, what constitutes very informal speech for a very educated or high class person will be very different from what constitutes informal speech for a little educated or lower class person. Can you think of some linguistic features in your native language where you would expect to find differences?

6. The interplay of regional, social and stylistic variation

Regional, social and stylistic variation is relevant and closely intertwined in every speaker's speech. Most speakers exhibit features of their region in their speech at least to some extent, but to what extent they do will depend of who they are socially: people lower down the social scale exhibit them more than people higher up the social scale. And, in addition, every speaker has a range of styles they use, with the more informal involving more non-standard and regional characteristics, and the more formal being closer to the standard.

Research task:

Listen to the TED Talk by American linguist Dan Everett: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=get272FyNto. After you listened to the talk once, listen to it again and make note of Everett's pronunciation of *-ing* endings on verbs: tally how many times he pronounces the ending as the non-standard [ɪn] and how many times as the standard [ɪŋ]. What proportion of the former have you found? Given that Everett is a highly educated upper middle class person speaking in a formal situation, what possible explanation can you think of for a relatively high occurrence of the nonstandard variant? Now listen to his talk again and listen for other linguistic features in which Everett could be exhibiting non-standard linguistic behavior, for instance, double negation, or any regional features that are not part of the standard. What do you find?

6. Questions to think about:

1. There is linguistic research that indicates that people tend to change their speech to make it more similar to their interlocutor's (a phenomenon called *accommodation*). How does this complicate the study of social variation in speech? What do you think can be done to minimize the effect of accommodation on people's speech?

2. What does Everett's example show you about the nature of variation, given that he does not exhibit any other non-standard features?

Research task:

If your native language is not English but has been learned as a foreign language: make a list of linguistic features that you would need to modify you're your language use in if you wanted to speak it "as a native" of New York City, London, or any other big city. Choose a city and do some research on what features characterize it.

7. Summary

Social variation in language is the aspect of variation in a language due to social characteristics (called social variables) such as age, gender, education, and/or social class (and in some cases others, such as race, religion, etc.), whereas stylistic variation is the aspect of variation along the formal vs. informal continuum. Research into both of these aspects has to follow fairly strict methodology regarding the selection of subjects (sampling) as well as the elicitation of data.

Review questions:
1. What are the three aspects of variation in language?
2. What is the vernacular and why it is important for sociolinguists?
3. What is the observer's paradox? How can it be overcome?
4. What is representativeness and what is generalizability? How are the two related in sociolinguistic studies?
5. What are the most important social variables?

Glossary of terms:

Observer's paradox: the problem that all variationist sociolinguistic researchers have to overcome, namely, that they aim to observe and study the kind of language use (the vernacular) that people produce when they are not being observed.
Social variation: one of the kinds of variation in language, which is based on social characteristics of the speakers.
Sociolinguistic variable: a linguistic feature that can be realized in different ways while still expressing the same meaning. For instance, the pronunciation of -*ing* in English can be non-standard [ɪn] or standard [ɪŋ].
Stylistic variation: one of the kinds of variation in language, which is based on the formality or informality of the situation a speaker is in.
Variant: one of the ways in which a sociolinguistic variable can be realized. Typically, one variant is standard, and two or more variants are non-standard.

Quizzes:
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdi6GZfN5HvdzSV4AACMgLfQVMBB69R8OVfHUjqibPhlfCHpQ/viewform

see also separate files

Further reading:

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