An Introduction to English Sociolinguistics

GRAEME TROUSDALE

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Graeme Trousdale

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To readers

This is a book about varieties of the English language, both now and in the past, and about the way in which the diversity that characterises such varieties comes to be used by individuals and communities of speakers in order to achieve interpersonal, social and political goals. In other words, it is about both the linguistic form of varieties of English, and the function of those varieties in communities across the world. In order to understand why varieties of English have the form and function that they do, we will make use of general research into the relationship between language and society, a discipline known as 'sociolinguistics'. Sociolinguistics covers a wide range of intellectual inquiry, and this book will not cover all aspects of the sociolinguistic enterprise. For example, this book does not deal in any depth with the range of methodologies used to investigate sociolinguistic variation in English (see Tagliamonte 2006 for an introduction to sociolinguistic method); nor does it deal in depth with aspects of discourse structure, conversational analysis, sexism and language, and many other topics which you might expect to find in an introductory book on general sociolinguistics. What this book does is draw on selected aspects of the findings of sociolinguistic research in order to illustrate a range of interesting things about the English language.

The first part of the book is concerned primarily with the function of English in various societies (though as we will see throughout the book, it is often difficult to discuss the function of English without making some reference to aspects of linguistic form). The first chapter is concerned with English as a linguistic and as a social concept. In this chapter, we will consider what many people might consider a surprising question: is English a language? In order to answer that question, we will need to establish what is meant by both 'English' and 'language', and we will see that when we use linguistic criteria (for example, sounds, words or sentences) to try to establish what 'English' is, in order to distinguish it from other languages such as 'French', 'Navajo' or 'Scots', some very

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interesting and problematic issues arise. When we use social, cultural or geographic criteria (for example, that there is a correct variety of English, or that English can be defined by its use in specific domains, or that English is the language spoken in particular places such as England and Australia) to try to establish what 'English' is, we run into other, equally interesting, and equally problematic issues. The second chapter looks at communities and individuals who speak English. In this chapter, we look at three different things: the notion of a speech community; a global network of English speakers; and the relationship between the individual and the English language. The third chapter of this book considers English explicitly as a sociopolitical concept, where we look at the place of English in (often government-authorised) language planning, and domains of English use in multilingual communities.

The second part of the book looks more closely at formal characteristics of varieties of English. Chapter 4 begins by locating the study of social variation in English within a larger context of dialectology (the study of varieties of language, usually regional varieties). We will also consider some of the ways in which English varies depending on the social characteristics of the speaker, the social context in which the discourse takes place, and the nature of the speaker's audience. The intersection of dialectology and sociolinguistics in terms of the social dimensions of geographic space is also discussed. Chapter 5 is concerned with the relationship between social variation in present-day English and the study of ongoing change in the language. We examine some of the insights that variationist sociolinguistics has provided for the study of language change in general, and change in varieties of English in particular. In this chapter, we will also consider the important issue of language maintenance – given the power associated with Standard English, which has grown since the beginnings of the standard variety about five hundred years ago, why do non-standard, vernacular varieties of English continue to thrive? Chapter 6 continues the theme of language variation and change by looking at sociolinguistics and the history of English. In this chapter we cover topics from all periods of the history of English, from whether we can sensibly talk about social variation in the earliest recorded forms of English in the Anglo-Saxon period, through to the sociolinguistics of polite and refined English usage in the nineteenth century, and the future of English.

Chapters 7 and 8 are about contact, and the linguistic consequences of contact between speakers of different varieties. These varieties might be different languages, or they might be dialects of English – what we see is that the linguistic processes involved in both cases are very similar. Chapter 7 looks at English in contact with other languages, picking up

some of the themes from Chapter 3, but concentrating on the formal properties of English in such contact scenarios, where language changes as a result of normal interaction between speakers, rather than authorised intervention. What linguistic properties or characteristics are found in varieties which have emerged from short-term and long-term contact between speakers of English and speakers of other languages? Chapter 8 looks at dialect contact, examining the kinds of varieties that emerge both through long-term contact at boundaries between dialect areas of English, and also as a result of mass migration to newly created communities. These communities may have been established fairly recently (as in the case of new towns in the United Kingdom) or much longer ago (as in the case of migrations to New Zealand).

The ninth chapter is concerned with the place of sociolinguistics within a larger theory of the structure of English, and of language more generally. We will consider the interplay of linguistic and social constraints on variation, and then outline some of the ways in which some theories have attempted to incorporate sociolinguistic findings into their framework for language structure, as well as considering the justification for such an incorporation. How do we bring together the important findings from quantitative sociolinguistics and the equally important findings from theoretical linguistics? This is a challenging and exciting aspect of research into why language varies in the way that it does, and how we should model such variation. The final part of the book is a concluding chapter which tries to bring together some of the themes in the rest of the book.

In what follows, I assume minimal knowledge of formal aspects of linguistic description, discussing particular linguistic features as they emerge. Specific linguistic terms are defined on first use. An appendix has been provided which gives some guidance on phonetic transcription conventions.

All of the chapters conclude with some questions for discussion. Some of these questions are designed for more general discussion; others are designed to check your understanding of some of the concepts introduced in the chapter. But more generally I hope that this book encourages you to think of your own questions about English sociolinguistics, and how you might think of a project which could answer those questions.

Further reading

Each chapter of this book concludes with some reading on the specific topics introduced therein. Here I make some suggestions for general reading on sociolinguistics which complement this book. These texts

include data from languages other than English, and are also typically about sociolinguistic theory and practice more generally.

An excellent introduction to many aspects of sociolinguistics is Meyerhoff (2006). Other very comprehensive introductions include Holmes (2001), Mesthrie et al. (2009) and Wardhaugh (2010); Chambers (2003) presents a particularly clear account of modern sociolinguistic theory. For handbooks, which present summaries of the main research grouped around particular topics, Chambers et al. (2002) is the standard for language variation and change, while Coulmas (1998) explores sociolinguistics more generally. In terms of a general theory of cognition, language and society, the textbook which comes closest to this one is Hudson (1996), though that book is not concerned with English exclusively. For introductions to sociolinguistic methodology, including the quantitative analysis of variable data, see Milroy and Gordon (2003) and (as mentioned above), Tagliamonte (2006). A comprehensive explanation of sociolinguistic terms is provided by Trudgill (2003) and Swann et al. (2004).

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1 What is 'English'?

1.1 Overview

Most of you reading this book will have a fairly good idea of what English is, and what it represents, and this is true no matter where in the world you come from. One of the reasons for this is associated with the world-wide spread of English, and the status that English has as a global language. English is associated by many with power and prestige: it is seen as the language of electronic media, the language of business, the language people often turn to when other means of communication fail – English is the world's *lingua franca* or common language. It fulfils a global function which other languages do not. There may be more speakers of Mandarin Chinese than there are of English, but Mandarin does not have the same kind of influence in the same number of countries as English does. The number of speakers of Spanish as either a first or second language might be growing rapidly on the American continent, but this does not match the total number of speakers learning English as a second language, in countries as diverse as Germany and Namibia. The spread of English, from its Germanic origins in the fifth century CE to its status as the only linguistic superpower of the twenty-first century, is not simply a fascinating subject of intellectual inquiry; it has also meant that English has become the language in which much international intellectual inquiry is reported, in research papers at conferences or research articles in journals, irrespective of the topic.

But this global spread has not been cost-free. As English has forced its way into a number of different communities across the world, local languages – and with them, the culture that those languages embody – have died out. 'Killer English' is often thought of as a recent phenomenon: it has been linked to the rise of mass communication, and to the political and economic might of two countries, the United States and the United Kingdom, from the nineteenth century onwards. However, even at its inception, English has been linked with the displacement

and marginalisation of indigenous languages: in the British Isles, after the arrival of the Germanic tribes in the mid-fifth century, the Celtic languages (such as Welsh, Cornish and Gaelic) were pushed further and further north and/or west: some have fared better than others, in terms of the number of existing native speakers.

Such accounts – of English as an emancipating language, or of English as a language of destruction – are often presented as if English somehow had a life of its own, distinct from the practices of those individuals who speak and write English on a daily basis. And this of course cannot be the case. There might well be a correlation between the spread of English and certain patterns of cultural and socioeconomic changes; but this is correlation, not causation. So it is important to keep quite distinct the speakers of a language and the language itself. And it is equally important to establish the relationship between the forms of English and the function of the language in different communities. Thus one of the aims of this book is to explore the relationship between formal characteristics of the English language – its sounds, spellings and grammar, for instance – and the speakers and writers who make use of English to fulfil a set of specific functions (which may or may not be highly specialised to the group in question). English, like any other language, must be considered as part of the social practices of the groups of speakers and writers who use it for particular communicative purposes. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate what this 'English' might be, and how and why it is used in the ways in which it is used in a range of different communities.

Here are some examples of texts (some spoken, some written) which might be counted as instances of English. The first is an extract from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, written around 1600; the second is a transcription of part of a conversation between a linguist and a young man from the United Kingdom; the third is from an American Express credit card statement; the fourth is from a blog (and there is enough evidence there to suggest that the writer comes from the north-east of England); the fifth is from Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, published in 1929; the sixth is from a track ('In Life') by a Nigerian hip-hop group called the Plantashun Boiz.

(1) To be, or not to be; that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing, end them. (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III, i, 57–61)

(2) yeah well . when we've done our GCSEs and everything . umm I

don't know we'll maybe make a tape or something when we've got some better songs . and . well we'll just send it off to NME and stuff but also our uncle knows a man who's . I think he's coming to the one on Tuesday and they'll like . you know apparently we're playing in this . charity one in June or something at . Hunter Hospital or something and there's a band that played there last year called . oh I don't know er but they got a record deal from that concert (Cheshire 2007: 156, emphases removed; the full stops here indicate brief pauses in speech)

(3) If you do not pay the full amount outstanding we will allocate your payment to the outstanding balance in a specific order which is set out in the summary box contained in this statement. The way in which payments are allocated can make a significant difference to the amount of interest you will pay until the balance is cleared completely.

(4) Whats the lamest Most patheticest (<< dunno if thats a word) excsue [*sic*] youve ever heard?
ive heard a few bad ones like haha
the mother was singin the wrong words to a song the neet and i was geet
"ur singin it rong mam" and she went "ii ana i was just testin to see what it soudns [*sic*] like wiv them words in" (http://www.northern-rave.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=55&t=14293; accessed 28 June 2009)

(5) "Dont talk to me about no show. Time I get done over this here tub I be too tired to lift my hand to do nothing."
"I bet you be there." Luster said. "I bet you was there last night. I bet you all be right there when that tent open." (William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* New York: Vintage, 1990 p. 15)

(6) Omoge show me right from wrong [Baby]
Jowo wa sinu aiye mi [Please come into my life]
Ko je kin da bi okunrin [Let me be like a man]
We'll be loving one on one
Till we see the morning sun
(Pidgin rap)
Ah ah ah,
Ah check am
Baby anytime I see your face
My heart go start to scatter
After I check am na you be my desire
I no dey tell you dis because I wan dey talk am
I dey tell you dis based on say na so I dey mean am (Omoniyi 2006: 199; emphases removed; translations of Yoruba in square brackets)

These extracts are intended simply to give some idea about the kind of data, which appear in a range of texts, which might be referred to as English (though note that whether we should classify them all as instances of 'English' is a matter of debate). First, we have to consider whether we are justified in talking about 'the English language', as if it were some sort of unified, identifiable whole. This may strike you as something of a non-issue, because the concept of 'the English language' is so well entrenched in our minds. But we will see that the existence of a 'language' as an object of linguistic inquiry (as opposed to a cultural belief shared by members of a community) has been the subject of some debate within linguistics as a whole, and within the discipline of sociolinguistics in particular.

1.2 Languages and dialects

We need to begin by examining what is meant by the terms 'language' and 'dialect', both for the linguist, and for the typical language user. That such terms have both popular and scientific meanings (which can lead to uncertainty and confusion when the terms are applied to real-life situations) has been recognised for some time (Haugen 1966). But even within the discipline of linguistic inquiry, the terms are not always used with the same meanings – for instance, both 'dialect' and 'language' have been associated with nationhood and identity in sociolinguistic literature, but such issues are not usually of interest to linguists working on matters pertaining to the language faculty (that part of human cognitive ability which is considered by some linguists to be unique to language, different from other parts of cognition) and structural patterns and constraints in human language (though these linguists will still use the terms 'language' and 'dialect' when discussing data of various kinds). Many theoretical linguists are interested in what we might call Language (the language faculty), which is manifested in various languages across the globe. Our concern here is with those manifestations (that is, languages, not Language), but we will return to the issue of the language faculty in the final chapter.

A dictionary definition of the terms 'language' and 'dialect' is a useful place to start, because dictionaries typically provide definitions on which at least some people in the community agree. One function of a dictionary is to represent what most speakers of a given variety will accept as an accurate meaning of any given concept: note that this is true both of dictionaries of the standard language in various countries (for example, the *Oxford English Dictionary* in the United Kingdom, or *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* in the United States), and of

dictionaries of local varieties (dialect dictionaries such as the *Dictionary of Smoky Mountain English* in the United States, Montgomery and Hall 2004). The online version of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (www.oed.com) has the following definitions[1] of 'language' and 'dialect':

> Language: The system of spoken or written communication used by a particular country, people, community, etc., typically consisting of words used within a regular grammatical and syntactic structure.
>
> Dialect: 1. Manner of speaking, language, speech; esp. a manner of speech peculiar to, or characteristic of, a particular person or class; phraseology, idiom. 2.a. One of the subordinate forms or varieties of a language arising from local peculiarities of vocabulary, pronunciation, and idiom. (In relation to modern languages usually spec[ifically]: A variety of speech differing from the standard or literary 'language'; a provincial method of speech, as in 'speakers of dialect'.) Also in a wider sense applied to a particular language in its relation to the family of languages to which it belongs.

Notice that such definitions illustrate how hard it can be to distinguish a language from a dialect: the last part of the definition of *dialect* suggests that one meaning of *dialect* is 'language'! But these definitions provide a useful starting point to allow us to explore what we mean by 'the English language' and 'dialects of English'.

First, note how the definitions explicitly link linguistic concepts (for example, "The system of spoken or written communication . . . typically consisting of words used within a regular grammatical and syntactic structure") with social concepts (for example, "used by a particular country, people, community, etc."). We therefore need to consider what kind of criteria we should use to identify varieties as 'languages' or 'dialects': linguistic, social, or both. Second, part of the definition of 'dialect' suggests that a dialect is in a subordinate position relative to a language. That subordination is both spatial and social: a dialect is smaller than a language (being restricted to a particular local or geographical area) and it carries less prestige (being different from the standard language). Third, there is a suggestion that 'dialect' can be used to describe the language of an individual. The more common term for the language of an individual is 'idiolect'. However, it is clear that we will need to consider how the linguistic characteristics of the individual are related to larger concepts such as language and dialect. Note also that the social concepts used (for example, 'people' and 'community') are really rather generalised, and as such might refer to a group of people which extends beyond a country (for example, people who speak English as a second

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