American English

Dialects and Variation

Second Edition

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2006

Blackwell
Publishing

6.3 The Patterning of Social Differences in Language

According to popular belief, dialect patterns are quite simple: The members of one social group always use a particular dialect variant while members of a different group use another one. For example, under this view, vernacular dialect speakers always pronounce *-ing* words such as *swimming* as *swimmin'* and use multiple negatives such as *They **didn't** do **nothing***, while speakers of standard varieties never use these forms. However, this "all or nothing" perspective often obscures the actual ways in which dialect forms are used and distorts the picture of language variation.

The pattern of dialect distribution which most closely matches the popular perception of dialect differences is referred to as GROUP-EXCLUSIVE usage, where one community of speakers uses a feature but another community never does. In its ideal form, group-exclusive usage means that all members of a particular community use a certain feature whereas no members of other groups ever use it. This ideal pattern, however, is rarely if ever manifested in American English dialects. The kinds and levels of social groupings that take place are just too complex for language patterns to work out so neatly. In many cases, linguistic distinctions between groups exist on a continuum rather than in discrete sets. For example, a certain group may use a certain amount of *-in'* for *-ing* while another group still uses *-in'*, but at a different rate. Furthermore, the definition of a social group is usually multidimensional rather than unidimensional, based, as it is, on a range of factors such as social class, ethnicity, gender, age, patterns of interaction, common practices, etc. And, as we have seen, dialects are constantly undergoing change – change that is distributed unevenly even within a seemingly unified community. For example, quotative *be like* (e.g. *She's like*, "*Where are you going?*"), a relatively recent innovation in American English, can be found even in small, fairly isolated communities, but it is found generally only among younger speakers.

The essential aspect of group-exclusive dialect forms is that speakers from other groups do not use these forms rather than the fact that all the members of a particular group use them. Not all people who are native to Pittsburgh use *you'ns* and *gumband*, but it is a safe bet that someone who is native to San Francisco or Seattle does not use these forms. Group-exclusive usage is therefore easier to define negatively than positively. Viewed in this way, there are many dialect features on all levels of language organization that show group-exclusive distribution. On a phonological level, many of the regional vowel productions presented thus far, such as the pronunciation of the vowels in *caught* and *cot* as the same vowel or the pronunciation of the /ai/ in *time* as [a] (as in *tahm*), show group-exclusive distribution across regions. There are similar examples in morphology, such as the absence of the *-s* plural on nouns of weights and measures as in *four acre*, *five pound*, and the pluralization of *you* as *youse*, *y'all*, or *you'ns*. In syntax, the use of positive *anymore* in *They go to the movies a lot **anymore*** and verbal complements such as *The kitchen needs **remodeled***, or *The dog **wants out*** are examples of group-exclusive usage patterns, while in the lexicon there are numerous examples such as *gumband* for *rubberband*, *garret* for *attic*, *juvember* for *sling shot*, as well as thousands of words found in the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (1985–2002).

In contrast to group-exclusive forms, GROUP-PREFERENTIAL forms are distributed across different groups or communities of speakers, but members of one group are more likely to use the form than members of another group. For example, highly specific color terms (e.g. *mauve*, *plum*, etc.) are often associated with women as opposed to men, at least among middle-class European American speakers in the United States, but there are certainly many men who make similar distinctions, and, of course, there are women who do not use such refined color designations. The association of a finely graded color spectrum with women is statistically based, as more women make these distinctions than men. We thus refer to the use of highly specific color terms as a group-preferential pattern rather than a group-exclusive one. We would not expect group-preferential patterns to be as socially meaningful as group-exclusive dialect features, although popular stereotypes of group-preferential dialect patterns sometimes treat them as if they were, in fact, group-exclusive. The popular characterization of vernacular speakers as saying *dese*, *dem*, and *dose* is a case where the stereotype of group-exclusive behavior actually obscures a fairly complex pattern that is really group-preferential – and also highly variable.

The careful examination of usage patterns shows that social groups are often differentiated on the basis of how frequently speakers use particular forms rather than whether or not they use the forms at all. In other words, individual speakers within groups may fluctuate in their use of variants, sometimes using one form and sometimes using an alternate. For example, consider the following excerpt showing the fluctuation of *-ing* and *-in'* within the speech of a single speaker during one stretch of conversation.

> We were walk*in'* down the street and we saw this car go*ing* out of control. The driver looked like he was sleep*ing* at the wheel or someth*in'*. The next thing I knew the car was turn*in'* around and just spinn*ing* around. I thought the car was com*in'* right at me and I started runn*in'* like crazy. I was so scared, think*ing* the car was gonna hit me or someth*in'*.

In the ten examples of the form *-ing* in this passage, four cases end in *-ing* and six in *-in'*. According to the linguistic pattern or "rule" for this process, which states that *-ing* in unstressed syllables may become *-in'*, all ten cases

of *-ing* should be realized as *-in'*, yet only six of them occur as *-in'*. This kind of variation, where a speaker sometimes produces one variant and sometimes an alternate one, is referred to as INHERENT VARIABILITY. This term reflects the belief, common among sociolinguists, that this fluctuation is an internal part of a single linguistic system and not the result of importations from another dialect. It seems very unlikely that the speaker fluctuating between *-ing* and *-in'* is switching between two dialects, one exclusively using *-ing* and another exclusively using *-in'*. Nor is the speaker shifting between two different styles within the interview. Instead, the speaker is using a single dialect system – one with two variants of this ending – and simply fluctuates in the use of the variants. This kind of fluctuation has long been recognized within linguistics, where certain processes are considered "optional" because they may or may not be applied. For example, there is an optional process that permits a speaker to place the particle *up* after a noun phrase rather than directly after the verb, so that *She looked **up** the number* may alternatively be realized as *She looked the number **up***. Linguists do not typically say that each of these sentences belongs to a distinctly different dialect, and that a speaker switches between the dialects. Instead, we say that both of these sentences are options within a single system. Similarly, we may say that the *-in'* and *-ing* forms are alternating variants within one system for most English speakers.

One of the important discoveries to emerge from the detailed study of dialects over the past several decades, particularly social dialects, was that dialects are sometimes differentiated not by the discrete, or categorical, use or non-use of forms, but by the relative frequency with which different variants of a form occur. In fact, it can be shown for a number of phonological and grammatical features that dialects are more typically differentiated by the extent to which a particular feature occurs, its relative frequency, rather than by its complete absence or categorical presence.

Table 6.1 displays the frequency levels of *-in'* for *-ing*, a phonological variable, and the syntactic variable of pronominal apposition (e.g. *My mother, she's coming to school* as opposed to *My mother's coming to school*) in four different social status groups of Detroit speakers (adapted from Shuy, Wolfram, and Riley 1967). Although the figures represent the mean scores for each social group, all of the individual speakers also exhibit variability between *-ing* and *-in'*, as well as between *my mother, she . . .* and *my mother. . . .* Frequency levels were computed for individual speakers by first noting all those cases where a form like *-in'* might have occurred – namely, in unstressed syllables ending in *-ing*. Then, the number of cases in which *-in'* actually occurred was counted. For example, in the sample passage given above, there are ten cases where *-in'* could have occurred, but only six of them, or 60 percent, were actually produced with the *-in'* form. This tabulation procedure follows a fairly standard format for

Table 6.1 Frequency of a variable phonological feature and a variable grammatical feature in four different social groups in Detroit

	Upper middle class	*Lower middle class*	*Upper working class*	*Lower working class*
Mean percentage of *-in'* forms	19.4	39.1	50.5	78.9
Mean percentage of pronominal apposition	4.5	13.6	25.4	23.8

Adapted from Shuy, Wolfram, and Riley (1967)

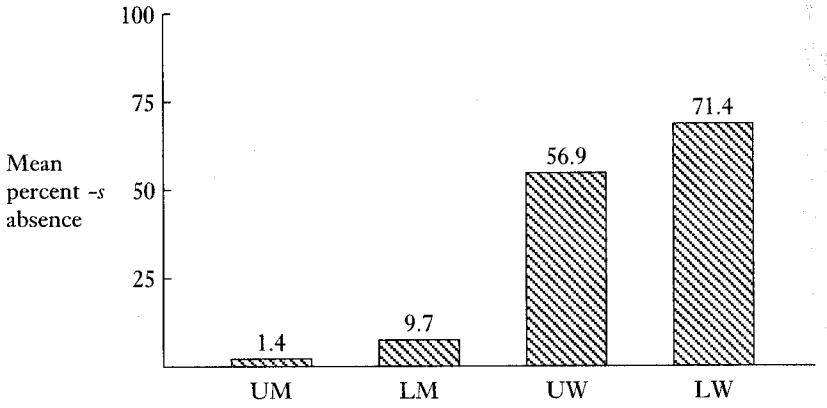
determining frequency levels of dialect forms, which can be indicated in the simple formula:

$$\frac{\text{No. of cases where a given form occurs}}{\text{No. of cases where the form might have occurred}} \times 100$$

In other words, we calculate the proportion of actual cases out of potential cases (i.e. 0.6) and multiply by 100 to arrive at a percentage score (60 percent).

The fact that there is fluctuation between forms such as *-ing* and *-in'* does not mean that the fluctuation is totally random or haphazard. Although we cannot predict which variant might be used in a given instance, there are factors that can increase or decrease the likelihood that certain variants will occur. These factors are known technically as CONSTRAINTS ON VARIABILITY. The constraints are of two major types. First, there are various social factors such as social class (as in table 6.1) which systematically correlate with an increase or decrease in the frequency level of usage. In other words, looking at table 6.1, we can say that a speaker from the lower working class is more likely to use both *-in'* for *-ing* and pronominal apposition than speakers from other classes.

Not all linguistic structures correlate with social status differences in the same way. Different linguistic variables may align with given social status groupings in a variety of ways. For example, consider the ways in which two linguistic variables are distributed across four different social strata within the African American community of Detroit, Michigan. These variables are third-person singular suffix absence (e.g. *She go to the store* for *She goes to the store*) in figure 6.1 and *r*-lessness (e.g. *bea'* for *bear*) in figure 6.2.



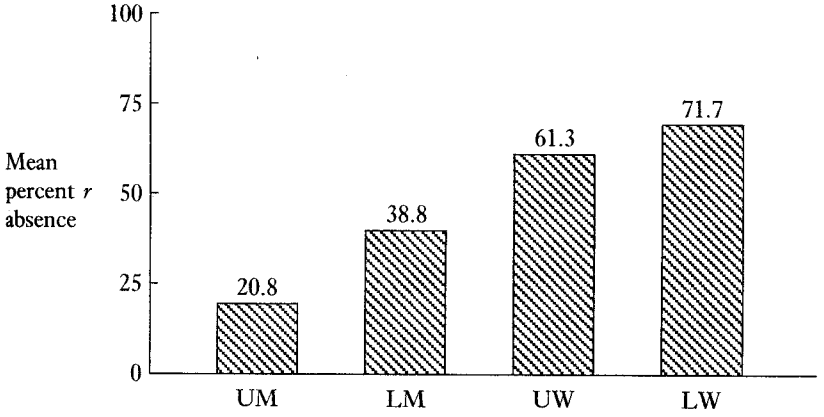
UM = upper middle class; LM = lower middle class; UW = upper working class; LW = lower working class.

Figure 6.1 Third-person singular *-s/-es* absence: an example of sharp stratification

In figure 6.1, the linguistic variation correlates with certain discrete social strata. The middle-class groups show very little *-s/-es* absence whereas working-class speakers show significant levels of *-s/-es* absence. The distribution of *-s/-es* use shows a wide separation between middle-class and working-class groups and is therefore referred to as a case of SHARP STRATIFICATION. On the other hand, the distribution of *r*-lessness in figure 6.2 indicates a pattern of GRADIENT or FINE STRATIFICATION, in which the relative frequency of *r*-lessness changes gradually from one social class to the adjacent one.

In the examples given in figures 6.1 and 6.2, sharp stratification is illustrated by a grammatical variable and gradient stratification by a phonological one. Although there are exceptions, grammatical variables are more likely to show sharp stratification than phonological ones. This underscores the fact that grammatical features are typically more diagnostic of social differences than phonological ones with respect to the standard–nonstandard continuum of English.

Stable linguistic variables defined primarily on the standard–nonstandard continuum of English tend to be sharply stratified, whereas linguistic features undergoing change often exhibit gradient stratification. This is due, in part, to the role of social class in language change within a community. As we discuss in the next section, change tends to start in a given social class and spread from that point to adjacent social classes. The kind of correlation that exists between social status and linguistic variation may thus be a



UM = upper middle class; LM = lower middle class; UW = upper working class; LW = lower working class.

Figure 6.2 Postvocalic *r* absence: an example of gradient stratification

function of both social and linguistic considerations. There is no single pattern that can be applied to this co-variation.

Since there are different patterns of correlation between social stratification and linguistic variation and many ways of differentiating social groups besides traditional measures of socioeconomic status, it is sometimes difficult to answer the question of how many social dialects there are in English. On one level, this question is best answered by examining the social stratification of particular linguistic variables. From this perspective, the answer may range from two, for a sharply stratified variable that shows a basic dichotomy between two broadly defined social groups, through six or seven varieties for finely stratified features. For linguistic variation showing a correlation with two basic social groups, the popular perception that there are two social dialects – namely, a standard and a vernacular – may be matched by the reality of social stratification. However, for other variables, multi-layered social dialect differentiation is indicated. It is important to understand that both continuous and discrete patterns of sociolinguistic variation may simultaneously exist within the same population.

6.4 Linguistic Constraints on Variability

Not all of the systematic influences on variation can be accounted for simply by appealing to various social factors. There are also aspects of the linguistic

system itself that may affect the variability of particular forms. Particular types of linguistic contexts, such as the kinds of surrounding forms or the larger units in which the form occurs, may also influence the relative frequency of occurrence. Because the linguistic influences on variation operate apart from the social factors that correlate with variability, these are sometimes referred to as INDEPENDENT LINGUISTIC CONSTRAINTS on variability.

The effect of linguistic factors can best be understood by looking at a particular case of phonological variation. Consider the process of word-final consonant cluster reduction that may affect sound sequences such as *st*, *nd*, *ld*, *kt*, and so forth. When this process operates, items such as *west*, *wind*, *cold*, and *act* may be pronounced without the final member of the cluster, as *wes'*, *win'*, *col'*, and *ac'*, respectively. The incidence of cluster reduction is quite variable, but certain linguistic factors systematically favor or inhibit the operation of the reduction process. These factors, or constraints, include whether the following word begins with a consonant or a vowel (more precisely, a non-consonant) and the way in which the cluster is formed.

With respect to the sound that follows, the likelihood of reduction is increased when the cluster is followed by a word beginning with a consonant. This means that cluster reduction is more frequent in contexts such as *west coast* or *cold cuts* than in contexts like *west end* or *cold egg*. An individual speaker might, for example, apply consonant cluster reduction in 75 percent of all cases when the cluster is followed by a word beginning with a consonant (as in *wes' coast*) but show only 25 percent consonant cluster reduction when the cluster is followed by a non-consonant (as in *wes' end*). The important observation is that reduction may take place in both kinds of linguistic contexts, but it is regularly favored in those contexts where the word following the cluster begins with a consonant.

Exercise 2

In the following passage, tabulate the incidence of cluster reduction for all the underlined word-final clusters. Observe whether the cluster is reduced or not, as indicated by the phonetic content in the brackets following the underlined cluster. For example, gue<u>st</u>[s] would indicate a reduced item since the final [t] has been omitted, and gue<u>st</u>[st] would not. For the sake of the exercise, ignore consonant clusters that are not underlined. Tabulate the items by setting up two columns, one for clusters followed by consonants and one for clusters followed by non-consonants. Items at the end of a sentence should be considered to be followed by non-consonants. For each cluster, first identify whether it is followed by a consonant or non-consonant and then enter it under the relevant category and identify in some way whether it is reduced or non-reduced. After extracting the first couple of items, your tabulation sheet might look like the following:

Clusters followed by a consonant	*Clusters followed by a non-consonant*
0 e.g. bes<u>t</u>[st] movie	0 e.g. mos<u>t</u>[st] of
1 e.g. las<u>t</u>[s] year	1 e.g. coas<u>t</u>[s]. It
. . .	. . .

1 = reduced cluster
0 = unreduced cluster

After you have finished entering all the items under the appropriate category, calculate the percentage of cluster reduction for each category by dividing the total number of clusters in the category into the number of clusters that are actually reduced, and multiply by 100. This will give you a percentage of cluster reduction for clusters followed by consonants and clusters followed by non-consonants. What can you say about the influence of the following context on cluster reduction based on this calculation?

Passage for word-final cluster reduction tabulation

Las<u>t</u>[s] year I saw the bes<u>t</u>[st] movie. It seemed silly but it was serious too. It was about this detective who lived in California, but he traveled up and down mos<u>t</u>[st] of the coas<u>t</u>[s]. It seemed like he was always one step ahead of the cops and one step behin<u>d</u>[n] the bad guys at the same time. Nobody really liked him, and it seemed like he was almos<u>t</u>[s] killed every time he left the house. Mos<u>t</u>[s] of the time, he was running from both the criminals and the police. In fa<u>ct</u>[kt] both sides were totally confused by him.

One time, the police set up a scam bus<u>t</u>[s] by pretending to smuggle in some drugs off the coas<u>t</u>[st]. When they smuggled the stuff inlan<u>d</u>[n] they wanted to sell it to the dealers. But the detective wasn't told so he thought it was a chance for a real bus<u>t</u>[st] on the dealers. Jus<u>t</u>[s] as he jumped in to make an arres<u>t</u>[s] a couple of dealers showed up, and he had to a<u>ct</u>[k] like he was one of them. So the police thought he was part of the dealers and the dealers thought he was part of the police. Both sides jumped in and he was trying to a<u>ct</u>[k] as if he was with the other side. He told a policeman to go along with him 'cause he was

making a bust[st] and he told a drug dealer to go along with him and he would get the drugs. Both sides were so confused by him they just[s] went along with the act[kt] and followed his lead. As it turned out, some of the police had gone underground[nd] and some of the dealers had turned evidence to the police. He was so confused himself he didn't know who to arrest[st]. Finally, he just[s] left both groups shooting at each other. He just[s] couldn't figure out who was bad and who was good.

Cluster reduction is also influenced by the way in which the cluster is formed. Clusters that belong to a single morpheme, as in the case of root words such as *wind* and *guest*, are more likely to undergo reduction than clusters that are created through the addition of an *-ed* suffix, as in *guessed*, which ends phonetically in [st] ([gɛst]), and *pinned*, which ends in [nd] ([pɪnd]). Again, fluctuation between reduced and full pronunciation takes place with both types of clusters, but reduction takes place more frequently when the cluster is an inherent part of a word rather than the result of *-ed* suffix addition.

When we compare the relative effect of different linguistic factors on the cluster reduction pattern, we find that some linguistic influences are greater than others. In some dialects of English, the influence of the following segment (consonant vs. non-consonant) is more important than the cluster formation type (not *-ed* vs. *-ed* cluster). Differences in the relative effect of linguistic constraints may be likened to the relative effect of different social factors, where, for example, social group membership, age, and gender may all influence the relative incidence of cluster reduction, but not in equal proportions.

In some cases, linguistic constraints on variability can be ordered differently across varieties of English. Table 6.2 presents a comparison of word-final cluster reduction for some different dialects of English, based upon a sample of speakers in each population. As seen in this table, all of the varieties of English represented here show clusters to be systematically influenced by the following phonological context and the cluster formation type, but the relative influence of the constraints may differ. In some cases, such as standard English and Appalachian Vernacular English, the influence of the following consonant is more important than the cluster type, whereas in other cases, such as Southern European American working-class speech and Southern African American working-class speech, the cluster type is a more important constraint than the following phonological context.

The analysis of linguistic constraints on variability can get much more sophisticated than the frequency tabulations and comparisons introduced here, as there now exist computerized statistical procedures for determining

Table 6.2 Comparison of consonant cluster reduction in representative vernacular dialects of English

Language variety	*Followed by consonant*		*Followed by non-consonant*	
	Not -ed % reduced	*-ed % reduced*	*Not -ed % reduced*	*-ed % reduced*
Standard English	66	36	12	3
Northern Anglo American working class	67	23	19	3
Southern Anglo American working class	56	16	25	10
Appalachian working class	74	67	17	5
Northern African American working class	97	76	72	4
Southern African American working class	88	50	72	36
Chicano working class	91	61	66	22
Puerto Rican working class (NYC)	93	78	63	23
Italian American working class (Boston)	67	39	14	10
Native American Puebloan English	98	92	88	81
Vietnamese English	98	93	75	60

From Wolfram (1986)

the probabilistic effects of different kinds of constraints on variable linguistic processes such as consonant cluster reduction. These programs can take the analyst well beyond the level of precision provided through raw tabulations. For our purposes here, however, it is sufficient to recognize the fundamental insights about the nature of linguistic variation that have come from these systematic approaches.

First, we see that dialect differences are sometimes reflected in quantitative differences rather than qualitative differences. Thus, in describing a dialect, we must be careful to note ways in which it differs quantitatively from other varieties as well as ways in which it differs qualitatively. We must also recognize that there are important constraints on the relative incidence of dialect forms based upon linguistic structure, as particular contexts and constructions will favor or inhibit the occurrence of a particular linguistic variant. It is also important to take these systematic effects into account in the description of language variation. When we talk about the absence of the copula in varieties such as African American English or Southern European American English, for example, it is important to note that this phenomenon is much more common in contexts in which general American English has *are* (e.g. *You ugly*, *They ugly*) than those in which it has *is* (e.g. *He ugly*, *The bird ugly*), even though copula absence may be observed in both types of contexts.

Finally, our studies show that not all linguistic constraints have equal weight, as their effects may be ordered with respect to each other. In other words, some constraints are more important than others in their relative effect on the fluctuation of forms. The investigation of linguistic constraints on variability reveals the subtle and complex ways in which dialect differences are systematically structured. This complexity is, of course, a far cry from the common popular perception that dialects are rather haphazard and that vernacular speakers randomly "drop consonants" when they talk.

6.5 The Social Evaluation of Linguistic Features

Although no linguistic features are *linguistically* better or worse than any other features, it is not surprising that the social values assigned to certain groups in society will be associated with the linguistic forms used by the members of these groups. If, for example, Southerners are viewed as stupid, then the merger of *pin* and *pen* associated with Southern speech will be taken as a sign of this stupidity, since people assign their perceptions of social groups to the distinctive language patterns used by the members of those groups.

SOCIALLY PRESTIGIOUS variants are forms that are positively valued through their association with high-status groups as linguistic markers of status, whereas SOCIALLY STIGMATIZED variants carry negative connotations through their association with low-status groups. In grammar, most prestige forms are related to prescriptive norms of standardness or even literary norms. For example, the use of *whom* in ***Whom** did you see?* or the placement of *never* in *Never have I seen a more gruesome sight* might be considered prestige

variants in some social contexts. Apart from these somewhat special cases, it is difficult to find clear-cut cases of prestige variants in American English on the grammatical level of language, particularly in the grammar of ordinary conversation.

Examples of prestige variants are also relatively rare in phonology. The use of an "unflapped" *t* in words like *better* or *latter* (e.g. [bɛtəɹ] as opposed to [bɛDəɹ]) as used by a select group of "Brahmin" dialect speakers found in the Boston metropolitan area may be an example of a prestige variant, as would some other phonological characteristics of this dialect, but this is a fairly isolated, somewhat unusual situation. The pronunciations of this restricted prestige dialect are modeled more on standard British English, or Received Pronunciation, than on American English. The fact that an external norm serves as a model for prestige in this instance is actually a commentary on the relative absence of prestige variants in American English dialects. That a British dialect is still held in such esteem a couple of centuries after America gained independence from British rule also may speak to the lingering sociolinguistic effects of colonialism. In some regions, the pronunciation of *either* as [aɪðəɹ] instead of [iðəɹ] or the pronunciation of *vase* as [vaz] vs. [ves] may be associated with high status, but these relate to the pronunciation of single lexical items rather than phonological systems and are therefore more properly considered lexical than phonological variants.

For present-day American English, the vast majority of socially diagnostic structures exist on the axis of stigmatization rather than the axis of prestige. Classic illustrations involving grammatical features include the familiar cases of multiple negation (e.g. *They **didn't do nothing***), regularized past tense verb forms (e.g. *He **knowed** they were right*), and different subject–verb agreement patterns (e.g. *We **was** there*). Stigmatized phonological features include *-in'* for *-ing* (e.g. *stoppin'*, *swimmin'*), [d] or [t] for *th* (e.g. [dey] *they*, [tɪŋk] *think*). There are also lexical shibboleths such as *ain't*. Unlike prestige variants, it is relatively easy to come up with examples of stigmatized variants for different levels of linguistic organization. This distribution pattern was, in fact, part of the rationale that led us to conclude in chapter 1 that standard American English is more adequately characterized by the absence of negatively valued, stigmatized items than by the presence of positively valued, prestige items.

It is important to understand that stigmatized and prestigious variants do not exist on a single axis in which the alternative to a socially stigmatized variant is a socially prestigious one, or vice versa. The absence of multiple negation, for example, is not particularly prestigious; it is simply not stigmatized. Similarly, the non-prestigious variant for *either* [iðəɹ] is not necessarily stigmatized; it is simply not prestigious. In fact, there are very few cases in American English where a socially prestigious variant is the alternate of a socially stigmatized one.

As discussed in the preceding section, it is important to keep in mind that the patterning of socially diagnostic structures is not an all-or-nothing proposition; it is often a matter of relative frequency that determines the social valuation of a form. For example, all English speakers use *-in'* for *-ing* to some extent, with those of lower social status using more *-in'*, the stigmatized variant, than those of higher status, who use *-in'* to a lesser extent. However, there is little stigma attached to the relatively low usage levels for *-in'* in higher-status groups, as opposed to the negative valuation attached to the higher usage levels for *-in'* among lower-status speakers.

The discussion of the social evaluation up to this point has been undertaken from the vantage point of those who place high value on the widespread, institutional language norms established by higher-status groups. These norms are overtly perpetuated by the agents of standardization in our society – teachers, the media, and other authorities responsible for setting the standards of linguistic behavior. These norms are usually acknowledged across a full range of social classes on a community-wide basis. Linguistic forms that are assigned their social evaluation on the basis of this widespread recognition of social significance are said to carry OVERT PRESTIGE. At the same time, however, another set of norms may exist, related to solidarity with more locally defined social groups irrespective of their social position. When forms are positively valued apart from, or even in opposition to, their social significance for the wider society, they are said to carry COVERT PRESTIGE. In the case of overt prestige, the social valuation lies in a unified, widely accepted set of institutional norms, whereas in the case of covert prestige, the positive social significance lies in the local culture of social relationships. It is possible for a socially stigmatized variant in one setting to have covert prestige in another. A young person who adopts vernacular forms in order to maintain solidarity with a group of friends clearly indicates the covert prestige of these features on a local level even if the same features stigmatize the speaker in a wider, mainstream context such as school. The notion of covert prestige is important in understanding why vernacular speakers do not rush to become standard dialect speakers, even when these speakers may evaluate the social significance of linguistic variation in a way that superficially matches that of their high-status counterparts. Widely recognized stigmatized features such as multiple negation, nonstandard subject–verb agreement, and different irregular verb paradigms may function at the same time as positive, covertly prestigious features in terms of local norms.

In recent years, the maintenance or even heightening of vernacular language features among non-mainstream speakers has been viewed in terms of power as well as prestige. For example, Scott Kiesling (1996) points out that working-class men may use vernacular variants as a means of projecting economic power rather than covert prestige, since working-class men traditionally have held occupations associated with physical toughness and "manliness" (and hence vernacular language features) rather than with advanced education. We discuss this alternative view in more detail in chapter 8.

The social significance of language forms changes over time, just as linguistic structures themselves change. It may be difficult for present-day speakers of English to believe that linguistic shibboleths such as *ain't* and multiple negation were once socially insignificant, but the historical study of the English language certainly supports this conclusion. Furthermore, shifts in social significance may take place from generation to generation. As William Labov (1966: 342–9) has shown, for New York City, the social significance of postvocalic *r* (as in *cart* or *farm*) has shifted during the past 50 years. For the older generation, there is very little social class stratification for the use of postvocalic *r*, but younger speakers show a well-defined pattern of social stratification in which the presence of *r* (e.g. *cart*) is more highly valued than its absence (e.g. *caht*). Similarly, as we saw in chapter 4, postvocalic *r*-lessness in Southern speech was once a prestigious pronunciation, following the model of British English. However, the valuation of *r*-less speech has changed over the decades, and today it is working-class rural groups in the South who are most characteristically *r*-less rather than metropolitan upper-class speakers. Because *r*-lessness used to carry prestige, we find that older, upper-class groups in some regions of the South retain a high incidence of *r*-lessness; however, younger upper-class speakers tend to pronounce their *r*'s. At the same time, younger, rural working-class speakers may be relatively *r*-less, thus uniting older metropolitan and younger rural speakers in *r*-lessness. The social valuation accorded to regional variables can shift fairly abruptly.

The social significance of linguistic variables may also vary from region to region. As a native Philadelphian, the first author grew up associating the pronunciation of *aunt* as [ant] with high-status groups. In his own working-class dialect, [ænt] was the normal pronunciation, and *aunt* and *ant* were homophones in his dialect. He was quite shocked to discover later in life that the pronunciation of *aunt* he considered to be prestigious and even "uppity" was characteristic of some Southern dialects regardless of social status, including highly stigmatized varieties such as vernacular African American English. Meanwhile (actually a couple of decades later), the second author grew up in a Southern dialect area assuming that [ant] was a highly stigmatized pronunciation associated with vernacular rather than standard dialects. In a similar vein, postvocalic *r*-lessness may be associated with the prestigious Boston Brahmin dialect or the RP (Received Pronunciation) English of the British Isles at the same time as it is socially disfavored in other settings, such as present-day New York City.

Although some socially diagnostic variables have regionally restricted social significance, other variables may have general social significance for

American English, in that a particular social evaluation holds across regional boundaries. Many of the grammatical variables mentioned above have this type of broad-based significance. Virtually every population in the United States that has been studied by sociolinguists shows social stratification for structures like multiple negation, irregular past tense verb forms, and subject–verb agreement patterns. On the whole, phonological variables are more apt to show regionally restricted social significance than are grammatical variables. This is due to the fact that grammatical variables have been ascribed the major symbolic role in differentiating standard from vernacular dialects. Phonological variables show greater flexibility, as they are more likely to be viewed as a normal manifestation of regional diversity in English. As noted earlier, this is particularly true in the case of vowel differences.

There are several different ways in which speakers within the sociolinguistic community may react to socially diagnostic variables. Speakers may treat some features as SOCIAL STEREOTYPES, where they comment overtly on their use. Items such as *ain't*, "double negatives," and "*dese*, *dem*, and *dose*" are features of this type. Stereotypes can be local or general and may carry either positive or negative connotations. Items like *ain't* and *dese*, *dem*, and *dose* are widely recognized as "bad grammar," while features like the pronunciation of *high tide* as something like "hoi toid," which characterizes the speech of coastal North Carolina, are strongly stereotyped but only locally. Further, the latter feature carries positive associations in that it is often associated with "British English" or "Shakespearean English." However, it still qualifies as a stereotype because it is the subject of overt commentary.

As with other kinds of behavioral stereotyping, we have to be careful to differentiate the actual sociolinguistic patterning of linguistic stereotypes from popular beliefs about their patterning. These beliefs are often linguistically naive, although they may derive from a basic sociolinguistic reality. For example, people tend to believe that working-class speakers always use the stereotypical *dese*, *dem*, and *dose* because they are too lazy to exert the effort required to produce them "correctly." They also think that working-class speakers always use these forms and that middle-class speakers never do. These beliefs are not supported empirically. Furthermore, stereotypes tend to focus on single vocabulary items or selective subsets of items rather than more general phonological and grammatical patterns. For example, speakers may focus on a single lexical item like *ain't* or the restricted pronunciation pattern involving *tomatoes* and *potatoes* in which *'maters* and *'taters* is stigmatized and *tomahtos* and *potahtos* is prestigious. Finally, we have to understand that popular explanations for sociolinguistic differences are often rooted in the same type of folk mythology that characterizes other types of behavioral stereotyping and therefore must be viewed with great caution.

Another role that a socially diagnostic feature may fill is that of a SOCIAL MARKER. In the case of social markers, variants show clear-cut social stratification, but they do not show the level of conscious awareness found for the social stereotype. Various vowel shifts, such as the Northern Cities Vowel Shift discussed in chapter 5, seem to function as social markers. There is clear-cut social stratification of the linguistic variants, and participants in the community may even recognize this distribution, but the structure does not evoke the kind of overt commentary and strong value judgments that the social stereotype does. Even if participants don't talk about these features in any direct manner, there are still indications that they are aware of their existence at an unconscious level. This awareness is often indicated by shifts in the use of variants across different styles of speaking. Although we will take up the notion of speech style more fully in chapter 9, we may anticipate our discussion by noting that the incidence of prestigious variants tends to increase and the use of stigmatized variants to decrease as we use more formal speech styles. For example, a speaker who is conversing with an employer during a business meeting will use more *-ing* pronunciations in words like *working* and *running* but will use more *-in'* when talking with friends over lunch.

The third possible sociolinguistic role which a socially diagnostic feature may fill is that of a SOCIAL INDICATOR. Social indicators are linguistic structures that correlate with social stratification without having an effect on listeners' judgment of the social status of speakers who use them. Whereas social stereotypes and social markers are sensitive to stylistic variation, social indicators do not show such sensitivity, as shown by the fact that levels of usage remain constant across formal and informal styles. This suggests that the correlation of socially diagnostic variables with social status differences operates on a more unconscious level than it does for social markers or stereotypes. Although social indicators have been identified for some communities of English speakers (Trudgill 1974: 98), practically all of the socially diagnostic variables in American English qualify as social markers or stereotypes rather than indicators. One possible exception involves variants associated with the earliest stages of vowel shifts, such as the Northern Cities Vowel Shift. When such vowel shifts begin, the use of new vowel pronunciations tends to correlate with social class differences but does not yet show any correlation with stylistic differences. This is particularly true of the backing of the vowel of *bed*, which moves closer to the vowel of *bud* and the subsequent backing of *bud* so that it moves closer to the vowel of *bought*. As these changes proceed, the new pronunciations will become social markers, and some of them may even attain the status of a stereotype, but they start out simply as social indicators.