Languages and dialects

- What's a dialect of a language?
- Dialects of English:
  - Scots / Scottish English
  - African American Vernacular English
  - Cockney
- A distinctive way of speaking

One view of dialects

- Corrupt, debased form of “proper” language
- “Bad grammar”
  - “We be workin'? Everyone knows a verb has to agree with its subject”
  - “Norf London? You can't say [θ]?”
  - “Dinna say dinna aw the time!”

No basis in reality

- Every language variety has rules
- No sense in saying one variety is “debased” or “bad” compared to another.
- The utterances of someone speaking AAVE or Scots are just as rule-governed as someone speaking Standard English
- People who don't speak these dialects can get them wrong

An excruciating example

"'Sup?" the cabbie said.
"No, thanks," I said. After pigging out over Christmas, I was trying to cut back on my caloric intake. "Besides," I pointed out, "it looks to me like you've only got half a filet of fish and what's left of a small order of fries."

"What you be talkin' 'bout, my man?" he said. "I don't be offerin' you my grub; I be sayin' hello. You know, like, what's up?"


Just plain wrong AAVE

- Raspberry was writing to satirize a move to use AAVE ('Ebonics') in some instructional contexts in schools in Oakland CA.
- Raspberry is African American, but doesn't speak AAVE.
- His attempt at AAVE is wrong. It would never be produced by an AAVE speaker
- AAVE has rules that must be followed – it's not just 'bad English'
What mistakes?

“What you be talkin' 'bout, my man?” he said. "I don't be offerin' you my grub; I be sayin' hello.”

- Be marks habitual aspect.
- She dancin "She is dancing"
- She be dancin "She dances regularly"
- What you be talkin’ 'bout?, I don't be offerin' you my grub, I be sayin' hello — wrong

- The right forms are What you talkin 'bout? (with no copula are) and I'm sayin hello (WITH a copula 'm)
- Rules for first person and second person are different!

(For more details on Language Log: http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~mey/languagelog/archives/000937.html)

A linguist's definition of 'dialect'

- “Bad grammar” can't have anything to do with it.
- So what is a dialect?
- Two speech varieties can be said to be dialects (of some standard) if they are mutually intelligible – if the speakers of the two varieties can understand one another.

Political definitions

- Hindi and Urdu are “separate languages”, yet are mutually intelligible. Linguists will talk of “Hindi-Urdu” as one variety.
- Mandarin and Cantonese are “dialects of Chinese”, but are not mutually intelligible. Linguists treat them separately.

Quite clearly dialects of English

- Western Massachusetts English
- Scottish (Standard) English
- Canadian English
- South African (Standard) English
- ...

Getting less clear

- AAVE?
- “Broad” varieties of Scots?
  - A'm awfu fashed wi yon chiel works doon the broc, A doot he's aw chuffed tae be the gaffer noo but A kent his faither, ken?
- Shetlandic?

Even the linguist’s definition has problems

- Where mutual intelligibility starts is not always clear
- You can clearly define two ends of a continuum as separate (e.g. Spanish and French)
- But there's a gray area in-between
- We won't worry about this too much, though
How do dialects arise?

- Languages change all the time.
- If changes happen in one place but don’t happen in another, you get geographical distinctions in varieties e.g. dialects.
- If this happens enough, you get undeniably separate languages.

Minor examples

- Scots never lost Old English /x/ (but now is losing it, at least among young working-class speakers)
  - It’s a braw bricht nicht the nicht
- Middle English changed the sound in mouse from [u:] to [aw], but Scots didn’t
  - There’s a moose loose aboot this hoose!

Big examples: Romance

- French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Romansch (Switzerland), Romanian: all divergent from Latin and originally “dialects”
- French amour [amuː], Sp. amor [amor], It. amore [amore] < all from Lat. amor ‘love’
- Romanian dragoste – borrowed from Slavic

How do languages standardize?

- What determines which dialect of a language becomes the standard (i.e. prestige variety?)
- Looking at what varieties are the standard gives us a clue...
  - England: City of London speech.
  - Scotland: Edinburgh speech.
  - France: Parisian speech.

Political and economic power

- Centers of political and economic power provide the standard language.
  - Publishing based there
  - Educational standards set there
  - Generally the language of the most successful people – nothing succeeds like success

Spread of the standard

- Once the standard is established, it spreads in various ways
- Indirect economic pressure: a desire to speak like the successful people
- But also very direct political and educational pressures
Nation-building through language

- In pre-Revolutionary France, very many “dialects” spoken (Occitan, Provençal, Corsican, Catalan, …)
- And also some languages unrelated or only very distantly related to French (Basque, Breton, Alsatian)

Post-Revolutionary France:

- “Report on the necessity and means of annihilating the patois and universalizing the use of the French language” (Abbé Grégoire)
- More in keeping with the ideals of the Republic and the unity of the French nation if everyone speaks the same language (which obviously should be Parisian French)

“Annihilating” local varieties

- Education and public policy beats local varieties out of people (sometimes literally)
- Government provides service only in standard variety/language
- Shaming of schoolchildren speaking the local variety

The “Welsh not”

- Primary education in Wales, mid-1800s
- A sign passed around anyone heard speaking Welsh
- Student wearing it at the end of the day was beaten

Modern-day

- Things have improved for speakers of languages which are clearly “different”
- Welsh, Gaelic, Breton taught in schools
- But things that are closer to “dialects” still stigmatized, although you don’t get beaten any more
- Scots, Provençal, AAVE

Promoting the status of “dialects”

- Lately some things that were derided as “dialects” have been given more respect as “languages”
- Shining example: Catalan, derided under Franco regime, now main language of Catalonia
But attitudes are ingrained

- The Scottish Parliament put together an informational booklet in Scots “Makkin yer voice heard in the Scottish Parliament”
- Can you guess what happened next?

Why so harsh?

- Popular perception of dialects being “bad grammar”, “spelt phonetically” etc.
- After years of being told “not to speak like that”, this perception will tend to stick around
- Also might easily be seen as “political correctness”

Do they have a point?

- Things like that leaflet may well be a waste of taxpayers' money.
- No-one is literate in Scots who isn't literate in English.
- But one would hope the debate could be held in informed terms rather than using terms like “slang”, “spelt phonetically” etc.

Shitstorm!

- “A joke? Certainly. What a waste of taxpayers' money”
- “It's a common in-joke among the Scottish to respell phonetically, as it becomes near-incomprehensible”
- “They purport to be in ‘Scots’, a kind of patois (oh, linguists, go easy on me)”

Should people not learn the standard?

- Certainly they should!
- No contradiction between learning the standard and holding on to one's “home variety” (be that Scots or AAVE or whatever)
- The problem comes when those varieties are stigmatized as “bad grammar”, an allegation which doesn't make sense.

The take-home messages

- So-called “dialects” are not inherently less logical or grammatical than standard languages. Just different.
- What language becomes a “standard” is a social, political, economic phenomenon.
- Non-standard dialects engender really strong feelings: shame (but also sometimes local pride) among those who speak them, often contempt among those who speak the standard.