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ETHNIC VARIETIES

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They're complicated.
Affected by group definition & social
categories & dichotomized within

At first glance, it may appear that the association of language with ethnic group affiliation is one of the more obvious relationships between language and culture. Practically all of the approximately 6,000 languages of the world, for example, are strongly associated with an ethnocultural group of some type. But this initial transparency is betrayed by the fact that language is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for ethnic group membership (Fishman 1999). Like socio-cultural borders, linguistic boundaries are permeable, negotiated constructs typically defined more on the basis of sociopolitical and ideological considerations than on the basis of structural linguistic parameters. Even the dichotomy between 'language' and 'dialect' turns out to be based more on cultural and political issues than on mutual intelligibility or structural linguistic properties. Thus, Sino-Tibetan language varieties such as Cantonese and Mandarin are commonly referred to as **dialects** of Chinese even though they may not be mutually intelligible, whereas Norwegian and Swedish are considered to be different languages although speakers usually understand each other. In the former case, there is an overarching cultural unity that transcends linguistic typology whereas, in the latter case, there is a national political border that reifies minimal structural diversity in linguistic varieties. By the same token, sociopolitical struggles about language – such as those over the status of Afrikaans in South Africa, the role of French and English in Canada, or the legitimacy of African American English (so-called 'Ebonics') in the United States – are ultimately not about language, but about **ideology, identity,** and sociopolitical **power.**

complicated relationship

culture & political } *intelligibility & structure*

ideology (1) **identity** (2)

power (3)

DEFINING ETHNIC GROUP AFFILIATION

It is often difficult to separate **ethnicity** from other social factors such as historical background, region, **social class**, and other sociocultural **variables**. For example, the variety labelled Irish English may have a strong association with cultural background, region, and politics in the British Isles, and African American English in the United States is strongly linked to demographic racial categories, **social status**, and region. Invariably, ethnicity interacts with a wide array of other social, historical, and socio-psychological factors and is embedded within an intricate set of sociocultural relationships, processes, and identities. The notion of ethnicity is further complicated by the increasing number of 'mixed-ethnic' individuals and the social categories into which they may or may not fit as determined by the social

Ethnicity
 { background
 - religion
 - social class
 - region
 - etc.

hierarchies of society. Notwithstanding this array of social factors, communities in which local tradition acknowledges more than one ethnic group may expect ethnicity to be one of the factors that correlates with linguistic variation (Laferriere 1979).

The definition of an ethnic group usually involves the following kinds of parameters: (1) origins that precede or are external to the state; (2) group membership that is involuntary; (3) ancestral tradition rooted in a shared sense of peoplehood; (4) distinctive value orientations and behavioural patterns; (5) influence of the group on the lives of its members; and (6) group membership influenced by how members define themselves and how they are defined by others (National Council of Social Studies, Task Force on Ethnic Studies 1976). Though these criteria seem expansive, they still cannot ensure clearly defined ethnic categorization. In most cases, self-selection is as significant as any other criteria, thus leading Giles (1979: 253) to reduce the definition of an ethnic group to 'those who perceive themselves to belong to the same ethnic category'. At the same time, it is also important to recognize that ethnicity is defined by social practice rather than personal attributes. As Fought (2002: 445) puts it, it is 'not about what one *is* but about what one *does*' that is the primary basis for establishing ethnicity. The practice of ethnicity distinguishes this construct from demographic, institutionalized racial categories based on personal attributes, though some behavioural traits may be related to the segregation of groups based on these attributes.

ethnic group parameters

defined by society & self (complicated)

In constructing ethnicity, groups form subcultures within a larger culture using a variety of behavioural practices that include language. Although it might seem that the degree of linguistic distinctiveness is determined by extent of ethnic separation, this causative equation is far too simplistic. Historical circumstance, social hierarchy, patterns of internal and external interaction, and ideology all help determine the construction of ethnolinguistic identity.

ethnolinguistic identity construction

ETHNOLINGUISTIC DISTINCTIVENESS

Ethnolinguistic distinctiveness may extend from significant typological language differences to minute details of prosody or restricted lexical differences. In the case of different languages, speakers may make symbolic choices in their language use or manage code switching to signal ethnic identity (e.g. Zentella 1997), while in the case of intra-language variation the manipulation of particular phonological, morphosyntactic, or discourse variables may be used to signal ethnic affiliation. For the remainder of this discussion, we focus on intra-language ethnic varieties, since the examination of language choice in multilingual situations is worthy of extended study in its own right (see Chapter 18).

choices affect perceptions

There is both a subjective and an objective dimension to the study of ethnic varieties, but it is often difficult to separate them in determining the basis of ethnic differentiation. Do ethnic varieties exist because sociolinguists are able to correlate linguistic variation objectively with ethnic group affiliation or because the members of society perceive these differences under the conditions of everyday

intra-language ethnic varieties