Language Variation
Language is power, and any linguistic variation may be seen to undermine that power. Here’s an example:

Canada has two official languages, English and French. In 1977, the Province of Québec passed Loi 101, La charte de la langue française ‘the charter of the French language,’ establishing French as the primary language of the province.

Loi 101 also established l’Office de la langue française, the Office of the French Language, creating a “language police” charged with enforcing the use of French in a variety of public situations: in offices, in advertising, and on business signs.

Up to now, businesses have been allowed to keep non-French names, whether they are local (a Chinese or Italian restaurant, for example) or international chains (McDonalds, Staples, KFC, Wal-Mart).

But now the Provincial Government wants to go beyond the letter of the law to ensure that all businesses have French names.
What is the difference between a dialect and a language?

- a dialect is a variety of a language spoken by a group of people that differs systematically from other varieties in terms of structural or lexical features
  - minor phonological differences (accent):
    - *pin*/pen
    - merry, marry, Mary
    - r-lessness
    - intrusive $r$
  - morphological differences:
    - you, youse, y’ins, y’all, you guys;
    - a- prefixing
minor syntactic differences:

- double negation;
- habitual *be*;
- the needs + pp passive: *the car needs washed*;
- double modals: *might could, hadn’t oughta anymore* without a negative constraint:

  *There’s so much of that going on anymore*

minor semantic or lexical differences:

- *bag/sack*
- *pop/soda*
- *faucet/spigot*
- *fireflies / firebugs / lightning bugs*
- *gumbands / rubber bands*
- *fixin to/finna / about to / intend to / gonna*
Language vs. dialect – dialects are mutually intelligible / languages are not

- But sometimes the definitions of *language* and *dialect* reflect historical and political rather than linguistic concerns

  Chinese is classified as a language, with dialects like Mandarin, Shanghainese, Cantonese, Hakka, and Wu, even though its “dialects” are mutually unintelligible.

  Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, and Icelandic are classified as distinct languages, even though they are mutually intelligible and could be considered, from a linguistic perspective, as dialects of the hypothetical language called Scandinavian.

  Hindi and Urdu are largely mutually intelligible, though they are written with different alphabets: Hindi uses Devanagari script and Urdu uses Arabic letters.
Max Weinreich: “A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.”

this is apocryphal, but it suggests the socio-political forces in play when language is concerned

eample (we’ll look at this in detail later):

the controversy that erupted in 1996-97 when the School Board in Oakland, California, declared that Ebonics (or African American English) was a language in its own right, not a dialect of English

What’s wrong with calling something a “dialect”?

Are England and the U.S. really two great nations separated by a common language?

Illinois made American its official language in 1923, changed it back to English in 1969

French translations of English books often say “Traduit de l’anglais” or “Traduit de l’américain.”
standard and nonstandard (prestige/stigmatized) dialects

standard language is sometimes called the language of wider communication:

language of instruction in school,  
used in government, law, commerce

stigmatized varieties are equal at the structural / communicative level, even the aesthetic level

nonstandard varieties may lack a technical vocabulary or written standards
nonstandard varieties are stigmatized as bad, sloppy, lazy, diseased, uneducated
given their stigma, why don’t nonstandard varieties disappear?

overt and covert prestige:

we assume that Standard English is always the approved form of speech and writing,

but when is Standard English *inappropriate*?

Problems defining standard English: We can all identify “nonstandard” features of language, but we don’t always agree on what the standard features are.

Is it easier to define standards for writing than for speech?

The notion of an “edited standard”: nonstandard varieties don’t necessarily have written forms

but even editors disagree on usage

is there a common core of standards?
**dialectology:** traditional focus on geographical variation

the Grimms looked at folk language as a way of recovering the roots of the language

the myth that somewhere in Appalachia there’s a group of people who speak English the way Shakespeare did

rural dialects are considered more conservative,

as is the language of older people

much dialectology focuses on lexical items

the isogloss: an imaginary speech line on the map

*pop / soda* isogloss roughly corresponds with I-80

*Terre Haute* isogloss was said to run down the main street of the city.
sociolinguistics:

age, gender, class, ethnicity, educational level

two examples of these?

an attempt to record language change in progress, rather than in retrospect

the Northern Cities vowel shift
the notion of the speech community

Martha’s Vineyard: residents who identified more with the island than the mainland had more centralized diphthongs for right, out; those who identified less had more standard forms of the sounds
Variation in a community of practice:

- work groups (technical language or jargon)
- living groups: families, roommates, Frats and Sororities (private language)
Variational factors within communities:

Age

Gender: women tend to use the more standard form –

this may be a situational factor, that women may use standard to become more upwardly mobile (men can rely more on their activities, while women must rely more on language?)

and to transmit language to children

Class (My Fair Lady)

Race and ethnicity

Social networks

Chicano English: an example of change at work
the effects of language contact

dialect contact:

we once thought that the spread of mass media (radio and TV) would level American dialects; has this happened?

as Americans become more geographically mobile, are dialects converging? shifting?

language contact:

it can be peaceful or warlike
it can involve power differentials
it can produce temporary or permanent changes in language: pidgins and creoles
Attitudes toward language variation

Why are language variation and linguistic change typically perceived to be bad?

Does variation interfere with communication?

Does variation foreground underlying social, economic, or political tensions?

Does variation threaten the fabric of the language?

Are there times when Standard English may not be appropriate?

What is linguistic equality?

What do we mean by code switching?

What are the pedagogical implications of linguistic variation?