



Language and Social Variation: A Need-Based Analysis of Mother Tongue Teaching with Special Reference to Speech Accommodation

Mr. Mohammad Hamid¹, Mr. Mohammad Iliyas Khan²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Linguistics, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, 202002, India

Email: hamidfaizi3430@gmail.com

²Research Scholar, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, 202002, India

Email: mohdilyas9918@gmail.com

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17323621>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 23-09-2025

Published: 10-10-2025

Keywords:

language classroom, perception, social class, social identity, speech style, speech accommodation, etc.

ABSTRACT

This research paper addresses the need and importance of speech accommodation in language teaching, particularly in the mother tongue. It describes how speech accommodation can help develop teaching skills in the language classroom. It also describes how the learners can better understand and develop their learning capacity in the language classroom. In this respect, this research paper closely analyzes the variations in speech style and provides some genuine reasons behind the variations. It highlights how speakers' social class and perception of the listeners affect the speech style in conversation or communication, and how it can be reflected in language classrooms. It also discusses how the idea of 'prestige' gives directions in explaining individual changes in speech under the impression of 'overt prestige' and 'covert prestige'. It also discusses how 'convergence' and 'divergence' can change and determine a person's speech style. It also demonstrates how people's speech patterns are closely tied to their social identity, as reflected in the specific language and terms they use, outlined in the 'Labovian theory of speech style or style shifting', and how this relates to the language classroom. Finally, it tells us how speech style closes and discloses a person's social identity.



1. Introduction

When we begin studying language and its variation across different regions, our primary focus is on how language is used differently in various geographical locations. It is clear that even within the same area, individuals speak in unique ways. Additionally, some ways of using language are commonly found only among specific individuals in society, while others do not use them. People from the same area but with different levels of education or socioeconomic status often speak in distinct ways. These differences in how they talk can quietly or clearly show which social groups or communities they belong to (Yule, 2006).

1.1 Speech community

A speech community refers to a group of individuals who share common norms and expectations about how language should be used. The field that examines the language characteristics that hold social importance within these communities is known as sociolinguistics.

1.2 Education and occupation

In one of the early sociolinguistic studies conducted in 1966, Labov investigated how the pronunciation of the postvocalic ‘-r’ varied among salespeople in three department stores in New York City. His findings revealed that the way the ‘-r’ sound was pronounced was closely connected to the salespeople’s jobs and socio-economic background. Specifically, the study showed that those from higher socio-economic classes tended to pronounce the ‘-r’ more frequently. Labov concluded that the frequency of some linguistic features, such as the (r) sound, can be used to determine a person’s social class. This supports the idea that language use is strongly tied to personal and social identity.

1.3 Speech style and style-shifting

Labov’s study of department stores helped him understand how social class and speech style influence language use. The two main speech styles are formal and informal. Formal speech happens when we pay more attention to how we talk, while informal speech happens when we are more relaxed and less careful. These are also referred to as careful and casual speech. Changing between these styles depending on the situation is called style-shifting.

Labov’s research found that middle-class individuals often modify their speech to sound more like upper-middle-class individuals when speaking more carefully or formally. His study shows that how people talk, including how they pronounce words, can reveal a lot about their social identity. This means



the community or place where someone lives has a significant impact on how they speak, and people naturally pick up language habits from the people around them.

Language use, especially speech style, has the power to reflect a person's overall personality and social position. However, it is also possible for individuals to mask or alter their social identity by adjusting their speech to fit different social contexts. This ability to shift speech styles tends to be more accessible to educated individuals, as they are more aware of social dynamics and expectations. In contrast, uneducated individuals may not consciously recognize such social cues.

Therefore, language can both reveal and conceal a person's social status. Additionally, when someone becomes highly self-aware during a conversation, they tend to use a formal style. In contrast, a casual or informal style is more common when they are not consciously monitoring their speech. In conclusion, speech style and the act of style-shifting are strongly tied to a person's level of consciousness during communication.

1.4 Overt and Covert Prestige:

Labov also found that individuals belonging to higher social classes tend to use language forms that reflect overt prestige—speech patterns considered socially desirable or “proper.” In contrast, those from lower social classes are less likely to shift from casual to formal speech. This may be because they place greater importance on maintaining the linguistic features that express their social identity within their community. Rather than adopting the language traits of higher-status groups, they intentionally avoid them, showing loyalty and solidarity to their own group by speaking in a way that aligns with those around them. For example, middle-class speakers often adopt certain pronunciations or grammatical structures commonly used by lower-status groups—such as saying “*I ain't doin' nuttin'*” instead of “*I am not doing anything.*” This shows that sometimes, people use particular speech styles not to signal upward mobility, but rather to align themselves with their social group or class. In this way, language can be used to express group solidarity and reinforce social bonds. This highlights another important role language plays in society—it can signal belonging to a specific social class or community. Additionally, the act of shifting language style is influenced by perception. People tend to adopt speech patterns they perceive as prestigious and avoid those seen as non-prestigious. However, ideas of what is prestigious or not vary across cultures; what may be respected in one culture might not hold the same value in another. This shows that cultural and social perceptions shape both language use and style-shifting.

1.5 Speech accommodation



Our speech style is influenced not only by our social class and how much attention we pay to our speech, but also by how we perceive our listeners. This idea is captured in the concept of speech accommodation, which refers to our ability to adjust our way of speaking, either by moving closer to or further away from the speech style of the person we are interacting with. For example, consider the following English phrases from Holmes (1992):

- “*C'mon, Tony, gizzalook, gizzalook*” – This is an informal, casual style used when speaking to someone familiar, like a friend.
- “*Excuse me. Could I have a look at your photo, Mrs. Hall?*” – This is a more formal and polite way of speaking, likely used when addressing someone in a position of respect or less familiarity.

These examples illustrate how we naturally adjust our language according to the person we are talking to and the context of the interaction.

In Urdu or Hindi

Tum meri nhi smjhjoge, Vijay (you will not get me, Vijay)

Ammi Jan! shayed aap meri bat smjh nhi parhi hain (Mom, I think you cannot get me).

In the earlier English examples, a teenage boy asks to see holiday photos. In the first example, he speaks casually to his friend, but in the second, he addresses his friend's mother more politely. Even though he is asking the same thing, he adjusts his tone to match how he thinks the listener speaks.

Similarly, in the given Urdu examples — “*Tum meri nahi samjhoge, Vijay*” and “*Ammi Jan! Shayad aap meri baat samajh nahi pa rahi hain*”—the message remains the same, but the way it is expressed changes depending on whom the speaker is addressing. This indicates that style-shifting in speech is influenced by the speaker's perception of the listener.

In these cases, the speaker is clearly trying to reduce social distance, a process known as convergence, where one adapts one's speech to resemble that of the listener. We often employ this approach when speaking with friends, colleagues, or younger individuals, adjusting our language style to match theirs to build rapport or convey closeness.

At the same time, we may sometimes address younger people using the honorifics or respectful forms we typically reserve for elders—such as using “*aap*” instead of “*tum*” in Hindi. This is often done intentionally to teach children how to show respect when speaking to those in authority. Therefore, we



can conclude that speech style or style-shifting is influenced not only by social factors or the perception of the listener, but also by the speaker's intent in a given situation. For example, consider the following expression:

'Yazdan, aap ne apna homework kr liya' in place of 'Yazdan, tumne apna homework kiya'

The sentence *"Yazdan, aap ne apna homework kar liya"* instead of *"Yazdan, tumne apna homework kiya"* shows a deliberate use of a more respectful form. This is an example of how speech style can be adjusted based on the relationship or intention behind the interaction.

In contrast, when a speaker intentionally increases social distance through language, the process is known as divergence. This occurs when someone uses noticeably different speech forms to set themselves apart from the listener. By choosing distinct language patterns or styles, a speaker can make their speech diverge from that of others. As Yule (2006) explains, such linguistic choices reflect how individuals can use language not just to connect with others, but also to highlight differences or maintain boundaries in social interactions.

Teenager: I cannot do it, sir.

Teacher: Oh, come on, if I can do it, you can too.

Teenager: Look, I cannot do it so.....

In the third line, the Scottish teenager clearly changes his tone, using words that are very different from the more formal way he spoke in the first line. This sudden change in style (divergence) appears to be a response to the teacher's suggestion that they are alike and equally capable. By altering his speech, the teenager is attempting to establish a distinction between himself and the teacher. Initially, he responds politely and formally, showing respect. However, when the teacher insists—implying that the task should be doable—the teenager changes his tone and style to strongly reinforce his point, making it clear that he genuinely believes he cannot do it. This example illustrates that we sometimes shift our speech style to emphasize a point, especially when we want to clarify our position or make someone understand our limitations. Thus, style-shifting can serve the purpose of bringing certainty or clarity to what we are trying to express in a conversation.

Similarly, in language classrooms, teachers can adjust their speech style to meet the individual needs and perceptions of their learners. For this to be effective, teachers should ideally be bilingual or trilingual, including proficiency in their mother tongue, or at least have a good understanding of the local



dialects of their native language spoken in the community. This familiarity allows teachers to communicate more effectively with students from diverse linguistic backgrounds and manage the classroom more efficiently. Having a strong command of the mother tongue enhances a teacher's ability to engage more students in learning activities and improves overall teaching effectiveness. Additionally, learners benefit more when taught in their mother tongue, as learning tends to be more successful in one's native language compared to a second language. It is essential to acknowledge that, in the context of language, an actual national language does not inherently exist; rather, the mother tongue is the primary source of meaning. The national language is simply a language used for official purposes by the government and serves to administer meaning, while the mother tongue is what actually creates meaning for individuals.

1.6 Register and Jargon

Another influence on speech style associated with social identity is the idea of register and jargon. "A register is a conventional way of using appropriate language in a specific context (Yule, 2006)." A register may be identified as:

Situational: for example, in church, (*ye shall be blessed in times of tribulation*) – religious register (ibid).

Occupational: for example, among lawyers, (*the plaintiff is ready to take the witness stand*) – legal register (ibid).

Topical: for example, talking about language (in the morphology of this dialect, there are fewer inflectional suffixes) – linguistic register (ibid).

There are some key characteristics of a register, one of which is the use of jargon. Jargon refers to the specialized technical vocabulary associated with a particular field or area of interest, such as terms like *plaintiff*, *suffix*, or *bless*, which were mentioned in earlier examples. Essentially, a register relates to how language is used in a specific context, while jargon refers specifically to the technical terms within that language. These two concepts often confuse students, so it is important to clarify their differences.

From my understanding, jargon consists of words or phrases that belong to a particular subject, field, or discipline and are used with their literal or precise meaning. For instance, in the sentence, "*In the last election, the Bhartiya Janata Party won with a majority,*" the word "*party*" is political jargon because it is explicitly used in the context of politics, making it part of the political register. On the other hand, in



the sentence, “*Ramesh is having a party after succeeding in the competition,*” the word “*party*” means a social gathering and is unrelated to any particular field or discipline. Therefore, in this context, it is neither jargon nor part of any register. Thus, when a technical word like “*party*” is used within its relevant context, it becomes part of a register; otherwise, it is simply jargon. In short, jargon is specialized vocabulary, while register is the use of that vocabulary in a specific situation. Essentially, jargon and register involve the same words but differ in their function and the way they are used. Consider the following examples.

- a) *A new party (a political group) came into the field in the recent election.*
- b) *An agreement was signed between the two parties (groups of people) to solve the dispute.*
- c) *Vijay is organizing a party (a social gathering) for his new home.*

In these examples, the word ‘*party*’ is the same, but is different in its function/distribution.

1.7 Slang

In the study of jargon, we understand that it refers to specialized vocabulary used by members of particular professional or established social groups. In contrast, slang is more commonly used by people outside of these higher-status groups. Slang, also known as colloquial speech, consists of informal words and expressions often used by younger individuals or specific interest groups (Yule, 2006). For example, the term “bucks” has been slang for dollars or money for over a century, while the phrase “megabucks”—meaning a large amount of money—is a more recent addition to slang vocabulary.

Similar to fashion and music, slang plays a significant role in our social lives, especially among young people. It is commonly used within specific social groups as a way to share ideas and attitudes, helping members distinguish themselves from others. Slang often reflects the identity of groups associated with specific life stages, such as early adolescence. Over time, slang expressions can become outdated; for instance, older terms like “*groovy,*” “*hip,*” and “*super,*” which meant “*really good,*” have been replaced mainly by “*excellent.*” The difference in slang usage between younger and older generations underscores the significance of age as a key factor in social language variation. From this, we can conclude that slang has the power to reveal much about a person’s social identity, including their group membership, social class or status, community ties, and age group.

2. Theoretical Background



Speech accommodation theorists study how people adjust their speech patterns through convergence and divergence based on their social goals, such as gaining approval, improving communication, and expressing identity. Convergence involves individuals adopting similar speech behaviours to minimize social differences, while divergence occurs when people highlight verbal and non-verbal differences to create distance from others. Speech accommodation theory was developed to demonstrate how social and psychological factors influence the way people modify their speech when interacting with others. It explains why people shift their speech styles in social situations and the social effects of these changes. The theory explicitly explores the cognitive and emotional processes behind why individuals converge or diverge in their speech. Furthermore, speech accommodation theory extends beyond just spoken language to include non-verbal and broader discursive aspects of social interaction. It offers a unique approach compared to other studies of language and social variation by concentrating on communication between individuals and groups.

Social identity theory suggests that people strive to feel good about themselves by either joining groups where they feel they fit in better or by enhancing their experience within the groups they already belong to. Because speech signals group membership, people adjust their communication—either by converging or diverging—to highlight important group differences and reinforce their social identity. In this way, Speech accommodation helps highlight what makes a group special and supports a person's social identity. There are four primary social and psychological theories related to this concept, which are outlined below.

2.1 Similarity-attraction

Similarity-attraction is a crucial aspect of speech accommodation. The similarity-attraction theory says that when our beliefs and attitudes are similar to someone else's, we are more likely to feel drawn to them. People often adjust their speech and body language—both in words and actions—to appear more like the person they are talking to. This helps build a stronger connection. One main reason someone might change their speech to match their conversation partner is to gain social approval. In other words, the more someone wants to be liked or accepted, the more likely they are to adjust their way of speaking. Natalé (1975) found that people who strongly want approval tend to match others' speaking volume and pause length more closely than those who do not care as much about approval. Additionally, when people perceive that others are adjusting their speech to them (a high level of accommodation), they often feel better about themselves and are more satisfied with their interactions. These ideas also apply in



classrooms. For example, when teachers and students use their native language and exhibit this kind of accommodation, it can lead to more effective teaching and learning experiences.

2.2 Social exchange process

The social exchange process theory suggests that people consider the potential benefits and drawbacks before making a decision. This theory focuses on how people evaluate their relationships, aiming to feel that they gain more from the relationship than they invest in it. In other words, people prefer relationships where the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. While convergence in speech often brings rewards, it can sometimes lead to costs such as extra effort to adapt, or a perceived loss of personal or group identity and integrity. Therefore, individuals carefully consider these costs and benefits when deciding whether to adjust their speech. In this context, using one's mother tongue can serve as an alternative approach that provides more benefits than costs.

2.3 Causal attribution process

Causal attribution theory suggests that we attempt to understand why people act in a certain way by inferring their reasons or intentions. This idea is relevant to speech convergence, which can be seen in either a positive or negative light depending on the reasons we believe drive it. While people generally respond more favourably to convergence and less favourably to non-convergence, their reaction, whether positive or negative, depends mainly on how they interpret the speaker's intentions. For example, Giles and Smith experimented with French and English-speaking Canadians. They discovered that listeners reacted more positively when they believed someone from a different group had changed their speech to connect across cultures, rather than doing it because they were forced to. Specifically, French listeners reacted favourably when they believed an English Canadian's shift toward French was motivated by a genuine desire to reduce cultural barriers. However, if they thought the same behavior resulted from pressure to conform, the positive response was weaker. This principle similarly applies to the use of English and Hindi/Urdu in India.

2.4 Intergroup distinctiveness

Tajfel explained that when people from different groups interact, they often compare aspects such as personality, skills, and possessions. In these comparisons, they attempt to demonstrate what makes their group superior, thereby enhancing their own sense of social identity. Because the way we speak—especially in our native language—is an important part of group identity, people may change their speech to sound different from others in order to protect their group's uniqueness. This is more likely to happen



when being part of the group is particularly important to them or when they feel their group identity is under threat.

Many ideas from social identity theory also relate to speech accommodation theory. Communication accommodation theory, which is shaped by social psychology and social identity theory, is built on four central beliefs:

1. Every conversation involves both similarities and differences in speech and behavior.
2. Our perception of another person's speech and behavior shapes how we evaluate the interaction.
3. Language and behavior serve as signals of social status and group membership during communication.
4. The accommodation process is guided by social norms, which influence what is considered appropriate in different contexts.

3. Contextual Relevance

The following are of the utmost importance in the communication behaviour of the communicators.

3.1 Sociohistorical context

The sociohistorical context refers to how past interactions between groups influence the way people speak. It encompasses the relationships between these groups and the social norms they adhere to when interacting with one another. These connections between groups affect how people act when they communicate. Factors such as political or historical connections between countries and the diverse religious or belief systems of the groups have a significant impact on how people speak.

3.2 Accommodative orientation

Accommodative orientation refers to how people perceive their conversations—whether they focus on the individuals involved, the groups to which they belong, or both. Three main things shape this view: (1) Personal factors, like the speaker's personality. (2) Group-related factors, such as how the speaker feels about people from other groups. (3) Initial expectations, including how likely they think conflict will happen. Several things can affect this last point, like: Whether the culture values the group (collectivist) or the individual (individualist), A history of problems between the groups, ongoing tensions from past



experiences, stereotypes, and social rules about how groups should be treated, and how strongly someone's self-worth is tied to being part of their group.

3.3 Immediate situation

The immediate situation means the exact moment when people are talking. It is affected by five related things: (1) the social and psychological feelings at the time, (2) what the speaker wants to achieve and how they focus on the listener, (3) language choices like making speech more similar or different, (4) actions like picking what to talk about and how to speak, and (5) how people name things and explain each other's behavior during the conversation.

4. Theoretical Assumptions

The first idea says that people bring their past experiences into conversations. So, how they talk is influenced not just by what is happening right now, but also by the broader social and historical context surrounding the interaction. What they have gone through with others before affects how they communicate and adjust their speech in future talks. Their attitudes and beliefs from these past experiences help decide how much they are willing to change the way they talk. The more things they have in common, the more likely they are to adjust their speech to match each other.

The second idea concerns how people perceive and reflect on a conversation. Perception means paying attention to what is being said, and evaluation means deciding if the conversation is good or not. When someone joins a conversation, they observe what is happening and then decide whether to adjust their behavior to fit in. For instance, if a person enters a staff room where two colleagues are discussing the chairperson's birthday celebration, they will assess the situation and decide how to respond—whether to join in and acknowledge the colleagues or to leave the room. If they choose to join, they will adapt their communication to suit the person they are talking to and the context. However, not every interaction requires speech accommodation. For example, when two strangers briefly bump into each other and engage in small talk before parting ways, they are unlikely to evaluate or adjust their speech since there is little chance of future interaction. Consider the following examples:

In English

Stranger₁: Excuse me, where is Park Street?

Stranger₂: Go straight and turn the left, you will find it.



Stranger₁: Thank you

Stranger₂: Any time

In Urdu

اجنبی 1: بھائی زارا سنیئے! انوکھا مال کہاں ہے؟

‘Stranger₁: Excuse me bhai! Where is Anokha Mall’

اجنبی 2: بھئی، یہ یہاں سے ایک کلومیٹر دور ہے

‘Stranger₂: bhai! It is one kilometer from her.’

اجنبی 1: اچھا بھائی، شکریہ

Stranger₁: Okay, Bhai, thank you.

اجنبی 2: جی ٹھیک ہے بھائی

‘Stranger₂: Okay, bhai.

In Hindi

अजनबी 1: भाई! क्या यहां पास में कोई temple है? (‘Bhai, is there any temple over here?’)

अजनबी 2: Yes भाई! South direction में यहां पास में एक temple मंदिर है। (‘Yes, bhai, there is a temple near here in the south direction.’)

अजनबी 1: बहुत बहुत धन्यवाद, भाई (‘thank you so much, Bhai’)

अजनबी 2: जी ठीक ह भाई (‘it’s okay, bhai’)

The third idea highlights that the way people speak and act reveals their social status and the group to which they belong. When two people who speak different languages converse, they typically use the language of the person with higher status. This happens for two main reasons. First, the person with lower status often seeks approval and acceptance from the higher-status individual. Since similarity fosters liking, this motivates them to converge. Second, the person with a higher status is unlikely to adjust their communication to match that of the lower-status individual and may even emphasize the



difference by diverging from it. In this situation, the lower-status person is essentially compelled to adapt to the language of the higher-status individual. This concept of negotiating "salient social membership" is clearly evident in interviews, where the interviewee attempts to align their speech and behavior with those of the interviewers to increase their chances of success. This occurs because the interviewer holds the higher status and generally does not change their communication style, while the interviewee seeks acceptance through matching the interviewer's communication patterns.

The final idea concerns what is considered proper behavior in social situations. Norms are the rules people expect during a conversation about what is acceptable or unacceptable to do. These rules help people determine how to adjust their communication style to get along with others. Typically, accommodations made in line with these norms are considered socially acceptable. For example, a young person speaking with older family members should avoid using slang that is commonly used among peers to show respect and ensure smoother communication. However, suppose someone is unaware of the other person's norms or makes incorrect assumptions about what is appropriate. In that case, it can lead to stereotyping, which can harm the relationship rather than help it.

5. Conclusion

In summary, Labov's concepts of speech style and style-shifting reveal subtle aspects of social stratification and the social functions of language. Our social identity is shaped by both formal and informal language use. Factors influencing this include the cultural context, a history of conflict between groups, existing tensions from past interactions, stereotypes, group norms, and the level of group solidarity or dependence, which affects how much a person's self-worth is tied to their group. The third idea highlights how people speak and act to show their social rank and group membership. When two people who speak different languages converse, they typically use the language of the person with higher social status. This occurs for two main reasons: first, the lower-status speaker seeks approval and acceptance from the higher-status individual, and since similarity fosters liking, this leads to convergence; second, higher-status speakers typically have little motivation to adjust their communication style to match that of lower-status interlocutors and are more likely to diverge instead.

Acknowledgment

I thank all the co-authors for their contributions to shaping this research paper and for their valuable input.

Declaration of Competing Interest

Mr. Mohammad Hamid, Mr. Mohammad Iliyas Khan

Page | 1011



The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Funding Source

No funding was received for this work.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing applies to this article, as the data were generated and analyzed.

Declaration of Generative AI

The authors declare that AI-assisted technologies have been used in the writing process solely to enhance readability and language.

References

- Brown, S. & S. Attardo. (2000). *Understanding Language Structure, Interaction, and Variation*. USA: University of Michigan Press.
- Downes, W. (1998). *Language and Society* (2nd edition). UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Holmes, J. (2001). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (2nd edition). Longman.
- Spolsky, B. (1998). *Sociolinguistics*. UK: Oxford University Press.
- Stockwell, P. (2002). *Sociolinguistics*. Routledge.
- Trudgill, P. (2000). *Sociolinguistics* (4th edition). Penguin Books.
- Chambers, J. (2003). *Sociolinguistic Theory* (2nd edition). Blackwell.
- Milroy, L. & M. Gordon. (2003). *Sociolinguistics*. Blackwell.
- Wardhaugh, R. (1998). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (3rd edition). Blackwell.
- O’Grady, W., J. Archibald, M. Aronoff & J. Rees-Millar. (2005). *Contemporary Linguistics* (5th edition). St. Martin’s Press.
- Mugglestone, L. (1995). *Talking Proper: The Rise of Accent as Social Symbol*. Clarendon Press.



Eckert, P. & J. Rickford (eds.). (2001). *Style and Sociolinguistic Variation*. UK: Cambridge University Press.

Giles, H., J. Coupland & N. Coupland (eds.). (1991). *Contexts of Accommodation: Developments in Applied Sociolinguistics*. UK: Cambridge University Press.

Biber, D. & E. Finegan (eds.). (1994). *Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Register*. UK: Oxford University Press.