



CHAPTER 18

Regional variation in language

Yesterday, I toll my dad, “Buy chocolate kine now, bumbye somebody going egg our house you know, cuz you so chang.” He sed, “Sucking kine mo’ bettah cuz lass mo’ long. Da kids going appreciate cuz . . .” And befo’ he could start his “Back in my days story” I jus sed, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, I undahstand,” cuz I nevah like hea da story again ah about how he nevah have candy wen he wuz small and how wuz one TREAT fo’ eat da orange peel wit sugar on top. Da orange PEEL you know. Not da actual orange, but da orange PEEL. Strong emphasis on PEEL cuz dey wuz POOR.

Tonouchi (2001)

Throughout this book, we have been talking about languages such as English, Spanish or Swahili as if there was a single variety of each in everyday use. That is, we have largely ignored the fact that every language has a lot of variation, especially in the way it is spoken. If we just look at English, we find widespread variation in the way it is spoken in different countries such as Australia, Britain and the USA. We can also find a range of varieties in different parts of those countries, with Lee Tonouchi’s account of “Trick-O-Treat” in Hawai’i as just one example. In this chapter, we investigate aspects of language variation based on where that language is used, as a way of doing **linguistic geography**. First, we should identify the particular variety that we have normally assumed when we referred to a language as English, Spanish or Swahili.

The standard language

When we talked about the words and structures of a language in earlier chapters, we were concentrating on the features of only one variety, usually called the **standard language**. This is actually an idealized variety, because it has no specific region. It is the variety associated with administrative, commercial and educational centers, regardless of region. If we think of Standard English, it is the version we believe is found in printed English in newspapers and books, is widely used in the mass media and is taught in most schools. It is the variety we normally try to teach to those who want to learn English as a second or foreign language. It is clearly associated with education and broadcasting in public contexts and is more easily described in terms of the written language (i.e. vocabulary, spelling, grammar) than the spoken language.

If we are thinking of that general variety used in mainstream public broadcasting in the United States, we can refer more specifically to Standard American English or, in Britain, to Standard British English. In other parts of the world, we can talk about other recognized varieties such as Standard Australian English, Standard Canadian English or Standard Indian English.

Accent and dialect

Whether we think we speak a standard variety of English or not, we all speak with an **accent**. It is a myth that some speakers have accents while others do not. We might feel that some speakers have very distinct or easily recognized types of accent while others may have more subtle or less noticeable accents, but every language-user speaks with an accent. Technically, the term “accent” is restricted to the description of aspects of pronunciation that identify where an individual speaker is from, regionally or socially. It is different from the term **dialect**, which is used to describe features of grammar and vocabulary as well as aspects of pronunciation.

We recognize that the sentence *You don't know what you're talking about* will generally “look” the same whether spoken with an American accent or a Scottish accent. Both speakers will be using forms associated with Standard English, but have different pronunciations. However, this next sentence – *Ye dinnae ken whit yer haverin' aboot* – has the same meaning as the first, but has been written out in an approximation of what a person who speaks one dialect of Scottish English might say. There are differences in pronunciation (e.g. *whit*, *aboot*), but there are also examples of different vocabulary (e.g. *ken*, *haverin'*) and a different grammatical form (*dinnae*).

Variation in grammar

While differences in vocabulary are often easily recognized, dialect variations in the meaning of grammatical constructions are less frequently documented. In the following example (from Trudgill, 1983) two British English speaking visitors (B and C) and a local Irish English speaker (A) are involved in a conversation in Donegal, Ireland.

- A: *How long are youse here?*
 B: *Till after Easter.*
 (Speaker A looks puzzled.)
 C: *We came on Sunday.*
 A: *Ah. Youse're here a while then.*

It seems that the construction *How long are youse here?*, in speaker A's dialect, is used with a meaning close to the structure "How long have you been here?" referring to past time. Speaker B, however, answers as if the question was referring to future time ("How long are you going to be here?"). When speaker C answers with a past time response (*We came on Sunday*), speaker A acknowledges it and repeats his use of a present tense (*Youse're here*) to refer to past time. Note that the dialect form *youse* (= "you" plural) seems to be understood by the visitors though it is unlikely to be part of their own dialect.

Dialectology

Despite occasional difficulties, there is a general impression of mutual intelligibility among many speakers of different dialects of English. This is one of the criteria used in the study of dialects, or **dialectology**, to distinguish between two different dialects of the same language (whose speakers can usually understand each other) and two different languages (whose speakers can't usually understand each other). This is not the only, or the most reliable, way of identifying dialects, but it is helpful in establishing the fact that each different dialect, like each language, is equally worthy of analysis. It is important to recognize, from a linguistic point of view, that none of the varieties of a language is inherently "better" than any other. They are simply different.

From a social point of view, however, some varieties do become more prestigious. In fact, the variety that develops as the standard language has usually been one socially prestigious dialect, originally associated with a center of economic and political power (e.g. London for British English and Paris for French). Yet there always continue to be other varieties of a language spoken in different regions.

Regional dialects

The existence of different regional dialects is widely recognized and often the source of some humor for those living in different regions. In the United States, people from

the Brooklyn area of New York may joke about a Southerner's definition of *sex* by telling you that *sex is fo' less than tin*, in their best imitation of someone from the Southern states. In return, Southerners can wonder aloud about what a *tree guy* is in Brooklyn, since they have heard Brooklyn speakers refer to *doze tree guys*. Some regional dialects clearly have stereotyped pronunciations associated with them.

Going beyond stereotypes, those involved in the serious investigation of regional dialects have devoted a lot of survey research to the identification of consistent features of speech found in one geographical area compared to another. These dialect surveys often involve a lot of attention to detail and operate with very specific criteria in identifying acceptable informants. After all, it is important to know if the person whose speech you are recording really is a typical representative of the region's dialect.

Consequently, the informants in the dialect surveys of the twentieth century tended to be **NORMS** or "non-mobile, older, rural, male speakers." Such speakers were selected because they were less likely to have influences from outside the region in their speech. One unfortunate consequence of using such criteria is that the resulting dialect description tends to be more accurate of a period well before the time of investigation. Nevertheless, the detailed information obtained has provided the basis for a number of Linguistic Atlases of whole countries (e.g. England) and regions (e.g. the Upper Midwest area of the United States).

Isoglosses and dialect boundaries

We can look at some examples of regional variation found in a survey that resulted in the Linguistic Atlas of the Upper Midwest of the United States. One of the aims of a survey of this type is to find a number of significant differences in the speech of those living in different areas and to be able to chart where the boundaries are, in dialect terms, between those areas. If it is found, for example, that the vast majority of informants in one area say they carry things home from the store in a *paper bag* while the majority in another area say they use a *paper sack*, then it is usually possible to draw a line across a map separating the two areas, as shown in [Figure 18.1](#). This line is called an **isogloss** and represents a boundary between the areas with regard to that one particular linguistic item.

If a very similar distribution is found for other items, such as a preference for *pail* to the north and *bucket* to the south, then other isoglosses can be drawn on the map. When a number of isoglosses come together in this way, a more solid line, indicating a **dialect boundary**, can be drawn.

In [Figure 18.1](#), a small circle indicates where *paper bag* was used and a plus sign shows where *paper sack* was used. The broken line between the two areas represents an isogloss that roughly coincides with lines separating several other linguistic features. Using this dialect boundary information, we find that in the Upper Midwest

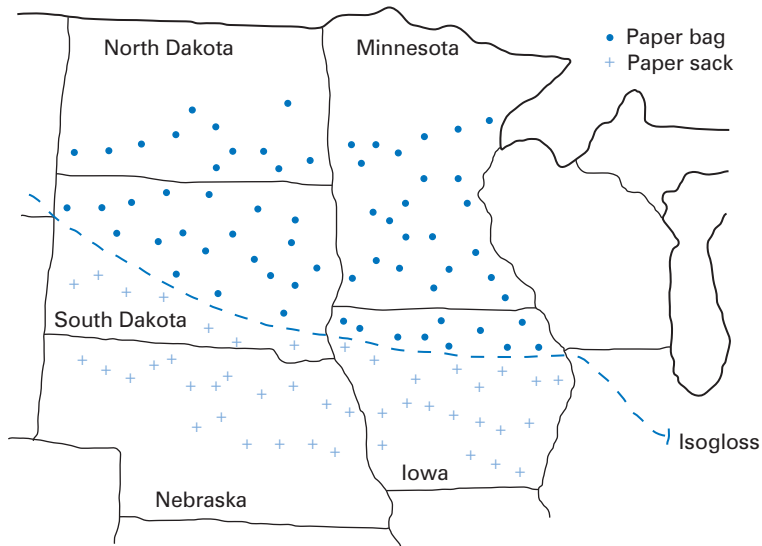


Figure 18.1

of the USA there is a Northern dialect area that includes Minnesota, North Dakota, most of South Dakota and Northern Iowa. The rest of Iowa and Nebraska show characteristics of the Midland dialect. Some of the noticeable pronunciation and vocabulary differences are illustrated here.

	(“ <u>taught</u> ”)	(“ <u>roof</u> ”)	(“ <u>creek</u> ”)	(“ <u>greasy</u> ”)	
Northern:	[ɔ]	[ʊ]	[ɪ]	[s]	
Midland:	[ɑ]	[u]	[i]	[z]	
Northern:	<i>paper bag</i>	<i>pail</i>	<i>kerosene</i>	<i>slippery</i>	<i>get sick</i>
Midland:	<i>paper sack</i>	<i>bucket</i>	<i>coal oil</i>	<i>slick</i>	<i>take sick</i>

So, if an American English (male) speaker pronounces the word *greasy* as [grizi] and asks for a *bucket* to carry water, then he is not likely to have grown up and spent most of his life in Minnesota. While making this general claim, we shouldn’t forget that, although the characteristic forms listed here were found in the speech of a large percentage of those interviewed in the dialect survey, they won’t necessarily be used by all speakers currently living in the region.

The dialect continuum

Another note of caution is required with regard to dialect boundaries. The drawing of isoglosses and dialect boundaries is quite useful in establishing a broad view of regional dialects, but it tends to obscure the fact that, at most dialect boundary areas, one dialect or language variety merges into another. Keeping this in mind, we can view regional variation as existing along a **dialect continuum** rather than as having sharp breaks from one region to the next.

A very similar type of continuum can occur with related languages existing on either side of a political border. As you travel from Holland into Germany, you will find concentrations of Dutch speakers giving way to areas near the border where “Dutch” may sound more like “Deutsch” because the Dutch dialects and the German dialects are less clearly differentiated. Then, as you travel into Germany, greater concentrations of distinctly German speakers occur.

Speakers who move back and forth across this border area, using different varieties with some ease, may be described as **bidialectal** (i.e. “speaking two dialects”). Most of us grow up with some form of bidialectalism, speaking one dialect “in the street” among family and friends, and having to learn another dialect “in school.” However, in some places, there are two different languages involved and the people who know both languages are described as **bilingual**.

Bilingualism

In many countries, regional variation is not simply a matter of two (or more) dialects of a single language, but can involve two (or more) quite distinct and different languages. Canada, for example, is an officially bilingual country, with both French and English as official languages. This recognition of the linguistic rights of the country’s French speakers, largely in Quebec, did not come about without a lot of political upheaval. For most of its history, Canada was essentially an English-speaking country, with a French-speaking minority group. In such a situation, **bilingualism** at the level of the individual tends to be a feature of the minority group. In this form of bilingualism, a member of a minority group grows up in one linguistic community, mainly speaking one language (e.g. Welsh in Britain or Spanish in the United States), but learns another language (e.g. English) in order to take part in the larger dominant linguistic community.

Indeed, many members of linguistic minorities can live their entire lives without seeing their native language in the public domain. Sometimes political activism can change that. It was only after English notices and signs were frequently defaced, or replaced by scribbled Welsh-language versions, that bilingual (English–Welsh) signs came into widespread use in Wales. Many *henoed* never expected to see their first language on public signs in Wales, as illustrated in [Figure 18.2](#), though they may wonder why everyone is being warned about them.

Individual bilingualism, however, doesn’t have to be the result of political dominance by a group using a different language. It can simply be the result of having two parents who speak different languages. If a child simultaneously acquires the French spoken by her mother and the English spoken by her father, then the distinction between the two languages may not even be noticed by the child. There will simply be two ways of talking according to the person being talked to. However, even in this



Figure 18.2

type of bilingualism, one language tends eventually to become the dominant one, with the other in a subordinate role.

Diglossia

A rather special situation involving two distinct varieties of a language, called **diglossia**, exists in some countries. In diglossia, there is a “low” variety, acquired locally and used for everyday affairs, and a “high” or special variety, learned in school and used for important matters. A type of diglossia exists in Arabic-speaking countries where the high variety (Classical Arabic) is used in formal lectures, serious political events and especially in religious discussions. The low variety is the local version of

the language, such as Egyptian Arabic or Lebanese Arabic. Through a long period in European history, a diglossic situation existed with Latin as the high variety and one of the local languages of Europe (early versions of modern Italian, French and Spanish) as the low variety or “vernacular.”

Language planning

Perhaps because bilingualism in contemporary Europe and North America tends to be found mostly among minority groups, many countries are often assumed to be **monolingual**. For many of those residents who are only capable of speaking one language (English), the United States would indeed seem to be a monolingual country. For others, it clearly is not, because they live in large communities where English is not the first language of the home. As one example, the majority of the population in San Antonio, Texas, will be more likely to listen to radio broadcasts in Spanish than in English. This simple fact has quite large repercussions in terms of the organization of local representative government and the educational system. Should elementary school teaching take place in Spanish or English?

Consider a similar question in the context of Guatemala, a country in Central America, where there are twenty-six Mayan languages spoken, as well as Spanish. If, in this situation, Spanish is selected as the language of education, are all those Mayan speakers put at an early educational disadvantage within the society? Questions of this type require answers on the basis of some type of **language planning**. Government, legal and educational organizations in many countries have to plan which variety or varieties of the languages spoken in the country are to be used for official business. In Israel, despite the fact that it was not the most widely used language among the population, Hebrew was chosen as the official government language. In India, the choice was Hindi, yet in many non-Hindi-speaking regions, there were riots against this decision. There were “National Language Wars” in the Philippines before different groups could agree on the name of the national language (Filipino).

The process of language planning may be seen in a better light when the full series of stages is implemented over a number of years. The adoption of Swahili as the national language of Tanzania in East Africa may serve as a good example. There still exist a large number of other languages, as well as the colonial vestiges of English, but the educational, legal and government systems have gradually introduced Swahili as the official language. The process of “selection” (choosing an official language) is followed by “codification,” in which basic grammars, dictionaries and written models are used to establish the standard variety. The process of “elaboration” follows, with the standard variety being developed for use in all aspects of social life and the appearance of a body of literary work written in the standard. The process of “implementation” is largely a matter of government attempts to encourage use of

the standard, and “acceptance” is the final stage when a substantial majority of the population use the standard and think of it as the national language, playing a part in not only social, but also national identity.

Pidgins

In some areas, the standard chosen may be a variety that originally had no native speakers in the country. For example, in Papua New Guinea, with more than eight hundred different languages, a lot of official business is conducted in Tok Pisin. This language is now used by over a million people, but it began many years earlier as a kind of impromptu language called a **pidgin**. A variety of a language described as a pidgin is often discussed as a “contact” language that developed for some practical purpose, such as trading, among groups of people who had a lot of contact, but who did not know each other’s languages. As such, it would have no native speakers. The origin of the term “pidgin” is thought to be from a Chinese version of the English word “business.”

A pidgin is described as an “English Pidgin” if English is the **lexifier** language, that is, the main source of words adopted in the pidgin. It doesn’t mean that those words will have the same pronunciation or meaning as in the source. For example, the word *gras* has its origins in the English word “grass,” but in Tok Pisin it also came to be used for “hair.” It is part of *mausgras* (“moustache”) and *gras bilong fes* (“beard”).

There are several English pidgins still used today. They are characterized by an absence of any complex grammatical morphology and a somewhat limited vocabulary. Inflectional suffixes such as *-s* (plural) and *-’s* (possessive) are required on nouns in Standard English, but are rare in English pidgins, while structures like *tu buk* (“two books”) and *di gyal place* (“the girl’s place”) are common. Functional morphemes often take the place of inflectional morphemes found in the source language. For example, instead of changing the form of *you* to *your*, as in the English phrase *your book*, English-based pidgins use a form like *bilong*, and change the word order to produce phrases like *buk bilong yu*, as well as *gras bilong fes*.

The syntax of pidgins can be quite unlike the languages from which terms were borrowed and modified, as can be seen in this example from an earlier stage of Tok Pisin.

<i>Baimbai</i>	<i>hed</i>	<i>bilongyu</i>	<i>i-arrait</i>	<i>gain</i>
by and by	head	belong you	he alright	again

“Your head will soon get well again”

There are believed to be between six and twelve million people still using pidgin languages and between ten and seventeen million using descendants from pidgins called “creoles.”

Creoles

When a Pidgin develops beyond its role as a trade or contact language and becomes the first language of a social community, it is described as a **creole**. Tok Pisin is now a creole. The first language of a large number of people in Hawai'i is also a creole and, though still locally referred to as "Pidgin," is more accurately described as "Hawai'i Creole English." A creole initially develops as the first language of children growing up in a pidgin-using community and becomes more complex as it serves more communicative purposes. Thus, unlike pidgins, creoles have large numbers of native speakers and are not restricted at all in their uses. A French creole is spoken by the majority of the population in Haiti and English creoles are used in Jamaica and Sierra Leone.

The separate vocabulary elements of a pidgin can become grammatical elements in a creole. The form *baimbai yu go* ("by and by you go") in early Tok Pisin gradually shortened to *bai yu go*, and finally to *yu bigo*, with a grammatical structure not unlike that of its English translation equivalent, "you will go."

The post-creole continuum

In many contemporary situations where creoles evolved, there is usually evidence of another process at work. Just as there was development from a pidgin to a creole, known as **creolization**, there is now often a retreat from the use of the creole by those who have greater contact with a standard variety of the language. Where education and greater social prestige are associated with a "higher" variety (e.g. British English in Jamaica), a number of speakers will tend to use fewer creole forms and structures. This process, known as **decreolization**, leads at one extreme to a variety that is closer to the external standard model and leaves, at the other extreme, a basic variety with more local creole features. Between these two extremes may be a range of slightly different varieties, some with many and some with fewer creole features. This range of varieties, evolving after (= "post") the creole has come into existence, is called the **post-creole continuum**.

So, in Jamaica, one speaker may say *a fi mi buk dat*, using the basic creole variety, another may put it as *iz mi buk*, using a variety with fewer creole features, and yet another may choose *it's my book*, using a variety with only some pronunciation features of the creole, or a "creole accent." It is also very common for speakers to be able to use a range of varieties in different situations.

We would predict that these differences would be tied very much to social values and social identity. In the course of discussing language varieties in terms of regional differences, we have excluded, in a rather artificial way, the complex social factors that are also at work in determining language variation. In [Chapter 19](#), we'll investigate the influence of a number of these social variables.