

A black and white photograph showing a person on the left wearing a balaclava and a police officer on the right wearing riot gear, including a helmet with a visor and a shield. The scene appears to be a protest or a conflict zone.

CHAPTER 19

Social variation in language

Neither shake thy head, feet, or legges. Rowle not thine eyes. Lift not one of thine eye-browes higher than thine other. Wry not thy mouth. Take heed that with they spettle thou bedew not his face with whom thou speakest, and to that end, approach not too nigh him.

Hawkins (1646)

In the preceding chapter, we focused on variation in language use found in different geographical areas. However, not everyone in a single geographical area speaks in the same way in every situation. We recognize that certain uses of language, such as slang, are more likely to be found in the speech of some individuals in society and not others. We are also aware of the fact that people who live in the same region, but who differ in terms of education and economic status, often speak in quite different ways. Indeed, these differences may be used, implicitly or explicitly, as indications of membership in different social groups or speech communities. A **speech community** is a group of people who share a set of norms and expectations regarding the use of language. The study of the linguistic features that have social relevance for participants in those speech communities is called “sociolinguistics.”

Sociolinguistics

The term **sociolinguistics** is used generally for the study of the relationship between language and society. This is a broad area of investigation that developed through the interaction of linguistics with a number of other academic disciplines that look at language in its social context such as anthropology, sociology and social psychology. We use all these connections when we try to analyze language from a social perspective.

Social dialects

Whereas the traditional study of regional dialects tended to concentrate on the speech of people in rural areas, as noted in [Chapter 18](#), the study of **social dialects** has been mainly concerned with speakers in towns and cities. In the social study of dialect, it is social class that is mainly used to define groups of speakers as having something in common. The two main groups are generally identified as “middle class,” those who have more years of education and perform non-manual work, and “working-class,” those who have fewer years of education and perform manual work of some kind. So, when we refer to “working-class speech,” we are talking about a social dialect. The terms “upper” and “lower” are used to subdivide the groups, mainly on an economic basis, making “upper-middle-class speech” another type of social dialect or **sociolect**.

As in all dialect studies, only certain features of language use are treated as relevant in the analysis of social dialects. These features are pronunciations, words or structures that are regularly used in one form by working-class speakers and in another form by middle-class speakers. In Edinburgh, Scotland, for example, the word *home* is regularly pronounced as [heim], as if rhyming with *fame*, among lower-working-class speakers, and as [hom], as if rhyming with *foam*, among middle-class speakers. It’s a small difference in pronunciation, but it’s an indicator of social status. A more familiar example might be the verb *ain’t*, as in *I ain’t finished yet*, which is used more often in working-class speech than in middle-class speech.

When we look for other examples of language use that might be characteristic of a social dialect, we treat class as the **social variable** and the pronunciation or word as the **linguistic variable**. We can then investigate any systematic variation in usage by counting how often speakers in each class use each version of the linguistic variable. This is rarely an all-or-nothing situation, so we usually find that one group uses a certain form more or less than another and not that only one group or the other uses the form exclusively.

Education and occupation

Although the unique circumstances of every life result in each of us having an individual way of speaking, a personal dialect or **idiolect**, we generally tend to sound like others with whom we share similar educational backgrounds and/or occupations.

Among those who leave the educational system at an early age, there is a general pattern of using certain forms that are relatively infrequent in the speech of those who go on to complete college. Expressions such as those contained in *Them boys throwed somethin'* or *It wasn't us what done it* are generally associated with speakers who have spent less time in education. Those who spend more time in the educational system tend to have more features in their spoken language that derive from a lot of time spent with the written language, so that *threw* is more likely than *throwed* and *who* occurs more often than *what* in references to people.

As adults, the outcome of our time in the educational system is usually reflected in our occupation and socio-economic status. The way bank executives, as opposed to window cleaners, talk to each other usually provides linguistic evidence for the significance of these social variables. In the 1960s, sociolinguist William Labov combined elements from place of occupation and socio-economic status by looking at pronunciation differences among salespeople in three New York City department stores (see Labov, 2006). They were Saks Fifth Avenue (with expensive items, upper-middle-class status), Macy's (medium priced, middle-class status) and Klein's (with cheaper items, working-class status). Labov went into each of these stores and asked salespeople specific questions, such as *Where are the women's shoes?*, in order to elicit answers with the expression *fourth floor*. This expression contains two opportunities for the pronunciation (or not) of **postvocalic /r/**, that is, the /r/ sound after a vowel.

In the department stores, there was a regular pattern in the answers. The higher the socio-economic status of the store, the more /r/ sounds were produced, and the lower the status, the fewer /r/ sounds were produced by those who worked there. So, the frequency of this linguistic variable (r) marked the speech as upper middle class, middle class or working class.

In a British study conducted in Reading, about 40 miles west of London, Trudgill (1974) found that the social value associated with the same variable (r) was quite different. Middle-class speakers in Reading pronounced fewer /r/ sounds than working-class speakers. In this particular city, upper-middle-class speakers didn't seem to pronounce postvocalic /r/ at all. They said things like *Oh, that's mahvellous, dahling!*. The results of these two studies are shown in Table 19.1 (from Romaine, 2000).

Table 19.1 Percentages of groups pronouncing postvocalic /r/

Social class	New York City	Reading
upper middle class	32	0
lower middle class	20	28
upper working class	12	44
lower working class	0	49

Social markers

As shown in Table 19.1, the significance of the linguistic variable (r) can be virtually the opposite in terms of social status in two different places, yet in both places the patterns illustrate how the use of this particular speech sound functions as a **social marker**. That is, having this feature occur frequently in your speech (or not) marks you as a member of a particular social group, whether you realize it or not.

There are other pronunciation features that function as social markers. One feature that seems to be a fairly stable indication of lower class and less education, throughout the English-speaking world, is the final pronunciation of *-ing* with [n] rather than [ŋ] at the end of words such as *sitting* and *thinking*. Pronunciations represented by *sittin'* and *thinkin'* are typically associated with working-class speech.

Another social marker is called “[h]-dropping,” which makes the words *at* and *hat* sound the same. It occurs at the beginning of words and can result in utterances that sound like *I'm so 'ungry I could eat an 'orse*. In contemporary English, this feature is associated with lower class and less education. It seems to have had a similar association as a social marker for Charles Dickens, writing in the middle of the nineteenth century. He used it as a way of indicating that the character Uriah Heep, in the novel *David Copperfield*, was from a lower class, as in this example (from Mugglestone, 1995).

“I am well aware that I am the umblest person going,” said Uriah Heep, modestly; “... My mother is likewise a very umble person. We live in a numble abode, Master Copperfield, but we have much to be thankful for. My father’s former calling was umble.”

Speech style and style-shifting

In his department store study, Labov included another subtle element that allowed him not only to investigate the type of social stratification illustrated in Table 19.1, but also **speech style** as a social feature of language use. The most basic distinction in speech style is between formal uses and informal uses. Formal style is when we pay more careful attention to how we’re speaking and informal style is when we pay less attention. They are sometimes described as “careful style” and “casual style.” A change from one to the other by an individual is called **style-shifting**.

When Labov initially asked the salespeople where certain items were, he assumed they were answering in an informal manner. After they answered his question, Labov then pretended not to have heard and said, “Excuse me?” in order to elicit a repetition of the same expression, which was pronounced with more attention to being clear. This was taken as a representative sample of the speaker’s more careful style. When speakers repeated the phrase *fourth floor*, the frequency of postvocalic /r/ increased in

all groups. The most significant increase in frequency was among the Macy's group. In a finding that has been confirmed in other studies, middle-class speakers are much more likely to shift their style of speaking significantly in the direction of the upper middle class when they are using a careful style.

It is possible to use more elaborate elicitation procedures to create more gradation in the category of style. Asking someone to read a short text out loud will result in more attention to speech than simply asking them to answer some questions in an interview. Asking that same individual to read out loud a list of individual words taken from the text will result in even more careful pronunciation of those words and hence a more formal version of the individual's speech style.

When Labov analyzed the way New Yorkers performed in these elicitation procedures, he found a general overall increase in postvocalic /r/ in all groups as the task required more attention to speech. Among the lower-middle-class speakers, the increase was so great in the pronunciation of the word lists that their frequency of postvocalic /r/ was actually higher than among upper-middle-class speakers. As other studies have confirmed, when speakers in a middle-status group try to use a prestige form associated with a higher-status group in a formal situation, they have a tendency to overuse the form. This pattern has also been observed in studies of "hypercorrection" (see [Chapter 7](#)), where speakers can produce different forms or odd pronunciations as they shift their speech style to try to "speak better."

Prestige

In discussing style-shifting, we introduced the idea of a "prestige" form as a way of explaining the direction in which certain individuals change their speech. When that change is in the direction of a form that is more frequent in the speech of those perceived to have higher social status, we are dealing with **overt prestige**, or status that is generally recognized as "better" or more positively valued in the larger community.

There is, however, another phenomenon called **covert prestige**. This "hidden" status of a speech style as having positive value may explain why certain groups do not exhibit style-shifting to the same extent as other groups. For example, we might ask why many lower-working-class speakers do not change their speech style from casual to careful as radically as lower-middle-class speakers. The answer may be that they value the features that mark them as members of their own social group. They may value group solidarity (i.e. sounding like those around them) more than upward mobility (i.e. sounding like those above them).

Among younger speakers in the middle class, there is often covert prestige attached to many features of pronunciation and grammar (*I ain't doin' nuttin'* rather than *I'm not doing anything*) that are more often associated with the speech of lower-status groups.

Speech accommodation

As we look closely at variation in speech style, we can see that it is not only based on speakers' social class and attention to speech, but is also influenced by their perception of their listeners. This type of variation is sometimes described in terms of "audience design," but is more generally known as **speech accommodation**, defined as our ability to modify our speech style toward or away from the perceived style of the person(s) we're talking to.

Convergence

We can adopt a speech style that attempts to reduce social distance, described as **convergence**, and use forms that are similar to those used by the person we're talking to. In the following examples (from Holmes, 2013), a teenage boy is asking to see some holiday photographs. In the first example, he is talking to his friend, and in the second example, he is talking to his friend's mother. The request is essentially the same, but the style is different as the speaker converges with the speech style of the other.

C'mon Tony, gizzalook, gizzalook.

Excuse me. Could I have a look at your photos too, Mrs. Hall?

Divergence

While we may want or try to sound like others in some social interactions to emphasize social closeness, there are other times when we may prefer to create the opposite effect. When a speech style is used to emphasize social distance between speakers, the process is called **divergence**. We can make our speech style diverge from another's by using forms that are distinctly different. In the third line of the following example, the Scottish teenager shifts to a speech style with features that differ substantially from the first line (while essentially saying the same thing).

TEENAGER: *I can't do it, sir.*

TEACHER: *Oh, come on. If I can do it, you can too.*

TEENAGER: *Look, I cannae dae it so . . .*

The sudden divergence in style seems to be triggered not only by a need to add emphasis to his repeated statement, but also by the "We're the same" claim of his teacher. This teenager is using speech style to mark that they are not the same.

Register

Another influence on speech style that is tied to social identity derives from **register**. A register is a conventional way of using language that is appropriate in a specific

context, which may be identified as situational (e.g. in church), occupational (e.g. among lawyers) or topical (e.g. talking about language). We can recognize specific features that occur in the religious register (*Ye shall be blessed by Him in times of tribulation*), the legal register (*The plaintiff is ready to take the witness stand*) and even the linguistics register (*In the morphology of this dialect there are fewer inflectional suffixes*).

Jargon

One of the defining features of a register is the use of **jargon**, which is special technical vocabulary, typically nouns (e.g. *plaintiff*, *suffix*), 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.” In many ways, it is the learning of the appropriate jargon of a profession that qualifies an individual as a valid professional within that area of expertise. This exclusive effect of specialized jargon, as in the medical register (e.g. *Zanaxyn is a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug for arthritis, bursitis and tendonitis*), often leads to complaints about what may seem like “jargonitis.”

Slang

Whereas jargon is specialized vocabulary used by those inside established social groups, often defined by professional status (e.g. legal jargon), **slang** is more typically used among those who are outside established higher-status groups. Slang, or “colloquial speech,” describes words or phrases that are used instead of more everyday terms among younger speakers and other groups with special interests. The word *bucks* (for *dollars* or *money*) has been a slang expression for more than a hundred years in the United States, but the addition of *mega-* (“a lot of”) in *megabucks* is a more recent innovation, along with *dead presidents* (whose pictures are on paper money) and *benjamins* (from Benjamin Franklin, on \$100 bills).

Like clothing and music, slang is an aspect of social life that is subject to fashion, especially among adolescents. It can be used by those inside a group who share ideas and attitudes as a way of distinguishing themselves from others. As a marker of group identity during a limited stage of life such as early adolescence, slang expressions can “grow old” rather quickly. Older forms for “really good” such as *groovy*, *hip* and *super* were replaced by *awesome*, *rad* and *wicked* which gave way to *dope*, *kickass* and *phat*. A *hunk* (“physically attractive man”) became a *hottie* and, instead of something being *the pits* (“really bad”), the next generation thought it was *a bummer*, *harsh!*, or said, *That’s sucky!*. The difference in slang use between groups divided into older and younger speakers provides some of the clearest support for the idea that age is another important factor involved in the study of social variation in language use.

Taboo terms

However, the use of slang can vary within the younger social group, as illustrated by the use of obscenities or **taboo** terms. Taboo terms are words and phrases that people avoid for reasons related to religion, politeness and prohibited behavior. They are often swear words, typically “bleeped” in public broadcasting (*What the bleep are you doing, you little bleep!*) or “starred” in print (*S**t! You stupid f***ing a**hole!*).

In a study of the linguistic differences among “Jocks” (higher status) and “Burn-outs” (lower status) in Detroit high schools, Eckert (2000) reported the regular use of taboo words among the “Burnouts,” both males and females. However, among the higher status group (the “Jocks”) males used taboo words only with other males, while females didn’t seem to use them at all. Social class divisions, at least in the use of slang, are already well established during adolescence.

African American English

In much of the preceding discussion, we have been reviewing research on social variation based mainly on examples from British English and what we might call “European” American English. Labeling one general social variety according to the historical origins of the speakers allows us to put it in contrast with another major variety called **African American English** (AAE). Also known as Black English or Ebonics, AAE is a variety used by many (not all) African Americans in many different regions of the USA. It has a number of characteristic features that, taken together, form a distinct set of social markers.

In much the same way as large geographical barriers, such as oceans, rivers and mountains separating groups of people, foster linguistic differences in regional dialects, social barriers such as discrimination and segregation serve to create marked differences between social dialects. In the case of AAE, those different features have often been stigmatized as “bad” language, following a regular pattern whereby the social practices, especially speech, of dominated groups are treated as “abnormal” by those dominant groups who have decided that they are in charge of defining “normal.” Although AAE speakers continue to experience the effects of discrimination, their social dialect often has covert prestige among younger members of other social groups, particularly with regard to popular music, and certain features of AAE may be used in expressions of social identity by many who are not African American.

Vernacular language

The form of AAE that has been most studied is usually described as **African American Vernacular English (AAVE)**. The term “vernacular” has been used since the Middle Ages, first to describe early local versions of the European languages that

eventually became French, Italian and Spanish (low prestige) in contrast to Latin (high prestige), then to characterize any non-standard spoken version of a language used by lower status groups. So, the **vernacular** is a general expression for a kind of social dialect, typically spoken by a lower-status group, which is treated as “non-standard” because of marked differences from the “standard” language. (See [Chapter 18](#) for more on the concept of the standard language.). As the vernacular language of African Americans, AAVE shares a number of features with other non-standard varieties, such as “Chicano English,” spoken in some Hispanic American communities. Varieties of what has been called “Asian American English” are also characterized by some of the pronunciation features described in studies of this vernacular.

The sounds of a vernacular

A pervasive phonological feature in AAVE and other English vernaculars is the tendency to reduce final consonant clusters, so that words ending in two consonants (*left hand*) are often pronounced as if there is only one (*lef han*). This can affect the pronunciation of past tense *-ed* forms in certain contexts, with expressions such as *iced tea* and *I passed the test* sounding like *ice tea* and *I pass the tess*. This characteristic is shared with many pidgins and creoles, as described in [Chapter 18](#), and has led to the suggestion that AAVE may have initially come into being in a way similar to other English creoles.

Initial dental consonants (*think, that*) are frequently pronounced as alveolar stops (*tink, dat*), with the result that the definite article (*the*) is heard as [də], as in *You da man!*. Other morphological features, such as possessive *-’s* (*John’s girlfriend*) and third person singular *-s* (*she loves him*), are not typically used (*John girlfriend, she love him*). Also, when a phrase contains an obvious indication of plural number, the plural *-s* marker (*guys, friends*) is usually not included (*two guy, one of my friend*).

The grammar of a vernacular

It is typically in aspects of grammar that AAVE and other vernaculars are most stigmatized as being “illogical” or “sloppy.” One frequently criticized element is the double negative construction, as in *He don’t know nothin* or *I ain’t afraid of no ghosts*. Because the negative is expressed twice, these structures have been condemned as “illogical” (since one negative supposedly cancels the other). Yet this feature of AAVE can be found in many other English dialects and in other languages such as French: *il ne sait rien* (literally, “he not knows nothing”). It was also common in Old English: *Ic naht singan ne cuðe* (literally, “I not sing not could”). There is nothing inherently illogical about these structures, which can extend to multiple negatives, allowing greater emphasis on the negative aspect of the message, as in *He don’t never do nothin*.

Table 19.2 AAVE structures

Activity or state	AAVE structures
current (= now)	<i>he busy</i> <i>he playin ball</i>
recurring or habitual (= usually)	<i>he be busy</i> <i>he be playin ball</i>
started or happened earlier (= from the past)	<i>he bin busy</i> <i>he bin playin ball</i>

The “sloppy” criticism focuses on the frequent absence of forms of the verb “to be” (*are, is*) in AAVE expressions such as *You crazy* or *She workin now*. It may be more accurate to say that wherever *are* and *is* can be contracted in the casual style of other varieties (*You’re crazy, She’s working*), they are not articulated in AAVE. Formal styles of Standard English require *are* and *is* in such expressions, but many regional varieties do not. Nor do many other languages such as Arabic and Russian require forms of “to be” in similar contexts. This aspect of the structure of AAVE speech can’t be “sloppy” any more than it would be “sloppy” in the everyday talk of Arabic or Russian speakers.

While AAVE speakers don’t include the auxiliary verb *is* in structures such as *She workin now*, to describe what is happening currently, they can use *be* (not *is*), as in *She be workin downtown now*, as a way of expressing habitual action, as shown in Table 19.2. That is, the presence or absence of *be* distinguishes between what is a recurring activity or state and what is currently happening. To talk about a habitual action that started or happened in the past, AAVE uses *bin* (typically stressed), not *was*, as in *She bin workin there*. In effect, the use of habitual *be* or *bin*, and the absence of forms of “to be” in present state expressions, are all consistent features in the grammar of AAVE. The negative versions of these verbs are formed with *don’t* (not *doesn’t*) and the verb is not used with a contracted negative. So, in AAVE, *She don’t be workin* is grammatical, whereas **She doesn’t be workin* and **She ben’t workin* would be considered ungrammatical.

In this discussion, we have focused on the linguistic features of social dialects of different groups. Yet those groups are not only distinguished by the basic language they use, but by more general factors such as beliefs and assumptions about the world and their experience of it. This is usually discussed in terms of “culture,” the subject of Chapter 20.