

What is more common in language uniformity or variability?

According to Milroy there is **no such thing** as a perfectly stable human language because languages are changing all the time. Therefore, logically, variability is much more common than uniformity. Uniformity is only found in Standardized languages that have been normalized.

What kinds of variability exist?

Geographical: different geographical varieties or dialects. Accents.

Social variability including gender, age, occupation

Linguistic variability depending on register:

Register: is a result of differences in the social situation of use (word choices, syntactic ordering of utterances). Is socially motivated and it is defined by the circumstance and purpose of the communicative situation. It has three dimensions:

-field social setting

-tenor refers to the relations between the participants in the event

-mode the medium of the communication

Style: the variation within register that represents individual choices along social dimensions.

Variables that depend on one's health or emotional state. Pronouncing /dəʊ/ instead of /nəʊ/ when we have a cold, for example.

How do we decide if a particular group of speakers belong to a particular dialect or language?

We can decide by seeing if a particular person's grammar and pronunciation are shared with other people. If we are looking at languages coming from completely different language groups, it is quite easy, for example, Spanish and Chinese. However, if two linguistic systems are very similar such as the case of Valencian/Catalan, it can be very difficult. It is so difficult, in fact, that it is impossible to decide if a person belongs to a particular dialect or language as the difference between dialect and language is not just based on linguistics but on politics, economics, sociological factors, etc.

For further information see the Hudson document

Saussure emphasized the importance of synchronic descriptions of languages rather than diachronic. He and his disciples (structuralists)

focused on language at different periods as finite entities. Is this reasonable?

Not really. Languages are in a constant state of flux (change) so pretending that there are finite states that can be studied in isolation from those coming before and after is not realistic.

The unattested states of language were seen as transitional stages in which the structure of a language was, as it were, disturbed. This made linguistic change look abnormal. Is it abnormal?

This view is ideological as change is seen as somehow being an abnormal state of affairs. It is not. Change is the norm. A language which does not change is a romantic view of language. I use the word *romantic* in its political sense. As we do not have complete records of the history of the language, there are bound to be unattested states of the language.

Milroy (1992: 3) says “the equation of uniformity with structuredness or regularity is most evident in popular (non-professional) attitudes to language: one variety – usually a standard language – is considered to be correct and regular, and others – usually ‘non-standard’ dialects – are thought to be incorrect, irregular, ungrammatical and deviant. Furthermore, linguistic changes in progress are commonly perceived as ‘errors’. Thus although everyone knows that language is variable, many people believe that invariance is nonetheless to be desired, and professional scholars of language have not been immune to the consequences of these same beliefs.”

Can you think of any example of non-professional attitudes to your own language?

First of all, an attitude is an opinion that is not based on fact. For example, I can say that I like the Irish accent and that I don't like the RP accent or that the New York accent is ugly and the Scottish accent is beautiful. These are opinions. However, in linguistics, feelings should not be included in our description of a language. So any attitude to language that is not based on facts or data is non-professional.

Why does Milroy use “scare quotes” around *non-standard* and *errors*?

The use of scare quotes shows that Milroy either disagrees with the concept of “errors” or that he wants to show us that the word “errors” should be attributed to someone else.

Are *non-standard* dialects “incorrect, irregular, ungrammatical and deviant”?

No, they are not. It is ridiculous to say that “me se cayó” is incorrect, irregular, ungrammatical and deviant. It is just a non-standard way of saying “me se cayó”. *Testa* is the standard Italian word for *head*. However, originally it was actually the word for something like plantpot (*maceta*). Maybe in the future, *chola* will replace the word *cabeza*. *Wyf*, as we have seen, meant “woman”. Now it means a married woman. We saw in the case of the reflexive pronouns in English that the non-standard forms are more regular than the standard forms.

“... much of the change generally accepted body of knowledge on which theories of change are based depends on quite narrow interpretations of written data and decontextualized citation forms (whether written or spoken), rather than on observation of spoken language in context (situated speech). (Milroy 1992: 5) Why do you think this is so?

This was because nearly all the information about the history of English is written. This influenced the way the theories on the history of the language. The tape recorder is a recent invention and so only recently has it been possible to study the spoken language. (See Labov video) Now that we have been able to study actual spoken language we have had to question some of the fundamental ideas in diachronic linguistics.

Any description of a language involves norms? Think of the descriptions of your own language. Why is this so? For example: *He ate the pie already* is considered to be non-standard in which variety of English and perfectly acceptable in which other?

He ate the pie already is the norm in American English. In British English we say *He has already eaten the pie*. Neither is intrinsically better than the other. There are norms in Spanish and Catalan too, of course. However, this does not mean that non-normative varieties of the language are “worse”.

What is the difference between descriptive and prescriptive grammars?

Descriptive grammar (definition #1) refers to the structure of a language as it is actually used by speakers and writers. **Prescriptive grammar** (definition #2) refers to the structure of a language as certain people think it *should* be used.

Both kinds of grammar are concerned with rules--but in different ways. Specialists in descriptive grammar (called *linguists*) study the rules or patterns that underlie our use of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences. On the other hand, prescriptive grammarians (such as most editors and teachers) lay out rules about what they believe to be the “correct” or “incorrect” use of language.

* <http://grammar.about.com/od/basicssentencegrammar/a/grammarintro.htm>

Weinreich, Labov and Herzog’s (1968) *empirical foundations of language change*:

Constraints: what changes are possible and what are not

Embedding: how change spreads from a central point through a speech community

Evaluation: social responses to language change (prestige overt and covert attitudes to language, linguistic stereotyping and notions on correctness).

Transition: “the intervening stages which can be observed, or which must be posited, between any two forms of a language defined for a language community at different times” Weinreich, Labov and Herzog 1968: 101)

Actuation: Why particular changes take place at a particular time.

The above are pretty self-explanatory so I will only explain the ones that might not be.

Constraints: There are linguistic constraints. For example, in English there are no consonant clusters (groups) made up of the following sequence /rbl/ so is difficult to foresee such a cluster existing in English. The solidarity constraint is completely different. It means that if you live in a very close community, you tend to follow the norms of your community in solidarity with its members.

Evaluation: Many people wish to adopt prestige forms of the language –perhaps an RP pronunciation instead of their own pronunciation of English. That is overt prestige. Covert prestige refers to people who adopt non-standard forms to belong to belong to a group.

Transition: See my Bunyan example in the answers to the questions on sound change.

What do you think the “prestige motivation for change” and the “solidarity constraint” mean? How are they opposed?

Some varieties of language are more prestigious than others. These prestigious varieties can influence less prestigious varieties which usually incorporate some features in order to become more prestigious. For example: the use of post-vocalic /r/ in New York.

Solidarity constraint requires the speaker to conform to local community norms rather than to norms that are viewed as external.

It means that for example in the case of Belfast vernacular, the pronunciation of /ei/ was not motivated by the prestige. Prestige refers to the external norms, while solidarity constraint refers to internal norms (of the community). With the advent of radio and television, many people thought that everyone would adopt a standard accent and grammar. However, in cities like Liverpool and Newcastle there has been no weakening in the use of the local accents. Many people are proud of their accent –it is part of their identity.

So prestige factors and solidarity factors are pulling in opposite directions.

Sound change: post-vocalic /r/ in New York/ The change from long ā to ō in some dialects of English.

The post-vocalic /r/ is the norm in American English. New York English, is like RP in that there is no post-vocalic /r/. However, whereas post-vocalic /r/ is prestigious in the USA, no post-vocalic /r/ is the prestigious form in England. Many New Yorkers are adopting post-vocalic /r/ so that their speech will be more prestigious. Long ā changed to ō in southern dialects of British English. So *stān* became *stōn* in the South but not in Scotland, for example.

Actuation: Why did /k/ palatalize before certain front vowels? PrsE: *cheese*, German *käse* English/Norse doublets *shirt/skirt*?

According to Milroy one condition could be that the proximity of the velar consonant to a front vowel may be necessary for the palatalization, but it is not a sufficient condition. He says that social conditions must be favorable, which means we must take into account the activities of speakers in social contexts in addition to the internal structural properties of language

What is the biological metaphor in language change?

Language is seen as a living organism. This contrasts with those, like Milroy, who stress that it is people, not languages, which bring about change. A language is not a living thing.

What is the difference between internal and external histories of a language?

Internal histories of the language put the emphasis on change within the language whereas external histories of the language put the emphasis on borrowing from foreign languages. I like to keep a balance between the two. There is, for example, a lot of internal influence of Cockney on RP.

Look up *Neogrammarians* and *lexical diffusion*. Why are they often found in the same paragraph or chapter?

Because the opponents of the Neogrammarians say that sounds change through *lexical diffusion* and do not happen throughout the whole language system.

Look up *social norm-enforcement*, *childish errors* and *slips of the tongue*. What have they to do with language change?

Childish errors and slips of the tongue might be causes of innovation and eventually of change. Social norm-enforcement normally makes it less difficult for innovations to take hold.