VARIATION PROJECT

Some Background

VARIATION exists at all levels of language. It can be geographic in nature (e.g. Southern American English versus Northeastern American English; central Ohio English versus Northern Ohio English, etc.) or based on socio-economic background of speakers, their educational background, their attitudes towards matters linguistic and otherwise, the situation in which language use occurs (e.g. informal context versus formal context), etc. In addition, the variation can be from one speaker to another (e.g. in the pronunciation of *aunt*), or may be seen in variable forms produced by the same speaker (e.g. you might say *economics* sometimes with an [e-] and sometimes with an [i-] for the first syllable, or *either* sometimes with an [i-] and sometimes with an [aj-], without any clear reason for using one or the other).

All linguistic levels (“components” of the “grammar”) show variation:

1. Pronunciation (Phonology)

   e.g. • *aunt* pronounced as [ant] versus [ænt] (GEOGRAPHIC)
   • *-ing* pronounced as [-ɪŋ] versus [-ɪŋ] (SITUATIONAL in part, with *-in* pronunciation in more informal contexts where the other is inappropriate, and vice-versa)
   • *with* pronounced as [wɪθ] versus [wɪð] (VARIATION FROM SPEAKER TO SPEAKER, and WITHIN SPEECH OF SAME SPEAKER)

2. Word-Formation (Morphology)

   e.g. • creation and spread of new words, such as *flotel* ‘floating living quarters’ (fairly restricted in use) or *workaholic* (fairly widespread in use); some of these are akin to unconscious blends that are more like speech errors than anything else, e.g. Ronald Reagan in a debate once said *authonomy*, apparently slip of the tongue blending *authority* and *autonomy*, but one which, unlike other speech errors, gave rise to a conceivable new word in the language (one that is actually quite like a more consciously arrived at “blend” such as *flotel* or *brunch*)
   • variability in formation of past tenses, participles, and plurals, e.g. *criteria* versus *criterions*, *houses* pronounced as [hæwsɪz] versus [hɔuwzɪz], *seeked* versus *sought*, *dove* versus *dived*, *had* written versus *had* wrote, etc.

3. Construction of Sentences (Syntax)
e.g. • use of *who* versus *whom*, or *was* versus *were* in *if I was/were* (based to some extent on education but varies with SITUATION even among “educated” speakers, and with ATTITUDES towards “correctness” in usage playing a role)
• *nec* painted versus *needs* to be painted or *needs painting* ((largely) GEOGRAPHIC)

4. Word-Use (Meaning/Semantics, Lexicon)

  e.g. • use of *critique*, a noun for many speakers, as a verb, gives the word a new meaning
• *tonic*: in the Boston area means ‘soda pop’, while elsewhere in US it means ‘quinine water’, as in *gin and tonic* (GEOGRAPHIC).

The study of variation in language is crucial for the understanding of language change for two reasons:

I. **Variation often represents the beginning point for many changes.** We will see that sound changes often start as nondistinctive variation among a small group of speakers and that competition thus arises between variant pronunciations; the resolution of the competition in favor of one or the other pronunciation leads to a change throughout the speech community. The same holds for the adoption of new words and forms — they generally start out as variant forms and compete with an older form, and only become solidly entrenched with the resolution of the competition.

II. **Variation often is brought about by the regular processes of language change.** For example, the type of pattern regularization that led to English having its main plural morpheme as */-s/* (with alternants */-s*, */-z*, */-lz*) is at work today producing competing plurals such as *critic*s, *antennas*, etc.

*Your Assignment*

Over the next few weeks, you are to keep a record of variable aspects of language that you encounter, whether it is variation in pronunciation, in word-formation, in word-use, in sentence-construction, or something else linguistic (do NOT concern yourself with *spelling* variation, however). You may find that occasional speech errors (e.g. *authonomy* cited above) as well as a careful consideration of your own speech habits (e.g. do you always/ever use *whom* in places where it can be used, do you always say *with* the same way, do you ever create new words for a particular effect, etc.? ) will provide all the data you need, but as additional sources of examples, you might want to consider also the speech habits of people around you (family, friends, teachers, enemies, etc.) and radio and TV programs, as well as written forms of English (books, magazines, newspapers, etc.). When you hear or see something that strikes your ear (or eye) as interesting in some way, always ask yourself if you yourself would say that word or sentence in that exact manner; such observations will be a good starting point for your collection of relevant examples.

You should record the examples of variation you find in a systematic way. Note down the pronunciation you heard for a particular word, along with what you consider it to be a variant pronunciation of, as well as an indication of when you heard it (under what
For each item in your record, give a statement as to what factors determine the variation 
(regional, social, situational, or other). Try to see if it is just random variation or instead 
shows some regularity (e.g. do you always hear this person say X where you would say Y?). 
Comment on what you believe the bases and origins of this variation or novel usage are — 
has the speaker blended two words (as in the autbonomy example above), has the speaker 
made an unconscious association between words (an analogy, as for instance if one says 
pronunciation for pronunciation), is the speaker copying the pronunciation or usage of some 
other person or group, is the speaker trying to convey a particular impression through his/her usage 
(e.g. of greater education than the person actually has), and so on? Consult a 
dictionary (the third edition (1992) of the American Heritage Dictionary is very good in this 
regard) to see what the status of the variant pronunciation or usage is — is it listed in the 
dictionary as a possible form, or is it idiosyncratic to the speaker you heard it from? What 
does the dictionary say about it — is the variation an indication of a change in progress (e.g. 
a “trend” for the future)? If it is involves what you believe to be a regional word or expression, check it out in the Dictionary of American Regional English (edited by Frederic Cassidy). Relate your findings wherever possible to class discussion on variation. Add any other remarks you feel may be appropriate, such as how the new pronunciation or usage strikes your ear, or the like; e.g., is it a usage or pronunciation you have heard elsewhere? Is it one you would use or have used yourself? Note that you may not be able to comment on all of these things for each item, but try to make your entries as informative and insightful as you can. Try to avoid facile judgments (e.g. if you happen to know the speaker to be Jewish, 
it need not be the case that the usage you hear is characteristic of all Jewish speakers or is somehow a “Jewish English” feature (though it might be — if you suspect that to be the case, investigate it somewhat; do not just report your beliefs).

Each entry will thus constitute a separate paragraph in your final presentation.

You must have a variety of different types of examples in your collection (so you cannot 
give me only regional variation or only phonological variation); you should have examples 
from at least three (3) different linguistic levels and of at least two (2) different types 
(regional, situational, education-based, etc.).

Do not use examples that we bring up in class, unless you have something novel or different to add about them.

Grading

For this project, you will be graded on the following criteria:

1. the content of your entries
2. the clarity of your presentation
3. the extent to which you fulfill the requirements of what we want in a particular entry (see above)
4. the extent to which you show that you have put some thought and work into this assignment
5. the extent to which you relate your discussion to points brought out in class or made in the textbook regarding variation and its connection to language change.

Although the number of entries is less important than the actual content of your entries, try to aim for about 12 (or so) entries — a project with only five entries probably will not be very successful, for example. You need not restrict yourself to just 12; I give that only as a guideline figure.

Your finished project should be at least 5 double-spaced pages in length (handwritten papers are fine as long as they are legible) and is to be turned in on **Wednesday, February 22**. There will be absolutely no extensions and late papers will lose credit. We will discuss the results in class on that day, so be prepared to talk about what you have found.