

Varieties, Codes, and Lects

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Short version

Varieties, codes, and lects are three different terms for ways of speaking, types of language, or more precisely: sets of features which are assumed to belong together and form a more or less complete package of linguistic resources with particular social associations. Variety is a cover term for languages, dialects, etc. that avoids the problem of deciding whether two different ways of speaking are distinct languages or dialects of a single language. Code is also understood as a cover term for a way of speaking, regardless of whether it is referred to as a distinct language or part of a language. Lects are (non-standard) subgroups of languages, which are associated with geographical belonging (dialects), ethnicity (ethnolects) or socioeconomic status (sociolects), etc.

Long version

Sociolinguistics uses the terms code and variety as cover terms for what are traditionally called “languages” and “dialects”. It has long been acknowledged that there is no linguistic way to distinguish between, say, dialects and languages. The textbook response to this is that a language is simply a dialect with an army and a navy (“a shprakh iz a dialekt mit an armey un flot” – Max Weinreich). On the basis of purely linguistic criteria it is not possible to draw clear borders between what are considered distinct languages (between e.g. Norwegian and Swedish or German and Dutch) or, for that matter, between what are considered separate dialects of the same language (e.g., between Vendebomål Danish and Thybomål Danish or between Tilburg and Eindhoven Brabant Dutch).

A distinction can be made between kinds of varieties or codes. On the one hand some varieties (e.g., dialects) are defined as all-encompassing, routinely used ways of speaking that are the result of a particular sociocultural upbringing. They are, so to say, ways of speaking by which one can live a whole life. Other varieties are more specialised or niched and more consciously used ways of speaking; their use is restricted to specific domains of use. These varieties can be called “registers”. A person may have only one language or dialect, but any speaker uses a variety of registers in social life within its language or dialect.

“Youth language” for instance, is a term for such a niched way of speaking, i.e. the language which youthful people speak in their peer group, while “the language of the youth” is a variety, i.e. the set of features characteristic of young people, even when they speak with elders (Kotsinas 1994). The same could be said about academic language vs. the language of academics, where the former is the language used in lecture rooms and academic papers whereas the latter is the way academics speak and through which they may be recognized as academics. Other examples of such niched codes (registers) are “military jargon”, “Eurospeak”, “academic English”, “RP”, “Behördendeutsch”, “literary French”, “textspeak”,

“street language”, and “mock Spanish”. Examples of non-niched codes or varieties are “Jamaican patois”, “Cockney”, “Yorkshire English”, “American English”, “Canadian French”, “Jutland Danish”, “Plattdeutsch”, and “Algemeen Beschaafd Nederlands”.

In the term code-switching, “code” stands for any recognizable way of speaking or type of language that can be distinguished from other ways of speaking or types of language. Thus it is possible to switch between German and French, but also between “regional Dutch” and “academic English” or between “colloquial German”, “Nigerian Pidgin English” and “Igbo”.

Lects are such varieties which are traditionally not considered to be “standard” languages. Derived from “dialect”, i.e. a variety which is typically associated with speakers in a given area, the term “lect” has been combined with other terms to denote specific groups of varieties. One such term is “ethnolect”, i.e. a variety which is associated with a specific ethnic group. Another term is “sociolect”, i.e. a variety which is associated with a specific socioeconomic status group. The element lect is also used in creolistics which distinguishes between basi-, meso- and acrolectal Creole varieties, with the basilect being the variety that is closest to the substrate (West African languages for the Atlantic Creoles) and the acrolect the variety that is closest to the superstrate or lexifier (Portuguese, French, English). Another term with the element lect is “idiolect”, i.e. the idiosyncratic way of speaking of one individual speaker. Mufwene (2008), for instance, understands language varieties as species, with idiolects as the individual organisms constituting the species. Lects are in other words, versions of a “language”, but the distinction and the boundaries between different lects are arbitrary socio-cultural constructs. Therefore, standard languages are in fact also (dia)lects, i.e. recognizable sets of features with social associations.

One observation is important here: in recent sociolinguistics a critical discussion of the concept of languages as separate and separable sets of features sees the idea of individual languages as historically invented, and based on political ideologies, rather than real-life language use. Heller (2007: 1) explicitly argues “against the notion that languages are objectively speaking whole, bounded, systems”, and she prefers to understand language use as the phenomenon that speakers “draw on linguistic resources which are organized in ways that make sense under specific social circumstances” (see also our “linguaging” lemma here). This insight must be extended to any set package of features, regardless of the term used for such a package. Rather than being natural objects, comprising readily identifiable sets of features, “varieties”, “codes” and “lects” are sociocultural constructions exactly as “languages” are.

References

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