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# UNIT 1 LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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Language is used primarily to communicate with other people, that is, language is used in society. There is a close relationship between language and society.

In this unit we shall discuss the following dimensions of language in society:

- Language is not a static entity but subject to variation
- This variation could be due to:

**Social Factors** such as geographical location, socioeconomic status, caste, ethnic group, and so on.

**Personal factors** such as sex and age.

**Context of the situation** such as topic of conversation, relationship between participants, and mode of communication

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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As teachers teaching in English, sometimes we feel that one of our important jobs is to correct the students' spoken and written English. In other words, we have in our minds a standard English variety, against which we judge the students' responses.

But when you go back home or even listen to other teachers in the staff room, you will notice that not only do they speak different languages, but they speak the same language in different ways from you.

For instance, if you and your neighbours are Hindi mother tongue speakers, you can talk to one another and understand each other quite easily. Yet, you must be aware that you do not speak exactly like your neighbours. A young neighbour (say a teenager) would probably use a lot more slang than you, a particular lady may have a very ‘correct’ pronunciation. Another neighbour is a ‘purist’ and insists on speaking a sanskritized variety of Hindi. These unique characteristics of a speaker are referred to as the speaker’s idiolect. In fact, we are often able to recognize different individuals by their distinct speech and language patterns (i.e. idiolect), and indeed this is a fundamental feature of self-identity. However, *beyond these individual differences, the language of a group of people may show regular variations from that used by other groups of speakers of the same language. For example, the Hindi spoken by people living in Benaras is systematically different from the Hindi spoken in Delhi and Aligarh. These groups of people are, therefore, said to speak different dialects of the same language.*

*The systematic or dialectal differences may be due to social factors, regional separation (as above), class, caste, and ethnic group and so on. The linguistic differences could also be due to personal-social factors such as sex and age. The context of the situation could also lead to a different variety of the language being used.*

In this unit, we shall make you aware of these broad social factors which lead to linguistic diversity. We shall also dwell on the question of a standard variety. These factors will enable you to understand that language is a social phenomenon, dynamic and changing, and not a static goal which we all have to achieve.

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## 1.2 REGIONAL VARIATION

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If we travel from one place to another in a particular direction, we notice linguistic differences, say, from one village to another. When the areas are close to each other, the differences will be relatively small. However, the further we get from our starting point, the larger the differences will become from that point.

For instance, take the case of Hindi spoken in different parts of India. We can find differences at the level of sounds, as well as vocabulary and grammar.

We give you some examples of Khari Boli (Hindi of Delhi) and Bhojpuri (Hindi of Eastern U.P.)

Differences at the level of sounds		
English	Khari Doli	Bhojpuri
‘boy’	ladka	larika/laika
‘fish’	machali	machari
‘fire’	aag	aagi
‘to take’	lena	leb

Differences at the level of words		
English	Khari Doli	Bhojpuri
'tree'	per	gaach
'meat'	Illaas s	egoti
'gram'	chana	bhut
'foot'	paer	god
'light'	praliash	anjor

If we look at the situation in Andhra Pradesh, the dialect spoken in Telangana contains a lot of Hindi-Urdu words which are absent in other areas.

Lets broaden our canvas a little, and consider the native varieties of English. We will notice that there are several differences between British, American and Australian English, not only at the phonological and lexical level, but also at the syntactic level, which is most resistant to change.

### Morphosyntactic forms

Present	British English Past and Past Participle	American English Past and Past Participle
burn	burnt	burned
dwell	dwelt	dwelled
spill	spilt	spilled
learn	learnt	learned
smell	smelt	smelted

Different Words Same Australian English	Meaning British English
paddock	field
picture theatre	cinema
singlet	vest
to barrack for	to support
bludger	a loafer, sponger

American English	British English
faucet	tap
sophomore	second year student
generator	dynamo
couch	sofa
monkey	wrench spanner
can	tin
queue	line
gas	petrol
sidewalk	path
molasses	treacle

**Check Your Progress 1**

**Notes:** a) Write your answers in the space given below:

b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the Unit.

1. What are the reasons for people speaking differently from one another?

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2. You evidently belong to a particular region, and either speak that dialect or have some knowledge of it. Now talk to another speaker of the same language who belongs to another region. Write down five words which are pronounced differently from your dialect.

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**1.3 CASTE DIALECTS**

In many parts of India, especially rural India, society is stratified into different castes. These caste dialects were originally spoken by stable, clearly marked groups, separated from each other, with hereditary membership, and with little possibility of movement from one caste to another. However, increasing education and urbanization has narrowed down these linguistic differences. Certain examples from Telugu are given below which were initially due to caste differences, but now exist hugely as a case of rural vs urban speakers.

**At the level of words**

Word	Urban (originally	Rural/ (originally
Brahmin) Variety	Non-Brahmin)	Variety
‘What’	eemiti	eeudi
‘sari’	chiira	jabbu
kooka	sickness	roogam

**At the level of sounds**

‘went’	velleanu	elleanu
‘lakshmi’	lakshmi	lacmi (Goddess)

**Check Your Progress 2**

**Notes:** a) Write your answers in the space given below:

b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the Unit.

1. Are there any linguistic difference because of caste in your language?  
Write down the differences that you notice.

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## 1.4 THE STANDARD DIALECT

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You must have heard terms such as the ‘prestigious standard’, ‘standard variety’, and so on. What do these terms imply? The standard variety is usually that variety which is used in print, and is normally taught in schools, and to foreigners learning the language. It is a variety that is codified, i.e. grammar books and dictionaries are written on the basis of this variety. Moreover, it is used in news broadcasts, and spoken by educated people. Many people consider this variety as the ‘real language’, and differences from it as dialects. However, this is only one variety amongst many, and its importance lies in the fact that it has attained a certain prestige.

As Hudson (1980) has pointed out, a typical standard dialect often passes through the following processes:

**Selection:** A particular language is selected to be developed into a standard language. This selection could be due to social or political reasons. However, in some cases the chosen variety has been one with no native speakers at all – for instance Classical Hebrew in Israel and Bahasa Indonesia in Indonesia.

**Codification :** Some agencies write dictionaries and grammar books about the chosen variety, so that everyone agrees on what is correct. Once codification takes place, it becomes necessary, for the citizens to learn the correct forms, and not to write the ‘non-standard’ forms of their dialects.

**Elaboration of function :** The standard variety is associated with all the functions of the central government, i.e. parliament, law courts, in bureaucratic, educational and scientific documents of all kind’).

**Acceptance:** This variety is accepted by the people as the national language of the state. Once this has happened, the standard language serves as a strong unifying force for the state, as a symbol of its independence from other states.

But what are the social reasons for one dialect becoming so prestigious? One reason could be that the dialect is spoken in the political, commercial and cultural centre of the country and gains in importance because of that. The dominance in France of the Parisian dialect, and in England of the London dialect, is attributable to this cause. In the United States, Standard American English is identified with the educated white middle class, and it reflects the general bias in the USA to the white middle class value system.

However, we must be very clear about one point. A standard dialect may have several functions. It may bind people together, or provide a common written form for multi dialectal speakers. But, in linguistic terms it is neither more expressive, nor more logical, nor more correct or complex than any other dialect. There are no scientific or linguistic reasons to consider it superior to any other dialect. All dialects are equally effective forms of language, in that any idea or desire that can be expressed in one dialect can be expressed just as easily in any other dialect. **Labelling one particular dialect as standard is a sociopolitical judgement, not a linguistic one.** In countries throughout the world, the standard national language is the dialect of the subculture with the most prestige and power.

**Check Your Progress 3**

**Notes:** a) Write your answers in the space given below:

b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the Unit.

1. What is a standard dialect? How did it attain prestige? Is it scientifically superior to the other dialects?

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2. Describe the process that a dialect usually passes through to become a standard.

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## 1.5 PERSONAL FACTORS LEADING TO VARIABILITY

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In the previous sections we discussed the social reasons for linguistic variation even among speakers of the same language. In this section we shall discuss individual attributes of the speakers, i.e. sex and age, which may cause variation in their speech.

### 1.5.1 Sex Differences

Linguistic research has shown that in many societies, the speech of the men and women differs. In some conservative societies this could be due to segregation of the sexes. But what about societies where men and women communicate freely with one another? Why, then, do such differences arise? Labov (1966) and Trudgill (1972, 1974) have looked at western societies of America and England, respectively. They demonstrated through several examples, that women used linguistic forms associated with the prestigious standard more frequently than men. They suggested three possible main reasons for this:

- (i) The social position of women in society is less secure than that of men, and, generally speaking, subordinate to that of men. Therefore, it becomes necessary for women to signal their social status by how they appear and behave (including linguistically), than by what they do.

- (ii) In most societies a certain roughness and toughness of speech is considered a favourable masculine attribute. Society, on the other hand, expects women to be more correct, discreet, quiet and polite, and increases the pressure on them to use more 'correct' and prestigious linguistic forms than men. For example, use of swear words is acceptable for men, but not for women.
- (iii) Women's traditionally greater role in child socialization leads them to be more sensitive and careful to norms of 'correct' and 'accepted' behaviour, and this includes linguistic behaviour.

With regard to Indian languages, not many studies have been conducted. There was one study by Mukherjee (1980) who worked on the assimilation of Hindi speech by Bengalis and Panjabis living in Delhi. She too found that females of these communities showed a higher percentage of assimilation of linguistic features associated with Hindi, than males. She also attributed this phenomenon to social insecurity.

In so far as foreign/second language learning is concerned, the majority of the studies seem to favour females as better second language learners and users than males.

Some other interesting psychological reasons have been cited for better linguistic performance by girls. Robinson (1971) has suggested that one reason why girls seem to perform better than boys is probably due to there being more females' teachers in schools. It is possible that boys react to this kind of female domination in a negative way and reject the standard English which is taught along with other aspects of the female value system.

It is also speculated that girls are more adept in second language because of their differential socialization from boys. Girls are socialized in such a way that they find it easier to muster the "empathic capacity". the ability to identify with other people's feelings and appreciate details of their behaviour which is such a significant factor for fluency in L2.

### 1.5.2 Age

It has been observed in several sociolinguistic studies that there is a marked difference between the speech of the older generation, and that of the younger generation, One of the factors for this could be age grading. It is widely recognised that there are characteristics of linguistic behaviour which are appropriate for different stages in a speaker's life span. For example, teenagers use certain slang items, and give them up when they become adults. You'll also notice that older people use certain forms only when they become old.

The difference in the speech of different generations is also useful for indicating language change in progress. William Labov (1972) talks about language change in real time and apparent time. Studies of linguistic change in 'real time' are longitudinal in nature and, therefore, not always possible for a researcher to carry out. An alternative is to investigate linguistic change in 'apparent time', which is done by comparing the speech of the older people with that of the younger people, whereby the speech of the older persons constitutes the older patterns, and those of the younger persons, the newer patterns, and the difference between them are considered to show language change in progress. This language change may occur due to purely

linguistic reasons, but it is often the consequence of various socio-psychological pressures which operate on different generations and which get reflected in their speech.

**Check Your Progress 5**

**Notes:** a) Write your answers in the space given below:

b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the Unit.

1. Is there any difference between the linguistic ability of the girls and boys in your class, especially with regard to English 'Uf there is, what do you think is the reason for it?

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2. Describe the difference between "age grading" and language change.

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## 1.6 VARIATION DUE TO REGISTER

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So far, we have looked at language variation according to the social-personal characteristics of the speaker (such as the region to which one belongs, social class, caste, sex, age, and so on). Now we will look at speech variation according to the different social situations/contexts in which a speaker finds himself/herself'.

Many factors can come into play in controlling the kind of language a speaker uses on different occasions. For example, if one talks to one's colleagues about their work, the language is likely to be rather different than one will use, say, at home with one's family. In other words, the language will depend on the relationship between the participants engaged in the act of communication. With one's family one is likely to be informal, with one's colleagues the language would be more formal, and with the boss the most formal.

**Example**

*To wife: Hurry up we'll be late*

*To colleague: It's time we left, we'll be late for the meeting*

*To Boss: Sir, it's 3 o'clock, and the meeting's at 3.15, shouldn't we leave?*

This type of variation is more formally encoded in some languages than in others. In Japanese, there are different terms used for the person one is speaking to, depending on the amount of respect or deference one wishes to show. Franch has two pronouns (tu and vous), with the former reserved for close friends and family. Although English does not have such pronoun distinctions, there are definite options available for indicating one's relationship with the person one is addressing (Yule, 1985).



Differences in formality also occur in the written language as well. Example,  
Just a short note to tell you that we reached home in one piece.

This is to inform you that we've reached home safely.

The formality-informality scale overlaps with another variable, namely the subject matter of the conversation. Topics such as quantum physics and international economics are likely to produce linguistic varieties which are more formal than those used in discussions on cooking and politics. Moreover, the language of the various disciplines itself is different. **The language of law is quite different from the language of medicine, which in turn is quite different from the language of engineering. The 'variation is mostly at the level of vocabulary, although in a few cases, there is a specialized syntax as well.**

#### **Example:**

All one can say is that the child's lexicon is drawn from more than one language, while the grammar is still in the early developmental stages.

The state shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, ———

In batch system models, the biological components and a supporting nutritive medium are added to a closed system.

The filamentous bacteria comprise only a few genera.

#### **Language also varies accordingly to whether it is written or spoken.**

Other things being equal, written English is more formal than spoken English, and this pertains to other languages as well. To give an extreme example, in Tamil and in Bengali, there is a clear and rather considerable difference between a literary variety (grandika) of the language and a colloquial variety (vayavahirka) . Therefore, variation could be due to the mode of communication.

From the above discussions we have distinguished speech according to three general types of dimension: relationship between participants, subject matter of conversation and mode of communication, i.e. speech or writing. Michael Halliday (1978) calls these three general types of dimensions: **field, mode and tenor**. Field is concerned with the purpose and subject matter of communication, mode refers to the means by which communication takes place, notably speech or writing; and tenor depends on the relations between participants.

Another widely used model has been proposed by Dell Hymes (1972), in which no less than thirteen separate variables determine the linguistic items selected by a speaker, apart from the variable of 'dialect'. It is very doubtful if even this number reflects all the complexities of register differences. Nevertheless, each of these models provides a framework within which any relevant study of speech similarity and difference may be located.

### Check Your Progress 5

**Notes:** a) Write your answers in the space given below:

b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the Unit.

1. Give three examples of language variation according to the relationship between the participants.

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2. Look at the general as well as the business section of a newspaper. Are there differences only in the lexicon - or are there differences in the syntax as well?

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### Languages in the Classroom : Multi Lingualism

*Have you ever wondered how easily you are able to talk to your parents in Punjabi (or whichever language is your mother tongue), or in English to your school Principal, or in Hindi to your school-teacher-friends, or sometimes in a mixture of English and Hindi to your students in school? Isn't it amazing that this quality of being able to talk in several languages to different people in different situations comes as naturally to us as perhaps, smiling! Its almost as if we maintain multiple identities at the same time.*

*And what about our students in school? You must have observed Moloy, Priya, Subroto, Arthi, Sukhvinder and many others from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds communicating freely with each other outside the classroom. Why is it, then, when these very students who are adept users of language, face major difficulties in a language inside the classroom? and the smiling faces become sad in no time.*

*It is ironical yet true, that in a multilingual country like ours where there are more than 1,652 languages spoken, where print media uses around 87 languages, where radio broadcasts are in over 71 different languages, where schools use more than 47 different languages as a media of instruction and where administrative work is conducted in 13 different languages (Census of India, 1971), we have classrooms where the freedom to use one's language has remained a distant dream. There is a continuous pressure on students to only talk in English in a English classroom and in Hindi in a Hindi classroom.*

*Should we not, as language teachers, rethink about our classroom practices and see how best we can help our students enhance their power of expression? Should not a multilingual classroom setting demand multilingual solution? Is it not time that we stop playing lip service to multilingualism and begin using it as a classroom resource?*

*This unit is an attempt to urge you to keep the multilingual reality in mind each time you enter your language classroom and help them explore the potential and power to develop language skills us naturally as smiling!*

**Check Your Progress 6**

**Notes:** a) Write your answers in the space given below:

b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the Unit.

1. Think about your own classroom practices for a while. Do you conduct your classroom teaching only in English or use Hindi Regional language as well? Why! Justify your approach.

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2. Do you allow your students to respond in Hindi or any other language in the English classroom? What are your reasons for allowing or disallowing the use of other language(s) in the English Language classroom.

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3. How do you view your role as a teacher? Do you think your role is to impart knowledge or do you think it is simply to facilitate the students'? Give reasons to support your answer.

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**1.7 LET US SUM UP**

In this unit we have tried to show you the close interrelationship between language and society. A person's speech may vary due to regional separation, differences in socio-economic status, caste and ethnic background.

Personal characteristics such as the sex and age of a person also lead to differences in language.

Finally languages vary due to the situation one is in, which would include whom one is talking to, the topic of conversation and the mode of communication .

**1.8 KEY WORDS**

- Dialect** : A variety of a language, spoken in one part of a country (regional dialect), or by people belonging to a particular social class (social dialect).
- Idiolect** : The linguistic system of an individual, i.e., her/his personal dialect.
- Language variation** : Difference in linguistic behaviour because of differences in region, social class, occupation, sex, etc.

<b>Purist</b>	: One who insists on preserving what s/he considers the 'correct' form of language, and is against language variation and language change.
<b>Register</b>	: Variety of language defined according to their use in situations, i.e. according to the relationship between the participants, the topic of discussion and the mode of communication.
<b>Regional variation</b>	: Variation in speech according to the particular area when' a speaker comes from. Variation may occur with respect. to pronunciation, vocabulary, or syntax.
<b>Social dialect</b>	: a variety of a language used by people belonging to a particular/ similar socioeconomic and/or educational background.
<b>Standard variety/dialect</b>	: the variety to a language which has the highest status ill a community or nation, and which is usually based on the speech and writing of educated native speakers of the language. A standard variety is usually described in dictionaries, grammars, taught in schools and universities; and used in media.

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## 1.9 SUGGESTED READING

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Chamber, J.K. and Trudgill, P. 1980. *Dialectology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Coates, J. 1986. *Women, Me" and Language*. London: Longman.

Hudson, R.A. 1980. *Sociolinguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Labov, W 1972. *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Trudgill, P. 1983. *Sociolinguistics*. 2nd edition. Harmondsworth, Penguin.

Wardaugh, R. 1986. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

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## 1.10 ANSWERS

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**Check Your Progress - 1**

**Check Your Progress - 2**

**Check Your Progress - 3**

**Check Your Progress - 4**

1. A standard variety is a dialect which has gained prestige in a speech community. It cuts across regional differences, and therefore provides a uniform means of communication. It is a variety that is codified, i.e., dictionaries and grammar books are written on the basis of this variety. Moreover, this is the variety used in mass media and education. One reason why a dialect attains prestige and becomes the standard is that it is spoken in the political and cultural centre of the country, and gains in importance because of that.

No, there is no scientific reason for its superiority.

**Check Your Progress - 5**