



Unit 11 - How language changes in society

The Continual Nature of Language Change

- All languages undergo continual change.
- Many people have strongly negative feelings towards changes in language.
- Changes are often made by younger speakers. Criticized by older speakers.
 - New meaning for old words: 'cool,' 'wicked.'
 - New stylistic forms: 'big-ass truck.'
- Is language decaying? Or is it making progress?

The study of language change

- Historical linguistics
- The study of the development of languages through the centuries.

Is it possible to study ongoing language change?

- Can we study changes as they **begin** to occur in our own society?
- Previous answer: 'No – too difficult.'
- Modern sociolinguistics: 'Yes – you just need good research techniques.'
 - **William Labov** – a pioneer of the study of variation in language
 - Two key studies:
 - New York department stores
 - Martha's Vineyard

The New York project

- Variation in the pronunciation of /-r/ in word-final position – ‘rhoticism’:
 - car_farm bar_more fur_blur floor_

Random or not?

- Previous descriptions: whether /-r/ is pronounced or not is just random and unpredictable.

The speaker hears both types of pronunciation around him all the time; both seem equally natural to him.

- Labov: not **random variation** but related to **social status**.

Accommodation and Variation

- Sociological studies discovered that female sales assistants in **department stores** subconsciously mimic their customers, particularly when their customers have high social status.
- Labov guessed this **accommodation** might cause **variation** in their language.

Labov's Hypothesis

- The /-r/ sound was regularly used more frequently by upper- and upper-middle-class people.
- Therefore, it might occur more frequently in the **accommodated speech** of lower-class sales assistants in better department stores.

Data collection from three different department stores with different class levels of customers:

- **Saks Fifth Avenue** – an upmarket department store in the center of Manhattan
- **Macy's** – a middle-class, middle-priced store
- **Klein's** – a cheap store with low-cost goods in a poorer part of Manhattan

Goal: elicit examples of word-final /-r/.

- **Complication:** if the sales assistants realized Labov was collecting data, they might change their speech.

Solution: Labov posed as a regular customer and asked two questions.

1. Labov asked about goods located on the **fourth floor** in each store.
 - “Excuse me, where is the furniture department?”
 - The sales assistant replied: “On the fourth floor.”
2. Labov pretended he had not heard and asked for a repetition:
 - “I’m sorry, where was that again?”
 - Reply: “On the fourth floor.” - given with a slower, more careful pronunciation.
3. Labov (secretly) noted down the use of /r/, the age, ethnicity, and gender of the salesperson.

The Results

- Higher use of /-r/ in the more expensive department stores:
 - Use of /-r/ was higher in Saks than in Macy’s.
 - The use of /-r/ in Macy’s was significantly higher than that in Klein’s.
- A significant difference between /-r/ use in casual speech and in more careful speech.
 - More /-r/ in the answers to Labov’s second question – the slow, careful repetition of ‘On the fourth floor.’

‘Sales for prestige’

- Sales assistants were increasingly adopting the /-r/ sound associated with members of the upper- and upper-middle class.
- The use of /-r/ = a new prestige pattern gradually spreading into the lower middle and lower classes.

Confirmed by listening tests

Steps: Recordings of speakers using different amounts of /-r/.

- Listeners were asked to judge which profession the speakers were best suited to:
- Factory worker - sales assistant - executive secretary - professor

Results: speakers regularly use /-r/ associated with higher-level professions.

20 years later...

- A follow-up study of the same type was carried out in the 1990s.
- **Results:** there was a further increase in the use of /-r/ by sales assistants in New York department stores.
- **General result:** variation in /-r/ use was/is **not random** but correlated with social class.

Data collection techniques and the 'Observer's Paradox.'

- It is easy to get samples of careful speech.
 - Interviews, reading passages of text, reading lists of words.
- More difficult to get samples of genuine casual speech
 - People change their speech when outside 'observers' are present.

One solution/strategy

- In interviews, ask informants to talk about any situation in which they thought they were in serious danger of being killed.
- Interviewees become emotionally involved and may forget the presence of the observer.

Conscious and subconscious variation

- **Conscious** variation: people are (more or less) aware of different ways of speaking.
- **Subconscious** variation: people are unaware of certain different ways of speaking.
- Conscious variation '**change from above** (the level of consciousness)' may often be towards an **overtly prestigious**
- Subconscious variation '**change from below** (the level of consciousness)' may result in a change to a **covertly prestigious**

- In New York, /-r/ occurred more in the **careful speech** of sales assistants.
- New York /-r/ insertion was a **conscious change** towards an overtly prestigious form.

The arbitrary nature of /-r/

- Both British and American speech originally pronounced /-r/ in the word-final position.
- This was discontinued by the 19th century
- /-r/ was re-adopted by the upper classes as a prestige pronunciation in the NE of the USA in the 20th century.
- Now it is (still) spreading through the middle and lower classes.
- The symbolic value of /-r/ has fluctuated with time and place in an 'arbitrary' way.
- Further point: the /-r/ pronunciation is not fully new – it has been (somewhere) in the language since earlier times.

Martha's Vineyard

- a beautiful island off the coast of Massachusetts
- permanent population: 6,000
- summer population due to visitors on vacation: 50,000
- mostly on the east side 'down-island.'
- 'up-island' remains rural and sparsely-populated

Vowel changes in MV

- Labov read descriptions of the speech of inhabitants of MV in the 1940s
- Compared with the 1970s → changes in certain vowel sounds in many speakers
- Interviews showed the islanders were **not aware** of this change.
- No variation within individual speakers – people either used the 'new' vowels or they didn't.

The patterns and their background

- The new vowels were most prominent in the **30-45**-year-old age group
- Those **under 30** didn't use them
- The vowel change was more present in the western part - up-island.
- Especially in **Chilmark**, the center of the fishing industry.

Differences between Up-island and Down-island

- Martha's Vineyard was once a prosperous whaling center.
- But only 3% of the islanders were still involved in fishing in the 1970s.
- Most of this 3% lived in the Chilmark area.
- So, the 'new' sounds were actually old forms used by the fishermen.
- And the fishermen had always had these sounds in their speech.
- The pronunciation was present in mainland America in 18th and 19thC.
- Why did the 30-45-year-olds suddenly start to (subconsciously) imitate the speech of the old fishermen?

Labov: an explanation

- Connected with the rise in popularity of MV as a tourist resort.
- Many older inhabitants disapproved of the "summer people" (tourists).
- They admired the old fishermen, who personified the traditional values of MV: independent, skillful, strong, and courageous.
- A strong contrast to the superficial, consumer-oriented society of the summer tourists.
- Admiration of the fishermen → people imitates the fishermen's way of speaking.
- Projection of a 'true islander' identity.
- The 'new' sounds were much stronger in those who were planning to stay on MV permanently - mostly the 30- to 45-year-olds.
- Those under 30 had not yet decided whether to stay on MV.

- So, younger people often didn't switch to the 'new' vowel sounds.

A typical pattern of change

- **Stage 1:** The speech of one social group differs from that of other groups.
- **Stage 2:** A second group admires the first group, and subconsciously adopts certain features in the speech of the former.
- **Stage 3:** The new speech features gradually displace other variant forms and often spread further to other groups as a new 'norm'.

Similarities and differences in the changes in New York and Martha's Vineyard

- **Similarities:**
 1. The changes were not completely new forms but were pronunciations already present in some other group.
 2. The changes both took place when one group adopted another as its model.
- **Main difference:**
 1. In NY the change was generally made consciously – people were aware that /-r/ was a prestige form and used more of it in careful speech.
 2. In MV, people were generally unaware of their altered pronunciation, and there was no variation in careful speech.

Conscious changes vs. subconscious changes

- People are very conscious/aware of the use of some variant patterns in speech. Other variation seems to go unnoticed.
- When people are strongly aware of the use of non-standard variant forms, they often criticize them.

An example: 't' as the glottal stop

- US/UK English words ending in 't'
- In British English, words ending in 't' are often pronounced with a 'glottal stop' when occurring before another word.

- wha(t) stupidity ho(t) water
- People don't notice they are making this change - it is a **subconscious change**.
- Other people pronounce /t/ as a glottal stop at the end of a sentence.
 - Wha(t)? Its ho(t).
- Also, in the UK(only), some people pronounce /t/ as. glottal stop 'word-internally':
 - bo(tt)le bi(tt)er bu(tt)er be(tt)er
- This similar change **is** noticed by people everywhere – it is a **conscious variation**.
- It is also often criticized – even by people who subconsciously make the /t/-glottal stop adjustment *between*

A similar Spanish example

- /s/ is sometimes pronounced as /h/ by Puerto Ricans and Cubans at the ends of words or syllables:
 - 'estos costenos' → /ehtoh kohntenoh/
- Criticized by Columbians as sloppy.
- But Columbians **sub-consciously** convert /s/ to /h/ at the beginning of words and between vowels:
 - 'pasamos' → /pahamos/
- Only **conscious** variation results in criticism.

Social reasons for language change: two more examples

Cajun English in Louisiana

- Cajuns originally spoke French
- Later learned English in school and pronounced it in a special way (L1 interference)
- 1950s economic decline, stigmatization of French → loss of French among young
- 1960s a Cajun renaissance

- Young Cajuns want to express Cajun pride
- The traditional marker of Cajun identity French had been lost.
- Young Cajuns convert their standard southern US English into the Cajun English pronunciations used by their grandparents.
- Important point: If a heritage language has been lost, a specially-accented form of a LML can substitute as a new marker of ethnic ID.
- Similar to Scottish/Irish English.

Newfoundland: using non-standard grammar to express identity

- Renewed pride in coming from Newfoundland among the young generation in urban areas
- A new local identity marker: adding a **non-standard -s** to verbs - 'I knows/loves it.'
- Borrowed from traditional Newfoundland rural speech but changed in a significant way.
- Now added to different kinds of verbs → distinct from 'uneducated' rural speech.
- 'Up-cycled' is cool and trendy, urban speak among the young + Newfoundland identity.

Summarizing so far

1. Changes are often not completely new but may be the re-adoption and adaptation of older forms.
2. Changes often catch on, like the spread of illnesses, as people consciously or subconsciously copy the patterns of other speakers/groups.
3. **Conscious changes** may often be in the direction of speech forms with **overt prestige**.
4. **Subconscious changes** are often movements away from overt prestige forms for reasons of solidarity and have **covert prestige**.
5. Changes may involve the simple copying of older patterns or borrowing and 'remodeling' with a distinctive new flavor.

Accents and identity

- NYC, MV, and Louisiana Cajuns: pronunciations/accents are important expressions of identity
- The social meaning of sounds can change over time – popular/unpopular.
- Are any pronunciations/accents felt to be attractive because of their linguistic properties, or are our attitudes to accents only caused by their social associations?

Two studies of attitudes to English accents

- 10 different accents of British English
- Listeners from the UK were asked to guess where the speakers came from.
- Also asked to rate the speakers on various personal properties, including 'pleasant-sounding' or 'not very pleasant-sounding'.
- Much agreement on ranking.

1= most pleasant 10=least pleasant

- 7-10 large urban areas
- 2-6 rural areas
- association of cities with dirtiness, industry, crime
- countryside associated with clean air, vacations, simple life
- BBC associated with high prestige

Phase 2: same accents played to listeners from the US

- Questions showed that US listeners did not recognize where the accents were from.
- Exception: listeners recognized the BBC accent and the London accent
- Listeners then asked to rank the accents according to most pleasant/least pleasant.
- 1: BBC accent
- 2 London accent
- s 3-10 – fully random
- Explanation: BBC prestigious

- London associated with tourism, an interesting place to visit
- Other rankings completely mixed as listeners did not associate them with specific places.

Conclusions

- English accents are NOT ranked for objective **linguistic** reasons, but for **social**
- Accents are associated with places and their inhabitants, and good/bad feelings about places come to be associated with the accents from these places.
- If we have negative opinions of a place, we may also find the accent from such a place to be unattractive.

A second study in the US

- A large study asking people from Michigan to judge the characteristics of speakers of different accents in the US.
- **Southerners** were classed as speakers of bad/incorrect English, but were judged friendly, down-to-earth and polite.
- People with a **North-eastern** accent: speakers of bad/incorrect English, judged to sound unfriendly and rude.
- **Northerners** (from the Great Lakes area): sound educated, smart, and speak correct English.

General conclusions

- People tend to judge the characteristics of others based on the sound of their speech.
- If there are negative characteristics associated with an accent, this can lead to prejudice and barriers to an individual's social and professional progress.

Language Change Part 2

Negative attitudes towards changes in the use of words

- Criticism that 'like' is meaningless, 'verbal garbage'.
- 'I'm standing there, you know, and she comes up to me and just insults me!'

like

like

like

- Is the use of 'like' really random?

'Bare *like*' – 4 regular functions:

- (1) A focus-marker preceding words that are emphasized, like focus-markers in other languages
- (2) *like* before numbers 'approximately'
- (3) 'like' used as a hedge to make requests/suggestions sound softer
- (4) 'like' used as a hesitation marker, like (adult) 'er..' and 'um..'

Conclusion

- 'bare *like*' is not meaningless and used in a random way. It has clear functions, and is used in ways similar to other functional words.
- But because it is a salient new pattern used by younger speakers, and misunderstood by older speakers, it seems to attract criticism.

'be like'

- be like is a 'quotative' expression:
 - I'm like: 'That's so unfair.' And he's like: 'I don't care.'
- 'be like' does have a clear function – like other new quotatives:
 - She's all: 'Let's just go already.'
 - So then Brad goes: 'No way, dude!'
- Stylistic equivalents to 'said'.

Changing the meaning of old words and developing new words

- Common change: new generations use words in different ways – adjusting their meaning.
- Criticized by older generations as illogical and causing a decline in the language.
- But each generation does this...

Literally vs. hopefully

- Original use of 'literally' = 'by the letter'
- Recent use of 'literally' = 'figuratively'
- Older generation speakers often criticize the new use of 'literally' – illogical, not 'in actuality/reality'.

Hopefully

- Original use of 'hopefully' = 'the subject of the verb is full of hope'
- Changed use of 'hopefully' = 'the speaker has a hope'
- No-one criticizes the 'new' use of 'hopefully' because the change happened one generation ago (although this change was criticized then..).

Contronyms - many words which have developed opposing meanings

That's a real bad-ass kitten

- Some words develop completely new uses: adjective + ass + noun:
- a crazy-ass preacher, lame-ass excuse
- -ass: a new intensifying affix 'very Adj'
- Adj-ass may also mean 'surprisingly Adj'
- An informal stylistic equivalent to surprisingly

Innit

- Words may also change their shape and develop new uses.
- British *innit*, from *isn't it*
- It's a nice day, isn't it ® innit?
- Now used in ways different from isn't it:
- It was good, innit? [wasn't it]

Dude

- New words, e.g. dude
- Originally a term for a sharp dresser

- 1970s surfer subculture - use of dude as an address term, communicating a chilled-out/laid-back attitude
- Now also often used in a friendly way to soften warnings and criticisms:
- Also now used among young women, often when talking about negative experiences:
- Conveys empathy in reactions to suffering.

like, innit and dude

- Contribute to communication in two different ways.
- A **social role**, stressing solidarity among speakers.
- Different **functional roles** – focus-marking, quotation, softening criticism, exclamation.
- **Take-home message:** words' meanings are continually on the move and frequently lead to useful new enhancements – to be valued not blindly criticized.

Changing sounds and other new targets of criticism: “uptalk” and “vocal fry”

- Uptalk = the use of rising intonation at the ends of sentences which are not questions.
- Uptalk intonation frequently occurs with , drawing hearer's attention to this information.

new information

- It can also communicate a 'hidden question'
- Uptalk may be used to indicate that a speaker hasn't finished saying what s/he would like to say and wants to continue talking.
- Conclusion: uptalk is not random, senseless intonation, but is used for various clear purposes.

Vocal fry

- A slow, low pitch 'creaky' voice
- Used by various popular figures in tv, pop music – Kim Kardashian, Britney Spears
- Mixed attitudes to VF: positive and negative

- One experiment with men and women saying the same sentence with/out VF:
- VF speakers judged less likely to make a good impression in a job interview.

High school language use

- ‘Jocks’ – studious, well-behaved, participate in school activities, sports, plan to attend college
- ‘Burnouts’ – little interest in studying, not likely to go to college, more interested in life outside school
- Frequent conflict between jocks and burnouts
- One symbol of jock/burnout identity: different language use
- New vowel sounds emerging in Detroit/Chicago/Cleveland
- Common among burnouts
- Jocks use new sounds less
- Female burnouts use more of the new sounds than male burnouts – they are more modern
- Female jocks use less of the new sounds than male jocks - they are more conservative
- jocks and burnouts gain respect through their – doing well in sports, or being able to fight well.

Male

actions

- jocks/burnouts are not given respect for doing well with the same actions.

Female

- Females are valued as jocks/burnouts due to the way they and .

dress

speak

- So, female jocks/burnouts use more of the typical language symbols of their group.

- Cameron (2008): Because girls have a more marginal position in their groups, they have to make more intensive use of symbolic resources to signal membership of their group.
- speakers are (again) more " than men – either more conservative or more innovative.

Female

extreme

Crossing

- Borrowing language patterns from another social or ethnic group.
- Afro-Caribbean creole speech borrowed in the UK by young whites and South Asians
- Why?
- Speakers of A-C creole are perceived to be 'tough', 'streetwise' and 'cool'.
- Young whites/South Asians use A-C creole to sound tough and express rebellion to authority.
- Also to increase group solidarity
- NO attempts made to join the A-C community
- A-C creole (esp. pronunciation) never used in the presence of A-C males – respect/fear.
- Crossing is not an attempt to assimilate and join another group, just borrow it's image through language.
- 'Mike' – a white teenager from NYC
- Age 13-14 spoke AAVE, wanted to socialize with young African Americans
- Not accepted – becomes critical of AA peers – but continued to use AAVE
- Symbol of a general anti-establishment, urban, youth culture with roots in AA community but now ethnically broader.
- A trans-ethnic hip-hop identity.
- African American speech borrowed by members of other US ethnic groups

- Asians in the US – the ‘model minority’
- Stereotypical association with being hard-working, good behavior, success in school and getting good jobs.
- Young Asians in Philadelphia from poorer backgrounds use AAVE to build a new Asian identity – projecting toughness/self-assertion.
- The Other Asian, a ‘problem minority’.
- Asian girls using AAVE in southern CA schools
- To build a new identity different from the Asian model minority image
- Not an AA identity – claim to speak ‘ghetto’ Not used to rebel – positive attitudes to school and academic success
- Switches out of ‘ghetto’ to SAE with adults
- ‘Ghetto’ is used as a symbol of a new cross-ethnic youth identity.

Crossing: conclusions

- Used to establish a new identity, not to (try to) join another ethnic group.
- Patterns borrowed: mostly vocabulary
- Not borrowed: pronunciation/accent
- Maybe accent is too personal to be borrowed, even ‘protected’ by a group.
- Perhaps strong local/ethnic accents may only be used by those born and growing up in a group/place, not borrowed by outsiders.

Language variation and change: final remarks

- Speakers often change their language to express a new identity:
- NYC /-r/ - a new ID
socio-economic
- MV vowels – to emphasize a ID
local
- Cajun English – to stress an ID
ethnic

- AAVE/'ghetto' – a new trans-ethnic youth ID
- Some 'changes' are the re-adoption of older patterns – NYC /-r/, MV vowels
- Other changes are genuine innovations – uptalk, broke-ass lawyer, *innit*
- Some changes are just expressions of a of speech – vocal fry
new style
- Other changes create patterns which have – like, uptalk
new functions
- Attitudes to change?
- Often negative among older generation speakers – innovations are signs of decay:
- Changing the meanings of words in illogical ways
- Random new pronunciations that are difficult to understand
- New forms of grammar that go against long-established rules

Language change - progress or decay?

- Can languages be said to be in a state of progress or decay?
- To talk about progress or decay, we need to assume some **ideal state of**
- However, it is not possible to define what the perfect state of any language might be.
- Because of this, it is difficult to talk of progress or decay in any real way.

Language, always changing

- Language change seems to be inevitable
- Young speakers (especially) create new patterns and new words.
- Changes should be welcomed, rather than resisted, as positive signs that the language we speak is still very much alive!