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Social varieties of American English

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Editors' introduction

This chapter explores the nature of social dialects within American English - in relation to which the stakes are much higher than they are for regional dialects. Your employability, intelligence, sincerity (even guilt) may be judged solely on the basis of the status-, ethnicity-, age- or gender-based variety you speak. These dimensions can interact with each other as well as with region, so that a linguistic feature that is socially distinctive in one city or ethnic group may not be distinctive in another. Vernacular varieties tend to have negatively valued or stigmatized features (like double negatives), while so-called "standard" varieties are negatively defined as lacking them.

Contrary to popular perception, as Walt Wolfram observes, "group exclusive" usages (e.g., "All women and no men say X") are rarer than "group preferential" usages (e.g., "Women are more likely than men to say X"), at least in the USA. Thus it is important to use quantitative methods to study socially conditioned linguistic variation, and to follow the accountability principle, which entails reporting the percentages of each variant observed out of the total number of cases in which it could have been used. Using an example involving variation between *-ing* and *-in*, in words like *walking* and *swimming*, Wolfram shows us how to do the requisite quantitative analysis and how to look for the linguistic and social or psychological factors that constrain linguistic variation. Linguistic variation is almost never haphazard.

In exploring social status (or class) differences, Wolfram distinguishes between the method of using "objective" multi-index scales and the method of eliciting the subjective views of community members. Whether investigators use consensus models of society or conflict models can also affect the analysis, and the extent to which social networks and local identity are taken into account can also make a significant difference. The chapter closes with a discussion of the social evaluation of language features, noting that the classification of these features as prestigious or stigmatized is often directly related to similar classifications of the people who use or avoid them. Wolfram also explains a long-standing sociolinguistic distinction among socially marked features that function as stereotypes, markers, or indicators, depending on whether they elicit overt comment and involve stylistic variation as well as variation across social groups.

The job interview was going smoothly. And then the applicant wrapped a double negative around the use of *seen* as a past tense in the sentence *Nobody never seen nothing*. At that point, the interviewers formed an indelible impression of the candidate's social background and unsuitability for the job. Incidents like

that point to the severe judgments that often are made in our society based upon perception of language as it relates to social position (Lippi-Green 1997 and this volume). People may be judged on capabilities ranging from innate intelligence to employability and on personal attributes ranging from sincerity to morality based solely on the perception of social differences in language. It is quite shocking to realize how quickly and categorically we may judge a person's background and character based simply upon a few utterances or, in some instances, the choice of a single word. Dialect differences related to region may be interpreted by the American public as matters of quaint curiosity and may even hold a certain amount of aesthetic charm but the stakes are different - and much higher - when it comes to differences in American English related to social status.

Although people often think of social varieties of language as if they were distinctive, unidimensional entities, it is not quite that simple. Even though we use the term "social dialect" or "sociolect" as a label for the alignment of a set of language structures with the social position of a group in a status hierarchy, the social demarcation of language does not exist in a vacuum. Speakers are simultaneously affiliated with a number of different groups that include region, age, gender, and ethnicity, and some of these other factors may weigh heavily in the determination of the social stratification of language variation. For example, among older European-American speakers in Charleston, South Carolina, the absence of *r* in words such as *bear* and *court* is associated with aristocratic, high-status groups (McDavid 1948) whereas in New York City the same pattern of *r*-lessness is associated with working-class, low-status groups (Labov 1966). Such opposite social interpretations of the same linguistic trait over time and space point to the arbitrariness of the linguistic symbols that carry social meaning. In other words, it is not really the meaning of what you say that counts socially, but who you are when you say it.

Generally speaking, the term social dialect is used to refer to differences that are associated with groups that are unequal in status and power. When language differences represent groups that are unequal in their power relations, it is quite common for society at large to interpret the differences in terms of the *principle of linguistic inferiority*. According to this principle, the speech of a socially subordinate group will be interpreted as linguistically inadequate by comparison with that of the socially dominant group. Thus, in popular culture, dialects associated with socially disfavored groups are thought to be nothing more than unworthy and corrupted versions of the varieties spoken by their socially favored counterparts. This interpretation is altogether contrary to the linguistic facts, which demonstrate the intricate patterning of language apart from its social evaluation and the arbitrary link between linguistic form and social meaning. Therefore, linguists take a united stand against any definition of dialect as a corrupt version of the standard variety. For example, a resolution adopted unanimously by the Linguistic Society of America at its annual meeting in 1997 asserts that "all human language systems - spoken, signed, and written - are fundamentally regular" and that characterizations of socially disfavored varieties as "slang, mutant, defective, ungrammatical, or broken English are incorrect and demeaning."

In American society, the notion of social dialect tends to be strongly associated with the varieties of English spoken by socially subordinate groups even though, technically speaking, the varieties spoken by socially dominant groups are certainly social varieties as well. The varieties of English associated with these socially subordinate groups are often referred to as vernacular dialects. The term vernacular dialect is used in a way analogous to the way that the term vernacular language is used to refer to local or native languages of common communication, that contrast with the official standard language of a multilingual country.

Part of the reason that the term social dialect is so strongly associated with vernacular varieties is related to the fact that the speech of low-status groups in American society tends to be much more socially marked than that of high-status groups. To a large extent, vernacular varieties are characterized by the presence of socially conspicuous and negatively valued structures – so-called “nonstandard dialect structures.” By the same token, socially favored varieties of English tend to be characterized by the absence of negatively valued, or socially stigmatized, features rather than by the presence of socially prestigious features. In fact, one possible definition of so-called “standard English” characterizes it as a variety of English that does *not* exhibit socially stigmatized structures of English – a negative definition – rather than a variety typified by any particular set of positively valued structures (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998). Americans seem to be more concerned that speakers avoid negatively valued features of speech than adopt positively valued ones. Accordingly, the notion of social dialects in American society has come to be associated with the vernacular varieties spoken by low-status groups.

The patterning of social differences in language

A popular perception of social dialects holds that all members of a given social group use certain structures and that members of other social groups never use these forms. But the reality of social dialect differentiation is much more complicated than that. Different linguistic variables may correlate with social-status groupings in a variety of ways, given varying histories of dialect contact, dialect diffusion, and changes in group relations. The pattern of dialect distribution that most closely matches the popular perception of dialect differences is referred to as “group-exclusive usage,” where one group of speakers uses a form but another one never does (Smith 1985). In its ideal interpretation, group-exclusive usage means that *all* members of a particular community of speakers would use the dialect form whereas *no* members of other groups would ever use it. This ideal pattern is rarely, if ever, maintained in dialects. The kinds of social groupings and intersecting web of social factors that typify group affiliations in society are just too complex for this pattern to work out so neatly. In the first place, the definition of any social group usually involves a constellation of characteristics rather than a single dimension, thus making the simple correlation of a linguistic form

with social position intricate and multidimensional. Furthermore, in many cases, actual social distinctions between groups exist on a continuum, and linguistic differences accordingly show a continuous rather than discrete correlation with social traits.

Notwithstanding the qualifications that have to be made when talking about group-exclusive dialect features, there certainly are forms of American English that are not shared across groups defined on the basis of relative social status. The essential aspect of these dialect forms, however, seems to be that speakers from other groups do *not* use them rather than that all the members of a particular group do use them. Group-exclusive usage is therefore easier to define negatively than positively. Viewed in this way, there are many dialect features on all levels of language organization that show group-exclusive social distribution. For example, grammatical structures such as subject-verb agreement in sentences such as *We grewed was down there* or the use of regularized past tense verb forms such as *We grewed tomatoes last year* may show group-exclusive usage in that only speakers of some low-status groups use these forms while speakers of high status groups do not.

In contrast to group-exclusive forms, group-preferential forms are distributed across different groups or communities of speakers, but members of one group simply are more likely to use a given form than members of another group. For example, empirical studies of the use of *-in'* [ɪn] versus *-ing* [ɪŋ] in forms such as *swimmin'* for *swimming* or *dooin'* for *doing* show that speakers of all social ranks actually use the *in* variant some of the time, but that speakers from low-status groups use *in'* at a much higher frequency level than their high-status counterparts. Thus, we can say that the use of *-in'* for *-ing* is a group-preferential pattern rather than a group-exclusive one. Group-preferential patterns may derive from the nature of the dialect variable or the nature of the social reality that underlies the social variable. For example, as we noted earlier, there are dimensions of group affiliation, interactional relationship, and ideological perspective that make social position far more complex than the simple designation of group membership based exclusively on socioeconomic status. We would not expect the symbolic effect of a group-preferential pattern to be as socially significant as a group-exclusive marking, although popular stereotypes of group-preferential dialect patterns sometimes treat them symbolically as if they were group-exclusive. The popular characterization of vernacular dialects of English in their use of *dese*, *dem*, and *dose* for *these*, *them*, and *those* is such an instance where the stereotype of group-exclusive behavior actually betrays a fairly complex pattern that is really group-preferential and also highly variable. Studies of community populations within particular regions of the United States have shown that, on the whole, socially diagnostic pronunciations are more likely to show group-preferential patterns than grammatical features do. For example, in a given Southern community, a phonological pattern such as the loss of the glide of the /ay/ vowel of *time* /aym/ or *side* /sayd/ as *ɪzəm* [ɪ:ɹm] or *sahd* [sɑ:d] respectively, or the deletion of the *r* in words like *bear* and *court* will show a group-preferential pattern in which all status groups use these features to some extent, with differences in relative

frequency rather than absolute usage differentiating social-status groups. On the other hand, grammatical features such as the use of the copulative *done* in *They done messed up* or the use of a regularized verb in *We growed beans* would show a group-exclusive pattern in that low-status groups use these features to some extent while high-status speakers avoid them completely.

The social dimension of dialect differences

In almost every society, some people have social prestige, power, and money, while others have little of these commodities. Few people would disagree about the social status classification of individuals who possess these attributes to an extremely high or extremely low degree. We would hardly mistake a chief executive officer of a major corporation who resides in a spacious house in an "exclusive" part of town for an uneducated, unskilled laborer from the "wrong side of the tracks." The reality of social stratification seems obvious, but identifying the unique set of traits that correlates with social-status differences in a reliable and reductive way is not always so simple. Ultimately, social-class distinctions seem to be based upon status and power, where status refers to the amount of respect and deference accorded to a person and power refers to the social and material resources a person can command, as well as the ability to make decisions and influence events. The challenge is to reduce these abstract notions to objective, measurable units that can be correlated in meaningful ways with linguistic variation. Different kinds of procedures have been used with varying degrees of success in attempts to capture the construct of social class.

The traditional sociological approach to social-status differences isolates a set of objectified socioeconomic characteristics that are used to rank individuals in some way. Typical variables include occupation, level of education, income, and type of residential dwelling, with ranked levels within each variable. For example, occupations may be scaled based on categories ranging from "major professionals" to "unskilled laborers"; education scales may range from professional and graduate school to less than three years of schooling, and residency scales may range from housing with more than two rooms per person and with a bathroom per each person to housing with three persons or more per room and with no indoor plumbing. Different weightings may then be assigned to variables if one trait is considered more significant than another. For example, occupation may be weighted more heavily than education or residency in computing a socioeconomic status score. The overall ranking obtained from combining scores for the variables is the *socioeconomic status*, usually abbreviated SES. Although this kind of ranking system yields a continuous scale, it is possible to divide the distribution of scores into separate social-status groupings, with labels such as upper-class, middle-class, working-class, and so forth.

In recent years, SES scales have been subject to considerable scrutiny, as social scientists began to realize that most of these scales are grounded in the values

of mainstream middle-class and higher-class populations (Rickford 1986). For example, researchers investigating language and gender have pointed out that females traditionally have been grouped into socioeconomic categories based on the characteristics of husbands, fathers, or other male "heads of household," often with wildly misleading results (McConnell-Ginet 1988).

As an alternative to the strict objectification of social-status differences assigned by an outside social scientist, it is possible to rely upon community members to make judgments about status differences. Ultimately, the real discriminators of social class are the members of the community themselves. From one perspective, social classes are constituted by the community, and they have no independent status outside the attitudes and perceptions of the group. Thus, members of a community are rated by other community members in terms of certain imputed status traits. Is a person "upper crust" or from the "wrong side of the tracks"? Typically, communities have their own designations for particular subgroups in terms of the social status hierarchy, and these can be tapped to determine class distinctions. As with externally assigned objective measures, however, there are problems in relying upon community members for the assignment of social-status differences. Different pictures of social class may emerge from representatives of different segments of the community, both on an individual and class level. For example, the lower classes may perceive social-class structure very differently from the upper classes. So even if we rely on subjective, community-based divisions, we are not assured consistency in determining social divisions.

Furthermore, the view of class presented here, which is based on analyses of Western society, emphasizes social agreement on the evaluation of prestige and behavioral norms. That is, it is believed that all social groups share certain expectations for appropriate and desirable behavior and also view increases in social status as positive and desirable. In this view, sometimes referred to as the "consensus model" of social class, individual competition is emphasized over conflicts between classes (Rickford 1986, Guy 1988). But it is also possible to view class differences as conflicts between those who control resources and means of production and can live off the profits of the workers on the one hand and the workers who earn the profits for those in power on the other hand. Under such a "conflict model," class differences are viewed as the consequences of divisions and conflicts between the classes, and linguistic differences, in turn, are seen as a reflection of the interests of different classes and conflicts between classes. Accordingly, the dichotomy between standard and vernacular may be viewed as the symbolic token of a class struggle. In other words, those who speak less standardly do not value standard speech as they do under the consensus model; rather, they use vernacular speech forms as a symbolic expression of separation from the upper classes with whom they conflict.

Ideally, a valid assessment of social-class differences should combine both objective and subjective measurements of many types of behavioral roles and values, but this is often easier said than done. Even to the extent that this is possible,

such a perspective does not assure a neat fit between social status or class differences and language variation. We have already noted that there are other social variables that intersect with social class, but there are also additional factors pertaining to community life and relationships that may set apart linguistic variation from other social status considerations. For example, one of the important correlates of linguistic differences relates to the so-called *linguistic marketplace*, in which a person's economic activity, broadly defined, is associated with language variation. People in certain occupations tend to use more standard varieties of the language than members of the same social class who hold other occupations. Thus, teachers or salespeople, who have to confront public expectations of language usage, may be more standard in their language than their social status peers in other occupations where they are not expected to use standard language forms. A person's "linguistic market index," a ranking assigned to speakers based upon descriptions of their socioeconomic life histories, may correlate with language differences more closely than traditional social-status designations, according to some researchers (see, e.g., Sankoff and Laberge 1978).

Another parameter intersecting with strict social class relates to the "social network." There may be important differences in interactional activity that correlate with language differences. For example, social networks characterized by repeated interactions with the same people in several spheres of activity (e.g., work, leisure, church) tend to correlate with a greater concentration of the dialect features associated with that group (Milroy 1987) than those with looser affiliations. Problems in the neatness of fit between social class and language, then, are not simply problems in the definition of social class, although these problems certainly exist. Instead, many of the difficulties in the straightforward correlation of social status with language variation relate to the ways in which social factors interact with each other in their effect on linguistic variation.

Also, in small, isolated communities where "everybody knows everybody," the correlation of language differences and socioeconomic differences may not be nearly as significant as in large, urban communities characterized by a high degree of social distance among different groups of speakers. For example, on the island of Ocracoke, an Outer Banks island off the coast of North Carolina, some of the most vernacular speakers are men who went to college off the island and later returned to the island (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1997). These men are among the most influential and powerful people on the island, owning considerable property and making considerable amounts of money from the tourism industry, yet they maintain a strong vernacular dialect. They also interact on a regular basis with outsiders, conducting business and socializing with them more than some other islanders. They maintain the vernacular because they wish to project a "traditional islander" identity rather than to identify with the middle-class or upper-class mainlanders, who typically are associated with standard speech forms. Thus, matters of identity and personal presentation have to be considered along with conventional status measures and factors pertaining to interactional networks in considering the relationship between language variation and social-status differences.

Systematic variability in social dialect differentiation

As noted previously, the careful examination of dialect forms shows that social varieties of American English are sometimes differentiated on the basis of how frequently particular forms are used rather than whether or not a variant is used. Individual speakers may fluctuate in their use of variants, sometimes using one form and sometimes using an alternate, only the relative frequencies of usage serving to differentiate social varieties. Consider the following excerpt showing the fluctuation of *-ing* and *-in'* within the speech of an individual during a single speech event.

We were walkin' down the street and we saw this car going out of control. The driver looked like he was sleeping at the wheel or somethin'. The next thing I knew the car was turnin' around and just spinnin' around. I thought the car was comin' right at me and I started runnin' like crazy. I was so scared, thinkin' the car was gonna hit me or somethin' . . .

In the ten examples of the form *-ing* in this passage, four end in *-ing* and six in *-in'*. This kind of variation, where a speaker sometimes produces one variant and sometimes an alternate one, is referred to as "inherent variability." The term inherent variability reflects the fact that this fluctuation is an internal part of a single linguistic system, or dialect, and should not be considered to be the result of importations from another dialect or of speech errors. In other words, there is no evidence that the speaker fluctuating between *-ing* and *in'* is switching between two dialects, one exclusively using *-ing* and another exclusively using *-in'*. Instead, the speaker is using a single dialect system — with two pronunciation variants of this ending — and the speaker sometimes uses one form and sometimes the other.

Over the past several decades, one of the important discoveries to emerge from the detailed study of social varieties of English is that dialects are sometimes differentiated not by the absolute presence or absence of particular forms, but by the relative frequency with which the variants occur. In fact, for a number of phonological and grammatical features, dialects are more typically differentiated by the extent to which a particular feature occurs (its relative frequency) rather than by its complete absence or categorical presence.

For four social-status groups of Detroit speakers, table 4-1 displays the frequency levels of the phonological variable *in'* for *-ing* and the syntactic variable called pronominal apposition (e.g., *My mother, she's coming to school* as opposed to *My mother's coming to school*). Although the counts represent the mean scores for each social group, each of the individual speakers in the groups also exhibits variability between *-ing* and *-in'*, as well as between *my mother, she . . .* and *my mother . . .* Frequency levels were computed for individual speakers by first noting all those cases where a form like *-in'* might have occurred — namely, in unstressed syllables ending in *-ing*. Then the number of cases in which *-in'* actually occurred was counted. For example, in the sample passage given earlier, there are ten cases

Table 4-1. Relative frequency of variable phonological and grammatical structures in four social groups in Detroit, Michigan

	Upper-middle	Lower-middle	Upper-working	Lower-working
Mean percentage of -in' forms	19.1	39.1	50.5	78.9
Mean % of pronominal apposition	4.5	13.6	25.4	23.8

Source: Adapted from Shuy, Wolfram and Riley 1967

where *-in'* could have occurred, but only six of them, or 60 percent, were actually formed with the *-in'* form. This tabulation procedure follows a fairly standard format for determining frequency levels of dialect forms.

The fact that there is fluctuation between forms such as *-ing* and *-in'* does not mean that the fluctuation is random or haphazard. Although we cannot predict which variant might be used in a given instance, there are factors that can increase or decrease the likelihood that certain variants will occur. These factors, known technically as "constraints on variability," are of two major types. First, various social factors such as social affiliation correlate systematically with an increase or decrease in the likelihood that a particular variant will occur. In other words, looking at table 4-1, we can say that a speaker from the lower-working class is more likely than speakers from other classes to use both *-in'* for *-ing* and pronominal apposition. But that is only one social factor that correlates with the relative incidence of *-in'* and *-ing*. Dividing the speakers on the basis of age, sex, ethnicity, or a division of the conversation from which these forms were taken on the basis of topic and interlocutor, would show that all of these factors intersect with social status. This is one of the reasons that we noted earlier that social status intersects with other social factors in its correlation with language variation. In fact, social status is not always the primary factor in the constellation of social factors that correlates with linguistic variation. In cases of rapid language change, for example, age may show a stronger correlation with language variation than status, and, in another instance, region may be a primary variable and status a secondary or moderating factor. Though status is often an important factor, its relative effect in relation to other social factors may vary considerably.

Even with microscopic attention to social details, not all of the systematic influences on variation can be accounted for simply by appealing to various social factors. There are also aspects of the linguistic system itself that may affect the variability of particular forms. Particular kinds of linguistic contexts, such as the kinds of surrounding forms or the type of construction in which the form occurs, may also influence the relative frequency with which these forms occur. Because the linguistic influences on variation operate apart from the social factors that correlate with variability, these are sometimes referred to as "independent

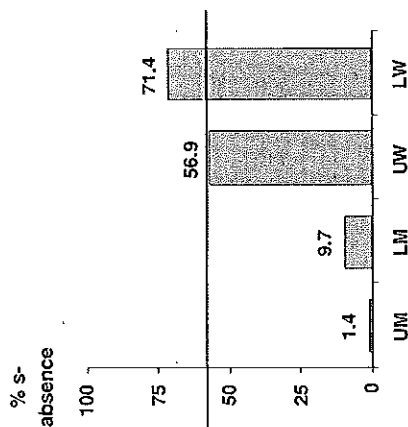


Figure 4-1. Example of sharp stratification: third-person singular *s*-absence among upper-middle (UM), lower-middle (LM), upper-working (UW), and lower-working (LW) class speakers in the African American community of Detroit, Michigan
Source: After Wolfram 1969

linguistic constraints" on variability. For example, the occurrence of *-ing* in a verb (*She was swimming in the river*) versus a noun (*Swimming is fun*) affects the relative incidence of *-in'* apart from the consideration of any social variables. Similarly, speakers of particular social groups who use *was* with plural subjects (e.g., *We was there*) typically do so more frequently with subjects that are noun phrases (such as *The dogs was here*) than with subjects that are pronouns (such as *They was here*). This pattern emerges when all social factors are controlled. So constraints on the variability of socially diagnostic items show complex sensitivity to a set of system-internal, structural factors as well as of social and psychological factors external to the linguistic system.

As mentioned, linguistic variables may align with given social-status groupings in a variety of ways. For example, consider the ways in which two linguistic variables are distributed across four social strata within the African American community of Detroit, Michigan (Wolfram 1969). The variables are third-person singular suffix absence as in *She go to the store* for *She goes to the store*, given in figure 4-1, and *r*-lessness after a vowel such as *bea'* for *bear* or *cou't* for *court*, given in figure 4-2. The sample for these two variables is the same population of speakers representing the African American community in Detroit. Notice that here the social-status differences are restricted to a particular ethnic group and region. As it turns out, in a Northern, Midwestern region such as Detroit, these diagnostic variables are pertinent only to social-status differences within the African American community, thus showing how social varieties are embedded within broader cultural and regional contexts. In fact, neither of the linguistic structures differentiated in figure 4-1 and figure 4-2 is pertinent to the social

and New Zealand, phonological variables may carry an equal or greater burden of social differentiation than grammatical features.

Since there are different patterns of correlation between social stratification and linguistic variation, it is sometimes difficult to answer the question of how many social dialects there are in English. On one level, this question is best answered by examining the social stratification of particular linguistic structures. From this perspective, the answer may range from two, for a sharply stratified variable that shows a basic dichotomy between two broadly defined social groups, through six or seven varieties for finely stratified features. For linguistic variation showing a correlation with two basic social groups, the popular perception that there are two social dialects – the socially acceptable and unacceptable implied in the popular designation of “standard” and “nonstandard” dialects – may be matched by the reality of social stratification. For other variables, however, multi-layered social dialect differentiation is clearly indicated. It is important to understand that both continuous and discrete patterns of sociolinguistic variation may simultaneously exist within the same population and community. The kind of correlation that exists between social factors and linguistic variation may thus be a function of both social and linguistic considerations; there is no single pattern that can be applied to this co-variation.

The social evaluation of linguistic features

Although there is no inherent social valuation associated with the variants of a linguistic structure, it is not surprising that the social values assigned to certain groups will be attached to the linguistic forms used by the members of those groups. It is thus no accident that so-called standard varieties of a language typically are associated with socially favored and dominant groups and that “nonstandard” dialects are associated with socially disfavored, low-status groups. The selection of particular linguistic structures for social evaluation may be arbitrary, but their evaluation tends to correlate with the social evaluation of the groups who use them. *Socially prestigious* variants are those forms that are positively valued through their association with high-status groups as linguistic markers of status, whereas *socially stigmatized* variants carry negative connotations through their association with low-status groups. In grammar, most prestige forms are related to prescriptive norms of standardness or even literary norms. For example, the use of *whom* in *Whom did you see?* or the placement of *never* at the front of the sentence in *Never have I seen a more gruesome sight* might be considered prestige variants in some social contexts. Apart from these somewhat special cases, it is difficult to find clear-cut cases of prestige variants on the grammatical level of language, particularly in the grammar of ordinary informal conversation.

In American English, examples of prestige variants are also relatively rare in phonology. The use of an “unflapped” /r/ in words like *better* or *latter* (e.g., [bɛtɚ] as opposed to [bɛrɚ]) as used by a select group of “Brahmin” dialect speakers

% r-absence

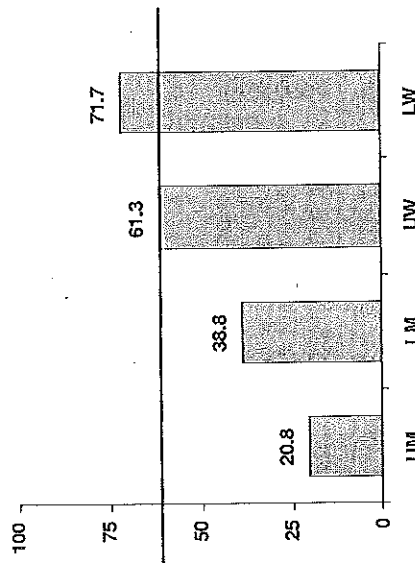


Figure 4-2. Example of gradient stratification: postvocalic *r*-absence among upper-middle (UM), lower-middle (LM), upper-working (UW), and lower-working (LW) class speakers in the African American community of Detroit, Michigan.
Source: After Wolfram 1969

varieties of European Americans in Detroit. The social differentiation of language among African Americans in Detroit obviously reflects both the roots of this community as a Southern transplant community and the segregation patterns that have served to maintain somewhat different patterns of social differentiation for African Americans and European Americans in this metropolitan area.

In figure 4-1, the linguistic variation correlates with certain discrete social layers. The groups designated “middle class” (UM = upper-middle class and LM = lower-middle class) according to conventional socioeconomic indices such as level of occupation, education, and residency show very little *-s* absence whereas working-class (UW = upper-working class and LW = lower-working class) speakers show significant levels of *-s* absence. The distribution of *-s* use shows a wide separation between middle-class and working-class groups and is therefore referred to as a case of “sharp stratification.” On the other hand, the distribution of *r*-lessness in figure 4-2 indicates a pattern of “gradient stratification” or “fine stratification,” in which the relative frequency of *r*-lessness changes gradually from one social class to the adjacent one.

In the examples given in figure 4-1 and figure 4-2, sharp stratification is illustrated by a grammatical variable and gradient stratification by a phonological one. Although there are exceptions, grammatical variables are more likely to show sharp stratification than phonological variables. This underscores the fact that grammatical features are typically more diagnostic of social differences than phonological ones in American society. In other societies, for example England

found in the Boston metropolitan area may be an example of a prestige variant, as would some other phonological characteristics of this dialect, but this is a fairly isolated, somewhat unusual situation. The pronunciations of this restricted prestige dialect are modeled more on standard British English, or Received Pronunciation, than on American English. The fact that an external norm serves as a model for prestige in this instance is actually a commentary on the relative absence of authentic prestige variants in American English dialects. In some regions, the pronunciation of *either* as [aɪðə] instead of [iðə] or the pronunciation of *vase* as [vaz] versus [veɪz] may be associated with high status, but these relate to the pronunciation of single lexical items rather than phonological systems and are therefore more properly considered lexical than pronunciation variants.

For present-day American English, it is clear that the vast majority of socially diagnostic structures exist on the axis of stigmatization rather than the axis of prestige. Classic illustrations involving grammatical features include the familiar cases of multiple negation (e.g., *They didn't do nothing*), regularized verb forms (e.g., *He knowed they were right*), and different subject-verb agreement patterns (e.g., *We was there*). Stigmatized phonological features include *-in'* for *-ing* (e.g., *stoppin', swimmin'*), [d] or [t] for *th* (e.g., [deɪ] or [deɪ] *they*, [tɪŋk] *think*). There are also lexical shibboleths such as *ain't*. It is relatively easy to come up with examples of stigmatized variants for different levels of linguistic organization as compared with prestigious variants. This observation is part of the rationale which may lead to the conclusion that standard English is more adequately characterized by the absence of negatively valued, stigmatized items than by the presence of positively valued, prestige items as suggested earlier.

Stigmatized and prestigious variants do not exist on a single dimension in which the alternative to a socially stigmatized variant is a socially prestigious one, or vice versa. The absence of multiple negation, for example, is not particularly prestigious; it is simply not stigmatized. Thus, it is not prestigious to say *She didn't do anything* for *She didn't do nothing*; it is just not stigmatized. Similarly, the non-prestigious variant for *either* [iðə] is not necessarily stigmatized; it is simply not prestigious. In fact, there are very few cases in English in which there exists a socially prestigious alternate for a socially stigmatized variant.

The discussion of the social evaluation of linguistic features up to this point has been undertaken from the vantage point of those who place high value on the widespread, institutional language norms established by higher-status groups. These norms are overtly perpetuated by the agents of standardization in our society — teachers, the media, and other authorities responsible for setting the standards of linguistic behavior. These norms are usually acknowledged across a full range of social classes on a community-wide basis. Linguistic forms that are assigned their social evaluation on the basis of this widespread recognition of social significance are said to carry *overt prestige*. At the same time, however, there may exist another set of norms that relates primarily to solidarity with more locally defined social groups, irrespective of the social status of these groups. When forms are positively valued apart from, or even in opposition to,

their social significance for the wider society, they are said to carry *covert prestige*. In the case of overt prestige, the social valuation lies in a unified, widely accepted set of social norms, whereas with covert prestige the positive social significance lies in the local culture of social relations. It is therefore possible for a socially stigmatized variant in one setting to have covert prestige in another. A local youth who adopts vernacular forms in order to maintain solidarity with a group of friends clearly indicates the covert prestige of these features on a local level even if the same features stigmatize the speaker in a wider, mainstream context such as school. The notion of covert prestige is important in understanding why vernacular speakers may not aspire to speak socially favored dialects, even when these speakers may evaluate the social significance of linguistic variation in a way that superficially matches that of their high-status counterparts. Thus, widely recognized stigmatized features such as multiple negation, nonstandard subject-verb agreement, and different irregular verb paradigms may function at the same time as positive, covertly prestigious features in terms of local norms.

In recent years, the maintenance or even heightening of vernacular language features among non-mainstream speakers has been viewed in terms of power as well as prestige. For example, working-class men may use vernacular variants as a means of projecting power rather than covert prestige, since working-class men traditionally have held occupations associated with physical toughness and manliness (and hence vernacular language features) rather than with advanced education.

The social significance of language forms may change over time, just as linguistic structures themselves change. It may be difficult for present-day speakers of English to believe that linguistic shibboleths such as *ain't* and multiple negation were once socially insignificant, but the historical study of the English language certainly supports this conclusion. Furthermore, shifts in social significance may take place from generation to generation. For example, in New York City (Labov 1966) and in some regions of the South (Feagin 1990), the social significance of postvocalic /r/ (as in *car* or *farm*) has shifted during the past fifty years. For the older generation, there is very little social-class stratification for the use of postvocalic /r/, but younger speakers show a well-defined pattern of social stratification in which the presence of /r/ (e.g., *car*) is more highly valued than its absence (e.g., *caht*). And, as noted earlier, postvocalic /r/-lessness in Southern speech was once a prestigious pronunciation, following the prestige model for British English. However, the valuation of /r/-less speech has changed over the decades, and today it is working-class rural groups in the South who are most characteristically /r/-less rather than urban upper-class speakers. Because /r/-lessness used to carry prestige, older upper-class groups in some regions of the South retain a high incidence of /r/-lessness; by contrast, younger upper-class speakers tend to pronounce /r/ in this context. At the same time, younger, rural working-class speakers may be relatively /r/-less, thus uniting older metropolitan and younger rural speakers in /r/-lessness but with quite different social meanings associated with the /r/-lessness.

The social significance of linguistic variables may also vary from region to region. Growing up as a native Philadelphian, I pronounced *aint* and *ant* the same [ænt]; furthermore, I associated the pronunciation of *aint* [ant] differently from *ant* [ænt] with high-status groups. In later life, I was quite surprised to discover that the pronunciation of *aint* I considered prestigious and even "uppity" was characteristic of some Southern dialects regardless of social status, including highly stigmatized vernacular varieties such as African American Vernacular English.

Although some socially diagnostic variables have regionally restricted social significance, other variables may have general social significance for American English, in that a particular social evaluation holds across regional boundaries. Many grammatical variables have this type of broad-based significance. Virtually every population in the USA that has been studied by social dialectologists shows social stratification for structures like multiple negation, irregular verb forms, and subject-verb agreement patterns. On the whole, phonological variables are more apt to show regionally restricted social significance than are grammatical variables. No doubt, this is due to the fact that grammatical variables have been ascribed the major symbolic role in differentiating socially differentiated dialects in American society. Phonological variables show greater flexibility, as they are more likely to be viewed as a normal manifestation of regional diversity in English. This is particularly true in the case of vowel differences.

There are several ways in which speakers within the sociolinguistic community may react to socially diagnostic variables. Speakers may treat some features as *social stereotypes*, where they comment on their use. Items such as *ain't*, "double negatives," and *dese*, *dem*, and *dose* are classic features of this type. Stereotypes can be regionally specific or generalized and may carry either positive or negative connotations. *Ain't* and "dese, dem, and dose" are widely recognized as "bad grammar," while features like the pronunciation of *high tide* as something like "hoi toid" (as in the speech of coastal North Carolina) are strongly stereotyped but only locally. Further, the latter feature carries positive associations in that it is often associated with "British English" or even "Shakespearean English." It qualifies as a stereotype because it is the subject of commentary.

As with other kinds of behavioral stereotyping, we have to be careful to differentiate the actual sociolinguistic patterning of linguistic stereotypes from popular beliefs about their patterning. These beliefs are often linguistically naive, although they may derive from a basic sociolinguistic reality. For example, people tend to believe that working-class speakers always use the stereotypical *dese*, *dem*, and *dose* forms and middle-class speakers never do. This belief is not supported empirically, although there is a correlation between the relative frequency of the nonstandard variant and social stratification. Similarly, the Outer Banks "hoi toid" vowel is a defining dialect trait of the region, but it is in flux and its rate of usage is highly variable. Furthermore, stereotypes tend to focus on single vocabulary items or selective subsets of items rather than more general phonological and grammatical patterns. For example, speakers may focus on a single

lexical item like *ain't* or the restricted pronunciation pattern involving *tomatoes* in which 'maters is stigmatized and *tomatoes* is prestigious. Finally, we have to understand that popular explanations for sociolinguistic differences are often rooted in the same type of folk mythology that characterizes other behavioral stereotyping and therefore must be viewed with great caution.

Another role that a socially diagnostic feature may fill is that of a *social marker*. In the case of social markers, variants show clear-cut social stratification, but they do not show the level of conscious awareness found for the social stereotype. Various vowel shifts seem to function as social markers. There is clear-cut social stratification of the linguistic variants, and participants in the community may even recognize this distribution, but the structure does not evoke the kind of commentary and strong value judgments that the social stereotype does. Even if people don't talk about these features in any direct manner, there are still indications that they are aware of their existence at an unconscious level. This awareness is often indicated by shifts in the use of variants across different styles of speaking. The incidence of prestigious variants tends to increase and the use of stigmatized variants to decrease as we use more formal speech styles. For example, a speaker who is conversing with an employer during a business meeting will use more *-ing* [ɪŋ] for *-ing* but will use more *-in'* [ɪn] when talking with friends over lunch.

The third possible sociolinguistic role that a socially diagnostic feature may fill is that of a *social indicator*. Social indicators are linguistic structures that correlate with social stratification without having an effect on listeners' judgment of the social status of speakers who use them. Whereas social stereotypes and social markers are sensitive to stylistic variation, social indicators do not show such sensitivity, as shown by the fact that levels of usage remain constant across formal and informal styles. This suggests that the correlation of socially diagnostic variables with social-status differences operates on a more unconscious level than it does for social markers or stereotypes. Although social indicators have been identified for some communities of English speakers, practically all of the socially diagnostic variables in American English qualify as social markers or stereotypes rather than indicators.

Conclusion

The differentiation of language on the basis of relative social status constitutes one of the most marked dimensions of variation in American English. Many forms are socially stigmatized because of their association with socially disfavored groups whereas few structures are considered prestigious because of their association with high-status groups. Accordingly, most studies of social dialectology have focused on vernacular dialect communities excluded from the mainstream by their vernacular dialect rather than elitist groups who set themselves apart from other groups by their prestigious language. As we have seen, the co-variation of