

Sociolinguistics : Idiolect, Variety, Accent, Dialect, Language

It is rather a truism that there are variations in the way people use language.

In sociolinguistics, it is established that everyone has distinguishable speech habits designated by the term “idiolect” or “one’s personal dialect” (Crystal, 2008, p. 236). However, in pursuit of systematism, sociolinguists endeavor to focus on salient linguistic forms that prevail in a particular group of people. In this quest, linguists often resort to notions such as code, variety, accent, dialect, and language. However, often the latter remain elusive concepts that fail to allow for or accommodate clear perceptions.

The term variety corresponds with the variations language manifests. It is employed as an umbrella term for language, dialect, accent, social dialect, and regional dialect. It is a neutral term that spares linguists the convolutions the other terms bring (Baker, 2010). Crystal (2008) sees that the term variety can serve three functions, first, he sees that it can be deployed where ‘the distinctiveness of language’ ‘is easily noticed as ‘London English’ or ‘religious English’. However, there are other cases where it is used in relation to other social variables such as age, sex, gender, and ethnicity. It can also be used as a cover term to dialect, register, medium,

and field. He adds that, for some sociolinguists, it can be restricted to a special type of language as for example occupational purposes.

According to Crystal (2008, p30), an accent refers to “The cumulative auditory effect of those features of pronunciation which identify where a person is from, regionally or socially”. Thus, the term accent is associated with pronunciation only. On the other hand, the concept register, in stylistics and sociolinguistics, refers to a variety of language that is specific to a particular social context such as scientific, religious, and formal and informal English. While the definitions of the terms accent and register are straightforward, it is the utilization of the notion of dialects that brings many complications and raise intense debate.

Wardhaugh (2006, p28) sees that, for common people, “a dialect is almost certainly no more than a local non-prestigious (therefore powerless) variety of a real language“. However, scholars find it often rather difficult to assign the terms dialect and language as they are ambiguous concepts. Adapting a simple way of looking at a dialect, one would consider the latter as “A regionally or socially distinctive variety of language” (Crystal, 2008, p.142). Crystal further adds that any language with a large number of speakers will develop dialects, in particular if that language covers a vast area with geographical barriers separating groups of people from each other. For example, Arabic is spoken in 22 countries and in each one there exist several

dialects or vernaculars. Nevertheless, speakers of these varieties maintain a certain degree of mutual understanding.

However, not all examples adhere to the above explanation. For instance, speakers of Cantonese and Mandarin poses an issue as both are said to be dialects of Chinese. Yet, the two are mutually unintelligible in their spoken form. Conversely, Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish are perceived as distinct languages, yet, people speaking these three have no problem understanding each other (Chambers & Trudgill, 2002). Consequently, the famous quote ‘a language is a dialect with an army and navy’ becomes useful in showing that the delineation between language and dialect is mostly political.

References

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- Crystal, D. (2008). *A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics* (6th ed). Malden, MA ; Oxford: Blackwell Pub.

Wardhaugh, R. (2006). An introduction to sociolinguistics (5th ed). Malden, Mass., USA: Blackwell Pub.

Quiz

Part A: Definitions

1. Define **idiolect** and explain how it differs from dialect.
2. What is meant by the term **variety** in sociolinguistics?
3. Define **accent** and explain how it is different from dialect.
4. What is a **register**? Give one example.
5. Explain **mutual intelligibility** with reference to dialects or languages.

Part B: Multiple Choice

6. Which of the following is associated with **pronunciation only**?
 - a) Accent
 - b) Dialect
 - c) Register
 - d) Idiolect

7. According to Wardhaugh (2006), many people see a dialect as:
- a) A prestigious national language
 - b) A non-prestigious local variety of a real language
 - c) A collection of registers
 - d) An accent with grammar
8. Which pair is an example of mutually intelligible varieties considered different languages?
- a) Mandarin and Cantonese
 - b) Norwegian and Swedish
 - c) British English and American English
 - d) Classical Arabic and Moroccan Arabic

Part C: Short Answer

9. Give an example of how **social variables** (like class, gender, or region) can affect a speaker's variety.
10. Why is the concept of **variety** often preferred by sociolinguists over the stricter terms “dialect” or “language”?
11. Explain why the distinction between dialect and language is sometimes more political than linguistic.