Introduction & Variation

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[adapted from W. Haddican (Queens College) slides]

Outline

- Variation and Variables
- Variation and Knowledge of Language

Social Information

- When we hear someone talk, what kinds of information can we gather?

- Imagine you are talking to me (the professor) on the phone, what five (5) things can you tell about me by listening only to my voice?

Social Information

Imagine you are talking to me (the professor) on the phone, what five (5) things can you tell about me by listening only to my voice?

- English Language Dominant
- Adult
- Good mood
- Male
- Assertive

- Educated
- White/Caucasian
- Amiable
- New Yorker
- Enthusiatic
- Postitive

Variation and Variables

An experiment:
- Listen to the audio presented and make note of impressions about the speakers (e.g. where they are from, class, language background)

Text:

Please call Stella. Ask her to bring these things with her from the store: Six spoons of fresh snow peas, five thick slabs of blue cheese, and maybe a snack for her brother Bob. We also need a small plastic snake and a big toy frog for the kids. She can scoop these things into three red bags, and we will go meet her Wednesday at the train station.

Variation and Variables

An experiment:

Variation and Variables

So, we infer lots of different social information about speakers based on their voices:

1. Personal: "personality" related features (e.g. pitch)
2. Stylistic: formal/informal
3. Social: class, ethnicity, age, regional background
4. Sociocultural factors: discourse/conversational practices
5. Sociological factors: how language is related to other kinds of social meaning (e.g. *tu/vous* use).

We map variation in speech onto these categories.

Group Discussion

1. How would you describe your accent in English?   Do you have a New York City accent in English? A general American accent?   Is your accent influenced by another language that you speak? If you speak another language, how would you describe your accent in that language?

2. How does a "typical" New Yorker talk? Can you imitate this way of talking? What exactly makes it different from other accents of English?

VARIABLES

Variables

Labov

• An important theoretical tool that sociolinguists use in studying variation is the *linguistic variable* (Labov 1972)—a linguistic unit with identifiable *variants*.

• A variable is typically denoted in parentheses, e.g. (t), (r).

Variables

• Language is a *mapping* of sound-meaning (gesture-meaning, grapheme-meaning) correspondences.

• A *variable,* then, is a single unit of meaning with two different sound (gestural/graphemic) realizations. These different realizations are called variants.

d[ʊə]g

<

d[ɔ]g

(phonological)

Variables

How old is she do you think?

How old do you think she is?

(syntactic)

lightning bug

firefly

(lexical)

It don't look too sunny.

It doesn't look too sunny.

(morpho.)

Variables

• Because of this, variationists often talk of a *variable* as involving "semantic equivalence." Another kind of variation is a single unit of sound with more than one interpretation. The notion *variable* is not typically applied to this variation.

> *Mouse*

Variables

• Now, with a neighbor or two, think of 2 examples each of:
- syntactic variables
- morphological variables
- phonological variables
- lexical variables
- Orthographic variables

Lexical Variables

- (hero) = {sub, hoagie, deli sandwich, po'boy, hero}
- (WANT) = {bid-, ARD, baya, 3ayiz}
- (mobile) = {smart phone, cell phone, cell, mobile, phone}
- (elevator) = {lift, elevator}
- (television) = {television, TV, telly, tube, TiVO, Roku}

Orthographic Variables

- (gray) = {grey, gray}
- (shop) = {shoppe, shop}
- (center) = {center, centre}
- (neighbor) = {neighbor, neighbour}

Phonological Variables

- (coffee) ={[cɔfi],[cɑfi]}
- (bagel) ={[beɪgəl],[bægəl]}
- (potatoe) ={[pəteɪtoʊ],[pətɑtoʊ]}
- (bag) ={[bæg],[bɛəg]}

Morphological Variables

- ({cactus}+{PL}) = {cactus-es, cact-i}
- ({fish}+{PL}) = {fish-ø, fish-es}
- ({ox}+{PL}) = {ox-ø, ox-es, ox-en}
- ({child}+{PL}) = {child-s, child-ren}
- ({people}+{PL}) = {people-ø, people-s}
- ({food}+{PL}) = {food-ø, food-s}
- ({1s.Poss}) = {mine, mine's, my}
- ({see}+{PST}) = {seen, saw}

Syntactic Variables

- To school I go ~ I go to school
- Where are you from? ~ From where are you?
- Are you OK? ~ You OK?
- John and Mary kissed ~ Mary and John kissed ~ John kissed Mary ~ Mary kissed John
- Est-ce que ~ verb inversion

VARIATION

Variation

So, it seems that the ways in which languages may vary are unbounded…subject to constraints imposed by the human language faculty!

"Strong islands":
(1) I saw Samantha and Ines.
(2) You saw Samantha and who?
(3) *Who did you see Samantha and__?

Variation

• Language is an important way that social meaning is *constituted*. In other words, one way we make social meaning is through language.

Variation

Labov

• One of the accomplishments of the last 40 years of work on linguistic variation has been to show that variation is *structured*.

• We *all* exhibit variation in our speech, but this variation is socially and linguistically constrained.

Variation

• So, it's not the case that anything goes in variation!

• Variation is systematically constrained linguistically and socially. This is called *orderly heterogeneity* (or *structured variation*).

• How can we explain this pattern?

• Speakers themselves have some knowledge of how variation relates to *social differences*.
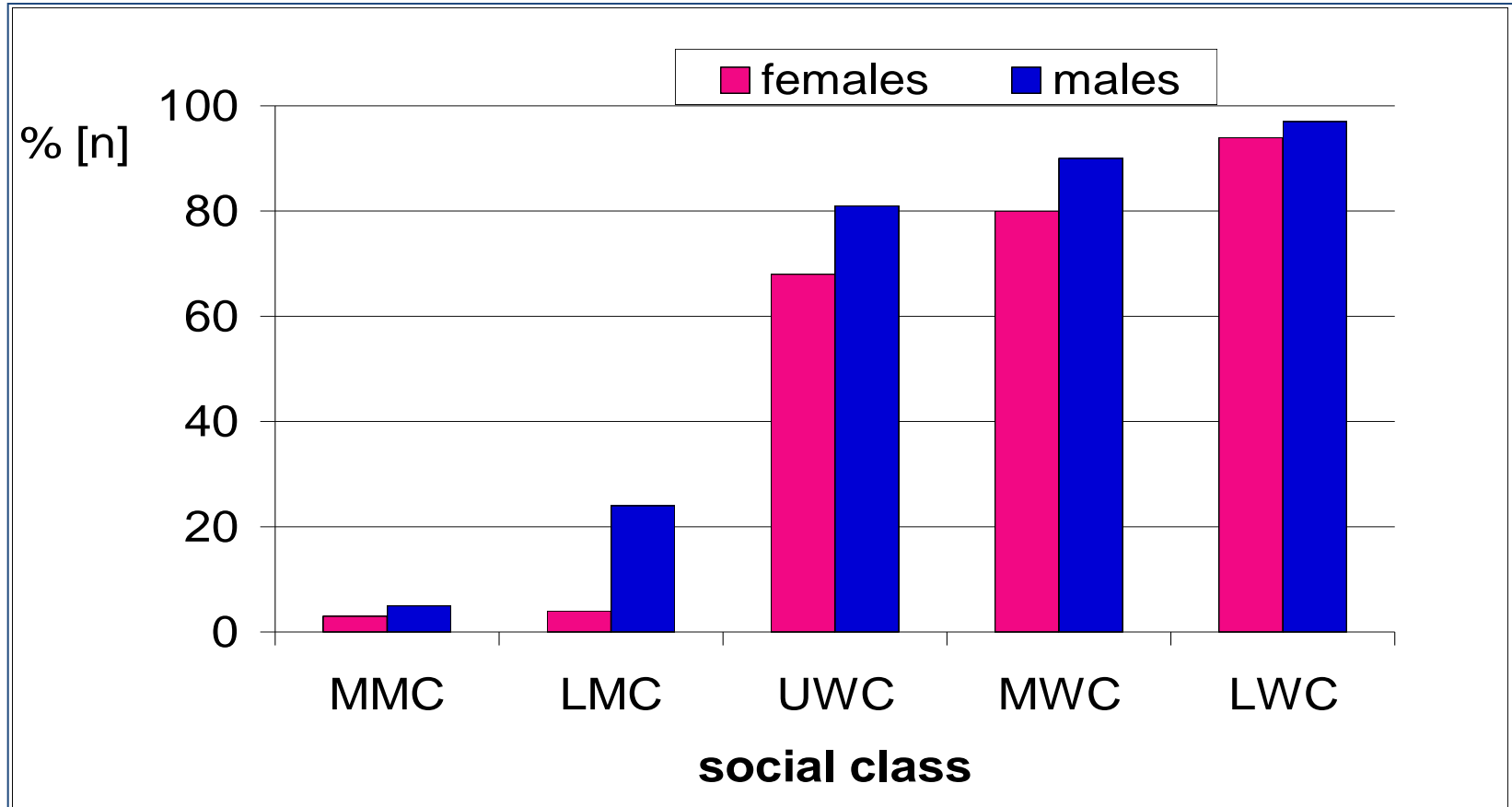
Examples of Systematic Variation

- ING x social class
- R-dropping x attention to speech
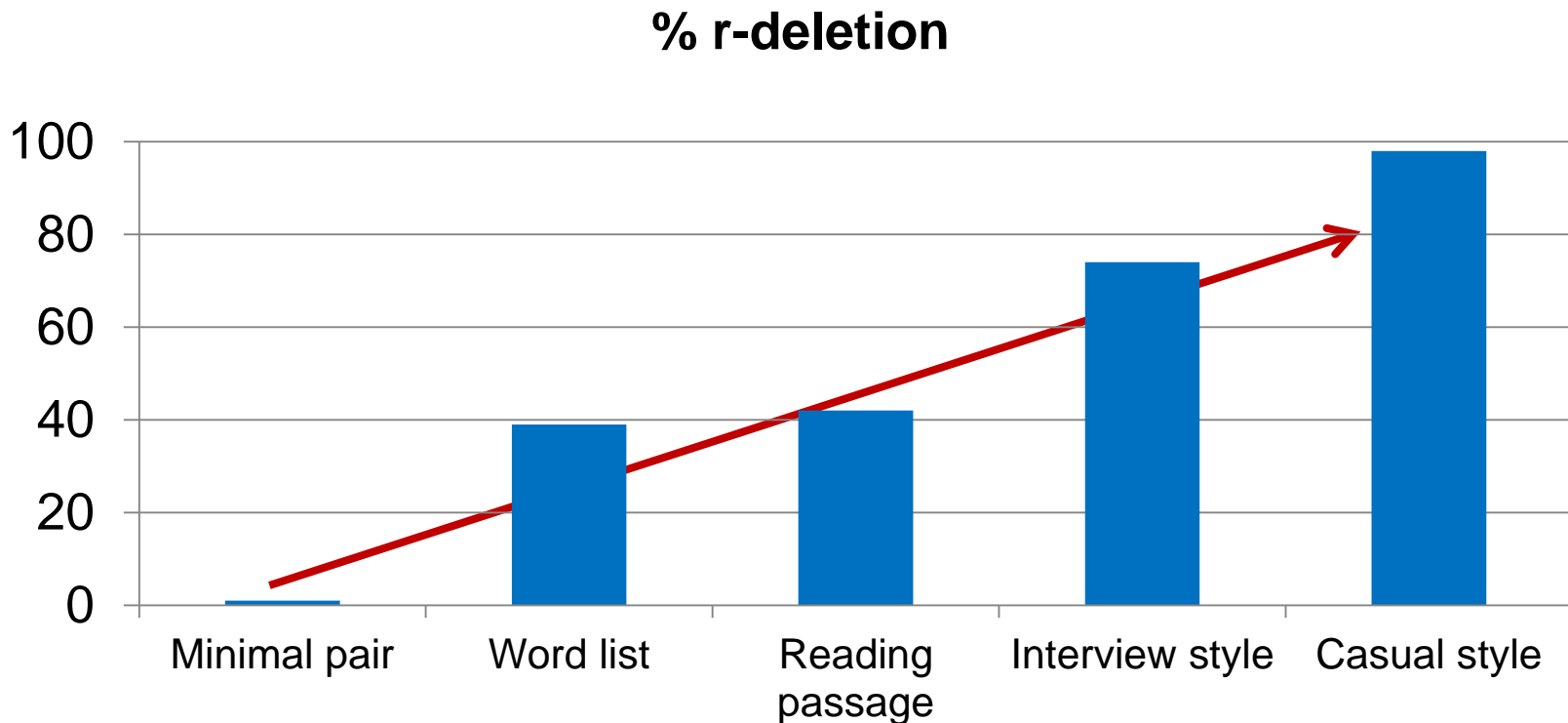- ING x topic x sexuality
- t/d-dropping x phonological environment

Variation

- Norwich English (Trudgill 1974)
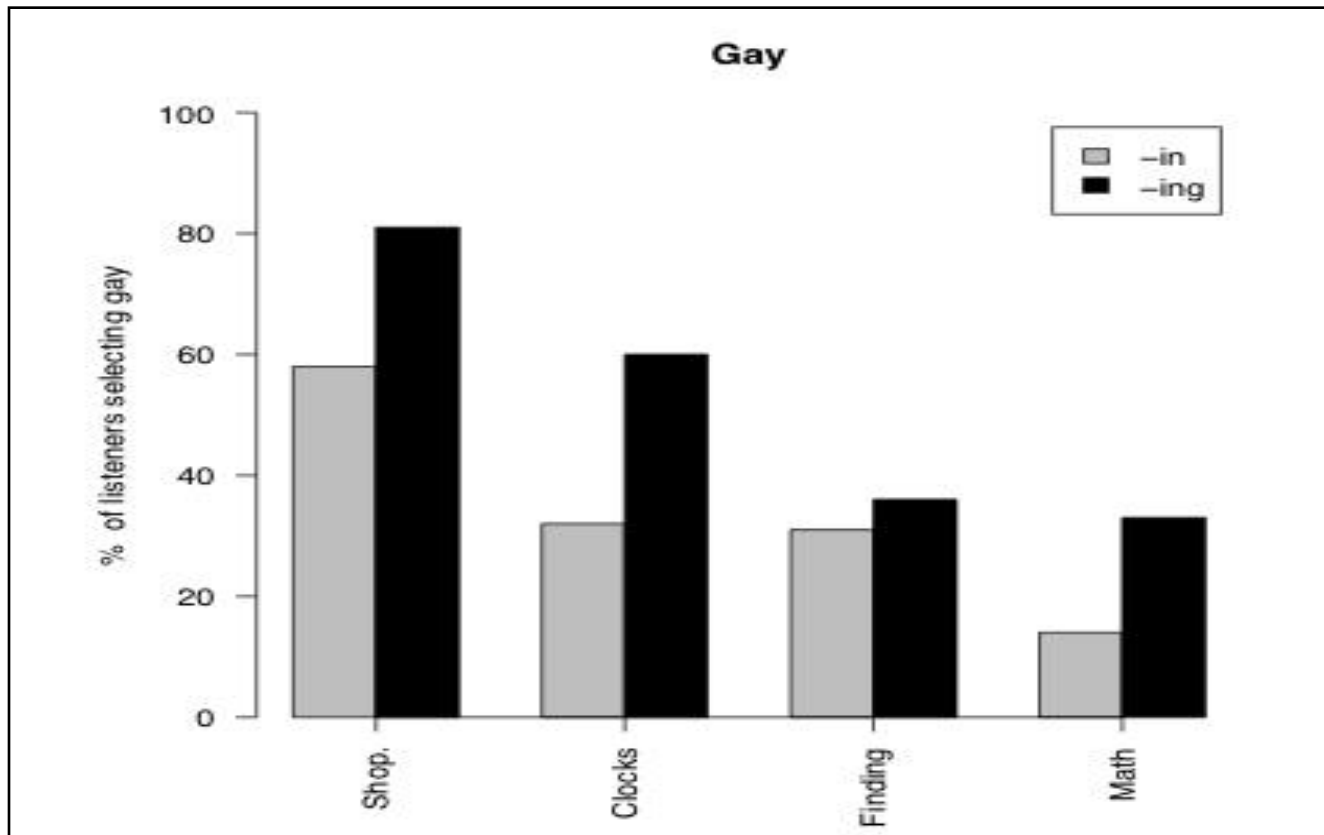- Use of [n] in gerund endings, *-ing:* walki[n], talki[n] etc.

Variation

- Susan Salto's (r) index for five styles (from Chambers 2003)

- Ca[r] vs. ca___

% r-deletion

Variation

- (ING) and perceptions of "gayness" (Campbell-Kibler 2005)

Variation

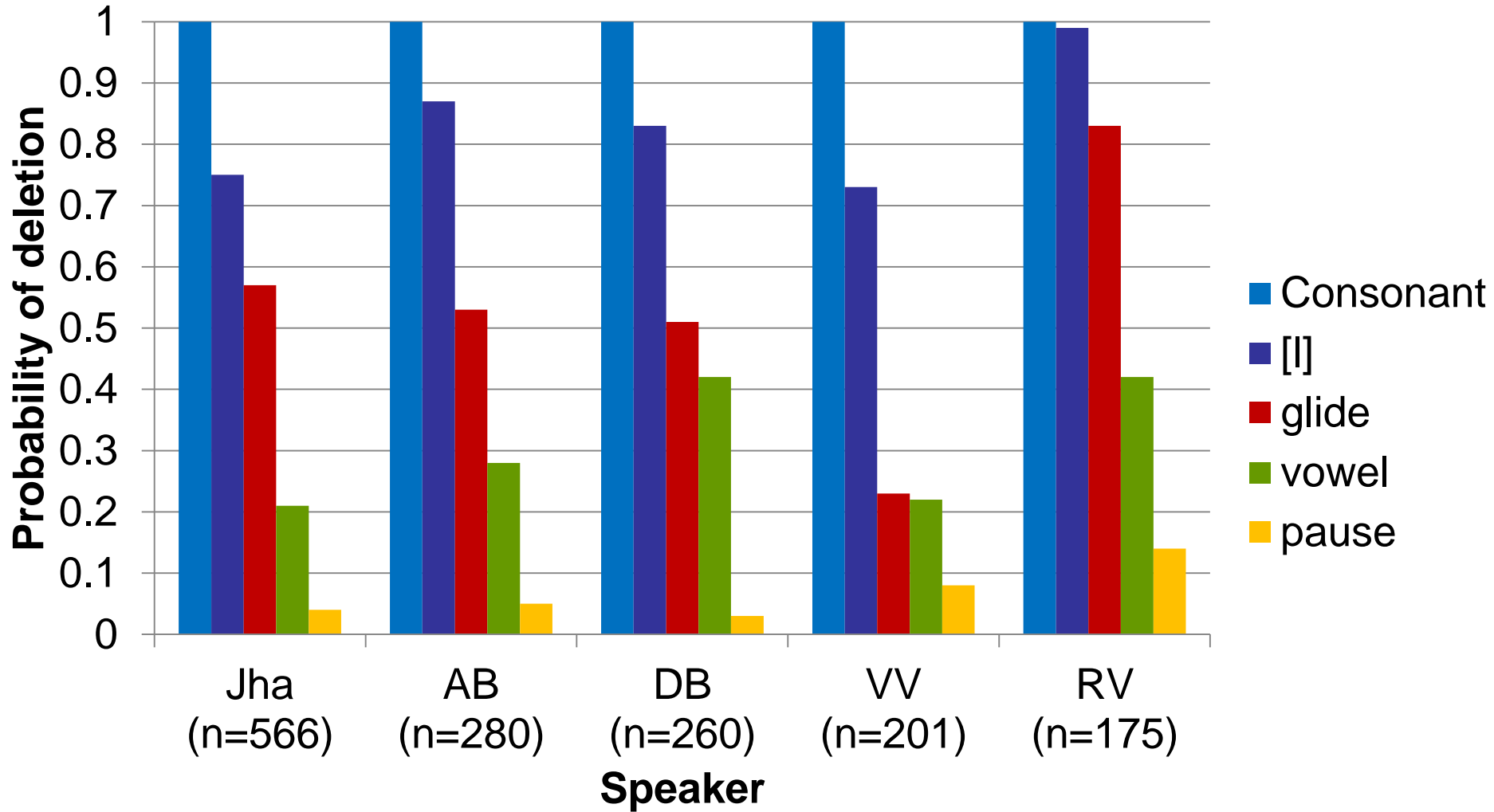• Philadelphia -t/-d deletion (Guy 2008)

(8) West vs Wes__
(9) Cold vs. Col__

• How does the following sound affect deletion?
(10) West end vs. West coast
(11) Cold afternoon vs. Cold beer

Variation

Variation

• So, it seems that social knowledge of language use in a community— knowledge of *who speaks how*--is an important part of speakers' *knowledge of language*.

• These studies also show that speakers have some knowledge of the probability of use of variants in different contexts!

Variation Recap

- Variation is structured, not random
- Variation is systematically constrained socially and linguistically.
  - A principal goal of sociolinguistics is to characterize this regularity and to infer lessons from it about the human knowledge of language.
- An important theoretical tool for studying variation is the *linguistic variable*.
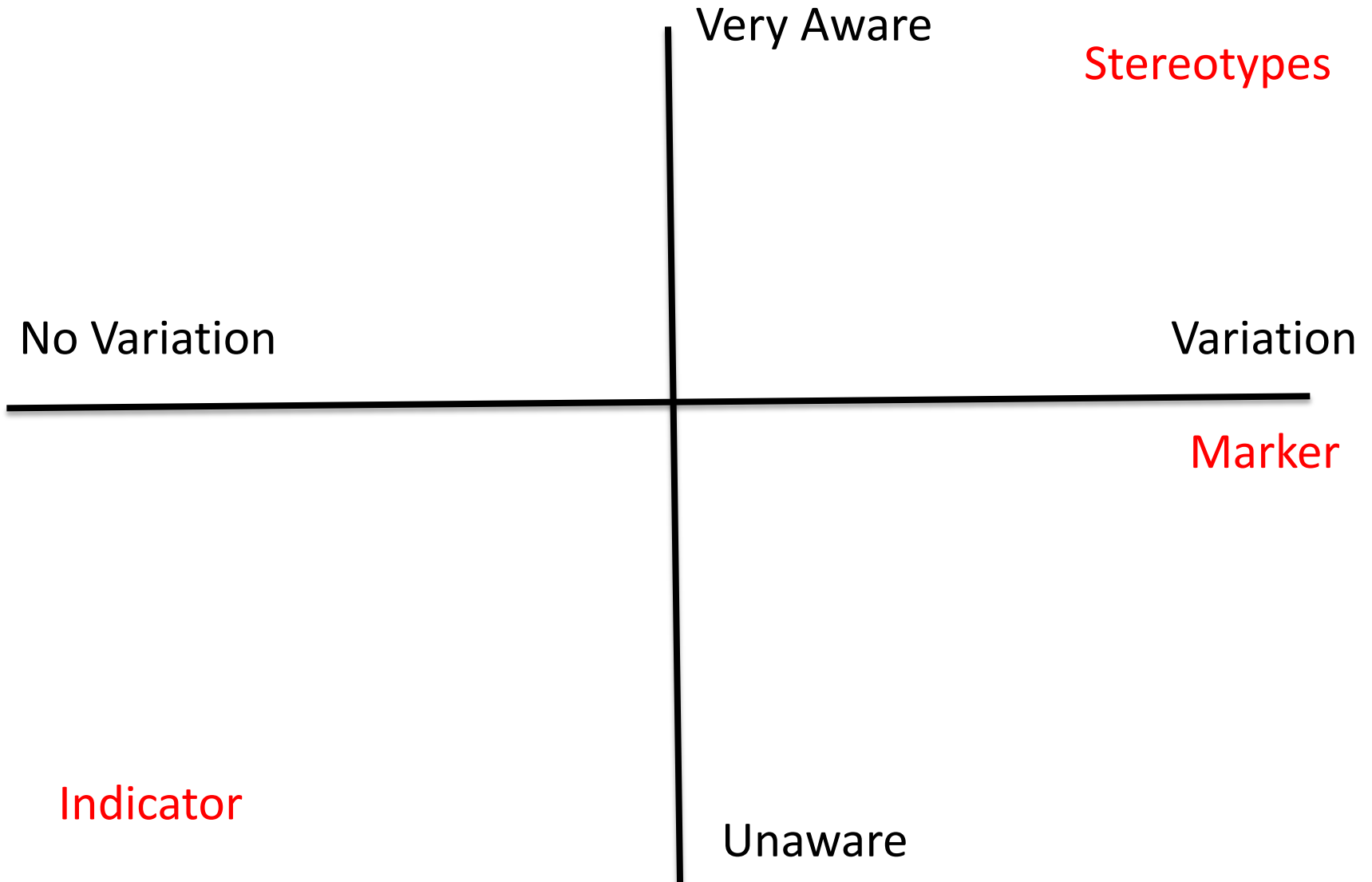
Manipulation of Variables

- Variables vary in terms of how aware the speakers are of them
- They can be manipulated/vary

Types of Variables

- Stereotypes
  - Widely recognized
- Marker
  - Less aware, but shows style effects
- Indicator
  - Not aware, can't control
- With your group, come up with two examples of each

Types of Variables

Stereotypes

- CA English: Prosody
- Texas English: "howdy" use
- Southern English: "y'all" use
- Gay American English: lisping
- Spanish L2 English: adding /e/ to beginning of words
- Chinese L2 English: adding vowels to end of consonant final words

Marker

- CA English: frequent use of "like"
- NYC English: [cɔəfi]
- Southen English: speech rate
- R-less English: ider, warsh, canader
- East Coast American English: voiceless labiovelar approximant conservation

Indicator

- CA English: high back vowel fronting, lax high front vowel tensing

- Female English: Uptalk

- Colombian Spanish: voiceless stop aspiration

- English L2 Spanish: voiceless stop aspiration

- Arabic L2 English: voiceless bilabilal stop voicing

Why Vary?

- What causes speakers to use this variation?

- Why might you change the way that you speak?

Why Vary?

- Group
  - Speech Community
  - Group membership
  - Audience
- Association with a value
- Language Attitudes
- Cost avoidance
- Reduce uncertainty
- Indexing

Indexing

- Indexing
  - Signal some bit of information using a specific variable
    - Group membership
- Can be indirect
  - Think about this in terms of a web of associations

Indirect Indexing

- What are some things that are indirectly indexed by:
  - Class
  - Race/Ethnicity
- What are these indices also generally associated with?
- If the associations {Y,Z} help constitute what it means to be X, then what can we say that {Y,Z} indirectly index X.

References/Further Reading

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