

# 3

## *Levels of Dialect*

Dialect differences range from the obvious use of different words like *sub*, *hoagie*, *hero*, or *grinder* to the minute details of phonetic production and perception of word pairs like *dawn* and *Don*. They may also involve the way words are put together into sentences, as in *The house needs painted* vs. *The house needs painting*, and even how language is used in carrying out social routines, such as greeting people with *Hi*, *Hey*, *Yo*, or *S'up*. Levels of variation include the LEXICON, the vocabulary of a language; PHONOLOGY, the sound system of a language; GRAMMAR, the formation of words and sentences; SEMANTICS, the meanings of words; and PRAGMATICS, the use of language forms to perform different functions. In this chapter, we examine language variation on each of these different levels and consider how they may contribute to differentiation in American English.

### 3.1 Lexical Differences

One of the most obvious levels of dialect variation is the lexicon, or vocabulary, of a language. Most of us can remember times when our failure to recognize a word used by some regional or social group resulted in confusion, if not outright communication breakdown. We may have been surprised when we traveled to different places in the United States and ordered a *soda*, only to find that we received a simple carbonated drink in Philadelphia and a carbonated drink with ice cream in it in Chicago. Or we may have been surprised to discover that different people were referring to the same kind of animal when they talked about *mountain lions*, *cougars*, and sometimes even *panthers*. And many parents have shaken their heads in confusion when their teenagers described an extraordinary event or object as *tight*, *dope*, or *sick*. Just about everyone has a collection of favorite anecdotes about lexical differences among the dialects of English.

#### Dialect quiz

Because the relationship between a real-world object and the word used to describe it is almost always arbitrary, we often find different labels used to describe the same object (or idea) in social or regional space. For example, *green beans*, *string beans*, and *snap beans* are different labels for the same vegetable, while *sneakers*, *tennis shoes*, *gym shoes*, and *running shoes* may refer to the same basic type of athletic shoe when worn as casual footwear. We also find different words because we find diverse objects and activities in different regions. People who live in coastal areas routinely use a number of marine-related terms that those who live in inland areas away from the water may never have heard. The multitude of lexical items that arise in different dialect areas may spring from any of a number of word-formation processes.

We mentioned in chapter 2 that new words may be completely made up, in a process known as COINING; in addition, they may be borrowed from other languages or created out of already existing words. In table 3.1 some of the ways in which new words can be created are listed. These words may be associated with social groups or regional groups of various types, including groups who share a particular interest. A new word typically starts out with a restricted range of usage; if it persists only among a regional or social subset of speakers, it becomes established as a dialect form, but if it spreads across a wide range of English dialects, then it may become part of the English language as a whole. Table 3.1 illustrates both

broad-based and dialectally restricted items as developed through the different processes available for new word creation.

Not only do dialects use different words, but they may use the same words with different meanings. Meanings are fluid and transitory, and they may change in a number of ways over time and place. In one common type of change a word may BROADEN or NARROW its meaning. For example, when the word *barn* was brought from Britain to America, it was used to refer to a building that was used only for storing grain. Its meaning was gradually broadened so that it could be used to refer to a building for storing all sorts of farm-related items, including animals and machinery. However, this broadening took place only in America, resulting in a lexical difference between America and Britain; in Britain, *barn* still means a storage place for grain. Other broadenings that have occurred in the history of English affected such familiar words as *holiday* (originally “holy day”, a day of religious significance), *butcher* (originally, “slaughterer of goats”), *companion* (“someone with whom you share bread”), *bird* (“young bird”), and *drive* (“to drive an animal”). One type of broadening may affect brand names, which originate as labels for products manufactured by one particular company but may develop into more general terms for certain types of products. Americans throughout the country use *kleenex* to refer to facial tissues of any type and the use of the verb *google* for general browser searches. On a more restricted level, speakers in the rural American South may refer to all refrigerators as *frigidaire*s or *kelvinator*s or to all brands of carbonated beverages as *cokes* or *Co-Colas*.

Table 3.1 Some of the ways in which new words can be created

| <i>Process</i> | <i>Definition</i>  | <i>Examples</i>   |
|----------------|--|---|
| compounding    | two or more existing words are combined to form a new word                       | <i>in-group, honeysuckle, breakwater, fatback</i>   |
| acronyms       | new words are formed by taking the initial sounds or letters from existing words | <i>radar</i> (radio detecting and range)<br><i>WASP</i> (White Anglo Saxon Protestant)<br><i>UN</i> (United Nations)                |
| blending       | parts of two words are combined to form a new word                               | <i>smog</i> (smoke/fog)<br><i>brunch</i> (breakfast/lunch)<br><i>sitcom</i> (situation/comedy)<br><i>broasted</i> (broiled/roasted) |
| clipping       | words are formed by shortening existing words                                    | <i>gas</i> (gasoline)<br><i>dorm</i> (dormitory)<br><i>'za</i> (pizza)  |

|                |   |  |
|----------------|---|--|
| conversion     | words are shifted from one part of speech to another without any change in their form   | <i>run</i> (as a noun in “They scored a run”)<br><br><i>tree</i> (as a verb in “They treed a cat”)<br><br><i>breakwater</i> (as a verb in “Everything around the island is breakwatered.”) |
| proper names   | proper nouns, which refer to a specific person, place, or thing, are changed into common nouns, which refer to a general class of items     | <i>jello, frigidaire, xerox</i>  |
| borrowing      | words from other languages are incorporated into the language or dialect  | <i>chipmunk</i> (Ojibwa)<br><br><i>delicatessen</i> (German)<br><br><i>arroyo</i> (Spanish)  |
| folk etymology | words are altered to make their meanings more transparent   | <i>cold slaw</i> (from <i>cole slaw</i> ), <i>old timers’ disease</i> (from Alzheimer’s disease)   |
| back formation | shorter words are created from longer words based on the removal of what appears to be an affix but is in reality part of the original word | <i>burgle</i> from <i>burglar</i> , <i>orientate</i> from <i>orientation</i> , <i>conversate</i> from <i>conversation</i>  |
| recutting      | words are reanalyzed into component parts which differ from the original parts  | <i>an apron</i> (from <i>a napron</i> ), <i>-aholic</i> , as in <i>workaholic</i> (from <i>alcohol + ic</i> ), <i>a whole nother</i> (from <i>an + other</i> )                             |
| derivation     | words are created through the addition of a derivational affix  | <i>bewitched</i> from <i>bewitch + ed</i> ;<br><i>reconsignment</i> from <i>re + consign + ment</i>  |

Narrowings are also commonplace in American English language variation. The word *meat* once referred to food in general but now refers to only one type of food. Similarly, the word *deer* referred to any type of animal, and the word *girl* could once be used to refer to a child of either sex. As with broadenings, some narrowings affected American English but left British English untouched. The word *corn* in Britain is still used to refer to any type of grain, while its meaning has narrowed to refer to only one specific type in America. Innumerable English words have narrowed or broadened in meaning over time, and this is an ongoing process.

Another type of change is MEANING SHIFT, or a change in the primary meaning of a word, often in the direction of one of the word’s sub-meanings. One of the most noteworthy historical examples of meaning shift involves the word *bead*. Originally, this word meant “prayer”, but it came to refer to a particular type of jewelry because rosary beads were often worn in the Middle Ages while saying prayers. Other shifts include *knight* (originally, “young

person”), *nice* (originally “ignorant”), and even *pen* (from the Latin *penna* “feather”). Some meaning shifts involve FIGURATIVE EXTENSION, or metaphorical extension, in which the use of a word is extended so that it can refer to items that are very different from those originally referred to, based on a common meaning feature shared by the two classes of items. For example, the term *submarine*, which literally refers to an underwater boat, has been figuratively extended to apply to a type of sandwich that is similar in shape to the seagoing vessel. *Virus* was once associated with a broad range of biological infections, but one sense has been extended to propagation of a debilitating code in a computer program or across a network. And *viral* can now be used for the rapid, widespread spread of any information as in *to go viral*. In fact, one could say that “new words often go viral.”

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### Exercise 1

Following are some sets of lexical items that reflect the cross-dialectal vocabulary differences we find in the regional dialects of American English. For each set of words, first attempt to determine whether the different terms are the result of the broadening or narrowing of a general English word or of lexical innovation. If the word represents an innovation, which of the processes discussed above (e.g. compounding, borrowing, etc.) were used to create the word? Are there cases which seem to involve figurative extension?

- 1 baby’s breath/chalkweed/mist “a type of plant, gypsophila”
  - 2 bathroom, restroom, washroom, toilet “toilet facilities in a public place”
  - 3 sneakers, running shoes, tennis shoes, gym shoes, runners “athletic shoes as casual footwear”
  - 4 earthworm/angleworm/fishing worm/night crawler “a type of worm used in fishing”
  - 5 metro/underground/subway “underground railway system”
  - 6 cashier/check-out/register “place where you pay in a store”
  - 7 ATM/bank machine/cash machine/guichet “machine that performs banking services”
  - 8 lowland/low ground/bottom land/savannah “land that usually has some standing water with trees or bushes growing on it”
  - 9 snap beans/string beans/green beans “a type of vegetable with a stringy fiber on the pods”
  - 10 beltline, beltway, loop, perimeter “a road that encircles a metropolitan area”
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The inventory of lexical differences in varieties of American English covers a wide range of categories, and the number of dialectally restricted words runs well into the thousands. In the questionnaire for eliciting items in the *Dictionary of American Regional English (DARE)*, some 41 different categories of lexical difference are outlined. Topography, food, furniture, animals, and equipment related to rural occupations lead the list, but the range of possible

differences is virtually unlimited and encompasses many terms for physical and emotional states as well as those for concrete items. Some current lists of regional lexical items (Boberg 2005) tend to focus more on fast foods, technology, and transportation than those in *DARE*'s original survey conducted more than a half-century ago. We have seen that the general public can become quite infatuated by the graphic, regional distribution of these terms, as indicated by the fact that the most-viewed online article in the *New York Times* in 2013 (38 million hits) involved a heat-map visualization of popular lexical differences in regional dialects of the United States (<http://www.ling.cam.ac.uk/survey>).

So far, we have focused *exclusively* on lexical differences in so-called CONTENT WORDS – words that refer to objects, ideas, events, or states in the real (or imagined) world. Differences also pertain to FUNCTION WORDS such as prepositions (e.g. *in, on, under*) and articles (e.g. *the, a/an*), items more likely to indicate grammatical information than semantic content. In many cases, differences in function words are confined to particular phrases. For example, different prepositions may be used in the phrase *sick to/at/in/on one's stomach* and *of/in the morning* (as in *We drink coffee of the morning*), while different articles may appear in a sentence such as *I've got a/the toothache*. In other cases, the difference involves the use or non-use of a function word in a particular type of construction. Thus, speakers in some dialect areas will not use a preposition with specific location, as in *She lives \_\_\_ Coal City* where other varieties say *She lives in Coal City*. In recent years, the word *because* (without the *of*) has exploded in new ways to introduce a noun, adjective, or other part of speech instead of a full clause. Thus we may say *because linguistics, because reasons*—or as the advertisement during the last World Cup soccer tournament, *because fútbol*. *Because* was voted “Word of the Year” by the American Dialect Society in 2014 “because useful.”

In most instances, the kinds of lexical differences we have discussed above are considered to be regional curiosities, and little significance in terms of social status or personal worth is attached to them. Lexical differences do carry social associations on other dimensions, such as urban vs. rural or “modern” vs. “old-fashioned,” but people are not usually socially stigmatized purely on the basis of saying *soda* versus *pop*, or *sneakers* versus *tennis shoes*. TABOO WORDS, popularly known by such labels as “four-letter words,” “swear words,” or “curse words,” constitute an exception to this observation. These items certainly stigmatize their users in particular social situations, but in American society, these items are viewed more in terms of socially appropriate behavior than of social group or regional differentiation. Speakers of any social class or ethnic group may be considered ill-mannered if they use these terms in inappropriate circumstances. All dialect groups recognize taboo terms, although the conventions for usage may differ to some extent from group to group, as do the classification of particular terms as taboo items. The use of *bloody* as an intensifier (e.g. *Where's the bloody car?*) is considered acceptable, if odd, in American English but is quite offensive to British English ears, while the word *tits* to refer to female breasts is not nearly as unacceptable in some rural American dialects as it is in non-rural varieties.

Some sets of vocabulary items are associated with groups of speakers who share a particular interest rather than with regional or sociocultural groups of speakers. These interests may range from technical or academic fields such as computer programming or linguistics to recreational activities like football, aerobics, or popular music. Any novice computer user who is looking for *user-friendly documentation* on how to set up *email filters* to avoid getting too much *spam* is well aware of the specialized vocabulary that has grown up around computer technology. Similarly, a casual observer of a Sunday afternoon football game may have no idea what is meant when they are told that “The *Seahawks' nickel defense* sacked the *Forty-Niners' quarterback* in the *shotgun formation* with a *safety blitz* while in a *cover three*.” Such specialized vocabularies, or JARGONS, cut across all types of social groups and arise via the same processes of word formation and meaning change that give rise to regional, social class, ethnic, and gender-based lexical differences. In popular culture, the term “jargon” is

sometimes used by confused or annoyed observers to refer to vocabulary which seems to be purposely obscure. However, what may be incomprehensible “mumbo-jumbo” to outsiders may simply be a necessity for precise, detailed communications among those who are involved in a specific field.

A more deliberately secretive jargon, such as a special vocabulary used by criminals, is referred to as an ARGOT (pronounced as *are-got*). A few dialectologists and lexicologists have become outstanding specialists in the vocabulary of various “underworld” groups, although special fieldwork problems are associated with the investigation of such communities of practice. Such study might, however, be a convenient fieldwork project for a wayward linguist who has been sentenced to spend time in prison.

### 3.2 Slang

In popular culture, the label “slang” is used freely to refer to everything from the general use of a vernacular dialect (e.g. “They don’t speak standard English; they speak slang”) to specialized vocabulary words that are technically considered jargon (e.g. “Computer people use a lot of slang”) to individual words that are socially stigmatized (e.g. “*Ain’t* is a slang word”). The rather loose, imprecise way the term slang has sometimes caused dialectologists to shy away from using this label at all. The *Dictionary of American Regional English* explicitly rejects the use of this label because it is “imprecise” and “too indefinite” (Cassidy 1985: xvii). At the same time, some dictionary-makers, or LEXICOGRAPHERS, employ the term with varying degrees of reliability among them. In addition, there exist special dictionaries devoted to slang, such as the *Historical Dictionary of American Slang* (Lighter 1994, 1997), *Slang U!* (Munro 1989), and *Slang and Sociability: In-Group Language Among College Students* (Eble 1996), as well as websites that feature many words that are considered to be slang, such as the well-known Urban Dictionary (<http://urbandictionary.com>) and the Online Slang Dictionary (<http://onlineslangdictionary.com>).

From a strictly linguistic standpoint, words are words, and those that are labeled as “slang” are formed linguistically no differently from any other lexical item. In fact, many slang terms are simply common lexical items that are recycled with new meanings; for example, terms like *cool*, *sick*, *fresh*, *wicked* and *tight* for “exceptionally good” are all common adjectives in English with non-slang uses. From the perspective of language as a kind of social behavior, however, there does seem to be a group of slang words that have a special status in American culture. What distinguishes these items is their sociopsychological role and social function rather than their linguistic composition. As Connie Eble puts it, “Slang is vocabulary with attitude” (2004: 382). The notion of relegating some words to this special status has been around a long time (over 2,000 years, according to some records), and serious sociolinguists and psycholinguists can hardly afford to dismiss this specialized use of items on the basis of a “lack of precision.” And we are starting to understand the specialized role that these items fulfill for different groups in our society (Eble 2004; Adams 2009; Ayto and Simpson 2010).

Part of the problem with defining slang comes from the fact that terms are based on a *set* of characteristics rather than a single criterion. One of the essential traits of slang is its association with informality. Granted that formality and informality are not easy to define in themselves, there are some social situations that are readily identified as formal or informal. In situations that we intuitively feel are informal, we find that formal words simply sound “wrong” or inappropriate while the opposite is true in situations we consider formal. Slang items are always found at the informal end of the continuum. A person who is rather slow-witted or oblivious to his or her surroundings might be described variously as *incognizant*, *unenlightened*, *unaware*, *blind*, *dense*, *clueless*, *spacey*, or *trippin’* but the social occasions considered appropriate for these different items differ drastically. Imagine how a

student would feel if he or she walked out of a meeting with an academic advisor who had just accused him or her of “trippin’” on a major exam – or how a teenager would feel if her or his best friend referred to a friend as “incognizant” or “unwitting” during a lunchtime conversation. In each case, the terms used would be considered inappropriate because slang terms such as *trippin’* are reserved for informal occasions while formal terms such as *incognizant* are more appropriate for use on formal, serious occasions than in casual conversation among peers. Words classified as slang carry strong informal overtones.

### [TED talk: What makes a word "real"?](#)

Another attribute of slang is its potential for referencing a group outside the mainstream adult population. An item like *sick* for “exceptionally good” is not only marked as informal, it is also associated with speakers who fall within a relatively narrow age range and who are considered to be “less responsible” than the adult members of society. Similarly, word usages associated with minority ethnic groups might be labeled slang, such as the terms *brother*, *bro*, *sister*, and *girl* as used by African Americans with a special in-group meaning to refer to other African Americans. As (Chapman (1986: xi) notes “the black influence on American slang has been more pervasive in recent times than any other ethnic group in history.” In part, this is because the vocabulary from non-mainstream cultures often strikes members of mainstream culture as novel, rich, and imaginative (Eble 2004: 383).

Slang items are also often cultivated in the context of close-knit peer groups, and the idea that the particular use of a term might be difficult for outsiders to understand may make it even more appealing as a symbol of in-group membership. This is one reason why teenagers and college students, with their emphasis on peer-group relationships, are often the primary source of new slang terms. That adults and people in other locales are totally unfamiliar with these terms is hardly a problem – in fact, teenagers may revel in the restricted sphere of usage of their terms. Not all items classified as slang have strong reference group associations, but many of the most recognizable cases of slang do.

### [Video: New lyrics for old people](#)

Another characteristic of slang is its role as a special kind of synonym. Slang terms typically have well-known, more neutral, conventional synonyms. English speakers who use *kick the bucket* for “die”, *wasted* for “drunk”, or *dope* for “exceptionally good” generally know that a neutral, alternate term exists but choose not to use it. The slang term is thus viewed as an intentional replacement, or a “flouting,” of the conventional, more neutral term that might have been used. Listeners presume that a person who uses *lunchin’* is deliberately choosing not to use a conventional term such as *unaware* and that a speaker who uses *barf*, *puke*, *ralph*, *yak*, or *worship the porcelain goddess* instead of *regurgitate*, *vomit*, or *throw up* is making a deliberate choice. On one level, slang projects a deliberate sense of irreverence or defiance of “proper” behavior.

Slang terms are often perceived as having a short life span, and certainly some items are short-lived, particularly those associated with localized or temporary social groups. But many items have considerable staying power. *Dough* for “money”, *cram* for “study intensely for a short period of time”, and *smooth* for “excellent”, have been around since at least the turn of the twentieth century – much longer than many terms that have been adopted as conventional words. The senior author remembers using the term *cool* as a teenager and thinking that it would probably not last very long. A half-century later, he was surprised to elicit the same term when he asked a group of college students to give him the latest terms for describing something exceptionally good. In popular culture, slang tends to be viewed as ephemeral and destined to be short-lived, notwithstanding the reality that some items have persisted as slang

terms for quite a long time and show no signs of fading out or becoming part of mainstream English. It is impossible to predict which of today's slang words will become part of the lexical stock of mainstream English, which will die, and which will remain "slangy" for years to come.

In discussing slang, we have to keep in mind that slang tends to exist on a continuum and that one person's slang may also be another person's conventional lexical item. Some items, however, are considered slang by virtually all English speakers, while others, which possess some but not all of these attributes, are of more indeterminate status. So far, we have yet to find a native speaker of American English who does not consider items like *sick* or *dope* for "excellent" to be slang, but there is much more latitude in the classification of other items, such as *rip off* for "steal" or *buck* for "money". The items *sick* and *dope* are closely associated with non-mainstream, in-group youth culture in informal settings. On the other hand, a term like *rip off* for "steal" is relatively informal and not associated with a particular in-group; it is now used in some relatively neutral contexts. Furthermore, *rip off* has been around for quite a while, while *buck* for "dollar" was first attested in 1856. Situated between slang and conventional lexical items are items that are sometimes referred to as COLLOQUIAL – that is, items that share the attribute of informality with slang but are not closely associated with in-group identity or with flouted synonymy. While all slang terms are probably colloquial, not all colloquialisms are slang. Of course, the distinction between colloquialism and slang is not always discrete either.

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### Exercise 2

Rate the following items in terms of how strongly you feel that each constitutes a "slang" item. Use a three-point scale, where 3 is the highest (you have a strong feeling that the item is slang) and 1 is the lowest (you don't believe that the item is slang). For example, an item like *dope* for "excellent" might be given a rating of 3 while *great* would be given a 1.

- 1            chicken "afraid"
- 2            zilch "nothing"
- 3            buck "dollar"
- 4            out to lunch "unaware"
- 5            frisk "search"
- 6            na mean "you know what I mean"
- 7            awesome "excellent"
- 8            aite "all right"
- 9            stupendous "excellent"
- 10          cool "excellent"

What is it about these items that determines your ratings? In your response, you should consider the factors of informality, in-group association, existence of neutral synonyms, and anticipated life span.

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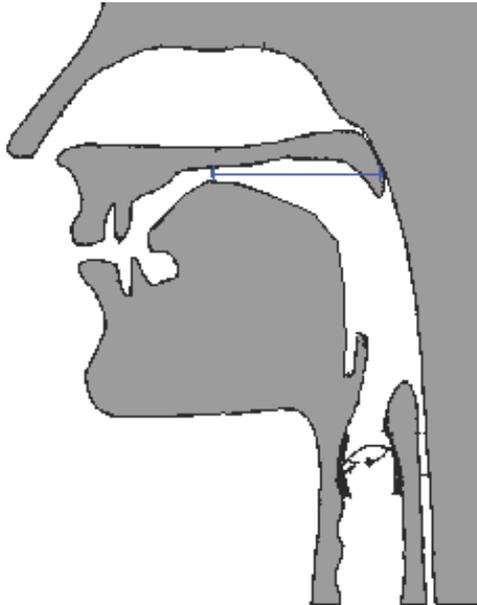
More recent investigations of slang have examined its indexical role in interactional discourse to authenticate different identities (Reyes 2005, 2011; Bucholtz 2011). Angela Reyes (2011), for example, describes how a group of Asian American teenagers in Philadelphia appropriated two African American slang terms, *aite* “all right” and *na mean* “know what I mean” by looking at their conversational use, including explicit discussions of the slang terms. Some teenagers racialized slang as belonging to African Americans, but it also served other social functions. It was used to separate youth from adult and in-group versus out-group Asian American youth based on region and local ties with African Americans. Slang emerged as linguistic capital in the teens’ construction of social boundaries with each other, as well as boundaries with other groups, thus serving multiple functions related to group reference. Interactional studies such as these show that slang can have a powerful role in indexing social groups, particularly for youth and minorities.

### 3.3 Phonological Differences

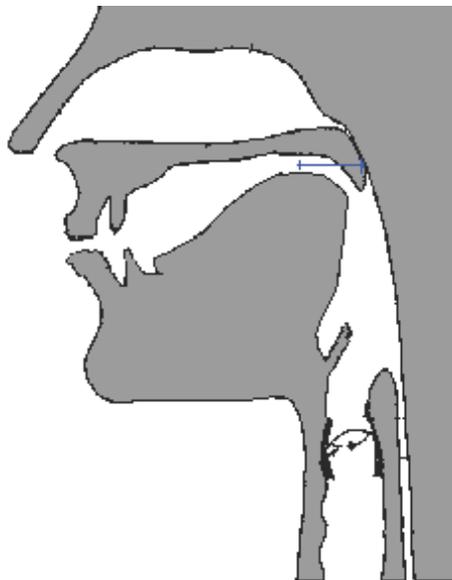
Listeners are quick to hone in on the distinctive vowel sounds associated with “the Southern drawl,” the “broad *a*” and “dropped *r*” of Boston speech, or the pronunciation of *swimmin’* for *swimming* in vernacular dialects across the country. At the same time, some phonetic differences are quite subtle and may not be noticeable to casual observers – or even to the speakers themselves– although they still serve to set apart different dialects. Phonological and phonetic patterns can be indicative of regional and/or sociocultural differences, and a person who has a good ear for language variation can often pinpoint a speaker’s general regional, social, and ethnic affiliation with considerable accuracy based solely on phonology. Even in today’s increasingly interconnected world, the use of a few critical pronunciation cues can narrow down a person’s place of origin to at least a general region of the United States, if not to the precise county of origin.

Phonological differences may be manifested in several ways. One of the most striking differences involves the pronunciation of various vowel sounds. As discussed in chapter 2, it is quite possible for a sound to be pronounced in a number of different ways but still be considered a single meaningful sound or phoneme. For example, the way in which the vowel in *hawk*, *broad*, and *taut*, the so-called THOUGHT vowel, is produced varies widely. In some regions, it may sound close to the vowel in *book* and *look*, the FOOT vowel, while in others it sounds like the LOT vowel in *rob* and *swan*.

Phoneticians often describe vowels according to where the tongue is located in the mouth during their production, so they talk about back vowels, front vowels, high vowels, and low vowels. For example, in the following cross-sectional diagrams of the mouth, we see the approximate location of the tongue in the production of the FLEECE vowel (also *beet*, *leap*, etc.) and the GOOSE vowel (also *boot*, *stoop*) in a default, ideal MAE. In the production of the FLEECE vowel in figure 3.1 the tongue is moved forward and high in the mouth so we would call this a high front vowel. The line indicates the prominent point of resonance from the back of the mouth. Linguists use a special alphabet, the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), to capture the sound phonetically (see inside cover) but we will rely on the “keyword” indicator here to indicate the vowel for more efficient reference with the understanding that this does not always capture the phonetics of the vowel precisely. In the production of GOOSE vowel in figure 3.2, the tongue position is high and back. It is virtually impossible to talk about vowels without this referring to the relative position of the tongue, though our details here are quite limited.



*Figure 3.1* Position of the tongue in the pronunciation of the FLEECE vowel [i]



*Figure 3.2* Position of the tongue in the production of the GOOSE vowel [u]

Determining the precise tongue position of vowels has been greatly aided by software technology developed over the past few decades, so that we can now measure the acoustics resulting from the articulation (as well as actual production through ultrasound technology) in a precise way through software programs that provide a visual image of sound waves. The most common format is a graph with two geometric dimensions: the horizontal axis represents time and the vertical axis represents frequency, which we hear as pitch. The tongue usually divides

the resonancy within the mouth into a least two sections—one behind the tongue and one in front of it.

As we move the tongue to produce different vowels and consonants, the shape of primary sections change, affecting the peaks of the acoustic resonance measured in hertz. In the examples given in figures 3.3 and 3.4, these peaks are indicated by dark lines that roughly correspond to the position of tongue called FORMANTS. The lowest formant (F1) corresponds approximately to the front-back dimension of vowels, the position below the line in figures 3.1 and 3.2. The second formant (F2) approximates the high-low dimension of the vowel, the position in the mouth in front of the tongue in figures 3.1 and 3.2. The chart also shows the FUNDAMENTAL FREQUENCY, F0, the lowest frequency of a periodic waveform, or “basic pitch.” The graph charts the movement of the tongue throughout the duration of the vowel production. Using such applications, we can measure how the tongue moves as it produces vowels across dialects in a precise way rather than relying on our auditory impressions. To illustrate, look at two dialect productions of the long vowel *i* in a word like *tide*, the so-called PRICE vowel. The spectrogram, the technical term for this kind of graph, captures the clear rising movement of the tongue in the production of *tide* by a speaker from Vermont in figure 3.3. The spectrogram in figure 3.4 is of a traditional Southern speaker saying the same word. In this spectrogram, the second formant remains consistent, meaning the tongue does not move or glide as it did for the Vermont speaker. We’ll discuss the nature of gliding shortly in vowels below.

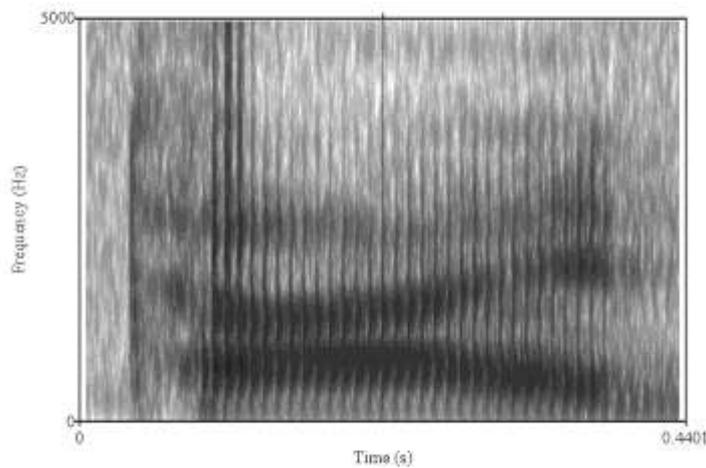


Figure 3.3 Spectrogram of glided *tide* as produced by a Northern speaker (Vermont)

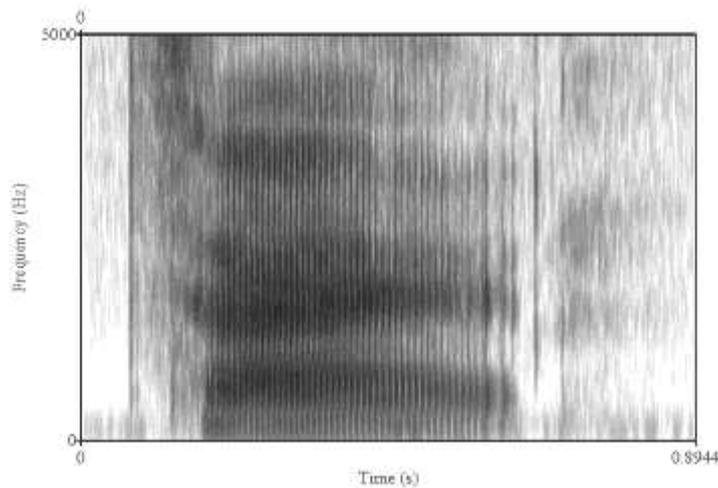


Figure 3.4 Spectrogram of unglided *tide* as produced by a Southern speaker (North Carolina)

The point of the illustrations is to not to lose readers in technical jargon—we often do that without trying—but to show how precise and detailed the analysis of phonetic detail in vowels can be with this kind of visual representation of acoustic signals. Phonetics has become a highly specialized and technically sophisticated science, allowing us to explore the nature of microscopic phonetic detail in the differences and similarities between varieties of English that we discuss here. Most of our observations about vowels are based on this type of evidence though we don't discuss the technical details in the description.

As we discussed in chapter 2, a pronunciation change in one vowel often sets off a kind of domino effect in related vowel sounds, resulting in a wholesale vowel shift or CHAIN SHIFT. A convenient picture of where the tongue is positioned during the production of various vowels can be illustrated by a chart in which the roof of the mouth is located along the top, the front of the mouth on the left-hand side, and the back of the mouth on the right. The result is a chart such as that in figure 3.5. Note that the chart is not drawn as a square because the space in our mouths is more trapezoidal in nature. For each vowel, the phonetic symbol in the IPA and keyword are given.

## Levels of Dialect

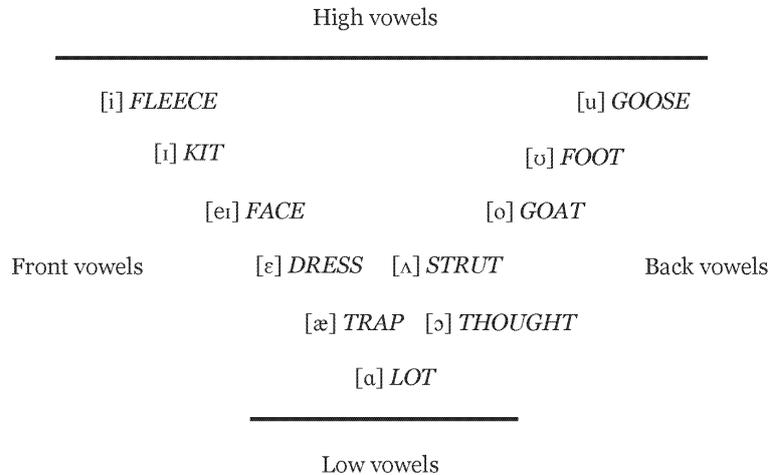


Figure 3.5 A chart of American English vowels according to tongue position

Figure 3.5 indicates that each vowel has its own “space,” referred to as PHONETIC SPACE, within the vowel trapezoid. As one vowel moves phonetically closer to a nearby vowel (e.g. the TRAP vowel [æ] in *bad* and *cab* may move forward and upward, into the “territory” of the DRESS vowel [ɛ] in *met* and *mess*, the second vowel may shift its phonetic value to ensure that the two vowels remain phonetically distinct enough to make meaningful distinctions in words – that is, to remain distinct phonemes. This second movement may trigger the movement of a third vowel, and thus a whole sequence of movements is set in motion. For example, there are currently some dialects of American English in which the lowering and fronting of the THOUGHT vowel [ɔ] to the LOT vowel [ɑ], so that a word like *caught* sounds like *cot*, has triggered the fronting of the LOT vowel closer to the BATH vowel, so that *lock* sounds almost like *lack* and *stock* like *stack*. This shift in turn is causing the BATH-vowel words (e.g. *bat*, *lack*) to sound more like the DRESS-vowel words (e.g. *bet*, *wreck*) – or even the FACE-vowel words (e.g. *bait*, *lake*) so that words such as *bag* and *bad* may sound something like *beg* and *bed* (or even *bade*). This vowel movement or VOWEL ROTATION, illustrated in figure 3.6, is part of a vowel shift pattern currently taking place in the Northern United States surrounding the Great Lakes Region, particularly in large cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and Buffalo. We will discuss this shift in more detail in chapter 5, as well as a couple of other important vowel shifts that are currently taking place in American English dialects.

# Levels of Dialect

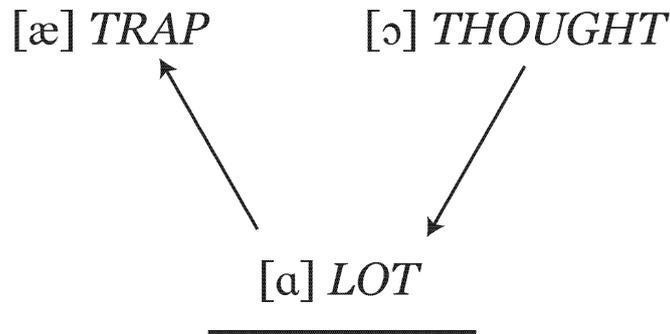


Figure 3.6 An illustration of chain shifting in the low vowels of American English

Chain shifting has also played a large part in the historical development of English. In fact, if it weren't for a major chain shift which took place from around 1450 to 1650, today's English would sound more like the English of Chaucer's time than the English we are used to hearing today. For example, words with the PRICE vowel (as in *tide*, *time*) would be pronounced with FLEECE vowel (phonetically [i]), as they were in Middle English (and as they still are in a number of continental European languages); FLEECE words would be pronounced with FACE vowels (e.g., *meet* would sound like *mate*); while words with MOUTH vowel (e.g., *house*, *sound*) would be pronounced with GOOSE vowel, as in *hoos* for *house*). In fact, we can still hear some of these old pronunciations in some dialect areas in the British Isles; for example, some Scots English speakers may say *hoos* for *house* or *neet* for *night*. In the United States, there are isolated pockets, for example, along the Southeastern coast and in the Appalachian Mountains, where a few older speakers still pronounce *anyhow* as *anyhoo*.

There are several English vowel sounds that we haven't included in the chart in figure 3.5: the PRICE vowel of *side* and *time*, the MOUTH vowel of *down* and *out*, and the CHOICE vowel of *boy* and *toy*. These sounds, called DIPHTHONGS, are each made up of two different vowel sounds and are pronounced by gliding the tongue from one sound into the other. The diphthong is produced by gliding from LOT vowel to the FLEECE vowel or KIT vowel ([ai] or [aɪ]) the MOUTH vowel is produced by gliding from LOT vowel to the GOOSE vowel; and the CHOICE diphthong is produced by gliding from the THOUGHT vowel to the FLEECE vowel ([ɔi]). In each case, the first element of the diphthong is called the NUCLEUS, since it is the central part of the vowel, and the second element is called the GLIDE, since speakers "glide" up to this vowel in producing the diphthong. Not all speakers of American English pronounce these diphthongs exactly as we have just described; in fact, differences in diphthongs can be highly salient in terms of delimiting different dialects. Southern Americans are perhaps more

well-known for their pronunciation of the PRICE vowel more like the LOT vowel in *tahm* for *time* than for any other dialect feature. The pronunciation change affecting /ai/ in Southern speech is referred to as UNGLIDING or MONOPHTHONGIZATION, since speakers have taken the PRICE diphthong – a two-part vowel – and turned it into a one-part vowel by leaving off the glide, or at least drastically shortening it. In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the ungliding of MOUTH vowel as in something like *dahntown* for *downtown*, is so distinctive that it is often cited as one of the defining features of the dialect known as “Pittsburghese.”

A slightly different type of ungliding occurs in areas of the Midwest where English has been influenced by Scandinavian languages. In most dialects of American English, tense vowels such as FACE and GOAT vowels are actually produced with a slight glide, as in something (as in [eI] for /e/ and [oU] for /o/) but this difference is not phonemic, that is, it doesn’t differentiate words. However, in parts of the Midwest, particularly the northern Midwest, /e/ and /o/ may be pronounced without the glide, as in the stereotypical pronunciation of the next-to-last syllable of *Minnesota* as *soht* – that is, with a longer, unglided GOAT vowel. This ungliding may also be found in a few other regionally restricted dialect areas, such as Charleston, South Carolina.

Along the Southeastern coastal area, extending from the Eastern Shore of Maryland down through the Outer Banks of North Carolina, there is an unusual production of the MOUTH vowel in which the second half of the vowel, the glide, sounds more like the FLEECE vowel [i] rather than the GOOSE vowel [u]. Thus, we may hear pronunciations such as *hace* [hæIs] for *house* or *brane* [bræIn] for *brown*. In fact, outsiders hearing this pronunciation often confuse the word *brown* with *brain*.

The pronunciation of the nucleus, or first part, of a diphthong may also serve to distinguish dialects from one another. For example, the nucleus of the PRICE vowel in some regions may be pronounced more backed and raised in the mouth so that it sounds something like (though not identical to) the CHOICE vowel. Residents of the Outer Banks islands are so well known for this production, as in *toid* for *tide* or *toim* for *time*, that they are often called – and call themselves – “hoi toiders” for “high tiders.” This pronunciation is found in East coast island areas such as Tangier and Smith Islands in the Chesapeake Bay, but it is also found in some isolated inland areas of the South as well. It is also found to a lesser extent in New York City English and a few other locations, though it doesn’t seem to be as noticeable in these areas as along the Southeastern and Mid-Atlantic coast.

In other dialect areas, such as Philadelphia, the nucleus of the MOUTH vowel may be pronounced with a TRAP-vowel nucleus [æ] rather than a LOT-vowel nucleus, so that a word like *down* is pronounced as [dæUŋ], while in an area such as Tidewater Virginia (and in many parts of Canada) with a nucleus more like the STRUT vowel like ‘uh’, so that a phrase such as “out and about” may come out sounding more like “oat and a-boat,” at least to the casual listener. Lots of dialect differences may affect the diphthongs of English, including differences in the pronunciation of both the nucleus and the glide. A partial list of some of these differences is given below.

#### *Differences in the production of the nucleus*

Backing, raising of the nucleus of PRICE vowel /ai/ in *tide* (Outer Banks of North Carolina; Charleston, South Carolina)

Fronting and raising of the nucleus of in the MOUTH vowel /au/ (e.g. Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, other regions)

Raising of the nucleus of the nucleus of the MOUTH vowel (e.g. Ontario, Canada; Tidewater Virginia)

Raising of the nucleus of PRICE vowel /ai/ (Tidewater Virginia; Canada)

*Differences in glide production*

Ungliding of PRICE-vowel diphthong before non-voiceless consonants, *tahd* (tide), *tahm* (time), *bah* (buy) (South)

Ungliding of PRICE-vowel diphthong in all phonetic contexts (e.g. Highland South, Texas South)

Ungliding of MOUTH diphthong in *down* (e.g. Pittsburgh)

Ungliding of CHOICE-vowel diphthong in *boil*, *oil* (e.g. parts of the South)

Ungliding of GOAT vowel [got] (e.g. parts of Minnesota, Wisconsin; Charleston, South Carolina)

Ungliding of FACE vowel [fes] (e.g. parts of Minnesota, Wisconsin; Charleston, South Carolina)

Fronting of the MOUTH-vowel glide (e.g. coastal Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina)

Sometimes, when a vowel moves into the phonetic space of another vowel, the tendency to rotate to preserve distinctiveness does not come into play, and the two vowels simply end up sharing the same phonetic space. When this happens, the distinctiveness between the two vowels is lost, and we say that a MERGER has occurred. One of the most noticeable and most widespread mergers currently taking place in American English dialects is the merger of the LOT vowel and the THOUGHT vowel, so that the vowels in word pairs such as *caught/cot*, *hawk/hock*, and *Dawn/Don* now sound alike. As we will discuss in chapter 5, the geographic area affected by this merger is quite large, and is spreading from centers such as western Pennsylvania to encompass a vast portion of the American West. It is also extending into the urban South and is becoming so commonplace that it may soon be considered part of mainstream or MAE rather than a regional variation. In fact, the second author of this book was surprised to find that a group of college students she was teaching refused to believe that the LOT vowel and THOUGHT vowel are considered to be two different phonemes in English. Apparently, these students had never even heard the vowels pronounced differently, let alone produced them that way themselves.

In many instances, a merger only takes place in a restricted phonetic context. Sounds are highly sensitive to their phonetic context, including the sounds they occur next to, the positions they occupy in words, and whether or not they occur in accented, or stressed, syllables. It is quite common for a merger to take place in one phonetic context but not in another. In one well-known case, the KIT vowel and the DRESS vowels are merged, but only when the following segment is a nasal sound such as [n]. Thus, in many Southern American dialects, there is no contrast between items such as *pin* and *pen* (with both usually pronounced as [pIn]) or *tinder* and *tender*. In these same dialects, the vowels in word pairs like *pit* [pIt] and *pet* [pet] remain distinct. Similarly, speakers of many US dialects do not distinguish between *morning* and *mourning*, and speakers of some dialects do not distinguish between *sure* and *shore*. In these cases the essential phonetic environment for the merger is the following [r]. The merger of the KIT vowel of *pill* with the FLEECE vowel of *peel* in Southern

American English and the merger of the GOOSE vowel in *fool* with the FOOT vowel of *full* which affecting some Southern, Northern, and Southwestern varieties only takes place before [l], as does the merger of the vowels in word pairs such as *bail* and *bell* or *whale* and *well*. In American English, vowels that are followed by nasal sounds such as [m] and [n] and liquid sounds like [r] and [l], are more prone to merger than vowels in other phonetic environments. In many dialects of English, the vowels of *merry*, *Mary*, and *marry* are all merged before *r*, whereas in at least one dialect (Philadelphia), the vowels of *merry* and *Murray* are merged while the vowels in *Mary* and *marry* remain distinct. Following is a partial list of some mergers that characterize varieties of American English:

#### *Mergers in American English dialects*

THOUGHT and LOT vowels, e.g., *Dawn* and *Don* (Western Pennsylvania, gradually fanning out to encompass much of the Western US, selected Northeastern locations)

KIT and DRESS vowel before nasals, as in *pin* and *pen* (South)

FLEECE vowel and KIT vowel before [l], as in *field* and *filled* (South; sporadically elsewhere)

FACE vowel and DRESS vowel before [l], e.g., *sale* and *sell* (South; sporadically in Northern areas)

GOOSE vowel and FOOT vowel before [l], e.g., *pool* and *pull* (South; sporadically in Northern areas)

SQUARE vowel, DRESS vowel, and BATH vowel before /r/, as in *Mary*, *merry*, *marry* (many areas of the US, including the South)

/hy/ and /y/ in *Hugh* and *you* (New York City, Philadelphia; sporadically elsewhere)

/hw/ and /w/ in *which* and *witch* (throughout much of the United States)

The last two mergers in the above list involve glides rather than vowels; glides are intermediate sounds between consonants and vowels.

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### **Exercise 3**

As noted, one of the interesting cases of vowel merger before [r] involves the vowels of the words *merry*, *Mary*, *marry*, and *Murray*, or *berry*, *beary* (acting like a bear), *Barry*, and *bury*. Ask several people who come from different regions of the country to pronounce these items and observe which items are pronounced the same and which are pronounced differently. What patterns of merger and distinction do you observe? What other sets of items fall into this general pattern? Can you identify any correlation between dialect region and the patterns of merger and non-merger in the speech of those you question?

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There are also cases in which differences between consonants may be eliminated, or NEUTRALIZED. One classic case of neutralization is so-called “g-dropping.” When the nasal segment represented phonetically as [ŋ] (often spelled “ng”) occurs at the end of a word in an unstressed syllable (as in *fighting*), it can be produced as the sound [n] (*fightin’*). This process makes the final nasal segment of *taken* [tekIn] and *takin’* [tekIn] or *waken* [wekIn] and *wakin’*

[wekIn] phonetically the same. The popular term “g-dropping” to describe this process is somewhat misleading, since the process really involves the substitution of one nasal sound for another rather than the loss of a sound. This process of [ŋ] for [n] is much more likely to take place with verbs than with nouns, as in *She’s swimmin’ now* versus *Swimmin’ is so fun*.

In many Southern dialects, the [z] and voiced *th* sound (e.g. *the*, *those*) sounds in words such as *wasn’t* and *heathen* become [d] before nasal sounds, resulting in pronunciations such as *wadn’t* and *headn*. Thus, we can say that the contrast between [z] and voiced *th* is neutralized before nasals in these varieties. And, of course, there is the stereotypical *dese*, *dem*, and *dose* for *these*, *them*, and *those*, in which the *th* is pronounced as [d]. There are a number of cases where consonant differences may be leveled or “neutralized” across varieties of English, but the phonetic contexts restricted. Many cases of consonant neutralization result from the way in which sounds are pronounced when they occur in sequences rather than to how sounds are organized into systems of phonemes.

Added and deleted sounds affecting the basic sequencing of sound segments are also usually restricted to certain phonetic contexts. For example, there are a number of dialects in which *r* and *l* may be deleted, as in *ca’d* [kad] for *card* or *he’p* [hɛp] for *help*. However, this deletion occurs only when the *r* or *l* follows a vowel; further, *l* is fully deleted only when it follows a vowel and precedes a LABIAL consonant – that is, one which is articulated using the lips, such as *p* or *f*, as in *he’p* for *help* or *woof* for *wolf*. In other post-vowel environments (e.g. *cold*), *l* is likely to be weakened, or pronounced in a more vowel-like way, but it will not be completely absent. Deletion may also be contingent upon where a particular sound occurs in a word or syllable, or whether the sound occurs in a stressed or unstressed syllable. For example, the deletion of the [w] sound of the word *one* in a phrase such as *young ’uns* “young ones” or *second ’un* “second one” is contingent upon the [w] being in word-initial, unstressed position.

Other cases of deletion have to do with how sounds are arranged into syllables. As discussed in chapter 2, it is not very “natural” for syllables to contain groups or clusters of consonants, and so these clusters tend to get reduced. Thus, speakers of all varieties of American English tend to reduce the final consonant clusters in words such as *west* [st], *find* [nd], *act* [kt], or *cold* [ld] to a single consonant, as in *wes’* [s], *fin’* [n], *ac’* [k], and *col’* [l] – particularly when speaking in informal style. Speakers of MAE, however, tend to restrict this process to instances in which the word following the cluster begins with a consonant (e.g. *Wes’ Point*, *col’ cuts*). On the other hand, speakers of some vernacular varieties dialects, particularly those historically influenced by a language that does not have syllable-final consonant clusters, may reduce the cluster regardless of the following segment (e.g. *Wes’ End*, *col’ outside*).

In another process relating to the sequencing of syllables, unstressed syllables at the beginning of words may be deleted, resulting in such pronunciations as *’lectricity* for *electricity* or *’member* for *remember*. There are also cases in which the number of syllables in words differs across dialects because of the deletion or insertion of vowels within the word. *Tire* and *fire* are two-syllable sequences in some dialects (i.e. [taɪ.ə-], [faɪ.ə-]) but single syllables in others. In a number of Southern varieties, *tire* and *fire* may be pronounced as *tar* and *far*. Similarly, an item like *baloney* consists of three syllables for most English speakers (*ba-lo-ney*) but only two syllables for some other speakers (*blo-ney*).

As mentioned above, one of the most important differences between Southern and non-Southern dialects involves the absence of the glide on the PRICE-vowel diphthong, so that words like *ride* and *time* are pronounced as *rahd* [ra:d] and *tahm* [ta:m] in Southern American varieties. Conversely, Southern American English is also distinguished from other varieties by the addition of a glide to some vowels which are not typically glided in non-Southern

varieties. In some cases, the addition of this glide actually leads to changes in syllable structure. In most non-Southern varieties, words such as *bed* and *Bill* consist of only one syllable. However, in some Southern dialects, the vowels in these words are given such a prominent glide that the words sound almost like two-syllable sequences, as in *beyud* for *bed* and *Biyul* for *Bill*. And in some traditional Southern rural cases, they may be even extended to three syllables, as in *be-yu-uhd* or *Bi-yu-uhl*.

Finally, we should mention the potential for pronunciation differences that have to do with such matters as the intonational contours of sentences, the stress patterns of words, and the timing of syllables. These differences are referred to as SUPRASEGMENTAL or PROSODIC differences, since they involve overarching “melodic” considerations rather than individual sound segments and their arrangement into syllables. Although prosodic differences have been studied in less detail than segmental differences, newer advances in technology allow for more precise measurement of these prosodic dimensions of speech. For example, several studies using instrumental measurement of intonation (Thomas and Reaser 2004; Thomas 2015) have shown that speakers of African American English tend to use more “pitch accents” (i.e. greater prominence on stressed syllables) and a wider pitch range than speakers of European American varieties. In addition, African American speakers (especially males) also seem to use a falsetto or very high pitch register more frequently than speakers of European American varieties. More recent studies of female teenagers also indicate that “creaky voice” may be an emerging type of female voice quality that may also be developing as a part of relatively young American women's unconscious linguistic performance. Thus, we have to add voice quality to the inventory of phonetic differences that may distinguish groups of speakers. As with other differences among dialects, differences in prosodic, suprasegmental features, and voice quality features tend to be gradient rather than absolute.

Variations in the stress patterns of words, mostly related to individual lexical items, also serve to separate varieties of American English. Depending on what regional dialect they speak, people may stress either the first or second syllable in items such as *Júly/JulY*, *hótel/hotél*, and *théater/theáter*. Speakers may also give different rhythmic patterns to syllables and phrases according to what dialect they speak. For example, Spanish-influenced varieties of American English are sometimes characterized by what is referred to as “syllable-timed rhythm,” where each syllable in a phrase such as *in the garden* is pronounced with equal length. On the other hand, speakers of most other American English dialects tend to have “phrase-timed rhythm,” in which syllables which are more strongly stressed (e.g. the first syllable of *gárden*) are held longer than other syllables in the phrase. Computer-aided studies of speech timing (Carter 2004; Thomas and Carter 2006; Thomas 2011), however, show that these differences are also gradient and that Spanish-influenced varieties of English are differentiated from other English dialects by the degree to which they use syllable-based timing vs. stress-based timing rather than the use vs. non-use of one timing system or the other.

Varieties may also exhibit a generalized lengthening of syllables. For example, evidence indicates that speakers of Southern American varieties tend to prolong vowel sounds for a slightly longer time than speakers of other varieties. This difference in vowel duration may be partly responsible for the popular perception that Southerners speak “slower” than most non-Southerners. However, we have to keep in mind that not all Southerners speak slower than all non-Southerners; in fact, there are plenty of Southerners who speak faster than non-Southerners. Further, the subtle speech-rate differences that do exist between Southern and non-Southern varieties are often exaggerated in popular characterizations of Southern speech, most likely because speakers of Southern American English are often stigmatized as “dumb” and “uneducated” and thus “slower” than speakers of non-Southern varieties. Although speech-rate features are often very noticeable to casual observers of language

variation, recent technical studies have helped sort out the empirical linguistic facts from the popular stereotypes (Kendall 2013).

Although there may be some social stigma attached to certain pronunciation differences, phonological dialect differences, particularly vowel differences, are usually considered to be matters of curiosity rather than grounds for evaluative judgment. Speakers may comment on the *o* of Wisconsin speech or the “broad *a*” of Boston as regional peculiarities without attaching particular social stigma or prestige to them; in fact these pronunciations may sometimes be celebrated as regionalisms. Consonantal differences are more apt to be socially diagnostic than vowel differences and may even lead to the stigmatization of speakers as “stupid” or “uneducated,” as in the case of *dese*, *dem*, and *dose* for *these*, *them*, and *those*; *baf* for *bath*; and *takin’* for *taking*. While phonological differences may be of relatively little importance in terms of social prestige, they do play a central role in terms of regional identity. It is difficult to explain why certain pronunciation changes take place in some regions or among some social groups and why other changes take place elsewhere. For example, it is hard to explain why Pittsburgh adopted the *dahntahn* pronunciation for *downtown* or why residents of Tangier and Smith Islands in the Chesapeake Bay adopted a pronunciation for *brown* that makes it sound like *brain* to outsiders. However, once a given pronunciation takes hold, it may persist for quite a long time as a symbolic marker of regional or social group identity.

### 3.4 Grammatical Differences

Grammatical variation may be discussed on a couple of levels. One level, MORPHOLOGY, relates to the way in which words are formed from their meaningful parts, or MORPHEMES. A word such as *girls* consists of two morphemes, the noun *girl* and the plural suffix *-s*; a word such as *buyers* consists of three morphemes, the verb *buy*, the agentive suffix *-er*, which changes a verb into a noun, and the plural suffix *-s*. Suffixes such as *-er*, which change the part of speech, or grammatical class, of the word to which they attach, are referred to as DERIVATIONAL suffixes. Endings such as the plural *-s* which do not alter the basic grammatical class and which serve to augment rather than change meaning are referred to as INFLECTIONAL suffixes. English has a relatively small set of inflectional suffixes, consisting of plural *-s*, (e.g. *girls*, *houses*), possessive *-s* (e.g. *John’s hat*, *the girl’s hat*), third-person present tense *-s* (e.g. *She runs*), past tense *-ed* (e.g. *John guessed*), participle *-ed* (e.g. *He has helped*), progressive *-ing* (e.g. *He is running*), and the comparative and superlative endings *-er* and *-est* (e.g. *smaller*, *smallest*).

Inflectional morphemes in English are susceptible to language variation in two ways, both of which make perfect sense in terms of the principles of language organization we presented in chapter 2, particularly the principle that states that language patterns strive to be as regular and straightforward as possible. In some cases, this principle leads to the loss of inflectional morphemes, whereas in other cases it leads to the creation of different forms. For example, some vernacular varieties, such as vernacular forms of African American English, are characterized by the loss of the third-person singular *-s* suffix (e.g. *She run* vs. *She runs*). This loss is the result of regularization: in modern English the third-person singular verb form is the only one that takes any suffix at all in the present tense. If we eliminate this *-s* ending, then all present tense verbs now have the same form, no matter what subject is used with them. Vernacular African American English also exhibits the absence of the *-s* possessive ending, as in *John hat* vs. *John’s hat*. In this case, the ending has been lost because, in essence, it is a redundant marker; the positioning of *John* and *hat* is sufficient to indicate that *John* stands in a possessive relationship to *hat*. Similarly, in some Southern rural varieties, the plural *-s* ending may be absent from nouns indicating measurement (e.g. *Go about four mile\_ up the road*) but only when the plural noun is preceded by a quantifier (a word indicating a specific or general

quantity such as *four*, *many*, or *some*), since it serves as a clear marker that the following noun is plural, thus making the *-s* ending superfluous.

Making language forms as regular and straightforward as possible sometimes leads to the addition of inflectional endings. In order to regularize the irregular person-number set, or paradigm, of possessive pronouns (*mine*, *yours*, *hers/his/its*, *ours*, *yours*, *theirs*), speakers of vernacular dialects may add various inflectional endings to some of the pronoun forms, as illustrated below:

| <i>Standard English</i> |             | <i>Vernacular variety I</i> |        | <i>Vernacular variety II</i> |        |
|-------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------|--------|------------------------------|--------|
| mine                    | ours        | mines                       | ours   | mine                         | ourn   |
| yours                   | yours (pl.) | yours                       | yours  | yourn                        | yourn  |
| hers/his/its            | theirs      | hers/his                    | theirs | hern/hisn                    | theirn |

Finally, regularization may lead to different inflectional markers rather than to the presence or absence of such markers. For example, the irregular plural ending *-en* in *oxen* may be regularized to *-es* in vernacular varieties, while irregular past tense verbs may be marked with the regular *-ed* suffix (e.g. *throwed* vs. *threw*) rather than by a vowel difference as in MAE varieties.

Morphological differences that are due to regularization carry a great deal of social significance in American society, and listeners draw sharp distinctions between vernacular- and MAE-speaking groups on the basis of the use or non-use of regularized morphological forms. In part, the prominence of regularized morphological forms may be attributed to the fact that all speakers have an unconscious inclination to regularize irregular forms. This tendency is overcome only by paying special attention to the irregular forms, which must be learned by rote since they are not as linguistically “natural” as regularized forms. This focused attention on learning exceptions subsequently makes them sensitive to social marking on a conscious level. In other words, because speakers of standard varieties may have struggled to learn irregular forms such as *oxen* and *thought* during their school years, they will be quick to notice when regularized forms are used and just as quick to stigmatize speakers who use them.

Not all vernacular word-formation processes are the result of regularization or simplification. As discussed in chapter 2, there is also a tendency to mark forms as clearly as possible so that listeners will pick up on all intended meanings. This tendency competes with the tendency toward regularity and simplicity of language form. Thus, vernacular word-formation processes may involve complications as well as simplifications, and vernacular speakers may sometimes use inflectional endings where they are not strictly required just to ensure that meanings are clear. Speakers of some vernacular varieties may “double mark” comparative and superlative adjectives, as in *more farther* or *most fastest*, and highly vernacular speakers may even double mark plurals, as in *feets* or *woodsies*. We also have to keep in mind that speakers of vernacular varieties may sometimes retain morphological markings which have been lost in MAE through processes of regularization and simplification. Speakers of some historically isolated rural Southern varieties, for example, may retain an *a-* prefix on *-ing* verbs (*She was a-huntin’ and a-fishin’*) even though this prefix, which used to indicate ongoing action, has long since vanished from standard varieties of English.

We summarize below some of the morphological features of various dialects in the United States, as introduced in this section and in chapter 2.

### *Regularized forms*

- Absence of inflectional morphemes
- Third-person singular *-s* absence; e.g. *He go* (African American English)
- Possessive *-s* absence; e.g. *the man hat* (African American English)
- Plural *-s* absence; e.g. *five mile* (Southern vernacular dialects)
- Addition of inflectional endings
- Possessive pronouns; e.g. *mines* (African American English; selected vernacular dialects); *hisn* (southern Appalachian dialects)
- More transparent forms
- Double-marked comparatives and superlatives; e.g. *most beautifulst* (most vernacular dialects)
- Marking of second-person plural forms; e.g. *y'all* (Southern dialects); *you'ns* (southern Appalachian dialects, Pittsburgh dialect); *youse/youse guys* (Northern dialects, especially Northeastern)
- Retention of *a-* prefix; e.g. *a-huntin' and a-fishin'* (Appalachian English)

The other major level of grammatical organization, SYNTAX, refers to the arrangement of words into larger units such as phrases or sentences. As with morphology, we find that the tendency toward making meaning differences transparent may lead to dialect differentiation in syntax. For example, it is common for speakers of vernacular varieties to use auxiliary, or helping, verbs to give verbs special meanings that can only be indicated in MAE through adding a good bit of additional material to the sentence, if the meaning can be conveyed at all. Vernacular varieties may be characterized by special auxiliaries such as COMPLETIVE *done*, as in *He done washed the clothes*, HABITUAL *be*, as in *Sometimes my ears be itching*, and AVERTIVE *liketa*, as in *It was so cold, I liketa froze*. If speakers of MAE wish to convey the meanings indicated by these special auxiliaries, they must resort to complex constructions such as *He washed the clothes and has now completely finished washing them*, *Sometimes my ears itch and sometimes they don't*, and *It was below freezing outside, so I could have frozen in theory, but I was in no real danger*. Auxiliaries may also cluster together in different ways to convey special meanings. Thus, DOUBLE MODALS (e.g. *might could*) are commonplace in Southern varieties and serve to convey a meaning of reduced obligation or lessened intensity. A sentence such as *I might could go* indicates that the speaker may be able to go but isn't quite sure.

Other verb-related differences in syntactic structure have to do with the types of structures that can co-occur with particular verbs. Some verbs take one kind of object in one dialect and a different kind of object, or no object at all, in another dialect. Thus, some vernacular dialects of English use the verb *beat* without an object (e.g. *The Cowboys beat*), whereas other varieties only use it with a direct object – that is, as a TRANSITIVE VERB (e.g. *The Cowboys beat the Giants*). In a similar vein, the verb *learn* in some dialects may co-occur with a subject indicating the person who is conveying knowledge to someone else, as in *The teacher learned me my lesson*. In other dialects, including MAE, *learn* can take as its subject only the person or people who are the recipients of the knowledge, as in *The students learned the lesson*;

otherwise, the verb *teach* must be used. Although the reduction of the *teach/learn* pair to *learn* alone is highly stigmatized, there are other verbs indicating similar relationships of converseness which have been reduced to a single verb with little or no negative social repercussion. For example, the verb *rent*, as in *The landlord rented an apartment to me* and *I rented an apartment from the landlord*, was originally used only with subjects indicating the recipient of the item of property, as in the latter example above. The reciprocal verb *let* was used when the subject indicated who was bestowing the item, as in *The landlord let the apartment to me*. Interestingly, speakers of British English still use the *let/rent* distinction.

Language variation can also be based on the types of structures that can co-occur with particular verbs. The verb *need*, for example, may co-occur with either *-ing* or *-ed* verbs, depending on the dialect area. In most of the United States, *need* co-occurs with a verb + *-ing* or *to be* complement, as in *The car needs washing* or *The car needs to be washed*. However, in some areas, most notably Western Pennsylvania and Eastern Ohio, *need* takes an *-ed* verb, as in *The car needs washed*. The *need* + verb + *-ed* pattern is also found in some areas of the British Isles, particularly Scotland. Although using an *-ed* verb with *need* may sound awkward to speakers who use *-ing* with *need*, there is nothing intrinsically more “correct” or more logical about using the *-ing* form. This is evidenced in the fact that there is a verb which is very similar to *need* – namely, *want* – which takes an *-ed* rather than *-ing* complement in all United States dialect areas (e.g. *I want the car washed*). Interestingly, though, there are parts of England, including parts of the Midlands and North, where *want* takes *-ing* (*I want the car washing*), thus demonstrating that *-ed* with *want* is no more “correct” than *-ing* with *need*.

Another type of syntactic variation involves patterns of AGREEMENT among different elements in a sentence. Agreement relations can be seen as either co-occurrence relations or as the “double marking” of meaning. For example, in MAE, we say that third-person singular present tense verbs must “agree” with their subjects (e.g. *She runs five miles every day*) because whenever a third-person singular subject occurs, an *-s* must co-occur on the verb. However, the *-s* marker also represents a “double marking,” in the sense that we can clearly tell that a sentence has a third-person singular subject without the *-s* marker on the end of the verb simply by looking at the subject itself.

Agreement patterns between subjects and verbs in English have changed substantially during the course of the history of the language. In particular, there has been a longstanding movement toward reducing the extent of agreement. In MAE today, the only agreement marking with almost all present tense verbs is the third-person singular *-s*. In the past tense, of course, there is no agreement marking at all, since we use the same verb ending (*-ed*) no matter what subject the verb occurs with (e.g. *I/you/she/we/they walked*). In Old and Middle English, however, there were agreement endings for use with first, second, and third person subjects, as well as for use with both singulars and plurals and for both past and present tense verbs. This complex agreement system eventually developed into today’s simpler system. Today, there are only a couple of verbs that still show slightly more complicated patterning in the present tense – namely, *be*, which is clearly highly irregular, and *do*, whose third-person singular form, *does*, has a different vowel sound in addition to an *-es* ending. In the past tense, only *be* remains irregular, since it has two forms, *was* and *were*.

In vernacular dialects of English, there is a strong tendency to extend the tradition of eliminating irregularities in the English subject–verb agreement system. This tendency may be manifested in several different ways, including the frequent use of *don’t* with third-person singular subjects in vernacular dialects throughout the US (e.g. *He don’t like me anymore*), the regularization of *be* (e.g. *We was going to the store*), and the absence of the third singular *-s* form, as discussed above (e.g. *She walk a mile every day*).

Other vernacular subject–verb agreement patterns have to do with the retention of historical agreement patterns. For example, in Southern Highland and some coastal areas, speakers often use *-s* endings with third-person plural subjects (e.g. *People goes*, *The boys works in the store*) as well as with third-person singular subjects. Although a structure such as *people goes* is highly stigmatized, it is not the result of ignorance of the MAE subject–verb agreement pattern; nor does it represent a lack of subject–verb agreement. Rather, it is the retention of a pattern that was commonplace and, indeed, perfectly acceptable, a couple of centuries ago in such varieties as Scots-Irish English, spoken in the province of Ulster in what is now Northern Ireland.

As with a number of other language structures we have looked at, we find that the use of the *-s* verb ending with third-person plural subjects shows a rather intricate patterning that may not be evident at first glance. Speakers who use *-s* in the third-person plural do not use it with all third-person plural subjects to an equal extent. Rather, the *-s* ending is used more frequently with certain types of subjects, including so-called collectives. Collectives are nouns that identify some sort of group or collection. They may be fairly specific, as in *government*, *family*, or *team*; or they may refer to more general collections of people or objects, as in *people*, *some of them*, or *a lot of them*. Because each of these words and phrases refers to one group composed of a number of members, there has always been a certain amount of uncertainty as to whether collective nouns should be treated as singular or plural. For example, some instructors are very conservative in treating *data* as a plural (versus *datum*) whereas others treat it as a singular. Some varieties, including MAE, classify them as plural and so use them with plural verbs, as in *people go*. Others classify them as singular and thus use them with verbs ending in *-s*, as in *people goes*. Neither agreement system can really claim to be the definitive, “correct” form, however. This is evidenced in the fact that, although general collectives such as *people* are considered to be plural in MAE (e.g. *People are visiting*), there are some specific collectives which are held to be singular (e.g. *The government was debating the issue*; *The team was winning*). In contrast, these specific collectives are considered to be plural in standard British English (*The government were debating*; *The team were winning*), a variety which is certainly highly regarded for its “correctness.” Thus, we see that subject–verb agreement patterns, which we often consider to be based on rigid, inflexible rules, are not even consistent across current MAE varieties of English, let alone in vernacular varieties or in a single variety over the course of time.

Syntactic agreement relations may affect other elements of a sentence besides subjects and verbs. In particular, the “double negatives” we discussed in chapter 2 as “negative concord” (e.g. *I didn’t do nothing*) may be viewed as ‘negative agreement’ as well as double marking, since double negation, or, more properly, multiple negation, involves using indefinite forms (e.g. *nothing* rather than *anything*) which agree with the negative form of the verb. Many distinctive dialect differences in syntax involve agreement patterns, and they are among the most evident social markers within American English.

Finally, syntactic differences may involve the basic linear arrangement of words in phrases or sentences. Although there is considerable variation across languages with respect to the sequencing of different types of phrases within sentences, there is relatively little variation of this type within English itself. Nonetheless, there are a few occasions where the ordering of elements within sentences varies across regional or social dialects. For example, the ordering of words in questions may vary, as in *What that was?* versus *What was that?* Similarly, the placement of adverbs may differ slightly in different dialects, as in *We’d all the time get into trouble* vs. *We’d get into trouble all the time*. Given the possibilities for sequencing differences in sentences, however, these differences play a relatively minor role in the differentiation of American English dialects. Some of the major syntactic differences in the dialects of American English are summarized in the following list:

### *Special auxiliaries*

- Completive *done*; e.g., *She done ate the food* (Southern vernacular dialects)
- Habitual *be*; e.g. *Sometimes they be acting weird* (African American English)
- Avertive *liketa*; e.g. *He liketa died* (Southern vernacular dialects)
- Remote time *béen*; e.g. *I béen met her a long time ago* (African American English; see chapter 7)
- Double modals; e.g. *They might could do it* (Southern dialects)

### *Co-occurrence patterns with verbs*

- Transitive–intransitive; e.g. *The team beat* (African American English)
- Reciprocal verbs; e.g. *The teacher learned me what I needed to know* (some vernacular dialects)
- Participle forms; e.g. *The cars needs washed* (Midland)

### *Agreement patterns*

- Negative agreement (multiple negation); e.g. *They didn't do nothing to nobody* (most vernacular dialects)
- Subject–verb agreement with *be*; e.g. *We was there* (most vernacular dialects)
- Past tense *be* in negative sentences; e.g. *I weren't there* (Southeastern and Mid-Atlantic coastal vernacular dialects)
- Inflectional *-s* on third-person plural verbs; e.g. *The dogs barks* (Southern rural dialects, Appalachian English)

### *Linear order*

- Adverb placement; e.g. *We're all the time in trouble* (Southern rural dialects)
- Question formation; e.g. *What that is?* (African American English)

As we see in this list, some of the dialect differences in syntax converge with other kinds of processes such as regularization. The absence of a verbal suffix in a sentence like *She go home* is a kind of regularization that relates to agreement. Similarly, regularization of past tense *be* to *was* is a change related to agreement.

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#### Exercise 4

The following sentence pairs represent different kinds of syntactic variation as discussed above. These types include the following: (1) the use of auxiliaries or verbal markers to give verbs special meanings (e.g. the use of double modals or averitive *liketa*), (2) co-occurrence patterns with verbs (e.g. whether or not a verb needs an object), (3) agreement patterns (e.g. agreement between subjects and verbs), and (4) variation in the linear order of structures (e.g. *He's all the time talking*). Identify the type of syntactic variation in the following sentence pairs or sets of sentences according to the categories set forth above. For example, a sentence pair such as *The Rams beat/The Rams beat the Cowboys* would be classified as type 2 in this classification, since the variation relates to whether or not the verb *beat* takes an object. In your description of each difference, be as specific as possible about the variation you observe.

- 1        *Did ever a stray animal come to your house?/Did a stray animal ever come to your house?*
  - 2        *Some people makes soap from pig fat/Some people make soap from pig fat.*
  - 3        *They started to running/They started a-running/They started running.*
  - 4        *There's six people in our family/There're six people in our family.*
  - 5        *They made him out the liar/They made him out to be the liar.*
  - 6        *We once in a while will have a party/We will have a party once in a while/Once in a while we will have a party.*
  - 7        *The dog ugly/The dog's ugly.*
  - 8        *The man béen met him/The man met him a long time ago.*
- 

### 3.5 Language Use and Pragmatics

In every language variety, there are a variety of ways to convey the same information or accomplish the same purpose, and the choice of *how* to say something depends upon *who* is talking to *whom* under *what* social circumstances. The term PRAGMATICS is used to refer to how language is used in context to achieve particular purposes. In this framework, one important concept in the study of pragmatics is the SPEECH ACT, which refers to an utterance that accomplishes a social action, such as requesting, making a promise, complimenting, or apologizing.

#### [Video: Steven Pinker on Pragmatics](#)

Speakers of all languages and dialects are quite capable of performing the same basic kinds of speech acts – directing, requesting, apologizing, and so forth – but how these speech acts are carried out and the conditions under which they are considered to be appropriate varies considerably across cultural groups. Statements may be strong and direct or softer and less direct. For example, consider the range of sentences that might be used to direct a person to take out the garbage.

*Take out the garbage!*  
*Can you take out the garbage?*  
*Would you mind taking out the garbage?*  
*Let's take out the garbage.*  
*It would be nice if someone would take out the garbage.*  
*The garbage sure is piling up.*  
*Garbage day is tomorrow.*

**Video: TED ed speech acts**

Each of these sentences may accomplish the goal of getting a person to take out the garbage; however, the sentences show varying degrees of directness, ranging from the direct command at the top of the list to the indirect statement at the bottom of the list. The sentences also differ in terms of their relative politeness and situational appropriateness. For example, a person of dominant social status (e.g. parent, supervisor) might use the most direct form when speaking with a subordinate, whereas a person of subordinate status would not typically have the option of using a direct command with someone in a higher social position. Knowledge of when and how to use certain forms is just as important for communication as the literal understanding of structures and words, and the failure to abide by cultural conventions for language use can have severe implications for how people are perceived within and across social groups.

Different social and cultural groups often have contrasting expectations about the appropriate use of direct or indirect expressions. For example, working-class African American parents have sometimes been observed to be more direct than European Americans in speaking to children, especially in correcting them. A parent or teacher might use a direct order in directing a child who has strayed: "Get back here, Melvin!" In a similar situation, however, another teacher might attempt to get the child to return to the group by saying, "Melvin, we need you to stay with the group" or "Melvin, would you like to stay with the group?" Because indirectness has come to be valued in some settings, such as the school or workplace, teachers have been taught that "I like the way Emerson is keeping her eyes on the blackboard" is better than "Look at what I'm writing on the chalkboard, Emerson" Contrasting expectations about directness may lead to misunderstandings across different groups. Children who are accustomed to a more direct style of adult communication may misconstrue indirect commands as less serious than their more direct counterparts and thus consider compliance optional. On the other hand, children who are used to more indirectness may feel threatened or intimidated by adults who consider directness to be the appropriate norm for directives with children.

Studies show that women in positions of authority in the workplace are often expected to be more indirect in their instructions to workers than male authorities and that conflict arises when women do not meet expectations of indirectness (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013). Thus, women who use direct commands may be given such negative labels as "pushy" or even "bitchy," whereas men who are direct in their instructions to workers may be labeled simply as "aggressive" or "demanding," words which are far less negative than "pushy" and may even be considered positive. In matters of directness vs. indirectness, expectations for gender-appropriate behavior may play a more important role than differing norms across different ethnic, social class, or regional groups, although all these factors tend to intersect in quite complex ways in determining the "appropriate" degree of directness or indirectness for any given speech act.

**Video: Ban bossy**

Related to the issue of cultural differences in directness is the distinction between literal and non-literal language use. For example, a statement such as “What are you doing?” can have both a literal and a non-literal interpretation. It may be interpreted literally as a request for explanation among workers who are performing a task together. However, if a teacher or parent utters this sentence on entering a classroom full of misbehaving children, it is not intended to be a literal request for information but an indirect directive to get the children to stop misbehaving. In fact, if the children were to respond to the question as if it were a literal request (e.g. by answering “We’re throwing paper on the floor”), this might evoke a more direct reprimand, perhaps about the inappropriateness of the response itself (e.g. “Don’t act smart!”).

Conventions for interpreting statements as literal or non-literal vary considerably among different social and cultural groups, as does the value accorded to literal vs. non-literal language use. For example, Shirley Brice Heath (1983, 2012) found that European Americans in one particular working-class community valued perfectly factual children’s stories more highly than African Americans in the same community, who placed higher value on stories embellished by non-literal language use, including invented quotations. This contrast contributed to the negative valuation of African American children by schoolteachers, since storytelling conventions in the classroom setting were largely reflective of mainstream, European American values regarding literalness. Conventions regarding literal meaning can also vary within ethnic groups, based on such factors as gender. Marjorie Harness Goodwin (1990) noticed that whereas pre-adolescent African American boys frequently referred to their abilities and actions in exaggerated terms, African American girls of the same age criticized each other for bragging. In some cultural groups, not only is exaggerating one’s abilities considered inappropriate, but even making literal statements about one’s personal qualities is considered to be “bad manners,” since it is expected that personal strengths will be downplayed, in keeping with a value on personal humility. Underlying cultural values and ideologies often enter into the determination of situational appropriateness concerning literal and non-literal meaning, as they do for directness and indirectness. We have a tendency to become so accustomed to our own community’s norms for carrying out speech acts that we fail to notice when contrasting conventions within another group might be interfering with communication. Our initial reaction is to interpret differences in language use based on our own group’s conventions. We therefore interpret more directness than we are accustomed to as rudeness and less literalness as deceitful.

Many types of language-use differences exist, but a couple of areas are particularly sensitive to variation across region, status, and ethnicity. One involves ADDRESS FORMS – that is, the titles and names speakers use when referring to the people they are talking to, such as the use of *Mr* or *Ms* with a last name or the use of a first name only. Considerations of social status, age, ethnicity, gender, age, familiarity, formality, and so forth all come into play when determining the form of address that is appropriate for a particular person in a given situation, but in many instances these diverse social factors can be reduced to the dimensions of POWER and SOLIDARITY. Loosely defined, “power” refers to how much control conversational participants have over each other, while “solidarity” refers to how much intimacy there is between addressors and addressees. Different regional and social groups weigh power and solidarity differently in determining appropriate address forms, and thus speakers in these groups may use quite different forms to address a single individual in a given social setting. Many middle-class European Americans, for example, may treat social status as more important than age, so that an older person working as a laborer may be addressed by his or her first name by a younger person. Conversely, speakers in many other ethnic communities in America consider age to take precedence over social status, and so younger speakers would address an older laborer by title and last name.

Various combinations of titles and names may be used in addressing people, including some that are unique to specific regions. In the South, a wide range of adults are addressed with the respect labels *Sir* and *Ma'am*, including parents, whereas in the North only a few adults with special status are addressed by these forms. Similarly, although non-Southerners tend to think of titles such as *Mr*, *Mrs*, and *Ms* as indicative of unequal power relations, Southern speakers may use *Mr* or *Miss* with a first name to indicate special closeness. For example, ten-year old basketball players on the basketball team Walt Wolfram coaches address him as *Mr Walt*. In some situations, such address forms suggest a sort of extended kinship relationship, so that children of Marge and Walt's close friends might address the couple as *Miss Marge and Mr Walt* but only until the children reach adolescence. Such terms have also been used traditionally in the South by long-term domestic help in addressing their bosses in the home, as captured in the famous film titled *Driving Miss Daisy*. In the North, the terms *aunt* and *uncle* may be used to indicate figurative kinship relationships with close friends of parents, including godparents.

Dialect differences in address forms are frequently judged as "rude" or "polite" by speakers from outside a particular regional or social group, and those who use inappropriately "familiar" forms are held to be "rude," while those who use inappropriately "formal" terms are considered to be insincerely deferential, or overly "polite." In reality, of course, different address forms may simply reflect different conventions for "appropriate" language use.

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### Exercise 5

One of the regional and cultural differences in language conventions is sometimes referred to as "Southern politeness." Can you think of language use conventions that might be included under this rubric? Are there differences in politeness conventions, address forms, directness, literalness, and so forth that might account for the perception that Southerners are more polite than Northerners? Think of concrete examples of language usages that might be a reflection of regional and cultural differences in norms for interacting with strangers and friends. To what extent do you think that the notion that Southerners are more polite than Northerners is a valid interpretation of differences in language use conventions?

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Conventions for greeting and leave-taking, which involve ritualized forms not to be interpreted literally, can also be sensitive to language variation. In most cases, greeting routines simply involve rote memorization of a limited set of formulaic exchanges and an understanding of the appropriate circumstances for their use. Thus, the appropriate response to "What up?" or "S'up?" when used as a greeting among African American speakers might be a rote response such as "Nothing to me" rather than a literal or spontaneous response such as "You and I are talking." Similarly, speakers learn to respond to the greeting "What's up?" with "Not much," even if they are undergoing dramatic, life-changing experiences, just as they learn to reply to "How ya doing?" with "Fine," even if they are currently suffering intense emotional turmoil. Of course, greeting routines may vary across different settings, and may range in form from *Yo* in Northern cities such as New York and Philadelphia to *Howdy* in some parts of the South (e.g. parts of Texas) to *Hey* in other parts of the South (e.g. North Carolina). Telephone greetings are also different from face-to-face encounters, and those accompanying service exchanges (e.g. between service provider and customer/client) are different from greetings between friends. For our purposes, however, it is most important to recognize that greeting routines are sensitive to regional, ethnic, gender, age, and status differences in American society. Although greetings are highly ritualized and are not meant to be taken literally, their social significance in establishing interactional relationships may be highly significant.

Similarly, conversational closings carry great social weight at the same time that their informational content is highly limited. Speakers do not simply turn away from each other abruptly and without explanation when ending a cooperative conversation. First of all, a participant may “pass” a potential turn in the conversation by saying something like “OK,” “Well,” or “So.” This signals a desire to end the conversation, which may be accepted or rejected by the other participants. Then a speaker engages in one of several leave-taking routines, including offering a compliment (e.g. “It was nice to talk to you”), providing a “reasonable” excuse for terminating the conversation (e.g. “I’ll let you get back to your work now,” “I’ve got a meeting in five minutes”), or making reference to a future meeting (“See you later”). We typically cannot say things such as “This conversation is boring, so I’m leaving” (as someone once did to the senior author) or “I’d rather be talking to Jeff than you,” even if such a feeling represents the real reason for closing a conversation. As with other areas of language use, conventions for “appropriate” leave-taking vary. Thus, it is not surprising that an older speaker expecting a conventionalized and relatively formal parting statement such as “I enjoyed talking with you” may interpret a younger speaker’s innovative and informal closing, “I’m outty” as rude and inappropriate.

Failing to recognize conventional cues for closing a conversation can lead to some awkward situations, and someone who is talking with speakers from a different cultural group may not be able to figure out the appropriate moment for leave-taking or how to allow the other speakers to exit the conversation gracefully. Even within a single culture, there are vast differences in how conversations are closed. We know speakers who do not seem to be able to pick up on any of our cues that we wish to terminate a conversation, even though they may share a common cultural background with us. Knowing how to close off a conversation is just as important as knowing how to start one, and those who fail to do so “appropriately” may be subject to the same sort of social censure as those who use the “wrong” address forms or give commands which are unexpectedly direct or indirect.

Topics of conversation also may differ according to the social or regional group of the participants involved. The determination of “safe” topics of discussion varies according to situational context and social relationships among speakers. A middle-class European American might consider a question like “What do you do for a living?” as an appropriate conversational opener at a casual social gathering, but the same question might be considered inappropriate by some minority groups in the same situation, who may interpret this as an indirect—and inappropriate—request for information about status. The appropriateness of direct questions about income and cost (e.g. house, car, etc.) may also vary from group to group. Regional and social groups may also differ in the amount of “small talk” that is appropriate before getting to the heart of the interaction. For example, “small talk” may be an important preliminary to getting down to business in some Southern areas, Latino, or American Indian groups but is not considered to be necessary by speakers in some other regions. Conventions for raising new topics and continuing with old ones also vary across groups. Some groups expect speakers to respond to all new topics raised in a conversation, while in other groups conversational participants may simply pass over a new topic without comment and without giving offense.

As with differences in other areas of language use, cross-regional and cross-cultural differences concerning conversational topics may lead to misunderstandings and negative evaluations of speakers from cultural groups other than one’s own. However, we must bear in mind that a difference such as the use of more “small talk” than we are accustomed to does not necessarily mean that a speaker is “beating around the bush.” Nor does less small talk mean that speakers are overly cold and businesslike. Rather, such differences are often simply reflective of differences in cultural conventions for the appropriate use of language in its social setting.

Once a topic is chosen and a conversation begins, matters of conversational “turn-taking” arise. Knowing when it is acceptable or obligatory to take a turn in a conversation is essential to the cooperative development of interactional discourse. This knowledge involves such factors as knowing how to recognize appropriate turn-exchange points and knowing how long the pauses between turns should be. It is also important to know how (and if) one may talk while someone else is talking – that is, if conversational *overlap* is allowed. Since not all conversations follow all the rules for turn-taking, it is also necessary to know how to “repair” a conversation that has been thrown off course by undesired overlap or a misunderstood comment.

Cultural differences in matters of turn-taking can lead to conversational breakdown, misinterpretation of intentions, and interpersonal and intergroup conflict. People from cultural groups accustomed to relatively long pauses between turns (e.g. Native American English speakers in the Southwest) may feel that they have been denied their fair share of the conversational “floor” when they are talking with people who are used to shorter pauses, because the short-pause speakers always step in and speak before the long-pause people. To further complicate matters, another feature of long-pause conversational style is a prohibition against overlapping talk. Those who do not allow overlapping conversation may feel interrupted by speakers from groups who are used to conversational overlap, such as speakers of Jewish English in New York City. Conversely, those who are accustomed to their listeners’ interjecting comments and overlapping in to indicate “high engagement” may feel that those who fail to do so are not showing enough involvement in the conversation and are unenthusiastic about the subject matter.

One particular type of overlapping talk found among a wide range of social and regional groups is BACKCHANNELING. Backchanneling involves interjecting small utterances such as *Mmmhmm*, *Uh-huh*, *Yeah*, and *Right* – or even just nodding the head – into the conversation to let the current speaker know that he or she may continue speaking. Different groups naturally vary in terms of the kinds of reinforcement offered to speakers by their listeners, and sometimes these differences may lead speakers to feel that their conversational contribution is not being appreciated (when there is too little backchanneling) or that their listeners are displaying insincere interest in what they have to say—when there is too much or the wrong kind of backchanneling. If listeners do not display appropriate variation in backchanneling signals (e.g. alternating between *Right*, *Yeah*, and *Mmmhmm*), then the message may be lack of support for the current speaker rather than increased support. If we are talking with someone who simply keeps repeating *Mmmhmm* with the same basic intonation, we will most likely come to the conclusion that this person is bored by what we are saying.

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### Exercise 6

Think of some types of behaviors you have observed among members of a social group other than your own that have made you uncomfortable or that you have considered offensive. Classic cases might involve talking with someone of a different gender, service encounters at stores, cross-ethnic encounters, and so forth. What kinds of language use tend to go along with the behaviors that have bothered you? In what ways might language-use conventions contribute to your impression? What is different about the conventions of your cultural/dialectal group compared to the other group? Are there aspects of your perception that, upon further reflection, might simply be related to how you interpret the language routines of other cultural groups rather than the intentions of the speakers? Are there aspects related to what you *expect* of certain social groups vs. what individual speakers actually *do*?

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We have seen that a number of different rules or conventions govern our conversational format and interactional style. And a variety of factors have to be considered, ranging from broad-based cultural values about who can talk to whom about what, to minute details concerning how certain subtle intentions may be expressed. Given the number and significance of the factors that enter into the selection of strategies for carrying out conversation, the likelihood of misinterpretation is almost staggering. Many shared language-use conventions across the varieties of American English exist, but there are also important differences among groups that can lead to significant misunderstandings across regional and social dialects.

Compared to the traditional focus on language form, the investigation of language use differences is still understudied, but its social significance should not be underestimated. In fact, major areas of social dissonance and conflict among different social and ethnic groups in American society are directly tied to people's failure to understand that different groups have different language-use conventions.

### 3.6 Further Reading

*American Speech*. A publication of the American Dialect Society. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press. This quarterly journal contains articles on all levels of dialect differences in American English dialects, balancing more technical treatments of dialect forms with shorter, non-technical observations. A regular section entitled "Among the New Words" contains lists of lexical items that have been innovated in the different ways discussed above.

Adams, Michael (2009) *Slang: The People's Poetry*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press. This highly readable account considers slang as a creative form of expression and shows how it is used in part to define groups and rebel against the mainstream. He concludes that slang should be viewed as "playful resistance to the commonplace" and should be understood as a form of poetry.

Cassidy, Frederic G. and Joan Houston Hall (general editors) *Dictionary of American Regional English*, vols. 1–6 (1985, 1991, 1996, 2002, 2012, 2014). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap. All six volumes of this exhaustive dictionary of regional lexical items have now been published, and it is also available online ([www.daredictionary.com](http://www.daredictionary.com)). The introductory articles in Volume 1 by Frederic Cassidy and James Hartman set forth some of the major phonological and grammatical processes that have led to differences in American English dialects, and the last volume (6) offers contrastive maps, an index to entry labels, questionnaire, and fieldwork data.

Eble, Connie (2004) Slang. In Edward Finegan and John R. Rickford (eds.), *Language in the USA*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 375–86. This chapter provides a succinct, thoughtful account of the nature of slang and its social functions in society, based on years of collecting slang terms from college students and from considering both the linguistic formation and social functions of these specialized terms. Other helpful readings and web addresses are provided in this article.

Labov, William (1994) *Principles of Linguistics Change*, vol. 1: *Internal Factors*. Oxford: Blackwell. This is a major descriptive and theoretical work setting forth the principles governing vowel shifts in the English language. The technical description presumes advanced linguistic knowledge. Up-to-date information on Labov and his colleagues' continuing research on the vowel systems of American English can be obtained by consulting the following web address: [http://www.ling.upenn.edu/phono\\_atlas/home.html](http://www.ling.upenn.edu/phono_atlas/home.html) (accessed 20 May 2014).

Morgan, Marcyliena (2002) *Language, Discourse and Power in African American Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. This description of language use in the African American community includes discussions of language use conventions, discourse patterns, and language ideologies. The focus is on language function rather than language form.

Thomas, Erik R. (2001) *An Acoustic Analysis of Vowel Variation in New World English*. Publication of American Dialect Society 85. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Though technical in detail, this work represents the most thorough presentation and discussion of the phonetics of English vowels presented to date.