File 12.1  
Introduction to 
Language Variation

Most people are aware of the fact that systematic differences exist among languages—for example, that English is different from Spanish, which is different from Arabic, which is different from Russian, and so on. However, many people are probably not aware of the extent to which systematic differences exist within languages. Internal variation refers to the property of languages of having different ways of expressing the same meaning. This is a property that is inherent to all human languages and to all speakers of a language. Thus, no two speakers of a language speak exactly the same way; nor does any individual speaker speak the same way all the time. The purpose of this unit is to introduce you to the ways in which languages vary internally and the factors that contribute to language variation. For purposes of familiarity, these files will focus primarily on variation in English, but you should keep in mind that variation exists in all languages.

Varieties, Dialects, and Idiolects

The term language variety is used among linguists as a cover term to refer to many different types of language variation. The term may be used in reference to a distinct language such as French or Italian, or in reference to a particular form of a language spoken by a specific group of people such as Appalachian English, or even in reference to the speech of a single person. In addition to this cover term, there are more specific terms that are used to talk about these different types of language varieties.

When a group of speakers of a particular language differs noticeably in its speech from another group we say that they are speaking different dialects. In English, the term dialect often carries negative connotations associated with nonstandard varieties. However, a dialect is any variety of a language spoken by a group of people that is characterized by systematic differences from other varieties of the same language in terms of structural or lexical features. In this sense, every person speaks a dialect of his or her native language. The term dialect is also misused by laypeople to refer strictly to differences in pronunciation. Such a mistake is easy to understand since differences in pronunciation are usually accompanied by variation in other areas of the grammar as well and thus correspond to dialectal differences. However, the appropriate term for systematic phonological variation is accent. In layperson's terminology, accent is often used in reference to "foreign accents" or regionally defined accents such as southern or northern accents. However, here again it must be noted that every person speaks with an accent. Also, as mentioned above, there is variation from speaker to speaker within any given language. The form of a language spoken by one person is known as an idiolect.

While these terms may seem simple and convenient here, when we consider actual languages, it becomes immediately obvious how difficult it is to make certain distinctions. How do we know, for example, if two or more language varieties are different dialects of the same language or if in fact they are separate, distinct languages? One criterion used to distinguish dialects from languages is mutual intelligibility. If speakers of one language variety can understand speakers of another language variety and vice versa, we say that these varieties are mutually intelligible. Suppose you are a native of Brooklyn, New York, and you go to visit some friends in Beaumont, Texas. You may notice some differences in the speech of your Beaumont friends (and they in yours), but essentially you will be able to understand each other. Your variety of speech and theirs are mutually intelligible but differ systematically, and are therefore dialects of the same language.
It is not always this easy, however, to decide whether two language varieties are different dialects of the same language or different languages just on the basis of mutual intelligibility. Other factors, such as cultural or historical considerations, may cloud the issue. In China, for example, Mandarin is spoken in the northern provinces and Cantonese in the southern province of Kwang Tung. Even though in spoken form these language varieties are not mutually intelligible, they are considered by the speakers of these varieties themselves to be dialects of the same language. Why? One reason is that these two varieties share a common writing system and are thus mutually intelligible in written form.

The opposite situation exists in the American Southwest between Papago and Pima, two Native American languages. These two language varieties are indeed mutually intelligible, having less linguistic difference between them than exists between Standard American English and Standard British English. However, because these two tribes regard themselves as politically and culturally distinct, they consider their respective languages to be distinct as well.

Another complication for the criterion of mutual intelligibility is found in a phenomenon known as a dialect continuum. This is a situation where, in a large number of contiguous dialects, each dialect is closely related to the next, but the dialects at either end of the continuum (scale) are mutually unintelligible. Thus, dialect A is intelligible to dialect B, which is intelligible to dialect C, which is intelligible to dialect D, but D and A are not mutually intelligible. A situation such as this is found near the border between Holland and Germany, where the dialects on either side of the national border are mutually intelligible. Because of international boundaries, however, (and probably political and cultural considerations as well), speakers of these varieties regard them as distinct languages.

At what point is the line drawn? Clearly, the criterion of mutual intelligibility does not account for all the facts. Indeed, there may be no clear-cut, black-and-white answer to such a question in every case. From the Family Tree Model, discussed in the unit on historical linguistics, we saw that a parent language may split and form daughter languages—e.g., Germanic split off into English, Dutch, and German (among others). This type of split may also occur when dialect differences become so great that the dialects are no longer mutually intelligible to the speakers of these language varieties.

**Speech Communities**

A group of people speaking the same dialect is known as a speech community. Speech communities may be defined in terms of a number of extralinguistic factors, including region, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity. However, it is rarely, if ever, the case that there exists a speech community in which a "pure" dialect—i.e., purely regional, purely ethnic, etc.—is spoken, because the identification of any speech variety as a pure dialect requires the assumption of communicative isolation. Communicative isolation results when a group of speakers forms a coherent speech community relatively isolated from speakers outside of that community. This type of isolation was perhaps once a possibility but is becoming increasingly rare these days owing to social and geographic mobility, mass media, etc. What is more likely the case today is that a particular dialect of a speech community is influenced by regional, social, and cultural factors. Thus, in most instances the varieties spoken among members of a speech community are not pure dialects but instead are influenced by the interaction of many different factors. Consider, for example, the following utterances:

(a) I used to could read.
(b) I wish it would snow.
(c) He had a broken back—was never set.
(d) Put some bakin' soda on it.
(e) I fell upside of the building.
Note the underlined parts of each sentence: (a) a double modal, (b) multiple negation, (c) relative pronoun deletion, (d) substitution of unstressed [a] in soda [soda] by [i] [sodi], and (e) lexical substitution of up against the side of by upside of.

All of these features have been identified as characteristic of Appalachian English (AE), a variety that, from its name, appears to be regional. However, to label this variety of English as regional tells only part of the story. The speaker of these utterances was a sixty-eight-year-old male, belonging to a lower socioeconomic status group. He was a native of a southeastern Ohio county that borders several Appalachian counties and that experienced a post-World War II influx of Appalachian blue-collar workers. Clearly, where this person lives has something to do with his variety of speech. But there are other relevant factors as well. For example, it has been determined that the pronunciation of soda in (d) represents a dying feature of AE and seems to be limited to older speakers. This feature, then, is not only geographically related but seems age related as well. Moreover, studies indicate that in careful speech men tend to use more nonstandard forms than women. So the fact that this speaker is male may also be relevant to his dialect. Finally, AE is a dialect spoken primarily by low-income, rural speakers, a group to which our southeastern Ohio speaker belongs.

So while it is true that AE is a dialect generally restricted to that area designated as Appalachian by the Appalachian Regional Commission, it can also be seen that geographic region overlaps with at least three other factors—age, gender, and socioeconomic status. This sort of interaction among extralinguistic factors seems to be true of most, if not all, speech communities and their corresponding dialects.