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## Unit 4: Sociolinguistic Variations

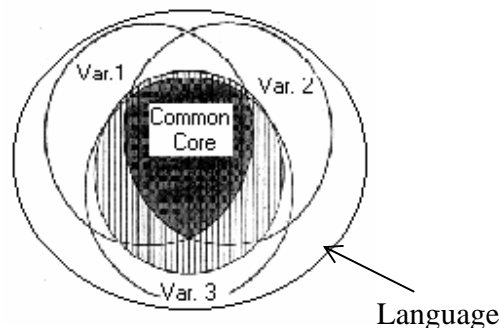
### Diversity in language

To most of us, our native language may appear to be **homogeneous**; i.e., our language may seem invariable from speaker to speaker, from region to region, from situation to situation, and so on. In other words, we may think that the pronunciation, morphology, grammar and vocabulary of our language are the same on all occasions and that is why we understand one another. However, there is no such a thing as homogeneity in any language.

When we examine any language closely, we can notice that that language varies not only from individual to individual, from region to region, but also from situation to situation with the same individual. That is to say, the varieties of a language differ from one another at all levels of linguistic structure - pronunciation, morphology, grammar, and vocabulary. For example, in English the words *half*, *neither*, *schedule*, *vase* are pronounced [ˈniːðər, ˈhæf, ˈskedʒəl, ˈveɪs] in American English (AmE) and [ˈnaɪðə, ˈhɑːf, ˈʃedjuːl, ˈvɑːz] in British English (BrE). Similarly, there may be differences in the way some words are spelled; e.g., *center*, *favor*, *tire* (of a car) in AmE, and *centre*, *favour*, *tyre* in BrE. Or both varieties of English could have different terms for the same object; e.g., *bookstore*, *hood* (of a car), *truck* in AmE, and *bookshop*, *bonnet*, *lorry* in BrE.

You may be wondering: if there are so many differences from variety to variety in a language, how come we can communicate pretty well with other speakers of the language? Well, fortunately the different varieties of a language share a range of common phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical features, or **common core** (cf. Crystal, 1991), which all the speakers of a language know, either consciously or subconsciously, and allows them to communicate (See Figure 2.1 below).

Figure 2.1: Language, variety and common core



## **A. Language Variability**

When a language is spoken in different countries, linguists speak of **varieties** of that language, or **national dialects**; e.g., American English, British English, Canadian English, Australian English, Jamaican English; or Spain's (or Peninsular) Spanish, Mexican Spanish, Venezuelan Spanish, and so on. Generally, the different varieties of a language differ from one another mainly in matters of pronunciation and vocabulary; differences in morphology and syntax seem to be minor. A proof of the latter is that in their written form, most varieties of a language are much the same and much easier to understand.

We could say that the major varieties of a language consist of dialects. Although there is no linguistically satisfactory definition of the term dialect, for our purposes, we can define a **dialect** as any variety of a language spoken by a group of people<sup>1</sup> that is characterized by systematic structural and lexical differences from other varieties of the same language, with which it is mutually intelligible (cf. Cipollone et al., 1998; Francis, 1958; Richards et al., 1992).

Generally, within a country, a language varies in different ways and for different reasons. The variety of a language spoken by the residents of a particular geographic area is usually referred to as a **regional dialect**. The particular way of pronouncing a language in a given geographic area or region is referred to as an **accent**. For instance, in the US we can have a New York accent (in which, e.g., 'r' is not pronounced before consonants and word-finally), a Southern accent (in which, e.g., the sound [aɪ] is often pronounced [æɪ] or [æ:]), a Midwest accent (in which all the r's are pronounced), and so on.

Similarly, within a given country (and sometimes within a region) a variety of a language may be spoken mainly by people belonging to a particular social class. In this case we refer to that variety of the language as a **social dialect** or **sociolect**. Often the speakers of a sociolect share a similar socio-economic status (SES) and/or educational background (cf. Richards et al., 1992). Sociolects may be classed as high or low in status. E.g.,

He and I were going to the movies. (higher sociolect)

'Im 'n me was goin' to the movies. (lower sociolect)

Also, within a language there may be a variety which is admired and emulated by the speakers of other dialects; we refer to such a variety as a **prestige dialect** (cf. Francis, 1958). For example, in England, for a long time, RP, or Received Pronunciation, was considered the most prestigious variety of English because it was the dialect that most educated and noble people would speak.

Sometimes, a particular variety of a language is used primarily by writers and scholars; Francis (1958) refers to it as a **literary dialect**. This dialect is characterized by the use of metaphors, structures and vocabulary which are not normally used by the average speaker of the language.

Among all the varieties of a language spoken in a country, the variety that most speakers accept as a model or norm and try to imitate is considered the **standard dialect** or **standard variety** (cf. Francis, 1958; Richards et al., 1992). Generally, the standard dialect is used in the media, education, politics, religion, the arts, etc. The standard dialect is also the

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<sup>1</sup> We usually refer to a group of people who speak the same variety of language as a **speech community**.

variety of the language which is taught to foreigners. E.g., Standard British English, Standard General American English, Standard Venezuelan Spanish, etc. Many linguists may argue that there is no such a thing as a standard variety because it differs from one part of the country to another and from people to people. Moreover, some users of the standard variety often think that their dialect is the best of and superior to all the other varieties; therefore, they may consider that the other dialects of the language which differ from the standard variety are corrupt or inferior dialects (i.e., **nonstandard** or **substandard dialects**).

As was said earlier, a language also varies from individual to individual. The particular variety of a language used by an individual, as expressed by the way he or she speaks or writes, is referred to as an **idiolect** or **idiosyncratic dialect**. Richards et al. (1992) say that, in its widest sense, an idiolect includes a person's way of communicating; e.g., his or her choice of utterances and the way he or she interprets other people's utterances. In a narrower sense, an idiolect may include those features, either in speech or writing, which distinguish an individual from others, such as voice quality, pitch, and speech rhythm.

In short, we can say that a language usually consists of major or national varieties. In turn each major variety consists of several dialects, and each dialect consists of very many idiolects.

## **B. Other Language Variations**

In addition, all languages vary according to several other parameters, such as occupation or profession, field of knowledge, situation, association of people, gender, age and so on. In the first place, any language varies from situation to situation. The variations of a person's speech or writing depending on the context in which the language is being used are referred to as **speech styles**, or simply **styles**.<sup>2</sup> It is a fact that no one speaks his or her native language in the same manner all the time; we all generally adapt our language to the topic being dealt with, the setting or situation in which we find ourselves, the social, political or religious status of person we are addressing (addressee) or degree of familiarity that we have with that person.

Speech styles are often expressed in terms of **degrees of formality**, namely, formal, informal, casual, colloquial, or intimate. For example, when a teacher is lecturing, he or she pronounces quite carefully and slowly, avoids using contractions, tries to use syntactic constructions and words that can be understood by everybody, and so on (formal style). But as soon as that same person meets his or her friends at a party, he or she will speak more carelessly and rapidly, will use a lot of contractions, syntactic constructions and words typical of the situation or setting (informal style). Although not all linguists agree on the types of styles and their characterization, we have to admit that we all automatically adjust our language to the situations and people we deal with.

In the second place, the specialized or technical words and expressions used by the practitioners of particular fields of study and professions are referred to as **jargon** (cf. Cipollone et al., 1998; Richards et al., 1992); e.g., medical terms such as *rhinitis*, *dermati-*

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<sup>2</sup> Some linguists use the term **register** in this sense (cf. Richards et al, 1992).

*tis, vasectomy, ECC*, etc.; linguistic terms such as *phoneme, aspiration, clause, deep structure*, etc. Every job and every field of study has some technical terms of its own, as does every hobby and sport, which are clear, expressive and economical only for its users; for outsiders such terms remain incomprehensible.

In the third place, we find non-technical special kinds of language which are used by specific groups of people for different social reasons. For instance, **slang** is the style or register of language that consists of terms that can substitute for standard terms of the same conceptual meaning but have stronger emotive impact than the standard terms, in order to express an attitude of self-assertion toward conventional order and moral authority and often an affinity with or membership in occupational, ethnic, or other social groups, and which ranges in acceptability from sexual and scatological crudity to audacious wittiness (cf. Chapman 1987).

**Table 2.1: Some examples of American English slang.**

<b>Slang Term</b>	<b>Meaning</b>	<b>Slang Term</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
buzz	feeling of pleasure or excitement (e.g., after drinking some alcohol)	mazeh	gorgeous guy
cas [kæʒ]	all right	mazehette	gorgeous girl
fake-bake	tanning salon	pot	marijuana
gork	nerd	sucky	awful
happa	half-Asian person	T.E.A.	great!
homeboy	very close male friend	to have missile lock	to concentrate

Mario Pei (1966) notes the following **characteristics of slang**:

- a. it is non-standard vocabulary characterized by extreme informality;
- b. its currency is not limited to a region;
- c. it is composed of coinages or arbitrarily changed words, clipped forms, extravagant forced, or facetious (= amusing) figures of speech, verbal novelties;
- d. it is short-lived and therefore subject to decline into use;
- e. generally, slang is only intelligible to those people associated with the group or groups who use it.

For example, slang is very common among adolescent and college students, in the army, among gang members, etc. O’Grady et al. (1997) gives us some examples of slang terms used in a US college (See Table 2.1 above).

Another speech variety that some particular groups of people use is referred to as argot. We can define **argot** as a class of secret language which is used by social groups whose members wish to or must conceal themselves or some aspects of their communication from nonmembers. An example of an argot is the **gay lingo**, whose lexicon denotes sexual practices, categories of homosexuals, physical appearance, and matters of taste, among others (cf. O’Grady et al., 1997). Some terms of the gay lingo are *butch* (= a very masculine woman or man), *camp* (= a playful appreciation of the ridiculous), *to come out of the closet*

(= to disclose one's homosexuality), *in the closet* (= concealing one's homosexuality from public knowledge).

It is important to point out that language cannot always be used freely. Society sometimes imposes some restrictions on the use of certain terms in public. For example, in any language there are a few terms which are not often used in public because they, and/or the things they refer to, are seen as offensive, obscene, or somewhat disturbing to listeners or readers (cf. Fromkin & Rodman, 1998; O'Grady et al., 1997). Such terms are referred to as **taboo words**, or simply **taboo**<sup>3</sup>; e.g., *hell, damn, fuck, shit*, etc.

Some taboo words have religious connotations and their use outside formal or religious ceremonies is considered profane; for example, the use of the word *God*, as in *My God!*, *goddamn, hell, damn*, and so on. However, in most cultures the most common and numerous taboo words are those relating to sex, sex organs, and naturally bodily functions. Below we present a list of some taboo words and their acceptable Latinate equivalents (See Table 2.2).

**Table 2.2: Some English taboo words and acceptable Latinate forms**

<b>Taboo Word</b>	<b>Acceptable Latinate Form</b>
balls	testicles
bitch	prostitute
cock (or prick)	penis
cunt	vagina
piss	urinate
shit (n.)	feces
tits	breasts
to fuck	to copulate (or have a coitus)
to shit	to defecate

We must also note that when something is forbidden, people always find a way to deal with it. In order to avoid the use of taboo language, people use euphemisms. A **euphemism** is a word or expression that replaces a taboo word or serves to avoid frightening or unpleasant subjects (Fromkin & Rodman, 1998). For example, in many societies death is feared; thus instead of using the verb *to die*, people are more likely to use the phrasal verbs *to pass on* or *to pass away*, or metaphors such as *to give up the ghost*. Similarly, as was said earlier, in order to avoid taboo words that relate to the bodily functions, intimacy or private parts, people use Latinate terms<sup>4</sup> (See Table 2.2 above) or euphemisms like the ones presented in Table 2.3 below.

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<sup>3</sup> The term **taboo** was borrowed from Tongan, a Polynesian language, in which it refers to acts that are forbidden or to be avoided (O'Grady et al., 1997).

<sup>4</sup> We should also note that the Latinate terms are used mostly by educated people not the common people.

**Table 2.3: Some euphemisms and their meanings**

<b>Euphemism</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
privates (or private parts)	male or female genitals
to make love	to engage in sexual intercourse
to perspire	to sweat
to pass away (or to pass on)	to die
collateral losses	civilian casualties
to take a leak	to urinate
funeral director	mortician or undertaker
sales representative	salesperson
to have the telephone out of order	to have the telephone service cut off

We must warn that, from a linguistic point of view, the words of a language are not intrinsically clean, dirty, good or bad; they simply reflect individual or societal values and prejudices. The filth or beauty of a word resides in the ear or mind of the listener or reader, not in the word itself.

Finally, we want to conclude this section by saying that a language does not vary only because of the reasons presented above. A language can also vary according to other factors such as the age and gender of the user, but we will not deal with such factors here.

### **Metaphors and Idioms**

The global meaning of a sentence cannot always be guessed from knowing the individual meanings of each word. Two cases of nonliteral sentential meaning are metaphors and idioms.<sup>5</sup>

A **metaphor** (or **figurative expression**) is a word, phrase or sentence which is used instead of other more common words, in order to describe or refer to a person, object, place, concept, etc. by likening them to other persons, objects, places, concepts, etc. in certain particular contexts (cf. Pei, 1966). The nonliteral meaning expressed through a metaphor is referred to as **metaphorical meaning**. For example, the following expressions are metaphors in English.

#### ***Metaphor***

the big drink  
He's in the prime of life.  
She is the apple of my eyes.  
That car is a lemon.  
The stork is visiting Mary again  
Walls have ears.

#### ***Meaning***

the ocean or the sea  
He's very young.  
I love her more than anything else.  
That car often breaks down and requires constant repairs.  
Mary is (pregnant and) expecting a child/baby again.  
Others might listen to what you're saying, even if they're not in the same room.

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<sup>5</sup> Other cases of nonliteral meaning are slang, proverbs, sayings, similes, phrasal verbs, euphemisms, etc.

Metaphors can be used for many purposes; e.g., to embellish our speech or writing, to sound derogatory or pejorative, to praise someone or something, to sound humorous, etc. Notice the following metaphors:

It makes my heart ache to see her suffer. = It makes me sad to see her suffer.

Poor Mrs. Smith has gone to meet her Maker. = Mrs. Smith has died.

That little girl is an angel. = That little girl is a beautiful, innocent or kind person.

For their part, **idioms** (or **idiomatic expressions**) are fixed sequences of words (phrases or sentences), with a fixed meaning that is not composed of the literal meaning of the individual words (cf. Cipollone et al., 1998). E.g., *to kick the bucket* means 'to die'; *to pull someone's leg* means 'to tease someone'; *He's in my bad books* means 'He's in disfavor with me'.

**Idioms** usually have the following **characteristics** (cf. Long & Summers, 1979):

1. Most idioms have only a nonliteral or metaphorical meaning; i.e., one cannot often discover their meanings by looking up the individual words in an ordinary dictionary. E.g., The thieves took everything, so I was left really *up a gum tree* (= in a difficult situation). However, some idioms have both a literal and a nonliteral meaning; e.g., *He spilled the beans* can mean (a) literally: 'He allowed the beans to get out of a container and fall on the floor or other surface; (b) nonliterally: 'He revealed a secret'.

2. Most idioms are more or less invariable or fixed, both in wording and in certain grammatical ways. That is to say, they function like lexical units or wholes. Because of this:

a. We cannot often make substitutions of synonymous words into idioms without loss of their idiomaticity or metaphorical meaning. E.g., in the idiom *John gave up the ghost* (= 'John died'), we cannot replace *ghost* by *apparition* and say *John gave up the apparition*; it no longer means 'to die'.

b. We cannot often introduce modifiers (e.g., adjectives and adverbs) into idioms. E.g., in the idiom *He let the cat out of the sack* (= 'he revealed a secret'), we cannot say *He let the black cat out of the sack*; it is no longer considered an idiom.

c. They cannot often be used in the passive. E.g., *Mrs. Jones gave up the ghost* cannot be transformed into *The ghost was given up by Mrs. Jones*; it is no longer an idiom.

d. Some idioms have slightly variant forms. E.g., We can say *until kingdom come* or *till kingdom come* (= 'for a very long time in vain') as in *You can protest till kingdom come; however, no one will pay attention to you*. Similarly, you can say *up to the/one's ears/eyes/neck/eyeballs* (= 'wholly concerned with something, esp. something troubling, work, business, or debt') as in *The secretary is up to her ears (in) addressing and stamping letters*. Another example is *to be in someone's good/bad books* (= 'to be in favor/disfavor with someone').

e. Most idioms are entered in dictionaries or the lexicon as single items of vocabulary.

3. Most idioms belong to informal spoken or written language; therefore, they are generally avoided in formal speech or writing.

4. Most idioms are language- and culture-specific; i.e., they make sense or meaning mainly to the speakers of a given language or members of a given culture. Therefore, most idioms cannot be translated word for word into other languages.

It is important to note that many metaphors are idioms. The main difference between these two types of expressions is that idioms are generally fixed sequences of words that function as wholes, while metaphors are not necessarily fixed sequences of words. That is to say, metaphors are more flexible expressions both from a lexical and a grammatical point of view.

**Reference:**

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