



Electronic lectures on
Linguistics

Adapted from Yule's The Study
of Language

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Lecture 2

Language and Social Variation

1. Introduction: Language as a Social Marker

Language is not just a tool for communication; it is a way to signal who we are, where we come from, and who we want to be. Sociolinguistics explores the relationship between language and society, focusing on how different social groups use language differently.

2. Core Concepts

The Speech Community: A group of people who share a set of norms and expectations regarding the use of language.

Sociolinguistic Variation: This is the study of why people in the same community speak differently. It is often linked to:

Social Class: Studies (such as those by William Labov) show that certain pronunciations (like the dropping of the "r" in "car") are strongly correlated with social class and economic status.

Age and Gender: Differences in how men and women use language (e.g., politeness strategies, hedges, or pitch) and how younger generations develop unique slang compared to older generations.

Idiolect vs. Sociolect:

Idiolect: The unique linguistic system of an individual (your personal voice).

Sociolect: A variety of language associated with a specific social group (e.g., "teen talk," or professional jargon).

Style and Register:

Style: Shifting between formal and informal language depending on the setting (Style-shifting).

Register: Using specific vocabulary and structures suited to a particular situation (e.g., a "medical register" used by doctors vs. a "layman" register).

Slang and Jargon:

Slang: Used by groups to mark social identity and distance themselves from others. It is often temporary and age-based.

Jargon: Specialized terminology used by professionals or hobbyists to increase efficiency and demonstrate *in-group* membership.

3. The Concept of Covert Prestige

Yule introduces an interesting paradox: sometimes, speakers actually avoid using *standard* or *prestigious* language. They may intentionally use non-standard forms to show loyalty to their peer group or community. This is called *covert prestige*, and it explains why certain dialects or slang terms persist despite pressure to *speak correctly*.

4. Key Discussion Points for Students

1. The Prestige Trap: Why do we often associate certain accents with *intelligence* or *authority* even when there is no linguistic basis for that judgment?

2. Social Media and Language: How is the digital age changing our social dialects? Are we moving toward a global sociolect, or are we creating more micro-dialects through online communities?

3. Code-Switching: Do you find yourself shifting how you speak when you are with your family versus when you are in a professional/academic setting?

5. Critical Thinking Activity: *The Accent Bias* Experiment

Play audio clips of speakers with different regional or social accents. Ask students to describe the speaker's likely profession, level of education, and personality based only on their voice. Discuss how these results reveal societal biases and stereotypes rather than linguistic facts.

Lecture Supplement: Key Terms (Glossary)

Sociolinguistics: The study of the relationship between language and society.

Standard Language: An idealized variety of a language that is used as a norm for public, educational, and professional contexts.

Accent vs. Dialect: An accent refers only to pronunciation, while a dialect includes specific vocabulary and grammar rules.

Style-Shifting: Changing the formality of one's language based on the social context.

