Language and Society (CL2.203)

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Quiz 1

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Question 1

The terms *language* and *dialect*, although used frequently in day-to-day speech, are not well-defined terms by any means. It is frequently very difficult to define precisely whether something is a language or a dialect.
Frequently, what is referred to as a language is a *politically powerful* "standard" dialect – just one out of possibly several. This is not a linguistic criterion, but socially and historically determined; for example, the variety of Hindi spoken in and around Delhi gradually gained prestige and is now what most people mean when they refer to "Hindi". Similarly, Parisian French is the "standard" against the several varieties of French spoken all over France.
It is also possible that the language is defined, again by political backing, but not of any single regional variety – rather, it is an amalgamation of the varieties spoken throughout the territory. For example, the standard of British English ("BBC English" or "The Queen's English") draws from varities spoken all over Britain, and is intelligible to speakers of all.

The above are examples of when the term "language" is used as a name for a special dialect out of many; however, it may also be used as an umbrella term covering a range of dialects. In such cases, what is difficult is to distinguish the boundary separating two languages – or even whether or not two languages have to be considered "the same".
The case of dialect continua exhibits this issue, and is, in addition, the situation in both North and South India. The languages spoken in North India - like Marathi, Gujarati, Sindhi, Punjabi, Hindi, Bhojpuri, Bengali, Odia and Assamese – form a continuum across the entire northern part of the country. Rajend Mesthrie (2000) says, in this connection, that the speech of each village differs only slightly from that of its neighbours; but the speech of two locations widely separated

becomes mutually unintelligible and, in fact, a new language entirely[1].
In South India (specifically Kerala), the variety spoken in districts bordering Tamil Nadu is equally similar to Malayalam and Tamil, and intelligible to both. Similarly, the variety of Kasargod (bordering Karnataka) shows a marked similarity to Kannada.

In the question of whether or not two languages are the same, another prime example to be found in India is the Hindi/Urdu controversy. These two languages have distinct scripts, identities and communities, but share a great deal of vocabulary in the day-to-day register and are frequently (but not always) mutually intelligible in that register. The Serbian/Croatian dispute is another such example from Europe.

Thus, in conclusion, it is not feasible to unambiguously distinguish a language and a dialect, or even whether two languages are the same or not. The above evidence from India and Europe is in support of this claim.

Question 2

The two notions of *linguistic* and *social variables* are very closely intertwined, but distinct ideas in sociolinguistics.
A linguistic variable is a feature of a language (phonology, morphology or syntax), whose expression differs among different social groups or social situations. For example, the second-person singular pronoun is a linguistic variable in Hindi. The various forms a variable can take are called its *variants*, which in Hindi are `tU`, `tuma` and `Apa`.
Social variables are part of the social context or situation surrounding an utterance; they are *not* linguistic in nature. For example, the level of politeness of an utterance is social variable. Its variants might be "rude", "casual" and "polite".

Social variables determine the choice of the linguistic variant to use in a situation. As in the above examples, the social variable of politeness determines whether one uses `tU`, `tuma` or `Apa` for the second-person pronoun.

Another example of a linguistic variable is the suffix `-aw(u)` in Malayalam. It is attached to verbs to mean roughly "that which", e.g. `avan parYayunnu` "he is saying"; `avan parYayunnaw(u)` "that which he is saying". The social variable determining its pronunciation is formality; in formal situations like news broadcasts, or court proceedings, it is pronounced fully as `-aw(u)`, but in more informal situations like rapid, day-to-day conversation (which may be polite or casual), it is almost always elided to simply `-e` (the above example would become `avan parYayunne`).

An example of a linguistic variable from abroad, as given by Mesthrie[2], is the

[1] Mesthrie, Rajend. Introducing sociolinguistics. Edinburgh University Press, 2009.
[2] Mesthrie, Rajend. Introducing sociolinguistics. Edinburgh University Press, 2009.

rhoticism of speech based on social class in New York. The variable here is the "postvocalic *r*", *i.e.*, *r* after a vowel but not between two vowels.
It was found that speakers of the working classes tended not to pronounce it very frequently, leaving it out in words like *card* and *pork*.
The upper classes, conversely, used it very frequently, but not all the time. It was, however, often enough to distinguish.
The lower middle classes afford an interesting example of what Labov called *hypercorrection* – overshooting the mark. They used the postvocalic *r* very frequently – even more than the upper classes did – showing a wish to emulate them, rather than (as shown by the working classes) a solidarity in their choice of variant.