LANGUAGE VARIATION AND CHANGE IN THE SPEECH OF BRITISH AND ROMANIAN ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to give an overview of the language of adolescents, as it is already known that they are seen as language innovators. We focus on English and Romanian and see to what extent there is language variation in their speech, taking into consideration a social variable: gender. In the literature girls are very careful with the language they use, meaning that they use the prestige forms whereas boys are at the other pole and they tend to use the non-standard forms. Swearing and taboo language is also included in the analysis.*

Keywords: *variation, gender, adolescents.*

1. Language variation and change

Why does language vary and why does it change? We have to see language as something alive and in a perpetual change. For example, we do not speak the same Romanian that was spoken 300 years ago, and the British do not speak the English used by Chaucer or Shakespeare. A sentence like *I don't need no money* is considered ungrammatical in contemporary Standard British English, as it contains double negation. In earlier times it was considered correct. It is a fact that "all languages change through time and we do not really know why this is, but it is a characteristic of all human languages." (Trudgill 2003: 7)

The most important thing about variation in language is that it occurs in the vernacular of everyday life. An adolescent says *I was like, whatever dude* whilst a 70-year old would say something like *You was always workin' in them days*[§§§§§§§§§§]. Are such utterances considered slang or mistakes or even part of a dialect? The vernacular was first defined by Labov (1972: 208) as "the style in which the minimum attention is given to the monitoring of speech" and later analyses of the vernacular showed that its target of investigation should be "every day speech" (Sankoff 1980: 54), "real language in use" (Milroy 1992: 66) and "spontaneous speech reserved for intimate or casual situations" (Poplack 1993: 252).

But how do we gain access to the vernacular? If we want to analyse it we must infiltrate in a speech community, both as an observer and a participant. An excellent example is the study carried out by Cheshire (1982) in Reading, England. She joined a gang and after being accepted by the members of the gang (both girls and boys) she started recording them in the same setting (the adventure playgrounds in the town). As she was interested in linguistic variation in nonstandard English, she chose speakers from the lower end of the social scale, who use nonstandard linguistic forms more often. The language used by such speakers is often known as the vernacular.

The term 'vernacular' can be used with another meaning, referring to the effect of speech style on linguistic variation (Cheshire 1982: 6). If we follow the traditional Labovian framework of analysis, *speech style* is seen as forming a linear continuum, reflecting the attention paid by speakers to their speech. It is believed that in formal situations people control the way they speak and, as a result they tend to use more socially prestigious forms and correct grammar. In informal situations, on the other hand, they are more relaxed and they pay less attention to the language they use, hence the usage of nonstandard forms and also swearing. Labov (1972: 112) writes that the most consistent patterns of variation are encountered in the vernacular speech style. However, analysing the vernacular speech is sometimes problematic as it is difficult to record it.

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§§§§§§§§§§ Examples taken from Tagliamonte (2011: 2).

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2. The linguistic variable

Speakers always make choices when they speak. For example, a teenager would say *What's up?* to a friend and *How are you?* to his grandmother, teacher, neighbour, etc. The meaning of the question is the same, but the degree of formality is different.

In the literature, one of the most basic definitions of the linguistic variable is two or more ways of saying the same thing. One of the earliest studies which focused on a linguistic variable, was carried out by Fisher in 1958 in rural New England. He investigated the (ing) variable[**********] and found out that a "model boy"[††††††††††] used the [ɪŋ] more often while a "typical boy"[‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡] favoured the [ɪn] form. He also discovered that in formal situations, boys used more frequently the [ɪn] form than girls, as shown in Table 1:

	-ing > -in'	*-ing < -in'*
Boys	5	7
Girls	10	2

Table 1 *Preferences for [ɪŋ] and [ɪn] endings, by sex (Source: Fisher 1958: 48)*

2.1. Phonological variables

At this stage it is important to mention that variationist sociolinguistics was built on the study of phonological variation. It is almost impossible to discuss the massive coverage of this phenomenon, and look at all the phonological variables studied. Instead, I will look at some of the most important variables that have been studied, namely postvocalic (r) and (t,d), but I will also refer very briefly to other variables as well.

Foulkes and Docherty (2006: 412) discuss different types of phonological and phonetic variables and in each case the variation also has complex social correlates:

(i) in the Glasgow dialect /x/ and /ʍ/ are receding in frequency and they are replaced by /k/ and /w/. This frequency is indexical of age as older speakers use them more frequently than younger speakers. Middle class children use more /x/ than working class children do (Lawson, Stuart-Smith 1999: 2541-2544);

(ii) variation regarding the phonotactic distribution of phonemes, the English /r/ being a case in point. The distribution of /r/ differs across varieties, marking a division between rhotic and non-rhotic accents (Wells 1982);

(iii) lexical distribution of phonemes. In England, both northern and southern accents contrast /a/ and /ɑ:/ but the difference lies in which vowel is used in a word. The short vowel is preferred by the Northern varieties in words like *path*, *class*, *bath*, whilst the long vowel in used in the south;

(iv) allophonic realization, which is the most common type of phonetic variables. In Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, stops are variably realised as plain oral plosives but can also be largynealized and glottal (Mondorf 2002: 162).

[**********] The (ing) variable is considered to be a stable sociolinguistic variable, meaning that it is not undergoing linguistic change and a correlation with age is not expected (Tagliamonte 2011: 187). However, Labov's extensive study in New York City showed that [ɪŋ] is sensitive to age and Horvath's (1985: 97) research in Australia proved that [ɪn] was a feature found in the speech of teenagers. Schleef (2011) states that (ing) is a good variable to take as a starting point and provides five reasons for studying it: (1) it occurs fairly frequently in conversation, (2) it is salient among native speakers of English, (3) it is stable (and has remained so for at least fifty years), (4) it can be analysed auditorily and (5) it has been studied in a number of varieties of English since the 1950s.

[††††††††††] The model boy was described as being popular, industrious in school and considerate.

[‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡‡] The typical boy was described as being strong, mischievous and not afraid of doing forbidden things.

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Hughes and Trudgill (1987: 32) note that the majority of English accents[§§§§§§§§§§] permit /r/ where it occurs before a vowel (e.g. *rat*, *trap*). However, they differ when /r/ occurs after a vowel (postvocalic /r/), in words like *car*, *bar*, etc. RP, for example, does not have postvocalic /r/, whilst Scottish and Irish accents, as well as the majority of North American accents do have /r/ in this position.

The most important study analysing postvocalic /r/ is Labov (1966) carried out in New York City. Labov chose three department stores in Manhattan: Sacks Fifth Avenue (a high-class store near the centre of the high-fashion district), Macy's (a store for the middle class with middle prices) and Klein's (a store which sold cheap items for poor customers). He pretended to be a customer and asked at what floor he could find shoes, knowing that the answer had to be "fourth floor". He pretended to have hearing problems and asked the customers or salespersons to repeat, thus eliciting more tokens in more careful style. Labov managed to gather over 1,000 tokens of the variable (r) and showed that in New York City /r/ can either be realised as a rhotic approximant or it can have a zero realization, with rates of [ɹ] production correlating with social class. Higher social group use more [ɹ] than lower social groups. The occurrence of postvocalic /r/ may index social class. Interestingly, in England things are the other way round. A high rate of postvocalic /r/ production indicates that the speaker has a low social status.

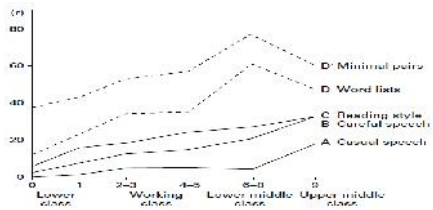


Figure 1. *Social stratification of (r) in New York City (from Labov 1966: 151)*

Labov's (1966) study of New York English revealed two important aspects of sociolinguistic stratification: linguistic differentiation and social evaluation. Regarding the linguistic differentiation the patterning of (r) in Figure 1 above shows the following tendencies:

(i) the difference between the social classes is not categorical, meaning that no class is characterised by the complete presence or absence of postvocalic /r/;

(ii) all social classes show an increase when moving from informal to more formal styles. This reveals that the variable marks not only status but also style;

(iii) as we follow the progression towards more formal styles, the LMC shows a greater increase in the use of /r/, until in word list and minimal pair styles they overtake the UMC averages.

Another well-studied variable in the variationist sociolinguistics framework is the (t,d) variable [**********]. The studies which focused on this variable show that it is a stable sociolinguistic variable and it qualifies as a linguistic marker because it can be correlated with style or formality but not with social class or apparent time (Tagliamonte 2011: 180). Tagliamonte (2005) analysed the (t,d) variable in York English and found an interaction between speaker age and sex. Among the adult York speakers there is gender variation in the sense that males tend to use simplified clusters more than females.

[§§§§§§§§§§] Here, the notion of *accent* refers to varieties of pronunciation whereas dialect describes varieties distinguished from each other by differences of grammar and vocabulary.

[**********] In the literature it is claimed that variable (t,d) is conditioned by the following linguistic factors: (i) the preceding and following phonological contexts, (ii) the morphological structure of the word.

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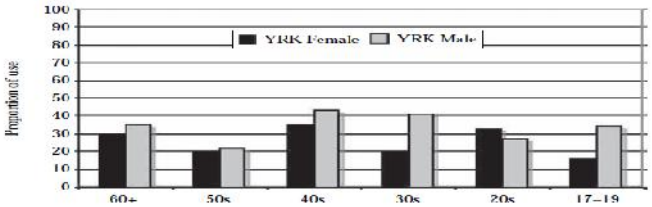


Figure 2. *Distribution of simplified clusters for variable (t,d) by gender in York, UK (from Tagliamonte 2011: 184)*

Tagliamonte's data reveal a correlation between gender and age. As far as middle-aged York speakers are concerned, there is a visible difference in that males tend to use simplified clusters more than females. Another finding which is of interest to us is that there are significant gender differences among adolescents (the 17-19 year olds). The same thing cannot be said about 20 year olds or the older generations (50+) where there are almost no differences.

An interesting study analysing the replacement of oral stops with glottal stops in Newcastle upon Tyne was carried out by Milroy et al. (1994). They found that males and females focused on different variants of /t/, women preferring the supra-local glottal variant which is spreading rapidly in a number of other British urban dialects, and men using the glottalised variant. In their work on dialect levelling in the cities of Milton Keynes, Hull and Reading, Kerswill and Williams (1997) found evidence that the replacement of /t/ with a glottal stop is one of the few phonological changes in progress in British English that teenagers know of. The following two comments were made by a teenage girl (1a) and boy (1b) from Milton Keynes:

(1) a. My mum takes the Micky if I say bu'er. She'll say butter.
b. My parents don't like me missing letters out, like if I say wa'er.
(Kerswill and Williams 1997: 165)

The two comments show that the teenagers are aware of the change, and they also know that the form is considered to be a non-standard one. They are immediately correct by their parents who also view the spread of [ʔ] a non-standard form.

In many varieties of English, there is laxing of /i/ and /u/ before /l/. Laxing means that there is a merger between [ɪ] and [i] and between [ʊ] and [u] so that "still" and "steel" become homophones (Meyerhoff 2006: 214). Bailey's (1993) study in Texas showed that the laxing of [u] to [ʊ] was used more frequently by younger women than by younger men. Eckert's (2000) pioneering work on language variation and change among Detroit teenagers revealed yet another interesting phenomenon. She discovered that the central vowel [ʌ] was backing in some speakers (*bus* sounding more like *boss*). This change in progress was confined to the speech of the group of adolescents she called *burnouts*, and within this group it was more advanced in the speech of girls than of the boys.

2.2. Morphological variables

Kiesling (2011: 14) argues that the variable context of morphological variables is identified by the grammatical function of the morpheme, for example tense and aspect marking on verbs, or plural marking on nouns. One of the examples discussed by Tagliamonte (2011) is verbal (s). In Standard English, the verb is marked in the third person singular (e.g. *sings*, *eats*, etc). However, variable verbal (s) means that the *-s* suffix can be absent in third person singular.

(2) a. She always *phones* me here and *reverseø* the charges to me.
b. He *comes* every three times a week he *comeø*.
(Tagliamonte 2011: 208)

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The *-s* suffix can be present in third person plural, as the examples in (2) illustrate:

(3) a. Well, dreams *comes* true. Lots of dreams *comes* true.
b. 'Cos people *comeø* along and they *comes* in with the kiddies.
(Tagliamonte 2011: 208)

In her study on the English spoken in Reading, England, Cheshire (1982) found out that the suffix *-s* occurs with other subjects, and she provides the following examples:

(4) a. I *starts* Monday, so shut your face.
b. You *know*s my sister, the one who's small.
c. They *calls* me all the names under the sun, don't they?
(Cheshire 1982: 31)

How can we account for this type of variation? One explanation would be that in the case of the (s) variable there is a standard and a nonstandard form, depending on the linguistic context: in Standard English the *-s* suffix is attached to the verb form in the third person singular, whilst in non-standard English it can be attached to the verb form not only in the third person singular, as the examples above show. Another explanation provided by Cheshire (1982: 31) is that the occurrence of the *-s* suffix in the 1st, and 2nd persons singular and plural and 3rd person plural can be attributed "to the previous influence of Northern varieties of English...the Northumbrian dialect of Old English had an *-s* suffix throughout the present tense paradigm, and this pattern was extended in the Middle English period to Midland areas."

The verbal (s) variable was studied in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) from a quantitative perspective and it was discovered that it was highly variable across individuals and conditioned by extralinguistic factors, i.e. it did not occur in formal styles or in middle-class adult speech. This is why verbal (s) was labelled "irregular and unsystematic" (Labov et al. 1968: 167) and a case of free variation. The variable inflection of present tense verbs irrespective of the grammatical person or number of the subject is one of the best features documented in AAVE. Poplack and Tagliamonte (2004) provide the following examples:

(5) First person singular
a. I *forgets* about it.
b. I *forget* the place where it is.

(6) Second person singular
a. You *speaks* fine French.
b. When you *speak* with me, fast I don't...know what you tell me.

(7) Third person singular
a. When she *come* out she *goes* and she *takes* her children. When she's on vacation well, she *remain* in the home.

(8) First person plural
a. We *call* her Virgie.
(*Interviewer: Why?*)
'Cause that's the name we *calls* her. That's her nickname.

(9) Third person plural
a. They *speak* the same English. But you see, the English people *talks* with grammar.
(Poplack and Tagliamonte 2004: 203-204)

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Apart from AAVE, Poplack and Tagliamonte (2004) discuss verbal *-s* variation in Devon English, and claims that "Devon is the ideal place to study verbal –s variation, as it represents one of the very few contemporary varieties of English in which non-concord *–s* is not simply a remnant, but remains productive (and variable) in all grammatical persons." This is illustrated above:

(10) First person singular
a. I *forgets* now how long I stayed there. Quite a good while I *think* I stayed with'em.

(11) Second person singular
a. You *goes* up that lane and you *goes* down another road.
b. You *pack* up for a fortnight, *put* your kit on your back, you *go* out, have a beautiful time.

(12) Third person singular
a. Nice maid, her. But her *likes* more the bloody old boy than her *do* the maid.

(13) First person plural
a. We *get's* a lot of trips, don't we? Once a month we *go*.

(14) Third person plural
a. Yeah they *drives*'em...They help out
b. The cattle all *goes* to, to the big markets, these days...they *go* straight to the slaughter house.

(Poplack and Tagliamonte 2004: 209)

This morphological variable, which occurred with all persons in Old and Middle English, has been preserved in Devon English.

As far as Romanian in concerned, there is a general tendency of masculinising the feminine.

(15) a. Răspundeţi voi invitaţiei lui Mădălina.
Answer you invitation of Mădălina.
You answer Mădălina's invitation.
b. Răspundeţi voi invitaţiei Mădălinei.

(Zafiu 2010: 37)

The correct form is the one in (15b) but few people use it. The more popular variant is the one in (15a). In the example provided in (15a) the noun *Mădălina* is in the genitive case, and the correct genitive form is *Mădălin**ei***. The preposed article *lui* is used before masculine names (*lui Andrei*, *lui Mircea*, *lui Costin*, etc) as well as before feminine names of foreign origin (*lui Elisabeth*, *lui Cosette*, etc), and names ending in a consonant (*lui Carme**n***) or in the vowels *-o*, *-i* (*lui Teo*, *lui Mari*). I do not know whether there are gender-related differences regarding this morphological variable, but it is worth looking into it. This is also encountered in common nouns or demonstrative pronouns, as the following examples (Zafiu 2010: 38) illustrate:

(16) a. să-i ia lu' doamna pachetul de ţigări.
to buy to lady the pack of cigarettes
b. mâna lu' fata
hand of girl
c. din cauza lu' băiatu'
because of boy
d. împotriva lui ăsta votez
against him this vote

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2.3. Syntactic variables

Syntactic variables are difficult to define, as it is not always clear if two variants are equivalent or not at some abstract level. In pro-drop languages, such as Romance languages (Romanian, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, etc), the use of on overt pronoun is optional:

(17) a. Vorbesc româneşte.
b. Eu vorbesc româneşte.

The sentences in (17) are both grammatically correct, and express the same thing.

Another variable which received considerable attention is the English deontic modality system. Deontic modals express obligation or necessity. We use them in order to exert pressure on ourselves or on someone else to do certain things. The forms included in this analysis (Tagliamonte 2011) are: must, have (got) to and got to:

(18) a. Next time I'm in the doctor's I *must* ask to see the physio.
b. They *have to* keep up with the Jones' now.
c. You'*ve got* to have a vice of some kind.

(Tagliamonte 2011: 228)

Tagliamonte further argues that *must* is the oldest form, dating back to the Old English period. The deontic *have to* is considered to have emerged in Middle English, *have got to* in the nineteenth century and *got to* and *gotta* in the twentieth century††††††††††.

There have also been studies showing that there are gender differences in the use of subordinate clauses, some of them dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century. The problem was that these studies were not based on empirical research. Jespersen (1922: 252) claimed that "a male period is often like a set of Chinese boxes, one within another, while a feminine period is like a set of pearls joined together on a string of 'ands' and similar words...In learned terminology we may say that men are fond of hypotaxis and women of parataxis." Mondorf (2002) looked for gender differences in the use of subordinate clauses in the London-Lund Corpus and found that women tend to use postposed adverbial clauses more than men do. She also stated that men tend to use finite adverbial clauses to express high commitment to the truth of the propositions expressed, whilst women use them to the opposite effect.

3. Swearing and taboo language: teenagers' speciality?

Swearing is a form of linguistic expression often referred to as *bad language*. Some people find swearing to be rude and disrespectful, while others use it every day.

Allan and Burridge (2006) note that swearing, like slang, is found in the colloquial style and it includes a wealth of obscenities taken from the pool of dirty words. Slang, however, does not necessarily include swearing, but it usually does. Swearing can also act as an in-group solidarity marker within a shared colloquial style. Boys usually greet themselves using swear words and this feature has started to be used by girls also. Men use all kind of words to describe women: *honey*, *sugar*, *pumpkin*, *sweetheart*, *darling*, *sweetie*, etc, but also more offensive words like: *fanny*, *tart*, *bitch*, *skank*, *cunt*, *whore*, *slut*, *wench*, *bimbo*, *hoe*, *floozy*, *sleaze*, etc.

Allan and Burridge further suggest that it is the use or non-use of swearing that marks the in-group. To this we may add the forms of jargon, slang and lots of abbreviation to increase the efficiency of communication. The idea that swearing is used by males and abhorred by girls or women has been proven to be false by research carried out in America (Risch 1987), South Africa (De Klerk 1992) and Great Britain (Hughes 1992). Speakers usually use swearing in the presence of members of the same gender. However, men and women swear and use dirty words differently:

†††††††††† For a more detailed analysis see Tagliamonte (2004), Tagliamonte and Smith (2006).

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> The word ass was used by females to denote either a social deviation or a body part; it was used mainly as a body part by males. Cock, cunt, and dick appeared as body parts in males' data but were not recorded for females. Similarly, neither tits nor pussy were used by females. For males, tits was a body part and pussy referred to a social deviation. Piss referred to anger for females but was more likely to mean a process for males. Balls, fuck, shit, and suck were used more or less by both males and females (Jay 1992: 139).

Taboo words have been divided by the British anthropologist Edmund Leach (quoted in Andersson and Trudgill 1990: 15) into three major groups:

a. Dirty words having to do with sex and excretion (e.g. *bugger*, *shit*);
b. Words that have to do with the Christian religion such as Christ and Jesus;
c. Words which are used in 'animal abuse' (calling a person by the name of an animal) (e.g. *bitch*, *cow*).

The word *fuck* is "one of the most interesting and colourful words in the English language today" (Andersson, Trudgill 1990: 60) which can be used in many different situations besides its sexual meaning:

Fraud: I got fucked by my insurance agent
Dismay: Oh, fuck it!
Trouble: I guess I'm fucked now.
Aggression: Fuck you!
Confusion: What the fuck?
Difficulty: I can't understand this fucking business.
Philosophical: Who gives a fuck.
Laziness: He's a fuck-off.
Displeasure: What the fuck is going on?

The word 'fuck' is also used in auxiliary swearing (i.e. not aimed at someone directly), for example: *This fucking exam is giving me nightmares*. For Kiesling (1998: 88) the word *fuckin'*, as a profanity, is associated with the vernacular, working class and physical power. Dooling (1996: 5) claims that men swear because they are "uncouth warthogs by nature" and they feel manly in a violent way. He further states that women react violently to swearing and suggests that a man being harassed would tell his harasser to *fuck himself* while a woman would file a formal complaint. Swearing for men is a substitute for a "good, long cry", since men are incapable of indulging in crying.

4. Conclusion

Variation is a key concept in sociolinguistics and implicitly in Language Variation and Change (LVC) research. Labov's (1969: 728) claim that variation is an inherent part of language represents the foundation of the LVC approach, which we adopt in this paper. But what is variation? If there is variation then it means that something varies (i.e. we can say the same thing in at least two ways). For example, if we have a verb like *watching*, the alternation between *watching* with [ɪŋ] and *watchin'* with [ɪn] in spoken English indicates that there are two ways of pronouncing the {ing} morpheme without changing the meaning of the word (denoting the ability to watch). Variation analysis is an important part of sociolinguistics, as it represents the branch of linguistics that starts from the rules of grammar and investigates the contact between these rules and society (Tagliamonte 2006).

The aim of this paper has been to discuss language variation and change in the speech of adolescents. We have seen that they are language innovators and they are also careful with the language they use. There is also gender-related variation in the speech of adolescents and these

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differences are phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical. Swearing and taboo language is also favoured by adolescents and they use them with different functions.

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