

File 12.3

Language and Socioeconomic Status

Standard vs. Nonstandard Varieties

The popular notion persists that every language consists of one "correct" dialect from which all other "inferior" or "substandard" dialects emerge. This misconception has arisen from social stereotypes and biases. It is not a linguistic fact. It is important to realize that a person's use of any particular dialect is not a reflection of his or her intelligence or judgment. *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. The aim of this file is to provide you with an understanding of how the terms **standard dialect** and **nonstandard dialect** are defined linguistically, and to dispel some of the myths associated with these terms.

Standard Dialects

The notion of standard dialect is really a complex one and in many ways an idealization. Descriptively speaking, the standard dialect is the variety used by political leaders, the media, and speakers from higher socioeconomic classes. 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.

In actuality, there is no one standard dialect but instead many different varieties of what people consider to be the standard. What ties these different notions together is **prestige**. Socially speaking, the standard dialect is the dialect of prestige and power. However, the prestige of any speech variety is wholly dependent upon the prestige of the speakers who use it. In the United States, the prestige group usually corresponds to those in society who enjoy positions of power, wealth, and education. It is the speech of this group, therefore, that becomes the standard, but there is nothing about the variety itself that makes it prestigious.

For proof of this claim, consider a case in which the status of a particular linguistic feature has changed over time from standard to nonstandard. Recall from the file on *Prescriptive vs. Descriptive Rules of Grammar* that multiple negatives were once commonly used by speakers of standard Old English and Middle English. Take, for example, this multiple-negative construction from Geoffrey Chaucer's description of the Knight in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* (from Millward 1989: 158):

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 to no kind of creature

Today, however, speakers who most commonly employ multiple-negative constructions are not members of the higher socioeconomic (i.e., prestige) group. Such constructions are rarely used in public spheres by political leaders or media spokespeople, and English grammar instructors discourage use of these forms in writing or in speech. Thus multiple negation is today considered a nonstandard feature. This example illustrates a change over time in the **prescriptive standard**, the standard by which we make judgments of "right" and "wrong." This example proves that such judgments are not linguistically founded but are instead governed by societal opinion, and most often by societal evaluation of speakers.

To consider another example of how linguistically arbitrary notions of the standard are, let us look at the following case. Few standard English speakers use object pronouns in subject position, as in (1) below:

1. Kim and me went to the store.

Yet media spokespeople, political leaders, and others of higher socioeconomic status are more and more frequently observed using subject pronouns in object position as in (2) and (3):

2. This is a matter between Kim and I.
3. Give the books to Kim and I.

According to the prescriptive standard, sentences (1), (2), and (3) should all be "corrected" as follows:

4. Kim and I went to the mall.
5. This is a matter between Kim and me.
6. Give the money to Kim and me.

However, not only would many standard English speakers not recognize (2) and (3) as violations of prescriptive rule, many would argue that intuitively sentences (2) and (3) seem "correct" while (5) and (6) seem "incorrect." This is known as **hypercorrection**, the act of producing nonstandard forms by way of false analogy. This example shows us that even violations of prescriptive rule (such as sentences 2 and 3 above) can be perceived as standard if they are used by members of the prestige group.

Standard American English (SAE)

The standard dialect in the United States is called **Standard American English (SAE)**. As with any standard dialect, SAE is not a well-defined variety but rather an idealization, which even now defies definition because agreement on what exactly constitutes this variety is lacking. SAE is not a single, unitary, homogeneous dialect but instead comprises a number of varieties. When we speak of SAE, we usually have in mind features of grammar more than pronunciation. In the United States, where class consciousness is minimal, pronunciation is not terribly important. Thus, there are varieties of SAE that are spoken with northern accents, southern accents, coastal New England accents, etc., but that are still considered standard. This is not to say that we do not make evaluations of speech based on accent, because we do. But we seem to be far more "tolerant" of variation in accent than we are of grammatical variation. Compare, for example, the varieties of English spoken by Connecticut native George Bush, Arkansas Bill Clinton, and Texan Ross Perot in the 1992 presidential debates. Most would agree that all three are speakers of SAE. And yet they all speak with distinctly different accents.

In Britain, on the other hand, where class divisions are more clearly defined and social mobility is more restricted, standard pronunciation or Received Pronunciation (RP), also known as BBC English or the "Queen's English," takes on the importance of standard grammar and vocabulary. Thus in Britain both pronunciation and grammar are markers of social status.

Nonstandard Dialects

All dialects that are not perceived as varieties of the standard are called **nonstandard**. It is important to understand that nonstandard does not mean “substandard” or “inferior,” although this is the perception held by many. Just as standard dialects are associated with the language of the “powerful” and “prestigious,” nonstandard dialects are usually associated with the language of the lower socioeconomic classes.

Most nonstandard varieties are stigmatized in the wider community as illogical and unsystematic. It is on this basis that many justify labeling nonstandard varieties as “bad” or “improper” ways of speaking, as opposed to standard varieties, which are said to be “good” or “proper.” Again, it must be emphasized that such evaluations are linguistically unfounded. Consider the following paradigms illustrating the use of reflexive pronouns in two varieties of English—one standard, the other nonstandard.

<i>Standard</i>	<i>Nonstandard</i>
I like myself	I like myself
You like yourself	You like yourself
He likes himself	He likes hisself
She likes herself	She likes herself
We like ourselves	We like ourselves
You like yourselves	You like yourselves
They like themselves	They like theirselves

Given these two paradigms, we can develop descriptive rules for the construction of reflexives in these two varieties.

Standard: Add the reflexive suffix *-self* to possessive pronouns in the 1st and 2nd person singular and *-selves* to possessive pronouns in the 1st and 2nd person plural.

Add the reflexive suffix *-self* to object pronouns in the 3rd person singular and *-selves* to object pronouns in the 3rd person plural.

Nonstandard: Add the reflexive suffix *-self* to possessive pronouns in the 1st–3rd person singular and *-selves* to possessive pronouns in the 1st–3rd person plural.

Given these rules, what about the nonstandard variety makes it any less systematic or less logical than the standard variety? Nothing. Both varieties are systematic and both are logically constructed. In fact, some may argue that the nonstandard variety is more systematic than the standard variety because it has a leveled paradigm, which, consequently, would be much easier to teach to nonnative speakers of English or children learning a first language.

Overt vs. Covert Prestige and Acts of Identity

Often, speakers who do not adapt to the standard are considered "lazy," "uneducated," and "unambitious." Speakers of nonstandard varieties are told that the varieties they speak are "wrong" and "inferior" and that they must learn to speak the varieties taught in school in order to become successful. As a result, children who come from homes where nonstandard varieties are spoken are at an immediate disadvantage in school, where they are forced to make adjustments from the language of their home communities to the standard varieties of the schools (an adjustment unnecessary for children from homes where standard varieties are spoken). Some make these adjustments and become **bidialectal speakers**, having a mastery of two dialects—one a standard variety, the other a nonstandard variety. Others become only marginally fluent in the standard but gain a mastery of the nonstandard dialect. And yet others master the standard and reject the nonstandard dialect altogether.

Which adjustments are made depends on a number of different factors. One factor returns us to the notion of prestige, specifically to the distinction between **overt prestige** and **covert prestige**. Overt prestige is the type of prestige discussed in the section above entitled "Standard Dialects." This is the prestige that is attached to a particular variety by the community-at-large, which defines how people should speak in order to gain status in the wider community. But there is another type of prestige that exists among members of nonstandard speaking communities and defines how people should speak in order to be considered members of those particular communities. The desire to "belong" to a particular group often becomes the overriding factor. Thus, in many ways nonstandard varieties persist, despite their stigmatized status, because of covert prestige. In this sense, language becomes a marker of group identification.

Another way of looking at this is in terms of what researchers R. B. Le Page and Andrée Tabouret-Keller refer to as "acts of identity." In their book, *Acts of Identity: Creole-Based Approaches to Language and Ethnicity*, these two researchers investigate the relationship between language and social identity, working from the following hypothesis:

The individual creates for himself the patterns of his linguistic behaviour so as to resemble those of the group or groups with which from time to time he wishes to be identified, or so as to be unlike those from whom he wishes to be distinguished. (181)

Their theory is that we choose to speak the way we do based on how we identify ourselves and how we want to be identified. The extent to which we are able to make certain linguistic choices as acts of identity is dependent upon the following conditions being met:

1. We can identify the groups
2. We have both adequate access to the groups and ability to analyse their behavioural patterns
3. The motivation to join the groups is sufficiently powerful, and is either reinforced or reversed by feedback from the groups
4. We have the ability to modify our behaviour. (182)

Thus to the extent that we are able to make certain linguistic choices, social identity plays a major role. Teenagers who wish to distinguish themselves from adults, members of rural communities who wish to be distinguished from members of urban communities, members of certain ethnic groups who wish to be identified as distinct from other ethnic groups, etc., may do so through language.

In this sense, language is more than just a means of communication; it is a type of "social badge." Of course, how we speak is not totally up to us; linguistic exposure is also a major factor, as discussed in the files on language acquisition. However, what this shows is that variation does not degrade a language or make it in some way imperfect. It is a natural part of every language to have dif-

ferent ways of expressing the same meanings. And linguistically speaking, the relationship between standard and nonstandard varieties is not one of good vs. bad, right vs. wrong. They are simply different ways of speaking, defined and determined by social structure and function.

For Discussion

1. Consider the following:

At the turn of the century, the form *ain't* was prestigious among many upper middle class English speakers in southern England. Today, however, its use is considered nonstandard or at best appropriate only for casual conversation.

In the United States "dropped *r's*" in words like *car*, *father*, and *bark* are perceived as features of nonstandard speech. In Britain, however, "dropped *r's*" are characteristic of Received Pronunciation and are thus considered part of the prestige dialect.

What do these two examples tell us about standard and nonstandard features? Are they defined on linguistic or social grounds? Explain your answer.

2. What is the significance of having a standard dialect in every language?
3. How might evaluations we make about language as "good" or "bad" help to preserve and perpetuate social stereotypes and biases?

References

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