

Chapter 6

Social Varieties and Language Attitudes

Opening Activity

This letter was written by a farmer to a zoo. The writer, a native speaker of English, did not know the plural of mongoose so instead of committing to “mongoose” or “mongeese,” he or she circumvented the issue. This shows that in many instances even native speakers of a language are unsure of what the “correct” form is. Students can be asked to think of similar phenomena from their language and share these areas of difficulty with the class. Other common examples from English are “lay/lie,” “sit/set.”

Objectives for Students

Content

Understand the nature of our attitudes toward speakers of dialects/
languages other than our own

Understand some features of common American English ethnic, socio-
economic, gender, and age varieties of language

Language

Differentiating between accents

Identifying the purpose in writing

Writing introductions

Combining sentences using coherence devices
Listening for specific grammatical differences

I. Attitudes

Techniques

This exercise works well as group work. It is most interesting if language backgrounds can be mixed. Students can think about it on their own (possibly with other speakers of their language) and then groups can be formed for comparison purposes. For the “other language,” students can arbitrarily pick a language or the teacher can assign one. In Activity C, the students are encouraged to use their previous knowledge of transitional devices to recombine the sentences.

Answers

A./B.

Answers will vary

C.

f., a., d., b., c., e.

Language varieties arise from regional, ethnic, socioeconomic, gender, and age differences. Both favorable and unfavorable value judgments of people are made on the basis of the speech characteristics associated with these language varieties. Of course, the speech characteristics that are highly valued may differ from one society to another. For example, some people might associate intelligence with the speakers of one variety while other people would associate lack of intelligence. Though these evaluations of intelligence might be entirely wrong, they become part of the societal norm and develop into stereotypes. As a consequence, speakers who are associated with the valued way of speaking are more highly respected than those who are not. In summary, linguistic inequality produces social inequality.

Additional Activities

Interview native speakers about their opinions of the English spoken in New York, in Alabama, and in Chicago (or if being used outside of the U.S., select different locations). What attitudes do they reveal about these language varieties? Do they reveal any attitudes they might have toward the speakers of these varieties?

D.

Demonstratives, repetition of key words, and linking signals

E.

Answers will vary.

II. Ethnic, Socioeconomic, Gender, and Age Varieties

Techniques

Activity A is a prereading exercise that asks the students to judge language spoken by different social varieties as correct or incorrect. Students should be asked why they consider some sentences incorrect.

Answers

A.

All of the sentences are grammatically correct within the rules of the dialect.

B.

To convince readers that these social varieties are languages with systematic rules for grammar and pronunciation and should not be judged as wrong or right.

C.

1. Ethnic (African-American Vernacular English), socioeconomic class (New York), gender (women's use of language), and age.
2. Black English: deleting final consonants, and /r/ and /l/; the use of the be verb, and double negation.

New York:	upper class	lower class
	pronounce final /r/	drop final /r/
	-ing	-in'
	/aw/	/ɔ/
	/th/	/t/ and /d/

Gender: women use more vocabulary choice, question intonation, hedges, emphatic modifiers and intonational emphasis, hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation, and superpolite forms.

Age: vocabulary differences

3./4. Answers will vary.

D.

Answers will vary. Ensure that the students have the three parts of an introduction: getting the reader's attention, letting the reader know the point of the writing, and providing background information or content.

E.

Tapescript

- V: You know like when my daughter go around, my sister's name, you know Crystal when she go around my family, they say she talk like—like she's white instead of black.
- C: Uh huh.
- V: But—what it is Bill, she talk the proper language.
- C: Oh, is she your mother?
- V: My daughter.
- C: Oh your daughter.
- V: Crystal.
- V: She speak the proper language.
- C: Oh really.
- V: And you know the rest of us speak that slang language
- C: No—Not—not like you
- C: Uh huh
- R: Yeah
- C: Why your daughter speaks proper language.
- V: Because I don't allow her to speak the slang at our house.
- C: Oh really.
- R: And plus—it comes from environment. The church
- V: Yeah, and then she in the church. In the environment.
- C: The environment uh always
- V: She—right, she was surrounded by Christians, and—you
- C: Uh huh.
- V: know the ho—the living we have, my living

Answers

1. She go
She talk
She speak
She in the church

2. instead → stead
the → d
rest → res
3. In the first instance, *like* is used as a filler. In the second, it has the meaning “as if.”

Additional Activities

If this course is being taught in an English speaking environment, students can be asked to collect data on different uses of *like*. There are a number of possibilities. One is for students to listen for instances of the use of *like* and then make a questionnaire using those instances and asking native speakers to state what the word means in various contexts. Another possibility is to gather tape recordings and have students work out what the meanings are, possibly asking for confirmation from native speakers. Television is also a good source of language representing various social varieties.

F.

1. M
2. W
3. W
4. M
5. W
6. M
7. W
8. W
9. M
10. W
11. W
12. M
13. M
14. W
15. M
16. W

G.

1. relax
2. man
3. kiss
4. nice, great

5. both mean approximately unpopular, weird
6. dating exclusively
7. movie
8. likes, loves
9. woman; great, beautiful
10. kissing
11. apartment, house, place
12. simply a filler; yuck, how awful
13. both mean stylish, up-to-date
14. all three mean great
15. a suitor, a date

H.

Because each generation often thinks that they have invented new expressions, all answers will not agree. Many of these have been used in different generations, sometimes with the meaning slightly changed. Have the students compare the data, and try to determine the generation to which each belongs.