

Exploring variation in indigenous minority languages

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Quantitative explorations of variation have been valuable for the study of many Western languages, but such variationist sociolinguistic approaches are less commonly applied to indigenous non-Western languages. This is unfortunate since variation is often the key to a wide range of useful perspectives for linguistic fieldwork. In the Sui language of southwest China, for example, many local village variants are best described in terms of clans. Women marry into the husband's clan, so each village contains speakers from multiple clans. Sui children must find their way along a linguistic path between the mother's dialect features and the local dialect of the father and older siblings. A field linguist must negotiate a similar path when describing this language community: Much of the Sui linguistic experience is centered around these subtle contrasts and clan identities, and even the basic structure of the language would be difficult to describe without recognizing how dialect variants are interacting within the same village. In other communities, factors like age or gender may be crucial to language description, as variation in such factors may suggest a change in progress or other important contrasts.

Using field data from China (Sui, Zhuang, and Lalo) and North America (Hmong and Native American English), this talk shows how a variationist perspective on indigenous languages can provide valuable insights for linguistic fieldwork. By carefully describing and quantifying variation, field linguists can break new ground in the understanding of the structure of a language, its sociolinguistic patterns, and its future trajectory of change. Linguistic variables to be discussed include tone, vowels, consonants, prosody, and lexicon. Social factors include region, age, gender, clan, contact, identity, mobility, and the notion of "community of descent" in linguistic fieldwork.