

24.900: Introduction to Linguistics
Monday, May 2, 2005

Language Variation and Language Acquisition

1. Squib projects due on Wednesday, May 4, 2005, 9AM.
2. Read chapter 10, "Language in Society", and chapter 8 "Language Acquisition."

I. Language Variation

No two speakers of any language speak exactly the same way; nor does any individual speaker speak the same way all the time. Variation is a natural part of human language, and it is influenced by such factors as socio-economic status, region and ethnicity. (Language Files 1998: p. 367)

- a. **Internal variation:** systematic differences within a language.
- b. **Dialect:** any variety of a language spoken by a group of people that is characterized by systematic differences from other varieties of the same language in terms of certain syntactic or lexical features. In some sense, everyone speaks a dialect of his or her native language.
- c. **Accent:** systematic phonetic or phonological variation.
- d. **Idiolect:** the form of a language spoken by one person.

II. Dialect difference or different language?

- a. How do we know if two or more language varieties are different dialects of the same language or are in fact separate, distinct languages?
- b. **Mutual intelligibility:** if speakers of one language variety can understand speakers of another language variety. There are limitations with this criterion, however. Other factors such as cultural or historical considerations also cloud the distinctions.

e.g.: speakers from Brooklyn, NY understanding speakers from Beaumont, Texas.

Speakers from Boston, Ma understanding speakers of Scots English.

- c. Mandarin and Cantonese: Even though these two language varieties are not mutually intelligible, they are considered dialects of the same language by speakers of these two varieties.
- d. Why? One reason has to do with the common writing system and thus mutually intelligible in written form.
- e. The opposite situation exists in the American southwest between Papago and Pima, two Native American languages. These two varieties are mutually intelligible, having less linguistic difference between them than exists between

American and British English. However, these two tribes regard themselves as politically and culturally distinct ergo two languages.

- f. **Dialect continuum:** This is a situation where in a large number contiguous dialects, each dialect is closely related to the next, but the dialects at either end of the continuum are mutually unintelligible. A situation like this is found near the border between Holland and Germany, where dialects on either side of the national border are mutually intelligible yet they are considered distinct languages.
- g. **At what point is the line drawn?** At the point that the dialect differences become too great (however this is defined or determined), two dialects of the same language may become two distinct languages. Consider the Germanic split: English, Dutch, and German.

III. Speech communities: a group of people speaking the same dialect.

- a. Speech communities may be defined in terms of a number of **extralinguistic factors** including region, ses status, and ethnicity. However, it is rarely, if ever, the case that there exists a speech community in which a pure dialect, i.e., purely regional, purely ethnic, etc. is spoken because the identification of any speech variety as a pure dialect requires the assumption of **communicative isolation**.
- b. **Communicative isolation:** results when a group of speakers forms a coherent speech community relatively isolated from speakers outside that community.
- c. **Consider the following examples:**
 1. I *used to could* read. (double modal)
 2. I *ain't no* girl now. (multiple negation)
 3. He had a broken back_____ was never set. (pronoun deletion)
 4. Put some bakin' *sody* on it. (substitution of an unstressed vowel)
 5. I fell *upside of* the building. Lexical substitution: up against the side of)

These examples are characteristic of **Appalachian English (AE)**. This dialect is regionally defined as well as being subject to factors of age, gender, and ses status.

IV. Variation at different levels of linguistic structure

- a. **Phonetic level:** In most American dialects, [t,d,n,s,z] are produced with alveolar articulation; however, some NYC dialects have dental articulation in which the tongue tip touches the top teeth.
 - Some British and Scottish dialects of English produce a trilled *r* while most Americans have either a retroflex [r] or a "bunched" [ɹ].
- b. **Phonological level:** Most American dialects have one vowel in *caught*, *dawn*, and *hawk* (something close to [ɔ] but a little lower) and another in *cot*, *Don*, and *hock* [a]. However, some dialects have the same vowel in all of these words, so that *Don* and *dawn* are homophonous.
 - Standard British English does not permit sequences of V-r-C or V-r-#. This is similar to Boston English where the sentence *Park the car* would be pronounced [pɑk ðə kɑ].
 - Some American English dialects do not permit sequences of C-r or C-l especially in unstressed syllables, so that the word *professor* would be pronounced [pɹɸɛsə].

- c. **Morphological level:** Some rural English dialects use the possessive morpheme with pronouns but not with nouns, e.g., *my life, his dog* but *Tom egg, the young lady purse*.
- In parts of northern England and southern Wales –s in not just a third singular present tense marker but a general present tense marker. These speakers say sentences like *I likes him, We goes etc.*
 - Many dialects of English have *hisself* and *theirselves*.
 - Appalachian English has past tense forms for various verbs that are different from the past tense forms found in other American dialects e.g., AE has [kɫʌm], [ɛt], and [hɛt] for *climber, ate and heated*.
- d. **Syntactic level:** For many southern speakers *done* can function as an auxiliary, as in *She done already told you* rather than *She has already told you*.
- For many AE speakers *right* can function adverbially, e.g., *a right good meal*.
 - For some dialects, combinations of auxiliaries like *might could, might would, may can*, and *useta could* are permitted to form a single constituent.
 - Many Midwestern dialects have the construction *The crops need watered*.
- e. **Semantic level:** *knock up* means 'rouse from sleep by knocking' in British English but 'make pregnant' in American English.
- Words for carbonated beverages differ from place to place: *soft drink, pop, soda pop*
 - *Rubber band, gummy band*
 - *Milk shake, cabinet, egg cream, ice cream soda*
 - *Firefly, glowworm, lightening bug, fire bug*

V. Language and Socioeconomic Status

- a. **Standard vs. Non-standard dialects:** Linguistically speaking, no one dialect or language is better, more correct, or more logical than any other. Rather every language variety is a rule-governed system and an effective means of communication.
- b. **Standard dialect:** It is an idealization. Descriptively speaking, the standard dialect is the variety used by political leaders (not always the case, however), the media, and speakers from the higher SES classes (the more literate and educated). It is also the variety taught in schools and to nonnative speakers in language classes. Every language has at least one standard dialect, which serves as the primary means of communication across dialects.
- c. Actually, there is no **ONE** standard dialect but instead many different varieties that people consider to be the standard. What ties these different notions together is **prestige**. **Over time, the prestige, standard dialect has become the nonstandard dialect in English; consider the use of the multiple negative constructions in the verse below.**

Chaucer's description of the Knight in the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales:

He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde
He never yet no villainy not said

In al his lyf unto no maner wight
In all [his] life no kind of creature

VI. Labov's sociolinguistic experiments

VII. Regional Language Differences (see attached maps)

California English	A NY dialect	
[yʊθ]	[yʊt]	'youth'
[θɪk]	[tɪk]	'thick'
[ðɪs]	[dɪs]	'this'
[wið]	[wid]	'with'
California English	UK	
[lɪDəl]	[lɪtəl]	'little'
[təɪDəl]	[təɪtəl]	'title'
California English	PA/NJ	SE
[waɪt]	[wʌɪt]	[wat] 'white'
[waɪd]	[waɪd]	[wad] 'wide'
[waɪ]	[waɪ]	[wa] 'why'

First Language Acquisition: How do children learn their first language(s)?

How much is learned? How much is innate?

How is it learned? What is innate?

Interplay here between linguistic theory and linguistic actuality

- I. What is the task faced by children when learning a first language(s)?
 - a. phonology
 - b. morphology
 - c. syntax
 - d. semantics
 - e. pragmatics

- II. How do we know what we know about this process?

- a. Types of experimental studies:
 1. naturalistic studies (diary studies)
 2. controlled experimental studies
 - cross-sectional
 - longitudinal
 - production
 - comprehension
 - judgment tasks

III. Plato's Problem:
How is it that children know so much given so little.

- IV. General characteristics of language development in general
 - a. development
 - phonological
 - syntactic
 - b. Nature of feedback to children
 - c. Role of negative evidence
 - d. Perception before production/comprehension before production
 - e. What the case of *Genie* and feral children tell us about the capacity for language.

V. **Phonological Development**

- a. **Babbling:** Ability to produce speech sounds begins to emerge around six months of age with the onset of babbling. Babbling allows children to experiment with and begin to gain control over their vocal apparatus. Recall all the myriad ways that articulators are involved in the formation of a single speech sound.
- b. **Even though babbling is language specific, there are significant similarities in babblings cross-linguistically.**

The data below are based the babblings of babies from 15 languages including English, Thai, Japanese, Arabic, Hindi and Mayan.

Frequently found consonants	Infrequently found consonants
p b m	f v θ ð
t d n	ʃ ʒ tʃ dʒ
k g	l r ŋ
s h w j	

- c. Even deaf children babble although their articulatory activity is somewhat less varied than that of hearing children. Deaf children, however, very quickly or co-simultaneously, begin to "babble" with their hands forming babbles in sign language so to speak.

d. **Developmental order:**

- As a group, vowels are generally acquired before consonants. Why might this be the case?
- Stops tend to be acquired before other consonants.
- In terms of the place of articulation, labials are often acquired first, followed (with some variation) by alveolars, velars, and alveopalatals. Interdentals are acquired last.
- New phonemic contrasts manifest themselves first in word-initial position. Thus, the /p/-/b/ contrast, for instance, will be manifested in pairs such as *pat-bat* before *mop-mob*.

Typical consonant inventory for a 2;00 year old in English			
<i>Stops</i>	<i>Nasals</i>	<i>Fricatives</i>	<i>Other</i>
p b	m	f	w
t d	n	s	
k g		h	

Typical consonant inventory for a 4;00 year old in English				
<i>Stops</i>	<i>Nasals</i>	<i>Fricatives</i>	<i>Affricates</i>	<i>Other</i>
p b	m	f v	tʃ dʒ	w j
t d	n	s z		l ɹ
k g	ŋ	ʃ		
		h		

e. **Early phonetic processes:**

- Deletion of unstressed syllables: hip po po ta mus [pɑs]
- spa ghe tti [ge]
- kan ga roo [wu]

f. Retention of unstressed syllables in final position: po ta to [tejdo]
 ba na na [ænə]
 el e phant [ɛlfən]

g. Syllable simplification: [s] + stop (delete [s]) stop>[tap], small>[mɑ], desk>[dɛk]

stop + liquid (delete liquid) try>[tʃ], crumb>[gʌ]

fricative + liquid (delete liquid) from>[fʌm], sleep>[sɪp]

nasal + voiceless (delete nasal) bump>[bʌ], tent>[dɛt]

f. Substitutions:

- *Stopping*: the replacement of a fricative by a corresponding stop
Sing>[tɪŋ]
- *Fronting*: the moving forward of a sound's place of articulation
Ship>[sɪp]
- *Gliding*: the replacement of a liquid by a glide
Look>[wʊk]
- Denasalization: the replacement of a nasal stop by a nonnasal counterpart
Room>[wʊb]

VI. Vocabulary Development

- a. By 18 months, the average child has a vocabulary of 50 words or more.
- b. Three strategies for learning the meanings of new words:
 1. The whole object assumption: a new word refers to a whole object. (Sheep: as a whole animal; not the whiteness, the wool)
 2. The type assumption: a new word refers to a type of thing, not just to a particular thing. (Sheep: as an animal not just to one particular sheep)
 3. Basic level assumption: A new word refers to types of objects that are alike in basic ways. (Sheep: refers not to animals in general but to a particular class of animals.)
- c. Meaning errors:
 1. overextensions
 2. Underextensions: kitty might refer to the family pet kitty but not to other kitties.