

3

Defining Groups

Key Concepts

How to define a speech community – regions, speakers, and norms

How to define a community of practice – interactions

Social network features and configuration

Social identity and group membership

How beliefs about groups of speakers shape how we use language

Language is both an individual possession and a social possession. We would expect, therefore, that certain individuals would behave linguistically like other individuals: they might be said to speak the same language or the same dialect or the same variety, that is, to employ the same code. In that respect they would be members of the same **speech community**. Sociolinguists have offered different interpretations of this concept. We are faced with the dilemma of wanting to study groups of speakers but lacking a clear definition of what comprises a group. We will discover that just as it is difficult to define such terms as language, dialect, and variety, it is also difficult to define speech community, and for many of the same reasons. Nevertheless, this concept has proved to be invaluable in sociolinguistic work in spite of a certain ‘fuzziness’ as to its precise characteristics. If we believe that there is an

interaction worth exploring between languages and groups, then we must continue to attempt to define both.

In this chapter, we will present different definitions of speech communities and two other ways in which groups of speakers have been discussed in sociolinguistics, through social networks and communities of practice. Finally, we will link these ideas about how we might define social groups with a framework for studying social identities in order to provide a bridge between individual repertoires and social categories.

Speech Communities

Sociolinguistics is the study of language use within or among groups of speakers. What are groups? The concept of a group is difficult to define but one we must try to grasp. For our purposes, a group must have at least two members but there is really no upper limit to group membership. People can group together for one or more reasons: social, religious, political, cultural, familial, vocational, avocational, and so on. The group may be temporary or quasi-permanent and the purposes of its members may change, that is, its *raison d'être*. A group also may be more than its members, for individuals may come and go; it may be linked to an enduring social category, region, or many other types of associated entities. Group members may also belong to other groups and may or may not even meet face-to-face. The organization of the group may be tight or loose and the importance of group membership is likely to vary among individuals within the group.

We must also be aware that the groups we refer to in various research studies are often groups we have created for the purposes of our research using this or that set of factors. They are useful and necessary constructs but we would be unwise to forget that each such group comprises a set of unique individuals each with complex identities. Consequently, we must be careful in drawing conclusions about individuals on the basis of observations we make about groups that we have defined for our research purposes. Furthermore, to say of any member of such a group that he or she will always exhibit a certain characteristic behavior is to offer a **stereotype**. We talk about such stereotypes as being part of **essentialism**, the idea that people can be placed into fixed social categories and that all members we assign to a category share certain traits which we see as the essence of this category. What sociolinguists (and social scientists) seek to do is not to make such generalizations, but to discover patterns in data which link social factors with language use without ignoring variation within groups and the specific practices and experiences that make up individual identities.

Linguistic boundaries

In sociolinguistics, we need a specific definition of a group in order to do research. The kind of group that sociolinguists have generally attempted to study is called the

speech community (see Patrick 2002 and Morgan 2001, 2006, for a general survey of the research.) For purely theoretical purposes, some linguists have hypothesized the existence of an ‘ideal’ speech community. This is actually what Chomsky (1965, 3–4) proposes, his ‘completely homogeneous speech-community’ (see chapter 1 for the discussion of linguistic competence that is related to this). However, such a speech community cannot be our concern: it is a theoretical construct employed for a narrow purpose. Our speech communities, whatever they are, exist in a ‘real’ world. Consequently, we must try to find some alternative view of speech community, one helpful to investigations of language in society rather than necessitated by abstract linguistic theorizing. However, we must also be aware that the groups we refer to in various research studies are groups we have created for the purposes of our research using this or that set of factors. They are useful and necessary constructs but we would be unwise to forget that each such group comprises a set of unique individuals each with a complex identity (or, better still, identities); the connections to identities will be discussed in more detail below.

Lyons (1970, 326) offers a definition of what he calls a ‘real’ speech community: ‘all the people who use a given language (or dialect).’ However, that merely shifts the issue to making the definition of a language (or of a dialect) also the definition of a speech community. If, as we saw in chapter 2, it proves virtually impossible to define language and dialect clearly and unambiguously, then we have achieved nothing. It is really quite easy to demonstrate that a speech community is not coterminous with a language: while the English language is spoken in many places throughout the world, we must certainly recognize that it is also spoken in a wide variety of ways, in speech communities that are almost entirely isolated from one another, for example, in South Africa, in New Zealand, and among expatriates in China. We must ask ourselves in what sense does this modern *lingua franca* produce a speech community that might be of interest to us, that is, ask what else is shared other than the very language itself. Furthermore, if speech communities are defined solely by their linguistic characteristics, we must acknowledge the inherent circularity of any such definition in that language itself is a communal possession. Speakers do use linguistic characteristics to achieve group identity with, and group differentiation from, other speakers, but they use other characteristics as well: social, cultural, political, and ethnic, to name a few. Our search must be for criteria other than, or at least in addition to, linguistic criteria if we are to gain a useful understanding of ‘speech community.’

We should also note that a recognizable single speech community can employ more than one language, whether we use national boundaries to define it (e.g., Switzerland, Canada, Papua New Guinea, all countries with more than one official language), city (or city-state) designations (e.g., Berlin, Singapore, New York City, where multiple languages are used for everyday interactions, education, and commerce), or neighborhood boundaries (e.g., in Little Village in Chicago you can hear both Spanish and English and in San Francisco’s Chinatown both Cantonese and English are commonly used). While these speech communities are all defined in terms of geographic areas, as we will see in the discussion below, there are other criteria besides language and region we can use to define speech communities.

Shared norms

One approach to defining a speech community often taken in sociolinguistics is to say that the speakers in such a community share some kind of common feeling about linguistic behavior in that community, that is, they observe certain linguistic **norms**. Such an appeal to norms forms an essential part of Labov's definition of speech community (1972, 120–1):

The speech community is not defined by any marked agreement in the use of language elements, so much as by participation in a set of shared norms; these norms may be observed in overt types of evaluative behavior, and by the uniformity of abstract patterns of variation which are invariant in respect to particular levels of usage.

This definition shifts the emphasis away from members of a speech community speaking the same to ascribing the same social meanings to particular ways of speaking. Milroy (1987, 13) has indicated some consequences of such a view:

Thus, all New York speakers from the highest to lowest status are said to constitute a single speech community because, for example, they agree in viewing presence of post vocalic [r] as prestigious. They also agree on the social value of a large number of other linguistic elements. Southern British English speakers cannot be said to belong to the same speech community as New Yorkers, since they do not attach the same social meanings to, for example, (r): on the contrary, the highest prestige accent in Southern England (RP) is non-rhotic. Yet, the Southern British speech community may be said to be united by a common evaluation of the variable (h); *h*-dropping is stigmatized in Southern England ... but is irrelevant in New York City or, for that matter, in Glasgow or Belfast.

Thus it is not so much how one speaks as how one evaluates ways of speaking that forms a speech community according to this definition. For the purpose of research, however, this is not a practical definition; values of particular ways of speaking are even less immediately apparent than linguistic patterns. Thus while this idea about shared norms is an important one, it does not easily lead to clearly demarcated speech communities.

Exploration 3.1: Judgments Again

Consider whether you judge each of the following usages acceptable, unacceptable, or maybe acceptable. Then ask yourself why you respond that way, that is, what are you actually responding to? Do you associate these usages with particular groups of speakers? Do you have a perception of regional or

social-class difference? Have you been told that particular ways of speaking are 'wrong'? In other words, try to figure out a basis for your judgment (and your willingness to judge). Discuss this with the other members of the class; do you share norms about these utterances, and assign them the same social meanings? Can you explain similarities and differences in judgments in terms of speech community membership?

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| 1. He hurt himself. | 2. She done it. |
| 3. The boy run away last week. | 4. To whom did you give it? |
| 5. They ain't got no money left. | 6. Can I leave the room now? |
| 7. Just between you and I, I think he's crazy. | 8. There's twenty people in the room. |
| 9. Stand over there by them boys. | 10. Sally dove in at the deep end. |
| 11. That'll learn you! | 12. I'm going to buy me a car. |

The concept of the speech community is also somewhat abstract because the particular norms that a community uses may or may not be exclusively linguistic in nature, and along with norms about particular linguistic variables and their social meanings and values, these norms involve evaluations of ways that language is used as well. For any specific speech community, the concept

reflects what people do and know when they interact with one another. It assumes that when people come together through discursive practices, they behave as though they operate within a shared set of norms, local knowledge, beliefs, and values. It means that they are aware of these things and capable of knowing when they are being adhered to and when the values of the community are being ignored ... it is fundamental in understanding identity and representation of ideology. (Morgan 2001, 31)

In other words, we again are using the concept of communicative competence, that is, that speakers within a speech community share a sense of social norms in discourse, along with ideas about the social group identities indexed by various varieties or features of language. One example of how discourse patterns may be significant within a speech community is found in Hymes (2004). He presents analyses of narratives from various Native American groups, showing how, even when they are produced in English, there are distinctive features which can be traced back to narrative structures in the Native American languages. In other words, such speakers use English in special ways to maintain their separate identities within the dominant English-speaking community (see chapter 6 for more on such social dialects).

Gumperz (1971, 114) expresses much the same view of the importance of shared norms, and also notes that the groups may be of various sizes and formed for various purposes:

Most groups of any permanence, be they small bands bounded by face-to-face contact, modern nations divisible into smaller subregions, or even occupational associations or neighborhood gangs, may be treated as speech communities, provided they show linguistic peculiarities that warrant special study.

Thus the relationship between language and social structure is paramount in the development of the concept of the speech community, and this includes the idea that there are different levels of speech communities which correspond to different types of social groups. Gumperz (1971, 115) discusses how linguistic forms can be grouped into dialects, styles, or registers (see discussion in chapter 2 of these various types of varieties). While we may be able to talk about a speech community of speakers of North American English, we can also identify smaller groups with their own norms for interaction related to specific regions, religious organizations, or occupational groups within this larger speech community.

It is also possible for speakers to share certain norms for language when they do not share linguistic systems. For example, in Eastern Europe many speakers of Czech, Austrian German, and Hungarian share rules about the proper forms of greetings, suitable topics for conversation, and how to pursue these, but no common language. They are united in a *Sprachbund* ('speech area'), not quite a speech community, but still a community defined in some way by speech. As we can see, then, trying to define the concept of speech community requires us to come to grips with definitions of other concepts, principally group, language (or variety), and norm.

A single speech community also need not contain only a single language or single variety. Gumperz (1971, 101) points out that 'there are no *a priori* grounds which force us to define speech communities so that all members speak the same language.' As we will see in chapter 4, many societies exist in which bilingualism and multilingualism are the norm, and the use of multilingual discourse may be part of the speech community norms. It is such considerations as these that lead Gumperz to use the term linguistic community rather than speech community. He proceeds to define that term as follows:

a social group which may be either monolingual or multilingual, held together by frequency of social interaction patterns and set off from the surrounding areas by weaknesses in the lines of communication. Linguistic communities may consist of small groups bound together by face-to-face contact or may cover large regions, depending on the level of abstraction we wish to achieve. (Gumperz 1971, 101)

This brings out another aspect of our definition of speech communities: they are defined partly through their relationships with other communities. Internally, a community must have a certain social cohesiveness; externally, its members must find themselves cut off from other communities in certain ways. The factors that bring about cohesion and differentiation will vary considerably from occasion to occasion. You are a member of one speech community by virtue of the fact that on a particular occasion you identify with North Americans rather than with

Australians; in another context you may distinguish between your Canadian speech community and the norms for speaking in the United States. Thus, it is context and contrast that help us decide what level of speech community is relevant. This approach would suggest that there is an English speech community (because there are French and German ones), a Melbourne speech community (because there are London and Bostonian ones), a Harvard speech community (because there are Oxford and Berkeley ones), a Chicano speech community (because there are others which are Anglo or African American), and so on.

Communities of Practice

As indicated above, one possible definition of a speech community is simply a group of people who interact regularly. Such groups and communities themselves are ever changing, their boundaries are often porous, and internal relationships shift. They must constantly reinvent and recreate themselves. Today's middle class, youth, New Yorkers, women, immigrants, and so on, are not yesterday's nor will they be tomorrow's. The group chosen to identify with will also change according to situation: at one moment religion may be important; at another, regional origin; and at still another, perhaps membership in a particular profession or social class. An individual may also attempt to bond with others because all possess a set of characteristics, or even just a single characteristic (e.g., be of the same gender), or even because all lack a certain characteristic (e.g., not be categorized as 'White'). Language bonding appears to be no different. In one case, command of a particular dialect or language may be a potent marker and, therefore, help create a sense of community and solidarity with others (e.g., a group of Americans abroad); in another case, the lack of such command may exclude you from a community of speakers and mark you in a very different way (e.g., as not being a user of RP or AAVE). However, even sharing the same dialect might be of no significance: if the circumstances require you to discuss astrophysics, your knowledge of the terms and concepts of astrophysics may be more important than the regional or social dialect you speak. Alternatively, speakers of Yoruba may find themselves forming a community with speakers of Japanese and Arabic within an English-speaking foreign-student speech community at a North American or European university.

One way sociolinguists try to get at this dynamic view of social groups is with the idea that speakers participate in various **communities of practice**. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1998, 490) define a community of practice as 'an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagements in some common endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of their joint activity around that endeavor.' A community of practice is at the same time its members and what its members are doing to make them a community: a group of workers in a factory, an extended family, an adolescent friendship group, a women's fitness class, a Kindergarten classroom, and so on. They add (1998, 490): 'Rather than seeing the individual as

some disconnected entity floating around in social space, or as a location in a network, or as a member of a particular group or set of groups, or as a bundle of social characteristics, we need to focus on communities of practice.’ (See Meyerhoff and Strycharz 2013 for additional details.) It is such communities of practice that shape individuals, provide them with their identities, and often circumscribe what they can do. Eckert (1998, 2000) used this concept in her research in a Detroit-area high school and Mendoza-Denton (2008) also used it in her work with groups of Latina girls in California. These variationist sociolinguistic studies will be discussed in more detail in chapters 6 and 7.

One study which makes use of the community of practice construct for the study of language and identities is Bucholtz (1999), an investigation of the language of ‘nerd girls’ in a US high school. Bucholtz (1999, 207) notes the following ways in which the concept of speech community is inadequate for research on language gender:

- (a) Its tendency to take language as central.
- (b) Its emphasis on consensus as the organizing principle of community.
- (c) Its preference for studying central members of the community over those at the margins.
- (d) Its focus on the group at the expense of individuals.
- (e) Its view of identity as a set of static categories.
- (f) Its valorization of researchers’ interpretations over participants’ own understandings of their practices.

Bucholtz argues that within the community of practice framework, we can define a social group by all social practices, not just language. This concept can also incorporate the idea that there may be conflict within a group about these practices and norms, and thus marginal members of communities, as individuals, can be better included in the analysis. Further, as we will discuss below, this does not put speakers into pre-existing identity categories, but focuses instead on their own construction of identity. Finally, through ethnographic research, it allows for the analysis to focus on how the speakers themselves, not the researcher, enact group memberships.

In this study on nerd girls, Bucholtz notes how the girls both conform to the larger social order (i.e., by focusing on academic achievement) and also resist it (i.e., by rejecting traditional ideas of femininity in dress and appearance). The values of the members of this community of practice are not set norms which define them, but rather are negotiated through ongoing social practices, that is, their interactions serve to define what a nerd is and how the various members of their group fit in this category.

This concept of authenticity in an identity category can also be found in Jones (2011), who writes about the construction of an ‘(in)authentic lesbian’ identity within a lesbian women’s community of practice, in which ‘girly’ practices were deemed less authentic than ‘dykey’ ones. Another view of authenticity is shown by Meadows (2010), who analyzes the discourse in a community of practice of two

Japanese language learners and how they sought to establish their legitimate connections to an imagined (Japanese) national community.

There are also studies which seek to expand on the community of practice concept of conflict, not consensus, as part of interaction. Davies (2005, 1) argues that the idea of legitimacy is central in community of practice analyses and power structures cannot be ignored: 'While practices may define the community, the community determines who has access to that practice.' Moore (2006) looks at narratives told among high school students in the northwest of England, noting that status inequalities can lead to inequitable allocation of control within a community of practice, and that such hierarchies must be taken into account in the study of community-building and identity construction. (See Gee 2005 for a further discussion of this issue and the usefulness of the community of practice approach for linguistic studies.)

The community of practice framework has also been used to study online communities. Early research explicitly focused on the development of norms; Herring (2001, 622), in an article reviewing research on computer-mediated communication, writes: 'Over time, computer-mediated groups develop *norms* of practice regarding "how things are done" and what constitutes socially desirable behavior; these may then be codified in "Frequently Asked Question" documents (FAQs. ...) and netiquette guidelines.' Other aspects of research which make reference to norm development are within the area of Pragmatics, looking at how (im)politeness expectations are negotiated in online contexts (e.g., Graham 2007, Locher 2010). (See chapter 10 for further discussion of Pragmatics and Politeness Theory.)

Another theme in research employing the community of practice framework and online contexts is the focus on the emergence of communities and the negotiation of individual identities with regard to community membership (Georgakopoulou 2006). For example, Hanh and Kellog (2005) look at how adult English language learners interact online, and emphasize that the community of practice framework allows us to note how negotiation of identities is part of the learning process. Similarly, Peuronen (2011) analyzes data from an online forum for Finnish Christians who participate in extreme sports, showing how they establish their own community as an online group, but also link it to other, wider communities: Christians, Finnish speakers of English, participants in extreme sports, and youth culture. (See also Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2007 for a further discussion of this aspect of communities of practice, i.e., the positioning of their members with relation to the world beyond the community of practice.)

Social Networks

Another way of viewing how an individual relates to other individuals in society is to ask what **social networks** he or she participates in. That is, how and on what occasions does a specific individual A interact now with B, then with C, and then again with D? How intensive are the various relationships: does A interact more

frequently with B than with C or D? How extensive is A's relationship with B in the sense of how many other individuals interact with both A and B in whatever activity brings them together? In a situation in which A, B, C, D, and E are linked in a network, do they all have links to each other or are B, C, D, and E only linked to A but not each other? How people in a social network are linked to each other is one way of viewing social groups as defined by the kinds, frequency, and constellation of social interactions.

Research on social networks in sociolinguistics has proliferated in the last few decades, but is most directly linked to Milroy (1980, 1987; Milroy and Llamas 2013). This work adapted sociological social network theory to sociolinguistic and showed how it could be used in the study of language. You are said to be involved in a **dense social network** if the people you know and interact with also know and interact with one another. If they do not do so, the social network is a **loose** one. You are also said to be involved in a **multiplex social network** if the people within it are tied together in more than one way, that is, not just through work but also through other social activities. (To see diagrams of these different types of networks, see the link in the online companion to this text for *English Language and Linguistics Online*.) People who go to school together, marry each other's siblings, and work and play together participate in dense multiplex networks. In England these are said to be found at the extremes of the social-class structure. Such networks indicate strong social cohesion, produce feelings of solidarity, and encourage individuals to identify with others within the network. On the other hand, middle-class networks are likely to be loose and simplex; therefore, social cohesion is reduced and there are weaker feelings of solidarity and identity.

Milroy (1980) shows that in several working class areas of Belfast, groups with dense, multiplex social networks fostered social solidarity which in turn served to enforce linguistic norms. The differences in social networks could be used to explain differences between different areas that were all categorized as 'working class.' They could also account for gender differences within areas where gender roles and patterns of occupation were quite distinct.

The social networks of particular speakers are not fixed; they can change, just as the ways in which people speak can change over their lifetimes. People also belong to different networks of different strengths. The recent availability of computers, smart phones, and other devices has produced entirely new types of networking which many people now use extensively, and there is now a body of research which looks at how these virtual networks function as speech communities (see Androutsopoulos 2006, Aitchison and Lewis 2003 and Akkaya 2014 for overviews of this research).

Much linguistic behavior seems explicable in terms of network structure and we will see in chapters 7 and 8 how valuable the concept of 'social network' is when we consider matters of language variation and change (see Milroy and Llamas 2013 for additional details). Milroy and Gordon (2008, 119) also point out that the 'concepts of network and community of practice are ... closely related, and the differences between them are chiefly method and focus. Network analysis typically deals with

structural and content properties of the ties that constitute *egocentric* personal networks ... [but] cannot address the issues of how and where linguistic variants are employed ... to construct local social meanings. Rather, it is concerned with how informal social groups ... support local norms or ... facilitate linguistic change.'

One of the advantages of a social network approach to the study of social groups is that instead of dealing with abstract categories, it looks specifically at who interacts with whom, and how. We will return to this topic and to a discussion of studies employing this framework in chapters 6–8 as we continue to develop our ideas on language variation and sociolinguistic methodologies.

Social Identities

Many of the ideas and issues involved in the study of speech communities, communities of practice, and social networks have been incorporated into the scholarship on language and identity. In chapter 1, we introduced the concept of identity as 'the linguistic construction of membership in one or more social groups or categories' (Kroskrity 2000, 111). Identity may be constructed through a variety of linguistic means. For instance, the use of certain lexical forms or language varieties may contribute to the identification of a speaker, as might particular communicative practices, such as the uses of silence, greeting formulas, or gaze.

A key concept in the study of identities is that identity is not something you *have*, it is something you *do*. Like a community of practice, it is something that finds its basis in interactions. Heller (2007) notes that the concepts of identity, along with those of community and language, are 'heuristic devices which capture some elements of how we organize ourselves, but which have to be understood as social constructs' (2007, 13).

Much of the literature on language and identity is based on the post-structuralist idea that social practices (such as language use) produce and reproduce the social world, including speaker identities. Thus, as Foucault (1980) has argued, the self is not fixed, but is something which is positioned and repositioned through discourse. Consequently, speakers' identities must be continually reconstructed and may be redefined through discourse; they do not exist outside of discourse (see Baxter 2002, drawing on the work of Foucault 1980). For example, an individual's identity as a woman, with a focus on the physical attributes of womanhood, may be brought to the forefront in one interaction (e.g., in a discussion about mammograms), but in another situation this identity may be further defined with regard to professional identity (e.g., while participating in a women's mentoring organization at work). In an online interaction, the gender identity of this same person may be completely irrelevant and unknown to the other participants in the dialogue.

The term 'identity' is used here to describe a primarily social rather than psychological phenomenon: identity is not the source but the outcome of linguistic practice (Bucholtz and Hall 2005). Brubaker and Cooper (2000) note the term

identity has been used to mean somewhat contradictory things, either a fundamental 'sameness' of group members or an abiding and foundational aspect of a person's self. In the social constructionist sense, however, the term identity is used to invoke the interactively developed self that is multiple, fragmented, and fluctuating. It is also used to discuss the speakers' identification with social categories of all types, including not only enduring social categories such as 'race' but also situational roles such as 'teacher' and interactional stances of similarity and difference. All of these may be relevant for how speakers define their speech communities, communities of practice, and social networks. So an African American teacher in a majority White school may see herself as a member of a community of practice with the other teachers at the elementary school where she works, but may also construct her identity as different from these colleagues in a discussion of race or White privilege.

Identities are contrastive and fluid; as this last example illustrates, we may identify as similar to a person in one situation, and as different in another. In some cases, identity categorizations may be imposed upon individuals by others (Kroskrity 2000: 113) or they may be severely constrained by others' perceptions (Bucholtz and Hall 2005). The study of language and identity is the study of the linguistic means through which membership assignments are made and how language is used to create, embrace, resist, or alter group boundaries. For instance, Fuller (2012) reports about a girl in a German-English bilingual classroom in Berlin, Germany, who repeatedly attempted to establish her identity as a speaker of German by using this code with her classmates. However, by often replying to her in English, her peers constrained her construction of her bilingual identity.

Issues of identity are particularly salient in work by Rampton (1995, 1999, 2001, 2010) on what he calls **crossing**: 'Language crossing involves code alternation by people who are not accepted members of the group associated with the second language that they are using (code switching into varieties that are not generally thought to belong to them)' (Rampton 2010, 485). The participants in his research are London teenagers, some of whom come from families who came to England from Pakistan or Jamaica, and speak Panjabi or Jamaican Creole in addition to various varieties of English, for example, Asian English, working-class London English dialects, and Standard English varieties. Within multiethnic social networks the teens use all these codes in various ways to index various stances and identities. While these youths have their own speech community, they also participate in other communities which lay claim to them, particularly ethnic communities. They integrate repertoires and adopt (and mock) norms of speaking from these other communities in their youth networks.

Each individual therefore is a member of many different groups. It is in the best interests of most people to be able to identify themselves on one occasion as members of one group and on another as members of another group. Such groups also may or may not overlap. One of the consequences of the intersecting identifications is, of course, linguistic variation: all people do not speak alike, nor does any individual always speak in the same way on every occasion. The variation we see in language

must partly reflect a need that people have to be seen as the same as certain other people on some occasions and as different from them on other occasions.

How identities are constructed and manifested is a pervasive issue in sociolinguistics. We will see its relevance to language use in the chapters that follow. In the next chapter, we will address issues of identity with regard to multilingual discourse; chapter 7 will show how the study of identities has been brought into variationist sociolinguistics. Ethnographic approaches to the study of identity will be included in chapter 9, and the role of identities in different approaches to discourse analysis will be addressed in chapter 11. Chapter 12 will include a discussion of research on gender and sexuality identities.

Beliefs about Language and Social Groups

A key aspect of the study of language and social groups is that how languages are evaluated usually has very little to do with their linguistic features, and much more to do with the social status of the groups associated with them. These beliefs about linguistic groups also influence how speakers use particular features and varieties of languages and are thus central to our understandings of social groups and language use.

Many people hold strong beliefs on various issues having to do with language and are quite willing to offer their judgments on these issues (see Bauer and Trudgill 1998, Niedzielski and Preston 1999, and Wardhaugh 1999). They believe such things as certain languages lack grammar, that you can speak English without an accent, that French is more logical than English, that parents teach their children to speak, that primitive languages exist, that English is degenerating and language standards are slipping, that pronunciation should be based on spelling, and so on and so on. Much discussion of language matters in the media concerns such 'issues' and there are periodic attempts to 'clean up' various bits and pieces, attempts that Cameron (1995) calls 'verbal hygiene.' Unfortunately, often people who voice opinion on this do not have any background in linguistics. Wardhaugh has written elsewhere (1999, viii), 'Linguists ... know that many popular beliefs about language are false and that much we are taught about language is misdirected. They also know how difficult it is to effect change.' Language beliefs are well entrenched, as are language attitudes and language behaviors.

While sociolinguistic research on language largely focuses on a descriptive, not prescriptive, approach, attitudes, beliefs, and ideologies about language are influences on language use, as well as being areas of study in their own right. Sociolinguists should strive for an understanding of language use and the social context, including ideas about language, because how people behave toward others is influenced not only by actual language use but also by ideals about the standard and ideologies about what kind of person uses language in different ways.

The connections we have discussed in the previous sections indicate that we use language to make ourselves part of particular social groups. We also use language

to categorize other people, and judge them, at least partially, according to the social value of the categories to which we assign them. In the next two sections, we will look at two strands of research that address how such lay beliefs about language and social groups are an important part of the study of sociolinguistics.

Ideologies

Errington (2000, 115) describes the study of **language ideologies** as ‘a rubric for dealing with ideas about language structure and use relative to social contexts.’ Particularly relevant here are ideologies which privilege certain ways of speaking as inherently ‘better’ than others. While some individuals are sometimes considered to be ‘good speakers’ of one variety or another, this judgment is usually less about the speaker’s proficiency than about the variety itself. That is, there are certain **hegemonic ideologies** about different ways of speaking that dominate in a society and are widely accepted, even by speakers of the varieties which are judged as deficient. These ideologies dictate that certain ways of speaking are indicative of undesirable social traits, for example, poverty or lack of education, or personal characteristics, for example, laziness. Other ways of speaking are associated with more desirable social groups and it is assumed that everyone should want to aspire to speak in these latter ways. Lippi-Green (2012), in a chapter titled *The real trouble with Black English*, discusses this issue, saying that although criticisms of AAVE are often made on the basis of linguistic inferiority, linguistic analyses have shown that AAVE is a rule-governed, systematic language with every bit as much sophistication as any other variety of English. What bothers speakers of Standard English is that they feel that continued use of AAVE is a rejection of mainstream – often perceived as White – middle-class values. We will have more to say about language attitudes toward different languages and their speakers in multilingual contexts in chapter 4, and about how language ideologies play a role in the construction of social identities in chapter 9; chapters 13 and 14 will also address how language ideologies influence the realms of education and policy.

Exploration 3.2: Slang

Look at the definitions for ‘slang’ provided on Urban Dictionary, an online dictionary providing definitions posted by users. (Ignore those that have nothing to do with language use; this word can also be used to mean sex, drug dealing, and the past tense of *sling* by some speakers.) What are the ideologies about slang that appear in this forum? To what extent are they about language (and, often, language decay) and to what extent are they about the groups of people associated with the use of slang?

Perceptual dialectology

The study of non-linguists' ideas about the regions, features, and values of dialects has come to be called **perceptual dialectology** (Preston 1989, 1999, 2002a, 2002b, Niedzielski and Preston 1999, Long and Preston 2003). The methodology employed by Preston in his work involved giving people maps of the United States and asking them first to draw dialect regions, and then to label the dialects and describe them in terms of both correctness and pleasantness. What emerges from such work is an understanding of the attitudes people have about the ways of speaking associated with particular regions. It also reveals stereotypes concerning people who live in these regions. Among various interesting findings in these studies we see that speakers may not rate their own dialect highly, and that many dialects (including the speakers' own), are sometimes rated highly for pleasantness but as lacking in correctness, or vice versa. For instance, the findings in Preston (1999) show that respondents from Michigan consistently rated their own dialect as correct, and perpetuated the stereotype of Southerners as speaking incorrect English. However, the Michiganders often rated southern speech as pleasant and friendly (often more friendly than their own region).

One of the interesting findings in some recent research in perceptual dialectology is that regional differences are often intertwined with ideas about other social groups. For instance, Bucholtz et al. (2007) found in a study done among University of California – Santa Barbara students about perceptions of language in the state of California, that although the southern California / northern California divide was prominent for most of the respondents, and stereotypes about the English spoken in these regions abounded, often other factors emerged as significant as well. Speakers of Spanish (mostly referred to as 'Mexicans') were often associated with Los Angeles and San Diego, and speakers of Chinese with the Bay Area. There were also certain areas associated with speakers of AAVE (the Bay Area, and Compton, a largely African American suburb of Los Angeles), but this was less frequent than the references to speakers of Spanish. An interesting finding was that the most common social label was 'hicks,' or other synonymous terms such as 'hillbillies' or 'rednecks;' the authors note that earlier studies have not shown this category to be associated with California by non-Californians.

Research by Alfaraz (2002) also shows the importance of other social factors intertwined with region in the evaluation of speakers of different social groups. This study, carried out in Miami, asked respondents to rate the pleasantness and correctness of various Latin American varieties of Spanish, a variety referred to as Peninsular Spanish, and two varieties of Cuban Spanish, representing the Spanish spoken before and after the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Alfaraz found that association of a particular variety of Spanish with speakers who were of low socio-economic class or were Black correlated with less positive evaluations of the variety. The pre-revolution Cuban Spanish, that is, the variety spoken by these respondents, was evaluated the most positively.

Studies in perceptual dialectology show us that people have far more nuanced beliefs about dialects than simply that they are either ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ Further, most people have a more sophisticated understanding of social groups, incorporating information about region, social class, race/ethnicity, and many other levels of identity.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we have grappled with how to define the social groups whose language we wish to describe and study in sociolinguistic research, noting that some of the same difficulties in defining what a language is surface in defining what a speech community might be. There is a tendency to look beyond the ways that people speak to define what makes them a community, and to focus on the presence of shared norms. Alternative ways of defining groups, for example, as a community of practice or a social network, are also presented as less abstract means of determining a social group for the purpose of research; both depend on linguistic interaction for their definitions. We also revisit the concept of identities, focusing this time on how identities are linked to social group membership.

Exercises

1. Make a short (15–30 minutes) audio recording of a community of practice you participate in (be sure you have the permission of everyone in the group before you record!). This could be your roommates or family members you live with, some friends you often eat lunch with, a group of co-workers, members of a knitting group, your rugby teammates, and so on; the only criteria is that this must be a group that meets and interacts regularly. Listen to the recording and answer the following questions:
 - How can you describe the joint endeavor of this group? Do there seem to be common goals of the interaction?
 - In what ways are the varieties spoken by the individuals in the group different – that is, do they come from different areas or social groups and have linguistic features that are associated with different varieties? Is there ever explicit mention made of speech differences?
 - In what ways do you see the shared norms of the group – are there particular lexical items or nicknames that are used in this group? Inside jokes? Topics of conversation that recur? In short, try to ascertain what features of the conversation indicate that this is a group that interacts frequently and not a group of strangers.
2. Find a map of the country you live in which has major state or province boundaries but no labels for these regions, and ask ten people to draw dialect