

1. Introduction to Sociolinguistics

Ling 380 (Spring 2021)

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Society, Language, & Code

- What's a *society*?

“Any group of people who are drawn together for a certain purpose or purposes.” (Wardhaugh 2005: 1)

- What's a *language*?

“What the members of a particular society speak.” (Wardhaugh 2005: 1)

- What's a *code*?

“When two or more people communicate with each other in speech, we call the system of communication that they employ a *code*.” (Wardhaugh 2005: 1)

- All speakers of a given language know its grammar.

“Knowing a language also means knowing how to use that language since speakers know not only how to form sentences but also how to use them appropriately. There is therefore another kind of competence, sometimes called *communicative competence*, and the social aspects of that competence will be our concern here.” (Wardhaugh 2005: 3)

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Would you like some coffee?

Do you want some coffee?

Want some coffee?

You want some coffee?

Y'wan' some coffee?

Coffee?

Some coffee, madam?

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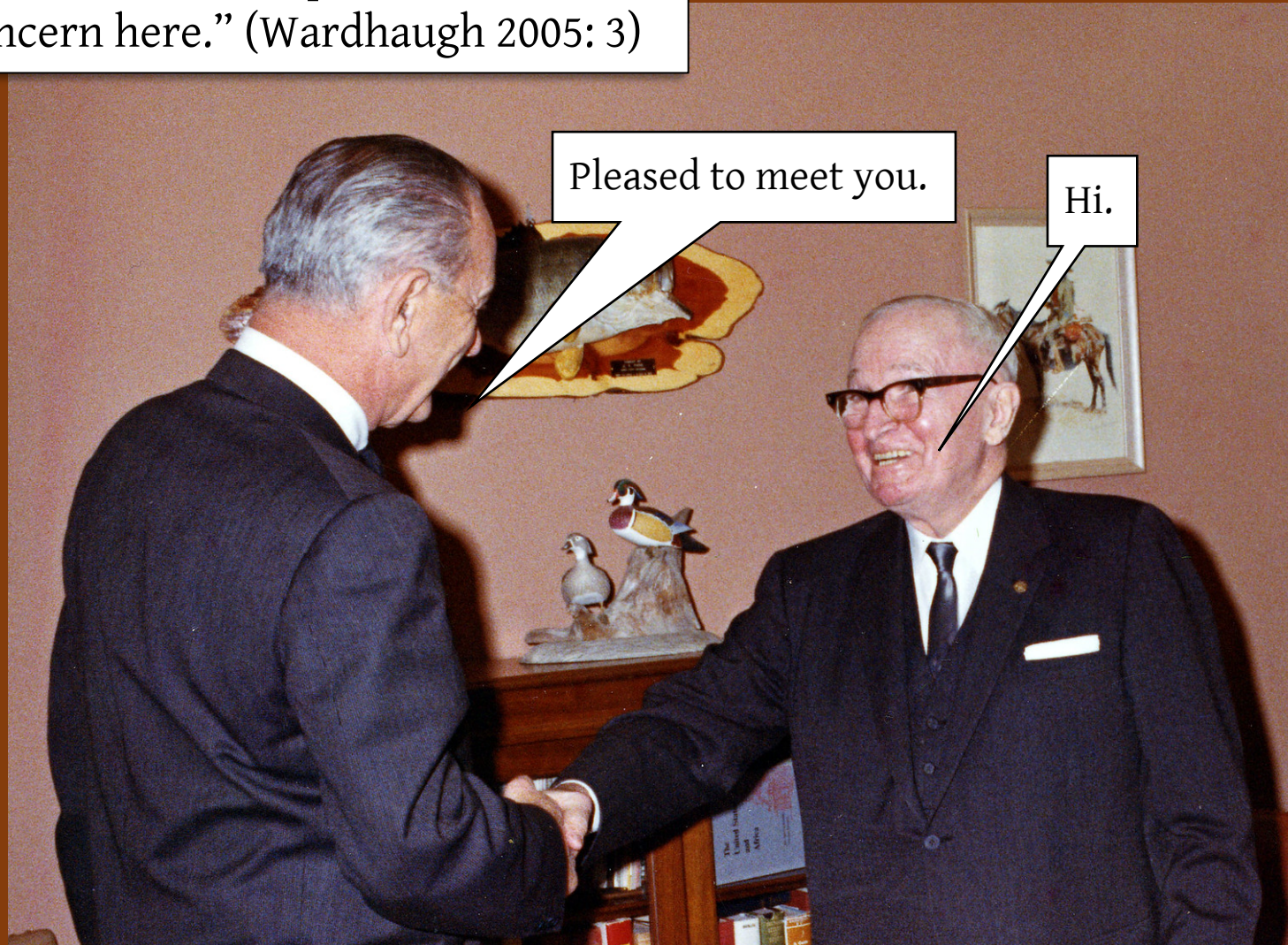
Pleased to meet you.

The pleasure is mine.

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Pleased to meet you.

You are touching my hand and I am wearing a suit.

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Pleased to meet you.

Goodbye.

Discussion! (p.3, q.1)

- Review the passage on page 3, question 1.
- Hymes argues that ‘in general, no phenomenon can be defined in advance as never to be counted as constituting a message.’ How does this observation apply to the above examples? Can you think of possible examples drawn from your own experience? Note that a basic assumption here is that ‘messages’ require a ‘language.’

Variation

- Everyone's speech varies depending on many factors.
 - creative desire, context, impulse, intention, etc.
 - this variation can be quite wide
 - but it's also bounded by limits and constrained by norms

“Our task will be one of trying to specify the norms of linguistic behavior that exist in particular groups and then trying to account for individual behavior in terms of these norms.” (Wardhaugh 2005: 6)

- A speaker's language use is strongly informed by their identity.



Identity

- You use language to assert who you are – to express your identity.
- This can be done consciously or unconsciously.

“Much of what we find in linguistic behavior will be explicable in terms of people seeking to negotiate, realize, or even reject identities through the use of language.” (Wardhaugh 2005: 6)

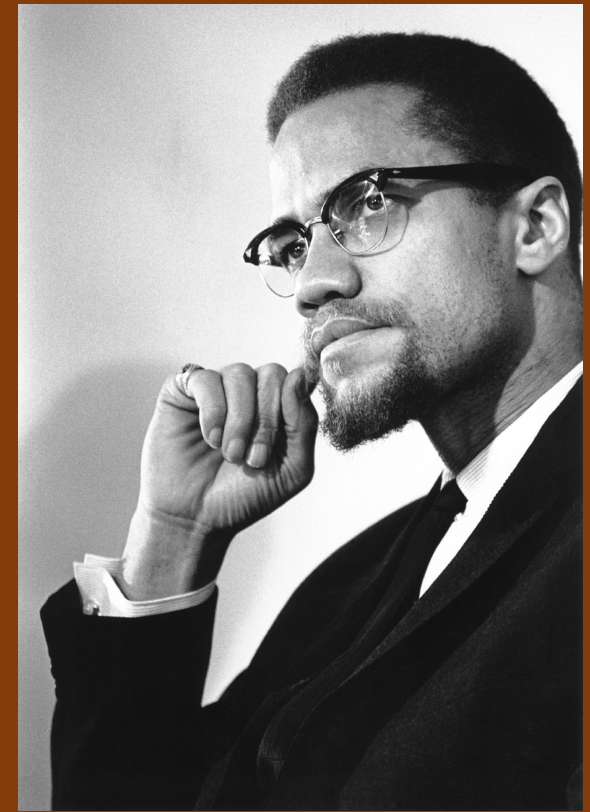
- Identities can change over time.
- We pick up on each other’s linguistic expressions of identity.



Malcolm X, discussing a Chinese ambassador in Ghana

He acted more human than many of the Americans that I've met. And he was well informed on the problem here. He didn't sound racist, he didn't sound fanatic, he didn't sound unreal, he seemed to have a very objective picture in front of him, he didn't sound like he was anti-American, and he didn't sound like he was anti-white. In fact, he told me it was silly for a person to be placed, or allow himself to be placed, in the position of a racist.

From *Malcolm Speaks*, ed. George Breitman (1990: 215)



- One's speech can indicate the kind of person they are.
- X says one's speech can show them to be:

racist

fanatic

anti-American

anti-white

unreal

Discussion! (p.7–8, q.3)

- Do you always agree with people you know about the ‘correct’ choice to make of certain linguistic forms? What do you, and they, regard as the correct completions of the *tag questions* found in the following examples?

He’s ready, isn’t he?

I have a penny in my purse, ___?

I may see you next week, ___?

I’m going right now, ___?

The girl saw no one, ___?

No one goes there anymore, ___?

Everyone hates one another here, ___?

Few people know that, ___?

The baby cried, ___?

Either John or Mary did it, ___?

Each of us is going to go, ___?

Discussion! (p.7–8, q.3)

- What kinds of difficulties did you find in completing this task? What kinds of agreements and disagreements do you find when you compare your responses to those of others? What do the standard grammars have to say about correctness here? How would you advise an adult learning English as a foreign language concerning this particular problem?

Discussion! (p.8, q.4)

- Describe some aspects of your own speech which show how it varies from the speech of certain other people you know. Do you pronounce words differently, use different word forms, choose different words, or use different grammatical structures? How do you view, i.e. judge, the speech of those who speak differently from you?

Contrastive Distribution

“Since *pin* and *bin* are different words in English, /p/ and /b/ must be contrastive units in the structure of English.” (Wardhaugh 2005: 8)

- If you replace *p* with *b*, you get a different word (and vice versa).
- Not all different sounds are contrastive.
[p] “*spin*” [p^h] “*pin*” [p^ɻ] “*stop*”
- You might think of contrast (for now) as **difference that matters**.

How do society and language interact?

- Society might influence language.
- Or language might influence society.
- Or they might influence each other.
- Or they might be independent.
- Or it might be impossible for us to know (for now).

Sociology & Linguistics

- Two different disciplines, each with different ways of addressing these topics.
- Sociolinguistics is about more than just applying the tools of sociology to linguistics, or vice versa.
- We'll talk more about the methodology of sociolinguistics very shortly...

Discussion! (p.12, q.1a)

- Consider your responses to the following questions and compare them with those of others.
- Does an Inuit 'see' a snowscape differently from a native of Chad visiting the cold north for the first time because the Inuit must be using a language developed to deal with the surrounding snowscape?



Discussion! (p.12, q.1b)

- Consider your responses to the following questions and compare them with those of others.
- If men and women speak differently, is it because the common language they share has a gender bias, because boys and girls are brought up differently, or because part of ‘gender marking’ is the linguistic choices one can — indeed, must — make?



Discussion! (p.17, q.6)

- Studies of linguistic variation make use of the concept of the 'linguistic variable.' One simple linguistic variable is the pronunciation of the final sound in words like *singing*, *running*, *fishing*, and *going* (-*ing* or -*in*') in contexts such as 'He was singing in the rain,' 'Running is fun,' 'It's a fishing boat,' and 'Are you going?' and on various occasions (e.g. in casual conversation, in formal speech making, or in reading individual words out loud). What do you find? How might you try to explain any differences you find?
- What's another linguistic variable?

The Methodology of Sociolinguistics

- Scientific – empirical, evidence-based.
- (Contrast this with ‘critical discourse analysis,’ which is nonscientific and interventionist, mentioned on p.15.)
- Sociolinguists must ask good questions, and find the right kinds of data that bear on those questions.
- Different types of data are used for different questions:
 - censuses
 - documents
 - surveys
 - interviews
 - naturalistic data (e.g. conversations)
 - elicited data (e.g. from an experiment)

Bell's Axioms (pp.18-19)

We'll focus on the last four for now.

1. The cumulative principle.
2. The unification principle.
3. The principle of convergence.
4. The principle of subordinate shift.
5. The principle of style-shifting.
6. The principle of attention.
7. The vernacular principle.
8. The principle of formality.

Everyone knows and uses a variety of linguistic styles. Language use differs based on context.

The more attention someone pays to their speech, the more 'formal' it will be.

The style which is most regular in its structure and relation to the history of the language is the vernacular, the relaxed style of unselfconscious speech.

Knowing they're part of a study, people pay more attention to their speech, making it more formal. It's thus hard to study vernacular speech.

Discussion! (p.20, q.3)

- For Labov and other sociolinguists the *vernacular* is very important. What do you understand by this term? When do you use such a variety? How easy or difficult is self-observation of that variety?

Before next class...

1. Do quiz #1, linked from the Updates page of our website.
 - Come to office hours next Tuesday with any questions!
2. Read pp.25–43 in the textbook, stopping before the Regional Dialects section.

Remember, there are no classes next Friday. Our next class is in **two weeks**, on 19 February.