

# WHAT IS FOLK LINGUISTICS?

## WHY SHOULD YOU CARE?

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Abstract: Folk linguistics seeks to discover what nonlinguists know about language and to derive from that knowledge evidence of their underlying folk theory of language. Such work is to be done not only for the completeness of the ethnography of language it gives us for a speech community, but also for the clues it may give linguistic theory and language variation and change and the support it may give to those who do applied linguistics. The analysis of conversational data, employing various techniques of discourse analysis, is suggested as the best way to uncover folk linguistic belief.

The re-emergence of interest in folk linguistics dates from a 1960 conference in California. Henry Hoenigswald said the following:

... we should be interested not only in (*a*) what goes on (language), but also in (*b*) how people react to what goes on (they are persuaded, they are put off, etc.) and in (*c*) what people say goes on (talk concerning

language). It will not do to dismiss these secondary and tertiary modes of conduct merely as sources of error. (Hoenigswald 1966:20)

In this paper, I will be interested in elaborating on Hoenigswald's (*c*): what people say goes on ("talk concerning language"), and I will use the term *folk linguistics* to refer to this topic. Although I will not limit folk linguistics to just "*talk concerning language*," I will use this definition as the jumping-off place for our discussion.

Here is how I will proceed:

- I. Why do it?
- II. Why is it hard or impossible?
- III. Where does it fit?
- IV. How should it be done?
- V. What has it already done for us?

I: Why Do It?

A: The ethnography of language reason: Folk linguistics must be done if we want a complete ethnography of language for any group. If we do not know what nonlinguists believe about language, we lack full information about perhaps the most important element of their cultures.

B: The linguistic theory reason: Folk linguistics should be done if we have any interest in the insights of those who use language daily. Why would we assume that linguists could not gain clues about language by listening to the linguistic comments of the folk?

C: The language variation and change reason: It would be surprising if folk linguistics did not bear on many elements involved in variation and change. Although much goes on below the conscious level, not everything does, and folk clues about winners and losers in language variation and change should be interesting, perhaps even explanatory.

D: The applied linguistics reason: How could one imagine doing applied linguistics without knowing the folk linguistics of the group with whom the work is to be done? To do so is to invite at worst disaster and at best unexpressed or even sullen disdain for one's attempts.

## II. Why is it so Hard (or Impossible)?

Two reasons are usually given here: It's hard because folk knowledge is so minimal and addresses so few linguistic concerns (and many of these inaccurately), and it's impossible because many things of linguistic interest are completely hidden from the folk.

A: Folk knowledge is minimal (or inaccurate)

The overt responses in American and English society generally are quite poor as far as vocabulary is concerned. "Poverty-stricken" would be the

best term for this vocabulary. The inadequacy of people's overt remarks about their own language is directly reflected in the fact that there are only a few words that they use to convey the subjective response that they feel. ... But some of the references made here today show that there are highly institutionalized folk attitudes toward language which are much richer than those which we are accustomed to meeting in the U.S. and England. (Labov, discussion of Hoenigswald 1966:23)

That might mean that folk linguistics is worth doing in other countries, but I believe that Labov is also wrong about Britain and America. He is concerned, for example, about nasals:

Frequently, if you ask somebody what he thinks of this style of speech (nasalized), he'll say it's very "nasal"; and if you produce a speech of this sort (denasalized), he'll say that's very "nasal" too. In other words, the denasalized speech characteristics of some urban areas and extremely nasalized speech are treated in the same way. (Labov, discussion of Hoenigswald 1966:23-4)

But Labov does not differentiate between the folk and linguistic taxonomies of this phenomenon, as shown in Figure 1.

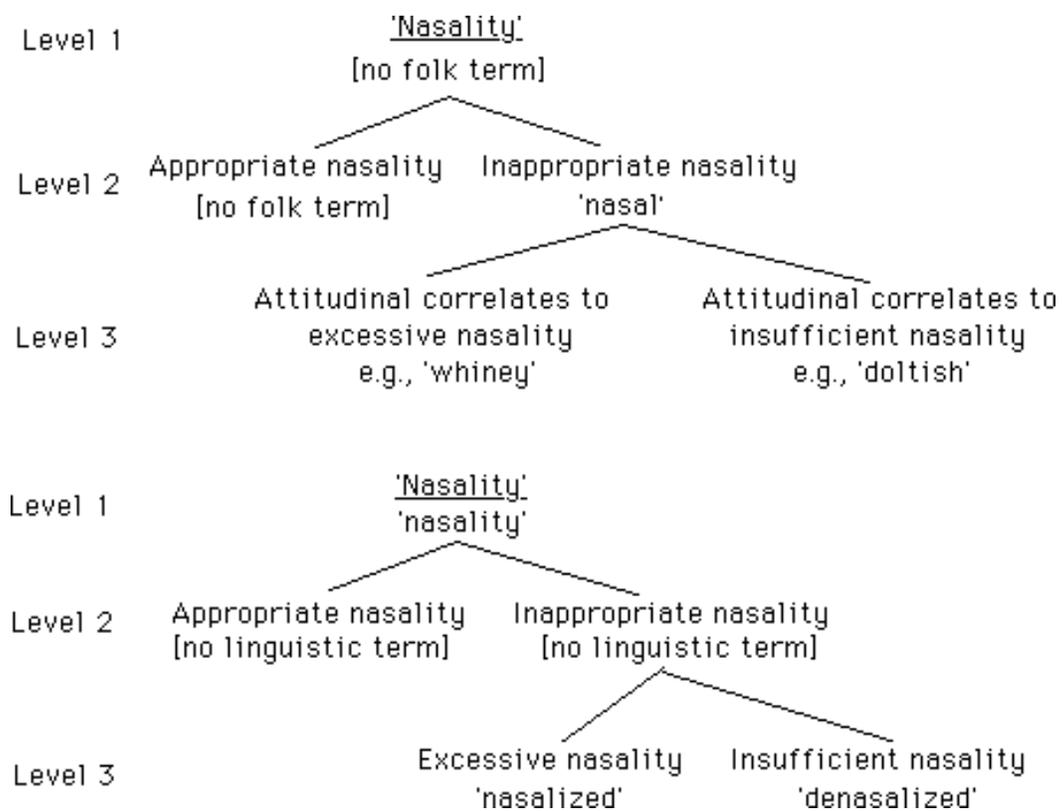


Figure 1. Folk (above) and linguistic (below) taxonomies of nasality

Disregarding this folk account overlooks both its sophistication and the clues it carries for further investigation.

It is sophisticated phonetically, for the respondents Labov describes use *nasal* to describe a nasal phenomenon; whether over- or underemployed, it is that feature (accurately) they hit upon. More importantly, the hint for further research is buried by the contention that nasalized and denasalized speech are “treated in the same way.” There are two problems lurking here. 1) Does the fact that they are labeled in the same way mean that they are treated in the same way? The attitudinal responses to denasalized speech might be considerably different from those to nasalized speech. If that is so, then Labov’s complaint that the folk terminology is limited might be correct; respondents might react differently to nasalized and denasalized forms, but have no terminology to differentiate these perceptually distinct stimuli, for the specific linguistic features which influence the behavior are not analytically known. That does not entail, however, that the different stimuli are “treated in the same way.” 2) Does the folk-phonetic terminology mask other terminology which might consistently differentiate nasalized and denasalized speakers (e.g., *whiney* versus *doltish*, respectively)? The misunderstandings lurking here may spring from linguists and/or the folk having missing terms in their accounts, sharing terms with different meanings, or even constructing systems in different ways.

At Level 1 in Figure 1, terminological richness is greater for linguists, who have a name for the phenomenon in general, but the first component of Level 2 is a draw; neither linguists nor the folk have a term which refers specifically to appropriately nasalized speech, although that is undoubtedly one of the requirements for such generalized folk evaluations as *pleasant* or *normal voice*. In the second component of Level 2, there is a folk term. What is “nasal” is “inappropriately nasalized,” a describable concept for the linguist, but one without a specific term. Level 3 is also a draw; both

linguists and nonlinguists have terms for the subcategories of inappropriately nasalized speech. Although this examination suggests that the folk vocabulary may be as large as the linguistic one for some of the elements it covers, it may also differ considerably from the technical one.

For example, the terminological mismatch which bothers Labov occurs between component two of Level 2 in the folk taxonomy and component one of Level 3 in the linguistic one: the folk use “nasal” for inappropriate amounts of nasality on either end of the scale; linguists use the form most like it (“nasalized”) for only the excessive end. Finally, social psychologists of language are interested in reactions to language and language varieties, but neither a standard linguistic nor folk terminology seems to be available. One might say in language attitude study that there are negative reactions to both nasalized and denasalized voices, but the two negative reactions, at least in American English, are significantly different. An excessively nasalized voice is an annoying, whining one; and excessively denasalized voice is a brutish, doltish one.

In general, therefore, it would seem that one must take folk terminology on its own, and that will require finding out attitudinal, presuppositional, and other matters, for their definitions will not be those of linguists. Not to attend to the distinctiveness of attitudes to excessively nasalized and denasalized voices in American English, for example, would be to miss very interesting and pervasive folk caricatures.

B: What can't the folk talk about at all? Although cognitive or mental operations are not excluded from folk speculation, it should be clear that some scientific characterizations of the competence foundations of human language are completely hidden from the folk.

[I]t does not make much sense to say that a model “uses” [quotation marks in the original] the passive rule because the rule does not really exist. What does exist is a system of constraints and principles. To use this kind of system all that the computational model must do is operate according to these constraints. (Berwick and Weinberg 1986:198)

For the folk, however, it may make a great deal of sense to talk about a “passive rule” if the structural makeup of a passive has in any way called itself to their attention (e.g., Niedzielski and Preston 2000).

So what can (and do) the folk talk about? Silverstein (1981) surveys five conditions for folk linguistic availability:

**1) Unavoidable referentiality:** For example, the deference- versus solidarity-with-hearer pragmatic system is realized as a second or third person plural (deferential) versus a second person singular (solidary) — e.g., German *Sie* versus *du*; French *vous* versus *tu*. The opposition is unavoidably referential, for the pronoun forms that carry the pragmatic system are the same ones that refer to individuals. In contrast, although a speaker’s selection of a certain phonetic variant in a given performance might symbolize greater deference to a hearer (as a result of the greater formality associated with that variant), such variants are not in themselves referential; therefore, although formality versus informality is a pragmatic opposition, its realization in the use of a particular phonetic variant is not unavoidably referential and is therefore less open to folk awareness.

**2) Continuous segmentability** refers to the fact that some linguistic units are not interrupted by other material. In ‘I am going to town,’ the entire sentence, each word, phrases such as *to town*, and even morphemes such as *-ing* are all continuously segmentable. The form which refers to the progressive aspect, however, is *am -ing*, and displays discontinuity, making it less open to awareness.

In a discussion of the passive, however, an equally discontinuous phenomenon, several US English speaking respondents provide evidence for considerable awareness of the construction (Niedzielski and Preston 2000). Subject-verb agreement, multiple negation, and so-called split infinitives, all discontinuous or potentially so, are also frequently discussed phenomena in English, suggesting that some other factors may overcome Silverstein’s purely linguistic categorizations.

**3) Relative presuppositionality** is Silverstein’s term for the degree to which a pragmatic function depends on contextual factors to realize its meaning. At one end of this scale are such items as *this* and *that*, which successfully function only if there is a physical reality to which they can be linked, a relative physical (or mental) distance which supports the choice between them, or a prior mention of some entity. Such presuppositionally dependent items do very little creative work and are readily available to the folk as linguistic objects.

At the other end of the scale are items that are themselves context creating. For example, Duranti (1984) notes that third person subject pronoun occurrence in Italian (a pro-drop language) signals a main character and usually one towards whom the speaker

displays positive affect. This function of overt pronoun realization in Italian is hidden to folk speakers.

4) **Decontextualized deducibility** says more about how some linguistic objects are accounted for by the folk than about their general availability. One common path taken by folk commenters on linguistic objects is that of specifying the “deducible entailed presuppositions,” a characterization which is the equivalent of stating the meaning. In other words, providing the contexts in which the form in question fits or is true is a common folk activity. Consider the following:

((In a discussion of Christmas, H has asked if there is any difference between *gift* and *present*; D has said earlier that there is not, but he returns to the question.))

D: Oftentimes a gift is something like you you go to a Tupperware party and they're going to give you a gift, it's- I think it's more impersonal, - than a present.

G: No, there's no difference.

D: No? There's real- yeah there's really no difference. That's true.

Maybe the way we use it is though.

G: There is no difference.

U: Maybe we could look it up and see what 'gift' means.

D: I mean technically there's no difference.

((They look up *gift* and *present* in the dictionary.)) (Niedzielski and Preston 2000)

**5) Metapragmatic transparency:** When the folk say what went on, they are more likely to mimic what was actually said if the performance is “metapragmatically transparent.”

Suppose Wanda is cold and that Karla is near the thermostat. Wanda could say:

Brrrrrrrr!

I’m freezing.

Aren’t you cold?

I wonder if the furnace is broken?

Would you mind if we had a little more heat in here?

Turn up the heat.

“Turn up the heat” has the greatest metapragmatic transparency, and folk accounts of the interaction between Wanda and Karla are more likely to result in an observation that “Wanda asked Karla to turn up the heat” than in any of the other request forms. “Wanda said ‘Aren’t you cold?’ and by that meant for Karla to turn up the heat” would be a strange report (except for a linguist or a philosopher).

But even those forms that Silverstein suggests the folk have better access to may not attract their attention. Why would that be? Sibata has a simple (and I believe correct) explanation: “...the average language user is so involved with communicating that he is usually not conscious of the words he uses” (1971:375), and I would add “... and not conscious of the words *others* use either.” So even those items which have the right sort of linguistic structure and pragmatic character to be available to the folk may, for the simple reason of the predominance of what we might call the communicative mandate, go unnoticed.

If that is so, what about the positive side of folk linguistics? That is, even given all the right linguistic and pragmatic conditions, why would any act of language allow or perhaps even compel us to overcome the communicative mandate? Again Sibata has identified at least half of the answer: “It appears to be natural for forms which differ from those which one usually uses to attract one’s attention” (1971:374). Again, I would add a little to Sibata: “...usually uses **or expects to be used** to... .”

Even all this detail does not yet characterize how folk attention may express itself. Once the communicative mandate is overcome, how is folk knowledge of language realized? Preston (1996a) suggests the following classification:

1) *Availability*: Not all areas (whether of performance, ability, or reaction) have equal availability. They may be ranked as follows:

a) *Unavailable*; the folk do not comment on some topics (e.g., specific phonological features of some so-called accents).

b) *Available*; the folk will discuss some matters carefully described by a fieldworker (e.g., deviant sentences), but they do not normally do so.

c) *Suggestible*; although seldom initiated in ordinary conversation, the folk will comment on topics if they arise; they do not require elaborate description from a fieldworker.

d) *Common*; topics of usual folk linguistic discussion.

2) *Accuracy*: Although it has no bearing on the value of the data, folk descriptions of language may be inaccurate or accurate.

3) *Detail*: A linguistic object may be characterized with great specificity or none.

a) *Global*; for example, the phonological detail of an accent might be unavailable, but that does not limit comment on the accent.

b) *Specific*; in some cases, linguistic characterization is detailed (e.g., accounts of speakers who are said to “drop their g’s” in *-ing* forms).

4) *Control*: In both account and performance, folk linguists may or may not control (i.e., be able to produce) the variety (or any aspect of it) under consideration.

This last cuts across the first three considerations in unexpected ways. A speaker who reports on only the global aspects of an accent might nevertheless give a detailed imitation of it (which might be in part accurate, in part inaccurate).

### III: Where Does It Fit?

So if real people do make observations about language, where does this sort of data fit in a more general picture?

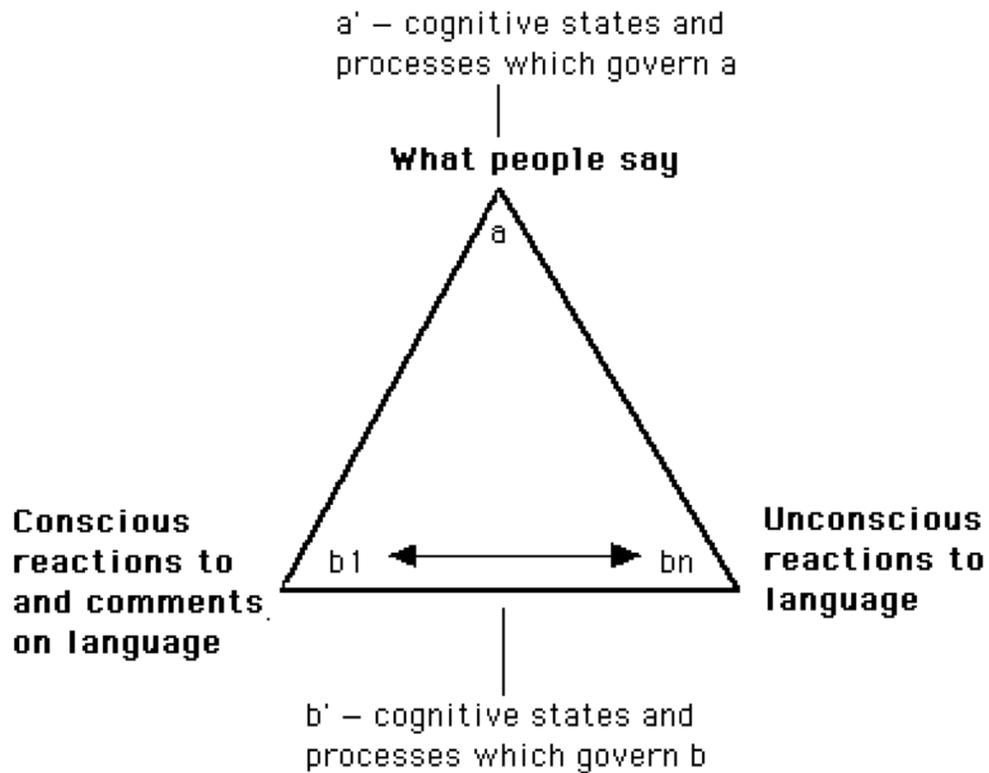


Figure 2. The position of folk linguistic study among general concerns

The top of this triangle (a) characterizes what Hoenigswald called “what goes on” in language, but the a' behind it represents the cognitive, sociohistorical, and other areas which explain why language is the way it is. The bottom of the triangle (b1 - bn) represents a continuum of consciousness of all linguistic (and language related) facts that are of any concern to the folk mind. The leftmost side (b1 through bx?) is the area of concern to those who look at folk linguistics. The rightmost (bx? - bn) is often called the domain of the “social psychology of language.”

Just as there are a' explanations for language use, shape, distribution, and change, there are b' explanations for both conscious and unconscious reactions to language, and the study of folk linguistics will want to uncover these, although, as in the use of so-called surface structures in the study of a', one will have to look at the expressive evidence of folk linguistic commentary and reactions to do so.

#### IV: How Should It Be Done?

The presentation of this triangle and the remark above that some facts about folk linguistic comment will have to be uncovered at the b' level suggest methodological concerns, and I will review some qualitative and quantitative approaches which have been taken. Perhaps the best known of these have been done within the subfield known as "perceptual dialectology" (which would have better been named "folk dialectology").

Two techniques — hand-drawn maps and ratings of areas — will illustrate qualitative and quantitative approaches to folk data, respectively.

Figure 3. A hand-drawn map of US regional speech areas by a young, male Chicago respondent

There are many things that could be said about this map, but perhaps the most straightforward path is an investigation of a few of the areas and their labels.

This Chicago respondent labels Chicago as the place of “Normal talk for the average person,” but he identifies Detroit as a place of “Black fro talk,” in spite of the very large African American population of his home city. He calls much of the South the home of “Southern talk the worst English in American [sic].” He seems unhappy that a large portion of the East Coast refers to soft drinks as “soda” instead of “pop,” and he identifies all of New York as having “Real Bad slang” but notes it is especially “terable [sic] around bronks [sic]” (i.e., the Bronx section of New York City). He very clearly does not care much for California English since it is spoken by “High Class Partying Slobs” and has a “Stuck up Sound.”

In addition to confirming some of the suggestions made by Sibata above (this is clearly a “pop” not “soda” speaker), studies of such maps as these (e.g., Preston 1996b) have shown that when the folk identify regions, they are much more concerned with evaluation than with areal delimitations of linguistic differences. This is only one piece of evidence for the dominating concern of prescriptivism in at least United States folk linguistic belief, but it is so strong that it triggered quantitative investigations in which respondent rankings of just such prescriptive notions were sought.

Here is an example of quantitative perceptual dialectology —, a ranking of the 50 states, Washington, D.C. and New York City on a scale of 1 to 10 for “correctness.”

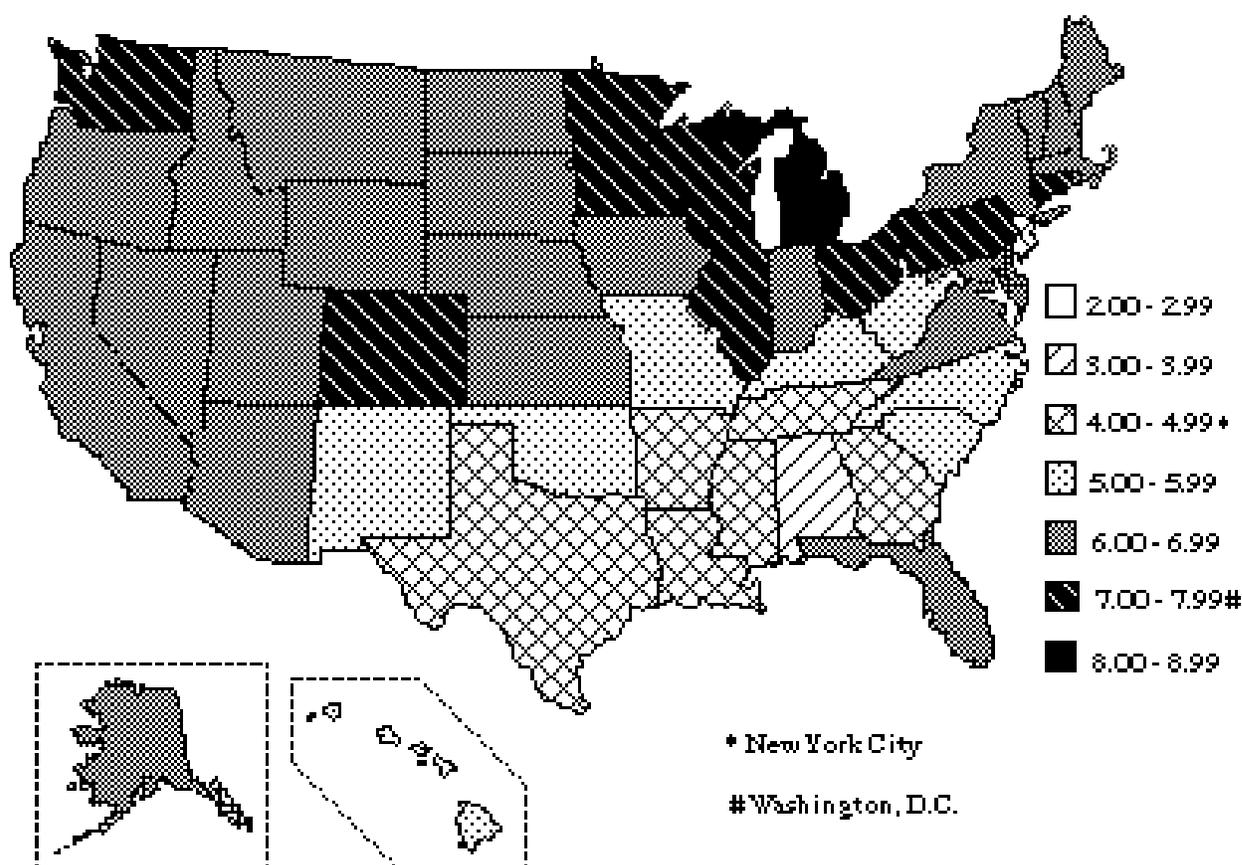


Figure 4. The fifty states, Washington, D.C., and New York City rated on a scale of 1 ('worst') to 10 ('best') for language “correctness” by southeastern Michigan respondents

These raters from Michigan are not in the least reticent to let us know that the home state has the very best English and that places like Alabama and New York City have the worst. Further studies of such rankings have shown that many northern Midwestern

speakers have a similar linguistic security to that expressed here by the Michiganders. Respondents from prejudiced areas like the South, however, do not have such great confidence in their language correctness, but they often rate their own varieties very high for language pleasantness and the solidarity it creates among fellow speakers (Preston 1996b). Again, although language prescription seems very prominent in these quantitative folk linguistic tasks, the importance of language in maintaining a sense of community is also found.

I believe, however, that the best method for determining the b' evidence in folk linguistics comes from the careful analysis of folk discourses. There are many approaches to the analysis of discursal interaction which may shed light on the folk linguistic content of them (e.g., Preston 1993, 1994, Niedzielski and Preston 2000), but I will illustrate one here which comes from *argument analysis* (e.g., Schiffrin 1985, 1990, Preston 1993, 1994). In this approach, the underlying presuppositions about language are uncovered by considering carefully the major moves of an argument: *position*, *dispute*, and *support*. Briefly, in this framework, positions are only those assertions and presuppositions that have been disputed; disputes themselves, once made, become positions on their own if they are disputed. Positions and disputes may be supported, and these supports too may be made positions if they are disputed, either directly for their truth content or indirectly for their relevance. In the notation used here a position, once identified by its being disputed, is identified as POS X; its dispute is DIS X; if this dispute itself is disputed on grounds other than a repetition of POS X, it becomes POS Y, and its dispute is the new DIS Y. Supports are keyed to the positions, disputes, and other supports which they support (e.g., SUP POS X supports POS X; SUPa POS X is the first

of more than one support of POS X; SUP/SUPa POS X supports the first support of POS X).

The data examined in this framework is taken from a conversation about African American English (more often called 'Black English' at the time this fieldwork was done, in the late 1980's).

C, Taiwanese male linguistics graduate student, age 34

D, African American male auto mechanic, community college associate engineering degree, now college student, born North-Central Ohio, residence now Detroit, age 40

R, African-American female teacher aide, two years college, born North-Central Ohio, residence now Detroit, age 41, spouse of D

A, African-American female community college student, born North-Central Ohio, residence now Detroit, age 19, daughter of D and R

1 C: We uh - linguistics, in this field, uh - from the book I s- I mean, I saw from the book that - many linguists quite interest in Black English. So could you tell me - a little bit about - your dialect?

2 D: Dialects.

3 C: Heh yeah

4 All: ((laugh))

[

5 D: Well, uh: - well - see the world's getting smaller. There's not=

[ [

6 C: ((laughs)) I- I mea- do you have-

7 D: = - even among all the ethnic groups we're- we're getting- getting less and less of dialectal in- inFLUence. (.hhh) Uh I'm- happen - not to be - from the South, uh: uh u- du- There is a certain aMOUNT of Black English that's (.hhh) spoken. There's a certain - certain uh: forms and uh certain idioms that uh uh- Blacks use that's indigenous to Blacks.

[ ]

8 C: Could - could you gi- ((clears throat)) give me some.

9 C: Uh huh.

10 D: Uh: I would say uh, - you know uh-

11 R: 'What's happening.'

12 D: Well that's kind of old. That's a- that's- that's back to my my=

[

13 R: That's old but I ( )

14 D: =day back in the sixties and I guess the early seventies, (.hhh) 'what's happening,' 'what's going down:,' uh:

Here is how the labels defined above may be applied to the opening of the conversation under consideration:

|                            |                             |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 C I saw from the book    | SUP POS 1                   |
| linguists interest in AAVE | POS 1 AAVE exists           |
| tell me about your dialect | POS 2 You speak AAVE        |
|                            | POS 3 AAVE is a dialect     |
| 2 D Dialects               | DIS 1 AAVE doesn't exist    |
|                            | DIS 2 I don't speak AAVE    |
|                            | DIS 3 AAVE is not a dialect |
| 3 C Heh yeah               |                             |

|  |   |
|--|---|
| (treats 2 D as a request for clarification rather than as a dispute) |   |
| 5 D The world's getting smaller                                      | SUP/SUP DIS 1 Media and communication networks are more elaborate and rapid |
| 6 C I mea-   |   |
| (recognizes <i>dialect</i> error?)                                   |   |
| do you have-   | CONCEDE (perhaps only POS 2)  |
| (attempts to reframe the request)                                    |   |
| 7 D less dialectal inFLUence   | SUP DIS 1 Varieties are less distinct                                       |
| I'm not from the South   | SUP DIS 2 Southern speakers are distinct                                    |
| AAVE forms and idioms exist  | SUP DIS 3 AAVE is lexically distinct  |

C's opening remarks seem to include no arguable positions; he justifies his request for information about AAVE by noting linguistic interest in it (and his friends know that he is a linguistics graduate student). D objects, however, and he makes it clear in 5-7 D that C's request for information about AAVE is full of unacceptable beliefs — an unacceptability only tersely expressed in 2 D, but with an intonation contour which clearly reveals something is amiss. In fact, disputes themselves are often very tersely expressed, and their detailed content can only be discovered from their supports or other material.

Although other things are presupposed in 1 C, those which prove important (i.e., ones made into positions by being disputed) are given in the right-hand column above: AAVE exists (POS 1); D (possibly his family) speaks it (POS 2), and it is a 'dialect' (POS 3). The disputes 'hidden' in 2 D question each of these. The requirement that positions be identified on the basis of their being disputed rather than on the basis of their being asserted is essential; none of the disputed elements is asserted. In this example, it is

obvious that a dispute itself may not contain sufficient information to establish what is disputed. Such identification is often delayed until support is given, particularly, perhaps, when non-asserted elements are disputed. In this example, D's supports will identify which positions of 1 C he disputes.

3 C acknowledges that 2 D disputes something or that something has gone wrong (with 'Heh'), but at the same time treats 2 D as a request for clarification ('Did you say "dialect"? 'Yeah'). In 4 All ((laughter)), however, everyone acknowledges further that something has gone amiss. C may believe that he has erred only by using the item *dialect*, and it may be that gaffe which he attempts to repair at 6 C with 'I mean,' but that is not certain since D takes the floor at 7 D before 6 C is completed.

5-7 D provide the detail which allows the specification of the disputes compressed in 2 D. 6 C, however, suggests that C knows that his mistake is deeper than his choice of the word *dialect*. 'Do you have' suggests (as 8 C and several subsequent moves in the conversation validate) that he is going to ask for examples. If this is the case, then C has perhaps already recognized the objection to his POS 2 — that D and his family are speakers of AAVE. One need not speak a variety to provide examples of it. D opens this longish stretch with a reassertion of dispute ('well'), strengthening, perhaps, the interpretation above that 3 C treats 2 D as a request for clarification rather than as a dispute. The first matter dealt with is the refutation of the belief in 1 C that AAVE exists (POS 1). D claims (in 7 D) that there is 'less of dialectual in- inFLUence,' a claim that distinct varieties (AAVE presumably among them) are on the wane. This support is supported by SUP/SUP DIS 1, an attempt to explain why linguistic diversity is decreasing. Schematically,

Improved communication and travel (SUP\SUP DIS 1)  
are the reason for the  
reduction of distinct varieties (SUP DIS 1)

which explains why  
 AAVE does not exist (DIS 1)  
 which disputes any claim or presupposition that  
 AAVE does exist (POS 1)

Although D does not mark them in this way, it is easy to paraphrase this chain of support using Schiffrin's *because* (1987) as a marker of subordinate moves: 'AAVE doesn't exist, because varieties are less distinct, because of improved communications.'

The next of C's non-asserted beliefs disputed is that D (perhaps his family) speaks AAVE, a belief encoded in the phrase 'your dialect.' D says that he is not from the South, and the beliefs which make that relevant are as follows: D has already claimed that AAVE doesn't exist due to reduction in linguistic variety, but even when varieties are minimized, the South is singled out as different (e.g., the prejudice against Southern English shown in Figure 4 above). Since it is an area where AAVE and presumably other varieties are distinct, D's claim that he is not from there is the support (SUP DIS 2) that ultimately identifies the second of C's objectionable positions (POS 2).

Finally, D's dispute of AAVE's dialect status is identified by SUP DIS 3. This support notes that whatever AAVE there is contains only forms and idioms — presumably insufficient features to make it a dialect. Nonlinguists' understandings of AAVE focus on slang and folk speech, and it is hardly surprising that folk linguistic awareness in general focuses on the word (as the review of Silverstein's work above suggests).

C 8 specifically acknowledges the validity of DIS 3 (and, by implication, SUP DIS 3) by asking for 'some' — presumably in reference to the forms and idioms of 7 D. This concession, however, refers only to the support — that AAVE has such structures, not to the positions which D has taken in his disputes (although within this framework, since they are not disputed, they are not technically positions). One might suggest that

disputes not specifically responded to are assumed accepted, but that would be an unwarranted assumption here. That resolution is not an obligatory structural unit in argument is supported by the conclusion of this first episode. The disputes of C's non-asserted positions are left unresolved in C's haste to get on with what he has come to see as the goal of the interview — getting examples of AAVE. The content of D's support of DIS 3 has allowed C to make that move. C's 'haste' could be criticized as 'interview-related,' but I am convinced that his moves do not spoil the naturalness of the conversation or, more importantly, the authenticity of the linguistic folk belief which the conversation provides instantiation of.

We cannot be sure what D was about to do in 10 D, but it is clear that R responds to C's request for an example in 11 R with 'What's happening?' This example triggers the next argument of the conversation, and what is disputed is perhaps even more deeply buried than the disputable parts of the first episode. In giving an example of C's request for a form or idiom, R has innocently done so, believing that the example she has given is authentic. 12 D disputes that (with *well*, again a minimally elaborated structure) and immediately supports the dispute with 'that's kind of old.' Schematically:

|                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| 11 R 'What's happening.' | POS 4 X is an authentic example of AAVE |
| 12 D Well                | DIS 4 X is not an example of AAVE       |
| 12 D that's kind of old  | SUP DIS 4 X is too old                  |

D's support seems flimsy, but it is related to DIS 1 and its support — AAVE is not distinct, for varieties are becoming less distinct in general, due to rapid and efficient communications. 'What's happening?' may have arisen in and once been an example of AAVE, but, due to the conditions D lists for the deteriorating of varieties, it was borrowed into other varieties and lost its distinctiveness.

Although this argument about the authenticity of the example is a new one, it is certainly related to the previous argument. In fact, the previous positions are especially relevant here since they have not been specifically accepted or refuted. The argument that included POS 1, however, does not continue here, because R 11 contradicts DIS 1 but does not directly dispute it. Similarly, 12 D agrees with DIS 1, SUP DIS 1, and perhaps even more directly SUP/SUP DIS 1, but since it does not directly support these earlier ideas, a new argument is tallied here, triggered by POS 4.

An interesting move might have developed if R had not been interrupted at 13 R; she agrees with D's contention that her example is old, but she apparently does not agree with his dispute of it as an authentic example (evidenced by the contrastive marker *but*). Nothing in the argument theory outlined above would prevent a speaker from disagreeing with the relationship of support to a position while accepting the claim of the support itself. Here, however, it may be that the rationale for D's DIS 4 support is so distant (SUP DIS 1 and SUP/SUP DIS 1) that R cannot access it, and she may believe that D objects just because her example is not in current use.

I believe this exercise in argument analysis shows how underlying folk belief may be extracted from conversation in a way that even a careful reading of the transcript would not allow. Identifying the precise positions, disputes, and supports, particularly those which are presupposed and whose identity can be retrieved only in discourse rather far removed from the physical marker of the move itself (e.g., 2 D's disputes embedded in the single word "Dialects"), has contributed to a better understanding of the linguistic folk beliefs which are in play here.

Argument analysis is not, of course, the only weapon in the arsenal of the student of folk linguistics. Narrative analysis (e.g., Labov and Fanshel 1977), ethnomethodological approaches to conversation (e.g., Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974), studies of topic and person reference and the deployment of old and new information (e.g., Preston 1993, 1994; Prince 1981), and a focus on foreground and background materials in discourse (e.g., Preston 1993, 1994) have all been used in looking at folk linguistic conversations in an attempt to dig more deeply into the folk theories of language which support the content of such talk.

Here is another discursal candidate for analysis, quoted from a southeastern Michigan middle-age, middle-class, female European-American respondent.

M: Yeah, ah see that - that's what upsets me. You can see a really - an educated Black person, I mean I- you know I don't care what color a person is. It doesn't matter to me. - And you can underSTAND them and you can TALK to them and - Look at on the news, all the news broadcasters and everything. They're not talking ((lowered pitch)) 'Hey man, ((imitating African-American speech)) hybyayhubyhuby.' You can't understand what they're saying. And - I just don't think there's any excuse for it. It's laziness and probably - maybe it is you know, because they are low class and they don't know how to bring themselves up or they just don't want to.

This is very clearly a discourse which has language (the unintelligibility of AAVE and the irresponsibility of those who speak it) as its topic. M's notice of AAVE is motivated

by two conditions already noted as common in folk linguistics: first, AAVE is different from her own variety (a linguistically internal reason) and, second, it is clearly not a prized or correct variety (a linguistically, or structurally, external reason). M also employs a performance to focus the listener's attention on the fact that AAVE is indeed unintelligible by providing a string of nonsense syllables, presumably an imitation of the acoustic affect AAVE has on M, but surely one she expects will ring true to her listener.

This brief folk linguistic comment also illustrates that a rich territory to mine for folk belief about language may be the presuppositions which lie behind such comment — the variety of unasserted folk beliefs which members of speech communities share. Linguists and philosophers alike agree that presuppositions form the backbone of mutual understanding among conversational participants.

Presuppositions are what is taken by the speaker to be the *common ground* of the participants in the conversation, which is treated as their *common knowledge* or *mutual knowledge*. (Stalnaker 1978:320, emphasis in the original)

It should go without saying that the deeper the sense of community or shared culture among participants, the more likely that enormous amounts of presupposed (and therefore usually unstated) beliefs will play an important role.

With this understanding in mind, let us return to M, who states very directly why some African-Americans speak a variety that she cannot understand — they are lazy. M may feel this is a little too blunt, for she goes on to excuse this behavior by noting that

such speakers are low class and don't know how to escape that situation, although she is also quick to add that it may be that "they just don't want to."

M further notes that "an educated Black person" can be understood and can be talked to (after the disclaimer that she does not care what color a person is), but she says she cannot understand other African-Americans (and she gives a little imitation of how they talk, which, except for "Hey, man," does not even consist of words).

Her first important folk claim is, therefore, that she cannot understand some varieties of African-American speech, but isn't this because M and speakers of AAVE simply do not share rule systems? Remember, M claims that she can't understand speakers of AAVE because they are "lazy." For her, the proof of this lies in the fact that many of them have not made any effort to learn her variety. She says "I don't think there's any excuse for it." What is "it"? Of course, "it" can only be the use of a variety which M cannot understand (at least within a social setting in which she believes she has the right to understand) or the failure to have learned such a variety. It might appear at first that she simply believes that speakers cannot be excused for using their native-language rule-system when there is another one around preferred by some.

How can M justify her belief that those who do not acquire another rule system are "lazy"? Isn't such acquisition difficult? In fact, many nonlinguists believe that standard English might be almost effortlessly acquired, and many find the standard variety to be the only embodiment of rule-governed behavior. The idea that nonstandard varieties are also rule-governed is a very strange notion to the folk since they are most often described by them as lacking rules. The relative ease with which speakers who have

no rules should catch on to a rule-governed system (i.e., a grammar) appears to be obvious to speakers like M.

It would be inaccurate, therefore, to suggest that M's underlying belief was that people with *different* rule systems ought to acquire hers. In fact, her belief is that people who behave in non-rule-governed ways should make the minimal effort to acquire an orderly way of behaving.

This is, of course, a most serious linguistic misunderstanding. No matter what language system another person in the world shows up with, it is a system. And, equally important, for those who know its rule system, it is just as efficient a device for communication and/or the organization of thought as any other language system, as William Labov has shown so convincingly in his 1969 article "The Logic of Nonstandard English." M's presupposition that nonstandard varieties have no rules, a fact clearly related to the predominant folk theory of language, at least in the US, is the basis for much of her diatribe against speakers of African American English.

There is, in addition, an alternative view of minority speakers which may cause even greater disparagement of such speakers than the "lazy" accusation we have just seen. In this view, they are simply recalcitrant because they already know good English but simply refuse to use it:

J: And I used to teach Black children. And I had a difficult time understanding what they were saying. And I found out later though that they were - it was intentional, because they could speak - like we speak. And they wer- because: I - was having difficulty with this o(h)ne little bo(h)(h)y. He was twe(h)lve. (.hhh)

And - I - was supposed to test him, for uh reading problems. And I couldn't understand what he was saying. And so I called uh the teacher next to me was Black. ( ) next to me. (.hhh) So I did go over and get her, and I asked if she would help me. (.hhh) And she came in and she- - just- said to him, she said 'You straighten up and talk - the right way. She's trying to help you.' ((laughs))

M would be even madder if she thought that all those people who were saying "Hey man, hybyayhubyhuby" could speak better but just refused to do so, but this is clearly what J has learned from her experience with a stubborn elementary school pupil (and she has been aided in this interpretation by a Black teacher, whom she regards as authoritative on the matter).

G, another schoolteacher, also voices the opinion that (apparently) *all* speakers know (somehow) the rules of standard English.

G: The children themselves - all of us at time may say the improper endings. We may say it. (.hhh) But we recognize it is somebody says to us 'Is it correct,' you say 'No,' you know, 'This is the correct way (to) speak.' (.hhh) But- to sit and TEACH it incorrectly I don't think is right. Cause you DO say 'I have gone,' You do not say 'I have went.'

G seems to believe that nonstandard usage is somehow recognized by its speakers. Of course, to the extent that such speakers have been instructed on the details of the contrast between nonstandard and standard grammar or to the extent that they have constructed a

contrastive grammatical analysis of their own on the basis of their exposure to both varieties, G may be in some small part right. But he appears to mean more than that. He appears to believe that there is some sort of innate recognition that nonstandard constructions are not right. Except for slips, then, which he recognizes, “there is no excuse” for the use of nonstandard varieties because we all know better.”

Of course, that is not so. We do not know the rules of a variety we do not know. If you are a speaker of some standard variety of US English, for example, try to imagine a situation in which everything you say or write will be judged and graded by how accurately it conforms to the rules of AAVE. After all, you have surely had a lot of exposure to it — from movies, TV programs, books, and even interpersonal communication. Most of us, however, would not fare very well. Among those who would get failing grades are those syndicated columnists in the US (both Black and white, by the way) who wrote about the 1996-7 Ebonics controversy, attempting to include examples of the variety. In fact, they performed miserably in AAVE. Most of their sentences would fall into the category “not valid examples of the variety in question.” Their pathetic attempts were perfect illustrations of the pervasive folk belief that AAVE (or any nonstandard variety) consists merely of breaking the rules of standard English (any of its rules, any way one chooses to break them). Admittedly, they seemed to use some silly strategy such as “sprinkle uninflected *be* widely throughout the discourse,” but that is simply further proof that nonstandard varieties in the minds of the folk are not really rule-governed.

Whatever the viable folk linguistic notions turn out to be, such discourse research is fruitful in folk linguistics because it relies on established analytic procedures, in these

cases on an analysis of the argument structure, one which outlined each position, support, and dispute as it arose, and on an analysis of presuppositions embedded in various discourses. These analyses allow situationally and culturally sensitive interpretations of the beliefs behind conversational content to be made. Folk linguistic investigations surely ought to involve further detailed analyses of talk about language, making use of the entire arsenal of discourse and conversation analytic tools now available to us.

Reconsider this earlier quotation from a folk respondent.

((In a discussion of Christmas, H has asked if there is any difference between *gift* and *present*; D has said earlier that there is not, but he returns to the question.))

D: Oftentimes a gift is something like you you go to a Tupperware party and they're going to give you a gift, it's- I think it's more impersonal, - than a present.

G: No, there's no difference.

D: No? There's real- yeah there's really no difference. That's true.

Maybe the way we use it is though.

G: There is no difference.

U: Maybe we could look it up and see what 'gift' means.

D: I mean technically there's no difference.

((They look up *gift* and *present* in the dictionary.)) (Niedzielski and Preston 2000)

If we focus on “there's really no difference” and “Maybe the way we use it is though,” we will come to the heart of an enormous difference between real people and linguists,

and, I hope, to a better understanding of the b' sorts of beliefs and theories which underlie folk expression about language.

When B tells us there is “really” no difference, he refers to a belief that the language is somewhere codified in a reality external to the human mind. When he notes that we “use” it in ways different from this codification, he refers to practices that, apparently for him, do not constitute the reality of the language.

Linguists, of course, believe very differently.

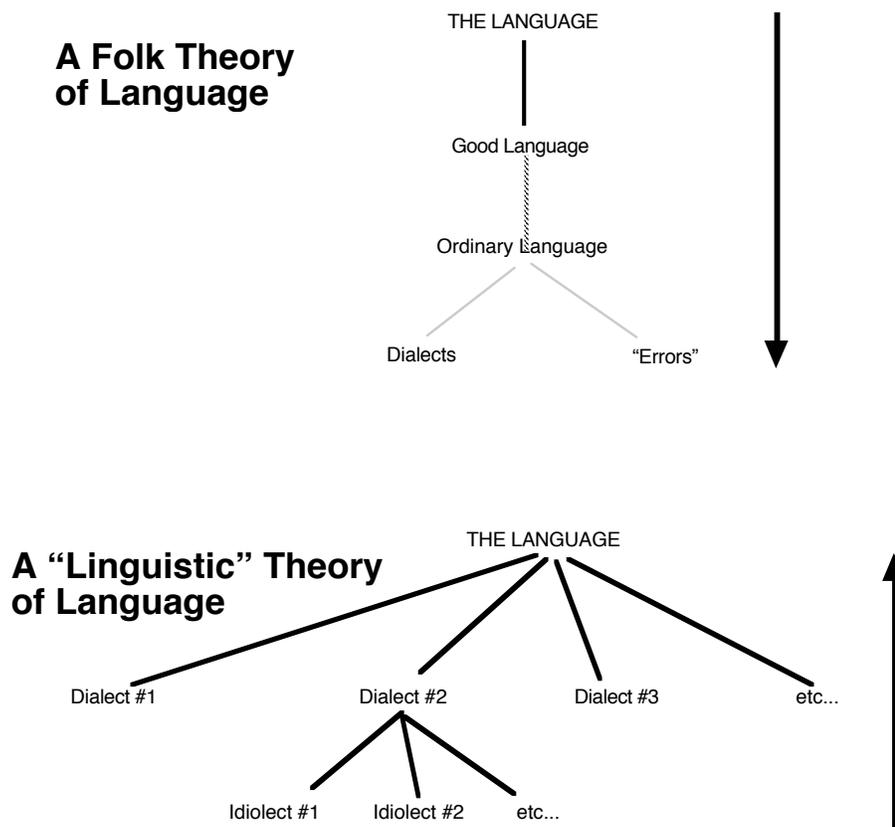


Figure 5. Folk and linguistic theories of language

Linguists have created an agreed-on but fictitious abstraction ('THE LANGUAGE') by pretending that there is a group of error-free, monodialectal, monostylistic speakers. The upward-pointing arrow shows that linguists know that the real basis of language, however, is embedded in the brains of individual speakers. The folk, however, appear to believe in their abstraction (also called 'THE LANGUAGE'), but the downward pointing arrow shows that, since they take it to be real, they also believe that individual language competencies somehow derive from it.

Linguists know, however, that varieties (in fact, idiolects themselves) are the only authentic cognitive examples of 'THE LANGUAGE,' and a linguist is just as happy to write the mid-level rules of Swiss German or Schwabian as he or she is to write the rules of so-called Standard German or Hochdeutsch. Any of these specific varieties is equally part of the basis for the abstraction "German"; for the folk, however, such varieties deviate from the single abstraction, an idealized but nevertheless real element for them.

Teachers of introductory linguistics will recognize another outcome of this folk belief: it is only the abstraction that is rule-governed; the deviations are not. The linguist's rules of African American Vernacular English or lower-class New York City English are nonsense for the folk. What rules could there be when the forms under discussion are simply failures to observe the rules of 'THE LANGUAGE'?

In the US, and I suspect in many other places as well, it is this top-down rather than bottom-up view of the very existence of "the language" itself that underlies a great deal of folk linguistic belief.

It not only explains much of what I have shown you but it also empowers at least

1) prescriptivism

- 2) a belief in the ease with which the standard variety may be learned
- 3) a belief that nonstandard varieties are unstructured
- 4) a belief that those who fail to learn the standard variety are inattentive or even recalcitrant

Finally, determining such an underlying theory of language for the folk allows us to re-evaluate and further pursue all the questions about and benefits of folk linguistics outlined at the beginning of this paper. I hope it will also inspire others to pursue their own local folk theories.

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