found. Morphological and syntactic variation also exists, though evidence about variation at these levels of the grammar is scanty. What holds true of variation in English, French, and Spanish presumably holds true of similarly structured communities speaking other languages, although here, too, evidence is scanty.

The Language Varieties of Women and Men

You know that in many speech communities women and men don’t speak identically. In the United States, certain words are associated more with women than men and may “sound” feminine as a result. Adjectives such as lovely, darling, and cute may carry feminine associations, as do words that describe precise shades of color, such as mauve and chartreuse.

In some languages, the differences between women’s and men’s speech are more dramatic than in English. In informal situations among speakers of Japanese, even the first-person pronoun ‘I’ differs for women (atasi) and men (boku). In French, je is the first-person pronoun for men and women, but because adjectives are marked for gender agreement, Je suis heureux ‘I am happy’ identifies a male speaker, while Je suis heureuse identifies a female speaker.

Reports of striking differences between gender varieties have been reported for Chukchee (spoken in Siberia) and for Thai. In polite Thai conversation between men and women of equal rank, women say diët好坏 while men say pʰõm for the first-person singular pronoun ‘I.’ Thai also has a set of particles used differently by men and women, especially in formulaic questions and responses such as ‘thank you’ and ‘excuse me.’ The polite particle used by men is kʰr ço, while women use kʰá or kʰа. Because these politeness particles occur frequently in daily interaction, speech differences between men and women can seem highly marked in Thai, despite the fact that few words are so differentiated.

There are also more subtle differences between men’s and women’s speech, the kinds of quantitative differences we saw between other social groups. For example, in Montreal, where professionals delete /l/ from articles and pronouns less frequently than laborers do, men and women also differ in pronouncing these same words. Figure 11-19 on page 378 shows that men delete /l/ more frequently than women for il (personal, as in il chante ‘he sings’), for elle, and for the pronouns les and la.

Patterns in which women delete sounds less frequently than men also appear in New York City and Norwich. In these cities, when higher socioeconomic classes behave linguistically in one way to a greater extent than lower ones, women tend to behave like the higher socioeconomic groups to a greater extent than men do.

In English, besides vocabulary differences, more subtle linguistic differences between the sexes can go largely unnoticed. One study examined the pronunciation of the -ing suffix in words like running and talking. In a semirural New England village, the speech patterns of a dozen boys and a dozen girls between the ages of 3 and 10 showed that, even in such young children, all but three used both alveolar [n] and velar [ŋ] pronunciations for verbal -ing. Interestingly, twice as many girls as boys showed a preference for the /ŋ/ forms, as shown below.
Chapter 11
Language Variation Among Social Groups: Dialects

What this analysis suggests is that differences between males and females in language use may seem surprising, given that girls and boys in this New England village (as generally in Western societies) face-to-face contact with each other. A separation in the communication channels, suggested earlier as a motivating factor in the differentiation of dialect speech patterns, does not appear to explain this case. What, then, is the explanation?

Masculinity and the Toughness Factor

There’s evidence for the prestige of *running* and *talking* pronunciations over pronunciations that “drop the g.” Here are two facts. (1) English speakers who use both variants (that’s virtually all of us) “pronounce the g” more often in situations of greater formality. (2) Social groups with higher socioeconomic status pronounce it more than boys and men do. One explanation may be that women are more status conscious than men—sociologists have found that to be the case in other arenas, so it wouldn’t be surprising. But linguists suggest an additional reason. Think of it as the “Toughness Factor.” Boys and men may associate pronunciations like *runnin’* and *talkin’* with working-class “toughness”—and that connection apparently outweighs any link to prestige. You could say that preferring the less prestigious pronunciation marks “masculinity.” Now, you might object that using the term “masculinity” to explain linguistic behavior of boys and men seems to beg the question. After all, what’s gained by calling a pronunciation “masculine” just because men use it more than women? Well, masculinity and femininity are not the same thing as male and female. Sex differences (male and female) are biological, and language differences don’t reflect biology. Instead, they reflect the sociocultural phenomena of gender—what it means to be male or female. You’re aware of gender differences marked by clothing, hair length, body decoration, and jewelry use. (“Wear some earrings, for God’s sake,” the mother of Emma Thompson’s character in the movie “The Winter Guest” tells her after she’s cut her hair short. “Let folks know you’re a woman!”) So you shouldn’t be surprised that language also reflects the important social identity of gender roles. It will be interesting to track how much the ongoing efforts to equalize gender roles in Western societies may mute differences between masculine and feminine pronunciations and other patterns of speech!

Why Do Stigmatized Varieties Persist?

You may wonder why speakers don’t give up their stigmatized varieties for more prestigious ones. The explanation seems to lie in the fact that a person’s identity—as a woman or man, as an American or Australian, as a member of a particular ethnic or socioeconomic group—is tied into the speech patterns of the group he or she belongs to. To change the way you speak is to signal changes in who you are or how you want to be perceived. For a New Yorker transplanted to California, speaking like a Californian is to relinquish some identity as a New Yorker. To give up speaking African-American English is to relinquish some identity as an African American. To give up working-class speech patterns acquired in childhood is to take on a new identity. In short, to take on new speech patterns is to reform oneself and present oneself anew.

Language is a major symbol of our social identity, and we have seen how remarkably fine-tuned to that identity it can be. If you wish to identify with “nonnative” regional, socioeconomic, or ethnic groups and have sufficient contact with them, your speech will come to resemble theirs.

We can illustrate with a telling investigation of linguistic and social identity on Martha’s Vineyard, an island off the coast of Massachusetts. There the vowels */æ/ and /a:/ have two principal variants, with the first element of each diphthong alternating between *æ* and the more centralized vowel *æ*. Words like *night* and *why* may be pronounced *[æ]or [æ]*; words like *shout* and *how* may be pronounced with *[aː]* or the more centralized diphthong *[aː]*. These variants are not typical dialect features; they don’t reflect gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. Instead, vowel centralization represents identity with traditional values of the island and its life. The up-island residents...