Variationist Approaches to Language and Education

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Abstract

Scholars of language variation and change have contributed to educational projects since the 1960s. The primary focus has been explaining the nature of dialects and language change to educational practitioners and students. Researchers have made connections to composition and other realms of English studies. Vernacular dialects, such as African-American Vernacular English, have been the main area of research, as these are the dialects that have been least understood and most disparaged. Researchers have attempted to help educational professionals and students better understand the nature of language and specifically language variation in order to improve educational practice.

Keywords

Sociolinguistics • Dialect • AAVE • Labov • Stereotypes

Contents

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Introduction

Since the 1960s, sociolinguists have investigated the interactions of language vari-
ation and education. Broadly construed, language variation includes language
change as well as social and geographic variation at any one point in time. For the
purposes of education, the overwhelming focus has been on socially stigmatized
language variation. Since language variation is a daily presence in every classroom,
many proactive efforts of variationists have concentrated on how educational poli-
cies and practitioners handle language variation.

The study of sociolinguistic variation developed from the fields of linguistics,
anthropology, sociology, and social psychology, and therefore it has a wide range of
methods and goals (Holmes and Hazen 2014). On the linguistic side, the study of
language variation developed from phonology and other linguistic fields with the
goal of constructing explanations for how humans produce their socially and lin-
guistically constrained patterns. The study of language variation differs from tradi-
tional linguistics in that scholars study the interaction between social and linguistic
factors.

Sociolinguists have long argued against the common and widespread belief that
there is a single supreme, homogenous correct form, and that all other forms are
deficient derivatives of it. Over recent decades, sociolinguists have emphasized that
all languages have multiple, linguistically legitimate forms and that correctness is a
matter of socially and rhetorically determined genre conventions (Hazen 2015).
There are many standard Englishes, and they have been variously defined at different
times according to shifting social and linguistic standards: For example, a question in
the form of "Ran he this way?" instead of "Did he run this way?" was standard
before the 1500s. Along with these standard Englishes are many other linguistically
legitimate varieties that do not carry the favored social status that the standard
varieties enjoy. In the USA, these stigmatized varieties are most often labeled as
vernacular.

This chapter focuses specifically on language variation issues and explains
important scholarship and possible paths of study as well as practical solutions.
This piece covers some early developments of language variation and education,
in addition to major contributions (e.g., key positions, foundational work on
vernacular varieties and literacy, classroom solutions, and teachers' and students'
attitudes toward language variation). Lastly, this work touches upon problems and
difficulties in language variation study, recent scholarship, and conclusions that
point toward possibilities for future study of language variation's position in
educational debates.

Early Developments

During the 1960s and 1970s, the pervasive question across both public and scholarly debate was what roles nonstandard language should play, if any, in institutional education. In other words, should vernacular language be encouraged, allowed, or discouraged in the classroom? Through this time, sociolinguists sided with two different approaches to language variation and education. In practice, these approaches were not mutually exclusive and were implemented in the same educational practices. The first approach was the dialect rights position from the National Council of Teachers of English, which maintains that students have a right to use their own language variety. The second approach involved the so-called additive dialect model, where standard language features are taught to vernacular speakers. Note that vernacular features are rarely taught to nonvernacular speakers, and criticism of this approach has been pointed at times, as ethnic minorities are required to adjust language features to the white majority's conventions (Sledd 1969). One of the implications for both these approaches is that students can retain their home variety while learning the genre conventions of standard writing. Another important implication is that speakers of nonstigmatized dialects, both students and teachers, should respect the speakers of stigmatized dialects.

The ideas of the dialect rights position have not always been clear for educational professionals, but a recent book helps to clarify the years of debate and to elucidate the fundamental questions. Perryman-Clark et al. (2014) created a critical sourcebook for US educators to draw from retrospective analysis of the past four decades' practical strategies, such as employing multigenre writing to help students explore their fullest range of language variation.

The additive approach follows a metaphor where people possess a "dialect" and then add another one to it, namely, the nonstigmatized standard "dialect." For scholars who study language variation, the term *dialect* works for larger units, such as geographic regions (e.g., the US South). Speakers develop diverse personal styles, which are drawn from language variation patterns of the larger dialect. The additive method attempts to teach students how to recognize stigmatized language variation patterns (e.g., possessive's loss in *That is Marc_ ball*) and replace them with nonstigmatized alternatives (e.g., *That is Marc's ball*) in the rhetorically appropriate contexts. Successful students in such programs should be able to recognize and perform in several genres. Reaser and Adger (2008) cover the entire range of educational issues concerning vernacular language varieties, including summarizing the largest studies of oral language development with a focus on language variation; they conclude that vernacular varieties do not cause developmental problems for students but institutional responses to the students do cause educational problems.

For both these approaches, educational success is dependent on distinguishing spoken language from written genre conventions.

Major Contributions

Modern sociolinguistic methodologies were developed from dialectology, linguistics, anthropology, and to some extent sociology (Holmes and Hazen 2014). Researchers from these subfields have made contributions to education from the inception of modern language variation study. Early on in the study of sociolinguistics, researchers recognized that knowledge of different dialects could assist teachers and students in their educational goals.

From this tradition, several modern books provide overviews of how knowledge of language variation, including its history, can benefit educators. These include *We Do Language* (Charity and Mallinson 2014), *Dialects in Schools and Communities* (Adger et al. 2007), and *Linguistics at School* (Denham and Lobeck 2014). These books cover some of the modern understandings of language, such as the recognition that all dialects follow linguistic rules and that language is a natural system that can be examined scientifically. The biggest single step for interested educators would be to learn the basics of how language works, which these texts help elucidate.

For reference sources specifically on vernacular varieties, including African-American English, see the bibliography by Rickford et al. (2012). It provides an excellent overview of the research, including quantitative study, which has been done on vernacular varieties in education. Over time, the focus has shifted from proving the legitimacy of AAVE to helping AAVE speakers learn institutional genre norms. For a general source on language stigmatization in English, such as the use of vernacular varieties in Disney films, readers should consult *English with an Accent* (Lippi-Green 2012).

Key Positions

In the 1960s, sociolinguists often argued against educational researchers' approaches to language variation in schools, for example, the deficit approach which assumed vernacular speakers were not exposed to enough language as children and hence performed poorly because of underdeveloped verbal skills. Baratz's work (1969) is an important article summarizing three possible stances toward language variation and education. The third approach, the one Baratz champions, is the modern approach of sociolinguists since the late 1960s – namely, that AAVE is a dialect of English like any other dialect of English. Baratz found that African-American children in Washington, DC, did significantly better at accurately repeating AAVE sentences, and European-American children were significantly better at accurately repeating nonstigmatized sentences. The implications from this approach affected language variation study both in speech pathology and in educational fields: The dialect of the community must be evaluated on its own terms. Other countries have experienced similar shifts in public opinion. For example, the UK went through stages of eradicationism, assimilation, tolerance, and acceptance in regard to Black English. These stages resulted from increased knowledge about language variation and its role in stigmatization.

Continuing Baratz's momentum, Fasold and Shuy (1970) edited a volume still valuable for researchers today. Wolfram's contribution in that volume lays out the basics of sociolinguistic research for educational professionals and argues forcefully for granting priority to some teaching goals over others, such as focusing on the most stereotyped features, which are sharply stratified between social classes. Wolfram asserts that doing so helps students learn the contrast between vernacular norms and institutional genre conventions. In addition, Shuy's contribution to the volume cites deprecating quotes from teachers about AAVE and suggests teachers learn about how English varieties work, especially the most stigmatized varieties. Yet, teachers must respect their students' dialects for students to earnestly engage with institutional norms. In a modern work that complements Fasold and Shuy (1970), Alim (2010) suggests how Critical Language Awareness directly addresses the concerns raised by Shuy (1970). Critical language awareness requires speakers to pay attention to the social and political underpinnings of their language ideologies; Alim suggests a classroom activity where students analyze stigmatized patterns (third-person singular verbal – s variation) of a local hip-hop artist to understand the systematicity of spoken speech and the sociolinguistic impact. As Shuy noted three decades earlier, Alim discusses how teachers and journalists often carry deep-seated assumptions about AAVE speakers and how traditional approaches to teaching genre conventions are often resisted by AAVE speakers. Critical language awareness helps teachers overcome the frustration associated with the politics of standard language teaching.

Perhaps the most widely known text from this early period of variationist work is Labov's *The Logic of Nonstandard English* (1969), which has both educational and social implications. In this work, Labov explains how the inner workings of nonstandard dialects follow clear patterns more consistently than do educated varieties. Claiming that vernacular dialects are legitimate has often been seen as ludicrous by the general public, but for sociolinguistic approaches to be effective, this argument must be faced directly.

Foundational Work on Nonstandard Dialects, Literacy, and Policies

Beyond scholars' engagement with spoken language practice, some linguists envisioned implications for literacy. Labov (1967) discusses the possible interference between students' development of literacy and their dialect, and he has argued that textbook writers and many teachers do not understand enough about the target vernacular varieties to produce truly helpful exercises. For example, the regular past tense form <-ed> is noted to be often absent in AAVE, yet this language variation pattern receives little to no attention from publishers of educational materials (Labov 1967, pp. 157–162).

Creoles have also been a focus of several studies on language variation and education. For example, Carrington (1976) discusses the wide diversity of creoles with different lexifier languages and the subsequent effects on education in the Caribbean territories. He also discusses the proscription of vernacular varieties and

prohibitive attitudes toward nonofficial languages, providing guidelines for determining relationships between vernacular varieties and school policies. For example, the first principal is that linguistic conditions are linguistically favorable to teach in a creole variety if it is unrelated to the official language, but conditions are linguistically unfavorable if the creole is related to the official variety.

In 1979, a legal case involving vernacular varieties and school policies became widely publicized. This case centered on African-American elementary students in Ann Arbor, Michigan, who were segregated into remedial classes. Advocates for the students argued that civil rights were being violated as the students' cultural and linguistic background was not accounted for in planning instruction. The ruling reaffirmed the school's obligation to accommodate their language variation (see Smitherman 2000, p. 154). By the 1990s, the deficit approach was no longer an overt position for educators, and sociolinguists had correspondingly shifted their focus away from proving the linguistic legitimacy of minority varieties.

At the end of 1996, the foundational issues of the difference/deficit debate roared back onto the international stage when the Oakland California School Board took steps to assist their African-American students, many of whom were performing poorly in school. Their approach was to bring students to full literacy by introducing the written word in the style and form of African-American English. For these issues and a full account of the firestorm surrounding the Oakland School Board's activities, readers should consult Rickford and Rickford's *Spoken Soul* (2000).

Similarly, in response to the social furor that eliminated bilingual education in California in 1998, students and professors developed the anthology *Tongue Tied* (Santa Ana 2004). Sociolinguistic approaches are found throughout the volume in application to numerous multilingual situations. For both the Ebonics debate and multilingualism, a safe prediction is that such media-sponsored uproars will occur in the future.

Although these situations are the most widely publicized, nonstandard varieties are not always officially stigmatized. For instance, Norway has two written standards, *Bokmål* and *Nynorsk*, both based on Norwegian speech; the country's law forbids forced speech standardization. This institutional respect for language variation has a long tradition dating back to a parliamentary motion in 1878. The underlying belief is that regional dialects reflect Norwegian cultural tradition uncontaminated by Danish rule. The import for the educational researcher is that stigmatization of nonstandard varieties does not have to be accepted or institutionalized.

As an introduction to sociolinguistic insights on literacy and education in European school systems, Cheshire et al. (1989) provide national perspectives, a review of the literature from 1970 to 1989, and classroom initiatives. For example, one study investigates nonstandard Dutch in school settings: Through examining language tests and both teacher and student questionnaires, they found that nonstandard speakers are at a disadvantage in comparison with their standard-speaking peers. Researchers in Europe have given clear descriptions of the attitudes surrounding more and less standard varieties.

Arguments for Nonintervention

Complementary to these debates of vernacular dialect in schools, Cheshire (2005) argues that nonstandard varieties in and of themselves are not as "detrimental to educational success as might be thought" (p. 2346). Several previous studies illustrated this point. Williams (1989) found that both standard and nonstandard speakers used colloquial forms in their writing: Hence it is important to analyze written work in order to disambiguate which issues result from normal literacy development and which result from vernacular interference.

The more effective approaches will distinguish the genre conventions of writing. For example, in analyzing three areas of England, Williamson and Hardman (1997, p. 255) advised teachers not to concern themselves with problems of prescriptive grammar and lexical items but to focus on punctuation and orthography. In their study, vernacular forms were rare compared with spelling and punctuation mistakes. This comparison is even true when the students' spoken language contained more vernacular features.

Classroom Solutions

Although variationists have identified related problems in educational practice, they have received criticism for not producing solutions. This section highlights some of the potential solutions variationists have discussed.

Rickford and Rickford (1995) examine the role dialect readers can play in classrooms and the benefits they provide for students and teachers. Dialect readers specially developed reading materials that include a local vernacular's variation in order to encourage literacy. Another important text from this period is Labov (1995), where he proposes five principles which help educational professionals understand the language variation patterns of AAVE. Perhaps the two most important principles are that teachers should (1) distinguish between mistakes in reading and differences in pronunciation and (2) give more attention to the ends of words, as that is the linguistic realm where most differences exist between AAVE and standard varieties. All of Labov's principles are based on both classroom research and extensive linguistic study of vernacular varieties. Labov and colleagues incorporated these ideas into a tutoring program called the *Reading Road* (http://www.ling.upenn.edu/pri/).

Beyond developmental reading issues, research on many levels of language variation should help educational professionals reach their goals with vernacular speakers. Shifting the focus to discourse analysis in educational settings, if educational professionals understand the communicative competence of older students, should bolster their opportunities to be active agents in their education. On numerous linguistic levels, two complementary works provide insights and practical advice for teachers about understanding communicative competence: Denham and Lobeck (2005) and Wheeler and Swords (2006). These works justify the need for modern

grammar study and include sections on classroom methodology and linguistic influences on writing.

In the first program to fully account for language variation across an entire state, Reaser and Wolfram (2005) developed a robust language variation module for middle school social studies classes. Their 450 instructional minute, multimedia curriculum on language diversity in North Carolina can be taught effectively by classroom teachers who have no training in linguistics. In addition, Reaser and Wolfram have also developed other educational resources from their extensive scholarship with language variation: www.ncsu.edu/linguistics/dialecteducation. php.

Focusing on pidgins and creoles, Siegel (2001) developed categories of programs and evaluated their qualities. His categories of programs – instrumental, accommodation, and awareness – incorporate pidgins and creoles to different extents. He further notes that research on instrumental programs, where the home variety is used as the main medium of instruction, in Australia and the Seychelles "has shown that students educated bilingually in their creole mother tongue and the standard outperformed students educated in only the standard language" (2001, p. 748). Siegel attributes the positive benefits of these and other studies to both educational logistics (e.g., students find it easier to develop literacy in familiar varieties first) and to the more positive attitudes such programs engender.

Educational researchers have also adopted variationist approaches to develop solutions to pedagogical problems. For example, Craig and Washington (2006) address long-standing variationist questions: The general consensus of researchers is that AAVE speakers do not have reading comprehension troubles related to their dialect and that no single language variation pattern will explain the black-white achievement gap, especially in terms of literacy.

Teachers and Teachers' Attitudes

Several variationist researchers have evaluated teachers' attitudes toward vernacular speakers. In general, studies have found that teachers in recent decades generally have a more positive attitude about AAVE and minority dialects. This positive support of local dialects is important because several sociolinguistic studies have shown a strong correlation exists between students' academic success and their community or ethnic identities, both of which influence their speech (e.g., Haig and Oliver 2003).

Teacher and student attitudes are considered the fulcrum of disadvantages for vernacular speakers by Barbour and Stevenson (1990) in their study of German variation. They find that German-speaking Swiss schools, where traditional, nonstandard dialects are normal, do not note educational dialect problems; the schools reporting such issues were the ones where vernacular and nonvernacular speakers interact: ". . . this strongly suggests that the problem is overwhelmingly one of social attitudes, rather than of the linguistic characteristics of non-standard German"

(p. 191). Correspondingly, Cheshire and Trudgill (1989) write: "The greatest dialect-related problems in the United Kingdom ... continue to be the attitudes and prejudices that many people hold towards non-standard dialects and accents of English, combined with the lack of understanding about the nature of dialect differences and of their social significance" (p. 106). As a complement to this view, Cameron (1995) provides a reexamination of linguists' descriptivist stance in relation to education and details educational reforms in the UK.

Rampton (2006) presents an updated argument about attitudes for English schools. In responding to the work of Trudgill in the 1970s, which propagated the idea of respecting nonstandard dialects, Rampton argued that the same dialect prejudices do not persist in the new century and that the nonstandard-speaking students may not be as linguistically insecure as previously thought (p. 318). In this new context, English teachers face a dilemma: They must both persist as "guardians of grammar" and as "agents of social language reform" and may run up against thorny issues such as third-person singular generic pronouns. Younger teachers might implement nonsexist pronouns rather than perpetuating the grammatical tradition of "generic" he. Importantly, attitudes for students and teachers have to be a recognized part of the curriculum. Cheshire (2005) writes: "The research indicates, then, that educational programmes that recognise the associations that standard and nonstandard English have for speakers, and that build on these, are more likely to result in children becoming proficient in using standard English than are policies which assume that acquiring the standard language is simply a matter of substituting one variant for another" (p. 2349).

Teacher's reception of language variation is directly related to the teacher's linguistic awareness. Two dissertations have specifically focused on how low levels of linguistic awareness lead to ineffective teaching. Williams (2012) surveyed composition teachers' language awareness and then tracked their interactions and discussions of students, specifically one-on-one writing conferences and the instructors' handling of language variation. Williams concluded better knowledge of the linguistic details of students' varieties results in better instruction. Strickling (2012) examined how teachers implement the professional development training on language variation that they had received and the subsequent effects on their linguistic awareness.

Beyond attitudes, the variationist research methodology now includes a direct assessment of students' language abilities. Charity et al. (2004) quantitatively assessed the frequency of standard variants in specified tasks. They distinguished AAVE and school English (SE) by degree of features, not categorical presence or absence. Their scholarly approach includes the position that the level of AAVE language variation patterns is not the important factor in predicting reading failure but instead that the familiarity with SE is the crucial factor. They write: "how often the SE forms are reproduced, was thus chosen as our measure of children's familiarity with SE" (p. 1342). They also find that "individual differences in familiarity with [school English] are strongly related to reading achievement in young, African-American students" (p. 1354). Their study inverts the reading conundrum by focusing on knowledge of school English.

Around the world and in the USA, the future of variationist research into language and education is bright. Although educational concerns were secondary to variationists in the past, the newest generation of scholars is making them a primary focus. Several dissertations focusing on different educational components highlight the range of research conducted by those attuned to language variation, including the previously mentioned Williams (2012). Sweetland (2006) discusses the study of the development and implementation of language variation teacher training programs. Reaser (2006) examines dialect awareness programs and their effects on teachers' and students' attitudes about language variation. Prichard (2015) assesses the effects of higher education on language variation patterns. Considering the expanded enrollment post-secondary schools have enjoyed since the end of World War II, scholars have learned little about how the experience and the social identity of post-secondary education can affect language variation patterns. Prichard's dissertation provides much needed research about higher education's role in language change.

The potential for expansion of sociolinguistic insights into the language variation of vernacular varieties should also help educational goals outside the English classroom. Mallinson and Charity-Hudley (2014) explore what hurdles speakers of vernacular varieties face in STEM disciplines and the best ways sociolinguists and STEM educators can collaborate to help those students.

Sociolinguistic Views and Prescriptivist Traditions

For educational professionals to confidently adopt a modern view of language variation, they should understand how it contrasts with traditional ideas about how language works and how it can aid their own pedagogical goals. Common beliefs about language are undergirded by several modern myths. One basic myth is that a supremely correct form, without variation, exists for all contexts and times; in previous centuries, this belief extended to the superiority of some languages (e.g., Latin) over others. Today, Western societies are currently in transition from such traditional beliefs to a scientific understanding of how language works.

Two signs of this transformation have become obvious to linguists who interact regularly with public opinion: People more readily accept that no one language is inherently superior and that language change is not decay. Were the other tenets of sociolinguists' findings to be taken up, such as the legitimacy of language variation, the educational goals of literacy and writing would be accomplished more thoroughly and efficiently.

Traditional beliefs about language do not allow any kind of legitimate language variation. Many prescriptivist doctrines of today were established in the eighteenth century, often in erroneous but well-intentioned comparisons between English and Latin. For example, do not split infinitives (e.g., *to boldly go*) and do not strand prepositions (e.g., *We have much to be thankful for*) are both erroneous extensions from Latin to English.

The challenge for scholars of language variation is to demonstrate that traditional prescriptivist approaches are less effective and efficient at achieving institutional goals. Fine-grained, quantitative examinations of pedagogy would provide evidence that a sociolinguistic understanding of language produces the best results. Within students' written and spoken language variation is a wealth of learning opportunities; if educational researchers can construct an accurate model of what students do when they accomplish institutional goals, the modern view of language variation would be an integral part of that process.

The sociolinguistic goals for education are to help people understand the natural linguistic equality of all varieties and help them establish teaching tactics that incorporate a scientifically sound view of language. The new foundation for educational purposes must eschew several components of traditional prescriptivism. This scientifically informed approach would allow teachers to encourage literacy and rhetorical skills at all levels while accurately portraying language. Teaching with an assumption of rhetorically focused language will be more successful for students and teachers alike because of its harmony with the nature of language (Hazen 2015, Chap. 10).

Conclusion: Challenges and Future Directions

For over 50 years, sociolinguists have contributed to language education research and practice. Research on language variation should play an important role in the development of language education policies and programs surrounding nonstandard dialects in education. Researchers have learned over the last half-century about sociolinguistic attitudes and the inner workings of stigmatized varieties. In the next 50 years, they should inquire about the best methods for shifting attitudes to a modern understanding of language variation. The most general results of the language variation approach to language and education should include a better understanding of language use in society and thus students' increased awareness of their own language variation.

One crucial component is to work with teachers to develop materials that reflect a modern, scientific view of language. Understanding how language works, including its social intricacies, makes the teaching of educational genre conventions less of a social hand grenade, increasing both the efficiency and effectiveness of the teaching. When language variation is properly understood, students are less opposed to institutional goals and the social connotations of them.

Cross-References

▶ Language Teacher Research Methods
▶ Researching Identity in Language and Education
▶ Researching the Language of Race and Racism in Education
▶ Second Language Acquisition and Identity
▶ Social Class in Language in Education Research

Related Articles in the Encyclopedia of Language and Education

James Collins and Ben Rampton: Language, Class, and Education. In Volume: Language Policy and Political Issues in Education

Bonny Norton: Language and Social Identity. In Volume: Language Policy and Political Issues in Education

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