

THE DEPTH AND BREADTH  
OF LANGUAGE VARIATION

Paul E. Reed Ph.D

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Why should you care about language variation?

- In a 2019 paper, Jones et al show that court transcriptionists were only 60% accurate in understanding African-American English
  - ▣ 'The transcriptions changed the *who, what, when, or where* 31% of the time. And 77% of the time, they couldn't accurately paraphrase what they had heard.'
  - ▣ They are certified to be 95% accurate...

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Why should we care about language variation?

- Baugh et al (1999) and Wright (2018, forthcoming) showed that property managers discriminate based on dialect
  - ▣ Baugh – call back rate/unit availability were correlated with African-American % of neighborhood
  - ▣ Wright – real estate agent listeners had different notions of personality/competence from 9 sec clips

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### Why should we care about variation?

- A recent poster at ASHA showed that children who speak Southern US English would score as having an articulation disorder unless a modified scoring system was used
  - ▣ 57% of the children would've been referred using the Standard scoring method
  - ▣ Rate of referral dropped to a more realistic 10% after using Modified Scoring

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### To remind ourselves

- It is the position of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) that no dialectal variety of English is a disorder or a pathological form of speech or language. Each **social dialect** is adequate as a functional and effective variety of English. Each serves a communication function as well as a **social solidarity** function. It maintains the communication network and the social construct of the **community of speakers** who use it. Furthermore, each is a symbolic representation of the historical, social, and cultural background of the speakers.

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### Situating Ourselves

- **Sociolinguistics:**
  - the study of how and why language varies in correlation with setting, geography, and social group membership
- **Language variation:** the study of language use according to the characteristics of its users and its *contexts of use*.
  - Variationist studies are traditionally large-scale, correlational and quantitative; we will examine more qualitative, micro-interactive, discourse-centered approaches later on.
- **Principles of language variation:**
  - Variation is governed by systematic rules
  - Variation happens at all linguistic levels, from phonology to morphology, syntax and the lexicon.

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**Language and Dialect**

“Linguistically speaking, no one dialect or language is better, more correct, more systematic, or more logical than any other”  
(*Language Files* p410)

Rosina Lippi-Green: a dialect is “perhaps nothing more than a language that gets no respect” (quoted in *HEW* 349).

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**Standardness and Prestige**

- Linguistic variables themselves cannot be better or worse than others
  - Social meanings are arbitrary: /r/-less English in UK vs. Boston
- The difference lies in the notion of **prestige**
  - Prestige is the ‘statusful’ social meaning of a linguistic variety
    - Associated with **power** in society (typically high SEC, education, etc)
    - This is **overt prestige**
  - But there is also value in using nonstandard varieties (otherwise people wouldn’t use them)
    - This value has to do with **solidarity** - maintaining membership in a group
    - The in-group appeal of non-standard varieties is known as **covert prestige**

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**Language Varieties**

- According to linguists, everyone speaks a dialect, and every dialect is also a complete, systematic language:
  - “Dialects and languages are in fact the same kinds of thing [...] Linguists never say things like ‘That is just a dialect, not a language’” (Wolfram 1998:44).

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**Dialect**

- Dialect (to linguists): “a neutral label to refer to any variety of a language that is shared by a group of speakers”
  - no good or bad dialects
  - If you speak a language you speak a dialect of that language (the standard is still a dialect)
- Dialect (popularly):
  - Refer to those who speak differently from oneself
  - Refer to varieties of English with societally recognized features
  - Refer to an incorrect or deficient English
    - Principle of linguistic subordination
  - Refer to a particular socially stigmatized variety of English

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**Dialect Myths**

- Popular myths about dialects differ from linguistic facts
  - Public perception of linguistic diversity contradicts linguistic realities
  - “A dialect is something that someone else speaks”
  - “Dialects always have highly noticeable features that set them apart.”
  - “Only varieties of a language spoken by socially disfavored groups are dialects.”
- Note: mostly negative myths
- Language Ideology: “ingrained, unquestioned beliefs about the way the world is, the way it should be, and the way it has to be with respect to language” (9)
  - what are the implications for those dialects that are considered “corrupt,” “bad,” or “ungrammatical” versions of the standard?

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**Standard Language Varieties**

- Standard American English
  - Refers to socially non-stigmatized forms of English
- Formal Standard English
  - (Prescriptive Standard English)
  - Based on written language and is codified in grammar texts
  - Conservative, resistant to change
  - Seen in impersonal writing and very formal spoken occasions
  - No speakers consistently speak as prescribed in grammar texts

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### Standard Dialects

- Informal Standard English
  - Continuum of standardness (continuous notion)
    - Extreme ends of continuum are usually judged consistently, but the middle speakers are not
  - Judgment of standardness depends on:
    - The hearer's background and experiences
    - The features being judged
    - Regional standards
- What is judged as non-standard?
  - Vocabulary
  - Pronunciation
  - Stigmatized grammatical structures

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### Vernacular Dialects

- Vernacular dialect: variety typified by use of nonstandard forms
  - Related to social class, region, ethnicity, situation, etc
  - Characterized by presence of stigmatized forms
    - How is this different from standard varieties?
  - Not considered socially respectable (because they are associated with socially disfavored groups)
    - How is this different from standard varieties?
    - Does this association reflect language facts?
    - Does this association reflect social facts?

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### Labeling Dialects

- Why might the way we label a dialect be important?
  - Social impact? Political impact?
- Why is the act of labeling a dialect difficult?
  - Carry strong connotations
  - Labeling a dialect entails labeling the people who speak it
- AAE (African American English)
  - Doesn't enter into "language" v. "variety" debate
  - Neutral term

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### Language Varieties

- Terminology
  - **Variety** (broadest term– any code used by a community)
    - **Idiolect** (individual' s unique way of speaking)
  - **Accent** (Phonological only)
  - **Dialect** (associated with geographical area or social group)
  - **Register** (associated with typical contexts of use)
    - Journalism register, sermon register
  - **Style** (“language varieties” that you put on in a given situation, often linked to formality, but also types of identities)

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### Introduction to Variation

- **Style**
  - All speakers can vary their own language (their idiolect)
  - Styles can be based in topic, setting, addressee
    - Usually determined by formality
- **Register**
  - Similar to a style, but a register is specific to a certain context and type of speech act
    - Eg, legalese register, Business English, medical English, ceremonial English

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### Introduction to Variation

- **Slang:**
  - Stylistically chosen lexical items, typically informal
  - **Common:** available to all speakers
    - *fridge for refrigerator*
  - **In-group:** available only to speakers with group-privileged status
    - College student slang. Examples?
- **Jargon:**
  - lexical items specific to a hobby or occupation
    - Eg, medical jargon, IT jargon

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**Variation and Linguistic Structure**

- Variation exists at all levels:
  - Phonetic
  - Phonological
  - Morphological
  - Syntactic
  - Semantic
  - Pragmatic

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**Variation and Linguistic Structure**

- Phonetic variation
  - A sound functions the same (ie, means the same thing), but is *articulated differently* in different varieties
    - Eg, /t/ in English in *bottle*
    - AmE: [bɑrɪ]
    - BrE: [bɑʔl]
  - Differences based on style or register of speech
    - Eg, /t/ in English in *bottle*
    - Informal AmE: [bɑrɪ]
    - Formal AmE: [bɑt]

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**Variation and Linguistic Structure**

- Phonological variation
  - A sound functions the same (ie, means the same thing), but *follows different phonological patterns* or rules
  - Differences in phonological inventory
    - Are these minimal pairs?
      - Dawn [dɔn] Don [dɔn]
      - Caught [kɔt] cot [kɔt]
      - Hawk [hɔk] hock [hɔk]
    - Differences in allowable sequences
      - English allows word-initial clusters: /sp/, /st/, /sk/
      - Spanish does not allow these clusters word-initially
        - Native Spanish speakers often add a vowel:
          - Student [Estudɛnt]

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### Variation and Linguistic Structure

- Morphological variation
  - Distribution of morphemes may be different across varieties
    - Eg, Use of the possessive /s/ in English
  - The use of different morphemes for the same function across varieties
    - Eg, reflexive pronouns in standard and nonstandard American English
      - himself vs. himself
      - theirselves vs. themselves
  - Variation across styles or registers
    - You guys, youse, y'all, yinz in American English varieties

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### Variation and Linguistic Structure

- Syntactic variation
  - Variation in what lexical categories words belong to (determining how they behave)
    - Eg, Southern AmE done as an AuxVerb
      - She done already told you
    - Eg, Southern AmE right as Adverb
      - A right good meal
  - Variation in how words combine together
    - Eg, midwestern AmE
      - The car needs washed
        - The car needs to be washed
        - The car needs washing
      - Double modals

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### Variation and Linguistic Structure

- Semantic (or Lexical) variation
  - Variation in what words are used to refer to the same object
    - (many words that refer to the same object)
      - Eg, to refer to 'sweet carbonated beverages'
        - <http://www.popvsoda.com/>
  - Variation in what a single word refers to
    - (a word that refers to many different objects)
      - Eg, 'barbecue'
  - Can be determined by style or register
    - Eg, Use of euphemisms, curse words

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## Variation and Linguistic Structure

- Pragmatic variation
  - Variation in how language is used in contexts
    - Relationships between Gricean maxims can vary by language
      - Eg, in some languages it is most important to be truthful (don't break the maxim of quality) and in some it is most important to be polite (so the maxim of quality can be broken more easily)
    - E.g., spinach in your teeth
  - Variation based on style or register
    - Formulations of speech acts as direct (based on politeness reasons)

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## Variation and Social Structure

Units of study:

- **Speech community**
  - A group of speakers defined by extra-linguistic variables (usually large-scale groups)
    - Eg, region, socio-economic class (SEC), age, gender, ethnicity, etc
- **Social network**
  - Represents the connections within a group of speakers
    - How people connect with others, how often, what kinds of people, what venues of contact, etc
  - Social networks are often used for studies of language change
- **Community of practice**
  - Group of speakers defined by their participation in a common goal
    - Usually a small scale group of speakers
  - Currently the most popular in studies of variation.

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## Implications

- Think critically about any assessment you use
  - Does the scoring need to be modified?
  - Does the procedure need to be modified?
- Think critically about other sources of data
  - Examples of situational effects
  - Consider how you might need to adjust the procedure
- Think critically about your own beliefs and how you describe/discuss language
- Be aware of your own biases
- Be aware of your own dialect

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□ Be familiar with some dialectology literature/journals

- You don't have to be a linguist, but you should know a little bit about variation

□ Be familiar with some of the linguistic atlas

- Some of these are somewhat technical
- For Alabama, the *Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States* and some other projects (Gazetteer of Southern Vowels – great resource!)

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### Implications

□ What do you do with this information? How should it inform your practice?

- Collect lots of data
- Listen, listen, listen
- Be involved in the communities
- Be sensitive to variation, and advocate for speakers of ALL dialects
  - You are seen as language experts!

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### Thank you!

Questions? Comments?

✉ [pereed1@ua.edu](mailto:pereed1@ua.edu)

 [pereed1](#)

 [paulereed.com](http://paulereed.com)

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