

# Sociolinguistics

## LING 200: Introduction to the Study of Language

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# Outline

- 1 Language change and its causes
  - The agents of change
  - Processes of language change
- 2 Language vs. dialect
  - Dialects and their classification
  - Language and social class
- 3 African American English

Slides credit: Lauren Clemens, Moti Lieberman, David Pesetsky

# Change is systematic

## What changes?

- Lexicon
- Phonology
- Morphology
- Syntax

## When do changes happen?

- **Diachronic change:** change over time, across generations.
  - Language families, *proto*-languages.
- **Synchronic change:** change within speakers at the same time.
  - Dialects, idiolects, sociolects, language varieties.
  - ...although, as we'll see later, these labels aren't very accurate.

# Processes of language change

- **Reanalysis of input:** string *a b c d e* is assumed to be generated by rule X instead of rule Y.
- **Grammaticalization** (lexical morphemes → grammatical morphemes)
- **Fusion:** words become affixes
- **Analogy:** patterns are regularized

(Recall: a case of reanalysis (+analogy)—  
the loss of the Case system between Old English and Modern English)

## Addition of affixes

- Over time, **grammaticalization** and **fusion** processes can lead to changes in the shape and function of words.
- **Grammaticalization**: lexical forms become grammatical forms (functional categories).
- **Fusion**: two words are reanalyzed as a word and an affix.
  - word word → affix+word (prefixation)
  - word word → word+affix (suffixation)

## Addition of affixes

### Example from Italian

- Italian (and French) future suffix *ò*: origin in Latin form *habeō*: ‘I have, hold, grasp’
- **Grammaticalization**: *habeo* underwent semantic reduction and became an auxiliary verb:
  - Amāre habeō: ‘I will love’
- **Fusion**: over time, the auxiliary is reanalyzed as a suffix.

#### Latin

Amāre habeō

Amāre habēmus

#### Italian

Amerò

Ameremo

‘I will love’

‘we will love’

# Addition of affixes

## Example from English

- **An ongoing process in English:**  
*He coulda come early.*
- For many speakers *a* is treated as an affix, no longer related to the auxiliary *have*.
- A clue is the spelling: *could of come* instead of *could have come*.

# Idiolects

- No two speakers speak exactly the same way.
  - Age
  - Gender
  - Emotional state
  - Lexicon
  - Grammatical rules
- ➡ Every person speaks a language that is ever so slightly different from that of everyone else's!
  - Everyone's *i-language* is different!
  - (Recall: linguists study i-language using data from e-language.)



## Remember: prescriptivism vs. descriptivism

Excuse me, do you know where I  
can buy McGill souvenirs at?

Hmmm, I'm afraid that at McGill  
we don't end sentences with  
prepositions

Oh! I'm so sorry!  
Do you know where I can buy  
McGill souvenirs at, asshole?

# Dialects

- Different groups of people who speak the same language speak it differently. How do we call these different variants of the language?
- Dialect vs. “variety”:
  - Dialect has a negative connotation.
- Dialectal diversity develops when people are separated
  - Geographically (**regional dialects**)
  - Socially (**social dialects**)
- **Accents** develop under the same circumstances, but dialects differ in more than just the way certain phonemes (sounds) are realized.
- ➡ Everyone speaks a dialect! (you may speak the **standard dialect**, but it is still a dialect.)

# Dialects

## The Standard

- The **standard** dialect (**prestige** dialect):
  - The dialect associated with the dominant social and political group
  - The dialect used by political leaders and national newscasters
  - The dialect used in school
  - The dialect taught to L2 learners
  - Dialect closest to the written form of the language

Often presented as the (prescriptively) “correct” way to use the language.

- The dialect that language academies take their cue from.

# Language vs. dialect

When is something a dialect?

When is something a language?

Rule of thumb:

- Dialects are mutually intelligible forms of a language that differs in systematic ways.
- When speakers of one dialect can no longer understand speakers of another dialect, they can be said to speak two different languages.

## Language vs. dialect

- Intelligibility can be asymmetrical.
  - Norwegians understand Danish better than Danes understand Norwegian.
  - Laos understand Thai better than Thais understand Lao.
- Nationhood is clearly relevant.
  - Norwegian and Swedish are mutually intelligible, but they are separate countries.
  - Newfoundland English!  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=12lCfrsYIfc>
  - Many mutually unintelligible varieties of “Chinese”

**“A language is a dialect with an army”**

—Max Weinreich (famous linguist)

# Language vs. dialect

## “Chinese”



- Mandarin
- Jin
- Wu
- Hui
- Gan
- Xiang
- Min
- Hakka
- Yue
- Ping
- ...

# Language vs. dialect

- Very distinct grammars; considered “dialects” of a single language
  - Arabic of Iraq, Morocco, and Egypt
  - Welsh of North and South Wales
  
- Nearly identical grammars; considered distinct languages
  - Fanti and Twi (Ghana and the Ivory Coast)
  - Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian (former Yugoslavia; Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia)
  - Hindi and Urdu (India and Pakistan)

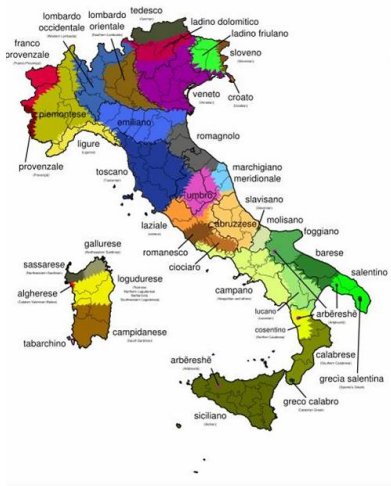
# Language vs. dialect

- Hindi and Urdu
  - Differences are becoming more and more magnified for political and religious reasons
- Hindi (India)
  - Left to right in the Devanagari script
  - Borrows from Sanskrit
- Urdu (Pakistan)
  - Right to left in the Arabic-Persian script
  - Borrows from Arabic and Persian



# Regional dialects

- Regional dialects are geographically based
- Instead of clear distinctions between regional dialects, you typically find a dialect continuum



## Regional dialects

### A local example

- “Canadian Raising”
  - Certain diphthongs (a single vowel with two parts), such as /aɪ/ and /aʊ/, take a different form before voiceless consonants (p,t,k,f,s)
    - /əɪ/ and /əʊ/
    - “about” /əbaʊt/ vs. /əbəʊt/
- Canadians made this famous, but it is also found in the upper Midwest of the US.
- The Molson rant:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WMxGVfk091U>

# Social dialects

- Social dialects are associated with different social groups or classes
  - occupation
  - place of residence (neighborhood)
  - education
  - income
  - “new” vs. “old” money
  - racial or ethnic origin
  - religion
  - caste

# William Labov's (1972) Department Store Study

## New York department stores

- Saks Fifth Avenue
  - High-end store; average price of women's coats in 1972 is \$90.
- Macy's
  - Mid-range prices; average price of women's coats in 1972 is \$79.95.
- S. Klein
  - Low-end prices; average price of women's coats in 1972 is \$23.

## William Labov's (1972) Department Store Study

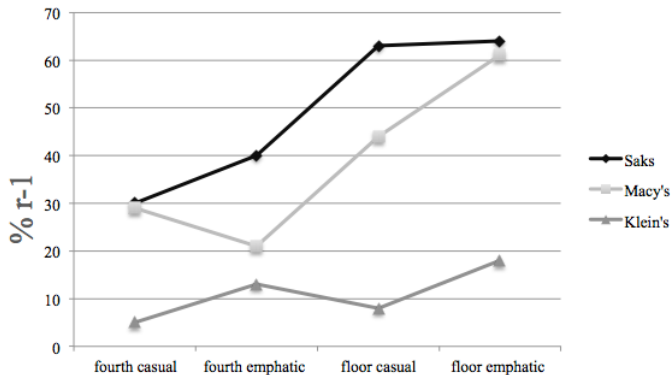
### The behavior of post-vocalic (r)

- In New York City the pronunciation of post-vocalic (r) in words like “fourth” and “floor” is variable.
- William Labov hypothesized:
  - Salespeople in the highest ranked stores will produce the most (r),
  - those in the middle ranked store will have an intermediate value,
  - and those in the lowest ranked store will have the least.

# William Labov's (1972) Department Store Study

## The experiment

- 264 individuals encountered in two afternoons in 1964; anonymous
- The interviewer asked:
  - Excuse me, where are the (women's shoes)?
- The salesperson answered:
  - (On the) fourth floor
- The interviewer then leaned forward and said::
  - Excuse me?
- The salesperson answered:
  - (On the) fourth floor



- More (r)'s at the end of the word than in the middle
- More (r)'s in the repeated statement than the original
- More (r)'s in upper-class store > middle-class store > lower-class store.
- Differences are most pronounced in middle-class store.

# African American English (AAE)

- We're going to take a look at the rules of one particular stigmatized variety of English
- African American English (AAE)
  - Distinct dialect of American English associated with the African American community
  - Not all African Americans speak AAE
  - Not only African Americans speak AAE



# African American English (AAE)

## Phonological features

- No “th” (/θ/ or /ð/)
  - Where Standard North American English (SNAE) uses /θ/, AAE uses /f/
  - [bæf] ‘bath’, [bɜːfdeɪ] ‘birthday’
  - Where SNAE uses /ð/, AAE uses /d/
  - [diz] ‘these’, [dæt] ‘that’
- Monophthongization
  - [da:n] ‘down’
  - [sa:d] ‘side’
  - [ra:z] ‘rise’

# African American English (AAE)

## Phonological features

- Cluster reduction
  - A cluster is an onset or coda with more than one consonant.
  - [kæs] ‘cast’
  - [tɔl] ‘told’
  - [dɛs] ‘desk’
- Except when the cluster is [voiced][voiceless]
  - [hæn] ‘hand’ vs. [pænt] ‘pant’
  - [kɔwl] ‘cold’ vs. [kɔwlt] ‘colt’
  - **Exceptions: ain’ and don’**

# African American English (AAE)

## Consequences for perception of past-tense/participial morphology:

- [pʊʃ] ‘push’ or ‘pushed’
- [pejdʒ] ‘page’ or ‘paged’
- [rejz] ‘raise’ or ‘raised’
- [dʒʌmp] ‘jump’ or ‘jumped’
- [mɪs] ‘miss’ or ‘missed’ (or ‘mist’)

... with predictable consequences for classroom performance on reading/writing tasks involving this suffix (Labov)