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University of Tikrit

College of Education for Humanities

Department of English

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Ethnicity and Social Networks

Submitted to
Prof. Ahmed Mohammed Salih
(Ph.D.)

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Introduction

When people belong to the same group, they often speak similarly. But there are many different groups in a community, and so any individual may share linguistic features with a range of other speakers. Some features index a person's social status; others may vary in frequency in the speech of women and men or identify a person as a teenager rather than a middle-aged citizen. There are also linguistic clues to a person's ethnicity and closely related to all these are linguistic features which are responsive to social pressure from those we interact with most frequently, our social networks. Individuals draw on all these resources when they construct their social identities. This chapter illustrates the relevance of ethnicity and social networks in accounting for people's speech patterns, as well as briefly introducing a related concept, the community of practice.

Ethnicity

Example 1 When I was in Montreal, I found a small restaurant in the old French quarter where the menu looked affordable and attractive. I was greeted in French by the waiter and I responded in French, though my accent clearly signalled that I was a native English speaker. At this point, the waiter, who was undoubtedly bilingual, had a choice. He chose to continue in French and, though I cannot be sure of his reasons, I interpreted this choice as expressing his wish to be identified as a French Canadian. In any case, I was very happy that my French had not been so awful that he felt he had to switch to English.

Many ethnic groups use a distinctive language associated with their ethnic identity, as demonstrated in the examples discussed in the first section of this book, as well as in example 1 above. Where a choice of language is available for communication, it is often possible for an individual to signal their ethnicity by the language they choose to use. Even when a complete conversation in an ethnic language is not possible, people may use short phrases, verbal fillers or linguistic tags, which signal ethnicity. So interactions which appear to be in English, for example, may incorporate linguistic signals of the speakers' ethnic

identity, as illustrated in example 2.

Example 2

Lee: *Kia ora* June. Where you been? Not seen you round for a while.

June: *Kia ora*. I've just come back from my Nanny's *tangi* [FUNERAL]. Been up in Rotorua for a week.

Lee: *E kī* [IS THAT SO!] a sad time for you, *e hoa* [MY FRIEND] and for all your family, *ne* [ISN'T IT].

June: *Ae* [YES]. We'll all miss Nanny. She was a wonderful woman.

In New Zealand many Maori people routinely use Maori greetings such as *kia ora* , and a con versation between two Maori people may include emphatic phrases, such as *e kï* , softening tags such as *ne* , and responses such as *ae*, even when neither speaks the Maori language fluently. Bargaining with Chinese retailers in the shopping centres, Chinese Singaporeans similarly often signal their ethnic background with linguistic tags, such as the untranslatable but expressive *la*, and phrases or words from their ethnic language. Emphasising common ethnicity may mean they get a better bargain!

The dominant language of the society, an important symbol of their distinct ethnicity – their language – often disappears. Italians in Sydney and New York, African Americans and Hispanics in Chicago, Indians, Pakistanis and Jamaicans in London are in this situation.

Ethnic groups often respond to this situation by using the majority language in a way which signals and actively constructs their ethnic identity. For groups where there are no identifying physical features to distinguish them from others in the society, these distinctive linguistic features may be an important remaining symbol of ethnicity once their ethnic language has disappeared. Food, religion, dress and a distinctive speech style are all ways that ethnic minorities may use to distinguish themselves from the majority group.

African American Vernacular English

In the USA, though their distinct languages disappeared centuries ago, African Americans do not need a distinct variety or code as a symbolic way of differentiating themselves from the majority group. They are visibly different. Nevertheless, this group has developed a distinct variety of English known as African American Vernacular English (I will use the abbreviation AAVE). This dialect has a number of features which do not occur in standard mainstream US English, and others which occur very much less frequently in the standard variety. These linguistic differences act as symbols of ethnicity. They express the sense of cultural distinctiveness of many African Americans.

One of its most distinctive features is the complete absence of the copula verb be in some social and linguistic contexts. In most speech contexts, speakers of standard English use shortened or reduced forms of the verb *be*

Example 4

African American Vernacular English	US Standard English
She very nice	She's very nice
He a teacher	He's a teacher
That my book	That's my book
The beer warm	The beer's warm

Another distinctive grammatical feature of AAVE is the use of invariant *be* to signal recurring or repeated actions, as in example 5.

Example 5

African American Vernacular English	US Standard English
She be at school on weekdays	She's always at school on weekdays

Multiple negation examples are examined, for instance, as a feature of the English of many lower socio-economic groups. It is also a feature of AAVE.

British black English

In Britain, the way different ethnic minorities speak English is often equally distinctive. The English of those who speak minority languages such as Gujerati, Panjabi and Turkish generally signals their ethnic background. And people of West Indian or African Caribbean origin use a range of varieties, depending on where they live in England, and how long their families have lived in Britain. Those born in Britain are usually described as members of the British Black community and some speak a variety of Jamaican Creole as well as a variety of English. Others speak a range of varieties of English with different frequencies of creole features depending on the social context and who they are talking to. The variety of Jamaican Creole still used by some British Blacks is known as Patois or British Jamaican Creole. London Jamaican, for instance, is the London variety of Patois. It derives from

Jamaican Creole, but it has a number of features which distinguish it from the Jamaican variety.

Example 6

Polly is a young British Black teenager who lives in the West Midlands. Her parents came to Britain from Jamaica in 1963 looking for jobs. Though Polly's mother had a good education in Jamaica, the only work she was able to find in Dudley was cleaning offices at night. Polly's father used to work in a factory, but he was laid off and has been unemployed for nearly two years now. They live in a predominantly Black neighbourhood and almost all Polly's friends are young Black people. She and her parents attend the local Pentecostal church. Her older brother used to attend too, but he has stopped since he left school.

Polly's verbal repertoire includes standard English spoken with a West Midlands accent, an informal variety of English with some Patois features, which could be described as Midlands Black English, and Patois, the variety of Jamaican Creole used by Black people in Dudley in the 1980s. Polly's patterns of language use

are not simple. While her parents use Patois or British Jamaican Creole to her and her brother, she is expected to use English in response. At home she uses Midlands Black English, but she uses a more standard variety to her teachers at the college where she is doing a hairdressing course. With some friends she uses a variety called 'chatting Patois' which has a small number of creole features. With other friends who like her can speak Patois, she uses full-blown Patois. In most shops, she uses standard English with the local accent, unless she knows the young Black person behind the counter, in which case she might use Midlands Black English.

There are a number of linguistic features which characterise Patois. It is a creole and as such it is quite distinct from standard English. There are lexical items such as *lick* meaning 'hit' and *kenge* meaning 'weak, puny'. There are many features of pronunciation, including stress and intonation patterns, which differ from those of standard English. The vowel sound in a word like *home* is sometimes pronounced as in Jamaican Creole, rather than as in the local variety of English. Words like *then* and *thin* are pronounced [den] and [tin]. Plural forms don't have *s* on the end. Tenses aren't marked by suffixes on verbs, so forms like *walk* and *jump* are used rather than *walked*, *walks*, jumped and *jumps*. The form mi is used for *I*, *me* and *my* (e.g. mi niem for 'my name') and the form dem is used for they, them and their (e.g. dem niem). Not surprisingly, given the patterns we have found elsewhere, some speakers use more of these features than others. Midlands Black English uses some of these features too, together with a distinctively Midlands accent of English.

Maori English

In New Zealand there has been considerable discussion about whether a Maori dialect of English exists. Many people assert firmly that there is such a variety, but there is little evidence so far of linguistic features which occur only in the speech of Maori people. The alternation between [d] and [e] at the beginning of words like the and then, for instance, is by no means confined to the speech of Maori people. Greetings like *kia ora* and vocabulary items like *tangi* ('funeral'), illustrated in example 2 above, are used by Pakeha (New Zealanders of European origin) as well as Maori in New Zealand. However, in general, Maori people use Maori words more frequently in their speech than Pakeha people do. The word *kuia* in. Kuia is a Maori word meaning 'old woman', which is widely known in New Zealand. Nevertheless, its occurrence in the child's story suggests the speaker is more likely to be Maori than Pakeha. There are also grammatical features which occur more frequently in Maori people's speech. In a study of 8-year-old children's speech, vernacular verb forms (such as walk for walked) occurred more often in the speech of the Maori children than the Pakeha. There were also some distinctive uses of verbs, such as went and, which seemed to be used as a narrative past tense marker by the Maori children.

Reference

- Swann, J., Deumert, A., Lillis, T., & Mesthrie, R. (Eds.). (2004). *The Routledge companion to sociolinguistics*. Routledge.