Language Variation and Change

Concepts and definitions

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Linguistics
Speaker contact and its effects
Accent

1) A reference to pronunciation, i.e. the collection of phonetic features which allow speakers to be identified regionally and/or socially. Frequently it indicates that someone does not speak the standard form of a language, cf. *He speaks with a strong accent.* 2) The stress placed on a syllable of a word or the type of stress used by a language (volume, length and/or pitch). In the International Phonetic Alphabet primary accent is shown with a superscript vertical stroke placed before the stressed syllable as in *polite* [pə'laɪt]. A subscript stroke indicates secondary stress, e.g. *a 'black,bird* (compound word) versus *a 'black 'bird* (syntactic group).
Rule

A formulation of a regular process in a language and/or the internalised knowledge of this process (from early language acquisition). For instance, the rule for forming an adverb from an adjective consists of adding -ly to the latter as in quick > quickly. Rules are not watertight, e.g. friendly is an adjective although it ends in -ly, because most processes in languages are regular with a small number of exceptions. This may be the residue of an historical process which was not carried through to completion or may be due to the fact that a form does not match the input necessary for a rule, cf. friendly which cannot take the adverbial ending -li/. Because native speakers do not experience difficulty in mastering exceptions there is rarely a ‘cleanup’ operation in a language to remove exceptions. Exceptions can attain sociolinguistic significance if they become indicative of a certain variety, e.g. the irregular distribution of long /æː/ in RP, contrast bland /blænd/ and blast /blæːst/. This type of situation can lead to hypercorrection with speakers saying /plæːstɪk/ for plastic /plæstɪk/, for instance.
Accommodation

A term from sociology (used primarily by Howard Giles) and applied to sociolinguistics, above all by the British sociolinguist Peter Trudgill. It assumes that when speakers are in face-to-face interaction with other speakers they will adapt their speech to that of their interlocutors, perhaps in an effort to make them feel at ease or to be socially accepted by them. If this accommodation occurs across an entire community then it can lead to new dialects which contain combinations of input features. Accommodation is taken to be responsible for the reduction in differences between dialects and for the rise of intermediate forms. It does not take place via the media (Trudgill 1986: 40 [1.2.3]). Additionally, individuals who leave a rural area, go to a city and return are accommodated to as they are regarded as being carriers of prestige forms by local inhabitants.
Hypercorrection

A linguistic situation in which speakers overgeneralise a feature or structure which they do not have in their native variety. For example, if some northern English speakers pronounce *butcher* /bɒtʃə/, with the vowel in *but*, i.e. as /bʌtʃə/, then this would be hypercorrection as they would not have /ʌ/ in their own vernacular and, in an effort to speak standard English, overapply the /ʊ/-to-/ʌ/ shift. If this happens in an entire community during accommodation then one can speak of hyperadaptation.
Network, social

A series of connections which individuals have with those they interact with socially. Networks, as the notion was developed for linguistics by James and Lesley Milroy, can be simplex or multiplex and can show weak or strong ties. Vernacular speakers, typically members of non-prestigious social groups with less access to higher education, are liable to have strong ties in multiplex networks. Middle-class speakers on the other hand tend to partake in weak-tie networks.

Network strength

A measure of the ties which individuals show in their social networks. Strong ties inhibit change as they are also an index of how closely speakers adhere to the vernacular norms of their community.
**Vernacular**

A cover term for popular, spoken varieties which are usually strongly localised and not influenced by a standard which might be present in the region where they are spoken. They are typically used by people who do not belong to the educated middle classes of a society and vernaculars do not necessarily have a written form though they may be (partially) represented using specially adapted spellings.

**Vernacular norms**

According to the linguists James and Lesley Milroy language usage is determined in vernacular-speaking networks by their own internal norms and not by public notions of a standard. These norms serve to maintain network identity and internal cohesion and govern the range of features found at any one time in a network with the possibility of change occurring through the introduction of innovations from outside. Vernacular norms are not explicitly codified (unlike standard varieties) and are transmitted orally across generations.
Prestige

An attribute of varieties which is determined by how they are viewed by speakers. Usually a standard variety enjoys highest prestige in a community and is favoured in public and official usage. Other varieties enjoy correspondingly less prestige. If a particular variety has a long tradition and high awareness then it may have increased prestige compared with other non-standard varieties. This is the case with Cockney in England which has a certain status as the vernacular of the capital which other urban varieties do not necessarily have.

Prestige, overt and covert

A reference to different kinds of prestige. Overt prestige is usually enjoyed by a standard which is explicitly codified, e.g. in grammars, usage manuals and dictionaries. Covert prestige is a characteristic of vernaculars: speakers do not openly praise them, but their local identity function means that they favour them over more standard varieties in community-internal communication.
Community of practice

A concept from sociology which refers to those individuals who share a particular occupation or engage in a common activity. This has been analysed from a linguistic point of view to see whether language norms are determined by communities of practice and whether these can initiate language change.

Examples of communities of practice would be people who share a certain profession, like bus-drivers, or a common pasttime or form of sports, e.g. football players.

Interloper

A person who participates in two speech communities. In the opinion of some sociolinguists, such as J. K. Chambers, such individuals can be important in transmitting language change from one community to another and thus cause change to spread socially and also geographically.
Linguistic marketplace

A notion introduced originally by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and adopted into linguistics by David Sankoff and Suzanne Laberge (see Sankoff and Laberge 1978 [1.1.1]) and further applied by the Canadian linguist J. K. Chambers (Chambers 2009, Chapter 5 [1.1.1]) when referring to the fact that speakers’ linguistic choices are determined by their position in society, either perceived or actual. Young adults make adjustments in accent and dialect when they take up occupations that require speech skills – sales, teaching, etc. Chambers stresses that men and women act differently in the linguistic marketplace.
Change from above, below

A classification of the sources of language change introduced by William Labov. Change from above is a conscious process, i.e. above the level of social awareness, and is initiated by a socially dominant group. For example, the borrowings of words or structures from other languages; this often runs parallel to extra linguistic changes such as the rise of an educated middle class. Change from below, on the other hand, is a largely unconscious process, below the level of social awareness, often occurring in the speech low-prestige groups leading to shifts in vernacular norms.
American linguist and founder of the modern discipline of sociolinguistics. Labov started his linguistic career with an investigation of the English used on a small island (Martha’s Vineyard) off the coast of Massachusetts and of English in New York city. In both instances he demonstrated conclusively that the use of language, above all systematic variation, was determined by social factors such as upward mobility or group solidarity. These findings triggered much further research into language and society which has led to many insightful studies, particularly in the English-speaking world. Labov’s work has also led to a reassessment of the methods and assumptions of historical linguistics.
Survey, rapid and anonymous

A survey technique which William Labov first employed for his investigation of New York English in the early 1960s. This consisted of briefly eliciting information from informants who were not aware that their speech was being observed. This was done by asking a question or two containing the sounds of interest, e.g. Q: Where can I find XXX? A: On the fourth floor (casual reply), Q: Sorry? A: On the fourth floor (more careful reply).
**Diffusion, cascade model of**

Diffusion of language change which takes place by going from one urban centre to another without affecting the intervening countryside. An instance would be the spread of TH-FRONTING to urban centres around England which are far from London without the rural areas between being affected. The question of size seems to be an important factor with larger cities adopting change before smaller ones.

**Diffusion, counterhierarchical**

Diffusion of language change which involves the spread of features from a rural to an urban setting. It is labelled ‘counterhierarchical’ because this is the opposite of what usually happens. There are a few cases such as the spread of rural *fixin’ to* into urban areas of Oklahoma.
**Founder principle**

A term used to refer to the influence of early settlers on the development of a variety. The assumption is that those speakers active in the early and formative period of a variety have a decisive influence on its later shape, irrespective of their numbers. Thus the early settlers in North America, the English of the seventeenth century and the Scots and the Ulster Scots of the eighteenth century, had a decisive influence on the formation of later American English, much more than, say, the numerically larger group of nineteenth century emigrants. The term ‘founder principle’ was coined by Salikoko Mufwene in an article on creole genesis.
‘Third wave’ sociolinguistic studies

A reference to studies of sociolinguistic variation in which individual style, rather than the realisation of variables across social groups, forms the focus of attention. The emphasis here is on small groups of individuals rather than broad communities. The extent to which speakers uses their styles of language to construct their social personae and forge their linguistic identity is a central concern of third wave studies. ‘Third’ in the name suggests that it follows the first type of class-based variationist study carried out by Labov in New York City and the second type of social network analysis by James and Lesley Milroy in Belfast.
Gender and language change

A central insight of sociolinguistics in the tradition of William Labov is that when change is taking place in a community it is frequently young females who form the vanguard of such change. Why young women in western countries should be the leaders of change is a matter of discussion. It can be observed that young women have a greater sensitivity to language variation and use innovative forms on the one hand to enhance their community status and on the other to project their social persona within their community. Men are more often bound to traditional local norms which can account for why they lag behind their female counterparts when language innovation and change is in progress.
**Linguistic variable**

A reference to a feature of a language/variety which shows particular variation in a speech community; speakers may or may not be aware of this variation. In NEW YORK and DUBLIN the realisation of /r/ is just such a variable. In northern England the absence of a distinction between the vowels in *but* and *bush* would be an instance (FOOT-STRUT SPLIT). Linguistic variables may be binary (presence or absence) or scalar (with values on a continuum). The latter is true of phonological variables. Examples of grammatical variables are double negation, the use of *ain’t* and the lack of marking with verbs in the third person singular in African American English. Variables can also be assessed quantitatively, i.e. how often a certain realisation occurs in the speech of speakers and/or across those in different social groups. A common non-linguistic designation for a linguistic variable, of which speakers are aware, is a SHIBBOLETH.
Shibboleth

A linguistic item which serves the function of identifying a speaker as belonging to one community and not another. The term stems from the Book of Judges (12: 5-6) in the Old Testament which recounts how Jephthah and the Gileadites defeated the Ephraimites at the banks of the Jordan. The Gileadites managed to cross the river before the Ephraimites. To check whether those behind them were actually from their group they asked each person to pronounce the word shibboleth (which meant either ‘stream in flood’ or ‘ear of corn’). Those who pronounced it as sibboleth, i.e. with [s] and not [ʃ], were not Gileadites, regarded as enemies and given short shrift or rather [sɔːrət srɪft].
Transmission vs diffusion

A distinction in principle between two means by which language passes between generations/speakers. With transmission one generation acquires its language from a preceding one in early childhood and in the process it masters complex community-internal norms. With diffusion language is passed between groups due to contact, largely among adults. This leads to transfer of structure between languages and imperfect acquisition which can in turn result in reanalysis of internal structures and a realignment of linguistic norms.
Linguistic variation and the family

Parents are obviously the prime transmitters of language to children in very early childhood (caregivers may also play a role if present in the home environment). Whether children then acquire the variation patterns of their parents (and/or caregivers and perhaps older siblings) depends on a number of factors: (i) whether the parents are from the locality in which they live, (ii) if not, how different their speech is from that of local inhabitants, (iii) whether the parents’ language variation (phonological, grammatical or lexical) is marked vis à vis the norms of the surrounding community and (iv) the degree of identification of children with their home surrounding.
Change in present-day English
Change, present-day grammatical

A reference to changes taking place in non-vernacular varieties of English mostly in Britain and in the United States and Canada, but also in South Africa, Australia and New Zealand (primary SETTLER ENGLISH countries). Throughout the twentieth and into the twenty first century the following areas have been identified by Leech et al (2009 [1.2.9]) as showing variation and change.

1) The subjunctive mood The demise and revival, especially in British and American English, of the mandative subjunctive, cf. She insists that he come tonight. The were subjunctive, e.g. If he were more attentive in class his grades would be better, is considered a recessive formal option.

2) The modal auxiliaries There is an apparent decline of true modals (depending on register): shall, ought to and need(n’t) are at the bottom of the frequency scale. The decline is connected to a corresponding expansion of semi-modals, particularly apparent with have to for (deontic) must, cf. You have to pay your TV license.
3) *The progressive* This has spread to contexts in which it was hitherto not found, e.g. with stative verbs, *He’s wanting to work elsewhere* (there are differences here between British and American English) and the distribution of the progressive by genre shows a scale of usage. Furthermore, varieties of English in South Africa have always shown a greater range for the progressive (on Black South African English, see Van Rooy 2006 [6.3.1.3]).

4) *The passive voice* The expansion of the *get* passive at the expense of *be* passives, *They got fined for speeding*. There is also an increase of so-called medio-passives as in *Organic food sells well nowadays*; note its use for adjectives in -able, e.g. *The buckles adjust easily* for *The buckles are easily adjustable*.

6) *Expanded predicates* The use of *take* and *have* as expanded predicates, e.g. *Have / take a look at the car*.

7) *Genitives* There is an expansion of *s*-genitives into inanimate contexts where previously *of*-genitives were used, e.g. *The car’s motor, The building’s roof*.
Other areas of change which one could mention would be (1) the great increase in noun to verb conversion, as in *to mailshot the electorate, to ring-fence the funding, the way we holiday today*, (2) the use of phrasal verbs as adjectives, both attributive and predicative, as in *It’s a must-have item, It was such a put-down, a get-out clause, joined-up thinking*, often in elliptical form, e.g. *a separated father, receipted childminders*, leading to considerable structural compaction, cf. *a gated community < a community which lives in an enclosed area with security gates*, (3) shifts to direct object, e.g. *to report (about) X, to appeal (against) X, to protest (about) X*, (4) changes in subcategorisation, e.g. a shift in animacy with subjects as in *This door is alarmed* (Hickey 2006 [1.2.9]).

None of the above phenomena represents categorical change in English grammar. Rather they are alterations in range and usage (Leech et al 2009 [1.2.9] speak of structures ‘losing ground’ and ‘gaining ground’) and could be arranged as recessive vs. emergent as follows.
Changing grammatical features of present-day English

These changes represent possible trajectories for major change in the future if the pathways, which are now recognisable, are continued and expanded and if the changes become categorical (a rule which must be adhered to).
Quotative ‘like’

A use of the pragmatic marker ‘like’, together with a form of *be*, to recount something as in *And I’m, like, ‘No way will my parents pay for that!’*. It is particularly common in young people’s speech across the anglophone world and would seem to have originated in American English.
There are several types of lexical change in non-vernacular varieties of English, usually involving extension or restriction in meaning. Extensions would be joy meaning ‘success’, e.g. *He got no joy out of the insurance firm*; culture meaning ‘general social behaviour’, e.g. *The culture of violence in modern society*; philosophy meaning ‘policy’, e.g. *The new philosophy of the company is to diversify*; issue meaning ‘difficulty’, e.g. *Unfortunately, our customers have been experiencing issues*. Examples of restriction are rarer but one would be *intercourse* which is now restricted to a sexual sense. Semantic shifts can involve new meanings not necessarily related to original ones. An example is *technically* meaning ‘in a strict sense’, e.g. *Technically, he was within the law*. 

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**Change, present-day lexical**