

# Sociolinguists and the relationship between language and society media essay



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Sociolinguists study the relationship between language and society in an attempt to discover the variety of reasons, including social factors, which affect the individuals speak in different contexts. In the 1992 film “ My Cousin Vinny” written by Dale Launer and directed by Jonathan Lynn, dialectal differences between the New York region and the southern region of the United States can be carefully observed. Additionally this film makes it possible to observe the variations in regional dialects when compared with Standard English language forms. Specifically the linguistic varieties that can be observed most frequently in “ My Cousin Vinny” are dialectal differences in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. As mentioned in the textbook, these linguistic varieties occur between groups which are separated by social variables including religion, region, ethnicity, and age.

In the film two friends from New York are travelling through rural Alabama when a misunderstanding leads to them being put on trial for the murder of a convenience store cashier, which they did not commit. One of their cousins who is a recently accredited lawyer, Vincent Gambini, decides to come from Brooklyn to Alabama in order to defend them. The character Vinny portrayed by actor Joe Pesci speaks a dialect which some refer to as “ Brooklynese”, a brash and loud vernacular which is in stark contrast to the polite, laid back drawl predominantly spoken by the people of Alabama in the film. One obviously apparent difference is found within vocabulary. In an early scene of the movie after Vinny and his fiancée Mona Lisa Vito arrive in Alabama they are ordering breakfast in a local diner. When the food arrives Vinny is distrustful of it, questioning the well-known southern breakfast food called “

grits". The cook is surprised and rather than call more attention to him Vinny chooses to pretend that he is familiar with this unfamiliar vocabulary word.

Vincent Gambini is aware that every community has a distinctive linguistic repertoire which they use to communicate and the common use of the vocabulary term grit is a part of the townspeople of Alabama's dialect. If he were to admit that he did not know the word he would be admitting that he was an outsider of their community, and by default would have a harder time fitting in and continuing his case. He, Mona Lisa, and the two boys already possess vastly different accents from the people of Alabama so Vinny attempts to smooth this over a bit by making himself more knowledgeable of their dialectal vocabulary. In a later scene of the film which takes place in the court room, Vinny is able to use his newly acquired knowledge of grits to disprove one of the prosecution's witnesses. When people belong to the same group they tend to speak similarly and Vinny's use of Alabama dialectal vocabulary signals to the members of the jury that he is one of them, affiliating himself with their social identity.

However, throughout the film Vinny and Mona Lisa Vito also use vocabulary words which are representative of their dialect and further separate themselves from the southern social identity with which they are trying to fit in. An overarching example of this is that both Vinny and Mona Lisa curse and use vulgar language more than any other characters in the film. It is second nature for them to use the "f" word in all of its' available forms to demonstrate a wide range of emotions including happiness, surprise and frustration. This colorful use of vulgarity is a part of their Brooklyn or perhaps New York City vernacular because it is something they learned at home, <https://assignbuster.com/sociolinguists-and-the-relationship-between-language-and-society-media-essay/>

acquiring its variety of uses through exposure and osmosis as explained in the textbook as the way in which members of dialects learn non-standard language forms. The southern characters curse considerably less and speakers of Standard English also make less frequent use of vulgarity to express themselves. Interestingly, their frequent use of cursing is likely a sign that they are not normally in such formal social contexts, like a court house, and instead are most frequently in informal situations.

In the second edition of "The Social Stratification of English in New York City", author William Labov discusses a wide set study of the vast dialectal varieties found in the New York City area. A variety as used here refers to any set of linguistic forms which is patterned based on social factors used in certain circumstances. Pronunciation differences between the characters from New York City and the characters from the South are easily observed in the film. Labov discusses the lack of enunciation of [th] as a distinguishing variable found in New York City's style stratification (pg. 154). During one court scene Vinny is speaking to the judge about the two "yoots" on trial with the judge having a very difficult time understanding what he means. This misunderstanding continues until Vinny exaggerates the word he was saying and pronounces it "youths". The Judges more formal way of speaking is in contrast with Vinny's informal pronunciation of the word, dropping the [th]. According to Labov, this pronunciation pattern has social significance and is reflective of a lower class or working class speaker of New York City dialect (pg. 233).

The final dialectal difference which is clearly observable in "My Cousin Vinny" is grammatical. Throughout the film Vinny uses "ain't", a <https://assignbuster.com/sociolinguists-and-the-relationship-between-language-and-society-media-essay/>

grammatically incorrect word used to convey “ is not”. Despite the fact that it is not actually an English word, “ ain’t” is used often in a number of dialects in reality. It is representative of an informal tone and often of a lower social status or economic background, and sometimes represents a lack of formal education by the speaker. Another grammatical dialect difference displayed by Vinny in the film is his frequent use of the word “ got” rather than the word “ have”. For example, after completing his cross examination of a witness he states “ I got no use for this guy” to signal that his line of questioning was finished. Similar to the stigmatization of “ ain’t”, the grammatical choice of using “ got” instead of “ have” is also representative of a lower socioeconomic background and signals an affiliation with an informal group. Vinny’s grammatical dialectal difference represents his regional and societal relationships. Labov explains, “ New York City boundary represents a circumscription of an area of negative prestige... not a recent pattern, but rather one which must date from at least the early part of the nineteenth century” (pg. 339). Through just a change in syntax Vinny Gambini signals his membership to the New York City region and to his informal, ethnic social identity.

These are only a few of the many observable features which demonstrate dialectal differences within the film “ My Cousin Vinny” but they are the most important. Dialect is defined as a language characteristic of a particular group of speakers and the most distinguishing features are vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. Vincent Gambini, and other characters from the New York region, are confused by southern vocabulary words like grits and confuse others with their own specific vernacular terms-some of which

include flagrant vulgarity. The way in which Vinny pronounces the words which are common to both dialects further succeeds in separating the two social groups. Lastly, the syntax of the sentences Vinny speaks as compared to the formal grammatical methods of the Judge gives insight into his socioeconomic background. This is evidence of the distinct differences in the social identities of the Alabama inhabitants and the visiting New Yorkers.