

Language and Society (CL2.203)

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Dialectology and Register

A general understanding about a dialect is that it is either a regional or social variety of a language (normally understood to be a standard language, or a variety with sociopolitical importance).

Mutual intelligibility is a useful criterion to demarcate language varieties. However, this criterion has its limitations; consider, for example, the case of dialect continua. Each variety is intelligible with those adjacent to it, but varieties at opposite ends may not be.

Further, mutual intelligibility depends highly on motivation (how much the speaker of one variety wants to understand another), and is therefore not reciprocal.

The family-tree model, too, can help with this. However, it is simplistic and does not consider the sociopolitical factors at play.

Bloomfield, Hockett and other linguists tried to demarcate dialects by plotting linguistic variables over a geographical region. These show the boundaries of areas where variants of the variable occur, called isoglosses. The coincidence of several isoglosses is called a dialect.

Wave theory is another way to model dialects. It assumes that changes spread outwards from centres of influence in the same way that waves spread outwards from a focus.

The term “register” is widely used in linguistics to refer to a language variety based on usage. For example, technical jargons are a kind of registers.