LINGUISTICS 101
SOCIOLINGUISTICS
Language Variation
and Language Contact
Sociolinguistics

- Definition: the study of the interaction between language and society
Language Variation
Dialects

• Dialect: a variety of a language spoken by a particular group of people

• Dialects differ systematically from other dialects

• Everybody speaks a dialect.

• Colloquial use of ‘dialect’ differs from linguistic use.
Dialects: Misconceptions

• Misconceptions about dialects:
  • some dialects are inferior to others
  • some dialects are less pure, logical, complex, etc than others
  • some dialects are ‘just slang’
  • language variety reflects intelligence

• There is no scientific basis for the above misconceptions!
Language vs. Dialect

- Spanish: ¿Donde está mi libro?
- Italian: Dove è il mio libro?
- Portuguese: Onde está meu livro?

‘Where is my book?’
Language vs. Dialect

- Taiwanese: gua e tsei di t'howi?
- Mandarin: wo de shu zai nali?
- Hakka: ngai su na bui?

‘Where is my book?’
(Lit. ‘My book is at where?’)
Language vs. Dialect

• Distinguishing language from dialect:

  1. If two dialects are *mutually intelligible*, they belong to the same language

  2. If two dialects are *mutually unintelligible*, they belong to different languages
Language vs. Dialect

- A language is a *collection of dialects*.

‘English’ =

{Standard American English, Bostonian English, Cockney English, African American English, Midwestern English, Appalachian English, Received Pronunciation (i.e. standard British English), Australian English, South African English, New Zealand English, ...}. 
Language vs. Dialect

• Politics and the language/dialect distinction
  • does not coincide with linguists’ distinction

1. Socially-/Politically-defined languages
   • Danish, Norwegian, Swedish
   • Czech, Slovakian
   • Hindi, Urdu

2. Socially-/Politically-defined dialects
   • Dialects of China
Dialectal Differences

• Any aspect of language is subject to variation
  • Phonetics
    • e.g. articulation of [t] in SAE vs. some Chicano English dialects
  • Phonology
    • e.g. word-final /s/ in Spanish dialects
    • e.g. different prosodic patterns in Japanese dialects, Korean dialects, SAE vs. Valley Girl
  • Morphology
    • e.g. subject-verb agreement -s on verbs in SAE vs. AAE
Dialectal Differences

• Differences between dialects
  • Syntax
    • e.g. inversion in embedded questions in SAE vs. Belfast English
      `They asked me if I was going to the meeting.’
      `They asked me was I going to the meeting.’
  • Lexicon
    • e.g. Am.En. ‘elevator’ = Br.En. ‘lift’
  • Word choice
    • e.g. use of words like ‘fabulous’, ‘delicious’, ‘bro’
Language Variation Factors

• Regional
  • Bostonian, New York, Southern, British English, etc.

• Social
  • socioeconomic class, education, age, gender, sexual orientation/identification

• Ethnic
  • African American English, Chicano English, Jewish English, Italian-American English, etc.
Regional Dialects

- Often separated by natural boundaries
- Infrequent communication → growing differences
- Many regional dialects can exist within miles of each other
Social Dialects

- Dialects of groups of people from specific social classes
- Socioeconomic / educational level
- Age
- Gender differences
- Sexual orientation/identification
Ethnic Dialects

• Associated with a particular ethnic group

• No inherent, biological reason

• Why do they exist?
  • language of one’s environment
  • history / other social factors
  • group identification
Standard Dialect

• An idealized version of a language

• ‘Choosing’ a standard dialect
  • often based on the *prestige* dialect
  • often based on the dialect of a capital city, or the most populated city in a country
Standard Dialect

- All dialects are scientifically equal, but there are benefits to knowing the standard dialect
  1. socioeconomic benefits
  2. simplifies communication between speakers of different dialects
  3. unifies people
Speech Style

• Speech style varies depending on context
  • formality (formal vs. informal *registers* of speech)
  • relationship between conversation participants
  • topic of conversation
  • setting
  • individual factors
Speech Style

- Variations in speech style:
  - may be integrated in grammar (e.g. formal/informal pronouns, conjugations)
  - involve lexical choice (pass away / die / kick the bucket)
  - involve construction choice (Give me... / Would you mind giving me...)
  - involve phonetic/phonological differences (e.g. more/less-careful articulation)
  - ...

- Can be found in any language variety
Language Contact
Types/ Causes of Language Contact

- Geographic proximity of languages
- Education (e.g. Latin)
- Prestige language
- Commerce (e.g. pidgins, lingua francas)
- Other dominance relations
- Bi/multilingualism
- Second-language influence
- ...

Effects of language contact

- Frequent lexical borrowing
- Borrowing of other aspects of grammar
- Language shift (from A to B)
- Language convergence (mutual influence)
- Language death
- Language formation (pidgins, creoles, mixed languages)
- Increase/decrease in dominance (e.g. lingua franca)
Lingua Francas, Pidgins, Creoles

- Lingua Franca
  - A language used by speakers of several different languages in order to communicate, usually for commercial purposes

  - The term refers to the pidgin of Italian mixed with French, Spanish, Greek, and Arabic, which was a lingua franca around the Mediterranean. It literally means ‘Frankish Language’.
Lingua Francas, Pidgins, Creoles

- Pidgin
  - Formed to allow communication among speakers of various languages (thus functioning as a lingua franca)
  - does not have native speakers
Lingua Francas, Pidgins, Creoles

- **Pidgin**
  - vocabulary often largely adopted from dominant language (the *lexifier* language, usually the *superstratum* language)
  
  - phonology generally derived from various *substratum* languages
  
  - syntax generally reduced
  
  - generally lack inflectional morphology (i.e. functional morphemes)
Lingua Francas, Pidgins, Creoles

• Creole
  • If children grow up in an area that uses a pidgin, they may adopt it as their native language
  • Creoles are ‘languages’ just like any other (just as complex, logical, etc.)
Multilingualism

• norm in many communities

• may involve complete or varying degrees of fluency depending on language and community

• even in largely monolingualistic societies (e.g. USA), multiple languages are often used
Code Switching

• bi/multilingual speakers may use multiple language/dialects within one conversation or utterance

• if switching mid-sentence, obeys rules of language currently in use

• context influences choice of language

• often misconstrued as ‘broken English’
Linguistic Decline

- Dialect leveling
- Dialectal discrimination
- Banned languages
- Endangered languages
- Extinct languages

- Opposite of linguistic decline: Linguistic Revival
Dialect Leveling

- Neutralization of dialectal differences

- Causes
  1. Education (reinforcing a ‘standard’ dialect)
  2. Migration (into towns/cities - causes dialects to mix)
  3. Media
Dialectal Discrimination

- Does not necessarily lead to decline
- Purnell, Idsardi and Baugh 1999 study
  - called to set up housing appointments in various areas
    - during calls, one of three dialects was used: SAE, CE, or AAVE
  - result: choice of dialect significant in setting up appointments
    - discrimination went both ways
  - additional experiment found that one word (“hello”) is generally enough to distinguish dialects
Banned Languages/dialects

• Languages/dialects are sometimes banned for political reasons
  • Cajun English and French were banned in Louisiana
  • Korean was banned in Korea by the Japanese during their occupation
  • France has an official language academy to dictate allowable French - often bans loanwords
  • Sign languages have been banned in many parts of the world
  • Many Americans favor an ‘English-only’ movement
Endangered / Extinct languages

• Endangered languages
  • languages which are not being passed down to the younger generation
    • generally have few living speakers left
      • e.g. many Native-American languages, Hawaiian, Provençal (in France)

• Extinct language
  • a language with no living native speakers
    • e.g. Latin, many Native-American languages
Linguistic Revival

- There are often efforts to revive endangered languages, these include:
  - teaching the language in elementary schools (as second languages)
  - creating schools using said language as language of instruction
  - creation of language academies to ‘define’ the dialect (as a way of ‘legitimizing’ it)

- Note that not all communities have a desire to ‘save’ their language.
Linguistic Revival

• Hebrew is a very special example
  • was a dead language for hundreds of years (extinct as of 400 B.C.E.)
  
  • written variant survived
  
  • in 19th century, there was a revival of the spoken form, including addition of lexical items
  
  • now, native language of about 5 million people