

It is the norm rather than the exception for speakers and speech communities to command a range of language varieties and systematically alternate among them. But this generalization encompasses situations that are described in very different ways, as if they constituted discrete sociolinguistic isolates: stylistic variation, code-switching, diglossia, and post-creole continua all involve variety alternation. How are these situations related? What aspects of the language or the social circumstances define, say, diglossia as opposed to style-shifting? This paper presents a general framework for analysing sociolinguistic alternation among language varieties, using data from Singapore English and Brazilian Portuguese.

We argue that the labeled situations are not discrete types, but points in a continuous field of variety alternation defined by two principal dimensions, one linguistic and one social. The linguistic dimension involves the degree of linguistic similarity between the alternating varieties; thus casual and careful speech styles are minimally different varieties perhaps distinguished only by frequency of use of sociolinguistic variables, while Fergusonian diglossia (Ferguson 1959) conceives of the alternating H and L varieties as related dialects of a language, and code-switching is commonly defined as involving alternations among different languages. The social dimension of variety alternation addresses the degree of separation of alternating varieties by discourse context: thus code switching is commonly defined as involving language alternation within the same discourse, even within the same sentence, while stylistic variation is often seen as being triggered by shifts in audience, topic or other situational factors that may define a different discourse setting, and diglossia is defined as involving fairly rigid separation of the varieties according to discourse domain.

On the linguistic dimension, an important issue that arises is how to characterize linguistic similarity; for example, whether the varieties are generated by the same or different mental grammars. The literature generally treats code-switching as involving two grammars, but style-shifting as occurring within a single grammar. But what about intermediate cases, such as diglossia, or speakers who alternate between standard and non-standard sociolects, (e.g. AAVE and Standard English, or Colloquial and Standard Singapore English)? Such cases involve a larger grammatical range than monolingual style-shifting. We propose an empirical approach to these issues in terms of constraint effects on variable processes. To the extent that varieties show the same constraints, they reflect the same grammars. Hence purely quantitative adjustments in the frequency of variables, as occurs in monolingual style shifting, reflects more grammatical unity than changes in the ranking of constraint effects, which we find in our Singaporean speakers, or the different constraint effects found in contrasting contact-influenced dialects of Portuguese in bilingual communities in Brazil.

Linguistically heterogeneous communities problematize the categorical treatment of style-shifting, code-switching and diglossia, presenting intermediate cases with a mixture of characteristics. As Woolard notes, a sociolinguistics that embraces diversity "should place bilingual and multilingual speakers ... at its center. New insights could derive from such a shift in perspective." One such insight is that variety alternation is better understood as a field of possibilities than a set of discrete types.

References:

Ferguson, Charles A. 1959. Diglossia. *Word* 15:325-40.

Woolard, Kathryn A. 1999. Simultaneity and Bivalency as Strategies in Bilingualism. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 8(1): 3-29.