



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# Speech

BOX: REGIONAL AND CLASS-BASED SPEECH

### LINGUISTIC RELATIVISM

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### EDUCATION AND LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

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#### REGIONAL AND CLASS-BASED SPEECH

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Depending on where they live, North Americans have certain stereotypes about how people in other regions, and nations, talk. Some stereotypes, spread by the mass media, are more generalized than others. Most Americans think they can imitate a southern accent. They also have nationwide stereotypes about speech in New York City (the pronunciation of *coffee*, for example) and Boston (“I pahked the kah in Hahvahd Yahd”).

Many Americans also believe that midwesterners don’t have accents. This belief stems from the fact that midwestern dialects don’t have many stigmatized linguistic variants—speech patterns that people in other regions recognize and look down on, such as *r*-lessness and *dem*, *dese*, and *dere* (instead of *them*, *these*, and *there*).

Actually, regional patterns influence the way all Americans speak. Midwesterners do have detectable accents. College students from out of state easily recognize that their in-state classmates speak differently. In-state students, however, have difficulty hearing their own speech peculiarities because they are accustomed to them and view them as normal.

In Detroit-area high schools, sociolinguist Penelope Eckert, as described in her book *Jocks and Burnouts* (1989), studied variation in speech correlated with high school social categories. Eckert’s study revealed links between speech and social status, the local high school manifestation of a larger and underlying American social class system. Social variation showed up most clearly in the division of the high school population into two main categories—jocks and burnouts.

Along with teachers, administrators, and parents (particularly jock parents), jocks helped maintain the school's formal and traditional social structure. They participated more in athletics, student government, and organized school-based activities. In contrast, burnouts (a social label derived from their tendency to smoke cigarettes) had their main social networks in their neighborhoods. They took school social structure less seriously.

A comparable split exists in many American public high schools, although the specific names of the two categories vary from place to place. Jocks have also been called preppies or tweeds, and burnouts have been called freaks, greasers, hoods, and rednecks. No matter what the opposed groups have been called in different regions and at different times, the social division always correlates with linguistic differences. Many adult speech habits are set when people are teens, as adolescents copy the speech of people they like and admire. Because jocks and burnouts move in different social systems, they come to talk differently.

The first step in a sociolinguistic study is to determine which speech forms vary. In New York City, the pronunciation of *r* varies systematically with social class and thus can be used in studies of sociolinguistic variation. However, this feature doesn't vary much among midwesterners, most of whom are adamant *r* pronouncers. However, vowel pronunciation does vary considerably among midwesterners and can be used in a sociolinguistic study.

Far from having no accents, midwesterners, even in the same high school, demonstrate sociolinguistic variation. Furthermore, dialect differences in Michigan are immediately obvious to people from other parts of the country. One of the best examples of variable vowel pronunciation is the /e/ phoneme, which occurs in words like *ten*, *rent*, *French*, *section*, *lecture*, *effect*, *best*, and *test*. In southeastern Michigan there are four different ways of pronouncing this phoneme. Speakers of black English and immigrants from Appalachia often pronounce *ten* as "tin," just as southerners habitually do. Some Michiganders say "ten," the correct pronunciation in standard English. However, two other pronunciations are more common. Instead of "ten," many Michiganders say "tan" or "tun" (as though they were using the word *ton*, a unit of weight).

Kottak's Michigan students often astound him with their pronunciations. One day he met one of his Michigan-raised teaching assistants in the hall. She was deliriously happy. When Kottak asked why, she replied, "I've just had the best suction."

"What?" Kottak queried.

"I've just had a wonderful suction," she repeated.

"What?" He still wasn't understanding.

She finally spoke more precisely. "I've just had the best saction." She considered this a clearer pronunciation of the word *section*.

Another TA once complimented Kottak, "You luctured to great effuct today." After an exam a student lamented that she hadn't been able to do her "bust on the tust." Once Kottak lectured about uniformity in fast-food

restaurant chains. One of his students had just vacationed in Hawaii, where, she told him, hamburger prices were higher than they were on the mainland. It was, she said, because of the runt. Who, Kottak wondered, was this runt? The very puny owner of Honolulu's McDonald's franchise? Perhaps he advertised on television, "Come have a hamburger with the runt." Eventually Kottak figured out that she was talking about the high cost of *rent* on those densely packed islands. ☺

## LINGUISTIC RELATIVISM

Just as there are no documented differences in brain complexity among contemporary human populations, no one has ever shown the *intrinsic* superiority of any language or dialect over another. The doctrine of **linguistic relativism** recognizes all known languages and dialects as effective means of communication. This doctrine contradicts popular beliefs and stereotypes. Many French people, for example, believe theirs is the only appropriate language for civilized conversation (and they are eager to ban foreign word *contamination* from their mass media). Many British and North Americans assert the superiority of English as a commercial language. (It is true that the vocabularies of particular languages do grow and develop as they are used repeatedly in particular contexts. However, any language used in a given context can undergo such a process of growth and differentiation, sometimes by borrowing foreign terms, sometimes by elaborating its own.)

Claims of intrinsic *linguistic* superiority are actually based on *cultural* rather than linguistic developments. The use of language in particular contexts reflects world politics and economics rather than inherent properties of the language itself. In creating and imposing a nation-state, and thereafter a world empire, the French spread their culture through their language. They asserted to the provinces they attached and the people they conquered that they were engaged in a civilizing mission. They came to equate the French language with civilization itself.

The contemporary use and distribution of a language reflect factors other than features of the language itself. One language spoken in China has more native speakers than English does not because it is a better language but because the population that speaks it has multiplied as a result of non-linguistic factors. English is the native language of British people, North Americans, Australians, New Zealanders, and many South Africans because of English colonization and conquest. The success of this colonization and conquest had nothing to do with the language itself. Weapons, ships, commerce, and sociopolitical organization played decisive roles.

Between 2,000 and 3,000 years ago a western African (proto-Bantu) population lived in a small area of what is now Nigeria and Cameroon. Today the linguistic descendants of the proto-Bantu language cover most of central and southern Africa. Speakers of Bantu did not expand because their languages

were superior as means of communication. Rather, they grew, prospered, and spread because they developed a highly competitive cultural adaptation based on iron tools and weapons and very productive food crops.

No language or dialect can confer, by virtue of its purely linguistic qualities, a differential advantage on its speakers. Only the social evaluation of its speakers and, by extension, of the language itself can do this. Languages are flexible and constantly changing systems. They easily admit and adopt new items and new terms. Speakers modify old forms, borrow foreign words, and create entirely new expressions. This process is so usual and constant that some nations, such as France, maintain agencies to safeguard the purity of the standard language and discourage its contamination by foreign words.

### SOCIOLINGUISTICS: THE STUDY OF LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

Actually, no language is a homogeneous system in which everyone speaks just as everyone else does. One reason for variation is geography, as in regional dialects and accents. The field of **sociolinguistics** investigates language in its social context, examining relationships between social and linguistic variation. Examples of linguistic variation associated with social divisions include the bilingualism of ethnic groups and speech patterns associated with particular social classes. To show that linguistic features correlate systematically with social, economic, and regional differences, the social attributes of speakers must be measured and related to speech (Labov 1972a).

As an illustration of the linguistic diversity encountered in all nation-states, consider contemporary North America. Besides English and French, Canada includes the languages of its First Nations (Native Americans) and many immigrants. Mexicans speak Indian languages as well as Spanish. In the United States, reflecting ethnic diversity, millions of Americans learn first languages other than English. Spanish is the most common. Most of these people eventually become bilingual, adding English as a second language. In many multilingual (including colonized) nations, people use two languages on different occasions—one in the home, for example, and the other on the job or in public.

Whether bilingual or not, we all vary our speech in different contexts; that is, we engage in **style shifts**. In certain parts of Europe, people regularly switch dialects. This phenomenon, known as **diglossia**, applies to “high” and “low” variants of the same language, for example, German and Flemish (spoken in Belgium). People use the high variant at universities and in writing, professions, and the mass media. They use the low variant for ordinary conversation with family members and friends.

Just as social situations influence speech, so do geographical, cultural, and socioeconomic differences. Many dialects coexist in the United States



Reflecting cultural and ethnic diversity, millions of Americans learn first languages other than English. Yet global linguistic richness is being reduced as people abandon their native languages for dominant and national languages. Shown here, an Apache woman transmits her ancestral language and culture to her grandchildren in Whiteriver, Arizona.

and Canada with Standard (American or Canadian) English (SE). SE itself is a dialect that differs, say, from BBC English, which is the preferred dialect in Great Britain. All dialects are effective as systems of communication, which is the main job of language. Our tendency to think of particular dialects as better or worse than others is a social rather than a linguistic judgment. We rank certain speech patterns because we recognize that they are used by groups that we also rank. People who say *dese*, *dem*, and *dere* instead of *these*, *them*, and *there* communicate perfectly well with anyone who recognizes that the *d* sound systematically replaces the *th* sound in their speech. However, this form of speech has become stigmatized, an indicator of low social rank. We call it, like the use of *ain't*, “uneducated speech.” The use of *dem*, *dese*, and *dere* is one of many phonological differences that Americans recognize and look down on.

### Gender Speech Contrasts

Women’s speech tends to be more similar to the standard dialect than men’s is. Consider the data in Table 15–1, gathered in Detroit. In all social classes, but particularly in the working class, men were more apt to use double negatives (e.g., “I don’t want none”). Women are more careful about “uneducated

**TABLE 15-1. Multiple Negation (“I Don’t Want None”)***According to Gender and Class (In percentages)*

	Upper-Middle Class	Lower-Middle Class	Upper-Working Class	Lower-Working Class
Male	6.3	32.4	40.0	90.1
Female	0.0	1.4	35.6	58.9

Source: From *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society* by Peter Trudgill (London: Pelican Books, 1974, revised edition 1983), p. 85. Reproduced by permission of Penguin Books Ltd.

speech.” This trend shows up in both the United States and England. Men may adopt working-class speech because they associate it with hard labor and thus with masculinity. Perhaps women pay more attention to the mass media, where standard dialects tend to be employed. Also, women may compensate for the socioeconomic barriers they have faced by copying the linguistic norms of upper-status groups.

According to Robin Lakoff (1975) and Deborah Tannen (1990), the use of certain types of words and expressions has reflected women’s lesser power in American society. For example, “Oh dear,” “Oh fudge,” and “Goodness!” are less forceful than “Hell,” “Damn,” and many stronger expressions. Men’s customary use of forceful words reflects their traditional public power and presence. Watch the lips of a disgruntled athlete in a televised competition, such as a football game. What’s the likelihood he’s saying “Phooey on you”? Men can’t normally use certain “women’s words” (*adorable, charming, sweet, cute, lovely, divine*) without raising doubts about their masculinity.

In certain domains, such as sports and color terminology, men and women have different sorts of vocabularies. Men typically know more terms related to sports, make more distinctions among them (e.g., runs versus points), and try to use the terms more precisely than women do. Correspondingly, influenced more by the fashion and cosmetics industries than men are, women use more color terms and attempt to use them more specifically than men do. Thus, to make this point when lecturing on sociolinguistics, Kottak brings an off-purple shirt to class. Holding it up, he first asks women to say aloud what color the shirt is. The women rarely answer with a uniform voice, as they try to distinguish the actual shade (mauve, lavender, wisteria, or some other purplish hue). He then asks the men, who consistently answer as one, “Purple.” Rare is the man who on the spur of the moment can imagine the difference between fuchsia and magenta.

Another gender contrast noted by Lakoff (1975), which she links to linguistic insecurity, is women’s greater tendency to end a declarative sentence with the intonation of a question? The gender difference even shows up in cyberspace communication. Using expletives or beginning a message with the salutation “Dude” suggests male identity. And female use of cyberspace sometimes shows some of the sociolinguistic insecurity that has been noted

in other contexts (Lakoff 1975; Tannen 1990). From postings we have read we suspect that women are more likely to end their messages with disclaimers, such as “But that’s just my opinion,” whereas men choose the more emphatic IMHO (in my humble opinion) to express the same sentiment.

Language is our principal means of communicating, but it isn’t the only one we use. We communicate whenever we transmit information about ourselves to others and receive such information from them. Our facial expressions, bodily stances, gestures, and movements, even if unconscious, convey information and are part of our communication styles. Deborah Tannen (1990, 1993) discusses differences in the communication styles of American men and women, and her comments go beyond language. She notes that girls and women tend to look directly at each other when they talk, whereas boys and men do not. Males are more likely to look straight ahead rather than to turn and make eye contact with someone, especially another man, seated beside them. Also, in conversational groups, men tend to relax and sprawl out. Women may adopt a similar relaxed posture in all-female groups, but when they are with men they tend to draw in their limbs and adopt a tighter stance.

Tannen (1990, 1993) uses the terms “rapport” and “report” to contrast women’s and men’s overall linguistic styles. Women, says Tannen, typically use language and the body movements that accompany it to build rapport, social connections with others. Men, on the other hand, tend to make reports, reciting information that serves to establish a place for themselves in a hierarchy, as they also attempt to determine the relative ranks of their conversation mates.

Interestingly, the rise of a service economy may be helping to mainstream feminine speech styles. In a study of telephone call-center operators in Great Britain, Cameron (2000) found a particular speech style to be the norm in customer service settings. This speech style emphasized affect, caring, empathy, accommodation, and sincerity—characteristics associated with the speech of women. Men working in customer service settings were also trained to use this communication style. Cameron notes that “the commodification of language in contemporary service workplaces is also in some sense the commodification of a quasi-feminine service persona” (2000, 324).

### **Stratification and Symbolic Domination**

We use and evaluate speech—and language changes—in the context of extralinguistic forces—social, political, and economic. Mainstream Americans evaluate the speech of low-status groups negatively, calling it uneducated. This is not because these ways of speaking are bad in themselves but because they have come to symbolize low status. Consider variation in the pronunciation of *r*. In some parts of the United States *r* is regularly pronounced, and in other (*r*-less) areas it is not. Originally, American *r*-less speech was modeled on the fashionable speech of England. Because of its prestige, *r*-lessness was adopted in many areas and continues as the norm around Boston and in the South.



*Language may be our main way of communicating, but it isn't the only one we use. Our facial expressions, bodily stances, gestures, and movements, even if unconscious, convey information and are part of our communication styles. What differences do you notice among these telemarketers? Do you think those differences are linked specifically to gender?*

New Yorkers sought prestige by dropping their *r*'s in the 19th century, after having pronounced them in the 18th. However, contemporary New Yorkers are going back to the 18th-century pattern of pronouncing *r*'s. What matters, and what governs linguistic change, is not the reverberation of a good strong midwestern *r*, but social evaluation, whether *r*'s happen to be in or out.

Studies of *r* pronunciation in New York City have clarified the social mechanisms of phonological change. William Labov (1972b) focused on whether *r* was pronounced after vowels in such words as *car*, *floor*, *card*, and *fourth*. To get data on how this linguistic variation correlated with social class, he used a series of rapid encounters with employees in three New York City department stores, each of whose prices and locations attracted a different socioeconomic group. Saks Fifth Avenue (68 encounters) catered to the upper-middle-class, Macy's (125) attracted middle-class shoppers, and S. Klein's (71) had predominantly lower-middle-class and working-class customers. The class origins of salespeople in those stores tended to reflect those of their respective clients.

Having already determined that a certain department was on the fourth floor, Labov approached ground-floor salespeople and asked where that department was. After the salesperson had answered, "Fourth floor," Labov

repeated his “Where?” in order to get a second response. The second reply was more formal and emphatic, the salesperson presumably thinking that Labov hadn’t heard or understood the first answer. For each salesperson, therefore, Labov had two samples of *r* pronunciation in two words.

He calculated the percentages of workers who pronounced *r* at least once during the interview. These were 62 percent at Saks, 51 percent at Macy’s, but only 20 percent at S. Klein’s. Labov also found that personnel on upper floors, where he asked, “What floor is this?” (and where more expensive items were sold), pronounced *r* more often than ground-floor salespeople did.

In Labov’s study, *r* pronunciation was clearly associated with prestige. Certainly the job interviewers who had hired the salespeople never actually counted *r*’s before offering employment. However, they did use speech evaluations to make judgments about how effective certain people would be in selling particular kinds of merchandise. In other words, they practiced sociolinguistic discrimination, using linguistic features in deciding who got certain jobs.

In stratified societies, our speech habits help determine our access to employment, material resources, and positions of power and prestige. Because of this, “proper language” itself becomes a strategic resource—and a path to wealth, fame, and power (Gal 1989). Illustrating this, many ethnographers have described the importance of verbal skill and oratory in local-level politics (Bloch 1975). A “great communicator,” Ronald Reagan, dominated American society in the 1980s as a two-term president. Another twice-elected president, Bill Clinton, despite his southern accent, was known for his verbal skills in certain contexts (e.g., televised debates and town-hall meetings). Communications flaws may have helped doom the presidencies of Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and George H. W. Bush (“Couldn’t do that; wouldn’t be prudent”).

The French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu views linguistic practices as *symbolic capital* that properly trained people may convert into economic and social capital. The value of a dialect—its standing in a “linguistic market”—depends on the extent to which it provides access to desired positions in the labor market. In turn, this reflects its legitimation by formal institutions—the educational establishment, state, church, and prestige media. In stratified societies, where there is always differential control of prestige speech, even people who don’t use the prestige dialect accept its authority and correctness, its “symbolic domination” (Bourdieu 1982, 1984). Thus, linguistic forms, which lack power in themselves, take on the power of the groups and relations they symbolize. The education system, however (defending its own worth), denies this, misrepresenting prestige speech as being inherently better. The linguistic insecurity of lower-class and minority speakers is a result of this symbolic domination.

Research indicates that Americans can infer race and class from speech patterns (accents, grammar, and diction). Americans may use such information to discriminate. Real estate and rental agents, who may discriminate

against people of color on sight, also ascribe to prospective tenants a race or class category on the phone and discriminate accordingly. Phone tag and voice mail provide the means for “racial screening,” protecting the racist landlord from any discomfort or inconvenience that would arise in a face-to-face rejection (Massey and Lundy 2001, 454–455). Telephone audit studies provide one measure of racial discrimination in urban housing markets. One such study of 79 rental units in Philadelphia showed that rental agents do systematically discriminate against African-American callers on the basis of speech. Researchers called rental agents to inquire about apartments listed in the local papers, using one of three linguistic styles: white middle-class English, black accented English, and Black English Vernacular.

Speech marks race, class, and gender, and speech influenced a caller’s likelihood of reaching a rental agent and of obtaining a rental unit. Compared to whites, African Americans were less likely to get through and speak to a rental agent, less likely to be told of a unit’s availability, more likely to pay application fees, and more likely to be questioned about their credit history. The findings indicate that the combination of being black and female limits access to housing even more. The callers who were black, female, and lower-income (signified by speaking BEV) were the most disadvantaged in securing housing (Massey and Lundy 2001, 467).

### **Black English Vernacular (BEV), a.k.a. “Ebonics”**

No one pays much attention when someone says “runt” instead of “rent”—an example of linguistic variation given at the start of this chapter. But some nonstandard speech carries more of a stigma. Sometimes stigmatized speech is linked to region, class, or educational background; sometimes it is associated with ethnicity or “race.”

A national debate involving language, race, and education was triggered by a vote on December 18, 1996, by the Oakland, California, school board. The board unanimously declared that many black students did not speak standard English but instead spoke a distinct language called “ebonics” (from “ebony” and “phonics”), with roots in western African languages. The poet Maya Angelou, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, and spokespersons for the Clinton administration soon disputed this claim. Indeed, professional linguists do regard ebonics as a dialect of English rather than a separate language. Linguists call ebonics Black English Vernacular (BEV) or African-American English Vernacular (AAEV).

Some saw the Oakland resolution as a ploy designed to permit the school district to increase its access to federal funds available for bilingual programs for Hispanic and Asian students. According to federal law, BEV is not a separate language eligible for Title 7 funds. Funds for bilingual education (itself a controversial issue, especially in California politics) have been available to support the educations of immigrant students (Golden 1997). Some educators have argued that similar support should be available to blacks. If ebonics were accepted as a foreign language, teachers could

receive merit pay for studying BEV and for using their knowledge of it in their lessons (Applebome 1996).

Early in 1997, responding to the widespread negative reaction to its original resolution, the Oakland educational task force proposed a new resolution. This one required only the recognition of language differences among black students, in order to improve their proficiency in English. School officials emphasized that they had never intended to teach black students in ebonics. They had just sought to employ some of the same tools used with students brought up speaking a foreign language to help black students improve their English-language skills. The Oakland school board planned to expand its 10-year-old pilot program for black students, which taught the phonetic and grammatical differences between Standard English and what the students spoke outside the classroom (Golden 1997).

While recognizing ebonics as a dialect of American English rather than as a separate language, most linguists see nothing wrong with the Oakland schools' goal of understanding the speech patterns of black students and respecting that speech while teaching standard English. Indeed, this is policy and teaching strategy in many American school districts. The Linguistic Society of America (LSA) considers ebonics or Black English Vernacular to be "systematic and rule-governed" (Applebome 1997).

BEV is not an ungrammatical hodgepodge but a complex linguistic system with its own rules, which linguists have described. The phonology and syntax of BEV are similar to those of southern dialects. This reflects generations of contact between southern whites and blacks, with mutual influence on each other's speech patterns. Many features that distinguish BEV from Standard English (SE) also show up in southern white speech, but less often than in BEV.

Linguists disagree about exactly how BEV originated (Rickford 1999). Smitherman (1986) calls it an Africanized form of English reflecting both an African heritage and the conditions of servitude in America. She notes certain structural similarities between West African languages and BEV. Their African linguistic backgrounds no doubt influenced how early African Americans learned English. Did they restructure English to fit African linguistic patterns? Or did they quickly learn English from whites, with little continuing influence from the African linguistic heritage? Another possibility is that English was fused with African languages to form a pidgin or Creole language in Africa or the Caribbean. This Creole might then have been brought to the American colonies by the many slaves who were imported from the Caribbean during the 17th and 18th centuries (Rickford 1999; Rickford and Rickford 2000).

Origins aside, there are phonological and grammatical differences between ebonics and SE. One phonological difference is that BEV speakers are less likely to pronounce *r* than SE speakers are. Actually, many SE speakers don't pronounce *r*'s that come right before a consonant (*card*) or at the end of a word (*car*). But SE speakers do usually pronounce an *r* that comes right before a vowel, either at the end of a word (*four o'clock*) or

within a word (*Carol*). BEV speakers, by contrast, are much more likely to omit such intervocalic (between vowels) *r*'s. The result is that speakers of the two dialects have different *homonyms* (words that sound the same but have different meanings). BEV speakers who don't pronounce intervocalic *r*'s have the following homonyms: Carol/Cal; Paris/pass. BEV's phonological rules also dictate that certain word-final consonants, such as *r*'s, *d*'s and the *s* in *he's*, be dropped.

Observing these phonological rules, BEV speakers pronounce certain words differently from SE pronunciation. Particularly in the elementary school context, where the furor over ebonics has raged, the homonyms of BEV-speaking students typically differ from those of their SE-speaking teachers. To evaluate reading accuracy, teachers should determine whether students are recognizing the different meanings of such BEV homonyms as *passed*, *past*, and *pass*. Teachers need to make sure students understand what they are reading, which is probably more important than whether they are pronouncing words correctly according to the SE norm.

Phonological rules may lead BEV speakers to omit *ed* as a past-tense marker and *s* as a marker of plurality. However, other speech contexts demonstrate that BEV speakers do understand the difference between past and present verbs, and between singular and plural nouns. Confirming this are irregular verbs (e.g., *tell*, *told*) and irregular plurals (e.g., *child*, *children*), in which BEV works the same as SE.

The phonological contrasts between BEV and SE speakers often have grammatical consequences. One of these is **copula deletion**, which means the absence of SE forms of the copula—the verb *to be*. For example, SE and BEV may contrast as follows:

SE	SE Contraction	BEV
You are tired	You're tired	You tired
He is tired	He's tired	He tired
We are tired	We're tired	We tired
They are tired	They're tired	They tired

In its deletion of the present tense of the verb *to be*, BEV is similar to many languages, including Russian, Hungarian, and Hebrew. BEV's copula deletion is simply a grammatical result of its phonological rules. Notice that BEV deletes the copula where SE has contractions. BEV's phonological rules dictate that *r*'s (as in *you're*, *we're*, and *they're*) and word-final *s*'s (as in *he's*) be dropped. However, BEV speakers do pronounce *m*, so that the BEV first-person singular is "I'm tired," just as in SE. Thus, when BEV omits the copula, it merely carries contraction one step further, as a result of its phonological rules.

BEV, like SE, is a rule-governed dialect. SE is not superior to BEV as a linguistic system, but it does happen to be the prestige dialect—the one used in the mass media, in writing, and in most public and professional contexts.

SE is the dialect that has the most “symbolic capital.” In areas of Germany where there is diglossia, speakers of Plattdeutsch (Low German) learn the High German dialect to communicate appropriately in the national context. Similarly, upwardly mobile BEV-speaking students learn SE.

Note that most of the speech forms we use every day are not learned from remote experience (such as the mass media) but within our own personal social networks, particularly from peers. Speech responds to primary influences—real people who make a difference in your life, such as supervisors, co-workers, and classmates. Urban ghetto existence tends to isolate blacks from whites. Many black children have never talked to white children before entering school. Despite the use of SE on radio and television, American dialect variance is actually growing, not just between blacks and whites but also between whites in different cities. Dialect divergence may have the effect of “locking” blacks out of “important networks that lead to jobs, housing, and basic rights and privileges” (J. Williams 1985, 10).

Although BEV is diverging from SE, the dialects are still close. This means that teachers in multiethnic classrooms should know something about the phonology and grammar of both dialects if they are to teach successfully. Schoolteachers should be able to help BEV-speaking students learn SE by showing them exactly how the standard dialect differs in phonology and syntax from BEV.

Many Americans who spoke regional and ethnic dialects as children have learned to shift their linguistic styles. Since BEV is a bit more different from SE than other American English dialects are, mastery of the prestige dialect requires more effort. If learning and teaching SE are to be goals of blacks and whites within our educational system, school personnel need linguistic knowledge and sensitivity. Otherwise, as Labov notes, “We’re in danger of forming a permanent underclass [of ghetto blacks]” (Quoted in J. Williams, 1985, 10).

## EDUCATION AND LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

Knowledge of linguistic differences is important in a multicultural society whose populace grows up speaking many languages and dialects. Because linguistic differences may affect children’s schoolwork and teachers’ evaluations, many schools of education now require courses in sociolinguistics. Also, sociolinguists and cultural anthropologists have worked side by side in education research, for example, in a study of Puerto Rican seventh graders in the urban Midwest (Hill-Burnett 1978). Researching in classrooms, neighborhoods, and homes, anthropologists discovered several misconceptions by teachers. For example, the teachers had mistakenly assumed that Puerto Rican parents valued education less than other parents did. In-depth interviews revealed that the Puerto Rican parents valued it more.

Researchers also found that certain practices were preventing Hispanics from being adequately educated. For example, the teachers' union and the Board of Education had agreed to teach English as a foreign language. However, they had not provided bilingual teachers to work with Spanish-speaking students. The school started assigning all students (including non-Hispanics) with low reading scores and behavior problems to the English-as-a-foreign-language classroom.

This educational disaster brought together a teacher who spoke no Spanish, children who barely spoke English, and a group of English-speaking students with reading and behavior problems. The Spanish speakers fell further behind not just in reading but in all subjects. They could at least have kept up in the other subjects if a Spanish speaker had been teaching them science, social studies, and math until they were ready for English-language instruction in those areas.

The researchers also found that Anglo-Americans and Hispanics reacted differently to humor and teasing. Many Hispanic youths believed that teachers' kidding comments went too far. They heard the remarks as insults and slurs rather than as jokes. The Hispanics who adapted most successfully were those who had learned the general American norm about kidding, so that teachers' attempts at humor didn't damage their self-esteem.

A dramatic illustration of the relevance of sociolinguistics to education comes from Ann Arbor, Michigan. In 1979 the parents of several black students at the predominantly white Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Elementary School sued the Board of Education. They claimed their children faced linguistic discrimination in the classroom. The children, who lived in a neighborhood housing project, spoke BEV at home. At school, most had encountered problems with their class work. Some had been labeled learning-impaired and placed in remedial reading courses. (Consider the embarrassment that children may suffer and the potential impact on self-image of such labeling.)

The African-American parents and their attorney contended that their children had no intrinsic learning disabilities but simply did not understand everything their teachers said. Nor did their teachers always understand them. The lawyer argued that because BEV and SE are so similar, teachers often misinterpreted a child's correct pronunciation (in BEV) of an SE word as a reading error. The children's attorney recruited several linguists to testify on their behalf. The school board, by contrast, could not find a single qualified linguist to support its argument that there was no linguistic discrimination.

The judge ruled in favor of the children and ordered the following solution: Teachers at the King School had to attend a full-year course designed to improve their knowledge of nonstandard dialects, particularly BEV. The judge did not advocate that the teachers learn to speak BEV or that the children be allowed to do their assignments in BEV. Nor did he find BEV to be a foreign language, as some of the champions of ebonics claim it to be. In the Ann Arbor case, the school's goal remained to teach the children to use SE,

the standard dialect, correctly. Before this could be accomplished, however, teachers and students alike had to learn how to recognize the differences between these similar dialects. At the end of the year most of the teachers interviewed in the local newspaper said the course had helped them.

Awareness programs focusing on linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity require unusual sensitivity. One program intended to enhance teachers' appreciation of cultural differences led instead to ethnic stereotyping (Kleinfeld 1975). Specifically, Native American students did not welcome teachers' frequent comments about their Indian heritage. The students felt set apart from their classmates and saw this attention to their ethnicity as patronizing and demeaning.

In a diverse, multicultural society, teachers (and citizens in general) do need to be sensitive to and knowledgeable about linguistic and cultural differences, and children need to be protected so that their ethnic or linguistic background isn't used against them.