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The measurement of sociolinguistic behavior requires the formulation of a unit which can take into account continuous, ordered variation within and across discrete linguistic types--the linguistic variable. The linguistic variable, itself an abstraction, is realized in actual speech behavior by variants. The formulation of the linguistic variable may be viewed as a function of its correlation with extra-linguistic variables (socio-economic class, sex, age, contextual style, and racial isolation) or independent linguistic variables (linear environment and syntactic construction). The author tries to show that in order to account for systematic variation between the variants of a variable a consideration of extra-linguistic and independent constraints is imperative. Only a consideration of these two facets will reveal the fully systematic nature of variation and the various constraints on the relative stigmatization of certain variants. (DO)

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Speech Association of America
December 1968

Social Stigmatizing and the Linguistic Variable in a Negro Speech Community

Within the last several years the speech patterns of lower socio-economic class Negroes have become increasingly important to linguists, sociologists, psychologists and educators. Whereas one can certainly understand why scholars might focus on that variety of English spoken by Negroes which shows the most structural and functional contrast with standard English, it has become increasingly apparent that there is a need to study the speech of a wider representation of the Negro population. To understand the significance of speech as an indicator of social status in a Negro community it is insufficient to consider only one subset of the community. Also, in order to study the role of linguistic behavior in social mobility it is necessary to determine how different linguistic features correlate with specific social levels. Furthermore, as a basis for the teaching of standard English it is essential to have some understanding of what particular features characterize specific socio-economic groups.

The research design of the Detroit Dialect Study was constructed in such a way to consider the speech behavior of residents from several different socio-economic levels. From the more than 700 original interviews conducted by the staff of the Detroit Dialect Study, 60 informants, evenly distributed in four discrete social classes were chosen to study the social stratification of speech in the Negro community. The four socio-economic classes represented in the study may conventionally be labeled upper-middle, lower-middle, upper-working, and lower working class. Those Negro informants were also chosen to represent three

age levels: (1) 10-12 year old pre-adolescents; (2) 14-17 year old teen-agers; and (3) 30-55 year old adults. Each of these informants had lived in Detroit for a minimum of 10 years.

The measurement of sociolinguistic behavior requires the formulation of a unit which can take into account continuous ordered variation within and across discrete linguistic types (e.g., within phonemes or across phoneme boundaries). The unit that permits this characterization has been termed the linguistic variable. The linguistic variable, itself an abstraction, is realized in actual speech behavior by variants; that is, individual items which are members of a class of variants constituting the variable. For example, we may choose to consider what we will call the theta (θ) variable in word medial or word final position. For this variable, generally represented orthographically as th in such words as mouth, nothing and tooth, at least four different variants are actually realized as one observes the phonological realization of this variable. These include an interdental voiceless fricative θ (e.g./nəθɪŋ/), a labio-dental voiceless fricative f (e.g./nəfɪn/), an alveolar stop t (e.g./nətn/), or no phonetic realization at all (e.g./nəɪn/).

The formulation of the linguistic variable has important dividends for sociolinguistics in that it is the unit which serves as the basis for correlating linguistic with extra-linguistic or independent linguistic factors. The particular value of a given linguistic variable may be viewed as a function of its correlation with extra-linguistic or independent linguistic variables -- extra-linguistic factors such as socio-economic class, sex, age, contextual style, and racial isolation. Independent linguistic factors include linear environment, syntactic construction, etc. To take a simple example, the t variant of the theta variable decreases in frequency as we move from the lower-working class to the upper-middle class while the θ variant increases. In reference to linguistic environment, we find that the

f variant of the θeta variable occurs in medial or final position, but never in the initial position.

The study of linguistic variables rather than categorical constants adds a new dimension to the examination of speech differences, namely, the quantitative measurement of the variants of a variable. As quantitative methods are used, correlations between linguistic and social patterns emerge. The utilization of quantitative methods is of course, somewhat of a paradox in linguistics since structural linguistics has been based on the classification of elements into discrete qualitative units, conceived as absolutely different from one another. That a qualitative model is adequate for a description of language as CODE (i.e., its cognitive function) is not disputed here; however, the functions of language when viewed as BEHAVIOR (i.e., its social function) suggest that a qualitative model is inadequate in accounting for the patterned variation between forms.

The quantitative measurement of linguistic variables necessarily involves counting variants. Although at first glance this may seem like a fairly simple procedure hardly requiring linguistic sophistication, Labov (1968:14) has correctly pointed out that:

> ...even the simplest type of counting raises a number of subtle and difficult problems. The final decision as to what to count is actually the final solution to the problem at hand. The decision is approached only through a long series of exploratory maneuvers.

In the first place, it is necessary to delimit the number of variants which can reliably be identified and to select the relevant categories for tabulation. It is also important to identify the total population of utterances in which an item may "potentially" vary. For example, if there are certain environments in which one variant is categorically realized for informants on all social levels, then a tabulation which includes this environment with environments where there is actual variation will skew the figures of actual

variation. Rather, it is necessary to identify relevant linguistic environments which may effect the variability of items.

With our previous discussion on the nature of the linguistic variable in mind, let us now turn to the actual variables which were delimited. Four phonological and four grammatical variables were chosen for this study. The four phonological variables were: 1) word final consonant + stop clusters (e.g. desk, ground, cold) whose variants are simply the presence or the absence of the final stop 2) Medial and final theta th (e.g. tooth, with, nothing), whose variants were given earlier 3) syllable final D (e.g. shed, good, stupid) whose variants are a voiced stop, a voiceless unreleased stop or glottal, and no phonetic realization and 4) post-vocalic R (beard, fire, sister) whose variants are simply retroflection and lack of retroflection. The grammatical variables were : 1) suffixial -Z including third person singular concord (e.g. he goes), possessive marker (John's hat, and certain plural constructions (e.g. five cents)--the variants are simply the presence or absence of - Z 2) multiple negation (or commonly referred to as "double negative" e.g. He didn't do nothing) 3) copula, whose variants are a full form of the copula (e.g. he is here), a contracted form (e.g. he's here), and the absence of a copula (e.g. he here) and 4) the use of "invariant be" forms were SE uses the conjugated forms of the verb (e.g. he be busy).

It is certainly beyond the limitation of this paper to present a detailed analysis of each of the individual variables although this is, in fact, what was done in our actual sociolinguistic research (See Wolfram, forthcoming). What can be summarized here in this brief presentation is three basis research questions concerning the function of the linguistic variable as a marker of social status in the Negro community in Detroit: 1) the extent to which social differentiation is quantitative or qualitative 2) the relation between socially diagnostic phonological and grammatical variables and 3) the effect of independent linguistic constructs on variability.

First, let us examine whether the differences between social classes are qualitative or quantitative. As one might expect, the differences between

social groups vary slightly according to the individual variable being analyzed. However, despite the slight individual differences, we can make some general observations. For one, we observe that 3 of the 4 phonological variables suggest that the differences between the four social classes of Negroes in Detroit are quantitative rather than qualitative. The one exception is the theta (θ) variable -- this variable tends to reveal the categorical absence of f among the middle class informants. But even among Detroit middle class residents (and particularly pre-adolescents and teen-agers) one will find some incidence of cluster final stop absence, post-vocalic r reduction (and this is despite the fact that the Negro community is surrounded by an r dialect area), and glottal or unreleased stop variants for potential d. On the other hand, the grammatical variables most typically reveal the categorical absence of certain variants among the middle class population. If the variables chosen here are in any way typical of the actual social stratification of speech, we may conclude that phonological variables will more often reveal quantitative differences between different social classes of the Detroit Negro community and grammatical variables will more often reveal qualitative differences.

A corrolary of the above observation concerning qualitative and quantitative differences between social groups is the conclusion relating to the relative social diagnosticity of phonological variables as they compare with grammatical variables. In order to understand the relation most clearly we can suggest the use of two terms, namely what may be called "sharp" stratification and "gradient" stratification. By sharp stratification is meant a quite definite statistical difference between the frequency with which certain variants are realized as one compares the classes in a sample. In the accompanying handout (Figure 1), the absence of -Z on third person singular forms is a typical case of sharp stratification. By gradient stratification is meant a gradual "step-like" difference in the statistical frequencies of particular variants as one compares

the different social classes in the sample. This is illustrated by the absence of retroflection for r in Fig. 2. If one were to translate these notions into the calculation of degrees of statistical significance one would expect that in the case of sharp stratification a significant degree of difference would be established between contiguous social groups (say LMN and UMN). But in the case of gradient stratification, one would expect that statistical significance would usually be established only in comparing non-contiguous groups (say UMN and LWN). In the case of the grammatical variables we find sharp stratification for all four variables. But for the phonological variables we find gradient stratification for three of the four variables. In the sense that grammatical variables more discretely divide the population than phonological variables, we may conclude that they are generally more socially diagnostic.

The third question, that of independent linguistic constraints on variability, is one which has received conspicuously little attention in sociolinguistic research. Whereas the last decade has witnessed an increasing awareness of systematic variation in speech as it correlates to social factors such as class, age, sex, and contextual style, the relative influence of independent linguistic constraints on variability has been overlooked. But our research reveals that there are linguistic effects on variation which have essential implications about the relative stigmatization of particular features. Linguistic factors such as syntactic construction types and environment may greatly affect the social diagnosticity of a particular feature. Take the case of multiple negation. Our tabulations of multiple negation (or, more conventionally, the so-called "double negative") reveal that one type of multiple negative, involving a negativized auxiliary and a negative adverb (e.g, don't hardly) is observed among the middle class population while multiple negatives involving a negativized auxiliary and an indefinite pronoun or determiner (don't do nothing) are categorically absent in the speech of middle class informants. Similarly, copula absence involving

is (e.g. he nice) is confined to the working class informants.

We also see that linear environment may have an important effect on the social diagnosticity of variables. Consider the case of consonant clusters given in Fig. 3. One will notice that the statistical discrepancy between the classes is much greater following a non-consonantal environment than following a consonantal environment. Cluster reduction is quite common for the Negro middle class population (as it is for most English speakers when a potential cluster is followed by a consonant). But when followed by a non-consonantal environment, the discrepancy between the social classes is much more apparent. We thus conclude that the absence of the final member of the cluster is considerably more stigmatized for the working class population in the non-consonantal environment. It is quite inconspicuous, and therefore less stigmatized in the consonantal environment.

In sum, we have tried to show that in order to account for systematic variation between the variants of a variable a consideration of extra-linguistic and independent linguistic constraints is imperative. Only a consideration of these two facets will reveal the fully sytematic nature of variation and the various constraints on the relative stigmatization of certain variants.

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Speech Association of America
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Handout: "Social Stigmatizing and the Linguistic Variable in a Negro Speech Community"

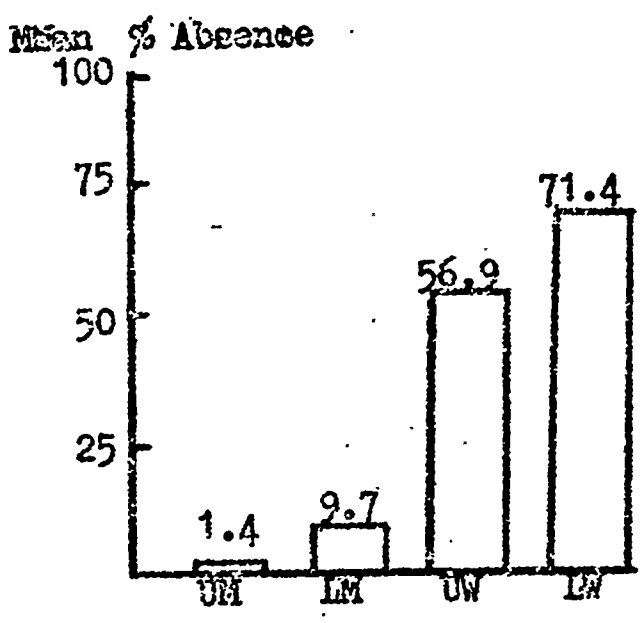

Fig. 1: Third Person Sing. -Z Absence: An Example of "Sharp" Stratification

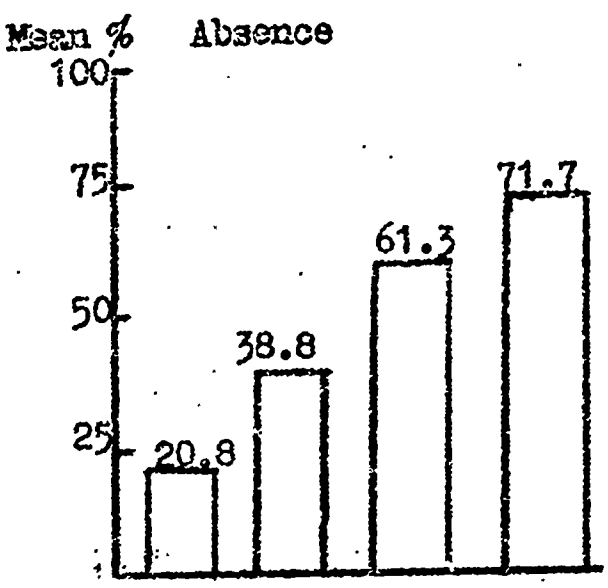

Fig. 2: Post-vocalic r Absence: An Example of "Gradient" Stratification

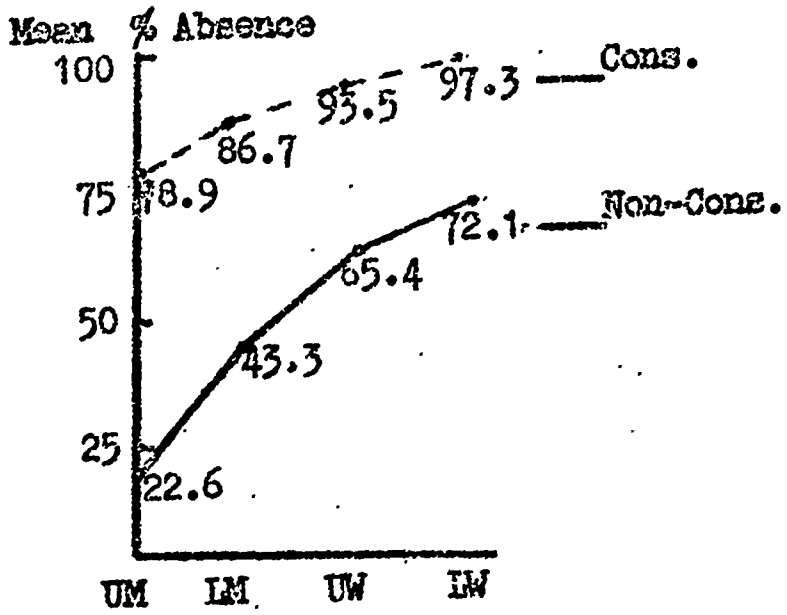

Fig. 3: Effect of Environment on Absence of Final Member of Consonant Cluster