

## INTD0111A/ARBC0111A

# The Unity and Diversity of Human Language

Lecture #19  
Nov 16<sup>th</sup>, 2006

## Announcements

- Just a reminder: No office hours today. If you have questions on Assignment #3, your only option now is to e-mail me and hope I read your message on time.
- Sara's question revisited: Just think: Does it make more sense to insert randomly or to delete systematically? Normally, deletion rules will target a "class" of sounds, but insertion rules do not insert a "class" sounds. And this is as "too far" as I can go.

## Transition

- Here's where we stopped last time:  
Sociolinguistically, a language is a collection of dialects that are mutually intelligible, but which systematically differ lexically, phonologically, morphologically, and syntactically.

## My dialect is better than yours

- Linguistically, all dialects are equal. Each is a linguistic system with a lexicon and a grammar.
- But sociopolitically and socioeconomically, dialects are, quite irrationally, not treated equally.

## My dialect is more equal than yours

- It's reminiscent of the situation in Orwell's *Animal Farm*:  
*"All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others."*
- Same here: "All dialects are equal, but some dialects are more equal than others."

## My dialect is better than yours

- These lucky "more equal" dialects are typically those of "prestigious" groups, and they are the ones that are typically referred to as the "standard," "correct," and "proper" way of speaking.
- The remaining unlucky dialects now become "less equal" and for that they get punished by the label "nonstandard," "substandard," "wrong," or "inferior" dialects.

## Class agenda: Debunking

- Ok, there is a lot of “bunk” when it comes to the issue of standard vs. nonstandard dialects, so we need to do some “debunking” here.

## I am rich, therefore I speak standard

- It can't be really an accident that in every society around the world, the so-called standard dialect is always that of the educated, wealthy, and those in power. Have you ever heard of a standard dialect spoken by the blue-collar inhabitants of the poor southern region of a country?

## I am rich, therefore I speak standard

- If this is the case, it would be really quite absurd to even suggest that “standard” has anything to do with the linguistic properties that a dialect has. But this is exactly what we hear: Standard is “more correct” and “more proper”. Even “purer” and “more logical” when the absurdity goes too far.

## Standard dialect and prescriptivism

- Second, the so-called standard dialect is often the one that conforms to the prescriptive rules in books of grammar.
- Ok, but many of these rules were put by people some centuries ago who believed that a language's grammar must be modeled on the grammar of Latin and Greek. After all, these are the languages of the great Classics.
- Yes, it was silly and we know that now. But why are some of us clinging to these “silly” rules?
- Well, to keep it “standard”!

## Standard dialect and prescriptivism

- So, what's wrong with stranding your prepositions? Or splitting your infinitives? And do we really need to answer “*Who is it?*” by saying “*It's I?*”
- Ok, let's expose this fallacy. Compare
  - a. *Kim and I went to the store.*with
  - b. *Kim and me went to the store.*
- Which one do you think is standard?

## Standard dialect and prescriptivism

- Now, do the same here:
  - a. *This is a matter between Kim and I.*
  - b. *This is a matter between Kim and me.*
- Which one do you think is standard?
- Many standard English speakers will actually argue that (a) is the correct form, through some sort of *hypercorrection*, i.e., the act of producing nonstandard forms by way of false analogy.

### Language change is NOT corruption

- Third, this whole popular fuss over “standard” language is fundamentally misguided. It’s based on the very bizarre idea that change is corruption. For some reason, people like to think that the past is good.
- Language change is neither bad nor good. It’s not progress nor decay. Language change is just that: *Change*.
- Passionate attitudes about standard language are thus rooted in an irrational attitude about language change.

### The “standard = logical” fallacy

- So, they tell you that using double negatives is bad. It’s illogical. Two negatives make a positive:  
*You don’t know nothing.*
- Ok, let’s see.
- That makes French an “illogical” language. Not only so, it also makes Old and Middle English “illogical”:  
*He never yet no villany not said*  
*In all his life to no kind of creature*
- Too many negatives there, Chaucer!

### The “standard = logical” fallacy

- But here’s the more serious question: Who said that language is a logic-governed system, anyway?
- What’s logical about putting your wh-phrases at the front of the sentence? Wouldn’t it make more sense to leave it *in situ*?

### The “standard = logical” fallacy

- And what’s logical about putting the object after the verb? Well, if it’s logical, then almost half of human languages are illogical, since they put the object before the verb.
- And what is logical about this third person singular -s at the end of verbs in the present tense in English? Why have tense morphology at all? Why can’t all languages be like Chinese?

### The “standard = logical” fallacy

- And is it better to have more vowels or less vowels?
- Well, let’s see.
- If you have more vowels, then the phonological system of your language is more sophisticated than if you have less vowels.
- Really? I thought if I can do more with less, then I am sophisticated. Isn’t economy good?

### The “standard = logical” fallacy

- And in my Arabic dialect, I have all these pharyngeal sounds that you guys don’t have. So, what does that make me? Superman?
- And am I really at a disadvantage because my language does not verb-serialize? Or object-incorporate?
- And is having these long polysynthetic words in a language good or bad? Logical or illogical?

### The “standard = logical” fallacy

- And what’s logical about using a dummy element like “there” or “it” in sentences like  
*There is a man in the room.*  
*It is obvious where this discussion is going.*
- And how about this funny *Do-support* rule in English? Why would a language need to have a dummy word to form questions and negate sentences? Isn’t that kind of wacky?

### Nonstandard means “different”: Period

- Well, you learned a lot about human language in this course, and you now know how languages differ and how they are the same.
- So, you can easily see how absurd it is to try to compare languages. And it is equally absurd to try to compare dialects of the same language.
- There is no such thing as a “better” or a “more expressive” dialect. There’s simply a “different” dialect.

### But this is not over yet

The debunking continues!

### So, should I drop my “r” or keep it?

- If there’s any sense at all to these claims about the superiority of a standard dialect, why is it that the same linguistic feature is considered standard in one dialect but nonstandard in another?
- Think of *r*-dropping in English dialects. What do you think of the BBC announcers dropping their *r*’s?  
Brilliant. It’s the Queen’s English. RP!
- Now, what do you think of New Yorkers dropping their *r*’s?
- Hmm...! Remember that *r*-drop was a marker of prestige when it first appeared in New England and the south. But what about now?

### So, what’s your point, Mr. Linguist?

- It all comes down to prestige, a totally nonlinguistic concept. No dialect is inherently better or worse than another.
- Dialects are just *different* language varieties. And this is just another instance of diversity. And diversity is not bad. Conformity is not required. And forcing conformity on people is lunacy.

### Some instances of lunacy: Languicide

- Russian tsars banned Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Georgian, Armenian, and anything non-Russian.
- Cajun English and French were banned in southern Louisiana by practice if not by law.
- And now they want to kill Singlish and replace it with the “Speak Good English” bunk.

### Some instances of lunacy: Banning

- France? They have an academy to regulate this absurdity: “We hereby declare *le parking*, *le weekend*, and *le hotdog* forbidden.”
- Not to mention all these efforts to ban the use of hundreds of local village dialects, or *patois*, including those that are separate Romance languages, or even non-Romance at all (e.g., Breton).

### The “change-is-corruption” fallacy

- Arabic? In Arabic-speaking countries, Classical Arabic has the status of a close to divine language, obviously because of its ties to Islam.
- Colloquial dialects are looked upon as “corrupt” versions of the “standard” language, which is still used though mainly in writing.
- But as usual, people are totally misguided, and pretty much clueless when they talk about these things.

### The “change-is-corruption” fallacy

- Arabic changed like every other language did, despite the efforts by Arab grammarians to keep the language “pure”.
- And when it changed, the changes were systematic, not random, again reflecting the constraints that govern what is a possible human language.
- Egyptian Arabic, for instance, developed a wh-in-situ strategy for asking questions, which did not exist in Classical Arabic, in what we can explain as a process of parameter re-setting.

### The “change-is-corruption” fallacy

- Many of today’s Arabic dialects also developed a bipartite negation like the one we see in French:  
?ana ma-fhim-t-iš  
I neg-understood-1sg-neg
- This is not corruption. This is simply a change in the negation paradigm coupled with a process of grammaticalization of the word “šay” (= thing).

### Irrational prejudices: Sign languages

- In many places of the world, the use of sign languages among the deaf was banned, so they can continue to read lips and produce sounds.
- When we discuss sign languages after Thanksgiving, you’ll see how sign languages exhibit the same exact linguistic properties that we see in all “spoken” human languages. The only difference is in *modality*: Spoken languages use the mouth and the ear; sign languages use the hand and the eye.

### Unfortunately, though, most people just “don’t get it”

- That said, linguists are quite a minority, and people who take linguistics courses are much much fewer in number than those who do not.
- Bottom line: The majority of people in human societies do not understand what we said here. For them, there is indeed a “better” dialect. As a result, whether we like it or not, certain sociolinguistic patterns evolve.

### **Standard = Success**

- As you should expect, one such pattern of behavior arises as a result of stigmatization of nonstandard dialects.
- Speakers of these nonstandard varieties are told that their dialects are wrong and inferior and that they have to learn the standard variety in school to become successful.

### **Standard = Success**

- That makes children who come from homes where nonstandard varieties are spoken at a disadvantage in school, because they need to make adjustments from the language they speak to the standard varieties they learn in class (an adjustment unnecessary for children who come from homes where standard varieties are spoken).

### **Standard = Success**

- Some make these adjustments and they become *bidialectal* speakers. Others become more or less fluent in the standard, but they retain their nonstandard dialect still. And yet some others master the standard dialect and reject the nonstandard altogether.
- Which adjustments are made depends on a number of factors, one of which is prestige.

### **Prestige: Overt**

- In sociolinguistics, a distinction is often made between overt prestige and covert prestige in the use of language varieties.
- Overt prestige is the one attached to a particular variety by the society-at-large, which defines how people should speak in order to be successful and gain status in society.

### **Prestige: Covert**

- Covert prestige, on the other hand, is what makes speakers of nonstandard varieties retain their dialects as a means to maintain their “belonging” to a particular community.
- Nonstandard varieties, despite being stigmatized, still persist, because their speakers use them as a marker of *group identification*.

### **Transition**

- Maybe this is a good point to transition to the issue of language and ethnicity.
- As an illustration of how certain ethnic groups may have a dialect of their own, we discuss two such dialects: African American English (AAE) and Latino (Hispanic) English.

## African American English

- AAE is a cover term used by linguists to refer to a continuum of English varieties typically spoken by African Americans.
- Notice, however, that there's more than just ethnicity here. Other factors influencing AAE varieties include age, socioeconomic status, gender, and style of speech.
- And no, AAE is not genetically predetermined, nor is it the result of "linguistic deprivation".

## African American English

- AAE is a rule-governed system, exactly as the so-called Standard American English (SAE) is. It shows the same kind of systematic differences from other dialects of English that occur between many of the world's major dialects.
- Let's discuss some of these here.

## AAE Phonology

- *r*-deletion is pretty common in AAE, such that the following words would come out the same:

*guard-god*

*sore-saw*

- Some speakers also drop their [l]:

*toll-toe*

*all-awe*

*help-hep*

## AAE Phonology

- Word-final consonant cluster simplification is also common, particularly when one of the two consonants is an alveolar (e.g., t, d, s, z):  
passed → [pæst] → [pæs]
- So, when an AAE speaker says  
*I pass the test yesterday*  
they are not making a mistake in tense morphology. They're simply simplifying the consonant cluster.
- Evidence: "*hated*" is pronounced [hetɪd] and does not become [het].

## AAE Phonology

- Neutralization of [ɪ] and [ɛ] before nasals: Also common in many dialects, resulting in *pen* and *pin* being homophonous.
- Loss of interdental fricative [θ] and [ð] word medially and word-finally: [θ] is replaced by [f], and [ð] is replaced by [v]:  
*mouth* [maʊf]  
*brother* [brʌvə]
- Word-initially, [θ] and [ð] become stops [t] and [d]:  
*think* [tɪŋk]                      *the man* [də mæn]

## AAE Morphosyntax

- Double (or multiple) negatives:  
*You don' know nothin'.*  
*I don' never have no lunch.*
- Copula "be" deletion:  
*He nice.*  
*You crazy.*
- Habitual "be":  
*The coffee be cold. (= always)*  
*He be tired out. (habitually)*

### **AAE Morphosyntax**

- Absence of possessive -s:  
*John hat; Byron car*
- Absence of third person singular -s:  
*she talk; he sing*
- Absence of plural -s after quantifier:  
*three dog; some cat*
- Use of stressed “bin” as an auxiliary:  
*She bin married.*  
*I bin known him.*

### **AAE is just another English variety**

- So, as you can see, AAE differs from SAE in systematic ways, and in the same manner that other dialects of English differ from SAE.
- As usual, popular beliefs turn out to be rooted in irrationality and ignorance. Claims about the “deficiency,” “incompleteness,” and “illogicality,” of AAE are simply ridiculous and in fact should be ridiculed when made.

### **Next class agenda**

- More on sociolinguistic variation.  
Style, slang and jargon.  
Language and gender.