

- **Social factors in language variation**
- **Linguistic analysis of language varieties**

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*Background reading:*

- CL Ch 13, sec 6

# 1. Review: Language varieties

- Different **speech communities** have different **sociolinguistic norms** (conventions about language use)
  - We can call these systems **language varieties**
- You may have a more or less positive or negative association with a particular variety
- A particular variety may be more or less prestigious in your society
- It may be a ***social advantage*** to speak/write a particular way to reach a particular goal

# 1. Review: Language varieties

- BUT:

Any naturally occurring language variety is a **systematic** language system, with a **mental grammar**

- It cannot be said that a language variety “has no grammar”
- The language variety that someone uses is not some kind of positive or negative indication of intelligence

# 1. Review: Language varieties

A speech community may be defined by...

- **Place** — Language varies by region | last time
- **Time** — Language varies by generation  
| we'll look at *historical language change* later in the course
- **Social factors** — Language varies by | today's topic
  - Class
  - Gender
  - Ethnicity
  - Situation

## 2. Social factors

- Example: **Class** and **situation**
  - Most English speakers show **variation** between two pronunciations of words ending in *-ing*
    - The final nasal is sometimes velar [ŋ] and sometimes alveolar [n]
  - But the *relative proportion* of pronunciations with [n] depends on various social factors, including:
    - the speakers' **social class**
    - the **formality of the situation** in which they are speaking

## 2. Social factors

- Example: **Class** and **situation**

Data from Labov (1966) | Graphic from Eckert (2005)

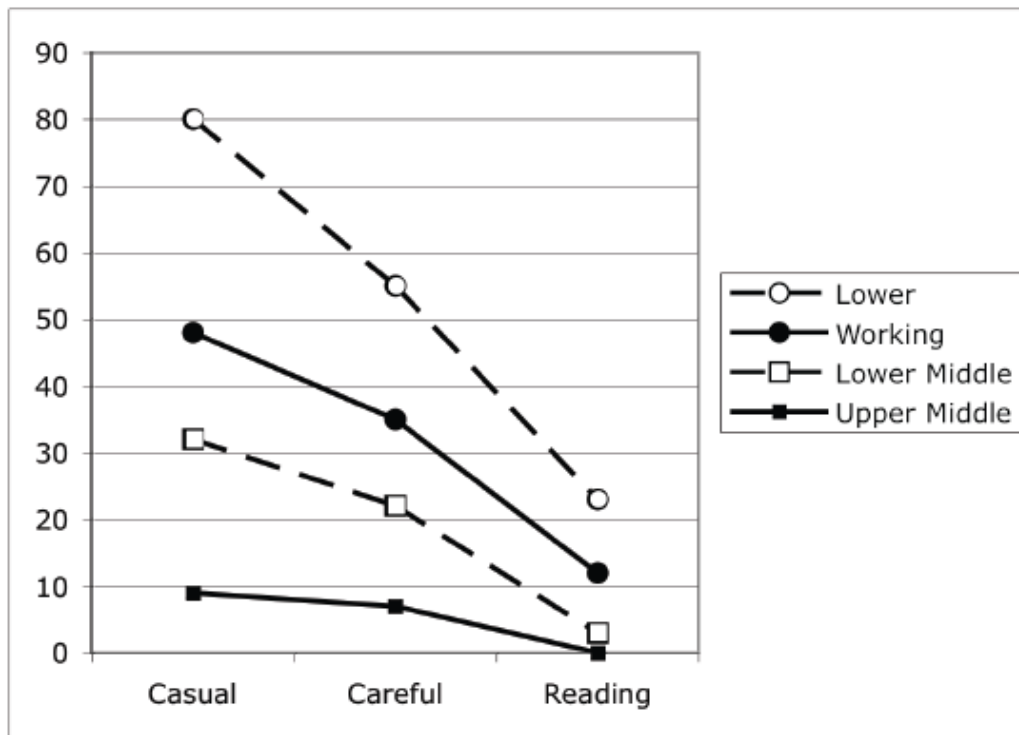


Figure 1. % Reduced -ing. from (Labov, 1966) in three styles and four socioeconomic strata.

- Graphic shows % *-ing* as [ɪn]
- Each line shows a different social class
- The three points show three situations

## 2. Social factors

- Example: **Class** and **situation**
  - The three situations represent:
    - Casual conversation (least formal)
    - Careful conversation (more formal)
    - Reading words on paper (most formal)
  - In the graphic, do we see that the [In] pronunciation is used more often...
    - As **income level** goes up, or down?
    - As the **formality** of the situation goes up, or down?

## 2. Social factors

- Example: **Ethnicity**
  - [Video clip](#) [2:02; start at 0:40] demonstrating the phonology of different ethnically-based English varieties, produced by linguist John Baugh  
  
(in the context of Baugh's research on **linguistic profiling** in the housing market)



### 3. Language variety is often a choice

- We all have access to different **levels of formality** (called **register**)
  - Would you say this in a typical job interview?  
*Hey, what's up?*
  - Would you say this when introduced to your roommate's girlfriend/boyfriend?  
*Good evening. I am pleased to meet you.*

### 3. Language variety is often a choice

- We all have access to different **levels of formality** (called **register**)
  - Would you say this in a typical job interview?  
*Hey, what's up?*
  - Would you say this when introduced to your roommate's significant other?  
*Good evening. I am pleased to meet you.*
- Speakers of English know that these two examples would be **out of place** in these contexts

### 3. Language variety is often a choice

- In a similar way, people who speak or are aware of multiple varieties **choose** to use a particular variety in a particular situation because of the kind of identity it indicates
  - Note: This “choice” is not always made at the level of conscious awareness!
- Implications for education
  - Some students appear to resist learning or using a standard or academic variety
  - Can we propose an explanation for this?

## 4. Group/network membership

- Example: **Social groups** in high school
  - Data from Eckert (1989, 2000), discussed in Eckert (2005)
- Research project in a Detroit-area high school
  - Students belonged to social groups they called “jocks, burnouts, and in-betweens”
  - The groups didn’t differ in region or age, and didn’t differ much in ethnicity or socio-economic status
    - So these are not the primary factors behind their language differences
  - They *did* differ in their attitudes toward school and their plans for the future (stay in the area, or move away)

## 4. Group/network membership

- Example: **Social groups** in high school

Data from Eckert (1989, 2000) | Graphic from Eckert (2005)

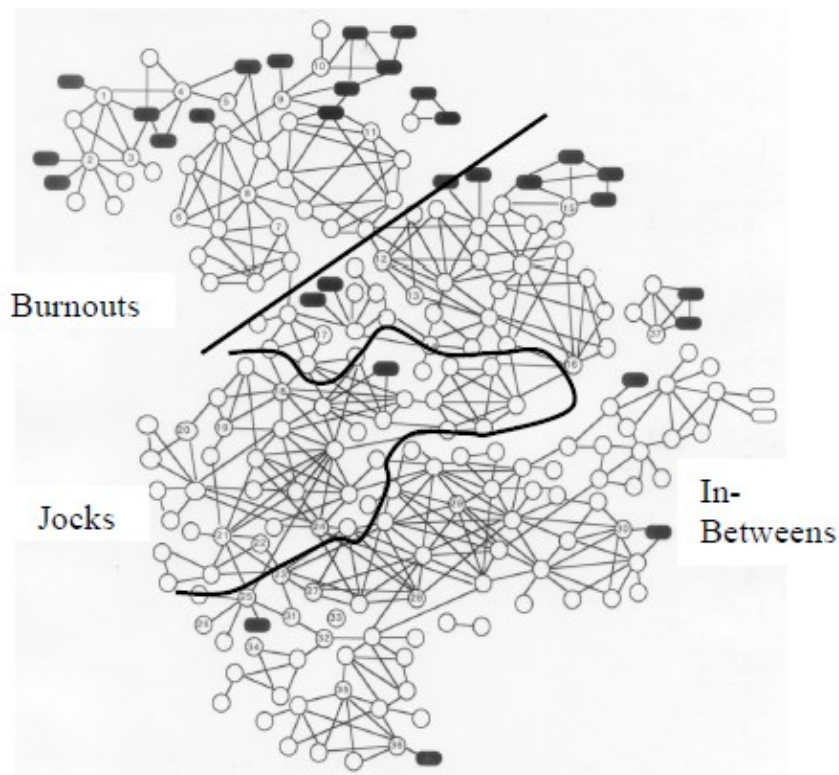


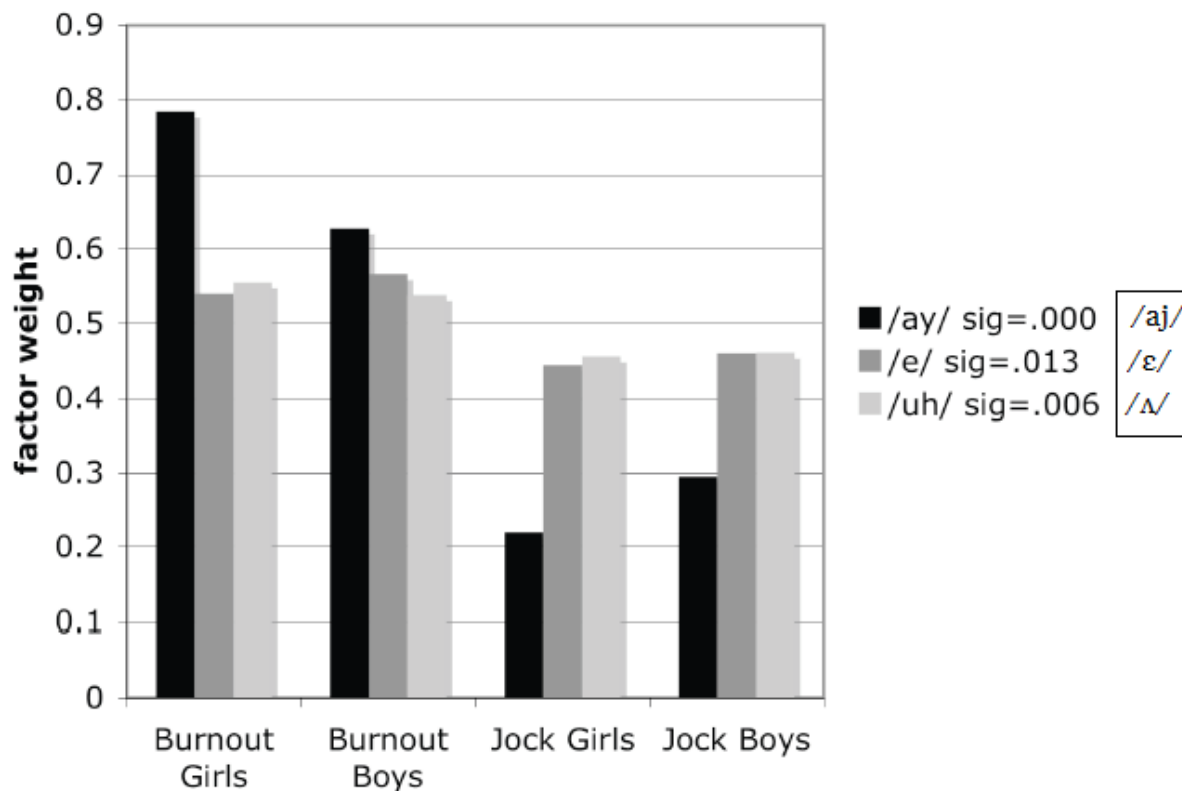
Figure 6. Girls' network

- This graphic shows a friendship network
- There are almost no friendship connections between 'jocks' and 'burnouts'

### 3. Language variety is often a choice

- Example: **Social groups** in high school

Data from Eckert (1989, 2000) | Graphic from Eckert (2005)



- Height of black bar shows how likely speakers are to say [ʌj] instead of [aj]
- 'Jocks', 'burnouts' have different **phonology**

Figure 9. Use of urban variables by gender and social category<sup>3</sup>.

### 3. Language variety is often a choice

- Example: **Social groups** in high school

Data from Eckert (1989, 2000) | Graphic from Eckert (2005)

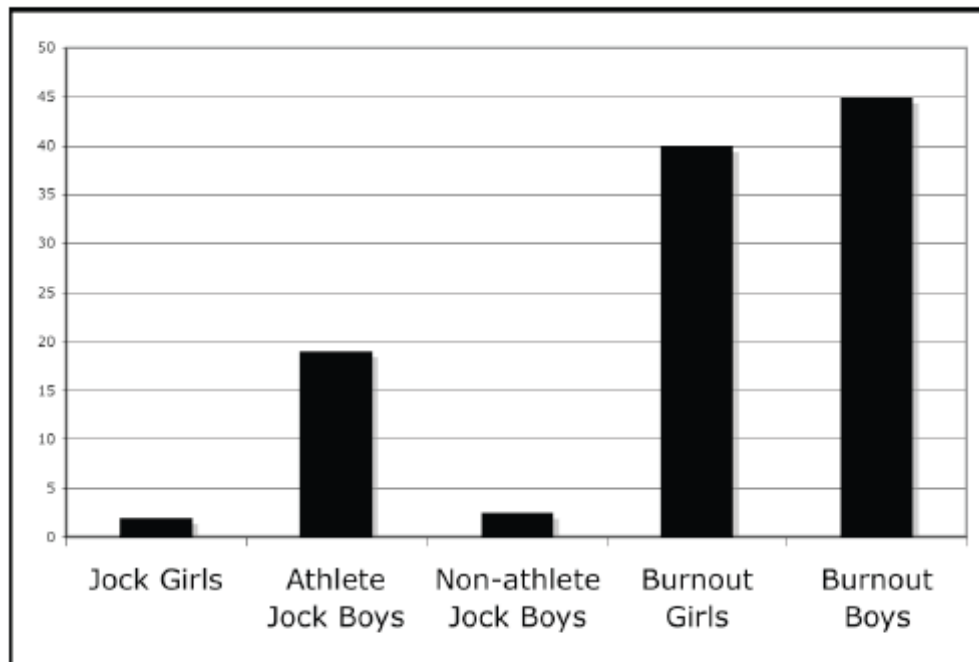


Figure 11. Use of negative concord.

- Height of black bar shows how likely speakers are to use negative concord, a two-part negative structure as in *I **don't** have **no** time*

→ 'Jocks', 'burnouts' have different **morphology**

→ Different **social networks** have different varieties!

## 4. Linguistic analysis of language varieties

- Case study: **So-called “double negatives”** in various English varieties
  - What does this sentence mean, if a non-emphatic stress pattern is used?  
*I didn't see no diamonds.*
- Some prescriptivists claim, “This is illogical! Two negatives should make a positive.”



## 4. Linguistic analysis of language varieties

- However, there are many languages with a **two-part negative construction** (also called 'negative concord', as in Eckert's high school graphic above)

Illogical?

- French: *Louis **ne** mange **pas** de boeuf.*  
Louis NE eat PAS of beef  
'Louis doesn't eat beef.'
- Spanish: *Ana **no** vio **nada**.*  
Ana NO saw NADA  
'Ana didn't see anything.'

## 4. Linguistic analysis of language varieties

- Now consider:

How does *any* function in standard English?

- *I didn't see any diamonds.*
- *\*I saw any diamonds.*

## 4. Linguistic analysis of language varieties

- *Ever* is a special element that needs to occur with negation (or in other special semantic contexts, like questions and hypotheticals) — the technical term is **negative polarity item (NPI)**
- Reconsidering “double negatives” linguistically:
  - The lexical entry for a word like *no* in a variety with so-called “double negatives” seems to look an awful lot like that for *any* in standard varieties of English
  - This is basically just a vocabulary difference!

## 4. Linguistic analysis of language varieties

- Case study: **Invariant *be*** in AAE
- AA(V)E = African American (Vernacular) English
  - Also called Black English (Vernacular) (BEV), “Ebonics”
  - Not all AAE speakers are ethnically African-American
  - Not all ethnically African-American individuals are AAE speakers
  - AAE is not just “slang” — “slang” is **lexical items** used in casual speech, but AAE is a **language variety** (or set of varieties) with characteristic phonological, syntactic, etc. rules and patterns

## 4. Linguistic analysis of language varieties

- Here are two sentences from an AAE speaker:

*The coffee be cold.*

*The coffee cold.*

Do these mean the same thing in AAE?

(Note: If you don't have a mental grammar for AAE, ***you can't know this*** without asking speakers who do have the relevant mental grammar!)

## 4. Linguistic analysis of language varieties

- Here are two sentences from an AAE speaker:

*The coffee be cold.*

*The coffee cold.*

Do these mean the same thing in AAE? | No!

- The invariant *be* construction has a specific meaning: 'to be *habitually*'
- More AAE *be* examples from Lisa Green (1998), "Aspect and predicate phrases in AAVE"

*I think those buses be blue.* | habitual meaning

*\*He be sick this morning.* | not habitual!

## 5. Language varieties and education

- Should non-standard varieties be **overtly discussed** in schools, as part of teaching students a standard or academic variety?
- Some potential advantages:
  - Makes use of systematic differences between mental grammars in explanations
  - If you were learning a new dialect, would you rather be told that you were deficient, or that there are systematic differences between the variety that you speak and the one that you are learning?

## 5. Language varieties and education

- Case study: The “Ebonics” controversy (Oakland, CA, 1996)
  - Here is a [synopsis](#) of what the Oakland school board intended (written by linguist Leanne Hinton)

“The notion that there is something just plain ‘bad’ about nonstandard varieties of English is so deeply imbedded in the minds of many people that they tend to believe that children speak Black English out of contrariness, and need to be corrected by punishment. Educators have known better than that for a long time now, and don't want to be disrespectful of African American children’s way of speech; but that very respect has left them without a way of teaching standard English. The method being embraced now by the Oakland School Board fills that void. By escaping the trap of thinking of nonstandard Black English as a set of ‘errors,’ and instead treating it as really is, a different system, not a wrong one, standard English can be taught by helping children develop an awareness of the contrast between their two speech varieties, and learn to use one without losing their pride in the other.”



## 5. Language varieties and education

- Case study: The “Ebonics” controversy (Oakland, CA, 1996)
  - Hotly debated, and largely misunderstood
    - Many people thought the intent was to teach AAVE in the classroom (rather than to discuss its differences from mainstream classroom English)
    - Many people objected to the use or discussion of AAVE at all, arguing that it was ‘bad English’ — there was a **serious lack of understanding** of language variation and mental grammar in this debate

## 5. Language varieties and education

- Case study: The “Ebonics” controversy (Oakland, CA, 1996)
  - If you are interested in more information and context (optional):
    - Read: Essays by [linguists and anthropologists](#) written at the time, reproduced by John Rickford
    - Watch: “[Education](#)” excerpt from *Talking Black in America*, a documentary by the Language and Life Project at NCSU (YouTube video; 2:51)

## 5. Language varieties and education

- Are these still open questions?
  - Whether or not to **use** AAE, or other non-“standard” varieties, in the process of teaching academic English
  - Whether or not AAE, or any other non-“standard” variety of English, consists of a **principled linguistic system**

## 5. Language varieties and education

- Whether or not to **use** AAE, or other non-“standard” varieties, in teaching academic English
  - This is a **legitimate open question** that can be examined on the basis of data — what teaching techniques are actually effective?
- Whether or not AAE, or any other non-“standard” variety of English, consists of a **principled linguistic system**
  - This is *not* an open question, because the answer is very clearly *yes*

## 6. Some final points

- Our society is increasingly aware of the need to show respect for diversity
- But sometimes, people who would never think of mocking or criticizing someone for their ethnicity still mock or criticize their **language variety**
- Why is that still “okay”? Should it be?

## 6. Some final points

- For fun:

**More about NC dialects!**

Ongoing research into NC speech communities  
at NCSU