Sociolinguistics

Language variety.

We often think of a language as a stable, unvarying communication system, used in a uniform way by all of its native speakers. The notions that a given language is unchanging, that it is the same everywhere, and that everybody who speaks it are using it exactly the same way are illusions. Language variation is, instead, pervasive.

No one speaks the same way all of the time.

(1) For instance, if you were to ask another person to take a seat in front of you so you can talk to him or her, would you always choose the same words?
What might you say to a potential client? _____
What might you say to your naughty little sister? _____

No one member of a language group speaks the same way as any other member of that group.

Each person has his or her own individual language variety or **idiolect**. As a consequence, you can identify a family member or close friend by certain speech patterns. And in the historical and legal worlds, authorship of written or printed works can be determined.

So when we think of a language like English, we should think of it as the union of the idiolects of all of its speakers. If English has N number of speakers of it, it also has N number of opinions of what its lexicon and grammar are. So there may be disagreements on what is a word and what is grammatical in a language.

(2) DT-Q45: Is the ei of EITHER pronounced like the ❒ ie of pie, or the ❒ ee of bee?
Our class response: pie _____ _____% bee _____ _____%
(3) DT-Q19: What do you call your evening meal? _____
Our class response: D _____ _____% S _____ _____%
B _____ _____% O _____ _____%
You can compare our answers to surveys conducted in many parts of Canada. See Dialect Topography of Canadian English, online at http://dialect.topography.chass.utoronto.ca/

And no one language group speaks like other language groups.

We are not just interested what all speakers of a language do, but also subgroups of them. When we identify certain people who have very similar idiolects because they come from the same region, they share the same **regional dialect**.
(4) An example of an English regional dialect is Newfoundland English.
(5) Another example of an English regional dialect is New Zealand English.

And if people have very similar idiolects because they share one or more socio-economic characteristics, they share the same **social dialect** or **sociolect**.
(6) An example of an English sociolect is AAVE (African-American Vernacular English).
(Most AAVE speakers share the same ethnicity as its name suggests, African-American.)
(7) Another example of an English sociolect is RP (Received Pronunciation).
(RP is a sociolect spoken by only 3% of the British population and is traditionally associated with those who can afford an English preparatory boarding school and Public School education. Therefore, this sociolect was traditionally defined on a common economic status and educational background.)

The distinction between language, dialect, accent, and language variety.

language
1. system of communication (includes pronunciation, grammar & vocabulary);
2. used by a (relatively) large group of people.

dialect
1. system of communication (includes pronunciation, grammar & vocabulary);
2. particular to a group of people, specified often by geographic location or socially.

regional dialect
1. system of communication (includes pronunciation, grammar & vocabulary);
2. particular to a group of people, specified by their geographic location

social dialect = sociolect
1. system of communication (includes pronunciation, grammar & vocabulary);
2. particular to a group of people, specified by a social trait such as class or sex

accent
1. system of pronunciation;
2. particular to a group of people, specified often by geographic location or socially

language variety = lect
1. system of communication (includes pronunciation, grammar & vocabulary);
2. which is sufficiently homogeneous to be analyzed as a system;
3. thus, can be a language or a dialect (any definition)

And to complete the picture

idiolect
1. _____

2. _____

Standard and non-standard language varieties.

[references: Chambers, J. K. 1995. *Sociolinguistic Theory*. Cambridge MA: Blackwell. Crystal, David. 1997. *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. 4th ed. Oxford UK: Blackwell. Wardhaugh, Ronald. 1992. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. 2nd ed. Oxford UK: Blackwell.]

All language varieties are equal: no language or dialect is intrinsically better or worse than any other language or dialect. This means, for instance, that all languages can express a given idea, that no language is inherently easier to learn than any other, and that all languages are worthy of study by linguists and the general population.

Despite linguistic equality, we hear of standard and non-standard versions of language.

A **standard language variety** is a language variety that:
1. has prestige, socially and/or politically, within its speech community; it is a norm of communication, often considered the "correct" or the "proper" language variety;
2. cuts across regional differences and is accepted by many sub-groups of the speech community;
3. is codified (has many published grammars and dictionaries); and
4. is institutionalized in such social structures as government, mass media, and second and foreign language teaching.

A **non-standard language variety** (may also be called a **vernacular** or, sometimes, a **colloquial** form of a language) is a language variety that does not have the traits of a standard language variety.

RP is an example of a standard language variety, and is the variety commonly used by the major British dictionary publishing houses, such as Oxford, Collins, and Longman.
But AAVE is a non-standard language variety or as its name states, a vernacular.

Appropriate and inappropriate uses of the non-standard and standard language varieties.

It is a well-known sociolinguistic observation that the vast majority of people produce both standard and non-standard elements in their first language. There are very few of us who never use any non-standard feature, and almost all of us are capable of producing at least a few standard elements. But what proportion of the language production from a particular individual is standard and what is non-standard is not at all fixed.

Some of the many factors affecting the mix of standard and non-standard language are:
• the biological, social and economic attributes of the language producer;
• the discourse context or the communication situation, including who is the communication receiver; and
• other linguistic choices previously made in the discourse dialogue.

Because virtually all of us have to be ready to produce and receive both standard and non-standard language features, it is very important we can work with both varieties, and distinguish which is which.

Why do we have non-standard language? Why don't we use the same standard language variety all of the time, so we don't have learn all this additional non-standard stuff?

Using non-standard language can have many purposes, for instance, showing solidarity with and affinity for the person or persons listening to you, to subconsciously mark yourself as belonging to social group or location, or for emphatic effect.

When it seems less appropriate to use non-standard language is when you want to be neutral or not part of any subgroup, to be a voice of authority or information, or to present yourself in an educated light. You are more likely to use non-standard language when speaking with people you know well, and are more likely to use standard language when writing for people you don't know well.

Factors concerning the speaker that influence language variation.

There are many factors that could affect the choices we make in language.
We can divide them into factors that relate to the speaker, and those that do not.
We'll begin with speaker characteristics that affect the choice of language.

Here are some of the major categories of speaker characteristics that affect language variation, and some examples of each:

1. the geographical location of the speaker
    - residence history – place of birth,
      place where raised, and/or
      place where living now
2. the attitudes or aspirations of the speaker
    - orientation to region – attitude towards residence region
    - social ambition – presumed attitude about ambitions beyond residence region
3. the biological-social-economic attributes of the speaker
    - age
    - sex/gender
    - social class
    - social network – who belongs in a group, and who knows who within that group

In our modern society, I would argue the most influential factors in determining why we speak the way we do are:
our age [time], residence history [place], and social networks [with whom we communicate].

Residence history, including place of birth, place where raised, and place where living now.

Many language phenomena correlate with the **residence history** of the subjects. This can be measured in many ways, for example, as the place of birth, the place where raised, and/or the place where living now.

(1) Let's consider an example where residence was the place where you were raised from ages 8 to 18. This measurement was chosen for the project Dialect Topography of Canadian English, done mainly in the 1990s. Ages 8 to 18 are presumed to be the time when a person's dialect becomes fixed, and after age 18, it is unlikely to alter much.

DT-Q2. What do you call the upholstered piece of furniture that 3 or 4 people sit on in the living room? _____

Americans in western New York overwhelmingly prefer the word *couch*, with *sofa* a distant second. Canadians from Ontario used *couch* and *sofa* too, but also had a unique Canadian word, *chesterfield*. English respondents from Montréal and Quebec City preferred *couch* and *sofa* in equal portions, but some also replied *chesterfield*.

	Western NY	Golden Horseshoe	Ottawa Valley	Montréal	Quebec City
couch	84%	53%	47%	38%	35%
chesterfield	0%	26%	33%	12%	20%
sofa	13%	12%	16%	40%	30%

(2) Here's another example of region-correlated language variation.

DT-Q24: What do you call a carbonated soft drink?

_____

According the self-report survey on www.popvssoda.com, the language choice *pop* is the most common Canadian English variant everywhere except Quebec, and the second most common American English variant. The variant *soda* is the most common American English variant. Other notable answers to this question include *soda pop* and *coke*, the latter often used in southcentral and southeastern United States. *Pop* is stigmatized in Quebec: many Quebeckers refuse to use because it is speech heard in Ontario, and use the compound *soft drink* instead. Below are some results of the Dialect Topography of Canadian English.

	Western NY	Golden Horseshoe	Ottawa Valley	Montréal	Quebec City
pop	54%	85%	54%	9%	35%
soda	41%	6%	9%	19%	11%
soft drink	0%	2%	24%	56%	41%

Orientation to (self-identification with) region, and social ambition.

[Labov, William. 1972. *Sociolinguistic Patterns*, C. 1 (pp. 1-42). Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.]

Orientation to region concerns speaker attitude towards the region of residence, classifying speakers as to whether they have positive, neutral, or negative attitudes towards their region of residence. **Social ambition** is a related measure, and indicates the social goals of people, for example, whether they wish to be part of the local neighbourhood, or wish to be seen as going beyond these ties. The results are very similar, so we'll look just at orientation to region.

(3) The linguist William Labov investigated who used more of two types of non-standard pronunciations in Martha's Vineyard, an island south of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. He looked at age, ethnicity (Yankee, Portuguese, Amerindian), occupation (e.g., fisherman), and place of residence on the island. But the factor that had the clearest correlation to the language choices was orientation to region.

A Positive attitude correlates with the highest use of non-standard local variants, and a Negative attitude with lowest use of non-standard local variants.
Therefore, using the non-standard local variants indicates local loyalty and solidarity.

Orientation to Region	Percentage of non-standard local pronunciations used for words like: ride, time, light	Percentage of non-standard local pronunciations used for words like: brown, loud, about
Positive attitude	63%	62%
Neutral attitude	32%	42%
Negative attitude	9%	8%

Age.

Age, of course, changes our physiology, and therefore can alter the way our speech sounds over time. As we age from children to adolescents, the pitch of our voices lowers as our vocal cords grow. And as we grow older still, general wear and tear can cause slippage and impede proper timing of vocal gestures; we can sound more crackly or raspy as time passes.

Many linguistic choices correlate with the age too: older subjects prefer one linguistic variant, while younger subjects prefer another variant. This fact should not be surprising because language change is pervasive.
(4) For example, for the couch/chesterfield/sofa language choice, young Canadians, as a group, no longer use *chesterfield*, but instead, *couch*.
(5) Another example is the pronunciation of words starting with the spelling <wh> like *whether* and *while*. Younger people across the English world today almost always prefer to pronounce these words with a [w] sound. Some older people, however, will use a sound close to [hw], and will contrast them to like-sounding words spelled with a <w> only, like *weather* and *wile*.

Gender and sex.

There can be significant differences between the speech of men and women. One well-know physiological difference is that men, as a group, usually have lower-pitched voices than women, as the former group have normally a larger larynx.

Moreover, the two sexes may select different language choices.
(6) For a cotton top that buttons down the front, men prefer the word *shirt*, no matter if a man or woman is wearing this piece of apparel. But women may use the word *blouse* if the object is worn by a woman.

Furthermore, women tend to use more standard language choices than men do.
(7) Women will more often than men say the standard *running*, not the non-standard *runnin'*.

Social class.

In industrialized societies, the two main social classes are the middle and working class.

Social class – middle class (MC) – non-manual ("white collar") workers
working class (WC) – manual ("blue collar") workers

In sociolinguistic work, the **social class** divisions are not solely based on occupation. It can also be based on the person's education, type of housing, type of neighbourhood, income, tastes (including spending habits), his/her parents' occupation, etc.

We generally find that the middle class tends to use more standard language choices than the working class do.
(8) The middle class will more often say *running*, not *runnin'*, than the working class.

Social network.

[Labov, William. 1972. *Language in the Inner City*. Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press. Summary reference: text]

"People who are well integrated into a particular social group [or network] may have linguistic characteristics rather different from those who are more peripheral in the group, because the influence of the group will be less strong and less consistent on the peripheral members."

Some linguistic choices correlate with the strength of affiliation with a social network, that is, a small group of people with social ties to one another

(9) William Labov did a study on gang language. All members of the two gangs, who lived on two adjacent blocks of the same street in New York City, were of the same sex (male), of approximately the same age, and of the same social class. Each subject was assessed as to whether he was a "core member" of the gang, a "secondary member" of the gang, a "peripheral member" of the gang, or a "lame".

• **social network** – a small group of people with social ties such that …
core members – have highest status within the network; have the most ties to other members
secondary members – have less high status in the network than the core members; have many ties, but not the most ties to other members
peripheral members – have moderate status in the network; have some ties to other members
lames – have little status in the network; have only a few ties, perhaps none, to other members; often considered outside the network but acquainted with it

Gang member association	% use of non-standard language
100s block gang – core member	70%
200s block gang – core member	63%
100s block gang – secondary member	61%
200s block gang – secondary member	56%
Peripheral member of either block gang	33%
Lame: not really a member of either block gang	36%

The core members of the gang have the highest use of the non-standard variant.
The secondary members have the next highest use of the non-standard variant.
The peripheral members and lames have the lowest use of the non-standard variant.

The use of non-standard language indicates the strength of gang membership: higher levels of non-standard language use indicate stronger gang network ties, while lower levels indicate weaker gang ties. Other well-known studies with similar observations involve high-school cliques and working class neighbourhoods. In other words, the more ties you have to a speech community, the more you are going to speak the speech of that community.

Factors not directly concerning the speaker but that influence language variation.

Recall that we said that there are many factors that could affect the choices we make in language. Here are some factors that do not relate directly to the speaker and his/her personal history or aspirations, but instead, to the discourse situation.

4. features of the discourse context or the communication situation
    - style – degree of formality
    - listener/reader – who will perceive the speaker/writer's production
5. other linguistic choices made in the discourse.
    - the phonological/phonetic characteristics of what was just spoken or about to be spoken
    - the verb tenses chosen in past discourse

Style, or degree of formality in speech.

People adopt different degrees of formality in speech, depending upon the circumstances. Linguists often classify the degree of formality into the following four styles produced when people are aware that they are being observed. They are given below, from most formal to the least formal.

• **style** – degree of formality in speech

word-list style (WLS):

- the most formal style when a person knows he/she is being observed
- produced when a person is reading a list of words aloud
- a subcategory of this style is called **minimal-pair style (MPS),** when the words differ only by a minimum of language sounds

reading-passage style (RPS):

- the second most formal style when a person knows he/she is being observed
- produced when a person is reading a passage (a small number of paragraphs) aloud

formal style (FS), also known as **interview style (IS)**:

- the third most formal style when a person knows he/she is being observed
- produced when a person is interviewed

casual style (CS)

- the least formal style when a person knows he/she is being observed
- produced when a person's attention is diverted from the act of producing language and, instead, is focused on communicating an idea (it seems that the person temporarily forgets that his/her language is being observed) – e.g., the conversation with an interviewer before or after the formal part of the interview; when a person is talking to a friend and not the interviewer; when a person tells a story of a time when his/her life was threatened

Non-standard language is spoken more as the formality of the style decreases.

The linguistic jargon of slang and taboo.

[All definitions are from: 1. Crystal, David. 1992. An Encyclopedic Dictionary of Language and Languages. London UK: Penguin Books.]
Some examples are from: 2. Crystal, David. 1997. The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language. 2nd ed. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press. 3. Maher, C. & Cutts, M. 1986. Plain English in the United Kingdom. *English Today* 2:10-12.]

slang
"Informal, non-standard vocabulary, usually intelligible only to people from a particular region or social group; also, the jargon of a special group, such as doctors, cricketers, or sailors. Its chief function is to mark social identity – to show that one belongs – but it may also be used just to be different, to make an effect, or to be informal. Such 'in-group' language is subject to rapid change." (Crystal 1992)

(1) English – The words that have meant 'good' over the last few decades:
70s - *groovy*, 80s - *bad*, 90s - *sweet*, 00s - *sick*, *phat*, *awesome*
I recall my brother and his friends in the 70s using the word *hoody* to mean 'good'. They can no longer remember using this word. It is definitely a slang word that was very short-lived.

In Great Britain, the word *brilliant* and now its clip *brill* mean 'good'. But this slang word is regional – it has not made inroads into North American English.

The word *cool* also means 'good', but it has not gone out of style. It is one slang word that has managed to infiltrate everyone's vocabulary, not just a particular social group.

argot (also known as **cant** or **speech disguise**)
{the name *argot* was originally applied to the speech of Parisian criminals, 1860}
"Special vocabulary used by a secretive social group, to protect its members from outside interference… Such groups include criminals, confidence tricksters, terrorists, ghetto groups, and street gangs." (Crystal 1992)

Sometimes argot is constructed from everyday words by giving them a special meaning:
(2) American criminal argot:
heater 'machine gun' *mechanic* 'professional killer' (Crystal 1997)
Other times the argot is constructed by rearranging the word sounds.
(3) Pig Latin:
This 'language' is usually thought of as a children's play-language, but I am aware of a case where a form of rapidly-spoken Pig Latin was used to communicate among leaders of a southern Ontario criminal ring who suspected that the police might be monitoring their conversations.

Pig Latin is constructed from the source language by moving the first consonants of a word (the initial onset) to the word's end and then by adding a nonsense syllable, such as *ay*.
eesay ouyay omorrowtay ightnay 'see you tomorrow night'

jargon (also known more neutrally as **terminology**)
"Technical terms and expressions used by a group of specialists, which are not known or understood by the speech community as a whole. Every subject has its jargon, which can contribute to the economy of communication and precision of thought among those who belong to the group. Objections arise when practitioners use jargon unthinkingly or excessively, in contexts where outsiders feel they have a right to comprehension, such as in medicine, law, and the civil service." (Crystal 1992)

(4) CB (Citizen's Band) or trucker talk (Crystal 1997)
Some of these terms have found their way into general slang.
five finger discount 'stolen goods' *grandma lane* 'slow lane'
anklebiter 'child' *10-4* 'message understood'

(5) British English legalese: a clause from a moving contract (Maher & Cutts 1986)
the 'legalese' version –

"General lien – The Contractor shall have a general lien upon all goods in his possession for all monies due to him from the customer or for liabilities incurred by him and for monies paid on behalf of the customer, and if part of the goods shall have been delivered, removed or dispatched or sold the general lien shall apply in respect of such goods as remain in the Contractor's possession. The Contractor shall be entitled to charge a storage charge and all other expenses during which a lien on the goods is being asserted and all these conditions shall continue to apply thereto."

the "Plain English" translation version –

"Our right to hold the goods – We have the right to hold some or all of the goods until you have paid all our charges and other payments due under this contract. These include charges, taxes or levies that we have paid to any other removal or storage business, carrier or official body. While we hold the goods and wait for payment you will have to pay storage charges and all other necessary expenses. This contract will apply to the goods held in this way."

Jargon and argot are particular types of slang.

Now let us compare slang with taboo language. They are two different concepts.

taboo language
"Words which people may not use without causing offence, because they refer to acts, objects, or relationships which are widely felt to be embarrassing, distasteful, or harmful. Verbal taboos are usually related to sex, the supernatural, excretion, and death, but in some cultures they extend to other aspects of domestic life (such as in-laws, private names, and certain animals). Polite society devises alternative forms of language [euphemisms] to refer to these areas.
Several types of taboo expression can be distinguished. **Profanity** is relatively mild notion, the choice of language conveying disrespect for what people hold sacred (usually something or someone religious). **Blasphemy** is much more serious, being the expression of gross irreverence towards the divine. **Obscenity** is language that arouses disgust because of its crude reference to sexual functions. All of these are loosely included under the heading of 'swearing' or 'bad language'. The term **expletive** is used in official contexts." (Crystal 1992)

I'll leave it to you to provide your own examples of taboo language.

euphemism
the use of an expression perceived to be mild or indirect instead of one that is harsh or unpleasantly direct; a way of avoiding taboo language
(6) English
people often avoid the word *die* and will use instead the expressions *pass on* or *pass away*

As an ESL teacher, which types of these special speech forms might you teach?