

The Sociolinguistic Tool Kit

Readings: Crystal pp. 10-13

In this lecture, let's take one word and trace its adventures in sociolinguistic space...

It's a word we heard in lecture.

"UN-BLINKIN-BELIEVABLE," said Rand...

- ...and then he asked himself why.
- He didn't answer, "because English derivational resources allow infixing."
- No, he answered "not to offend you."
- His answer fell outside *formal linguistic* explanation, which he was teaching.
- English derivational morphology explains how he *could* say "un-blinkin-believable"...
- But what kind of linguistics explains why he *did*?

Sociolinguistics.

- Here is another tool kit:
 - not an account of language as a set of *rules*,
 - but an account of language as an arena of *actions*.
- It answers questions like, “what’s offensive and why?” “How do people offend and defend with words?” “Why does that matter?”

Let’s take it from the top,

Starting with the most basic
question of all:

Why do humans talk?

- **“To communicate.” “To exchange facts and ideas.”** (*referential use*).
 - What, if anything, does “-blinkin-” refer to?
- **Emotion**
 - What emotional “color” did “-blinkin-” give?

■ **Social connection** (*phatic use*)

- Did this word choice increase our “connectedness?”

■ **Sound power**

- Do English words with “-blinkin-” in some way compel with sound?

■ **Controlling reality** (*performative use*)

- Did this word choice actually change the world?

■ **Recording**

- Did “-blinkin-” give his utterance more power to last through time?

■ **Language organizes thought**

- Did using an unusual word influence the way we organized our thinking?

■ **Language gives identity**

- What identity was being conveyed?

A provisional bottom line

Language *changes* thought, feeling, and social reality, as well as just talking “*about*” it referentially. So in using language we are actually constructing our world.

The sociolinguistic perspective:

- An analogy: it's like thinking about law versus political science.
- In law class we study how people *can* act—it's an abstract set of rules. Formal linguistics is about “laws” of language.
- In poli sci we study how people *do* act, using and also breaking the rules of law. Sociolinguistics is about language *action*.

The language variable (Stockwell 3)

- The *language variable* is the feature of speech whose use we want to explain, e.g. “-blinkin-”.
- Language variables can be of any level:
 - Code: What code(s) in play?
 - Style: What style choice?
 - Register: What register was he in?
 - Syntactic pattern: What sort of sentences was he making?
 - Lexical item: our object of study, “-blinkin-”.
 - Phonetic: What sound particulars do we notice?

Language variables in this speech event:

- Rand used English code
- In formal style
- In academic lecturing register.
- He used a rare morphological device, infixing in English
- To deliver a taboo lexical item...but drew back, using a euphemism.
- Phonetically, we heard n not ŋ

The *social variable*

- Social variables are attributes of an encounter that affect how people speak.
- Some are
 - Age (His, yours)
 - Place of origin (ditto)
 - Context of the conversation (what are our social roles here?)
 - Gender
 - Social class
 - Ethnicities...
- How did each of these condition “-blinkin-”?

A two-way street

- Stockwell emphasizes the way social variables “cause” language features.
- But an anthropologist might say that the language variable changes the social situation.
- How did “-blinkin-” alter the social reality of our group?

So in talk, we are shaping society itself. We are deciding

- who's "close," who's "far"
- who's "my people" or not
- who receives respect.
- All this can be a life-or-death matter.

Tools for studying relations
between social and language
variables.

(Continuing with Stockwell)

Dialect

- A **dialect** is a (geographically) regional way of using a given language's vocabulary and grammar.
- Everybody speaks a dialect – there's no way not to.
- English dialects: Appalachian, New England, "[Thames] Estuary," "Received" [Queen's] English, Jamaican, TV midwestern...

Dialect versus Language

- How different do codes have to be before we say they are different language?
- The rule of thumb is mutual intelligibility.
- Are midwestern and Jamaican English dialects of one language, or two languages?

From an on-line dictionary of "Jamaican Patwa"
<http://www.eng.miami.edu/~kbrown/rasta-la.ht>

BEX : vex (verb), or vexed (adjective). (5)

BHUTTU (BUHTUH) : an uncouth, out of fashion, uncultured person Use: Wey yu a go inna dem deh cloze? Yu fayva buttu (12)

BISSY : cola nut. (5)

BLY : chance, "must get a bly", "must get a chance". (4)

BOASIE : adj. proud, conceited, ostentatious. Combination of English boastful and Yoruba bosi-proud and ostentation. (7)

BOBO : fool. (5)

BRAA : from BREDDA; brother. (5)

BRAATA : a little extra; like the 13th cookie in a baker's dozen; or an extra helping of food. In musical shows it has come to be the encore. (5)

BREDREN : one's fellow male Rastas (1)

Dialect is about the higher-level features of language:

- a regional population's characteristic word choices
- and its syntactic (sentence constructing) rules.
- It's not the same as "accent."

Accent

- everybody speaks with an **Accent**.
- **Accent** is a regional, class (etc) way of producing a language's sounds.
- Accent refers only to pronunciation, where dialect refers to bigger features – vocabulary and grammar.

Accent, Stockwell's example: rhoticity

- Meaning how people do or don't pronounce the English /r/
- Most Americans speak rhotically: we do pronounce /r/ when it's not before a vowel. We do it a certain way, called retroflex (pulling the tongue tip back from the alveolus). "farm," "car"
- Scottish rhoticity realizes /r/ with a tongue trill, flicking tongue-tip against alveolus: "farm", "car"
- English in England is not rhotic: "farm," "car". Neither is New England speech – "pak youa ca at Havad yad."

There's wonderful research on dialect and accent.

- <http://www.utexas.edu/courses/linguistics/resources/socioling/boughtmap/boughtmap2.html>
- <http://polyglot.lss.wisc.edu/dare/dare.html>
Link: audio sampler

Register

- **Register** is a set of linguistic forms that belong to a kind of social occasion.
- Register differences are huge, but mostly unconscious. One is hardly ever aware of making a register choice

Each of these is a register:

- chatting on internet
- lecturing (Is “**-blinkin-**” part of the register?)
- conducting a nursing conference in medical jargon,
- playing a game of bridge,
- murmuring to a lover
- Improvising rap lines.

Sociolects are language varieties that reflect social background, in terms of occupation, education and social class. Examples:

- Academic talk
- Military speech
- The speech of a closed elite group, like an aristocracy
- The talk of outlaws and pariahs
- Cockney

Style

- **Style** is variation within a register or sociolect. Style moves like a slide switch along social dimensions.
- Examples of style scales:
 - Casual to formal (... “-blinkin-” ?)
 - Impersonal to intimate
 - Monologic to dialogic
 - Formulaic to creative (... “-blinkin-” ?)

Multilingualism, code switching, diglossia

- Is monolingualism normal? How about our class?
- Everybody is multi-something:
 - If not multilingual,
 - Multidialectal,
 - Familiar with many registers
 - Fluent on various style scales.
- In other words, everybody uses multiple codes.
- Codes are diglossic when they serve in different functional spheres.

(What’s a code?)

- A code is a set of signs that “stand for” other “things”:
 - Words are a code that stands for things & ideas
 - Chinese characters are a code that stands for words
 - Alphabet is a code that stands for segments of speech sound.
- Of course, different languages are different codes.
- But any single language can be considered as having multiple codes, because the set of signs and what they stand for varies by register, style, dialect etc.

The most obvious code switchers are bilingual people.

- **Compound Multilinguals** have
 - A “mother tongue” from childhood, his L1
 - A second language, his L2.
- A person with two co-equal L1's is a **coordinate bilingual**.

Codes and domains

- Each code is appropriate to a **domain** – a situation or context.
- And speakers jump around – we **code - switch**.

We also code-switch within one language:

- We all jump back and forth between registers, dialects, styles, etc.
- When Rand said “-blinkin-” ,he code-switched for just a moment .
- From what to what?
- Why?

Sociolinguistics and inequalities

- Social classes and ethnic groups have their own sociolects. When you use language you reveal your social status. It's costly to reveal low status.
- Example: NPR reported last week about "Black-sounding" names that cost people a chance at a job. "Jane gets a callback, but not LaTondra."

Labov's "R" in New Yo[r]k Study

- In NYC (unlike most of USA) people of lower social classes don't pronounce /r/ unless it's before a vowel:
 - not "fourth floor"
 - but "fawth flaw".
- New York's high social classes do speak "rhotically".

Dr. Labov goes shopping

- Labov went to department stores of different status.
- In each, he asked for what he knew was on the fourth floor. He pretended not to hear so people would repeat.
- He found that in middle and high class stores, employees of low social class would overemphasize the /r/ s in "fourth floor."
- ? They were **hypercorrecting** in their attempt to copy a prestige sociolect.

Genderlects: are there specific male/female lects?

- A hot topic these days.
- Why?
- Look at this chart “how to talk like a man/woman:

Feminine Communication Rules	Masculine Communication Rules
Include others: Use talk to show interest in others and respond to their needs.	Assert yourself: Use talk to establish your identity, expertise, knowledge, and so on.
Use talk cooperatively: Communication is a joint activity, so people have to work together. It's important to invite others into conversation, wait your turn to speak, and respond to what others say.	Use talk competitively: Communication is an arena for proving yourself. Use talk to gain and hold attention, to wrest the stage from others; interrupt and reroute topics to keep you and your ideas spotlighted.
Use talk expressively: Talk should deal with feelings, personal ideas, and problems and should build relationships with others.	Use talk instrumentally: Talk should accomplish things such as solving a problem, giving advice, or taking a stand on an issue.

Supposedly, acc. Robin Lakoff, female genderlect involves

- certain vocabulary (“sweet” “lovely”)
- rising intonation of surprise and questions
- tag phrases “you know”, “kind of”
- superpoliteness, like hedging in order not to seem domineering (“Can I ask you s.t.?”)
- women expect a steady stream of phatic sounds (“hmmm” “uh huh”).

"You're not listening"

- Men, according to D. Tannen, interpret the female phatic stream as interrupting with trivia.
- Women, she says experience male silent listening as not listening at all.
- The resulting bad communication, she says, reinforces gender conflict.

This is in hot debate.

- Some argue that female genderlect traits are really characteristics of underdog speech, not female-specific.
- Others are now finding that there are genderlects in many or all languages, but they do not vary the same way as in English.

Standardization versus Language Loyalty

- "Standard" varieties of most languages are the sociolects of ruling elites.
 - Castilian nobility in Spain
 - Southern English aristocracy in England
 - "Mandarin" Chinese
- As gatekeepers of media, they classify all other variants as "mere" dialects.

Standardization occurs through stages:

- Selection, pushing aside others. One type of midwestern has pushed aside Appalachian, New England and other American English.
- Codification: academe and schooling formalize exactly what features lie within standard.
- Elaboration: As a standard spreads, it acquires increasing range of uses, because new contexts adapt to it – like computing.
- Acceptance: The dominant sociolect comes to feel “neutral”. It disappears into the background of commonsense normality. People accept the Peter Jennings version of English as transparently “correct.”

BUT language loyalty chips away at standardization.

- Talking the sociolect of people we care for is a prime source and sign of loyalty.
- at high school, black kids consider speaking AAVE the true sign of loyalty to their group.
- Almost everybody is multi-sociolectal, and engaged in some small “language war” of this kind.
- When Rand says “-blinkin-”, is he showing a language loyalty? Fighting standardization? Why?

Politeness and “face” (Stockwell 22-24)

- Everybody wants to be accepted as “really” being what his social role suggests.
- Every time somebody speaks, he risks losing “face” or injuring somebody else’s.
- Politeness can be thought of as language strategy for protecting “face”.

Politeness and face saturate speech

- Languages encode this at all levels – for example, Korean has six discrete levels of politeness, not just the tu/vous (TV) of Europe, and they affect many linguistic levels.
- When Rand said “-blinkin-” he meant not to “offend”. Could that be recast as a “face” issue?

Bottom lines:

- The sociolinguistic approach is about the ways we **use** the formal structures of language, as opposed to the structures themselves.
- **The way we use them doesn't just reflect society, it creates society** – the actual fine tissue of human connectedness.
- And the way we create connections or barriers among speakers eventually feeds back to alter the structures themselves.
- Distancing encourages divergence of form, new sociolects, even new languages.
