



THE PROBLEM OF STUDYING VARIATION IN MODERN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of the numerous identifiable variations in pronunciation; such differences usually come from phonetic inventories of local dialects, as well as from wider differences in standard English among different primary-speaking populations. The active is part of the dialect, concerning the local pronunciation.

KEY WORDS: *relevance, greatness, extraordinary, dialect, pronunciation, variation.*

ПРОБЛЕМА ИЗУЧЕНИЯ ВАРИАЦИИ НА СОВРЕМЕННОМ АНГЛИЙСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ

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Аннотация

В этой статье представлен обзор многочисленных идентифицируемых вариаций в произношении; такие различия обычно происходят из фонетической инвентаризации локальных диалектов, а также от более широких различий в стандартном английском языке различных первично-говорящих популяций. Актив является частью диалекта, касающегося местного произношения.

Ключевые слова: *актуальность, величие, необыкновенный, диалект, произношение, вариация.*

Variation is a characteristic of language: there are several ways to say the same thing. Speakers can distinguish between pronunciation (accent), word choice (vocabulary), morphology, and syntax (sometimes called "grammar"). But while the variety of variation is great, there seem to be limits to variation—speakers usually don't make drastic changes to word order in sentences, and don't use new sounds that are completely foreign to the language they're speaking. Linguistic variation does not equate to linguistic grammaticality, but speakers are still (often unconsciously) sensitive to what is possible and what is not possible in their native lecture.

Variationists study how language changes by observing it. This is achieved by looking at valid data. For example, variation is studied by examining the language and social environment, and then



the data is analyzed as the change occurs. The variety of research programs must be flexible due to the nature of the language itself. This is due to the fact that the language is also mobile during the transition and does not transition from one state to another instantly.

Language variation is a key concept in sociolinguistics. Sociolinguists investigate whether this linguistic variability can be explained by differences in the social characteristics of speakers who use the language, but also investigate whether elements of the surrounding linguistic context encourage or discourage the use of certain structures.

Studies of language variation and its correlation with sociological categories, such as William Labov's 1963 paper "The Social Motivation of Intelligent Change" led to the founding of sociolinguistics as a subfield of linguistics. Although contemporary sociolinguistics includes other topics, linguistic variation and change remains an important issue at the heart of the field.

The latest studies of language, which led to the theory of discourse, are aimed at elucidating the functioning of communicative processes and procedures for the constitution of meanings, a decisive contribution to new directions in the field of language teaching. Undoubtedly, it is a wider and more complex system of signs that relates to communication, capable of accepting various languages and fulfilling its main purpose. And it is characterized as a social fact, because it is a fundamental tool of communication, because it is fundamentally a tool of communication.

The language does not present itself in a unique and uniform way: it conveys variations depending on the groups that use it. Each of the variants of these variants, provided in the use of the language, represents certain patterns - normal resources for this group, thus calling it a dialect.

How we speak is influenced by many things. Firstly, there is learning to speak English itself, where how we pronounce our words is all part of learning how to speak and copying the speech of those around us. If we are born into bilingual families, then we may learn to speak English alongside another language. Then, as we go to school, we learn to read and to write a written equivalent of English speech that has standardized forms of spelling, punctuation and grammar, known as standard English. Depending upon your home background, you may speak standard English with its associated accent Received Pronunciation (RP). Or, you may speak standard English with a regional accent such as that associated with Birmingham or the Black Country, and you might include a few dialect features different from standard English, such as vocabulary in your speech.

As we move across the country we experience not only changing landscape and architecture but also a gradual change in the sounds we hear, in the accents and dialects that relate to the place in which they are spoken and to which they belong. This phenomenon is known as a dialect continuum. The terms accent and dialect are often used interchangeably, although in linguistic terms they refer to two different aspects of language variation.

English dialects may be different from each other, but all speakers within the English-speaking world can still generally understand them. For example, a slogan on a t shirt reads: Black Country spoken, English understood.

In England, there are two main dialects or varieties of English: standard English, used widely in public institutions such as education, media and the law. We learn it in school when we are taught to read and to write. Standard English is not bound by geographic location, and is the form used most commonly in writing. Regional dialect/variation, that is bound by geographical location. It is used most commonly in speech, but also in writing such as Irving Welsh's novel English dialects may be different from each other, but all speakers of English can still generally understand them. A speaker from Birmingham for instance, might sprinkle his or her speech with localized vocabulary, such as "bab" for woman or girl and a speaker from the Black Country say cut



for canal and use regional grammatical constructions, such as *Ow yam bin?* or *bin ya?* For How have you been? In addition, such speakers use a range of local pronunciations. For all these reasons such a speaker could be described as a Black Country dialect speaker.

There are also non standard dialect features that are shared by more than one dialect. For example, the expression *ain't* and the double negative construction *I ain't got no pencil* feature in more than one dialect. This is because, as English was standardised and a grammatical description written, the grammatical pattern for expressing a negative was through the verb *do* or *have* plus the word *not*. I do not have a pencil; I don't have a pencil; I didn't go to school yesterday and so on. Speakers of regional varieties of English continued to use the double negative. Equally, in speech, shortenings of words like *because* to *cos*, not pronouncing the letter <g> at the end of words such as *goin*, *stoppin* and *glotalling* are features of spoken English used by standard and non standard speakers of English alike.

What is an accent?

Accent refers to the differences in the sound patterns of a specific dialect and not its vocabulary and grammar. A speaker from Birmingham who generally speaks standard English vocabulary and grammar, but whose pronunciation has an unmistakable hint of the Black Country, is described as having a Black Country accent. Many of us may speak English with a regional accent, but it is becoming increasingly less common for us use dialect features of vocabulary and grammar in our speech, especially in formal contexts.

The accent most commonly associated with standard English is known as Received Pronunciation (RP). RP is not bound by geographical location, and the accent most commonly associated with the Royal Family, people in professional occupations and linked to upper and middle social classes. RP is also subject to change, as the RP of Queen Elizabeth is different from that of her children and grandchildren. BBC presenters, often once thought of as 'gatekeepers' of RP, now present the news and current affairs programmes in a wide range of regional accents. There is also regional variation in RP: for example, the fact that the sound <a> can be pronounced as short, as in *cat* in words like *bath* and *grass* or long, as in *farm*. A short <a> is characteristic of Northern England and a long <a> of Southern England. Given that the South of England is perceived as a more prestigious than the North, then we may find ourselves consciously using one or other as a way of marking identity with either region.

It is possible to speak standard English in a variety of accents: Glaswegian, Geordie, Brummie or Yorkshire, for example, but unlikely that a regional dialect will be spoken in any other accent than that associated with the dialect. That is, you are not likely to find the Black Country dialect, Geordie dialect, or any other regional dialect, spoken in an RP accent.

Is standard English better than regional varieties of English?

At one time, the variation from standard English apparent in regional dialects was thought to be idiosyncratic, illogical and thus 'incorrect' and its speakers often thought of as 'unintelligent'. However, linguistic investigation into regional accents and dialects has shown that all varieties of English to be found in the UK today, as well as other varieties across the world such as General American, are rule-governed. Thus, it is not the case that standard English is linguistically a better or more superior variety of English. Its prestige lies in the social value given to it as the language of education, the law, public administration and so on.

Is it either standard English or regional variety?

In the middle of the twentieth century, education became universally and freely available in England, and children by law had to go to school until the age of fourteen, then fifteen until the 1970s,



sixteen until the turn of this century until they are adult, at the age of eighteen. As our world has become increasingly reliant upon literacy, so the adult population has become increasingly more literate. Literacy in English has evolved over several hundred years, and reading and writing standard English is taught in school, since it is the variety of English required for educational purposes and other realms of public life. Pupils who come from backgrounds where a regional variety of English (or another language) is spoken at home – and you may be one of them – may find that learning to read and to write may influence the way that they speak, so that speech becomes a mixture of standard English and regional variation. How we speak and write then, is influenced by the context, audience and purpose of the linguistic situation in which we find ourselves. We may speak in a regional variety with family and friends, but at work, or at school or university, accommodate or modify the way we speak to sound more standard.

Does English change?

As a living language, English changes over time and varies according to place and social setting. Some people find this upsetting, and perceive English changing as English degenerating. But, life does not stand still and today's world is characterised by more rapid social and economic change than at any other time in history that in turn has an impact upon uses of English.

Although standard English vocabulary is described in dictionaries, these have to be updated on a regular basis to take account of changing social patterns, so that ways of life and vocabulary associated with it that can be edited out and new words added in. For example, in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, there was a range of vocabulary associated with horses as a means of transport that we no longer use, replaced by trains and cars. Technology has brought with it not only new words, such as computer but also added meanings to already existing words. A mouse used to refer to a small mammal, but now also means a piece of equipment that allows you to navigate a computer screen (and if you are reading this, you may have your hand on it). You may find that your grandparents and older people generally use or know dialect features far more than you do or your parents, partly as a reflection of the world in which they were brought up.

Standard English is also described in grammars of English. Linguists once thought that all languages fitted into one general grammatical patterning known as universal grammar. We now know that this is not the case, and that different languages have different grammatical categories. What was once thought of as a singular concept then, grammar, has become pluralised, so we can talk of grammars. The advent of new technologies such as sound recording and the internet together with the increasing digitisation of data has allowed linguists to compile data sets of language use known as a corpus, or if more than one, corpora. Modern dictionaries and grammars of English are increasingly based upon language corpora and thus how language is actually used rather than how a linguist might think it is or should be used. Corpora of spoken English have also made us aware that speech has just as much a grammatical structure as writing and so there are now grammars of spoken English just as there are of written English.

What about attitudes towards variations of English?

For mainly historical reasons, certain English dialects or varieties have been viewed more positively than others. Thus, standard English, because of its association with being the national English language, has been perceived as the most prestigious of English varieties. However, the fact that some dialects and accents are seen to be more prestigious than others is more a reflection of judgements based on social, rather than linguistic, criteria.

As society changes, so too do attitudes towards dialect, accent and variational use of English generally. Until not so very long ago, variation uses of English were associated with social class.



Manual employment was characteristic of belonging to what sociologically was called the working class, and such employment demanded minimal demands of literacy and educational qualifications. It was also generally not paid very well. Occupations that did demand a higher degree of literacy and educational qualifications such as teachers, lawyers, administrators and so on were characteristic of the middle class. These occupations are generally better paid. Today, issues of social class are not straightforward as they once were; increased educational opportunity and economic prosperity means that more and more young people are exposed to standard English than ever before. Nevertheless, linguistic prejudice still exists, particularly amongst employers, some politicians and sections of the general public.

Is it possible for attitudes towards variations of English to change?

Paradoxically, as more and more young people and adults are educated to increasingly higher levels, and learning about regional varieties in English has become a part of an A level English or undergraduate degree programme in English or Linguistics, then they become more aware of attitudes and prejudices towards uses of English. A consequence of this is, is that they can come to realise that how they speak can include an element of choice: they can choose to adapt their speech to become ever more like standard English, or they can choose to draw upon variational features of regional accents and dialects to mark an identity linked to a particular region. For example, an educated speaker of standard English born and brought up in Birmingham, may deliberately choose to include words such as Bab and phrases such as tarra a bit for goodbye. Equally, middle aged adults can incorporate vocabulary learnt from their children into their speech in ways that cut across age groups, such as the abbreviation later for see you later or hood for neighbourhood. Thus, regional variation today is no longer so strongly tied to social class but rather cuts across social categories such as social class, age, ethnicity and gender.

Speaking with a regional accent, particularly, no longer has the social connotation it once had and automatically linked to a working class background. Increased variety of accents in the media for example, also helps to break down prejudice towards variation use of English.

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