



Curriculum subject: English Language

Level: Key Stage 5, Undergraduate (English Language/Linguistics)

Topic: Social variation

Article

[Social variation across the UK](#)

Activity

Choose an aspect of speech that you know varies from speaker to speaker and according to context. You should probably choose a pronunciation variable, such as <-ing> words, or the pronunciation of <t> between vowels or <h> at the start of a word. You could choose a grammatical feature, such as the use of non-standard tenses or multiple negation, but you will find these are more difficult to study as you need large amounts of data – a <t> sound between vowels will crop up frequently in the course of a ten-minute conversation, but you will be lucky if you hear more than two or three negative constructions. Now attempt one of the following investigations:

- Select an individual speaker and monitor his or her speech in different contexts. Record or monitor his or her speech in a formal context – you might like to prepare a word list or reading passage featuring several examples of the variable or record a presentation – and record or monitor an informal conversation or group discussion. Do you notice any differences in the speaker's pronunciation of that variable in the different speech contexts?
- Select at least four speakers in your community, half of whom come from a different age, gender or social group (i.e. two boys/two girls or two older speakers/two younger speakers etc.). Record or monitor their speech in a formal context – you might like to prepare a word list or reading passage featuring several examples of the variable – or monitor their speech in an informal conversation or group discussion. Do you notice any differences in individual speaker preferences according to their age, gender or social background?
- Record several episodes from your favourite soap and compare the speech of two or more characters. Do their preferences vary for your chosen feature and, if so, is this random variation or can you draw any conclusions about the way the actors are trying to convey aspects of their character's identity in terms of age, gender or class differences?