

LECTURE 2

Dialect and Dialectology

S. Romaine in Mesthrie (2001:310)

Dialectology is a long-established branch of linguistics: the existence of geographical diversity was among the first observations made by the Greeks. Dialectology determined to a great extent the nature of scientific research into language in the nineteenth century. The investigation of local dialects was seen as a way to recapture linguistic history and to provide the missing links for comparative historical reconstruction, the primary enterprise of linguistics at that time. It was believed that dialects preserved older speech patterns in pure form.

1. The Term 'Dialect'

In both its traditional and modern sense, dialectology has to do with the origins and distribution of dialects. The term 'dialect' has generally been used to refer to a subordinate variety of a language, such as English, which has many dialects. A regional dialect is a language variety associated with a place, such as the Yorkshire dialect in England or Bavarian dialect in Germany. Dialects of a language tend to differ more from one another the more remote they are from one another geographically. In this dialectology has to do with boundaries, which often coincide with geographical features such as rivers and mountains. Boundaries are, however, often of a social nature, e.g, between different social classes, groups, 'social dialects'. Thus, dialect to an extent is a feature of one language which differs in form, meaning, or function according to the geographical, social, and stylistic characteristics of speakers. Features that vary geographically (i.e. from one region to another) are normally identified, as shown below, within the kind of study known as **dialect survey** and result in the compilation of a **dialect atlas**. Trask (1999:25) defines a dialect in relation to language as "language, say English, is really a collection of regional differences in a variety". Other linguists use term dialect synonymous with accent. Gulf Arabic is the standard variety of the regional vernaculars, Holes (1995:3) noted that "there are many regional varieties in the Saudi Arabia of which educated spoken Arabic is the variety used by Educated Arabs speakers as an intermediating variety between the standard and the colloquial".

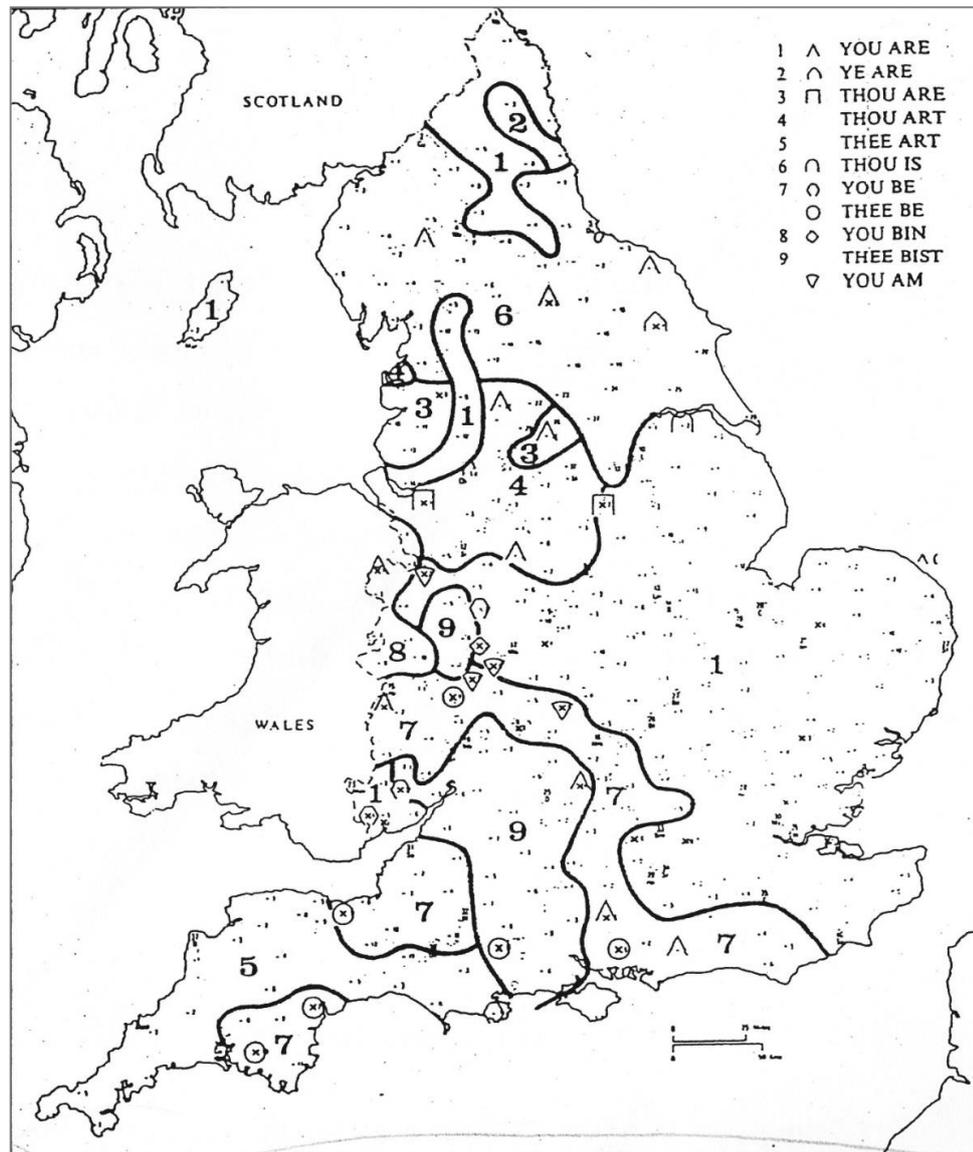


Figure 1A map from the Linguistic Atlas of England 1978 showing regional variations on the construction you are (Crystal 1992: 102)

2. Dialect surveys:

When data has been collected on the different forms, meaning or functions of a certain sociolinguistics variable used in a certain geographical area, the information is shown on a map or number of maps, known as **dialect atlas** (or **linguistic atlas**). The collection of such data is known as **dialect survey**. The geographical area covered by the survey may be a whole country or just one region of the country (as the map shows). Dialect survey make use of **informants** (typical representatives of a region's dialect who provide us with information about sociolinguistic variables). These people, in many dialect surveys, tend to be **NORMS** (an acronym for **n**on-mobile, **o**lder, **r**ural, **m**ale, **s**peakers). It is believed that such information's are less likely to be influenced by the dialects of other regions. The information obtained becomes the basis of the linguistic atlas.

3. Dialects: regional and social

Dialects, which are different ways of speaking the same language, are either regional or social. Regional dialects reveal the speaker's geographical origin (e.g. rural or urban, northern or southern) while social dialects are associated with the speaker's social class, age, gender, and occupation. The study of such speech varieties is known as **dialectology**. However, the exclusive study of regional dialects is more specifically referred to as **dialect geography** (or **linguistic geography**) and the exclusive study of social variation as **social dialectology**.

A speech variety becomes a dialect when it uses pronunciation, grammar (word structure and sentence structure) and lexis (vocabulary) in ways which make the regional or social background of the user identifiable. General mutual intelligibility is still possible, in spite of the variation.

Regional dialects are easier to distinguish than social dialects; it is easier to say that a given speaker comes from a particular region, city, or village than to say whether he/she is educated or uneducated, an engineer or lawyer, etc.

A regional variety can be divided into **subvarieties**. For example, the southern Egyptian (colloquial) dialect has subvarieties in various (or provinces) of southern Egypt.

Social dialects (or **sociolects**) are varieties of language used by groups of people defined according to such factors as (social) class, education, age, gender, ethnic background, and occupation. According to social class (or **social background**), there is variation from the speech of the high class to the speech of the middle and low(er)/working class.

4. Types of variables:

Linguistic variation often shows strong correlations with social variables like social class, gender, age, education and occupation. The concept of a sociolinguistic variable has come to be central in discussion of linguistic variation due to the development made by W. Labov of the notion of the linguistic variable. A variable is some point of usage for which two or more competing forms are available in a community, with speakers showing interesting differences in the frequency with which they use one or another of these competing forms, Trask (1999).

Variables may be **phonological** (different pronunciations of the same word), **orthographic** (different spelling of the same word), **morphological** (different word structure) ⁸, **syntactic** (different sentence structure), **lexical** (different lexical items, such as words, conveying the same meaning), or **semantic** (different meanings associated with the same word). An example of phonological variation is the pronunciation of such words as far and farm with or without /r/ in New Yorker American. The higher the socioeconomic status of New Yorker, the more likely he/she is to sound the r in far and farm. Similarly, reading is pronounced as /ri:diŋ/ in careful, formal speech and as /ri:diŋ/ in informal and regional speech. In addition, the third person singular present marker – s/es/ies, which is consistently used in Standard English, may be dropped in non-standard English.

5. Differences between Dialects

Some linguists make a further distinction between accent and dialect. An accent consists of a way of pronouncing a variety. A dialect, however, varies from other dialects of the same language simultaneously on at least three levels of origination: pronunciation, grammar or syntax, and vocabulary. Educated speakers of American English and British English can be regarded as using dialects of the same language because differences of these three kinds exist between them. In practice, however, speakers of the two varieties share a common grammar and differ from each other more in terms of vocabulary and pronunciation. Some examples of these differences are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1 some differences between American and British English.

| | American | British |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| Pronunciation | ate / eit / (rhymes with mate) | /ɛt/ (RP ; see accent) (rhymes with met) |
| Grammar / Syntax | Jane had gotten used to it. | Jan had got used to it. (pp of get) |
| Vocabulary | Sam took the elevator rather than the stairs. | Sam took the lift rather than the stairs. |

The influence of educational background of speakers could be said to result in three general varieties of speech: **(a) uneducated speech**, characteristic of illiterate speakers; **(b) fairly educated speech**, typical of educated speakers without a college degree; and **(c) (highly) educated speech**, characteristic of speakers with a college education, who tend to talk like a book, that is, make frequent use of features of written language in their speech. The passive, for example is often used in the colloquial Arabic of this category of individuals.

In terms of age, speakers can be classified into older speakers and younger speakers. Speech varies accordingly, from the more careful speech of older users to the casual and slangy speech of younger users.

Male speech and female speech are two language varieties based on the factor of **gender**. Gender-based variation can be said to manifest itself in four main areas of difference:

1. **Vocabulary**: female speakers tend to use more **prestigious forms** than male speakers with the same general social background do, thus sounding 'more educated, more refined. Such forms belong to the **prestige (standard) variety** of the language.¹¹
2. **Pronunciation**: female speakers, generally, seem to be more careful with their pronunciation than males are. However, Arabic-speaking females tend to pronounce the sounds ط، ظ، ض، ص and ق in a way that confuses them with ز، د، ت، س and ك respectively.
3. **Topic of conversation**: females discuss their personal feelings and experiences more than males do while males seems to prefer non-personal topics, e.g. politics and sport.
4. **Degree of cooperation**: in mixed-gender pairs, the rate of males interrupting females seems to be greater than the rate of females interrupting males.

The last social determinant of speech to introduce here is the **ethnic background** of speakers. The effect of this factor in the USA, for example, is such that two general sets of speech varieties can be distinguished.

1. The speech of **recent immigrants** versus the speech of **long-time citizens**. The speech of the former often shows transfer from the mother tongue (the language of the 'old country'), that is, the linguistic features of the mother tongue affect the linguistic features of the newly learned language.
2. The speech of **Anglo-Americans** versus the speech of **African-Americans**. The letter, for example, tend to drop (a) final consonants, saying *band* as /bænl/ instead of /bændl/; (b) linking *be*, saying *they at home* instead of *they are at home*, and (c) the third person singular present suffix, saying *she go home* instead of *she goes home*.

[The social factors of gender and age will be discussed in details]