

²⁸ From William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Random House, 1956), p. 23.

²⁹ Richard Llewellyn, *How Green Was My Valley* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1940), p. 1.

³⁰ From Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1925), p. 3.

8

CHAPTER

Varieties of English: Regional, Social, and Ethnic

We have seen how language-users shift their speech habits according to the degree of formality required, the subject about which they are talking, the genre, and medium. All such shifts contribute greatly to the variability of language. There are other types of variation too. Indeed, the phrase "varieties of English" probably makes us think first and foremost of the pronounced differences in the linguistic habits of people from different regions, social classes, and ethnic groups. It is these kinds of variation that we will be discussing in this chapter. In more traditional terminology, this topic would be referred to as "dialects of English," but for reasons outlined below, we adopt the term "variety" as well as the more familiar "dialect."

When you greet someone you don't know and ask formulaic questions, you are not only establishing lines of communication and setting up social roles, you are also finding out something about where the person is from and perhaps also what the person's socioeconomic status is—or at least what he or she would like you to think it is. Dress, style of walk, gesture all indicate such factors too, but language plays a crucial role. Formulaic openings, such as comments on the weather, allow an apparently objective context to reveal delicate differences. Even a formula as simple as

1. a.  Hi, how are you?

tells a lot about the speaker, revealing, for instance, that the speaker wants to be informal (**Hi** as opposed to **Hello**), and is from the United States (**Hi** is

rarely used in England), and probably from the Southeast United States. In many other parts of the United States the intonation pattern in 1a with rise-fall on **you** can be used only for a real question, not a greeting. Speakers from these regions use an intonation pattern with a rise on **are**:

1. b.  Hi, how are you?

for the greeting. Another greeting formula, **Mornin'**, tells something about regional or social background through presence or absence of **r**, and presence of [n] versus [m], where [n] indicates familiarity, casual speech, or lower-class economic status. There are very few utterances that do not give us at least some extra-linguistic information.

In most speech communities, we find language variation along lines of regional or ethnic origin, socioeconomic status, and also sex, age, and education. All speakers have at least some internalized knowledge of how their language varies along these parameters, and in most cases we find culturally shared attitudes to certain varieties. For instance, in England before the Second World War, a social dialect known as the King's or Queen's English was the high prestige variety, mandatory for anybody aspiring to a civil service or academic post, and speakers of this variety were socially approved of while nonspeakers were not. This attitude was immortalized in Shaw's *Pygmalion* and the musical based on it, *My Fair Lady*. Since the 1960s, however, a considerable number of regional and even social varieties have become widely acceptable in England. Indeed, many prospective professors who twenty-five years ago would have cultivated "the Queen's English" now studiously avoid it and announce their social and regional origins proudly (in some cases we may even find a "reverse snobism," the adoption of a variety typical of a socioeconomic class lower than that into which the speaker was born). This cultural attitude depends for its existence on the knowledge that language varies, and that language varieties can have social meaning. That is, they can function as indicators of social identity.

In sum, when we consider why people speak the way they do, all of the following factors must be considered separately in addition to the structure of the code itself:

1. type of speaker (regional and ethnic origin, socioeconomic status, education, sex, age)
2. type of addressee (as in 1)
3. topic of speech (politics, sex, linguistics, a drunken brawl)
4. genre (sermon, casual talk, interview)
5. medium (spoken, written; radio, television)

6. situation (classroom, bar, a walk in the fields)
7. degree of formality (casual, formal)
8. type of speech act (statement, command, question).

These factors form the basis of study in the discipline called "sociolinguistics." All are essential to a full understanding of language as communication and of the structures that control it. We are concerned with the first of these factors here. Particular attention will be paid to ways in which variation depends on regional or ethnic origin, and social status. Even within these limits, there are dozens of varieties of English on which we could have focused, for example, Irish, Australian, Cockney, Appalachian, or Texan. The one we have chosen is Black American English Vernacular. It has been selected as the focus of this chapter because many recent theoretical and methodological developments in sociolinguistics have been worked out primarily in research on this variety (or rather cluster of varieties), and an extensive, coherent body of research is available on the subject. It is also a language variety that has been used in many highly successful literary experiments.

Before going on to a specific look at some ways in which English varies according to "type of speaker," let us note some of the methodological problems in studying language variation.

THE DATA ON VARIABILITY

Preceding chapters have considered aspects of language that can be established through introspection. However, when we consider the question of variability according to type of speaker or addressee, introspection is no longer of any use. This is because any individual controls only some of all the possible varieties of a language. Also, most people imagine they speak very differently from the way they actually do. People hearing themselves for the first time on a tape recorder are amazed and sometimes shocked by what they hear. Many people think they speak more homogeneously, even more standardly, than they really do. To find out what different kinds of regional or other varieties there are, then, one must use data collected through questionnaires, interviews, tape recordings of free speech, and the like. This method in turn raises problems of its own.

First, one can never be sure the collected data is complete; in fact, one can be pretty sure that it is incomplete, that there are relevant forms that have not shown up. This is particularly true of syntactic structures. A second, related problem is the fact that data is always skewed by the presence of the person collecting it. It is particularly difficult to collect samples of people's most spontaneous, informal speech because people are likely to speak very self-consciously and formally when they know they are part of a linguistic inquiry. Interviews tend to elicit what people think they ought to say, rather than what

they do say. Postal questionnaires elicit even more formal and less spontaneous responses, because writing itself triggers formality. Oral questionnaires are more effective, but interviewees are still watchful of their speech in this context. With either medium, material to be elicited often cannot be asked for directly, particularly if it is phonetic. For example, there are some varieties of English in which the vowel in *wash* is [ɔy]. If one wants to investigate presence or absence of [ɔy] in such words, a question like "How do you pronounce *wash*?" would probably make people too conscious of their pronunciation. Their response might be influenced by spelling, by prestige norms, or by the interviewer's own pronunciation—the relevant factor could not be determined. A far better way to approach the problem would be to ask for relevant lexical data: "What is another term for laundry?" If it is lexical variants one wants to study, extensive discussion is often needed to capture stylistic differences or slight meaning differences. For example, a question such as "What is the name of the thing you fry eggs in?" might elicit "A skillet"; only further questioning such as "Do you use or know any other terms?" might elicit *frying pan*, and only a third question would get to appropriate contexts for the two terms.

Various research methods have recently been developed in attempts to overcome such problems, mainly under the inspiration of William Labov. In an early study he investigated a very widespread phenomenon called "*r*-fulness." This has to do with presence or absence of [r] after a vowel in such words as *car*, *barn*, and *farmer*. Brooklynes, for example, is famous for not having [r] in words such as [boyd] "bird." Labov studied the correlation of *r*-fulness with social prestige by asking sales personnel for the location of the shoe department at three large New York department stores. These three stores appealed to very different kinds of clientele, and all had their shoe department on the fourth floor. He jotted down the presence or absence of *r* in the responses, which were almost uniformly "On the fourth floor," and found that the personnel in the highest prestige store used *r* far more frequently than in the middle prestige store, and hardly at all in the lowest prestige store.¹ Such a technique has the advantage of interviewer anonymity (none of the sales personnel knew that this was any other than a shopper's ordinary question), but it has the grave disadvantage of providing only impressionistic results, and no reliable information on the speakers' social or regional background, their education, attitudes to language, and so forth. Although never able to eliminate consciousness of the interviewer and of the tape recorder, Labov found that lengthy interviews, including reading of a passage and casual conversation, tend to relax people, and that questions like "Were you ever in danger of death?" almost always prompt answers in the least self-conscious speech, marked by a switch to a less standard or formal style. The more emotionally involved the speakers, the closer they come to the variety most natural to them. Most recently, Labov has found that one can best collect casual speech by group interviews; this, however, requires extremely fine recording equipment and a group of people who know each other well.²

Even when one has collected reasonably reliable data, the task of identifying language varieties is not immediately solved. For one thing, differences between varieties often involve not the bare presence or absence of a form, but the quantitative likelihood of a form being used or not used. Let us take an example from Black American English. It is extremely unlikely that upper-middle-class Black speakers would use multiple negatives in formal speech, such as *Nobody never did nothing* in the sense of *Nobody ever did anything*. At the other end of the scale, working-class Blacks speaking informally are extremely likely to use multiple negatives. But the same upper-middle-class Black speaker who does not use multiple negatives in formal situations will occasionally use them in informal ones. Similarly, the working-class Black speaker who uses multiple negatives most of the time in casual speech will use fewer of them in formal situations. Thus, in distinguishing between middle- and working-class Black English, we would not want to say simply that the former lacks multiple negatives and the latter has them; rather, we would have to talk about the frequency of occurrence of multiple negatives. Moreover, no one feature, such as multiple negation, serves to distinguish one variety from another. A great many varieties of English in fact use multiple negation. It is not a particular feature, but a whole network of features from every aspect of linguistic structure—phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical, and pragmatic—that make up what is recognized as one variety or another.

That a form is usually not completely present or absent but is used relatively more or less in certain circumstances may at first seem surprising. We have all imitated other varieties of English by selecting certain features that we think are typical. For example, we might characterize a nonstandard speaker by substituting *ain't* for *isn't* in all cases. However, were we to listen closely to such a speaker, we would discover that *ain't* is used only some of the time. The tendency to stereotype certain language varieties may be partly the result of wanting to draw attention to the variety. But it may often be partly determined by ignorance of the factors that control use or nonuse of features like *ain't*. Among literate speakers, the tendency to stereotype is also partly a direct consequence of projecting the relative uniformity of written language onto all varieties of the language other than those with which they are fully familiar.

Stereotyping not only misrepresents what speakers do with their language, but also picks somewhat arbitrary targets. For example, *ain't* and double negatives arouse very bad reactions in standard speakers and even in some nonstandard speakers who recognize that these are socially unacceptable. They are called "stigmatized" forms. On the other hand, other nonstandard forms, such as [ɪn] for [in] for the present progressive morpheme, arouse little negative reaction. They are merely the object of condescension, not opprobrium.

Early studies of variation according to type of speaker focused on regional distinctions, sometimes intermixed with social distinctions. Such varieties were called dialects. There has been considerable confusion in the

use of this term. Everyone speaks one or more dialects of a language insofar as they use certain regional and social varieties. Yet many people think only other people use dialects. This comes in part from confusion of the term "a dialect," which simply means "a variety," and includes the standard variety, with "dialect," which refers only to nonstandard varieties. People who "speak dialect" are understood to speak with distinct regionalisms, perhaps even with noneducated features. They are often considered quaint, boorish, or in some other way inferior. Another term sometimes confused with "a dialect" is "accent," which refers solely to pronunciation. Although "accent" describes the phonological characteristics of any dialect, in everyday talk, to say someone "speaks with an accent" means they speak with a sound system distinctly different from one's own.

When linguists began to study and establish clear differences between regional and social varieties of English, as well as to study such factors as sex-related differences in language, they found that the term "dialect" used for the first two but not the last obscured the similarity between the different varieties. Many linguists have therefore rejected the term "dialect" and use either "variety" or "lect," with specification of whether the variety is regional, social, ethnic, or sex-related. We prefer the term "variety," but will sometimes use "dialect" too.

REGIONAL VARIETIES

Although there has been an interest in regionalisms from time immemorial, as reflected in jokes about pronunciation, or efforts to imitate regional dialects, little systematic work was done on them until the beginning of this century. Since then, extensive work has been carried out in various countries on regional dialects, and by various methods. The most common methods have been the postal questionnaire and individual interview. Most work has been done on phonetics, inflections, and lexicon, very little indeed on syntax or varieties of discourse.

In all cases of regional studies, maps are made charting the regional distribution of the forms in question. For example, the various phonetic pronunciations of *calf* including [kæf], [kæf], [kæf] (the dot indicates length) would be plotted on one map, the various pronunciations of *path*, *pass*, *aunt*, *farmer*, etc., on others, the various past forms of the verb (e.g., [sɔː], [sɪn], [sɪd] for the past tense of *see*) on others, and the terms used for the wood or metal receptacles in which one carries water (e.g., *bucket*, *pail*, etc.) on yet others. Such maps are studied for patterns of continuity and discreteness. Boundaries are set by mapping the furthest points to which a form has penetrated, and a line is drawn connecting these boundaries. The line is strictly speaking called an "isophone" if it connects phonetic boundaries, an "isogloss" if it connects an lexical or grammatical ones. However, "isogloss" is commonly used for both

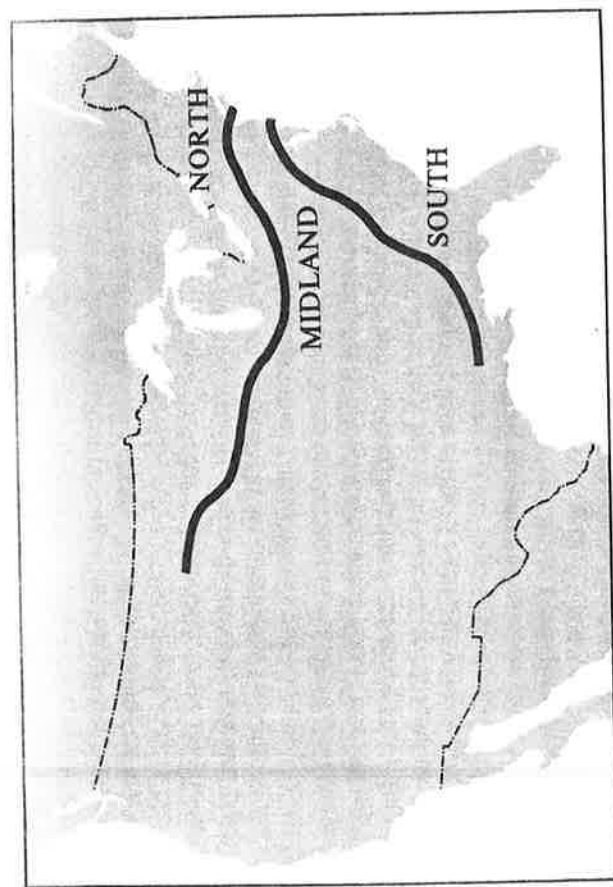
kinds of lines. Maps marked this way are superimposed and, though the boundaries between forms are usually not identical, they tend to fall into clearly discernible groups or bundles of isoglosses. Large bundles are considered to be the major dialect boundaries. Here only some of the major bundles in America will be illustrated.

The most interesting aspect of dialect differences is the way in which major boundaries tend to reflect earlier stages in the language and political boundaries or migration patterns that may be many centuries old. History is in some sense laid out in geographical space. If one knew nothing about the history of a language or its speakers, one could nevertheless infer changes in the language from contemporary dialect differences. This is particularly true in a country like England where the language has been spoken for a long time (in this case fifteen hundred years), but even when there is little time-depth (only three hundred years in the case of the United States), it is by no means insignificant, as will be shown below.

Work on United States linguistic geography has been going on steadily since the 1930s. At first the focus was on the Eastern States, mainly because the dialect differences are more noticeable there than elsewhere as a result of the longer settlement of the East. However, the whole of the country east of the Mississippi is now covered, either by unedited field work, by partially or fully edited materials, or by published materials.³ The same is true of some of the country west of the Mississippi, including California and Nevada.

In most countries dialect surveys are based primarily on the criterion of indigenesness—interviewees' families have resided in the area for several generations, and have had largely the same kind of occupations. In the United States, this criterion has to take second place because in certain regions, such as the West, few speakers come from places where their families have resided for several generations; even if they have, there has usually been radical change in occupation over the generations. However, interviewees are normally at least second-generation residents of the area. Usually three age groups are interviewed: people around 70, 60, and 50; and three educational groups: those with little formal education, those with better education (usually through high school), and those with college education (labeled groups I, II, and III, respectively).

Careful plotting of data has shown that the major regional areas are divided as in the map of the dialect areas. The boundaries best established are marked by a heavy continuous line. They represent distinct linguistic differences between the North, Midland, and South of the Eastern United States. The Midland area, starting with the Delaware Valley, fans out in the central United States, and like other less well-defined boundaries, reflects settlement patterns. The earliest immigrants came from England in the seventeenth century and settled all along the Atlantic coast, establishing essentially independent colonies with distinct linguistic and cultural differences. Ties with England were strong, and the seaports were centers not only of trade but of linguistic influence. About 1820 large numbers of Ulster Scots and Palatine



DIALECT AREAS OF THE UNITED STATES
EASTERN DIALECT BOUNDARIES⁴

Germans arrived in the Delaware Bay and spread out to Philadelphia and Ohio. This settlement is reflected by the linguistic boundaries of the Midland area.

A few examples of the distinctions between dialects of the rural North, Midland, and South must suffice here.⁵ Of course the areas each have many subareas, each with its own characteristics. The data here are illustrative rather than definitive. However, they clearly demonstrate two facts already mentioned: Dialects are characterized by bundles of characteristics, not single features, and there are degrees of difference between dialects—the Midland and South have more in common with each other than with the North. The characteristics listed here are used by the social groups I, II, and III unless otherwise specified.

Northern Characteristics

- Phonology:** [r] kept after vowels except in Eastern New England, e.g., in **hoarse**, **four**, **cart**, **father**.
[o] versus [ɔ] in **hoarse** versus **horse**, **mourning** versus **morning**. This distinction is receding in Inland Northern dialects. Also found in Southern dialects.
[s] in **greasy**.

Morphology and Syntax:

- dove** [dov], past of **dive**.
hadn't ought "oughtn't." (I, II)
clim [klim], past of **climb**. (I, II) Also Southern.

Lexicon:

- pail**. (Midland and Southern "bucket.")
spider "frying pan." (I, II) Receding in Inland Northern. Also Southern.

Midland Characteristics

- Phonology:** [r] kept after vowels. Also Inland Northern.
[ə] in **on**. Also Southern.
[z] in **greasy**. Also Southern.

Morphology and Syntax:

- clum** [kləm], past of **climb**. (I) Spreading in Inland Northern.
you-all, plural of **you**. Also Southern.
I'll wait on you "for you." (I, II) Also South Carolina.

Lexicon:

- skillet** "frying pan." Spreading.
snake feeder "dragon fly." (I, II)
a little piece "a short distance." Also South Carolina.

Southern Characteristics

- Phonology:** [r] sometimes lost after vowels.
[o] and [ə] contrasting in **hoarse-horse**, **mourning-morning**. Also Northern.
[æw] diphthong in **mountain**, **loud**. Also Midland.
[ə] in **on**. Also Midland.
[z] in **greasy**. Also Midland.

Morphology and Syntax:

- clim [klim], past of climb. (I, II) Also Northern.
- he belongs to be careful. (I, II)
- he fell outn the bed. (I)
- you-all, plural of you. Also Midland.
- Lexicon: spider "frying pan." Also Northern.
- carry "escort." (I, II)

SOCIAL VARIETIES

The intensive study of social, especially urban, language variation is considerably more recent than that of regional dialects. It gets much of its impetus from a study of English varieties in New York made in the early sixties by William Labov.⁶ Although not all the necessary variables have been distinguished in studies of social variation, attempts are usually made to obtain adequate samples from the social spectrum of the urban community, including groups defined by ethnicity, education, age, and sex, as well as socioeconomic status. Among problems still to be rectified in much sociolinguistic work is the tendency to take sociologists' class-scalings as givens, and to assume that language is dependent on them. However, it is conceivable that class stratification actually depends in part on language differences and that language and class do not coincide. Nevertheless, as has often been pointed out, the correlations between social rank and social dialects do seem to hold. Furthermore, in many cases they support the distinctions that sociologists make between working- and middle-class groups. Another problem is that both sociologists and linguists have tended to classify women according to the social status of their husbands. This classification is valueless in predicting networks of linguistic interaction if, for example, a woman works as a domestic and her husband is a road-mender.

Unlike regional studies, social studies have for the most part been conducted in a very small number of urban areas, most notably New York, Philadelphia, and Detroit in the United States, Montreal in Canada, Glasgow and Norwich in Great Britain. Unlike regional studies, they have been conducted exclusively through verbal (not postal) interaction. Emphasis has been primarily on phonetics, inflections, and function words such as pronouns or forms of the negative. Vocabulary has barely been considered, partly because distinctions in vocabulary are not as great in urban as in rural areas, and partly because the sophisticated recording equipment now used can ensure massive and reliable collection of phonetic data and also of lengthy

verbal interactions, something which was impossible in the early days of regional studies. In nearly all studies, the focus is on the interrelation of social stratification with style-shifting from casual to more formal varieties, especially in reading. This has been of central interest because it illustrates not only the variability of individual speakers' usage, but also the general tendency of all speakers in a certain community to shift in similar ways.

It is often said that the modern city is a kind of melting pot where sharp differences of culture, religion, and language disappear. While it is true that regional language differences tend to become minimized in an urban setting, social language differences atypical of rural situations arise. The extent to which regional differences disappear depends on the extent of migration. Broad features of Southern American English persist in the South even in dense urban areas because migration to Southern cities is largely from Southern areas. In Northeastern cities, all but gross regionalisms are less clearly observable because migration to urban areas is from the South as well as the North.

As we saw in the discussion of naming in Chapter 6, social stratification works on two complementary principles—it groups people with similar socioeconomic interests together and at the same time it establishes barriers and distances. The groups are, of course, never sharply defined, and therefore there are no absolute distinctions. Studies have repeatedly shown gradation from one group to another, emphasized by speakers' abilities to switch to varieties used by people in neighboring communities. It appears that virtually nobody has a range over the whole spectrum, but most people master a continuous part of the spectrum. Furthermore, there is usually greater skill in mastering varieties higher on the social scale than in mastering those lower on the scale. But even if there is gradation, there are also distinct clusterings of features according to class.

An example of phonetic variability is the well-known case of *r*-fulness in New York City. It has been selected here because it is a very simple example involving only one sound, [r]. In New York, lower-class speakers tend to use postvocalic *r* very little, especially in casual speech, compared to upper-middle-class speakers. All speakers, however, use more *r* in formal speech, particularly in reading, than in informal speech. What is especially interesting is that lower-middle-class speakers who do not use *r* much in casual speech shift when reading word lists to a speech variety in which *r* is not only far more frequent than in their own casual speech, but is also far more frequent than in the variety used by the upper middle class when reading word lists. This suggests that lower-middle-class New Yorkers regard *r*-fulness as highly prestigious. In situations such as in reading, when they are paying a lot of attention to speech, they "hypercorrect" or overdo the *r*-ful forms in an attempt to sound like members of a higher class.

These facts are plotted in Figure 8-1. The vertical axis indicates the percentage of *r*-ful pronunciations of words with postvocalic *r*, such as **guard**, **car**, **beer**, **beard**, **board**. The horizontal axis indicates the degree of attention

paid to speech, from most casual on the left to most careful on the right. "Minimal pairs" refers to reading pairs of words that differ primarily or exclusively in one phonemic feature, for example, **guard** and **god**, or **dark** and **dock**, which for most New Yorkers have essentially the same vowel. The designation LC refers to lower class, WC to working class, LMC and UMC to lower- and upper-middle-classes, respectively.⁷ Thus the bottom line of the graph reads: Lower-working-class speakers use *r*-ful forms about 2 percent of the time in casual and careful speech, about 4 percent of the time in reading style, about 10 percent of the time in reading word lists, and over 30 percent of the time when reading minimal pairs like **dark** and **dock**.

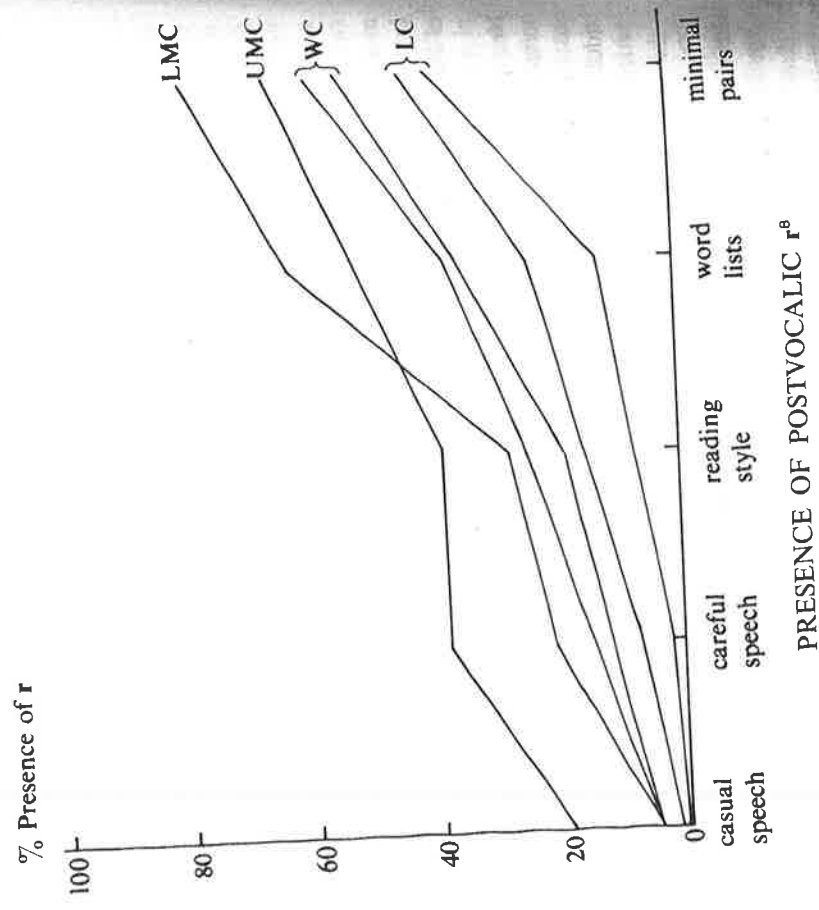
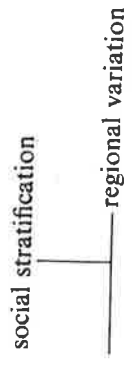


Figure 8-1.

Comparison of Figure 8-1 with the regional map would readily demonstrate that regional studies are concerned with "horizontal" variation, that is, variation through geographical space, while urban studies are concerned with

"vertical" variation, that is, variation through social space. If we think of a model somewhat like:



we can see how the two types of variation study can and indeed must intersect. The influence of social or regional variability is not entirely unidirectional. Migration patterns can affect language, and in the case of New York English, the influx of Midwesterners brought distinct Midwesternisms into speech, such as the use of postvocalic [r]. Nevertheless, in general, innovations spread out from a center of social and cultural importance. Thus we need to think of the relation between the two axes of the model as a dynamic one, each influencing the other, but with the main thrust of change at a social center. Social centers and prestige groups, of course, constantly change, as demonstrated by migration patterns, whether from rural areas to cities, from inner cities to suburbs, from city to city.

Labov and his associates have shown that at least in large urban areas like New York, Philadelphia, and Detroit, the greatest degree of change in speech patterns can be found among those who at the same time have the greatest hope for upward mobility and nevertheless are in the greatest jeopardy of falling back to a lower socioeconomic status. In other words, the greatest change is found linguistically where there is the greatest degree of social insecurity. The group that is linguistically most insecure is the lower middle class, and lower-middle-class teenagers in particular. The lower middle class more than any other demonstrates the phenomenon called "hypercorrection" that we saw in Figure 8-1. Because lower-middle-class speakers, especially teenagers who are just beginning to actively enter the economic system, feel that a linguistic feature such as *r*-fulness is a marker of social acceptability, they cultivate it so much that in self-conscious speech they actually use it more than the class they are modeling themselves on. That the hypercorrection is actually motivated by a stereotype of prestige and is not a chance phenomenon is strongly supported by evaluation tests in which hearers were asked to listen to recordings and to judge the acceptability of the speech patterns for certain kinds of jobs, such as salespeople in lower-class department stores versus salespeople in upper-class and exclusive stores. Invariably informants in New York rated *r*-ful utterances higher than *r*-less ones; if the same speaker had used [ka] in casual speech and [kar] in more formal speech and these two utterances had been spliced in one tape, they were taken to be by different speakers of different social status.⁹ A similar kind of test is one where people are asked to evaluate their own speech. Speakers almost always think they speak a more prestigious and consistent variety than they actually

do, and New Yorkers were sometimes quite shocked to hear that they actually used *r*-less forms, while not being at all shocked to hear that they used *r*-ful forms. In other cities, of course, one might find the reverse.

In language as in other fields of human activity, prestige is a complex factor. Our examples so far have shown prestige accruing to the highest socioeconomic class. However, prestige is ultimately a matter of allegiance, not of socioeconomic standing. Positive evaluation may therefore be assigned to features of any social class, given the right conditions. For example, male high school students in South Africa have been shown to evaluate lower-class forms relatively highly, associating them with virility and active life, while their female counterparts evaluate upper-class forms more highly.¹⁰ On Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts, Labov found linguistic evaluation correlated with lifestyle and values. Groups who associate themselves with mainland culture modify their speech toward upper-class mainland speech, but groups who wish to retain the older fishing culture of the island have adopted certain linguistic habits directly opposed to upper-class mainland English. For example, they have retracted their low diphthongs [ay] and [aw] to something approaching [ey] and [ew] (an archaic pronunciation).¹¹

"STANDARD ENGLISH"

What is a "standard" variety? Although most people have intuitive answers, there is often confusion about this question. One of the difficulties is that there are, broadly speaking, two views of what "standard" means, and they frequently get mixed up. One is the view that Standard English is the variety used in formal situations by educated people, especially those commanding local or national respect as leaders. That is, in one view, Standard English is defined descriptively on social and stylistic parameters. It is not conceived as an absolute, but as the appropriate variety for communication, whether spoken or written, in activities of social prestige. It is the variety, then, that is appropriate to a particular intersection of social class (educated, usually but not necessarily upper middle class), topic, style, and medium. Given this view, one could claim that there are a number of Standard Englishes, not only regional varieties such as British and American, but ethnic ones too. Indeed there is considerable evidence that a standard variety of Black English is developing, as used by congressmen, writers, radio and TV reporters, and especially teachers.¹² There is, however, another, very different view of Standard English, which is essentially "prescriptive" rather than descriptive, and which regards the standard as an absolute, as a thing apart, recognizable primarily through the written form of the language. This is the view of the standard as an ideal rather than as a norm, as the repository of refinement in the language, and as something that can be legislated upon. It underlies evaluation of the language of works to be published and of the acceptability of new vocabulary items into the language. In certain countries, such as France and Tanzania, it

underlies actual legislation by an academy whose sole or prime function is to pronounce judgment on style and lexicon. For those who hold the prescriptive view of Standard English, the written variety alone is usually considered standard, and the definition is therefore far narrower than for those who hold a descriptive view.

The two concepts of Standard English are largely traceable to the rise of the middle class in the eighteenth century. The upper classes felt threatened in urban communities, especially London, by the growing importance of the lower middle class and the rapid increase in their mobility. At the beginning of the eighteenth century we find grammars that were based on descriptions of the language spoken by educated people. These grammars were aimed primarily at "maintaining caste," that is, establishing for the upper classes a linguistic code based on their own behavior that would, along with moral and other codes, separate them from the threat of middle-class "upstarts." By the end of the eighteenth century, however, we find a new kind of grammar, primarily prescriptive, codifying the language of the upper classes as models or ideals for the social betterment of those with less social status. Such prescriptive grammars dominated thinking about language until this century, when linguists' insistence on the importance of description in analyzing language led to greater interest in the schools in descriptive approaches to English. The prescriptive idea is still markedly present in the average person's expectations of a dictionary—dictionaries are often regarded as Bibles, telling you what you ought to write or say, whereas in fact serious dictionaries simply record the current lexicon as used by educated people. It was the assumption that a dictionary ought to legislate that caused the widespread furor in the sixties over Webster's Third International Dictionary. Pains-takingly determined to record more than "educated," "standard" uses of the lexicon, the editors of this dictionary included certain regionalisms and colloquialisms, that is, forms unacceptable in written language, including ain't, with explicit indication of the region and style for which such forms were appropriate. But many readers were horrified and wrote outraged reviews.¹³

Another prescriptive approach with very wide currency holds that there is a "best" English, even a "pure" English. There is no intrinsically "best" English, although one can with full justification speak of the more appropriate or effective variety of a language for some particular type of communication. The prime function of standard varieties is public rather than private. Therefore standard language is most appropriate to relatively formal styles and genres, for media addressing large numbers of people, and especially for utterances intended to have some permanence (for example, those that appear in print). Other varieties better fit functions that are private or personal, and expressed in informal genres through impermanent media.

Prescriptive attitudes that regard the standard written language as the only "good" language or regard the language of the educated classes as the "best" language gave rise to the idea that varieties other than the standard were "substandard," in other words, inadequate, sloppy, even unsuitable for

logical thought. This, of course, is a judgment based on a feeling of social (even moral or genetic) superiority and on evaluation of different varieties for the same function. Since different varieties serve different functions, they cannot be judged fairly by one function alone. Linguists have insisted on the adequacy of different language varieties for their particular functions (they have, however, often been misunderstood as claiming the adequacy of any one variety for all functions, especially those of the standard, which is patently absurd). Clearly a language-user who does not know a standard variety is more limited than one who can use it as the verbal repertoire relevant to public communication and certain types of employment. On the other hand, language-users who know mainly the standard often lack the verbal repertoire relevant to other social activities of the community. "Verbal deficit," about which so much is said in the schools, is not used to refer to inability to use language in structured and effective ways in native settings, but rather to the inability to perform in expected ways in particular formal test situations. Nevertheless, one can say that the fewer linguistic options a speaker has command over, the less power that person has, unless he or she is a member of the standard language-speaking community. Rejection of the prescriptive notion of the standard has led to rejection of the term "substandard" and its replacement by "nonstandard." Less loaded than "substandard," "nonstandard" is still far from an ideal term, since it takes the standard as the norm.

The notion of an English "pure and undefiled" has no basis in the language itself, though it well serves the purpose of those who wish to establish a model for writing and of those who (often dangerously) attempt to equate language with social mores—an idea lurking behind many etiquette books. From the eighteenth century on, it has been traditional to imitate Dr. Johnson, who compiled the first modern dictionary, and to talk of the "decay" of language. As Dr. Johnson himself saw (though with regret), the language necessarily changes since each child has to make his or her hypotheses about the language and develop a grammar. Another reason for inevitability of change is that people change from one social group to another or interact with other groups and are necessarily influenced by those whom they talk to and especially those whom they try to emulate. The sense of decay is primarily due to the fact that the standard language is written as well as spoken, whereas other varieties are usually only spoken. Change in the written language is obviously far more easily perceived than in the spoken.

In both the descriptive and prescriptive sense, Standard English is clearly socially defined. That certain regional varieties such as London British English in England or Middle Western American English tend to become associated with the standard does not change the essential nature of the definition, since all such associations are correlated with the social importance of the region in question. Fundamentally, standard varieties serve a combination of unificational, prestige, and frame of reference (or code of correctness) functions. They tend to obliterate regional associations except of a gross kind

and in this sense are unificational. Designed for communication beyond the family, town, state, or even country, they can be learned by speakers of any class, and therefore, although rooted in upper-class language, can even obliterate social distinctions under certain circumstances, resulting in a group defined not so much by class but by education.

ETHNIC VARIETIES: BLACK ENGLISH

There is an enormous mix of ethnic groups in the United States and Great Britain. Members of any one ethnic group will probably speak a variety of English distinct from other varieties. Many speakers have as their native language a language other than English. Others, like Black Americans, speak as their native language varieties that originally derived from other languages in contact with English. Whatever the particular situation, there are gradients from ethnically distinct varieties of English to Standard English.

Because immigrating ethnic groups tend to settle in specific regions, for example, Swedes in Wisconsin, Germans in Pennsylvania, Cubans in Florida, and tend to have similar occupations, it is never possible to make clear distinctions between ethnic, regional, and above all socioeconomic varieties. Should Black English be considered an ethnic variety or a socioeconomic variety? In his extensive studies of speech patterns in New York, Philadelphia, and other urban areas, Labov has treated Black English primarily as a social variety (or rather group of varieties). This approach has led him to stress the view that Black English shows very few absolute differences from White English; the vast majority of differences are quantitative. For example, the speech of Blacks shows greater absence of word-final consonant clusters than the speech of Whites in the same socioeconomic group, but essentially no differences in type. This matter will be discussed further below. Other linguists have treated Black English primarily as an ethnic variety and have concentrated on its differences from White English.¹⁴ The two perspectives can be clearly correlated with different political and pedagogical attitudes. The social approach emphasizes unity, the ethnic approach suggests teaching promote separatism. Pedagogically, the first approach suggests teaching Standard English as another variety of English, socially more useful in a get-ahead society; the second suggests teaching Standard English as a language so different that it is really a second language. Both perspectives take a stand against traditional prejudices which had branded Black English as an inferior variety, lacking structure and logic and not suitable for complex or abstract communication.¹⁵ This prejudice had a particularly strong effect on pedagogy, leading to a policy that the job of schools was to obliterate Black English and replace it with Standard English in the verbal repertoire of Black speakers. The research of people like Labov refutes this view by demonstrating that

though very different in surface structure from Standard English, Black English is a logical and cohesive system, as highly structured as other, more standard varieties. In view of the fact that Black English refers to the type of language spoken by Black Americans in large urban areas, and of the fact that Black leaders, especially politicians and educators, are tending more and more to use a phonetically distinctive pronunciation (accent) when speaking Standard English, it appears appropriate to consider Black English as primarily an ethnic variety, but one that has been largely assimilated into the mainstream of English and that has strong correlatives with socioeconomic varieties in America.

Like other varieties of English, Black English is by no means monolithic. There is a gradation from varieties that are very different from Standard American English (hereafter abbreviated as SAE) to varieties that are very similar. Those that are very different are largely spoken by speakers in the lowest socioeconomic ranges; they are called Black English Vernacular (hereafter abbreviated as BEV), and are the main topic of most research on Black English.

As we have seen, the urban mix tends to wipe out strong regional features, but promotes social stratification. This stratification accounts for many of the characteristics of BEV, although certain features can be related to Southern American characteristics, and others to the historical origins of Black English, specifically the linguistic contact between African slaves in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries and British, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and other slave traders or plantation owners. This historical aspect of Black English will be explored briefly in Chapter 9. Here some of the major characteristics of BEV will be reviewed, with some indication of social and stylistic variations, and of characteristics shared with other varieties of English.¹⁶

Phonology

- (1) **Postvocalic r**: Many Black speakers, whatever their regional affiliations, do not have postvocalic **r** in words like **court** and **core**. This feature can readily be compared with East Midland and Southeastern British English and to Southern American English, but may also have its origins in the phonologies of West Africa. Lack of postvocalic **r** is also found in SAE in parts of the Northeast. Lack of postvocalic **r** is therefore not critical for BEV, although it may be distinctive in certain communities, such as Chicago, where White speakers use predominantly *r*-ful varieties.
- (2) **Use of [ɪn]**: The present participle is usually [ɪn], not [ɪn]. This is characteristic of most nonstandard varieties of English and of the rapid speech of some standard varieties. However, [ɪn] tends to be found more frequently in the speech of Black than White speakers in comparable regions or social groups.
- (3) **Lack of [θ] and [ð]**: SAE [θ] and [ð] tend not to occur in some varieties

of BEV in word-initial and word-final positions. Such varieties are to be found largely among speakers of the lowest socioeconomic ranks and in least formal situations. SAE [θ] corresponds to BEV [t] word-initially as in [tɪŋk] **think**, and to [f] word-finally and sometimes medially, as in [mawf], [nəfɪn] **mouth, nothing**. SAE [ð] corresponds to word-initial and occasionally final BEV [d], as in [deɪ] and [wid] **they** and **with**, and to word-medial [v] as in [brəvə] **brother**. Such correspondences are characteristic of contact languages —[θ] and [ð] are rare in the languages of the world; and speakers of languages without these interdentals, when in contact with English, tend to reinterpret them as the nearest alveolar stop, or as labiodental fricatives (New Yorkers of Italian origin often demonstrate similar features). However, similar correspondences can be found in the speech of many White Americans, not necessarily as the result of some other contact situation; for example, [v] is common for medial [ð] in the speech of many Whites in Kentucky.

(4) **Deletion of word-final [l]**: Often word-final [l] is deleted, so that **coal** is pronounced [ko]. Again, this is not a criterial feature of BEV. Word-final [l] is lost in various parts of England in contemporary English. During the history of the language it has been lost in many words preconsonantly, as is attested by spellings like **folk** and **talk**. Some regional dialects differ in the United States according to whether a speaker says [kalm] or [kam] for **calm**.

(5) **Reduction of word-final consonant clusters**: Reduction of word-final consonant clusters (as in **walks**) is a widespread phenomenon. It may be a universal of rapid speech, at least when a word ending with two consonants precedes another starting with a consonant (as in **wax seal** [wæks sil, wæksil]). The history of English has seen the reduction of many clusters both initially and finally. The difference between spelling and pronunciation reveals this clearly, since many clusters were reduced after the development of printing with its subsequent fossilization of the spelling system. Consider, for example, Middle English [wɪŋg] and Modern English [rɪŋ] **wring** or Middle English [lamb] and Modern English [læm] **lamb**. Sometimes the old consonant cluster remains in phonological alternations, such as [jəŋ-ɪŋgər] or in related words such as [məlaɪn-məlɪɡnt].

A characteristic of most word-final consonant cluster reductions is that both members of the cluster share the same feature of voicing—both are voiced, or both are voiceless. Most speakers of English have a rule of the type:

-C₁C₂ ⇒ -C₁

Condition: C₁ and C₂ are both voiced or both voiceless.

Rapid Speech.

Preferred in position preceding word with initial consonant.

BEV, however, has a much more general (i.e., less constrained) rule:

-C₁C₂ ⇒ -C₁

Condition: C₁ and C₂ are both voiced or both voiceless.

Some examples of correspondences are:

SAE	[old]	[maynd]	[end]	: BEV	[ol]	[mayn]	[en]
	[tɛst]	[wasp]	[lɛft]		[tɛs]	[was]	[lɛf]

but

SAE	[jəmp]	[kræŋk]	: BEV	[jəmp]	[kræŋk]
-----	--------	---------	-------	--------	---------

Where reduction of a cluster results in retention of a consonant that can itself be reduced, we will find even further modifications. Thus SAE [old] is BEV [ol] by consonant cluster reduction; [l] is in the appropriate position for [l] deletion, and we therefore find [o]. The rules operate systematically like any other rules. We can compare the SAE and BEV forms of **old man** and **old aunt** as follows, assuming rapid speech in both cases:

	SAE	BEV	SAE	BEV
Underlying form	[old mæn]	[old mæn]	[old ænt]	[old ænt]
Cons. Cl. Red.	ol	ol	ol	ol
[l] red.		o		
Surface form	[ol mæn]	[o mæn]	[old ænt]	[ol ænt]

([l]-reduction is disfavored in BEV before a word beginning with a vowel.)

Since the nominal and verbal inflections of English are largely realized by sibilants and alveolars that agree in voicing with the preceding consonant, this difference between BEV and other varieties of English makes BEV appear very different indeed in inflectional structure. This issue will be discussed further in the next section.

(6) **Pitch patterns:** Less extensively studied than the consonant and vowel patterns of BEV are the pitch patterns.¹⁷ These are, however, equally characteristic, and likewise involve questions of tendencies rather than absolute distinctions. In comparable speech situations, pitch contours of Black speakers tend to have a wider range than those used by White speakers. Frequent changes of pitch into high falsetto are characteristic, often indicating ingroup relatedness and friendship. In informal situations, sentences including statements end more often in level or rising contours than do sentences spoken by Whites. The fact that we are speaking here of informal situations is crucial. The tendency to use falling intonations even for yes-no questions seems to be

a feature of formal talk and may be a hypercorrection but is often interpreted as hostile by teachers. Believing that they use rising intonations too much, speakers may compensate by going too far in the opposite direction in not using them when talking to superiors, and say, for example:

2. You the teacher = "Are you the teacher?"

Intonational patterns play a very important semantic role. Logical connectors like **if** that are so often considered by teachers to be "missing" in BEV are in fact present in the form of intonational contours. Specifically, the subordinate clause often ends in a rise, where in White varieties it would end in a level contour or less of a rise:

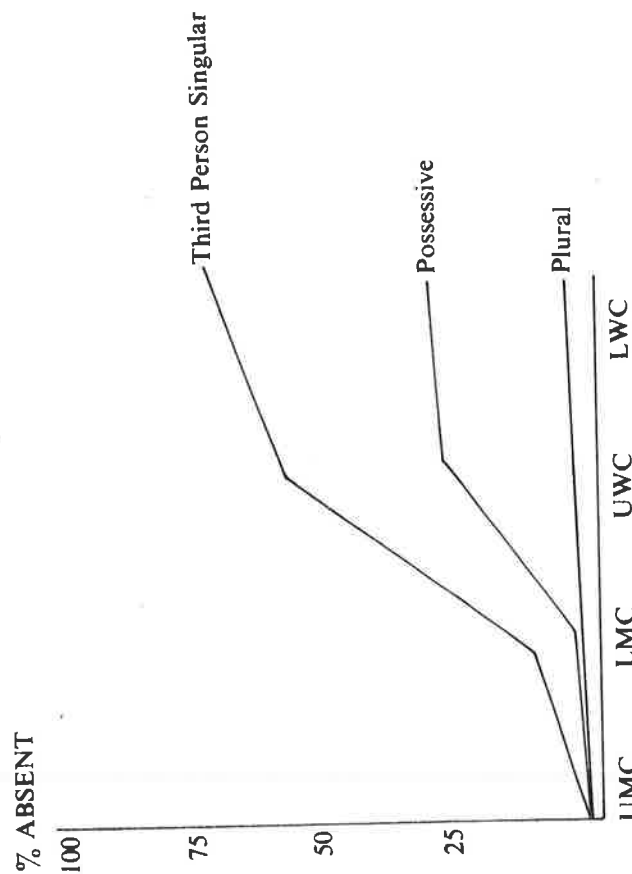
3. a. She wanted proof, I could give her proof.
b. She can do me some good, that's cool.

A possible reason for the prevalence of these intonational patterns is the high value set in Black culture on certain interactional genres such as verbal dueling and the call and response components of church services. Middle-class White culture tends to value topic oriented discourse—or at least that is what is most highly valued in school. It also values the written word very highly, a form notorious for its inadequacy in reflecting intonational patterns, and for necessitating substitutes for oral rises and falls in pitch. Although the same kinds of rising intonation patterns can be found in both Black and White speech, they are less highly favored in White speech and tend to be stigmatized, whereas in Black culture they are not.

Inflections

As indicated earlier in this chapter in the fifth part of the section on phonology, the surface absence of consonant clusters in word-final position is not just a phonological phenomenon. It has far-reaching consequences for inflections. For example, BEV [tu kæt] is equivalent to SAE [tu kæts] **two cats**, BEV [də dag leg] to SAE [ðə dagz legz] **the dog's legs**, and BEV [ʃi sit] to SAE [ʃi sɪts] **she sits**. Although final [s] and [z] both function as noun plural,

noun possessive, or third person singular present tense-markers, the likelihood of their being absent in surface structure depends on their function. Absence of all three [s, z] morphemes in the variety of BEV spoken in Detroit in an interview situation is noted in Figure 8-2.



ABSENCE OF THREE -s INFLECTIONS IN DETROIT BLACK ENGLISH¹⁸

Figure 8-2

Why is this? Since it is used only for the third person singular present (she walks, but I, you, we, they walk), the verb inflection -s really does not indicate tense so much as number in Standard English. But even here it is redundant. Number is normally a function of nominals and is not needed on the verb to communicate effectively. It appears that some speakers of BEV do not have the third person singular present tense inflection in underlying structure since they never express it. Others have a verb inflection that on first sight corresponds to the Standard English one, but it is used with all persons (e.g., I walks) and in fact functions as a present tense-marker, not a number-marker. For these speakers the inflection is sometimes present and sometimes not. In acquiring Standard English, they have to learn not only to use the form more frequently, but also to assign a different function to the inflection.

In the case of the possessive there is considerable redundancy too. Word order alone can indicate the relationship between a possessive and its head; this is common in Standard English compounds such as **table-legs**. The possessive relationship can also be expressed by alternate prepositional phrases such as the **legs of the table**. However, constructions like **taleteller** (where **tale** is the object) render possessive constructions potentially ambiguous in some contexts, and this may account for the greater use of possessive inflections than of third-person-singular-present-markers.

Finally, the plural of the noun is given surface manifestations more often than the other two inflections because, in the absence of quantifiers such as **many**, **some**, or **three**, nothing else indicates number. This explains why the plural-marker is usually absent when some other pluralizer, such as the quantifiers just mentioned, is present that would render the inflection redundant.

While some BEV speakers appear not to have the third person singular present inflection in underlying structure, all seem to have underlying noun possessive and plural, and also underlying past tense (realized as [t, d, əd], etc.). Evidence for this is the use of distinct plural, possessive, and past forms where vowel alternation is concerned (e.g., **man-men**, **ride-ride**) or where the inflection forms a whole syllable (e.g., **horse-horses**, **pit-pitted**). Particularly interesting are cases of nouns that have undergone consonant cluster reduction in the singular and then have [əz] added in BEV, where in SAE the plural would be [s], e.g., BEV [tes, tɛsɪz], equivalent to careful SAE speech [tɛst, tɛsts] (this is usually [tɛss] in less careful speech). The conclusion that we can draw is that BEV speakers learning SAE do not have to learn the possessive and plural noun inflections; what they do have to learn is that consonant cluster deletion should not apply except in rapid, casual speech.

Although past tense inflections are present in deep structure, certain very frequent verbs such as **come** and **say** are treated as invariant (i.e., the past-marker is $\emptyset$), as are **put**, **cut**, and similar verbs in SAE. Combined with the effect of consonant cluster deletion, this generalization of the $\emptyset$ past can give the casual observer the false impression that past tense is not expressed.

Syntax

(1) **Verbal auxiliaries:** One of the factors most characteristic of BEV is the system of verbal auxiliaries. Much has been written about them,¹⁹ but there are still some puzzles. Here we will mention only a few major points. Most interesting is the way in which time relations are expressed. In SAE only adverbs, not tense-markers, distinguish something that has happened a long time ago from something that has happened very recently. In BEV, however, the distinction can be made by auxiliary verbs. Thus there is a contrast between:

4. BEV He done gone. SAE He has recently gone.
5. BEV He bin gone. SAE He has been gone a long time.

Be (where signals stress) is currently disappearing, but *do* is widely used. Unlike **bin**, it has counterparts in White dialects, for example, Appalachian English.

Similarly, in SAE, adverbs like **right now** and **often** distinguish states of affairs that are momentary from those that recur at intervals. In some varieties of BEV, however, the first meaning is expressible by an inflected form of the verb **be** (e.g., **am**, **is**, **are**), while the second is expressible by an uninflected one. Since the latter **be** never changes according to person or number, it is often called "invariant **be**." Examples are:

- | | | | | |
|-------|-----|---------------|-----|--------------------------|
| 6. a. | BEV | She's tired. | SAE | She's tired (right now). |
| 7. a. | BEV | She be tired. | SAE | She's (often) tired. |

The invariant **be** is most often used in the context of adverbs like **sometimes**, **often**, **always**, and **whenever**, which clearly indicates its iterative nature, as in:

- | | |
|-------|-------------------------------------|
| 7. b. | Sometime she be angry. |
| c. | Whenever she be tired she be cross. |

but it is not limited to adverbial contexts.

There is another invariant **be** with quite a different function (that of expressing intention), as in:

- | | |
|-------|---------------------|
| 8. a. | He say he be going. |
|-------|---------------------|

This is derived from:

- | | |
|-------|--------------------------|
| 8. b. | He say he will be going. |
|-------|--------------------------|

Constructions of this type are also found extensively in White Southern speech, and so are others like **Be you George's son?** where **be** expresses identity. By contrast, invariant iterative **be** as in 7 is not common in White Southern speech. Indeed, many White speakers do not understand iterative **be** unless they know BEV well. The iterative **be** seems to have its origins in the pidgin and creole languages spoken by Black slaves in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and will be discussed further in the next chapter.

(2) **Absence of copula:** Another characteristic of BEV is that the inflected *be*-verb (frequently called a "copula") is not often present in surface structure if it signals present tense. The form **She's tired** given in 6a is somewhat formal. More often the form is:

- | | |
|-------|------------|
| 6. b. | She tired. |
|-------|------------|

especially in casual speech. As Labov has often pointed out, this "zero copula" occurs where phonologically reduced forms of inflectional **be** occur in SAE; thus:

- | | | | | |
|-------|-----|-------------------|-----|---------------------|
| 9. a. | BEV | She hungry. | SAE | She's hungry. |
| b. | BEV | I leaving. | SAE | I'm leaving. |
| c. | BEV | That where he is. | SAE | That's where he is. |
| d. | BEV | *That where he. | SAE | *That's where he's. |

This suggests that the BEV system essentially parallels the SAE system in this respect. But, because phonological reduction has been carried further, the form disappears in surface structure.

Zero copula in the present tense is actually quite common among the languages of the world. It is attested, for example, in Latin and Russian. In these languages and in BEV, the past tense form appears in surface structure, but often not the present. This is presumably because the present can be inferred from the speech situation, whereas the past cannot be inferred.

(3) **Use of *It's a*:** Another often mentioned feature of BEV syntax is that where SAE uses **There's a . . .** as a device for thematizing an indefinite NP in certain sentences with locatives, BEV tends to use **It's a . . .**, as in:

- | | |
|-----|----------------------------------|
| 10. | It's a boy in my room name John. |
|-----|----------------------------------|

Since it is usually pronounced [iss] (with "long s") this form in fact appears not to be understood as **it plus is**, but rather as a unit word the function of which is to shift indefinite nominals from initial position in the sentence.

(4) **Multiple negation:** Multiple negation, while characteristic of most non-standard varieties of English, is particularly common in BEV.²⁰ In other dialects, multiple negation is largely used for emphasis, as in:

- | | |
|-----|----------------------------------|
| 11. | Nobody don't like a boss hardly. |
|-----|----------------------------------|

For such speakers it is optional. However, for some speakers of BEV it is nonemphatic and obligatory. Multiple negation is so fundamental to BEV syntax that it can affect not only the main clause but even spread to subordinate ones:

- | | |
|-----|---|
| 12. | We ain't askin' you to go out and ask no pig to leave us alone. |
|-----|---|

It should be noted that in these two examples there is one underlying negative which spreads in surface structure to all indefinites (**some**, **ever**, and so forth). In effect, multiple negation is a kind of agreement rule; it is not fundamentally different from the rule (in languages like Russian) that requires adjectives to agree with the nouns they modify in number, gender, and case, or the English rule that requires the present tense verb to agree with the subject (**He walks**

but **They walk**). Those who proscribe multiple negation on the grounds that two negatives make an affirmative (just as two minuses make a plus in mathematics) are confusing surface structure with underlying function.

(5) Question transformation: The question transformation in BEV is for many speakers considerably simpler than in SAE. In yes-no questions there is frequently no auxiliary verb shift, and **He left?** rather than **Did he leave?** is typical. Yes-no questions indicated by intonation and not by word-order shifts are of course characteristic of spoken English of all varieties, therefore such question forms in BEV are notable only for their frequency. Content questions, too, tend to remain in the underlying Subject-Auxiliary-Verb order, with only the question word in initial position, as in **Where the white can is?** However, those speakers who do use auxiliary inversion in questions generalize it to subordinate as well as main clauses: **Where did he go? I want to know where did he go?** This, too, is a feature of casual spoken English in general.

Speech Acts

Certain kinds of speech acts may be associated with specific groups of people, not merely particular situations. For example, much reference has been made in recent linguistic studies to certain ritualized speech acts of Black speakers, especially ritual insults, known as "playing the dozens," "sounding," or "signifying." Ritual insulting is highly stylized and forms a significant part of the predominantly oral culture of the BEV speech community. It is a competitive game in which players make up elaborate obscenities with which to describe one another's relatives, especially the opponent's mother, for example:

Yo mama is so bowlegged, she looks like the bite out of a donut.²¹

Playing the dozens involves exchanging insults in a highly formulaic way. The pattern is almost invariably: Speaker A starts with **Your mother (Verb) ...** or **Your mother is like ...** Speaker B parries, trying to outdo A. Third parties present evaluate the game.

For example, here is an excerpt from a ritual insult exchange recorded in New York City:

- Boot:* His mother go to work without any draws on so that she c'd get a good breeze.
Money: Your mother go, your mother go work without anything on, just go naked.
David: That's a lie.
Boot: Your mother, when she go to work and she had—those, you know—open-toe shoes, well her stockings reach her be—sweeping the ground.

Ricky: (laughs)

Roger: Ho lawd! (laughs)

Money: Your mother have holes—potatoes in her shoes.

Boot: Your mother got a putty chest (laugh).

Money: Arrgh! Aww—you wish you had a putty chest, right?²²

Money loses his first turn because it is less funny than Boot's initiating turn; his loss is confirmed by David's **That's a lie**. Money loses again when he asks a question (**You wish you had a putty chest?**), instead of retorting with a more preposterous claim, and gives up with **Aww!**

As the example suggests, the dozens are well formed only if they are intended and understood to be impersonal, which is usually achieved by making claims so exaggerated as to be obviously false. Among members of a group who can assess the insult's referential truth value or lack of it, such speech acts are acts of friendly verbal dueling. As a ritual they are exempt from consequences other than approval for winning; however, between groups ill-acquainted with each other, they are inappropriate and often meant as (or taken as) acts of aggression, frequently provoking fights.

Age-Grading

All the characteristics we have been discussing here are socially graded, with the greatest differences from SAE being in evidence in the speech of the lower working class (cf. Figure 8-2). They are also heavily age-graded, with young children evidencing the greatest number of forms different from SAE. In particular, it is often noted that in any BEV speech community invariant **be** is used mainly by preteenagers. Comparative studies of the speech of Black and White children of the same class might show similar kinds of stratification, though probably with some statistical differences. Unfortunately, to date most of the acquisitional studies of Black children have focused on school-age children in ghetto communities, especially from the age of eight up, while acquisitional studies of White children have for the most part focused on the speech of preschool children and children up to the age of six, with little emphasis on social stratification. Therefore we know next to nothing about similarities and differences between age-graded social and ethnic groups.

ATTITUDES TO THE USE OF LANGUAGE VARIETIES IN LITERATURE

The extensive use of colloquialisms or of regional, social, or other varieties in literature to portray character or indicate social meanings is fairly recent. In the early periods of English literature, authors wrote mainly in their own

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