

University of Biskra

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THEME THREE: Language Variation

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1. Sociolinguistics and Language Variation

Sociolinguistics and language variation involve the study of how language varies among different groups of speakers and the relationship of this variation to social factors. The study of the effects of social structure on language and the exploration of the speaker's linguistic diversity could help people know more about one way language to develop his/her personal, cultural, and social identities.

On the available literature, it has always been said that William Labov is the founder of variationist linguistics and his seminal work entitled, "Social Stratification of English in New York City", published in 1966, is seen to be the cornerstone in sociolinguistic research. For Labov (2008), any investigation "begins with the simple act of noticing a variation – that there were two alternative ways of saying the same thing" (as cited in Djenane, 2018, p. 24). Djenane (2018) explicated this strong point that urged Labov to demonstrate that "Language use is highly structured and not random". In Djenane's words, it is stated:

Language use is conditioned by a number of social structures. To put it in another way, language use is conditioned by a number of social variables like social class, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, status, level of education, since then, a plethora of research about language and society have mushroomed (Djenane, 2018, p. 24).

With regard to the basic assumption that views that language variation is socially determined, it is worth noting that language variation presupposes that languages vary from one place to another, from one situation to another, and from one social group to another. This implies that language variation is the outcome of the effects of social factors on language. These social factors could concern examples such as geographical, ethnic, social class, gender, age, socio-economic status, and educational factors. For sociolinguistics, these social variables are interconnected and are also reflected in every language variety's pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and syntax.

2. Main Manifestations of Language Variation

The manifestations of language variation could be identified in many examples. In what follows, the main examples are going to be briefly defined and presented:

2.1 Dialect

A dialect is a particular variety of language. It is the collection of attributes (phonetic, phonological, syntactic, and morphological) that make one group of speakers noticeably different from another group of speakers of the same language.

In general, there are many types of dialects. Examples of these are:

2.1.1 Regional Dialect. A regional dialect is a variety of language spoken in a particular country. A regional dialect is not a distinct language. Some examples of regional dialects could be the “Hillbilly English”, the English language used by the Appalachians in the United States of America, and the “Goodie”, the English language used in Newcastle in the United Kingdom.

2.1.2 Minority Dialect. A minority dialect is a variety of language spoken by a particular minority ethnic group and used as a marker of identity. Examples of minority dialects could concern the American Vernacular English in the USA, London Jamaican in Britain, and Aboriginal English in Australia.

2.1.3 Standard and Non-standard Dialect. A standard dialect is a variety of language, which is supported by institutions. Such institutional support may include:

- government recognition or designation,
- presentation as being the “correct” form of language in schools,
- published grammars, dictionaries, and textbooks that set forth “correct” spoken and written forms, and
- an extensive formal literature that employs dialect in prose, poetry, non-fiction, etc.

Examples of standard dialect comprise: Standard American English, Standard British English, and Standard Philippine English.

Contrarily, a non-standard dialect is not a beneficiary of institutional support although it has a complete vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. The non-standard dialect of the English language in Southern England could be a good example of non-standard dialects.

2.2 *Idiolect*

An idiolect is a variety of a language unique to an individual. That is, every individual has an idiolect. This mainly concerns the individual's grouping of words and phrases. The sum of idiolects can make an *ecolect*, a variety of language specific to a household.

2.3 *Sociolect*

A sociolect is a variety of language characteristic of a social background or status. An example of a sociolect is Standard Italian, which is a dialect spoken by and particular to Tuscany. Nonetheless, being the natural language of Italy, it is a sociolect since it carries a certain prestige from being the language that is used in all the country. It is used in all sectors, including the media, education, and also used in the press.

2.4 *Register*

A register is a variety of language which focuses on the use of language in a particular situation. Wardaugh (2006) says that “registers are sets of language items associated with discrete occupational or social groups” (p. 52). This means that each speaker has a range of varieties and choices of language at different times. A register is mainly characterised by vocabulary differences either by the use of particular words or by the use of words in a particular kind of language produced by the social situation.

A register is commonly identified by certain phonological variants, vocabulary, idioms, and expressions that are associated with different occupational or socio-economic groups. For Ferguson (1984), “people participating in recurrent communication situations tend to develop similar vocabularies, similar features of intonation, and characteristics of bits of syntax and phonology that they use in these situations” (p. 20). Of course, one person may control a variety

of registers. One can be an airline pilot, a journalist, a financier, etc. Each register helps the speaker communicate at a specific time and/or place.

2.5 Style

A style is about the range of variation within the speech of an individual speaker. It concerns a variety of language from formal to informal. It is argued that people's styles of speech could reflect not only aspects of their identity, such as their ethnicity, age, gender, and social background but also indicate the contexts in which language is being used.

According to Joos (1961), there are five speech styles that speakers of a given language tend to use depending on the context where they are and the people they address. These speech styles are:

1. **Intimate:** It is a private style that is often used between or among the members of one family. The language used in this style may not be shared in public.
2. **Casual:** It is a common style among peers and friends. It uses a mixture of different forms of language, such as jargon, slang, or vernacular language.
3. **Consultative:** It is a standard style. Professional or mutually-acceptable language is recommended in this style. Examples of situations of this style include communications between teacher and student, doctor and patient, judge and lawyer, employers, and employees.
4. **Formal:** It is a style that is used in formal settings. Unlike the consultative style, this is one-way. This style is found in speeches of ministers, formal talkers, and pronouncements of judges.
5. **Frozen:** It is a frozen style in time since it remains unchanged. It mostly occurs in ceremonies. Examples are religions and historical ceremonies.

2.6 Defining some Concepts Common in Language Variation

- **Isogloss:** It is a geographical boundary or delineation of a certain linguistic feature. In other words, it is about a line or a map enclosing an area within which a particular linguistic feature is found.
- **Jargon:** It is a specific terminology that relates to a specific activity, profession, or group. It develops as a kind of shorthand, to quickly express ideas that are frequently discussed between the members of a group. It is more specialised or precisely used among practitioners of a particular field.
- **Slang:** It is the use of informal words and expressions to describe an object or condition. It is the vocabulary that is meant to be interpreted quickly but not necessarily literally. It is particular to a certain subculture, such as musicians and members of the minority of groups.
- **Taboo:** It is concerned with the use of a term to replace a well-known conventional synonym to avoid the discomfort caused by this conventional term.