SOCIOLINGUISTIC VARIATION AND CHANGE

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Summary

All language is subject to variability; some is completely predictable, but some is not. What appears to be *free* and unconstrained variation between and within individuals often proves to be subject to probabilistic categorical linguistic and/or social constraints. This structured variability may be an indication of changes taking place in the language, thus diachronic studies of change may be complemented by synchronic studies of variation. The research methods and the quantitative analysis of such variation are reviewed. Key findings in variationist linguistics are discussed: the systematic distribution of variants in different styles and across different social groups (age, class or social network, gender). Striking parallels between the distribution of variants across different social categories emerge: for example, changes below conscious awareness are favored in more careful styles, by speakers from the middle (or lower middle) class and women. The meaning of these distributional parallels are considered. Finally, recent directions in the study of language variation and change are discussed. These include links with qualitative methods for studying language variation and the use of variable data to illuminate studies of language contact.

1. Sociolinguistics and the Study of Variation and Change

When you start to study any language, it immediately becomes clear that it contains a lot of inconsistencies and irregularities. Sometimes different people in a group of

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