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17.1 Language variation and change

If there were two pervasive myths about language that sociolinguists would like to dispel, they would probably be the myth that language can or should remain static, and the myth that one dialect can be inherently superior to another in some way. These commonly held myths contradict the primary principles of sociolinguistics – that the form of a language varies as a reflection of social variation between and within communities, and that at least some of this variation will result in long-term language change.

Although the discipline of sociolinguistics that we describe in this chapter is relatively young, these basic principles have their roots in the earlier established disciplines of historical linguistics and sociology, and sociolinguists still share a close connection with scholars in these fields. The difference today between sociolinguistics and the related subfields of anthropological linguistics (see Chapter 16) and the sociology of language is that the primary focus of sociolinguistics is on linguistic structure itself. Although sociolinguistics concerns itself with language in its social context, and consequently with both linguistic and social factors, the focus remains on linguistic structure as opposed to language use, the latter being a more central concern to the sociology of language.

Weinreich *et al.* (1968) laid out the principles for the study of language ‘as an object possessing orderly heterogeneity’ (p. 100). The focus of this paradigm is the synchronic observation of language change as it happens, through close examination and quantification of linguistic variables that are correlated with social characteristics of speakers and aspects of the interactions between speakers. One of the guiding principles of this research paradigm has been the ‘use of the present to explain the past,’ (also known as the Uniformitarian Principle, Labov 1978) which proposes that at least some of the linguistic variation that can be observed today is evidence of change in progress, and that all of the change that occurs in language is preceded by a period of variation.

As an example we can take the development of the use of *do* in yes–no questions in the Late Middle English period. Before it became obligatory to use the auxiliary verb *do* in a yes–no question, as in *Do you like green beans?* the use of *do* in this context was variable and speakers could either form questions like *Wrote you this letter?* (the earlier and
previously exclusive form) or *Did you write this letter?* (the newer form) (Ellegård 1953, in Kroch 1989). The use of *do*-insertion in questions is an example of what is known as a ‘linguistic variant’ in sociolinguistic terminology. An abstract linguistic variable is realized by functionally equivalent linguistic variants (‘two ways of saying the same thing’), so in this example questions with *do*-insertion and questions without *do*-insertion are two variants of the variable ‘yes–no questions.’

Linguistic variation and ensuing change can occur at all levels of the grammar, although some types are better researched than others. Language can vary at the level of the lexicon, as in the regionally variable terms in English for a carbonated beverage (*soda, pop, tonic, coke, fizzy drink, soft drink*) or for a pair of shoes with rubberized soles (*sneakers, trainers, plimsolls, tennis shoes*). Relatedly, the meaning of words may vary at the level of semantics or pragmatics. For many speakers of American English, for example, the use of the adverb *anymore* in a positive utterance is perfectly acceptable, as in *Everybody looks young anymore* (‘Everybody looks young nowadays’), whereas for other speakers this sentence is completely ungrammatical, as *anymore* for those speakers may only occur in a negative or interrogative utterance (e.g. *Nobody looks young anymore*).

Syntactic variation occurs when a grammatical function, such as asking yes–no questions (above), may be performed using semantically equivalent syntactic structures. Likewise, variation at the level of morphology may occur when a single function has multiple forms: e.g. relative pronoun *who* and *whom* variability in modern English. To date the best-researched cases of variation are at the levels of phonetics and phonology. Phonetic variation refers to any variable pronunciation of sounds that does not affect the phonological system, as in the variable palatalization of dental stops in Cairene Arabic, where /t/ may be pronounced as either [t] or [tʃ] (Haeri 1994), or the variable pronunciation of intervocalic /g/ as [ŋ] in Japanese (Hibiya 1995). Phonological variation on the other hand refers to variations in pronunciation that affect the phonological system in some way, generally through the addition or subtraction of a sound from the phonemic inventory. French, for example, acquired phonemic nasal vowels after a period of variable nasal assimilation to following nasal consonants e.g. [bon] and [bɔ] for *bon* ‘good.’

To summarize, language may vary at all levels of the linguistic structure, and some of this variation will lead to long-term language change. The challenge sociolinguists face is how to observe and quantify this variation, as well as how to determine whether any particular instance of synchronic language variation is evidence of diachronic change. In general, the first step is to identify the linguistic variable and its variants. In the case of the Cairene Arabic example above, for instance, one would identify the variants [t], [tʃ], and [t] of the abstract variable (t). The second step is to find a way to observe natural language use that is likely to contain the variable, select speakers from relevant social groups and across the age spectrum, and design a relevant data collection method. The final step is to analyze the linguistic variable with respect to the relevant social factors.

The primary goal of selecting speakers from across the age spectrum relates to the relationship between synchronic variation and diachronic change. Only real-time historical data can provide a definitive answer to the question of whether an instance of synchronic variation is indicative of diachronic change. But when real-time data are not yet available, either because the variant is too new or because it has not been studied before, sociolinguists rely on the apparent time construct to surmise the presence of change in progress. The apparent time construct takes age as a proxy for the passage of time, concluding that differences across generations of adults from a single speech community mirror actual diachronic developments. The underlying assumption of this construct is that the speech of
each generation reflects the language as it was at the time that generation learned the language, an assumption which depends on the notion of a critical period for language acquisition and little to no change throughout an individual’s lifespan.

The use of apparent time requires large amounts of natural speech data to provide an overview of what is going on in the community. These data typically cannot be collected under survey or lab conditions, since understanding the mechanisms of language change requires knowledge of the social context of language use. Although speech and/or judgments are collected from individual speakers, the focus in sociolinguistics is always on the community as the object of study. Although more recent sociolinguistic work has looked at smaller communities of practice (discussed further below), the emphasis in much of the field remains on the speech community, defined broadly as a group of people who share a common structural base and social evaluation of linguistic variables (Labov 1972a). Although sociolinguists may differ on the size and type of community that is meaningful with respect to linguistic variation, all researchers in this vein place importance on the interrelationship between the social groups that individual speakers belong to, the social context of language use, and linguistic variation within and between such groups.

Exactly how do sociolinguists collect large quantities of naturally occurring speech under maximally natural conditions? What does ‘maximally natural’ mean? A special focus of sociolinguistic research has been a concern with capturing the vernacular, or a speaker’s most natural and unmonitored speech. There is good reason for this. The public tends to believe that languages should be static objects, and that language changes are inherently undesirable. The motivations for this belief are complex, but are largely due to the association between language changes and speakers of non-standard varieties. Linguistic innovations tend to emerge more readily in the non-standard varieties of a language. Unlike the standard variety, these dialects are not subject to a high degree of normative pressure from educators, are mostly spoken in the home, and are neither codified in dictionaries nor in many cases written down at all. They are spoken among less powerful groups such as the young, the urban working class, the rural poor and ethnic minorities. Some recognizable and highly stereotyped examples include the French teenage slang verlan, Cockney (London) English, Appalachian English and African-American English. Innovative variants in the speech of these groups, such as the tag question innit in London (They couldn’t get the paint off, innit?) and habitual non-finite be in African-American English (Jason be acting crazy lately) are often viewed by the public as corruptions of – and even a threat to – the standard variety.

Sociolinguists must therefore tread carefully, given the high degree of public scrutiny of language variation, and the likelihood that speakers will self-police their own output. They face the Observer’s Paradox: in order to observe someone’s most vernacular speech, the speaker must not feel that he or she is being observed. Since overcoming this paradox would entail the unethical practice of clandestine recording, sociolinguists have instead found ways to mitigate its effects. In the following section we describe some of these data collection techniques and the techniques that are used to analyze synchronic variation with respect to diachronic change.

17.2 Methodology

One way of reducing the effect of the observer is to not use a recording device. In a rapid and anonymous survey, for example, the researcher approaches informants in a public place with a simple question that is calibrated to elicit instances of a single linguistic variable.
Asking *Excuse me, do you have the time?* of passers-by in Charleston allowed Baranowski (2007) to surreptitiously write down dozens of examples of *four* and *quarter* in which post-vocalic (r) was variably realized. None of his informants knew – or needed to know – that he was a researcher.

Ethnography similarly allows the researcher to observe without drawing attention to him/herself. Members of the speech community are aware of the researcher’s identity and purpose, but become used to his/her presence through long periods of participant-observation. The more access and trust the researcher gains, the greater the likelihood that speakers will produce something close to their usual vernacular in interactions with the researcher. Sometimes the researcher is permitted to leave a recording device running in the background while speakers interact with one another; other times the researcher will record his or her casual conversations with the speakers.

The most frequently used data collection method is a sample survey of a community in which speakers are recorded during sociolinguistic interviews. The Observer’s Paradox is addressed via strategies within the interview itself. After seeking mostly factual information about the speaker’s personal and residential history, the interviewer gradually builds rapport with the speaker through questions about local issues and about universal experiences such as games played in childhood. Under the right circumstances, a speaker will relate a personal narrative: a story about a reportable event, often dramatic or funny, in which the speaker was a chief protagonist. In recalling this event, the speaker pays minimal attention to his or her speech, and produces vernacular speech, or something approaching it. The goal of the interviewer is to maximize such opportunities for the speaker to produce his or her vernacular, while also capturing other, more formal speech styles by asking speakers to read a passage and a word list containing variants of interest to the researcher.

Once collected, recordings and transcriptions of naturally occurring vernacular speech will form corpora that can be mined again and again for sociolinguistic variables. These corpus linguistic investigations (see Chapter 32) have been supported by increasing computational power and digital storage of data files. Sociolinguists have also successfully made use of data from non-sociolinguistic sources, such as oral history and archived radio recordings, and digitized newspapers and other texts. Real-time analyses of individual speakers (panel studies) have also been facilitated by access to decades’ worth of digitized recordings, such as a well-publicized study of the changing pronunciation of the Queen of England in her Christmas broadcasts from the 1950s to the 1980s (Harrington *et al.* 2000). In addition, YouTube videos and new written media such as blogs and Twitter have opened up the potential pool of data sources for vernacular language.

Although experiments continue to constitute a minority methodology in sociolinguistics, sociolinguists sometimes rely on elicitation and judgment tasks when capturing the vernacular is not a priority. They can be used – judiciously – for phenomena such as syntactic variables that may occur infrequently in interviews. Sociolinguists can now field surveys via the Internet, or recruit participants cheaply via crowd-sourcing sites such as Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. Audio clips can be included in these online surveys, making it possible to conduct experiments on the perception and social evaluation of sociolinguistic variables.

Another beneficiary of the digital revolution has been dialect geography: the sector of sociolinguistics in which researchers map variable linguistic phenomena to the real world. For example, a dialect map with a geo-located point for every sampled American who answered the question, *What is your word for a carbonated beverage?* would show that *pop* is used mostly in the northern and midland USA, *soda* in the east and southwest, and *coke* in the south. Dialect mapping has been pursued since at least the nineteenth century. Until
the mid-twentieth century, maps were typically hand-drawn, included a few hundred informants at most, and were constrained to regions rather than entire countries. Now, thousands of informants can be surveyed via telephone, Internet and social media. Furthermore, with the advances in digital and online mapping, we have the ability to layer linguistic data with other information (e.g. census data, topography). We are on the verge of huge leaps in our understanding of how linguistic innovations and changes diffuse over physical space.

In the next section, we discuss how all of these data-gathering methods are employed in answering the central question: How and why does language change occur?

17.3 Inter-speaker variation

17.3.1 Sampling the speech community

An important goal of early dialect geographers was to provide a historical baseline for subsequent research. Informants were limited to older rural speakers (usually men) who had spent their whole lives in a locality, and who could be expected to use the ‘traditional’ speech of the area. Untouched by dialect contact and with limited influence from the supralocal, standard way of speaking, their conservative speech formed a kind of fossil record. Furthermore, linguistic differences between communities (such as those that said *darning needle* versus those that said *snake waiter* for ‘dragonfly’) could then be interpreted as having arisen independently on either sides of physical barriers such as rivers, hills and mountain ranges. Areas of linguistic similarity indicated unimpeded historical diffusion of language features in those places. With such a deliberately constrained sample of informants, geography alone was sufficient for explaining the distribution of linguistic patterns.

In the mid-twentieth century, attention turned from physical to social barriers between groups of speakers. It was observed that even in large cities, members of different social class and ethnic groups do not always use the same lexical items, nor do they use the same morphological and phonological variants at the same frequencies. Yet members of urban speech communities also share many features of the local dialect, suggesting that language changes diffuse not only from place to place, but from group to group and speaker to speaker. One key way to understand how language changes arise and spread over time, therefore, was to broaden the speaker sample beyond older, rural, non-mobile speakers, and to look at inter-speaker variation in the present.

Quantitative sociolinguistic studies generally take a small set of social categories as straightforward, and seek to balance their sample of speakers with respect to these categories. These ‘straightforward’ (etic) social categories include sex, social class, ethnicity and age. The existence of linguistic variation that correlates with these social categories is well-documented, and we provide an overview in the rest of this section. Defining social categories for sociolinguistic purposes has never been entirely straightforward, however. Categories have been increasingly problematized and debated, in line with similar discussions elsewhere in the social sciences. A more ethnographic approach, grounded in the practices of anthropology, avoids preconceived social categories and instead uses locally meaningful categories (emic) once the researcher is familiar with the community. In what follows, we describe each of the major etic social categories and their effect on language change. We also discuss how ideas from anthropology and sociology have influenced sociolinguists’ thinking about inter-speaker variation.
17.3.2 Gender

Perhaps the most heavily discussed social category in sociolinguistics has been gender. Labov (1990) aggregates the findings of many quantitative studies of language and gender into three ‘principles,’ the first two of which concern standard language. Under Principle I, women use the standard variant of a diachronically stable variable more frequently than men. For the English suffix –ing, for example, the standard variant velar nasal [ɪŋ] has varied for centuries with non-standard alveolar nasal [ɪn], and women have been shown repeatedly to use standard [ɪŋ] proportionally more frequently than men. Under Principle IIa, women use proportionally more of an innovative variant during a change in progress than men do, so long as that variant carries overt prestige. In New York City in the 1960s, for example, Labov (1966) reported that women used non-local, prestigious post-vocalic [r] more frequently than men. Women’s greater tendency to employ overtly prestigious linguistic variants is not interpreted as a biological imperative but as a consequence of women’s historically weak social position relative to men. Where women have relatively little economic capital, either because they are out of the workforce or because they are prevented from attaining positions of power, standard language can be a powerful source of symbolic capital for them. Standard language commands respect from others and elevates a speaker’s social status. Somewhat paradoxically, however, women use incoming variants that are not overtly prestigious at a higher rate than men do (Principle IIb). Yet this typically happens only at the early stage of a language change, for as long as the variant is below the level of public attention. Once members of the speech community become aware of the change and start to denigrate it there is a decline over time in women’s use of the variant relative to men’s.

More recently, sociolinguists have paid greater attention to individuals who were excluded from the binary sex categorization, such as transsexuals, and to differences such as sexual orientation that were formerly absent from analyses of gendered linguistic behavior. There has also been a move away from viewing men as the default gender type against which women’s linguistic behavior is contrasted, and toward considering male linguistic practices in their own right. Sociolinguists are also confronting intersectionality. Under this view, social characteristics are not seen as merely additive: e.g. female + black + working class + gay + young. Instead, they are seen as constituting a greater whole, forcing sociolinguists to consider not just the independent effects of gender, class, ethnicity etc. on inter-speaker variation, but the linguistic outcomes of being specifically e.g. a black, gay, working-class young woman.

17.3.3 Race and ethnicity

Race and ethnicity have been integral analytic categories in the field from its inception in the 1960s. The Civil Rights movement in the USA strongly influenced much of this early work, such as Labov’s (1969, reprinted 1972b) seminal paper, ‘The logic of non-standard English.’ Labov used examples of speech from sociolinguistic interviews to argue that, contrary to assumptions then (and even today), African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) is just as logical, versatile and structured as mainstream standard American English. Concern for the reputation and rights of minority groups has been evident in sociolinguistic research ever since, as we discuss in a later section.

Given that the majority of quantitative sociolinguistic work has been conducted in the USA, it follows that much of the work in which race is employed as an explanatory category
has also come from the USA. African-Americans have received the most attention. This is in part because of the aforementioned desire among sociolinguists to remove the stigmas attached to AAVE, and in part because this dialect is linguistically quite dissimilar to mainstream standard English. It thus affords many opportunities to observe variation, for example when speakers alternate between AAVE features (habitual be, completive done, copula absence etc.) and standard features. Yet it has become apparent that AAVE is not a monolithic dialect to be contrasted with the standard variety. It exhibits dialect-internal variation across regions (cf. differences between Atlanta and Detroit varieties) and across social groups.

Due to long-standing residential and cultural segregation of the two groups, White and Black Americans typically do not participate in the same language changes, or else not to the same degree. Similar findings obtain for other ethnic groups whose social networks are largely non-overlapping, such as Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. Other studies have found that minority groups adopt mainstream linguistic changes in part rather than in whole, as is the case for Arab-Americans and African-Americans in areas of the northern USA where a set of interlocking vowel changes is occurring. Still others show minority ethnic groups such as Italian-Americans in Philadelphia and Mexican-Americans in California participating fully in mainstream changes, but lagging behind the majority group(s).

Race/ethnicity is undergoing the same problematization as gender, and some points of debate include: (1) complexifying super-categories such as ‘Asian-American,’ which may obscure within-Asian-American linguistic differences, and ‘White,’ which has been taken for granted as a default category (much like ‘men’); (2) self-identification with a racial/ethnic category versus researcher-imposed identification; (3) identification with multiple ethnic identities, and of course, intersectionality of ethnicity with other social characteristics.

17.3.4 Age

Age intersects with the social factors discussed so far. There may be meaningful changes over time in the degree to which a speaker’s ethnicity or gender is a foregrounded component of their social identity. This in turn may have important implications for his or her use of variable linguistic features. In a series of interviews conducted with a single African-American young woman, ‘Foxy Boston,’ Rickford and McNair-Knox (1994) found that Foxy’s use of AAVE features increased and decreased over the years, partly because of changes in the importance of race to Foxy’s sense of self. Her leadership of an African-American student organization in college, for instance, coincided with a rise in her use of AAVE variants such as copula absence.

For most purposes, however, sociolinguists have treated social categories as static, since by convenience the majority of studies are synchronic, cross-sectional snapshots of a speech community at one point in time. These studies rely on the aforementioned apparent time construct, whereby data from speakers across a wide range of ages serve as a proxy for two or more generations of real time. Inter-speaker variation between age groups may indicate that a language change is in progress over time: a rise in an innovative variant among the young, perhaps, and/or the decline of a conservative variant over the generations. An interpretation of this kind depends on two assumptions that should ideally (but for practical reasons sometimes cannot) be verified. First, an individual’s sociolinguistic repertoire is acquired in childhood; undergoes some incrementation of ongoing changes through contact with peers prior to and during adolescence; and for the most part undergoes no major changes in adulthood. The
speech of a sixty-year-old, then, would be representative of the speech of that same person at age twenty. Second, differences between old and young people’s speech in the sample is a consequence of this incrementation process, with successive generations overtaking the frequency with which their parents use an incoming variant.

The first assumption has been largely validated (Bailey et al. 1991), although there is some counter-evidence from the relatively few panel studies thus far conducted by sociolinguists. The second assumption depends on the availability of historical evidence for comparison. In early sociolinguistic studies, this evidence necessarily had to be drawn from any written texts that represented vernacular speech, from metalinguistic commentary about speech, or from regional dialect atlases. Increasingly researchers are able to use previous sociolinguistic studies as their historical comparison to conduct trend studies – real-time historical comparisons of comparable speakers in the same speech community.

For a given sociolinguistic variable, if there are no differences in usage between historical and contemporary speakers, the researcher concludes that the variable is diachronically stable. Any relationship between speaker age and the variable must then be attributed not to change in progress but to age-grading: a regular association in every generation between the variable and a particular life-stage or life-stages. Non-standard [ɪn] for example, exhibits a peak in frequency among young people in virtually every English-speaking community investigated to date.

Of course, life-stages are as subject to problematization as ethnicity and gender, and must be clearly situated within the place and time of the study. Whereas very large-scale surveys in other social sciences can use age as a continuous predictor, sociolinguistic studies are typically conducted on a smaller scale, in which speakers must be grouped into age ranges out of practical necessity. This has often been done by regularly grouping speakers by tens of years (e.g. age thirty to forty, or born 1960–1980), but more typically by age ranges that are meaningful in the community under study, e.g. ages fourteen to eighteen represent the high school stage in the USA; ages sixty-five plus represent the retirement life-stage in most Western societies. Even within a society it is possible for life-stages to alter over the generations (e.g. ‘teenager’ is a relatively recent social construct), and this must be borne in mind when making historical comparisons across datasets.

17.3.5 Social class

Speaker samples from Western communities are commonly stratified by indicators of socioeconomic status such as household income, residence value, years of education attained and occupational prestige. Sometimes only one of these indicators is needed to capture sociolinguistic differences in the community under study, while in other cases a combination is required. Regardless of the way in which stratification is measured, sociolinguists commonly use cover terms such as ‘lower-middle class’ and ‘upper-working class’ for the individual strata, provided these are meaningful in the community itself. Study after study has shown that the greatest linguistic cleavage occurs at the boundary between the working class and middle class, no matter how these are defined in a given speech community. Traditionally the two major classes have been distinguished by their orientation to manual versus non-manual occupations, although this is changing as ever greater numbers of Westerners attend a tertiary college and as service jobs increase at the expense of manufacturing and other labor-intensive jobs. As such, type of tertiary college attended (research-oriented, teaching-oriented, vocational, etc.), rather than number of years of education, may prove to be an increasingly important indicator of sociolinguistic difference.
Underpinning all of these stratification schemes, however, is the same issue faced by the earliest dialect geographers: how to distinguish the most and least geographically and socially mobile speakers. Hierarchical social class categorization serves to differentiate relatively non-mobile working-class speakers, who best typify the local vernacular, from relatively mobile middle-class speakers, who have more access to standard variants and who are more likely to use them. Importantly, however, sociolinguists have demonstrated clearly that all members of a speech community acquire the local dialect; the differences in the speech of different social classes are gradient and not discrete. This is contrary to earlier beliefs that people from different social classes employed entirely different repertoires. Kroch (1996) found that even members of Philadelphia’s upper class used locally stigmatized Philadelphia features, and these were subject to the same complex phonological, morphological and lexical constraints as for all other Philadelphians. Nonetheless, studies repeatedly find a correlation between higher social status and lower use of local or non-standard variants. For example, in a study of Rivera in Uruguay (Carvalho 2004), local Uruguayan Portuguese dental stops were used least frequently by the mid-middle class (the highest status group in the sample), more frequently by the lower-middle class, and most frequently by the working class. The inverse was true for the distribution of supralocal Brazilian Portuguese palatalized stops.

Speakers in the middle of the social spectrum are of special interest, because they tend to exhibit a high degree of linguistic insecurity, both qualitatively (I hate the way I speak) and quantitatively e.g. self-reports in which speakers underestimate the frequency with which they actually produce non-standard variants. Interior group speakers are also the most likely to exhibit sporadic hypercorrection (e.g. in this example from a job advertisement: Please indicate the job for which you’d like to be considered for) and the ‘crossover effect,’ in which they produce standard variants at higher rates in formal speech than speakers in the top social class.

For sociolinguistic variables that are not subject to overt public comment, and which perhaps are still in the incipient stages of generational change, there is no evidence for hypercorrection or crossover. Nor is there a straightforward linear correlation between socioeconomic status and frequency of use of a variant. Instead, sociolinguists have often observed a curvilinear relationship, with the innovative variant being most frequent in the interior of the social continuum. The leaders of language changes therefore appear to be speakers in the upper-working to lower-middle classes. This seems just as paradoxical as the fact that women are conservative with respect to stable variables, but progressive with respect to language changes in progress. Why would the linguistically insecure middle class simultaneously be spearheading linguistic change? The answer for both women and the middle class is most likely that they tend to have loose social networks. Networks are discussed in the next section.

Finally, sociolinguists working in non-Western communities have been especially reliant on emic social categories, since it may not be relevant to impose etic class categories on their samples (see Stanford and Preston 2009). In some societies, affiliation with a caste, clan or tribe may be more socially meaningful than occupation or education. In post-colonial communities, there may still be long-standing linguistic divisions between speakers descended from the rulers and speakers descended from the ruled, despite modern democratization and increasing social equality. Post-Communist countries pose the opposite problem, wherein relative social equality is replaced by growing inequality. In such countries, continuing or former association with the government continues to be a strong marker of social identity. Emic categories are also employed in studies of Western
communities when the participants are too young to be classified by occupation or education, and are defined by their community of practice instead.

17.3.6 Social networks and communities of practice

Ethnographic approaches have given rise in the last two decades to a categorization technique that identifies ‘communities of practice’ (Lave and Wenger 1991): groups of people who might be demographically quite heterogenous, but who share an enterprise (e.g. a job, a project, a band, a sports team) or a set of behavioral and symbolic practices (e.g. punk music, attachment parenting, street gangs). Sociolinguists have found it useful to look at the symbolic practices – above all, the symbolic use of linguistic variants – of groups that are too small or too non-traditional in scope for sample survey methods.

Language change, however, comes about not only within social groups but crucially as a result of interaction between them. Since the late 1970s, aspects of social network theory have been used to model the diffusion of sociolinguistic variants within and across geographic space and social categories/communities. In particular, the theory has been used to demonstrate how language changes can be transmitted between groups even when they have only fleeting interactions with one another. Social network analyses have improved our understanding of the special linguistic behavior of interior social groups such as the ‘middle class,’ and why this group is often shown to lead change. Speakers in this group have social network ties through their jobs, neighborhoods, etc. to community members both above and below them on the socioeconomic spectrum. A proliferation of weak ties to other groups in addition to dense ties within their own group may account for the leadership of the middle class in language changes that begin without public awareness. The linguistic insecurity of speakers in the middle group may also derive from their social network structures. They are regularly exposed to both standard and non-standard ways of speaking, and as such are especially sensitive to the social value of linguistic variation.

17.3.7 Inter-speaker differences in evaluation of variation

A simple way of thinking about the social value of variation is to see it as essentially binary, whereby linguistic variants can have either overt prestige or covert prestige. Overtly prestigious variants such as [ɪŋ] and I beg your pardon? are used at the highest frequencies by the highest status groups, and more frequently in formal than in informal speaking/writing styles. They are sanctioned by arbiters and representatives of ‘good’ language: dictionaries, textbooks, teachers, newscasters. Covertly prestigious variants such as [ɪn] and You what? may be thought of as in-group or solidarity markers. They are not publicly sanctioned, and are most frequently used by the lowest status groups and in the most informal speaking/writing styles. Yet they have value (prestige) within these contexts, since they are positively evaluated by their users as indexing meanings such as solidarity, sincerity or subversiveness. Importantly, the social evaluations of both overtly and covertly prestigious linguistic variants are typically shared by all members of the speech community, and indeed constitute one of the most important criteria for defining a speech community.

Over the decades, research in perceptual dialectology (how speakers perceive dialect boundaries) has demonstrated this key fact about speech communities many times. Americans, for example, are united in their evaluation of English dialects from the southern United States as being less overtly prestigious than English dialects from the northern
United States. Even residents of the South agree with this evaluation. It is thus possible to claim that speakers of US English form a speech community at the national level.

Yet evaluations of sociolinguistic variation are not entirely uniform: there are differences across groups. More recent work demonstrates that evaluation of variation depends not only on the listener’s geographic speech community, but also on membership in other social categories. The relatively new use of GIS software has allowed us to analyze this more efficiently and see it more clearly, for instance by analyzing the use of the labels that are assigned to different regions according to the speaker’s age, region and sex. Differences in the social evaluation of a linguistic variant, even if quite minor, are presumably integral to the promotion of a language change among some groups but not among others. In the next section, we consider the same tension between uniformity and diversity at the intra-speaker level.

17.4 Intra-speaker variation

The fact that people change their speech according to their interlocutor and the speech context is not controversial, although the systematicity of intra-speaker variation may be opaque to non-linguists. Speakers are aware of their use of stigmatized or taboo words in certain contexts and not others, for instance, such as where and when and with whom they will swear. Moreover, speakers are generally somewhat aware of their use of variants that are highly commented upon and may try to limit their use in more formal contexts. In English these include variants such as ain’t and like as a quotative or discourse marker (I was like ‘Why are you even doing that?’ and I don’t know, like, how I’m going to get there). Finally, without being consciously aware of it, speakers may vary in their use of less-commented-upon linguistic variants such as the (t) variable in Arabic, depending again on whom they are talking to, and when and where, etc. All of these are examples of style-shifting, or the variable use of linguistic variant(s) depending on the speech context.

The different examples given above also demonstrate differences in speakers’ awareness of linguistic variables, and this tends to relate to the degree to which a new variant has become established in the speech community. New incoming variants generally have the status of indicators, and although they may show inter-speaker variation between different social groups, they do not show intra-speaker variation and are not subject to style-shifting. Sociolinguistic markers are those variants that speakers may not be consciously aware of, and that are not subject to overt commentary in the community, but that nonetheless are recognizable enough that they can be manipulated by speakers such that they are subject to style-shifting, as in the (t) in Cairene Arabic. Stereotyped variants are those that are overtly commented upon in their community and of which speakers are highly aware, such as ain’t, and like. Although these variants may, and often do, hold covert prestige for speakers, they are often avoided in those settings where the speaker is trying to ‘make a good impression’ or is highly aware of their language use.

The systematicity of style-shifting was demonstrated by William Labov in New York City (1966) and Peter Trudgill in Norwich, England (1974), where both showed that stable variables like (ing) showed not only social class and gender stratification, but also significant and systematic intra-speaker variation. In those studies, different speech contexts were created through use of the sociolinguistic interview; they showed speakers consistently using more of the standard variant when reading aloud than they did in any kind of spontaneous speech, and higher frequencies of the non-standard variant [in] in casual spontaneous speech than in more careful spontaneous speech. Since these contexts did not involve any differences in interlocutor or setting, Labov attributed these systematic style
differences to the degree to which an individual speaker was paying attention to his or her own speech. That is, in reading tasks speakers tend to pay more attention to their speech than they do while speaking naturally, and even while speaking naturally speakers exhibited different levels of attention to their speech depending on the formality of the context. Crucially, these studies showed style shifts occurring in the same direction in all social classes and the independence of style and social stratification.

Later studies of style-shifting criticized the attention to speech model for portraying the speaker as too passive, and too egocentric. They argued that speakers accommodate to their interlocutor in any speech event, and style-shifting should therefore be attributed to accommodation to audience member(s). This idea was developed by Bell (1984), building on social psychological work on interaction. A corollary aspect of this model is the hypothesis that if style-shifting occurs as a result of accommodation to other speakers, then the range of intra-speaker variation will always be smaller than that of inter-speaker variation – this is often known as Bell’s Axiom. In this model even the effect of setting and topic may be attributed to different audiences, by positing that in addition to audience members who are present a speaker may accommodate to an audience member who is only imagined (for example if a speaker uses more standard variants when talking about school, this may be because they are imagining their teacher as an invisible audience member).

But what about the fact that people may shift in order to portray themselves differently or to consciously associate with some group or disassociate with another? Speakers may style-shift to stereotype some social group or as a communicative ‘shortcut,’ as when a South Asian-American teenager switches to Indian-accented English in order to present conservative views that are not her own with no need to then explicitly distance herself from those views. These observations combine with the findings of sociolinguistic studies that take a more ethnographic approach and capture a wider range of stylistic variation. Speakers have been shown to use stylistic variants more agentively to portray themselves in different ways or to do different types of sociolinguistic work. As a result many researchers have adopted a model of style-shifting that puts more emphasis on speaker agency, often known as a speaker design approach. Under this framework, speakers actively draw upon the social meanings that are ‘indexed,’ sometimes recursively (Eckert 2008), by a given sociolinguistic variant. For example, in most English-speaking communities, a fully released /t/ indexes good education, higher social class and formality, but can also be used in relevant circumstances to convey a stance of precision, scorn or disapproval, or a gay, Jewish, urban or British identity, among many other indexical meanings. Sociolinguists who study speaker design are especially interested in the ways in which speakers combine meaningful linguistic variants to construct social personae such as ‘yuppie’ or ‘Valley Girl.’

Models of style-shifting are closely related to, and indeed have roots in, observations and analyses of the social purpose of code-switching – that is, multilingual speakers switching between different languages or language varieties in one speech event, either intra- or inter-sententially. In fact these two processes are hardly different, except insofar as the use of different languages may be more apparent to the speaker and certainly to the monolingual observer than the use of different sociolinguistic variants within one language may be. Perhaps for this reason researchers in this field have always given more weight to speaker agency. Blom and Gumperz (1972), for instance, distinguished between situational code-switching that occurs because different settings are associated with different languages, and metaphorical code-switching, which may be loosely correlated with a change in topic, but which also allows for speaker flexibility in indexing the social meanings associated with different languages in their repertoire. Most recent studies of the sociolinguistics of code-
switching have turned to an approach that considers the different ways that code-switching may contextualize different aspects of the conversational event (see Auer 1998).

17.5 Multilingual communities

Despite early sociolinguistic interest in multilingual phenomena such as code-switching, the majority of the sociolinguistic studies of the 1960s and 1970s examined synchronic inter- and intra-speaker variation in monolingual urban communities. Even in those cities that were multilingual, such as Montréal and New York City, researchers tended to focus on monolingual speakers or monolingual speech. Multilingual communities have been comparatively underrepresented in variationist research of the type we have been discussing here, perhaps because it is daunting to consider the additional linguistic and social factors that may be relevant in multilingual communities. But the linguistic and social outcomes of contact between speakers in multilingual communities are of great interest to sociolinguists, not only because the majority of individuals in the world belong to multilingual speech communities, but also because of the insights that they may offer on the processes of language change more generally.

The multilingual communities that are of most interest to sociolinguists are not necessarily those where the community is multilingual but made up of monolingual speakers (as in many cities of the world), but rather those speech communities that are made up of multilingual speakers. Although a variety of interesting outcomes may arise out of the contact between speakers of different languages, including the spread of lingua francas and the development of pidgins and creoles, variationist sociolinguists are generally more concerned with the linguistic outcomes of the contact between two or more languages on the structure of those languages, which means a focus on the languages as they are spoken by multilingual individuals. In keeping with a focus on linguistic structure over language use, sociolinguists seek to understand the mechanisms of change in multilingual communities, assuming that at some level these mechanisms are universal ones that apply in monolingual communities as well. For instance sociolinguists have used quantitative methods to examine the possible locations of code-switches in multilingual discourse, under the assumption that an analysis of the structure of this type of multilingual discourse may offer insight into the structure of language more generally.

Perhaps the most pressing question in this area is the extent to which contact between languages necessarily causes change. In the past it was often assumed that any change that was observed in contact languages was most likely to have been caused by contact, often through the direct adoption of some feature of the other language. The best known example of this comes from Gumperz and Wilson (1971) and their description of language contact outcomes in the village of Kupwar, Maharashtra. Gumperz and Wilson describe a situation of convergence, where the varieties of Marathi, Kannada and Urdu in the village each display features borrowed from the other and not used in standard varieties of the languages spoken elsewhere in India. More conservatively, others have argued that language contact can accelerate the development of an internal change that has already begun. Silva-Corvalán (1994), for instance, shows Spanish–English bilinguals in Los Angeles exhibiting fewer instances of the Spanish subjunctive mood, and argues that although Spanish seems to be moving toward decreasing use of the subjunctive anyway, this process is accelerated by contact with English, where the subjunctive is rarely used. Moreover, the basic assumption that contact causes change is increasingly coming under question, with researchers such as Poplack and colleagues in Ottawa arguing that the inference of change in French from
contact with English has been overemphasized (see Poplack et al. 2013). It remains for further studies of variation in contact languages to answer these questions.

While the mechanisms of change in mono- and multilingual communities might be argued to be the same, the social parameters that must be considered in multilingual communities are arguably more complex than in comparable monolingual communities. For this reason the social outcomes of language contact are also of concern to sociolinguists, and this is one area where sociolinguistics overlaps significantly with research in other fields, particularly in the sociology of language and the related fields of language policy and planning. Moreover, given current estimates of the degree of language endangerment worldwide, with researchers estimating that 50–90 percent of the world’s languages may be endangered (Chapter 25; Krauss 1992; Crystal 2000), questions about language contact cannot be considered separately from issues related to language obsolescence. Although situations of stable multilingualism are not uncommon (Québec is a good example, as are parts of India and South Africa), many more cases of language contact eventually lead to language shift, where the use of one (usually politically dominant) language gradually replaces the use of another. Recognition of this fact has led to the development of measures of language vitality that are informed by sociolinguistics, such as Giles et al.’s (1977) measure of ethnolinguistic vitality, which takes into account both institutional support for the language and demography of the population of speakers, as well as speaker evaluations about language that may lead to community-level choices about language use.

17.6 Broader applications

These dire estimates of language endangerment have also brought up questions related to linguists’ social responsibility – their responsibility to society to protect linguistic diversity and their responsibility to the communities in which they work. Most relevant for most sociolinguists is their responsibility to the community – both in terms of how they portray that community in presentations and publications and in terms of what they give back to a community they have worked with. From the beginning sociolinguists have been concerned with the ‘social, educational, and political implications of language variation’ (Wolfram et al. 2008: 2), starting with Labov’s work to demonstrate the logic of non-standard English (cited above). But despite at least five decades of work demonstrating the systematicity of language variation and change, the public misperception that non-standard dialects are ungrammatical, unsystematic and illogical remains, and a number of scholars in the field are continuing to work to combat this misperception particularly in the classroom, where it is thought to do the most potential harm. A small but growing number of sociolinguists in the USA work with educators on programs to increase awareness of dialect diversity in the classroom as well as to develop school programs for students that directly address dialect differences (summarized in Rickford 1998). In these contexts and globally, sociolinguists have worked to defend the linguistic rights of those who speak varieties of language that may not be considered standard, a field of research and activism that examines the subset of universal human rights that may be considered linguistic human rights (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 1995).

Besides education, the study of language change in its social context intersects with other fields of intellectual inquiry. Sociology, anthropology, social psychology and human geography have already been mentioned. Sociolinguistics is a direct offshoot of historical linguistics, seeking to apply insights from the course of past language changes to those we see in the contemporary world, in keeping with the Uniformitarian Principle. Historical
linguists have likewise followed the Uniformitarian Principle, applying insights from sociolinguistics to their historical data. Modern historical linguists are producing more nuanced accounts of how language changes were transmitted across space and social groups in the past, and they are now better able to evaluate the relative contributions of language-internal and language-external (i.e. social) factors to historical changes.

Formal linguists used to consider their object of study to be Chomsky’s ‘ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community’ (1965: 3) but this is rapidly changing. Syntacticians, morphologists and phonologists are developing ways to account for dialect variation and linguistic gradience in their theoretical models. Psycholinguists and neurolinguists are also turning their attention to the processing of linguistic variation. More collaborations between sociolinguists and their colleagues, and the emergence of new scholars from graduate programs who can pursue the study of variation and change from multiple perspectives, can only be to the benefit of all language research.

Note
1 Parentheses are commonly used for the abstract variable, e.g. (t), and square brackets for the variants, e.g. [t] and [t’]. This notation may also be used for morphological variables, as with (ing) and its variants [ɪŋ] and [ɪŋ].

Further reading
Eckert (2000); Labov (1972a, 1972b, 1978); Labov et al. (2006); Preston (1999); Preston and Long (2002); Sankoff (2001); Tagliamonte (2012).

References


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