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Variation

Edward Sapir's extraordinary contributions to Anthropology and Linguistics underlie all of the following observations regarding linguistic variation. He was ever mindful of the fact that language and linguistic behavior tie human cognition to the social organizations that maintain the life of any language. Following in that tradition, ethnographers of communication affirmed incontrovertible linkages between linguistic forms and their social functions in speech communities throughout the world. William Labov described linguistic variation as "linguistic differences that don't make a difference." For example, English can freely substitute "kids" for "children" without any loss in denotational meaning; this type of free linguistic variation is common.

Studies of linguistic variation travel under different guises, depending substantially upon theoretical orientation and the nature of the data under analysis. All studies of linguistic variation are rooted in social contexts, typically where language is used by ordinary people engaged in day-to-day activities. Other studies of linguistic variation are highly specialized, perhaps concentrating on education, or the use of language in the courts. Analyses of language in the workplace, or during telephone conversations, as well as in remote villages where literacy is embodied within oral traditions, all exhibit degrees of linguistic variation.

Linguistic variation also takes place at all levels within the grammar; more specifically, syntactic variation can be observed (e.g. Tom hit Dave. Vs. Dave was hit by Tom). It also occurs lexically, as mentioned above. Phonetic and phonological variation are perhaps most commonly observed because we often tend to associate many characteristics of dialects or accents with their specific phonetic and/or phonological properties. Quantitative analyses of phonology and morphophonology lie at the heart of many sociolinguistic studies, but such quantitative analyses represent one of several approaches to analyses of linguistic variation.

Journal of Linguistic Anthropology 9(1–2):263–266.

My own interest in linguistic variation grows directly from personal observations regarding linguistic discrimination against African Americans. Although I now have considerable command of standard English, this was not always the case. I grew up in inner-city neighborhoods in Philadelphia and Los Angeles. I also attended public schools where the vast majority of my teachers—regardless of their racial background—were openly critical, if not hostile, to African American English.

Indeed, my earliest awareness of linguistic variation occurred during early childhood when I observed striking differences between the language of my teachers, my playmates, and people throughout the community. Like most people, their life experiences and educational backgrounds strongly influenced their speech. Such is the case with the linguistic variation illustrated in Figure 1.

Four African American males are displayed, along with evidence of their usage of nonstandard English negation. The adolescent data were collected in 1975, and the young adult data were collected in 1985. As teens the young men almost always used nonstandard negation. That is, whenever possible, they would say, "I ain't got none," or "He ain't seen it" in contrast to standard English, "I don't have any," or "He hasn't seen it."

Coco and Juan are brothers by blood, as is the case for Russel and Leon. However, Coco and Juan lived in poverty with a single mother who was drug dependent and on welfare. Russell and Leon were middle class; their father was an attorney and their mother an elementary school teacher. Again, as teens they rarely—if ever—used standard English. However, their circumstances changed as adults, and so did their relative usage of standard English.

Coco enlisted in the army as a private and had risen to the rank of sergeant by 1985; he is presently a colonel with plans to retire from active military duty. His brother Juan had been convicted of murder during a

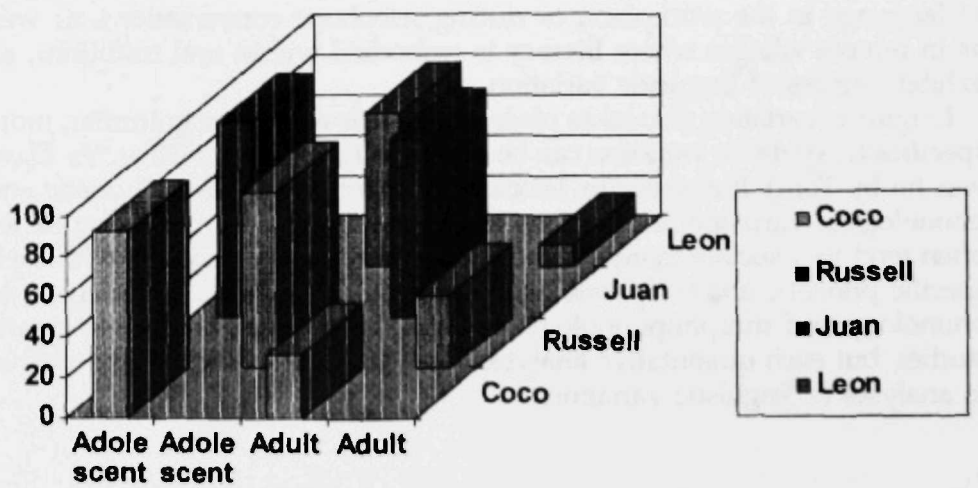

Figure 1
% of nonstandard negation for four African American males as teens and adults

robbery, and he continues to serve a life sentence in prison; he could not be tried as an adult for his crime, otherwise he may have received a death penalty. Russell owns three small stores "in the old neighborhood"; in 1985 he owned a single hardware store. His brother Leon received an MBA, and after leaving IBM in 1992 he formed a software corporation with some of his former colleagues. He has prospered as an entrepreneur and philanthropist.

The linguistic variation that they demonstrate is both typical of many communities and somewhat unique as part of the African American experience. First of all, many Americans vary usage between standard and nonstandard English, and I frequently hear many well educated people use "ain't" or other nonstandard forms, often for emphasis. The point at hand seeks to affirm that linguistic forms are frequently influenced by their function. In the case of my African American consultants, their life experiences resulted in different exposure to standard English, as well as different circumstances that either embrace or reject standard English. Leon observed that he would have been outcast at IBM had he tried to speak "Black English," but Juan noted that standard English was devalued in prison, and those convicts who embraced it did so at considerable personal risk.

Linguistic variation within a single language differs considerably from linguistic variation across languages. Letticia Galindo's study of Chicanas who were former gang members is highly illustrative of the latter case, where linguistic variation includes bilingual code-switching between Spanish and English, as well as Caló, the slang and jargon that was common in prison and within their gang culture. Far from the stereotype of impoverished linguistic abilities, these women demonstrate how knowledge of more than one language or culture can enhance communication, allowing interlocutors to draw on their complete reservoir of knowledge; that is, as long as others share comparable communicative competence. Galindo's studies take on added relevance because of politicized efforts to dismantle affirmative action and the passage of laws intended to eliminate bilingual education. The informants whom she interviewed were not only socially disenfranchised, they were linguistically disenfranchised, and educationally disadvantaged.

Her account of the use, or lack thereof, of cursing among Chicanas who had served time in prison offers insights into cultural and linguistic norms that could only be obtained by an outstanding fieldworker. I stress this point because Galindo's exceptional skill as a fieldworker is understated in her research; she does not boast about her ability to draw out conversation that is intimate or salacious, nor does she imply that others can not do what she has done. However, those of you who read her work will no doubt agree with the observation that she has managed to record extremely casual speech, which, at times, was potentially incriminating of the speakers (all of whom she has protected with pseudonyms).

Upon concluding her linguistic survey she returns to the functional realm of Pachuca discourse in context, and she builds upon the observations of Gumperz and Hernandez-Chavez who also observed that substantial Mexican-American codeswitching only occurs among those with adequate linguistic skill. The newly arrived immigrant from a Spanish speaking country

can not utilize these same linguistic resources; that is, without substantial English proficiency.

Matters of linguistic variation go far beyond minority communities in the United States. Evidence of linguistic variation can be found among individual speakers throughout the world, as well as within the speech communities they occupy. Within the U.S. context, however, matters of linguistic variation take on considerable significance in the life of minority group members who lack fluency in mainstream U.S. English. It is partially for this reason, and my own desire to enlist anthropology and linguistics in the quest for greater social equality, that the chosen examples of linguistic variation are relevant to social concerns beyond that of language usage.

(See also *codes, genre, individual, register, style, switching, voice*)

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