

## Module: Sociolinguistics

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### Lecture 04: Language Varieties

#### ❖ Varieties of Language:

**1- Language Variety:** this is a general term that maybe used at a number of levels. We can use the term to distinguish between English and French, but we can also use the term to distinguish between two varieties of English, such as New York City English vs. Appalachian English.

**2- Dialect:** this is a complex and often misunderstood concept. For linguists, a dialect is the collection of attributes (phonetic, phonological, syntactic, morphological, semantic) that make one group of speakers noticeably different from another group of speakers of the same language.

#### ❖ Common Sources of Misunderstanding:

- ✓ **Dialect is NOT a negative term for linguists:** very often, for example, we hear people refer to non-standard varieties of English as “dialects”, usually to say something bad about the non-standard variety (and thus about the people who speak it). But, the term *dialect* refers to ANY variety of a language. Thus, by definition, we all speak a dialect of our native language.
- ✓ **Dialect is NOT synonymous with accent:** Accent is only a part of dialectal variation. Non-linguists often think accents define a dialect (or that accents alone identify people as non-native or foreign language speakers). Also, non-linguists tend to think that it’s always the “other” people that have “an accent”. So, what is “accent”?
- ✓ **Accent:** this term refers to phonological variation, i.e. variation in pronunciation. Thus, if we talk about a Southern Accent, we are talking about a generalized property of English pronunciation in the Southern part of the US. However, Southern dialects have more than particular phonological properties. A person is said to have an oxford accent when we find in his speech certain phonological characteristics related to English spoken in that

town. The term accent is also used to refer to some foreign, non-native features in the speech of a person- usually a foreigner speaking a second language.

### **3- Standard and Non-standard Dialects:**

A standard dialect (also known as a standardized dialect or “standard language”) is a dialect that is supported by institutions. Such institutional support may include government recognition or designation; presentation as being the “correct” form of a language in schools; published grammars, dictionaries, and textbooks that set forth a “correct” spoken and written form; and an extensive formal literature that employs that dialect (prose, poetry, non-fiction, etc.). There may be multiple standard dialects associated with a language. For example, Standard British English (Br E) is the broad term used to distinguish the forms of the English language used in the United Kingdom from forms used elsewhere in the Anglophone world. British English encompasses the varieties of English used within the UK, including those in England; Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales.

Standard British English and Standard Indian English may all be said to be standard dialects of the English language. A nonstandard dialect, like a standard dialect, has a complete vocabulary, grammar, and syntax, but is not the beneficiary institutional support.

### **4- Regional Dialect:**

A regional dialect is not a distinct language but a variety of a language spoken in a particular area of a country. Some regional dialects have been given traditional names which mark them out as being significantly different from standard varieties spoken in the same place.

### **5- Minority Dialect:**

Sometimes members of a particular minority ethnic group have their own variety which they use as a marker of identity, usually alongside a standard variety. This is called a minority dialect, examples are African American Vernacular English in the USA, London Jamaican in Britain, and Aboriginal English in Australia.

### **6- Indigenized Variety:**

Indigenized varieties are spoken mainly as second languages in ex-colonies with multilingual populations. The differences from the standard variety may be linked to English proficiency, or may be part of a range of varieties used to express identity. For example, “Singlish” (spoken in Singapore) is a variety very different from standard English, and there are many other varieties of English used in India.

### **7- Social Varieties:**

Another kind of language variation is linked to the different social classes in the society (speech community). Members within the same speech community have differences in their linguistic behavior determined by the social group or social class to which they belong. Factors such as cultural background, education, profession, place of residence, financial wealth and others determine people’s social position and differentiation and thus the way they speak.

### **8- Idiolect:**

An idiolect is simply the technical term we use to refer to the variety of language spoken by each individual speaker of the language. Just as there is variation among groups of speakers of a language, there is variation from speaker to speaker. No two speakers of a language speak identically. Each speaks her or his own particular variety of that language. Each thus speaks her or his own idiolect.

### **9- Sociolect:**

Varieties spoken by socially defined speech communities. It is associated with a particular social class.

### **10- Registers:**

The specialised vocabulary and/or grammar of certain activities or professions (professional language). A register is a subset of a language used for a particular purpose or in a particular social setting. For example, an English speaker may adhere more closely to prescribed grammar, pronounce words ending in -ing with a velar nasal (e.g. “walking”, not “walkin”) and refrain from using the word “ain’t” when speaking in a formal setting, but the same person could violate all of these prescriptions in an informal setting.

The term was first used by the linguist Thomas Bertram in 1956, and brought into general currency in the 1960s by a group of linguists who wanted to distinguish between variations in

language according to the *user* (defined by variables such as social background, geography, sex and age), and variations according to *use*, “in the sense that each speaker has a range of varieties and chooses between them at different times”. (Halliday et al, 1964)

The focus is on the way language is used in particular situations, such as legalese or motherese, (baby talk, motherese, parentese or child-directed speech) is a non-standard form of speech used by adults in talking to toddlers and infants. It is usually delivered with a “cooing” pattern of intonation different from that of normal adult speech: high in pitch, with many glissando variations that are more pronounced than those of normal speech. Baby talk is also characterized by the shortening and simplifying of words.

Halliday (1964) identifies three variables that determine register: **field** (the subject matter of the discourse), **tenor** (the participants and their relationships) and **mode** (the channel of communication, e.g. spoken or written). Any or all of the elements of language may vary in different registers \_ vocabulary, syntax, phonology, morphology, pragmatic rules or different paralinguistic features such as pitch, volume, and intonation in spoken English.

Registers often also have non-linguistic prescriptions such as appropriate dress codes, body language, and proximity of speakers to one another.

**End of Lecture Four!**