

Practice Unit 11

1. Classify the following instances of variable or non-standard use according to (a) their regional spread (specific versus general) and (b) their degree of linguistic stigmatisation (high or low). A reference work which will prove extremely helpful for this task is Kortmann and Schneider's 2004 *Handbook of Varieties of English*.

I don't know nothing about that.

If you're honest, it don't matter whether you're rich or poor.

I don't know where I've putten the bloody receipt.

I'll be afraid as long as they haven't caught the bloke what done it.

Come quick! We need a doctor.

He's the type that only works good under pressure.

Read this. That'll stop you asking any more silly questions.

Is you is my baby or is you ain't?

He's gonna wanna talk to you again about it, I'm sure.

Them youngsters had it coming for some time.

2. Consult the *Atlas of North American English* by Labov, Ash and Boberg (2006). What does this atlas tell you about the occurrence of post-vocalic /r/ in present-day American English?

As a dialect atlas, this work primarily covers regional variation in American English. Which groups of speakers/types of linguistic variation are excluded from coverage?

3. Explain the conflicting pressures of overt and covert linguistic prestige alluded to in the following personalised column from the London *Sunday Times*:

Many years ago my then future (now ex) husband used to reduce me to near-hysterics whenever we took a taxi back to his house. As soon as we neared home, he'd lean forward, slide open the glass partition, and tell the cab driver: "There's a li'el slip road just dahn on the right, mate, alrigh? Cheers." Then he'd shut the partition, lean back, adjust the collar on his Prada coat, and, in his normal voice, say something like: "That claret at supper was utterly divine."

This happened most nights. He'd laugh, too, but he still continued addressing cabbies in his pretend accent. The husband wasn't - isn't - a braying Hooray of the incurable kind (I know someone who goes to "marse" every Sunday) and, with time, his of-the-people accent became pretty convincing, to the point where he now marches around Hackney, east London, speaking like a native whenever the mood takes him. It works beautifully until some enterprising market stallholder asks him if went to school local.

I used to think this was terribly funny until I started doing it myself. Put me on Radio 4 and I speak normally. Stick me in a taxi and my natural

accent completely disappears. Take me to a smart restaurant and I'm Lady Bracknell; take me down the market and naturally, without thinking twice, I'll ask the stallholder: "Are you avin' a laugh?" when he tries to overcharge.

Like some schizoid chameleon, I alter my accent to match that of my interlocutor - but only if said interlocutor speaks, for want of a better phrase, like a Kevin. And there's an expression you don't hear very often any more, because political correctness has sprung to the rescue of every single kind of accent. Except mine.

The only accent it is now actively all right to pillory is the so-called "posh" - the clear enunciation that comes from being privately educated or having upper-middle class parents. Mention the amazing ugliness of the Birmingham accent, for instance, and some bien pensant type will reproachfully inform you that it's a wonderful accent, actually, and that it's terribly important to maintain this kind of regional linguistic diversity (which it is). Make a joke about speaking like Tim Nice-but-Dim, on the other hand, and everybody will laugh like drains at the absurdity of public school voices. Why? Why is received pronunciation invalid and every other accent imaginable not so?

Speaking properly - because no matter how unfashionable it is to say it, I speak properly and many of the people I meet do not - has become comical.

(India Knight, "Speak proper? Not likely," *Sunday Times* 11 Nov. 2001)

4. Explain the conflict pressures of overt and covert linguistic prestige apparent in the following two statements by African-American informants:

"It pisses me off when the Oreos - they be trying to correct your language, and I be like, 'Get away from me! Did I ask you to - correct?! No! No! No, I didn't! Nuh-uh!"

("Fabiola", teenager)

"I do think it's - it makes a difference, because in our day an' time, if you don't use your English as near right, people kinda look at you as if, 'Oh, I don't want her in - on my job, to speaking' dis way or in my kitchen, around' my childrens, you know, so I think it does make a difference how you speak [...]"

I have to try, you know, I guess. I - I tries to put the words right, the verbs and things, I try my best to - take my time if I - especially if I'm - speaking' to someone tha's is - uh- educated, you know."

("Penelope Johnson", cleaner, in her fifties)

(quoted from: Rickford, John R. 1992. "Grammatical Variation and divergence in Vernacular Black English", in: Gerritsen, Marinel & Dieter Stein (eds.). *Internal and external factors in syntactic change*. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter. 175-200.)

Comment on the non-standard linguistic features used by both speakers. How are they related to the image which is being projected?

5. Consider the following three texts, which each in its own way deal with the linguistic situation of the Latino minority in the U.S. The first is from a sociological treatise, the second from the autobiography of a reformed gang member, and the third a poem by a New York-based Puerto Rican (= "Nuyorican") writer:

(1) "For native-born Mexican Americans, the ethnic community is made up of Mexican Americans who have selectively acculturated and interact with Anglos, as well as other Mexican Americans. However, the content and degree of interethnic interaction is governed by time and place and reflects a situational ethnicity. At times, some of our respondents are Mexican Americans, part of the larger society, knowledgeable about American culture and interacting with the mainstream population. At other times, the same respondents are American Mexicans, carrying on traditional culture, taking pride in their heritage, and tied intimately to others of similar ethnicity. At still other times, they are Chicanos, practicing new and emergent cultural patterns and sustaining an ethnic community set apart from both Anglos and recent immigrant Mexicans." (Keefe/ Padilla 1987: 190)

(2) "But the kicker was when Mrs. Baez returned the newly-typed versions of my writing; I couldn't believe I had anything to do with it. The shape of the words, the forms and fragments of sentences and syllables, seemed alien, as if done by another's hand. The fact was I didn't know anything about literature. I had fallen through the chasm between two languages. The Spanish had been beaten out of me in the early years of school - and I didn't learn English very well either.

This was the predicament of many Chicanos.

We could almost be called incommunicable, except we remained lucid; we got over what we felt, sensed and understood. Sometimes we rearranged words, created new meanings and structures - even a new vocabulary.

Often our everyday talk blazed with poetry.

Our expressive powers were strong and vibrant. If this could be nurtured, if the language skills could be developed on top of this, we could learn to break through any communication barrier. We needed to obtain victories in language, built on an infrastructure of self-worth." (Luis Rodriguez, *Always Running*, p. 219)

(3) Miguel Algarín ("Nuyorican", 1975)

my NUYORICAN being
my eagle knife caution
filled mind reads your neon
signs AQUI YOUR CREDITO ES GOOD
and I feel sad that in school,
we're forced to reach for standards
do you know what I mean?
standards like
STANDARD ENGLISH

STANDARD SPANISH

but meanwhile your
neon signs tell the real truth:
you are bilingual Puerto Rico
you are NUYORICAN on
your own home soil.
your schools scold me for illiteracy
while your Cuban/ American bankers
sell me the island in spanglish.