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Linguistics 203

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# Lecture 8
# Usage and variation

"Up to now, we have been considering English as a language."—Denning et al.

## **What is** a language exactly?

Is there a good way of answering questions like the following?—
- **How many different languages** are spoken in the world?
- What is the **oldest language** that is still spoken?

These questions **presuppose** that "**a language**" is a well-defined entity—
that it's always possible to classify two ways of speaking or writing as either "the same language" or "different languages".
In fact, that's **not true**;
languages **aren't** discrete and well-defined entities; the boundaries between them are **fuzzy** and it's **not always possible** to e.g. count how many there are.

## No two people speak exactly the same way—

We can't say "a language" has **a consistent structure** and vocabulary, because in that sense no two people would speak the same language.
If I call Coca-Cola *soda* and the letter Z *zee*, and you say *pop* and *zed*,
is that enough to say we speak "different languages"? **Probably not**.
This sense of language is called an **idiolect**—
the **individual way** a particular person speaks,
with a **different grammar and vocabulary** than anyone else's idiolect.
But if two people's **idiolects** are **broadly similar to each other**,
we might say they speak "the same language".
Thus the idea of "a language" is **an abstraction** in this sense.

**How similar** is similar enough?
There's no one agreed-upon and well-defined standard.
A common rough definition depends on the concept of **mutual intelligibility**—
if two idiolects are so similar that one speaker easily understands the other, we might think of them as speaking **the same language**.
This is the only definition that depends **only on properties of the idiolects**
(rather than, e.g., the social and political context in which they exist),
but as we'll see, this definition is not as clear-cut as it seems.

Another possible definition: agreement on a **common authority**— ?
two people speak the same language if they would consult the same source to find the name of something they don't know the right word for.
But this **isn't always applicable**;
not all languages have authorities, dictionaries, etc.

## What is a **dialect**?

In common usage, *dialect* often has a negative connotation, implying **non-standard** speech.
But in linguistics, the term has a more generic meaning.

A **dialect** is an **intermediate abstraction** between "idiolect" and "language"—
a set of **very similar** idiolects, often associated with a given geographical area.

Dialects can be viewed on **broad or narrow scales**:

- **Canadian English** is a dialect, compared with British, American, etc. dialects;
- but **within** Canadian English we can speak of the **Toronto dialect**, the **Montreal dialect** (of English), the **Vancouver dialect**, etc.;
- and within Toronto, there may be different dialects associated with **different ethnic groups** ("ethnolects").

The differences between the idiolects of two people from Toronto may be small compared to the differences between Toronto English and Montreal English;
Toronto English and Montreal English are more similar to each other than Canadian English is to Australian English;
in the same way, Canadian English and Australian English are more similar to each other than English and Dutch, which we think of as different languages.

Thus the difference between "languages" and "dialects" depends on **scale**;
it's **not** an absolute difference.
There's **no totally satisfactory criterion** for deciding whether two varieties are **dialects of the same language** or **different languages**.

The possibility of a **dialect continuum** makes mutual intelligibility **problematic** as a way of defining different languages:
There are **chains of dialects** where any two dialects **next to each other** are mutually intelligible, but the ones **at either end of the chain** aren't mutually intelligible with each other.
How many languages does such a chain consist of?

What gets **called** a "dialect" or a "language" often depends on **political** factors, such as **national boundaries**.

**Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish** are all mostly mutually intelligible,
but they're usually referred to as **three separate languages** just because they're spoken in three separate countries.
(Dialect differences **within** these countries can be as big as the dialect differences **between** them!)

**Serbian** and **Croatian** are described as separate languages **nowadays**,
but when Serbia and Croatia were part of the **same country** (Yugoslavia), they were considered a single language.
**Urdu** (spoken in Pakistan) and **Hindi** (spoken in India) are a similar situation.

Thus, dialects that are **very similar** in **linguistic** terms are thought of as being different **languages** because of **political and cultural** difference.

Opposite cases also exist:
varieties of language that are **quite different** in objective terms are **described** as "a single language" because they are **politically** or **culturally** united.

**Chinese** is the most famous example here:
"Chinese" includes **multiple varieties** that are **not mutually intelligible**, such as Cantonese, Mandarin, Hokkien, and many others.
But because China is a **unified political state** (and has been for a long time), these highly distinct varieties are often described as "dialects of Chinese".
(Linguists usually refer to Mandarin, Cantonese, etc. as separate languages, however.)

A famous catchphrase: "**A language is a dialect with an army and navy.**"

Thus, there's no clear answer to "how many languages are there?", because there's no objective way to define what counts as "a language": Does Serbo-Croatian count as 2 or 1? Chinese as 1 or 13?

The same principle applies to **language change over time**—
is Old English the "**same language**" as modern English?
Old English wouldn't be **mutually intelligible** with modern English, but **every stage in between** is intelligible with the ones before and after it, and they all would describe themselves as speaking "English".
Old English is **more similar** to Proto-Germanic than it is to modern English; would we say that it's the "same language" as Proto-Germanic?

We may place the boundary between "Old English" and "Middle English" at a specific time such as the Norman conquest of England, but that's really an **arbitrary** decision;
People didn't go to bed on October 14, 1066 speaking one language and wake up on October 15 speaking a different one.

This is why we can't answer a question like "What is **the oldest** language?"
The language today **isn't the same** as the language was even yesterday; but it has direct **historical continuity** as far back as Proto–Indo-European.
So there's **no way to define** "how old" a particular language is.
(Well, except languages that were **invented** at a specific time, like Klingon or Esperanto.)

Some dialects may be considered "**standard**" and others "**non-standard**"—
this is a **social** judgment, and not a linguistic one.
Standard dialects are those used by **educated** people in **formal** situations, and they conform to people's **prejudices** about the "proper" way to speak.
In many situations, in order to be socially **respected** or **taken seriously**, it's necessary to **learn to speak** a **standard** dialect, even for people who grew up speaking a nonstandard dialect.

Non-linguists often use "dialect" to mean **only** non-standard dialects;
but **standard** varieties of a language counts as dialects too! **Everyone** speaks "a dialect".

## Prescriptive vs. descriptive

There are **two different ways** of talking about language **structure** and **differences** between dialects:

Linguists take a **descriptive** approach:
The goal is to **describe** as accurately as possible the way language is used—how sentences are structured, how sounds combine, etc.—and **why** it is used that way.
They study language they way scientists in any other field study their subjects: observing phenomena and trying to explain the patterns behind them.
The descriptive approach **does not make value judgments** between dialects (or between specific **features** of dialects).

Many other commentators on language take a **prescriptive** approach:
Their aim is to maintain and enforce **standards** on language use, defining some dialects (and features) as correct and others as incorrect.
This attitude aims to **prescribe** how people "**should**" speak, rather than to **describe** how people **do** speak.

Descriptive linguists don't deny the **existence** of standardization—that people will be **socially disadvantaged** by speaking non-standard dialects and regarded more favorably if they use standard dialects.
But these are facts about **society**, not facts about the **dialects themselves**.
Dialects become standard **because they're spoken by privileged people**, not vice versa.
Nonstandard dialects **aren't** inadequate or "wrong" in any **objective** sense; it's just by an **arbitrary** social judgment that they're considered that way.

Prescriptivists promote **several false myths** about language:

- that nonstandard dialects are **lacking in structure** or "ungrammatical"
- that nonstandard dialect speakers are **less intelligent**
- that nonstandard dialect features are **illogical** or **don't make sense**
- that **change** away from the current standard is **harmful** to the language

## None of these things are true!

But many people believe them because prescriptivism is **very influential**.

### All dialects are equally well-structured.

Prescriptivists often believe that "grammar" means only **prescriptive** grammar—i.e., the **rules people are taught** to follow so as to speak the **standard** dialect.
But in fact **all dialects and languages** have a **grammar**—a **complex system** of rules learned **subconsciously** in **childhood**, determining how words and sentences are formed.
Not following the **prescriptive** rules of the **standard** grammar doesn't mean you're not following **any** rules of grammar at all—different dialects have **different sets of grammatical rules**.

## Speaking a non-standard dialect doesn't mean you're less intelligent.

It is always **easiest** to learn a language or dialect in **early childhood**—
between the ages of 1 and 4, it happens more or less **automatically**;
you learn the dialect **spoken by the other people around you**.
Learning a language or dialect that's **not spoken around you as you're growing up** is much more difficult.
So if the dialect spoken by your friends and family **is the standard one** already, you end up speaking the standard language without even trying.
But if the people around you growing up speak a **nonstandard** dialect, learning the **standard** dialect **takes more effort** and is **more difficult**.
When people don't speak the standard dialect, it's not because they're "not as smart" as standard speakers—just that they **learned a different dialect** at the time in their lives in which language learning is easy.
If a standard speaker tried to learn a nonstandard dialect, they probably wouldn't do very well either.

Some people **do** speak both standard and nonstandard dialects—
or speak a **single** dialect that contains both standard and nonstandard features, that they can **shift between**. (In fact, **most people** do.)
Standard and nonstandard linguistic features are often appropriate for **different social situations**—just like **wearing different clothes** in different situations.
If someone uses nonstandard dialect features in **casual** situations and standard features in **formal** situations, they're **behaving appropriately** for the context.

## Nonstandard dialects aren't illogical—

or at least, no more illogical than standard dialects.
More precisely, logic **isn't really a meaningful criterion** for describing dialects.

A very common **nonstandard** feature in English is the "**double negative**":
using **multiple negative morphemes** to express a negative sentence:

double negative: *I don't know nothing about it.*
standard (single negative): *I don't know anything about it.*

Prescriptivists often call the double negative **illogical**,
because in **logic**, two negatives **cancel out** and make a positive.
They claim this **illogicality** is why the double negative is nonstandard.
But **that's not the real reason**!

In **French**, using a double negative is **more standard** than the single negative:

standard: *Je ne sais rien.* ('I don't know anything')
single negative: *Je sais rien.*

If **logic** were the reason for features being standard or nonstandard, the double negative **would be** nonstandard in French as well. But it's highly **standard**!

## Change isn't harmful to the language.

Language change is **always in progress**;
if it weren't, we'd still be speaking Old English (or Proto-Germanic, or whatever).
**What the standard is** is also always changing;
Features that are part of the standard **now** weren't always standard.

Prescriptivists often claim that some change in the language **introduces ambiguity** or **makes it harder to express some meaning**.
This may even be true occasionally;
but it's just as likely to make the language **clearer** in some way.
It can't possibly be the case that the standard **as it exists now** is the **best possible** vehicle for expressing ourselves.
The language always **meets the needs** of its speakers.

Prescriptivists often **assume** that nonstandard features are the result of change, even when they have existed in the language for centuries.
The use of *they* to refer to a **single, generic** person is found in Middle English, but many people believe it's a recent invention.

## Where do prescriptive standards come from?

If the standard is **arbitrary**, and not more logical or efficient than other dialects, **how** does it become the standard?
Often it's just based on **social structure**:
the dialect spoken by the most **wealthy**, **powerful**, or **privileged** group will have **its** features considered to be the most linguistically "correct".

Sometimes it's based on **borrowing features** from other **respected** languages:
**Latin** does not use double negation, or prepositions at the end of a sentence;
these are valid as **descriptive** rules **of Latin**, though not for English.
**Prescriptive rules** against those in **English** were invented as an effort to make English **more like Latin**, as a language for writing about serious topics.

And sometimes prescriptivists just take their **personal preferences**
and assume they are **objective facts** about the language,
often making up some justification for considering it poorly-structured.
But the real excuse is that they **just don't like it**.

There's nothing wrong with having **preferences** about language;
lots of people **like their own dialect** and find it easiest to understand.
But you shouldn't treat **personal preferences** as claims of **objective superiority**.