

Unit 2

Conventions in Language Use

Instructional Objectives

Upon completion of this unit, you are supposed to be able to:

1. describe the concept of a **convention**;
 2. identify different levels of formality in language;
 3. define dialects and explain how they are formed;
 4. explain what causes different accents and consider how people feel about accent.
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WHAT ARE CONVENTIONS?

In a language, there is a typical pattern of behavior (it can be called language convention since ‘language’ in a broader sense includes gestures). A convention may be roughly defined as a rule of behavior, or an expected way of doing things. All societies have important conventions, or rules, with respect to both behavior and speech. Some rules of behavior, for example, include ways of greeting other people, respecting seniors, treating children, showing attitudes towards teachers, etc. Speech is also ruled out, for example, in terms of choices of language functions, diction, etc.

Concretely speaking, if you happen to pass a house where Fijian people are eating, they will probably call out:

“Mai kana! (Come and eat.)

You can comfortably reply:

“Vinaka Ausa kana oti! (It’s all right thanks—I have eaten)

Then, you just keep walking. Such an invitation is a kind of greeting. It is a social convention—a very pleasant one. Although people normally refuse the invitation, they are also welcome to accept it.

It is quite different in English where people commonly greet others with “How are you?” Although this might appear to be an inquiry after your health, the convention is that you simply say something like “Fine, thanks.” — even if you are feeling terrible. You do not give a detailed health report—unless, perhaps, the person asking the question is a doctor.

Task 2-1

Make an informal observation about people in your neighborhood, noting down how they greet each other. Make a dialogue and give the English translation (as in the case of Fijian).

Learning about the Conventions

From Task 2-1, you are probably aware that when you learn a language after you have learned your **mother tongue**, you will encounter problems. How do you acquire the social rules or conventions of the language you are learning? It is not at all easy to learn **what** to say, but the real problem is to learn when and where to say it, as well as what **behavior** is appropriate—especially when you do not have the culture around you to learn from.

Say, for example, in shaking hands. There are many conventions associated with the simple act—depending on the conventions of the culture where it takes place. Consider the following issues.

- Do women shake hands? If so, are the circumstances in which they can do it restricted?
- Who initiates the handshake?
- Is it done when people greet each other or when they are parted?
- Are both hand used?
- What words accompany the handshake?
- Are there occasions where handshake is not appropriate?

With respect to the Indonesian context, English is a compulsory subject in school settings. Many kinds of teaching materials have been developed and used in class. It is relatively easy for the students to find examples of the English language, but then, it is more difficult to find the examples in the ‘cultural context’ of the English language. For this reason, they might not be aware of the conventions associated with English language use—such as who shakes hands with whom, in what situation and so on.

It is argued that, since English in Indonesia is a foreign language, the ‘English’ cultural conventions might not be so important. But, it is! In fact, this is a point which needs to be carefully considered. In the example above (in Fiji), people may use the dialogue (“*Mai kana*” etc.) in English. So this is an example of where Fijian conventions carry over into English language use.

Task 2-2

With reference to Task 2-1 above, is it possible to have Javanese or Indonesian conventions carried over into English language use? If it is, give sample dialogues with relevant contexts. If it is not, Why? Justify your answer.

Mini Survey 2-1

Based on the above issues on handshake, develop interview questions in your first language. Ask the questions in your neighborhood, selecting three groups of people, (1) aged between 15-30 years old, (2) aged between 35-45 years old, and

(3) aged between 50-60 years old. See if they have different perceptions on handshake. Report your interview in English (Max. 2 pages).

Who Decides on Correctness?

To answer the above question, it is logical to assume that ‘correctness’ in language use is determined by the language users themselves. This does not mean that people sit down to regulate what is correct and what is not. Instead, through their shared knowledge and use of the language, and through their use of certain codes for communication, they make agreements on:

- grammatical correctness
- vocabulary choice
- pronunciation, and
- changes to the language

Despite the fact that the agreement is not formal, it indicates successful communication upon mutual understanding between the message encoder and decoder — say for instance if one person chooses to use certain words to convey a message. In other words, the language users follow certain agreed set of rules about the language.

At one time or another, however, there might be occasions where the previously agreed rules are broken, but communication still manages to take place. For example, you will for sure understand the following sentence, but is it ‘correct’?

My sister loved the man who I had lived with for years.

Most native speakers of English today would probably say that it is correct. But a few years ago there would have been strong arguments about it. Some—perhaps older, more conservative—speakers would have said it should be:

My sister loved the man with whom I had lived for years.

Today, *whom* is almost never used in speech and is less and less used in writing. The users of English have dropped it from the language. Thus it can be said that they have agreed to a change in the use of the word. Similarly, changes in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar are going on all the time in all languages. Languages are therefore living and changing systems. They change over time and distance.

Mini Survey 2-2

Conduct an informal survey (library or field research) on some changes (in pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar) of a language over ‘time’ and ‘distance’. Note that you have to be familiar with the language you are surveying or be a native speaker of that language.

Different Social Levels of a Language

In addition to the above aspects of agreement in language use, there is another aspect of language convention, namely social levels of a language. People use different social levels of a language at different times and in different places. The main two social levels of language include:

- **casual**—for example, we say ‘*Hi*’ in casual situation, to greet someone we know well; and
- **formal**—for example, it is normally more appropriate to say ‘*Good morning*’, ‘*Good evening*’ etc., when greeting someone of a higher social status or in other **formal** situation.

In general, spoken language tends to be informal as you probably have noticed that written language tends to be more formal than speech. It should be noted, however, that different languages have certainly different ways of expressing social levels. And those differences depend on the social context. In Samoan, for example, the sound /k/ is used in casual language and replaced by /t/ in more formal situations. So, the word ‘*loku*’ is the same as ‘*lotu*’ meaning *church*, depending on when and where each word occurs.

There are of course some other kinds of social levels in language as well as **formal** and **casual**, but it is not necessary to discuss at the moment. The important thing to remember is that in teaching English as a foreign language:

- the **social context** is missing from the classroom; yet
- language has **social** and **grammatical** rules (e.g. when is *Hi* more appropriate than *Good morning*’)

It is necessary to think of ways of communicating the social rules to the students where appropriate. For example, school leavers are often criticized for using very **informal** or casual language in their letters of application for jobs; it may be that they did not get informed of the importance of using the appropriate form of language in particular situations, especially with respect to formal and informal use of English.

Task 2-3

Write two dialogues (in your first language) locating the difference between casual and formal use of language. Create possible contexts to accomplish the task.

DIALECTS

Many languages have dialects; even what is claimed to be the standard language, it is actually only one of the dialects of that language. What is a dialect? A **dialect** is one variety of a language used by a group of people in the same general language group.

The different dialects within a language are clearly related to the one language. Therefore, they are at one time or another called **language varieties**.

How do Dialects Differ?

The main differences between a dialect and other varieties in the same language group include the differences in:

- the words
e.g. New Zealand or British English: *bloke* (meaning *man*)
- the grammar
e.g. English in Northern England: *I were walking along the road.*
North standard English: *Did you eat yet?*
And / or
- the pronunciation of words
e.g. North American English for *dance* [dæns]
British standard English for *dance* [da:ns]

Such differences do not necessarily mean that these dialects are different languages. A dialect simply has different words or meaning of words, and different ways of pronouncing some of the same words in relative comparison with other varieties of the language in question.

Is it easy to identify a dialect? It is, especially when the dialect is spoken. It is identified through the way people pronounce. Most significantly, common dialect variations are in the vowel sounds, and all words contain vowels. However, it is not always easy to spot a written dialect unless words with different spellings and grammatical forms appear in the text (such as *color* for American English and *colour* for British and Australian English; *I don't have* for American English and *I haven't got* for British English). In the case of a language with the same spelling for every word and the same grammatical forms, it is not at all easy to identify the dialects of a particular language.

It is important to note that there is no **right** dialect, or no one that is **better** than the others. In other words, each dialect is an equally good form of a particular language, and each dialect has its own conventions. In studying language, we no longer talk of what should be said; we talk about what is said.

Mini Survey 2-3

Try to investigate one language by informally interviewing the students in campus who are assumed to have different dialects within the same language. Report the differences in terms of vocabulary, pronunciation, and possibly grammar.

How Are Dialects Formed?

The greatest factor that helps form a dialect is geographical factor. People who speak the same language but live in different geographical locations will form their own dialects. However, it should be noted that different dialects do not have

to come from different countries (such as the case American and Australian English). In Java Island (with reference to East and Central Java), for example, there are quite a number of different dialects of Javanese. In such a case, the language has **regional** dialect.

ACCENTS

Accent or pronunciation, it is argued, is an aspect of language conventions which many people have strong opinions about. People from the same place and / or with the same language background usually have similar accents. An accent can be identified by means of comparison between 'when people speak their mother tongue.' and 'when they speak other languages.

People from different parts of a country may have different accents. This situation can be identified with reference to the mother tongue. People from different area or island may speak the same language with different pronunciation, which is, thereby, a character of dialects.

Furthermore, there are many differences in accent among the countries where most of the population has English as a first language (such as the United States of America, Australia, Britain, Canada, and New Zealand)---and there are many different accents among the people within each of those countries. A North American can probably tell you whether a fellow American is from New York, California, or Texas, by listening to the accent. In Britain, the regional accents are even more distinct. Can you tell whether someone is from a different part of your country by listening to their accent? Such differences are geographical in nature.

A person's accent can apply in more than one language. When someone is using English as a second language, their accent is influenced by the sounds and patterns of the first language. Think about the vast number of different English accents that we can hear around the Pacific. English is spoken in all countries, but with a different accent in each. Fijian people, for example, often pronounce the standard English / l / sound—as in *sit*—more like the / i / sound—as in *seat*. Many speakers of Tongan and Samoan pronounce the / b / sound more like / p /. These differences in accent are because each speaker's English is influenced by sounds in their mother tongue.

Idiolects

Every person by nature has a slightly different personal accent, just as every person has his or her own distinct set of fingerprints. Therefore, it is possible to identify a person on the telephone by his or her **idiolect**—that is the way of speaking, including his or her 'personal accent'. However, this idiolect is similar to

the usual community accent (unless, for example, it is he or she who has lived or studied in different countries for some length of time).

Task 2-4

Tick an appropriate column whether the corresponding statement is true or false.

No	Statement	True	False
1	Language develops over time.		
2	Dialects are mostly influenced by geographical aspects		
3	One dialect may show the social status of the speakers		
4	The so-called standard language is better than its generic dialects		
5	Commuters may be able to speak more than one dialect of a particular language.		
6	One particular accent indicates a particular dialect.		
7	Idiolect is personal.		
8	Living in a foreign country for a long time may reshape one's first language.		
9	It is important to master more than one dialect of a foreign language.		
10	Adopting the dialect of a person with whom you speak is highly appreciated.		

Attitudes to Accents

Do we have to be loyal to our own dialect? People worry about accent, and often have prejudiced attitudes about it. Very often people laugh at others who use their language with a very different accent. Also, people criticize others and say that their pronunciation is wrong. A clear example is that the *Banyumas* dialect of Javanese is often made fun of. What do you, as a linguist, say about that?

Actually that should not happen if everyone has language awareness. Truly, one group is not more correct than the other group. Both are correct and following the language conventions that are used by the social group they belong to. They pronounce words in the way that other people in the group pronounce them. At least, they learned to pronounce this way when they were children. Pronunciation tends to become more fixed as people grow older.

However, it is normal for anyone to find strange when other people behave differently, including in the way they use language. It may be surprising to hear other people using our language with an accent different from ours. Actually, there

is certainly nothing wrong with different accents. It is a fact that accents vary from one individual to another.

What Accents are ‘Acceptable’?

The key issue is actually that accent becomes a problem if communication breaks down. That is, we may find it difficult to understand what a person is saying due to the way he or she pronounces words. Most probably, he or she is using speech sounds of his or her own in place of the required speech sounds of the target language. This is then the concern of a language teacher. A language teacher should therefore design pronunciation drills of the target language to make the students’ pronunciation **intelligible**. In other words, acceptable accents are those intelligible accents.

A case for Discussion

Anton comes from Yogyakarta, a city famous for its standard Javanese. He is a student of UNSOED Purwokerto, a city famous for its Banyumas dialect of Javanese. He is now falling in love with a local girl (Purwokerto). Soon he wants to introduce his girlfriend to his parents in Yogyakarta. Shall he teach her Yogyakarta dialect or not? Give your arguments.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

With respect to foreign language learning, what are the implications that can be drawn from this Unit? Tick an appropriate column whether the corresponding statement is an implication.

No	Statement	Yes	No
1	We are free to adopt any variety of the target language.		
2	We should ignore other dialects of the target language, except the one we decide to adopt.		
3	Consistency with one dialect of the target language is the most important benchmark.		
4	Learning the pronunciation must be given a priority in one dialect, while still recognizing other varieties.		
5	Wrong pronunciation is tolerable.		
6	Intelligibility refers to the correct pronunciation.		
7	Dialects should not be learned in the classroom.		
8	Listening practice gives experience for language awareness.		
9	Learning to speak should be incorporated with learning to listen		
10	When speaking, one can change his or her dialect in line		

with the situation.
