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Understanding semantics

Fromkin, V., Rodman, R., and Hyams, N. 2007, *An introduction to language*, 8th edition, Boston: Thompson Wadsworth.
In this introductory linguistics text, the authors present two chapters on semantics and pragmatics, introducing major concepts in the two fields.

Lobner, S. 2002, *Understanding semantics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
This volume is a thorough introduction to semantics, going beyond the current chapter's overview to explain compositional semantics and other aspects of the field.

Negotiating meaning

Hickerson, N. P. 2000, *Linguistic anthropology*, 2nd edition, New York: Harcourt.
A useful introduction to linguistic anthropology, the study of how language is used in various social contexts, this text covers many topics, including discussion of the social variables that affect language.

Lakoff G. and Johnson, M. 1980. *Metaphors we live by*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Lakoff and Johnson's text is one of the first to explain theories about the centrality of metaphor in human language and the importance it has in interpreting cultures.

Pragmatics

Cutting, J. 2002, *Pragmatics and discourse: A resource book for students*, London: Routledge.
This is a comprehensive introduction to pragmatics and discourse that employs a range of real texts for analysis.

Yule, G. and Widdowson, H. G. 1996. *Pragmatics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
The authors write a useful introduction to pragmatics that lays a solid foundation for further study in the field.

Discourse analysis

Gee, J. P. 2005. *An Introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method*, 2nd edition, New York: Routledge.
Gee writes a highly accessible introduction to discourse analysis, using a wide range of contemporary oral and written texts for analysis.

Schiffrin, D., Tannen, D., and Hamilton, H. E. (eds.) 2003, *The handbook of discourse analysis* (Blackwell Handbooks in Linguistics), London: Blackwell.
This book is a collection of contemporary essays that present a variety of research in discourse analysis. Included is an overview of the field written by the authors.

8 Variations in American English

Key terms

Accent
Dialect
Chain shift
Chicano English (CE)
Learner language
African American English (AAE)
Pidgin
Creole
Ebonics debate

Overview

This chapter asks you to continue your work as descriptive linguists by focusing on American English dialects. You will learn why so many different varieties of American English exist, and you'll read about some of the most commonly discussed dialects spoken today in the United States. Finally, the Hot Topic asks you to consider the linguistic implications of self-improvement courses intended to help speakers modify their particular dialects.

Introduction

On your first day at college you probably heard many different varieties of American English, especially if the users were from other regions of the United States. Perhaps a classmate confused you by asking where the "bubbler" was, or maybe you couldn't easily understand the New Yorkese of someone in your dorm. When your roommate commented that the window "needs washed," you knew you had entered a new language community, one in which speakers varied in their vocabulary use, their pronunciation of certain words, and even in their syntax. In this chapter we are

> An individual's **accent** is the way that person pronounces certain sounds. ... may indicate his regional and social identity. Some of the most commonly identified accents in the United States today include the Southern drawl, the Texas twang, the urban rap, and the redneck tone of voice.

interested in exploring some of the language varieties of American English, tracing their histories, as well as describing their characteristics.

Because vocabulary, pronunciation, and syntax differences are all markers of particular American language communities, we can discuss them as characteristics of particular dialects. A **dialect** is a variety of a language spoken by people of a particular region (regional dialect) or social group (social dialect) that varies in systematic ways from other varieties of the same language. Linguists seek to identify language differences among dialects. But remember that any discussion of dialects is about generalizations. You may be from the South but not have a drawl, or you may live in the city but not have an urban accent.

In fact, our individual idiolects are shaped by our personal characteristics, including our educational level, socioeconomic class, gender, upbringing, and all the other factors that make us who we are. Because a person's idiolect is affected by many aspects of his individuality, people who live in the same area, or who are the same age, gender, or race, may still speak very differently from one another.

To further complicate our discussion of language variation, remember that the language we use is always changing. So we need to remember that when linguists identify a certain pattern in language usage, they are not identifying a concrete aspect that will always be present. Instead, they are indicating a particular usage common to a certain place, a certain situation, and a certain type of speaker. These language generalizations are formed by gathering specific, detailed data about language usage and then abstracting general concepts from the data.

We want to be very clear in distinguishing between linguistic generalizations and language stereotypes. Both deal with broad observations, but stereotypes arise from cultural attitudes rather than from concrete facts. For example, Ted Bundy, a notorious serial murderer who eventually confessed to twenty-eight brutal killings in the 1970s, at first was passed over by police searching for him because he was articulate and confident in his language. Bundy appeared "squeaky clean" both to the young women he lured to their deaths and to initial investigators because American culture holds a particular stereotype about the kind of people who commit violent murders: They will be unattractive in appearance and ungrammatical/uneducated in speech. You are probably familiar with other kinds of stereotypes about the language of certain regions or certain people, stereotypes that link language usage with personality and character traits: Anyone who uses "bad" grammar with the cashier in the grocery store will pay with food stamps, or anyone who uses academic language outside a school setting is a snob. Stereotypes are not supported by facts; instead, they are linked to emotion and to cultural values.

In this chapter you'll learn about the scientific study of language variation, including how linguists gather information and hypothesize about dialect differences.

Exercise 8.1

A.   Choose one of your own language communities, such as one connected to a sport, a hobby, a geographical region, or even a gender, and identify stereotypes that speakers outside your community may hold about your chosen community. Explain why these opinions are stereotypes rather than linguistic generalizations.

B.   Identify a language community outside your own and identify stereotypes your community holds about these other speakers. Explain why these opinions are stereotypes rather than linguistic generalizations.

Studying dialects

Since SAE is the privileged dialect within the United States, many Americans have the idea that it is "correct" and so stigmatize all American English dialects that depart from SAE conventions. People not familiar with the study of language frequently misunderstand the study of dialects, thinking that the purpose is to identify and then eliminate all the nonstandard "errors." As you know, though, linguists conduct language research in as objective a manner as possible, with the purpose of identifying the language that's actually in use. Through the data they've gathered, researchers have demonstrated that all dialects, regional ones such as Southern American English and ethnic ones such as Chicano English and African American English, are just as systematic and rule-governed as SAE.

In addition to identifying the language itself, linguists interested in regional dialects also link that particular language usage to a specific location. In this process, data is gathered as objectively as possible by having field workers either record people's speech or ask people about their use of particular words or phrases. The data is then correlated by its geographical location, or "mapped," as Figure 8.1 illustrates. Using this method, linguists can generalize about the ways in which dialects have migrated and changed over time, and they can project future changes. To help you understand how dialect mapping works, as well as to give you some practice in objectively "collecting" language data and drawing generalizations, the following exercise asks you to discover the various lexicons at work in your classmates' language.

As you undoubtedly know, using double negatives within one sentence is not acceptable according to the conventions of SAE. Yet this usage is frequently heard throughout the United States in a variety of different dialects. Speakers will double a negative to add strong emphasis: "I don't want no more complainin'" leaves you in no doubt about how the speaker feels about whiners. You may not know, though, that the double negative has a long tradition dating back hundreds of years. Chaucer (1889) even uses four negatives when describing the Knight in "The General Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales*: "He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde/ in all his lyf unto no maner wight" (lines 70–71). [He never yet said anything offensive to any type of person in his entire life]. Even though Chaucer doesn't use SAE in this line, we easily understand Chaucer's point that the Knight was a model of courtesy.

Various mapping projects of American English dialects are currently going on in the United States. The following websites of the TELSUR Project, http://ling.upenn.edu/phono_atlas/home.html, and the Dictionary of American Regional English, http://polyglot.ss.wisc.edu/dare/dare.html, give more information about these studies.

What do you call the drink made with milk and ice-cream?
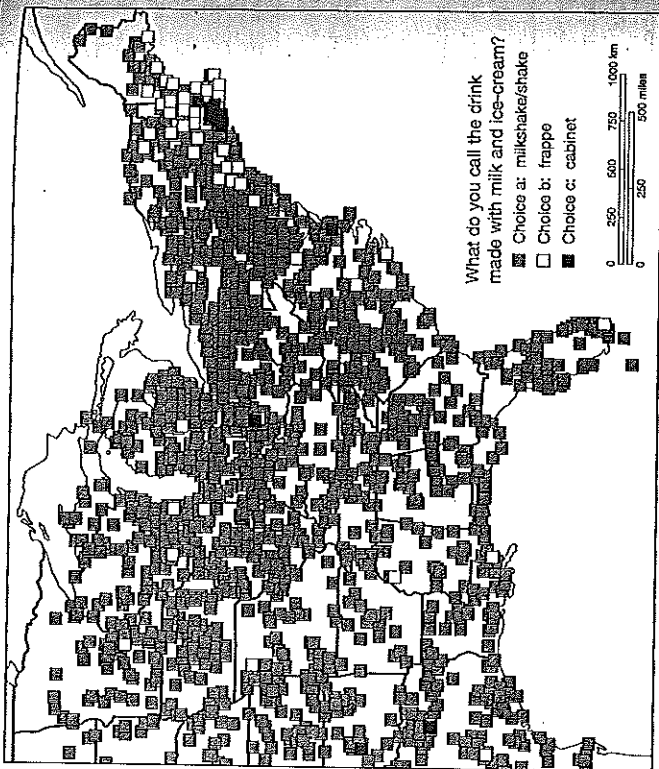☒ Choice a: milkshake/shake
☐ Choice b: frappe
■ Choice c: cabinet

Figure 8.1 *Example of mapping a dialect (After B.A. Vaux and S.A. Golder 2003, Dialect Survey, http://www4.uwm.edu/FLL/linguistics/dialect/staticmaps/q_63.html)*

Exercise 8.2

Look at the following list of words and circle the one that is part of your lexicon. Then ask your classmates what part of the country they are from and note which words they use. If you discover terms from your classmates that are not listed below, include them too. Based on their answers, can you sketch some generalizations about regional usage of some of these terms? Try creating a map that shows the location where each term is used.

1. dragonfly   mosquito hawk   darning needle   snake feeder
2. soda   pop   tonic   soft drink   coke
3. frosting   icing
4. run   kill   brook   branch   creek
5. hoagie   sub   hero   po-boy   grinder   torpedo
6. lightning bug   firefly
7. green beans   string beans   snap beans
8. seesaw   teeter-totter
9. hot dog   frankfurter   wiener   link
10. sprinkles   jimmies

The mini-study of your classmates' dialects in Exercise 8.2 might have made you realize the extent to which language varies in the United States. Now let's consider why there are so many diverse dialects. Why do people in one country speak in a myriad different ways? The answer to this question is complex, since differences can be attributed to physical, social, and linguistic factors. The following discussion examines variation in both regional and social dialects so that you can understand the interaction of these diverse factors.

Regional dialects

Regional dialects of American English can be traced back to the diverse English dialects spoken in Britain. Early settlers from England brought their dialect varieties with them, thus immediately creating regional differences in colonial America as they settled across the eastern seaboard. Once early settlements were established, migratory routes extending out from these population centers would usually follow, and each settlement's dialects would be disseminated along these routes. Looking at the dialect map in Figure 8.2, we can see that the dividing lines between dialect regions today are quite often the same routes of migration that settlers took.
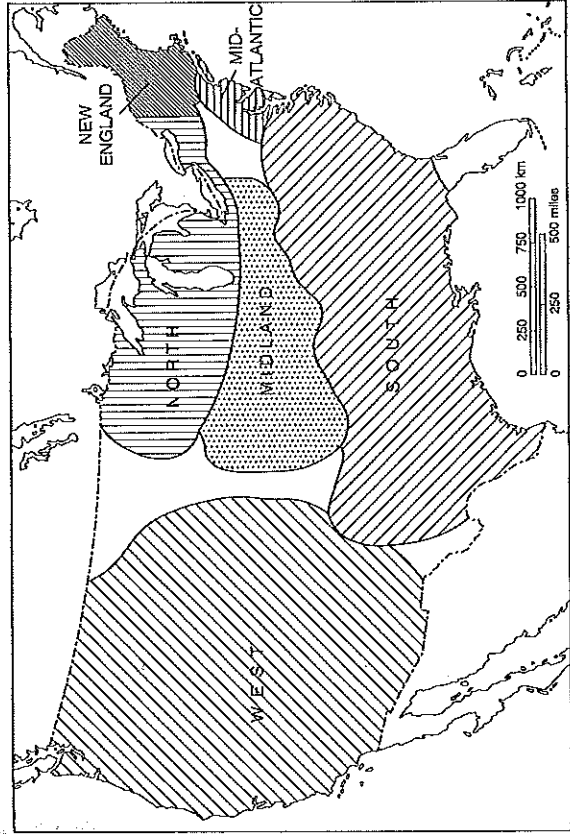

Figure 8.2 *American regional dialects today*

The lines dividing the Southern Region from the Midland and the Midland from the North East Region indicate typical east-to-west routes as first Europeans and, later, Americans moved into the western territories.

Exercise 8.3

Consider your hometown or the place where you spent most of your time growing up. Can you identify the first people who settled that area? If not, do some quick research and see if you can determine the ethnicity of those who founded your town. Then, think about your home dialect. What characteristics of the dialect might include traces of the original founders' language? Take into consideration all aspects of the language: words, accent, syntax, etc. Write up a summary of your research.

Today the terms *Northern*, *Midland*, and *Southern* describe diverse dialects of the Atlantic seaboard, although linguists also recognize regional differences within each classification. The Northern dialect shows distinct variation, for instance, between speakers in Eastern New England and New York, and those in the Inland North. If you listen to speakers from Boston and New York City, for example, you may notice the loss of [r] in words like *dark* [dak] and *bar* [ba], whereas speakers in other northern areas, such as western New York State, usually retain the [r].

The Midland dialect has been divided into Northern and Southern Midland, with various regional differences under each division. Some states contain several dialect communities: Pennsylvania, for instance, has three distinct Northern Midland dialects found in the Philadelphia, Susquehanna Valley, and Pittsburgh areas, respectively.

Variations of the Southern Midland are found in parts of Maryland, West Virginia, Kentucky, Carolina, and Tennessee. Finally, the Southern regional dialect also has variations, extending from the eastern shore of Maryland, down through portions of Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. One characteristic distinguishing the Coastal Southern dialect from other Southern dialects is that Coastal Southerners tend to omit the *-r*, typically only pronouncing the preceding vowel. In this particular southern dialect, *door* becomes [do] and *par* becomes [pa].

Linguists seem to agree that the diversity of American English dialects is reduced the further West one travels in the United States. This is so because the English-speaking population of the West came in large part from the East, and therefore its dialects represent

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Today, of course, American regional dialects continue to change, reflecting the people of each region. For example, the Northern Cities Shift is a twentieth-century change in vowel pronunciation that has taken place in the cities south of the Great Lakes, including Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Buffalo, and spreading from upstate New York westward to Minnesota. This particular change affects the six short vowels in *caught, cot, cat, bit, bet,* and *but* in what is called a **chain shift**, when a group of sounds seems to change their pronunciation at the same time. Such a change is triggered when one sound begins to shift. Then others change as well, in order to keep phonemes distinct in their pronunciations. You may recall the Great Vowel Shift discussed in Chapter 6, which is another example of a chain shift.

Figure 8.3 *Ethnic diversity in the United States* (*Credit: Lloyd Wolf/US Census Bureau*)

a merger, to some extent, between the more distinct dialects of the North, the South, and the Midland. Western dialects may have some unique characteristics, though. For example, a more recent variation found in California in the 1980s was dubbed "Val-speak," after the language spoken by girls living in the San Fernando Valley area of Los Angeles. You may be familiar with Val-speak, since it has now spread to other parts of the country.

Geographical location and immigration history do not account for all of the dialect differences in American English. You may be aware that many dialects are also known by the social and ethnic characteristics of their speaker communities. In the following section we will discuss how these characteristics affect dialects.

Social language variation

Ethnic variation

Annual events held across the country celebrate the United States' diverse ethnic heritage: the Irish St. Patrick's Day Parade in New York City, the Cinco de Mayo celebration in San Antonio, the kielbasa-eating contest held every year in Milwaukee, the Cajun music fest in Louisiana, the African American Love Feast in Baltimore, and so on. What could be more natural than to be proud of one's cultural heritage? (See Figure 8.3.)

A person's cultural heritage, of course, includes his linguistic background. Whether someone was born somewhere else and is now an American citizen, is an immigrant living in the United States, or is a native-born American, he probably can trace his roots to a particular "foreign" culture and thus to

a particular, non-American-English language community. While classifying people by their ethnic heritage might seem natural, though, in fact, many social factors create our individual ideolects. For instance, African American English is strongly associated with certain geographical regions, such as the southern United States and large urban centers, but it is also linked with a particular socioeconomic status. Likewise, the Italian English dialect is associated with particular areas (cities in the northeast, especially) and a certain type or class of people. Thus we can't consider only the "ethnic" aspect of a dialect; we must consider its users' other characteristics (Wolfram 2004).

Another difficulty of analyzing the ethnicity of dialects is trying to determine if the language is a true dialect of English or actually an example of transference from another language. Are the speakers using different forms of English because they are in the process of learning English and so still being influenced by their native tongue, or are these nonstandard forms a distinctive part of the dialect maintained through generations? In fact, the only way to determine whether a dialect is an actual dialect or merely a stage in the process of learning a language is to study the language over time, noting whether these different forms are retained or eventually discarded. Many English dialects in the United States today are often mistaken for learner languages, including the Chicano English (CE) dialect, which we will now examine in detail.

Dialect focus: Chicano English Perhaps you've overheard a customer in a Mexican restaurant ask a server who has a "Spanish" accent where she is from. The customer may assume that the server is a non-native speaker of English whose language reflects that of a language learner, that is, that she speaks a language filled with forms transferred from her native tongue. In fact, when they hear an accent that seems foreign to them, most Americans think the same thing. They might be surprised to find out that not all Spanish-influenced Englishes are learner languages but that many are fully rule-governed dialects of American English.

Figures from the US Census Bureau (2007) on ethnic populations reveal that, in 2006, approximately 44.3 million Hispanics, or people of Spanish or Latino origin, are now living in the United States. The presence of Hispanics in the United States has expanded the group of American Englishes to include a wide variety of Spanish-influenced dialects, including Cuban English, Columbian English, Puerto Rican English, and others. Belonging to this group is Chicano English (CE), perhaps the most widely spoken of these dialects because it is the language of choice for many Mexican-Americans, one of the largest ethnic minorities in the United States. Just like the Southern
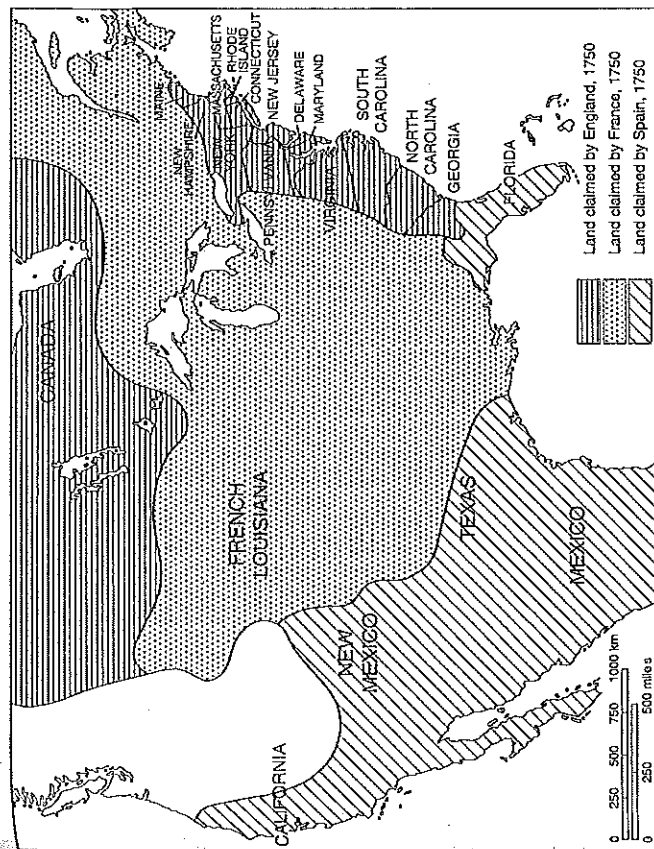
Figure 8.4 *Regions of Spanish settlement in colonial North America*

dialect, the "Valley Girl" dialect, the Boston dialect, and so on, **Chicano English (CE)** is a specific variety of American English with systematic usage features, such as pronunciation, lexicon, syntax, and morphology, that are shared by the entire language community. And just like these other dialects, CE usages can be traced over time, so it is not a learner language, as some Americans wrongly assume.

CE emerged from a historical language contact situation between Spanish and English speakers in the southwestern territories of the United States. Figure 8.4 illustrates the extent of Spanish holdings during colonial times. These lands were first settled by the Spanish and, later, when British colonists and then Americans began moving into these areas, a language contact zone between the two language communities formed. The boundaries of this zone would shift, of course, as the border shifted, for example after 1848 when California, parts of Arizona and New Mexico, and Texas became part of the United States. In addition, language contact became more frequent as Mexican immigration to the United States increased. During the process of learning English as a second language, these immigrants, like all second language learners, used a **learner language**, that is, a non-native variety of the target language (in this case, English) that was influenced by their first language (in this case, Spanish). As linguist Carmen Fought (2003) notes, this learner language was the precursor

to the more established and enduring dialect of CE, which the children and successive generations of these immigrants would speak.

Even though it began as a learner language generations ago, CE is now a recognizable dialect, spoken only by native speakers of English, persons who were born in the United States. CE speakers are distinguished, then, from Mexican immigrants who have come here and learned English as a second language and so may use a learner language. Many CE speakers do not know any Spanish, and some do not live within Mexican or Mexican-American families. CE is a form of English that has been influenced by contact with Spanish; it is not a form of Spanish that's been influenced by English.

Table 8.1 identifies a few commonly recognized rules of Chicano English.

Table 8.1 *Commonly recognized rules of Chicano English*

	Rule	Example
Phonology	Reduction of consonant clusters at the end of words	*last* and *board* pronounced as [læs] and [bor'] respectively.
	Devoicing of [z] in all positions	*easy* = [isi]
	Devoicing of [v] in final position	[lʌv] = [lʌf]
Morphology	Deletion of the *-s/-es* endings on the third person singular verb form	"She don't want to hear that" or "The dog come when I call"
	Use of simple past tense forms as participles	"I had went there before" or "She had wrote that down"
Syntax	Use of multiple negatives in one sentence	"I don't have no classes" or "We can't get no help"

Exercise 8.4

Nonlinguists sometimes refer to combinations of Spanish and English as *Spanglish*, a general term that doesn't describe a specific dialect or even a specific type of usage. Discuss the following questions with a partner, and then be prepared to share your ideas with the class. First, why might a Chicano English user find such a reference to her language insulting? Then consider the semantics of using the term *Spanglish*. Would the meaning change if the user was non-Spanish speaking? Non-American-English speaking? Finally, based on your own observations or research, give some examples of Spanglish and explain in what situations it might be used.

Dialect focus: African American English The general term **African American English (AAE)** refers to a group of related dialects spoken primarily by a large population of Americans of African descent. Note that not all African Americans speak AAE, and that not all those who speak AAE are African Americans. As is true for any language, people learn the dialect of their

community, and for most, this is the dialect they grow up with. Skin color does not determine the dialect one speaks, but one's culture or environment does. As linguist Salikoko S. Mufwene (2001) reminds us, the term AAE covers a broad span of diverse varieties, just as Southern American English does, for example. People in coastal Mississippi speak very differently from people in Appalachia, but the elements they share in common make them both "Southern." Region also has an impact on AAE: An AAE speaker in the southern United States will sound different from an AAE speaker in the north. An urban AAE speaker might sound different from an AAE speaker in a more rural area. But they all share certain elements of their language that mark AAE as a distinct dialect.

As the name indicates, the earliest speakers of AAE were African Americans, or, to be more direct, Africans brought to the United States as slaves. Obviously, newly arrived slaves wouldn't have known much, if any, American English. However, their language difficulties began before arriving in an American port. Even though each group of slaves on board a trading ship came from the same continent, they would probably not have shared the same native language. Slave traders bought slaves from a variety of locations, so each shipload would have contained individuals from a number of different tribes and of different places. Some slave traders may even have intentionally increased the communication difficulties by separating groups of Africans who spoke the same language as a way to maintain control and prevent uprisings while at sea. So how did AAE develop from this mesh of different languages?

Linguists have several different theories about the development of AAE that focus on the influence of prolonged language contact between the slaves' native tongues and American English, as well as on the preservation of older language forms that geographical isolation creates. Proving these theories is difficult because we have few factual records of oral language from earlier periods.

AAE may have developed as a pidgin language, a language that arises when people who do not speak the same language come into contact. In this case, the native languages of the slaves came into contact with English, Spanish, Dutch, and Portuguese, the languages of the slave traders. In order to communicate, slaves may have developed a common language, combining elements of their traders' various languages and including terms from their native African dialects. Most pidgins are developed only enough for rudimentary communication and so typically do not include function words, like articles and prepositions, or extended vocabularies. This changes when the children of those who speak a pidgin are born. The language of these second-generation speakers is called a **creole**, which means that it develops more language features and a more complete grammar. Some creoles remain languages unto themselves, that is,

People sometimes confuse AAE with the language of rappers and other members of hip-hop culture. The two are not the same, though. Users of hip-hop language tend to be members of certain social groups, while AAE users spread across all demographic groups throughout the United States. Hip-hop has only been in existence for a few decades, and AAE has been in use for centuries. Hip-hop language has roots in AAE, but since hip-hop culture is tied specifically to the arts and innovation – dance, art and music – rather than to a particular history and ethnic background, it has grown in a different direction.
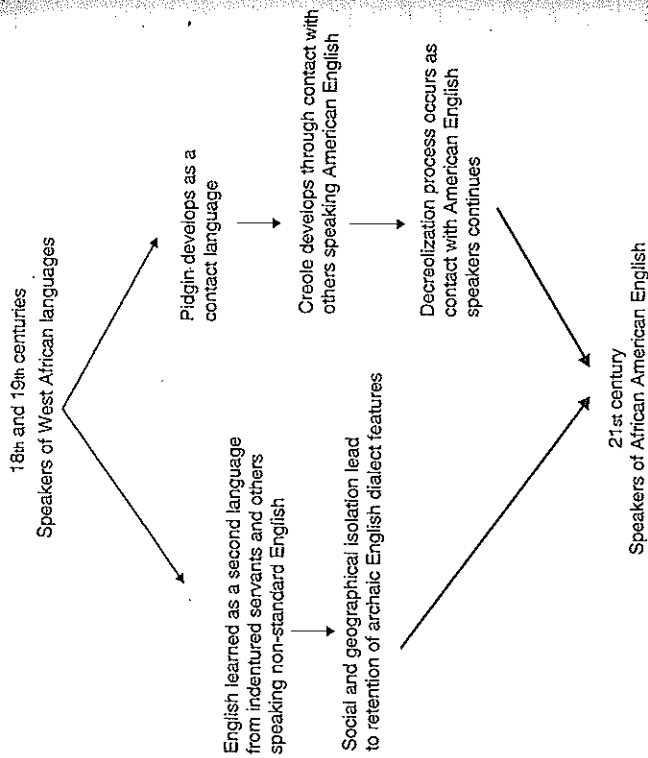
Figure 8.5 *Theories about the development of AAE*

they exist alongside other languages and do not slowly blend with others over time. The fact that AAE shares some words and grammar structures with some of the Caribbean creole languages may be evidence that AAE began as a pidgin language.

Today, though, AAE resembles SAE much more closely than it resembles any other language. Doesn't this contradict the creole theory? Not necessarily. In some situations, a creole may become dominated by another language, so much so that it becomes decreolized, meaning that it loses so many elements of its originating mix of languages that it becomes a dialect of that dominant language rather than a separate language in its own right. In the case of AAE, even if it began as a creole, it certainly has had prolonged contact over several hundred years with SAE. Over time it could have gradually absorbed more and more English, losing elements of the other parent tongues.

Other linguists have theorized that the newly arrived slaves would only have had contact with a very few native English speakers. So, rather than being forced to develop a pidgin for communication, they would have had to learn English because it was required to communicate with those in power. And rather than interacting with the most articulate SAE speakers of that time, the slaves probably only spoke to those who used nonstandard English dialects of their own. The English that the slaves learned, then, would not have been the SAE of

that era. Supporters of this theory point out that some of the distinctive features of AAE today also existed in older varieties of English used in earlier time periods and with other nonstandard dialects such as Appalachian English. If it developed in this way, AAE then originated as a dialect of American English and not as a separate language. Figure 8.5 contrasts these two theories.

Notice that these different theories for the development of AAE could also have worked together. Slaves could very well have developed a pidgin to communicate with speakers of a variety of American English dialects, a history that would support both of these theories. Where linguists do seem to agree is that the development of AAE happened over a period of time and was produced by its speakers coming into continual contact with other languages – perhaps languages other than English, or perhaps earlier forms of English alone. And no matter how AAE came into being, today it is a distinct dialect with its own usage conventions.

Until linguists began studying AAE in the 1970s, most Americans believed that this dialect was simply an abbreviated or shortened form of SAE. And because it was considered a partial form of English, most people thought AAE was ungrammatical, that is, that it lacked a systematic set of grammar rules by which it was governed. The contrary proved to be true, however, after linguist William Labov (1972) analyzed AAE and found that its grammar was just as complex as that of other dialects of English, including SAE. Table 8.2 examines some of the most commonly recognized rules of AAE.

After reading the linguistic description of AAE, you now know that it is a structured, rule-governed dialect of American English. Many Americans how-ever, do not share this view and still regard it as a broken form of English, much as they might consider Chicano English a broken dialect as well. This general attitude toward AAE became very apparent in what became a national discussion in the late 1990s on its possible use in one public school system. The discussion is important for what it reveals about the role of language variation within a particular language community, as well as American attitudes about non-standard dialects. Box 8.1 examines the origins of the national controversy over African American English.

Gender variation

Another area of study within social variation examines gender and language. For centuries stereotypes have existed about the ways in which men and women really talk more than men? Do men really interrupt more than women? Questions like these have made researchers wonder if a relationship exists between a speaker's

William Labov is an influential American scholar working in the fields of sociolinguistics and dialectology. Labov introduced a more objective methodology for gathering language data, helping transform the field of linguistics into a quantitative science. His early work studying social groups in Harlem relied on objective observation of real-life language use which was then subjected to mathematical analysis. So when Labov articulated the grammar rules of AAE within the language community he'd been studying, he was able to prove their existence rather than merely assert an opinion that they might exist. You can read Labov's essay, "How I Got into Linguistics," and "What I Got Out of it," on the PBS website *Do You Speak American:* www.pbs.org/speak/speech/sociolinguistics/labov/

Table 8.2 *Commonly recognized rules of AAE.*

	Rule	Example
Phonology	Reduction of consonant clusters at the end of words when the following word begins with a consonant	*desk top* [destəp]
	Reduction of consonant clusters when past tense ending *-ed* added to verbs ending in consonants	*dropped* [drɒp] *missed* [mɪs]
	b, d, and *g* at the ends of words become [p], [t], and [k], respectively	*bad* [bæt] *gag* [gæk]
Morphology	Express habitual actions or states in the present by using the uninflected *be*	*He be tired. She be happy.*
	Deletion of the *-s/-es* endings on the third person singular verb form	"She don't want to hear that" or "The dog come when I call"
Syntax	Use of multiple negatives in one sentence	"I don't have no classes" or "We can't get no help"

Box 8.1 Controversy over the Oakland School Board resolution

In 1996, the Oakland, California School Board passed a resolution intended to improve the academic performance of African American students in its district. The resolution focused on two main points: first, that some African American speakers use a language that is historically different from other American English dialects, including Standard American English (SAE), because of its roots in West African languages; second, teachers would be trained to use African American English (AAE) in the classroom as a bridge leading to students' acquisition of SAE proficiency. Due to the incomplete reporting of the resolution by the media, the general public came to believe that the Oakland School Board viewed AAE as a language distinct from English, and that teachers would be instructing students in both AAE and SAE in the Oakland schools. The resulting controversy began a national discussion about using AAE in schools, known as the Ebonics debate. Even later, after the board clarified its position, stating that it would only use AAE as a transitional tool and that it would not be taught as a language itself, the public could not accept the notion that an "inferior" language would actually be used in the classroom. Linguists joined the debate to educate the public that AAE was a dialect with a fully developed grammar rule system, just like SAE, and therefore no less "correct" than SAE, but today, over ten years later, many Americans still don't recognize AAE as a distinct dialect. You can read the Oakland School District resolutions, linguists' responses, and comments on the need for teacher training in American English dialects at http://linguistlist.org/topics/ebonics/

language and gender, and, if so, how this might affect social relations. Before we discuss the results of some of this research, however, we should first define what we mean by the term *gender*. Most scholars use *gender* to refer to a practice, or a set of behaviors, that expresses what *a culture* defines as masculine or feminine nature. Note that we stress that these behaviors are denoted masculine or feminine by a culture, different from sex characteristics, which are biologically determined. Gender differences are usually those seen between male and female, created when people carry out different activities thought to express either male or female natures. And these gender differences vary from one culture to another because the concepts of masculine and feminine vary from one culture to another. As a significant human activity, language communication has also been identified as gendered.

In the early years of gender and language research, scholars conducted studies that catalogued phonological, morphological, and syntactic traits of male and female speakers. In later studies, linguists used discourse analysis to examine gender and language, primarily focusing upon conversations and their contexts. Let's now look at the findings of some of these studies.

Differences in speech of males and females Studies have revealed some differences in the ways that English-speaking men and women use language within western cultures, from the words that they employ to the ways in which they hold conversations: how they contribute, what part they take, what they talk about, and so on. Table 8.3 illustrates some of these potential differences.

What causes these observed variations in the ways men and women speak? The answers to this question have been varied, but most can be grouped into essentially two positions: those that attribute these differences to power differentials between men and women, and those that attribute them to the different natures of men's and women's lives.

Explanations for gender speech variation As you have seen throughout this text, a person's language is shaped by the culture in which he resides. Researchers engaged in gender discourse analysis have noticed that a participant's language very much depends upon the nature of power within a discourse or exchange. These researchers suggest that in cultures where the masculine is privileged and males typically retain more power as a result, men will tend to hold the power in conversations as well, and so exhibit any or all of the characteristics noted in Table 8.3.

More recent studies have refined this thesis. They have found that not only men but also women whose power status is high engage in the discourse characteristics listed in the table, and that this use occurs in discoursal situations with both female and male subordinates. These findings suggest that the discourse of power, then, is not just the language of men or women but the

Table 8.3 *Differences in the speech of males and females within western cultures*

	Men's language	Women's language
Phonological differences	Lower pitch; Smaller range of intonation; more monotone; Stronger, louder voices	Higher pitch; Greater range of intonation; Softer, possibly breathier, voices
Morphological differences	Lexical terms reflecting cultural norms: in the west, perhaps a larger wordbank of sports, building construction, and other terms; Greater use of nonstandard terms, such as vulgarities	Lexical terms reflecting cultural norms: in the west, perhaps a larger wordbank of color, fashion, and other terms; Greater use of prestige word forms
Discoursal differences	More interrupting in some conversations	More facilitative feedback in some conversations, such as use of tag questions

discourse of the more or the less powerful (Cameron 1998; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003). While we might accept the idea that in almost all cultural contexts power differentials exist, does this fact explain all of these differences in gendered conversation? Some researchers have suggested that the dissimilarities stem from broader cultural experiences that are different for men and women. For instance, linguist Deborah Tannen (1993) argues that men and women use language differently because they are sexually segregated at various stages in their lives. This segregation into same-sex groups creates a group culture, or a group norm of behavior, which includes norms in the ways of speaking. Tannen believes that men and women learn different communication skills according to their respective group's purposes for creating relationships. For instance, women often seek intimacy, understanding, and reassurance from their relationships with other women, while men, who tend to favor more independence, are less concerned with forming close or equal relationships with other men. Those who favor the culture difference explanation propose that when men and women do come together, they often do not communicate well because they are using different communication skills.

Both of these positions attempting to explain the differences in male and female discourse have been criticized by other sociolinguists for their reliance

Research on gender differences in language has broadened our understanding of boys' and girls' learning styles in the classroom, which in turn has influenced pedagogical methods. Teachers today are very aware of their students' potentially different discoursal behaviors and may employ teaching approaches that complement these diverse styles.

on stereotypical views about men's and women's characters and for their neglect of other factors that influence discourse. As you've seen, many other variables come into play when a person uses language, including ethnicity, purposes of engagement, setting, and so on. Linguists clearly need to be aware of the consequences of excluding some factors and including others when they study discourse. While the research into the connections between gender and language use continues, for now we will recognize that gender is one factor among many that influences the ways in which we speak with others.

Exercise 8.5

Get into a group of two or three people and discuss the characteristics of language that you might hear in one or two of the single-gender group listed below. Consider all aspects of language: what sounds, pitch, words, sentence constructions and meanings (direct or implied) might you hear? Then think about these characteristics. Are they based upon social expectation of the ways in which males and females talk or on your own experience of these groups? Or on both? Once your group has identified some of these characteristics write a short dialogue that you imagine could take place among some of the members of the group you've chosen to analyze. Once it has been written, share the dialogue with your other classmates.

1. senior women's luncheon club
2. a middle-aged men's bowling league
3. a group of girls in a kindergarten class
4. twenty-something male friends in a bar
5. twenty-something female friends in their dorm room

Chapter summary

This chapter has introduced you to the notion of regional and social varieties of American English, as well as the methodology linguists use to study **dialects**. You have learned about the historical link between the development of regional American English dialects and the early migration routes of English-speaking settlers in this country. In addition, you now know about the history and some of the linguistic structures of both **Chicano English** and **African American English**, two of the most commonly spoken social dialects in the United States today. And finally the chapter explored the relationship between gender and language.

Critical Thinking exercises

1. Go to the website of the International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA), a repository of source recordings of both English language dialects and English spoken in the accents of other languages.

downloadable at IDEA at web.ku.edu/~idea/ Listen to two or more American English dialects of your choice, jotting down some examples of the pronunciation, words, and syntax of each that you hear. Then, write up a descriptive analysis of each dialect, noting differences that you observe in phonology, morphology/syntax, and lexicon. Speculate on how these differences might have arisen.

2. Pick a contemporary dialect to analyze from media portrayals in popular culture. For example, you might look at a music video or a movie or a TV show – anything that portrays speakers with two or more dialects interacting with each other. How are dialects and language variations used to create individual characters in this portrayal? Do they shape one's attitude toward a particular speaker, or comment on a particular language community in American society? You might also think about the reactions of other people to this particular portrayal. Are they the same as your own reactions?

3. Sociolinguists (linguists who study language in social contexts) have found that people who might not take offense to a regional dialect do take exception to other kinds of dialects, often stemming more from their notions about the people who speak these dialects than from the dialects themselves. Think of some American dialects that have particular connotations attached to them. You can start off with the Southern and Northern, but then branch out and consider other dialects – class, ethnic, gender, etc. – as well. Speculate about why the dialects you have chosen have more connotations attached to them than other dialects. Write up your observations in a short essay.

Hot Topic: Change your life! Get a new accent today!

You may have seen advertisements in newspapers and online for companies that claim to be "accent reduction specialists," or "dialect modification experts." Their services aren't just for non-native speakers seeking to reduce their foreign accents but extend as well to American English speakers who wish to minimize their regional accents (suggested accents that need improvement include those of New York City, the American South, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, and the Midwest farmland). To help individuals seeking to change their regional accents, one company offers a special "articulation tape," which can be used to furnish the user with "elevated/classical American diction."

The services provided by these companies bring up some interesting questions, especially in relation to the notion of "good" or "bad" accents. Think about these services and consider the following questions, in a group or by yourself. Jot down your ideas as you discuss or ponder, and then write them up in a short response. Note: If you wish to see some of these advertisements, you

may seek out these companies by typing into your search engine "accent reduction" or "dialect modification."

1. Who is the intended target audience of these ads? Consider which occupations might require people to think about and perhaps change their accents.

2. Which American English accent do you think these companies might have selected as a goal for their customers to learn? One company mentions students learning "elevated/classical American diction." How might you define this? See if you can write down a list of words that might be included in its lexicon.

3. What are some of the implications of these ads? Why might the existence of these programs be at the same time both characteristically and uncharacteristically American? Hint: Consider some of the traditional values that are associated with Americans.

4. How might linguists view these programs, given what you know about how linguists work? Finally, what are your own feelings about the services these companies offer?

Learn more about it

Studying dialects

Finnegan, E. and Rickford, J.R. (eds.) 2004. *Language in the USA*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
The editors offer a comprehensive examination of American English, including essays discussing regional and social varieties.

Wolfram, W. 1991, *Dialects and American English*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
In prose meant for the reader unfamiliar with technical linguistic terminology, Wolfram introduces students to the subject of American dialect variation through discussions of the nature of dialects, descriptive detail of dialects, and the application of dialect information.

Dialect focus: Chicano English

Fought, C. 2003. *Chicano English in context*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
Fought provides an excellent study of Chicano English within the context of East Los Angeles, with a thorough description of the phonological, morphological, and syntactic characteristics of CE.

Penfield, J. and Ornstein-Galicia, J.L. 1985, *Chicano English: An ethnic contact dialect*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
This early study of Chicano English gives a useful and detailed linguistic description.

Dialect focus: African American English

Green, L. J. 2002, *African American English: A linguistic description*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Green gives an authoritative introduction to the dialect of African American English (AAE). In addition to descriptions of AAE grammar, the book includes discussions of AAE in literature, contemporary media, and education.

Mufwene, S. S., Rickford, J. R., Bailey, G., and Baugh, J. (eds.) 1998, *African American English: Structure, history and use*, New York: Routledge.

This complete reference work describes AAE's structural features, its history and lexicon, its use in discourse, and its relevance to the educational problems of African American children.

Gender and language

Cameron, D. 1998, *The feminist critique of language: A reader*, London: Routledge.

This textbook provides extracts of primary source material from the leading scholars studying gender and language, giving readers an introduction to the range and depth of the field.

Eckert, P. and McConnell-Ginet, S. 2003, *Language and gender*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This introductory textbook explores the relationship between gender and language use.

Tannen, D. 1991, *You just don't understand: Women and men in conversation*, London: Virago.

One of the early researchers in this field, Tannen investigates the ways in which men and women communicate differently. She also examines how argument and interruption function within different discoursal contexts.

9 Language, community, and American policy

Key terms

Language policy
Sociolinguistics
Overt prestige
Covert prestige
Slang
Taboo
Jargon
Official language

Overview

In this chapter you'll learn how the interconnection of language, power, and identity can affect entire language communities, as well as the individuals within those communities. Those with power within a community are able to control the language, and thus the identity, of those without power. After explaining basic concepts, the chapter focuses on the complex language community of the United States, discussing a few of the laws implemented in the past that have directly affected language usage. You'll explore some of the historical conflicts over language usage, such as that between American English speakers and Native Americans, as well as examine the debate over "Official English." Finally, the Hot Topic asks you to reflect on the position of endangered languages in the world today and the policies that have been enacted to save them.

Introduction

Do you remember the 2006 public furor over a recording of "The Star-Spangled Banner" with Spanish lyrics? It made its debut on April 28, just before the US Congress began debating the topic of immigration reform, and immediately received a great deal of media attention, primarily negative. Adam Kidron, president of the song's recording company, explained that "Nuestro