Basic Sociolinguistic concepts: Vernacular, Variation, Linguistic variable, Markers, indicators and stereotypes

Source: Pr. Patrick's web page

Social Stratification: distinct social levels (1) can be identified, and (2) can be ranked/evaluated

Vernacular:

1. The most systematic and unmonitored level of speech; one's native dialect, learned before school, literacy & exposure to other norms.
2. A non-prestigious, non-standard dialect or accent

Free Variation: linguistic alternations that are not linguistically conditioned (i.e. predictable); formerly believed to be unsystematic (now known to be often *socially* or *stylistically conditioned*)

Linguistic Variable: a linguistic unit with 2 or more variants, which can occur in precisely the same environment without producing a difference of meaning.

Sociolinguistic Variable: a linguistic variable which is sensitive to social or stylistic context

Indicators, markers, and stereotypes

Labov distinguishes 3 types of linguistic variables (exs. in Wardhaugh reading) according to their level of sociolinguistic salience, i.e., the degree to which speakers are aware of their social evaluation:

indicator, *marker*, and *stereotype*.

Indicators show no style-shifting, but vary with social stratification; they have *no social interpretation* attached. Ex: Norwich (a:) is like this: it's fronter than the RP vowel in words like *after*, *cart*, *path*. It is a regional feature with differentiation by social class, but little by style; not stigmatized or corrected; part of a regional standard. There is no age stratification, so it's not part of a

change in progress. There is little contrast within the same social or class group. Indicators are not part of change, or are very early/late stages.

Markers show both social and stylistic stratification. Classic sociolinguistic variables ar3e usually markers, e.g. (ING), (R), and (TH) in New York City. They are linguistic variables to which social interpretation is overtly attached. We call them *markers*, because they *mark* or *correlate with* some social characteristic or identity.

Stereotypes not only have well-known social meanings, but are *generally stigmatized* and often actively avoided. In other words, their social significance is so great that it actually affects people's conscious speech behavior. Labov's example is the pronunciation "Toity-toid Street" in New York City (stereotypically: Brooklyn) for "33rd Street". Stereotypes are popularly-known characteristic features which tend not to show regular stratification, because everyone is so aware of them that they are often avoided by the very group of people they were once characteristic of.

Speech Community:

Source: Introducing sociolinguistics By Mesthrie, Swann, Deumert and Leap

The Notion of 'Speech Community'

Traditionally, sociologists study societies in terms of categories like class, ethnicity or regional and economic characteristics. 'Community' as typically used in sociology suggests a dimension of shared knowledge, possessions or behaviours. Linguists draw attention to another dimension of social organisation by using the term 'speech community'. Essentially, the term stresses

that language practices may be equally diagnostic of the social coherence of a group, and may be a more natural boundary for sociolinguistic study than, say, geographical cohesion alone. The term cannot be exactly equated with groups of people who speak the same language. Thus speakers of Spanish in Spain, Columbia and Texas do not form a speech community. (The term 'language community' is sometimes used to discuss the superset of speakers of the same language in different parts of the world.) Conversely, speaking different primary (or home) languages does not necessarily preclude people from belonging to the same speech community. In multilingual communities where more than one language is spoken by a majority of people, sufficient consensus about appropriate rules of speaking and interpreting linguistic behavior may arise for it to be considered one sociolinguistic unit (or speech community). This has been claimed, for example, of India, where a number of common sociolinguistic conventions have been found to underlie the great diversity of languages. Prabodh Pandit (1972) used the term 'sociolinguistic area' to describe this phenomenon.

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that 'speech community' is not precise enough to be considered a technical term. Even in linguistics, the emphases stressed by different scholars carry varied nuances, as Muriel Saville-Troike (1982: 17–18) emphasises:

1. Shared language use (Lyons 1970).
2. Frequency of interaction by a group of people (Bloomfield 1933; Hockett 1958; Gumperz 1962).
3. Shared rules of speaking and interpretations of speech performance (Hymes 1972).
4. Shared attitudes and values regarding language forms and language use (Labov 1972a).
5. Shared sociocultural understandings and presupposition regarding speech events (Sherzer 1977).

The core meaning that we might extract from these is that a speech community comprises people who are in habitual contact with each other by means of speech which involves either a shared language variety or shared ways of interpreting the different language varieties commonly used in the area. Peter Patrick (2002: 593) concludes his detailed survey of the complexities of the concept of speech community, with a more postmodern outlook:

> [Researchers] should not presume social cohesion or accept it to be an inevitable result of interaction; size and its effects should not be taken for granted; social theories, including class analyses, must be explicitly invoked, not accepted as givens; the speech community should not be taken for a unit of social analysis; and we ought not to assume that [they] exist as predefined entities waiting to be researched or identify them with folk notions, but see them as objects constituted anew by the researcher's gaze and the questions we ask.