

2. Variation and Change II

Introduction to Language (Ling 201)

Prof. Pentangelo

Spring 2026

Icebreaker

- Find Someone Who...
- Don't fill in yourself on your own sheet.
- Don't use the same person for two squares.

Find Someone Who...			
Has a dog	Knows ASL	Knows how to knit	Drives
Shares a hobby (name & hobby)	Has been to California	Has a cat	Hates cilantro
Is a painter	Loves the same show (name & show)	Free Space (name & fun fact)	Knows CPR
Is multilingual (name & languages)	Lives outside NYC	Loves to garden	Skates



Dialects and Languages

- Is there a standard way of distinguishing between a 'language' and a 'dialect'?
- No.
- *Language Files* introduces us to the term 'language variety.' What is this?

10.1.1 Languages, Dialects, and Idiolects

The term **language variety** is used by linguists as a cover term to refer to any form of language characterized by systematic features. The term may be used in reference to a distinct language such as French or Italian, in reference to a particular form of a language spoken by a specific group of people, such as Appalachian English or New York English, in reference to the speech of a single person, or even in reference to the way a single person speaks in a particular context. In addition to this cover term, there are more-specific terms that are used to talk about these different types of language varieties. Every native speaker

3

What's the difference between
dialects and languages?

G. Tucker Childs

*Is it better to speak a language than a dialect?
Which one do you speak?*

Strange as it may seem, there is no generally agreed-upon way to distinguish between a 'language' and a 'dialect'. The two words are not objective, scientific terms, even among linguists. The lay community is no different, and people often use the terms to mean different things. As used by many people, 'language' is what 'we'

Dialects and Languages

When a group of speakers of a particular language differs noticeably in its speech from another group, we say that the groups are speaking different dialects. In English, the term *dialect* sometimes carries negative connotations associated with nonstandard varieties. Linguistically speaking, however, a dialect is **any variety of a language spoken by a group of people that is characterized by systematic differences from other varieties of the same language in terms of structural or lexical features**. In this sense, every person speaks a dialect of her native language. (LF 417)

group of people

systematic differences

structural features

lexical features

- What about accents?
- Does anyone not have an accent?
- What dialect do you speak?

What dialect do you speak?

- Let's try something.
- We'll each take the New York Times Dialect Quiz. It is linked to from the main page of our class website, or from this QR code.



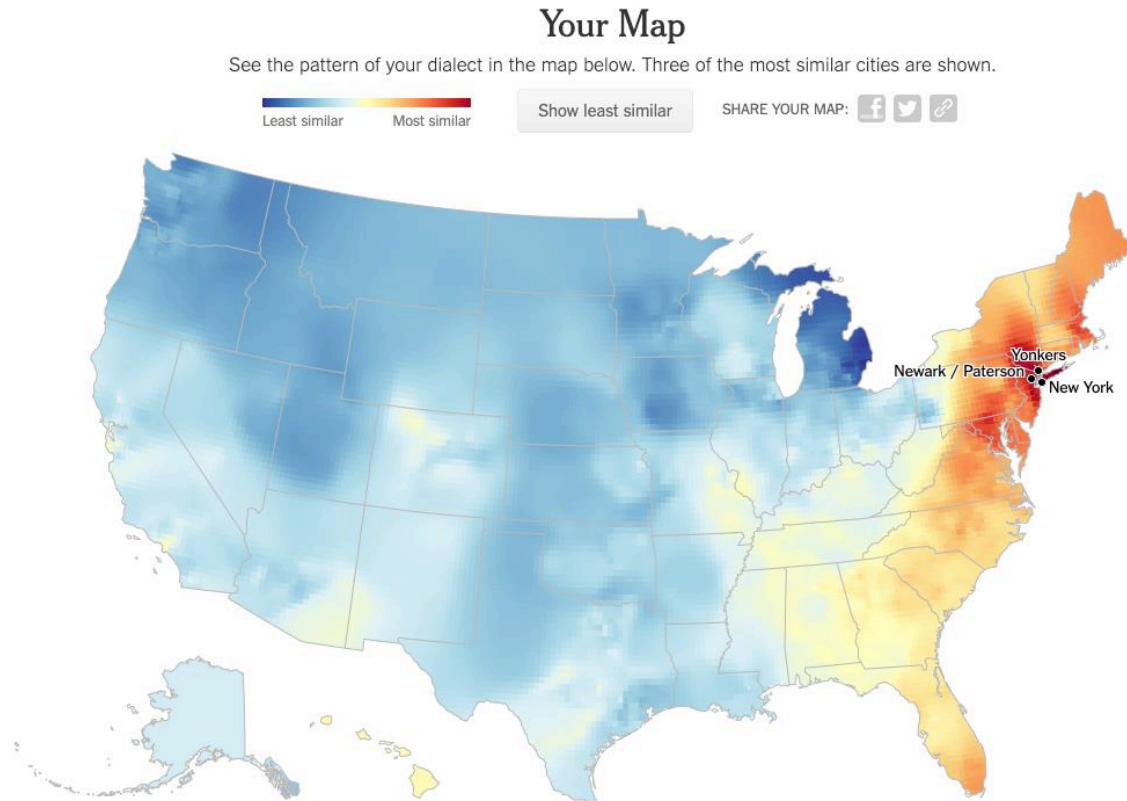
For the best results, answer on your own, without discussing with others. We'll all discuss together after we've all taken it.

Note: The quiz dates to 2013, so it doesn't really capture dialect changes that may have occurred over the last 10 or so years.

What dialect do you speak?

- My results from last semester:

How about you all?



If you want more of this :



What dialect do you speak?

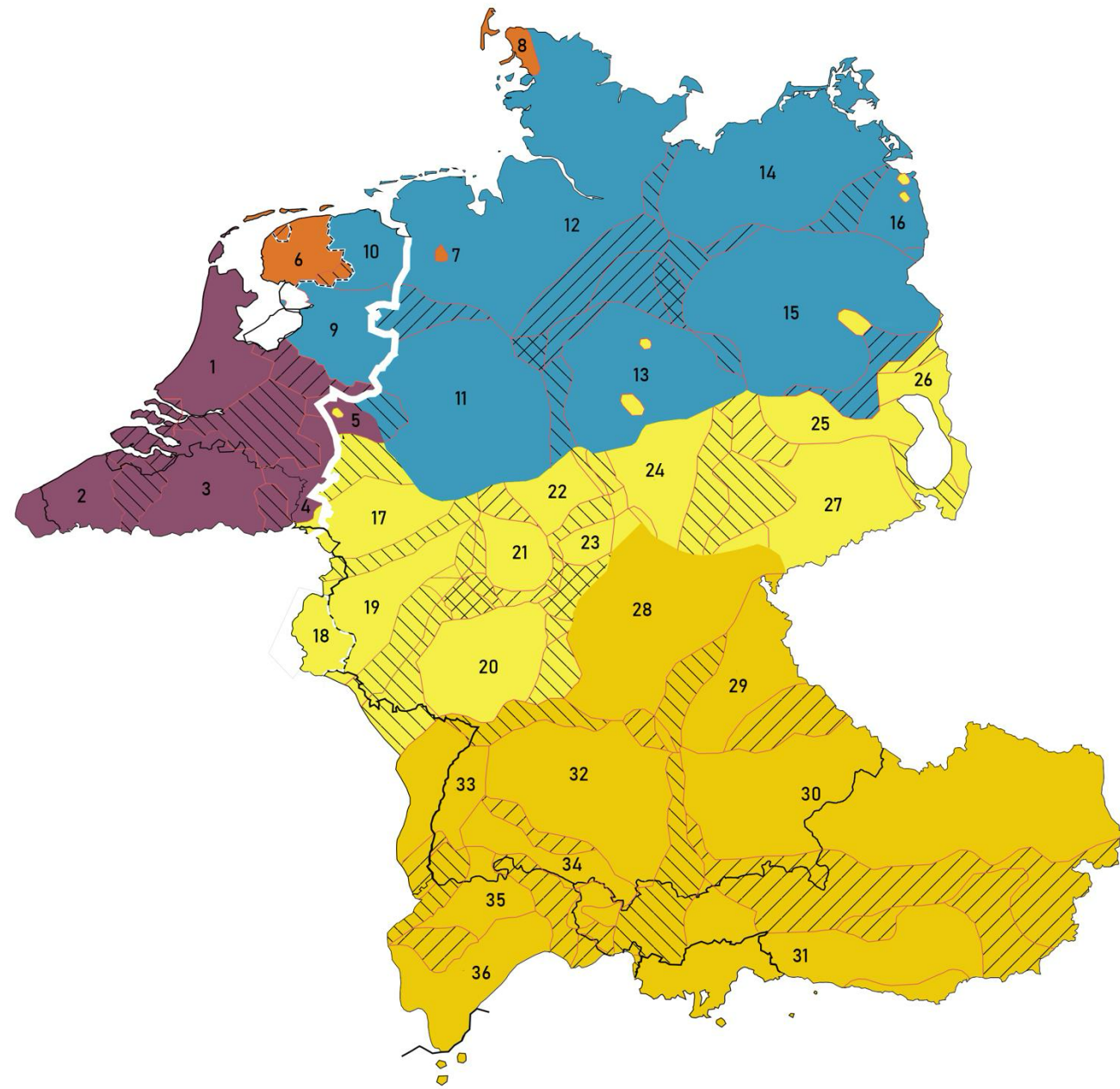
- Let's say that we are all speakers of New York English.
- Does that mean that we all pronounce everything the same?
- Use the same vocabulary?
- What's an **idiolect**?



Commuters riding the SI Ferry in 2023.
Photo: SILive

Dialects

- What's a **dialect continuum**?



Dialects

- As we've said before, there is no standard scientific way of distinguishing between a dialect and a language.
- But there *are* some factors to consider.
- Mutual intelligibility – can someone speaking X understand someone speaking Y, and vice versa? If so, X and Y have some degree of mutual intelligibility.
- As a rule of thumb, we can usually say that two varieties are dialects of the same language if they have a high degree of mutual intelligibility.

usually

high degree

Languages, dialects, and identity

- Ethnicity and language are often intertwined: there's an idea that to be German is to speak German, to be an Arab is to speak Arabic, or to be Pakistani is to speak Urdu.
- Is Urdu a different language than Hindi?
- Mandarin and Cantonese are what linguists consider different languages, but speakers of both will (usually) say that they speak Chinese. Also, both read and write the same. There's a notion that to be Chinese is to speak Chinese.
- “Hispanic” as an ethnicity.



Languages, dialects, and identity

“A language must be felt by its speakers to be different from other languages.”

- Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian, Montenegrin – all mutually-intelligible, and historically often considered a single language, but regarded by their speakers as different languages because they belong to different communities.
- Recently, EU-member Bulgaria blocking North Macedonia’s accession to the EU because N.M. claims they speak Macedonian, while Bulgaria argues that there’s no such language – that Macedonian is just Bulgarian.



POLITICS | NORTH MACEDONIA

Bulgaria and North Macedonia: A new start?

Boris Georgievski

01/24/2022

For two years, Bulgaria has blocked North Macedonia's bid to open accession talks with the EU because of a historical row. But with new governments in Skopje and Sofia, there is hope that compromise can be reached.



North Macedonia and the Macedonian region



“The impasse stems primarily from the fact that the previous Bulgarian government led by Boyko Borisov demanded that North Macedonia accept that both the Macedonian nation and the Macedonian language are Bulgarian in origin and character. Skopje had rejected the ultimatum, saying that it goes against European principles and its right of self-determination.”

Style and Register

- What are **speech styles**?

“systematic variations in speech based on factors such as topic, setting, and addressee.”

- What’s **register**?

involves degrees of formality

- What’s **style shifting**?

note that this is often automatic

- Break up into groups to do activity #1 on your sheets.

Jargon and Slang

- What is **jargon**?
- What are some examples?
- What is **slang**?
- How are they different?
- What's an **in-group**?
- In your same groups, do activity #2.

words like *fridge* for *refrigerator* or *TV* for *television*. **In-group slang** is the more specialized slang of a particular group at a particular time. In-group slang, like technical language, can be used to keep insiders together and to exclude outsiders. Learning the appropriate in-group slang can thus be a key to entrance into a particular group. In order for the group to preserve its closed status, however, there is often a fairly high turnover and renewal of slang expressions. Some slang is very short-lived, like *twenty-three skidoo!*, but some lasts long

Standard Dialects

- What is **multiple negation**?

“I can’t do nothing right.”

- What is **hypercorrection**?

“He helped Larry and I.”

- Consider:

Around 1900, the form *ain’t* was prestigious among much of the upper-middle-class in southern England. Now it ain’t.

In the US, is it standard or nonstandard to pronounce the *r* in *car*, *father*, and *bark*? And how about in the UK?

What does this tell us about standard and nonstandard features: are they defined on linguistic or social grounds? Why?

- On your own, do activity 3 on your sheets.

Standard Dialects

Standardization is “the process by which a language has been codified in some way.”

- Williams (1992: 146) says:

“[Standardization is] a sociopolitical process involving the legitimization and institutionalization of a language variety as a feature of sanctioning that variety as socially preferable.”

- Standardization often follows the development of a body of literature.
- The norm is often idealized: the standard variety may be similar to one spoken variety, but will often be artificial to some degree for everyone.

Standard Dialects

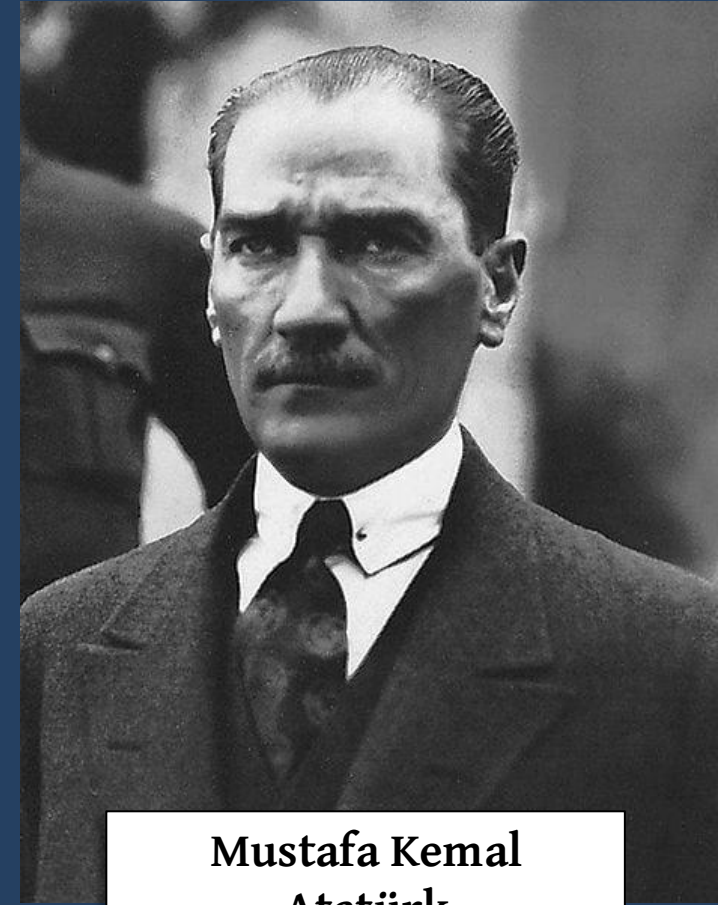
- When a language is standardized, all those varieties that are nonstandard often get regarded as *substandard*. This is where it gets troublesome.
- The more divergent a variety is from the standard, the less authentic – or the more “broken” – it will be regarded as.
- These nonstandard varieties are often called “dialects” by the general public. (This is why “dialect” sometimes has negative connotations.)



Dante Alighieri
The vernacular in which he wrote *La Divina Commedia* and other works shaped standard Italian.

Standard Dialects

- Think about this in connection with English. What varieties are disempowered?
- Who speaks “standard English”?
- The development of the standard is often a way of realizing political goals.
- In the 20th century, Atatürk and his followers transformed Turkish by shedding Arabic and Persian loanwords and adopting the Latin alphabet. Why?



**Mustafa Kemal
Atatürk**

As part of his de-Ottomanization of Turkey, the Turkish language was drastically reformed.

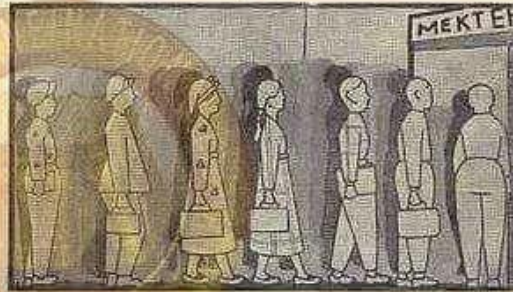
ESKİ YAZI ÇOK GÜÇTÜ

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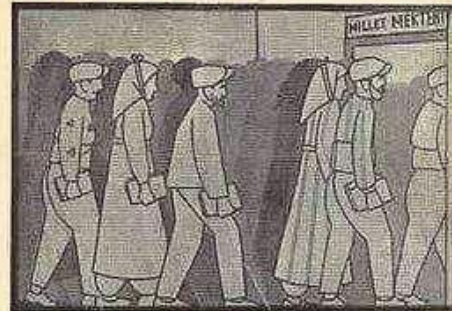
YENİ YAZI

Okuma ve
Yazmayı

Kolaylaştırdı



İNKİLAPTAN SONRA MEKTEPLER ÇOĞALDI



Millet Mektepleri açıldı:

İHTİYAR, GENÇ Herkes okuma öğreniyor.

C. H. F. 22

The old script was too difficult

New script

Reading and writing made easy

After the revolution

Schools increased

National schools were opened:
everyone is learning to read.

Old and young

c.1930 Turkish poster promoting the transition from the Perso-Arabic Ottoman script to the Latin script

Phonetic Variation

- Phonetics is the field of linguistics dealing with the production and perception of **speech sounds** as well as the **signs** used in sign languages.
- Sometimes, pronunciation differences across two different varieties involve phonetic variation.
- New Yorkers, for example, tend to pronounce sounds like /t, d, n/ with the tips of our tongues touching our teeth, while speakers of other American dialects don't – their tongue tips are further back.

These letters between slashes are actually symbols from the International Phonetic Alphabet. /t/ means “the t sound,” /d/ means “the d sound,” etc. Sometimes they mean the sound you'd expect—sometimes they don't.

Phonological Variation

- Phonology involves the systematic distribution of sounds in language. It accounts for most pronunciation differences across different varieties.
- Merry, marry, Mary – are these pronounced differently?
- Phonology also has to do with what kinds of sounds can show up where.
- Can an English word start with /ps/?
- Can a Spanish word start with /sk/?



What are these?

What's the state that's south of Georgia?

The opposite of "can't" is:

Morphological Variation

- Morphology involves how words are constructed of smaller meaningful parts called morphemes.

Standard American English

• I	myself	myself
you	yourself/yourselves	yourself/yourselves
he	himself	hissself
she	herself	herself
it	itself	itself
we	ourselves	ourselves
they	themselves	theirselves

themself is becoming more widespread

Syntactic Variation

- Syntax involves syntactic categories (like noun, verb, adjective), how words come together to make phrases, and how phrases come together to make sentences.
- Do you like this sentence? Write your answer down without conferring with others.

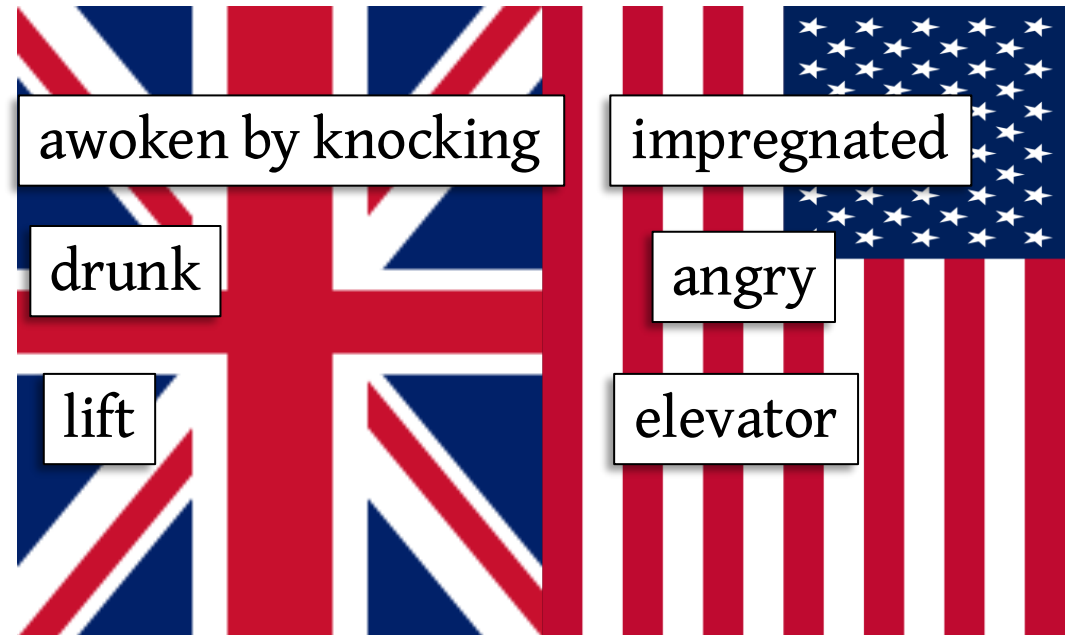
The car needs washed.

Standard: “The car needs washing” or “The car needs to be washed.”



Lexical Variation

- Lexical variation involves diversity in word choice and diversity in the meanings of a given word.
- What does “knocked up” mean?
- What does “pissed” mean?
- What do you call this:



- Lexical variation is very prominent as we shift styles – “dude” is not very formal, but “gentleman” is, for example.

For next week:

- Read RH 21–28 and 33–36 and C 131–137
- There will be a quiz on these readings at the start of next week