



LANGUAGE VARIETY

"Language is a process of free creation; its laws and principles are fixed, but the manner in which the principles of generation are used is free and infinitely varied. Even the interpretation and use of words involves a process of free creation"

Noam CHOMSKY

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Explaining what language variety is and how it encompasses different dialects, sociolects, registers, and styles within a language.
- Discussing the social, cultural, geographical, and historical factors that contribute to the development of language varieties.
- Providing examples of different language varieties, such as regional dialects, sociolects, and professional jargon, and analyze their features.
- Exploring how language varieties reflect and shape the identities of individuals and communities.

BACKGROUND

Language variety is a general term for any distinctive form of a language. Linguists commonly use language variety (or simply variety) as a cover term for any of the overlapping subcategories of a language, including dialect, idiolect, register, and social dialect. Linguistic variety is used interchangeably with the term **"lect"**.

In *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* (1992), Tom McArthur identifies two broad types of language variety:

- **User-related varieties** are associated with **a particular people** (i.e. a variety can be determined by who the language user is: his/her age, gender, education, ethnicity, social class, regional belonging, etc.). A variety can also be related to a place or a community such as American English (referring to the place where English is spoken) and Afro American English (referring to the Afro-American community).
- **Use-related varieties** are associated with the functions performed by the variety, such as the language of courts, contracts, literary texts, Internet conversations, etc. like business English, advertising English, medical English, and so on

This concept encompasses dialects, registers, jargons, and idiolects. Varieties arise due to geographical, social, and contextual factors. For example, British English and American English are dialects of the English language, each with unique pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Registers vary based on context, such as formal or informal speech, while jargon is specialized language used within specific professions. Idiolects are the unique language patterns of individuals. While language variety refers to the different forms of a language, language variation focuses on the differences within these forms. Language variation examines how and why language changes across different contexts, speakers, and regions.

1) LANGUAGE VARIATION: FOCUS ON USERS

Language variation refers to the differences in language use among speakers, influenced by factors such as region, social class, ethnicity, and context. This concept is crucial for understanding how language evolves and adapts to meet the needs of its users.

- a) **Dialect:** The term dialect refers to the form of language used by a group of people who belong to a specific area, location, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, or any other group. It is used to describe features of grammar and vocabulary as well as pronunciation that are used by a particular group of people and that distinguish them from others around them. Linguists distinguish between two types of dialects:
 - o **Regional Variation:** are varieties of language that are spoken by a particular group of people who belong to the same geographical location, like British and American English or Algerian and Egyptian Arabic. As linguist Labov notes, "*Regional dialects are a powerful indicator of local identity and community belonging*".
 - o **Social Variation (Sociolect):** Language variation also occurs across different social groups, resulting in sociolects. For instance, teenagers often develop their own slang to create a sense of identity and belonging. Words like "lit" (exciting) and "ghost" (to suddenly cut off communication) are examples of slang that may not be understood by older generations. Sociolinguist Penelope Eckert explains, "*Slang is a way for young people to establish a distinct social identity and to signal their membership in a particular group*".

It is important to recognise, from a linguistic point of view, that none of the varieties of a language is inherently 'better' than any other; they are simply different. From a social point of view, however, some varieties do become more prestigious. For example, dialects spoken in urban areas are often considered to be more prestigious than the ones used in rural areas, though they only have differences in vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. So, prestige is not linguistically determined but it is the outcome of people's judgements and attitudes. "Some people think of dialects as sub-standard varieties of a language, spoken only by low-status groups--illustrated by such comments as 'He speaks correct English, without a trace of dialect.' Comments of this kind fail to recognize that standard English is as much a dialect as any other variety--though a dialect of a rather special kind, because it is one to which society has given extra prestige. Everyone speaks a dialect—whether urban or rural, standard or non-standard, upper class or lower class" (Crystal, 2006).

- b) **Individual Variation (Idiolect):** Probably no two people are identical in the way they use language. Minor differences in phonology, grammar, and vocabulary are normal, so that everyone has, to a limited extent, a 'personal dialect'. It is often useful to talk about the linguistic system as found in a single speaker, and this is known as an idiolect. That is, idiolect refers to an individual way of speaking. Like a fingerprint, idiolect is unique to a one person because it represents his/her identity, which differs from others'.
- c) **Temporal Variation (Temporal dialect):** Also known as a *chronolect*, is a specific variety of a language that is distinguished by time-related factors. This means that the characteristics of the speech variety are influenced by the historical period in which it is used. For example, Old English, Middle English, and Contemporary English are temporal dialects of the English language, each representing different stages in the language's evolution.
- d) **Accent:** An accent is a specific way of pronouncing a language, often associated with a particular geographic region, social class, or ethnic group. Unlike dialects, which include differences in grammar and vocabulary, accents are solely concerned with pronunciation. For example, the way English is pronounced in the United States differs from how it is pronounced in the United Kingdom, Australia, or India. Accents can serve as markers of identity and can influence perceptions in social and professional contexts. They reflect the speaker's background and can sometimes lead to biases or stereotypes.

2) LANGUAGE VARIATION: FOCUS ON USES

In terms of language variations that are based on its uses, the discussion is focused on the ways in which speech reflects the contexts in which language is used and not the characteristics of the speakers. The language variation that is concerning with the uses or functions can be called as *style, register, jargon, or slang*.

a) Style

For the term style, there are many definitions which are basically the same. The first to be mentioned here is the definition given by Marjohan (1988:34) that style refers to “*a variation in speech or writing from more formal to more casual*”. Some markers for the formal style would be the use of *may* instead of *might* and *can* and also constructions such as *For whom did you get it?* Instead of *Who'd you get that for?* in more casual speech.

The style is related more with the situations than with the speakers themselves, it means that we talk about the same speakers who talk in different ways on different situations and not the different speakers who talk in different ways from each other.

According to Holmes (2001:246) the term style refers to language variation which reflects changes in situational factors. She also mentions that styles are often analysed according to the levels of formality. Joos (1967) in his book *The Five Clocks* as quoted by Nababan (1986:22) divides the style of formality into five levels, frozen, formal, consultative, casual and intimate styles. The description of these styles can be seen in the following:

a. Frozen style: It is the most formal style used in formal situations and ceremonies. It is called frozen because the pattern has been set up firmly and can never be changed by anyone. In written form, we can see this style in historical documents, ratification, and other formal documents.

b. Formal style: It is the style used in formal speech, formal meeting, office correspondence, lesson books for school, etc. Formal style is basically similar to the frozen style that is only used in formal situations and not in informal situations.

c. Consultative style: This is the style used in ordinary conversation held at school, in meeting or conversation that leads to result and production. It can be said that this style is the most operational one.

d. Casual style: It is the style used to speak with friends, family or relatives, during the leisure time, while exercising, etc. The casual style markers in English mentioned are:

- The absence of an article at the beginning of a sentence: Friend of mine saw it. Coffee's cold.
- The absence of the subject at the beginning of a sentence: Bought it yesterday? Makes no difference.
- The absence of an auxiliary: Leaving? Seen John lately?

e. Intimate style: This is the style used with people who have close relationships with the speaker. By using this style those people do not need to use complete sentences with clear articulation, they just simply use short words. It happens mainly because there is an understanding among those people.

b) Register

Register is a variety of language used in a particular situation, for a particular purpose. It is also often used to describe the conventional way of using language that is appropriate in a specific context, which may be identified as situational (in a mosque), occupational (among lawyers), etc. We can recognise specific features that occur in the religious register, linguistics register, and so on. In other words, register is different from social or regional dialects which are determined by who the users of language are not by the situation of discourse. The best example of registers might be the case of the different registers of English used in the different modules like linguistics, civilisation, literature, methodology, etc. Though only English is used in these different situations, the language varies considerably from one module to another. These are called different registers because they are quite different, yet they are neither different languages nor dialects. The most important feature that distinguishes between registers is the kind of vocabulary that is specific to every field of discourse.

c) Jargon

One of the defining features of a register is the use of jargon, which is the special technical vocabulary associated with a specific area of work or interest. In social terms, jargon, helps to create and maintain connections among those who see themselves as “insiders” in some way and to exclude “outsiders”. Accordingly, it is the special words used in a particular profession, a group, or occupation and may not be understood outside its context. So, jargon constitutes a part of register and it helps in the distinction between the different fields of discourse, as it is only about the technical terms and expressions used in a particular situation. For example, the language used in this handout is English, the register is specific to the field of linguistics (other fields have other registers), and what distinguishes it from other registers is the technical terms and expressions used (vocabulary), or simply the linguistics register is identified by its linguistics jargon.

Hence, language varies in this case because of the field of language use (not the user of language) and variation occurs only in vocabulary (not grammar and pronunciation).

d) Slang

Whereas jargon is the specialised vocabulary used by those inside established social groups (doctors, lawyers, teachers, politicians, etc.), slang is more typically used among those who are outside established higher-status groups (used by common people in informal situations like friends discussing outside). That is to say, both of jargon and slang are only about vocabulary, yet they are different in the kind of expressions involved; as the former is used in formal context and it requires thus technical terms, while the latter is used in the most informal situations and this type of vocabulary is also informal. Therefore, slang or “colloquial speech” describes words or phrases that are used instead of the more everyday terms amongst younger speakers. Slang is mainly identified by the following characteristics:

- *Fashionable Nature*: Similar to clothing and music, slang is a social aspect subject to fashion trends, particularly among adolescents.
- *Group Identity*: It is used by individuals within a group who share ideas and attitudes, serving as a way to distinguish themselves from others.
- *Origins and Spread*: Slang expressions are typically introduced by members of a specific social group. These expressions may remain exclusive to that group, acting as a badge of identity, or they may become widely known and used.
- *Transience*: Most slang terms are temporary; they are used for a few months or years before falling out of use and being replaced by newer slang terms.

CONCLUDING POINTS

Language variation has been one of the major factors that led to the emergence of sociolinguistics because it has long been neglected by theoretical linguists in addition to the fact that it constitutes an indispensable part of the actual language use in people’s everyday life. In other words, though linguistic theories, introduced in the beginning of the 20th century, revolutionized the ways of language study, they did not consider the fact that a language is used differently in different situations and by different people.

It is also of a paramount importance to mention that many language users have an active command of more than one sociolect and/or dialect, and actively switch between the various elements of their **linguistic repertoire**. At the same time, the repertoire of lects/varieties of the individual speakers in a speech community is not the same. Different people master different dialects, sociolects, technical sublanguages, stylistic registers, and even if we consider a single lect as a linguistic system, the individuals’ knowledge of the lect may diverge considerably. Furthermore, this correlation between language and society can be studied from different perspectives, depending on the sociolinguists’ orientation.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- How has your own language use varied in different social contexts (e.g., with family, friends, at work)?
- What are some examples of regional dialects or sociolects you are familiar with? How do they differ from the standard language?
- How do new slang terms or expressions emerge within a language community?
- How has globalization influenced the spread and mixing of language varieties?