

**ЯЗЫКИ НАРОДОВ ЗАРУБЕЖНЫХ СТРАН (С УКАЗАНИЕМ КОНКРЕТНОГО ЯЗЫКА ИЛИ ГРУППЫ ЯЗЫКОВ) / LANGUAGES OF PEOPLES OF FOREIGN COUNTRIES (INDICATING A SPECIFIC LANGUAGE OR GROUP OF LANGUAGES)**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60797/IRJ.2024.144.173>

**ON THE MATTER OF DEFINING A LANGUAGE VARIETY AS A “SOCIOLECT”: THE ISSUE OF TERMINOLOGY**

Research article

**Nazarova A.Y.**<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ORCID : 0000-0002-4715-0802;

<sup>1</sup> Federal State University of Education, Moscow, Russian Federation

\* Corresponding author (nazarova.alex[at]yandex.ru)

**Abstract**

**Aim.** To develop a methodology that allows to accurately define a variety of language as a “sociolect” based on an updated and summarized characteristic of the sociolect.

**Methodology.** The research is based on a theoretical review of the main provisions on the nature of the sociolect, it presents a set of characteristic features. The basis of the study is descriptive and comparative methods.

**Results.** The concept of “sociolect” is summarized, its main features are highlighted and a new, refined, interpretation of this term is presented. The article offers a number of clear criteria that make it possible to check whether a given language variety of the national language can be attributed to a sociolect.

**Research implications.** The results obtained are of scientific interest for the theory of language, dialectology, and can also be used in the development of training courses in sociolinguistics.

**Keywords:** sociolect, British English, Estuary English, “Posh” sociolect, sociolinguistics.

**К ВОПРОСУ ОБ ОПРЕДЕЛЕНИИ ЯЗЫКОВОЙ РАЗНОВИДНОСТИ КАК «СОЦИОЛЕКТА»: ПРОБЛЕМА ТЕРМИНОЛОГИИ**

Научная статья

**Назарова А.Ю.**<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ORCID : 0000-0002-4715-0802;

<sup>1</sup> Государственный университет просвещения, Москва, Российская Федерация

\* Корреспондирующий автор (nazarova.alex[at]yandex.ru)

**Аннотация**

**Цель.** Разработать методику, позволяющую точно определить разновидность языка как «социолект» на основании уточнённой и генерализированной характеристики социолекта.

**Процедура и методы.** В основе исследования лежит теоретический обзор основных изложенных положений по природе социолекта, представлен набор характерных для него черт. Базой являются описательный и сравнительно-сопоставительный методы.

**Результаты.** Произведено обобщение понятия «социолект», выделены его основные черты и представлена авторская, уточнённая трактовка данного термина. Статья предлагает ряд чётких критериев, позволяющих отнести ту или иную разновидность национального языка к социолектам.

**Теоретическая и практическая значимость работы.** Полученные результаты представляют научный интерес для теории языка, диалектологии, а также могут быть использованы при разработке учебных курсов по социолингвистике.

**Ключевые слова:** социолект, британский английский, эстуарный английский, социолект «Posh», социолингвистика.

**Introduction**

In any language of the world, a variety of linguistic variants that arise as a result of the territorial and social division of society can be distinguished. The linguistic variants resulting from the latter group of reasons (i.e. social factors) are the subject of study of a special branch of linguistics – social dialectology. Many domestic and foreign studies have been devoted to the description and analysis of social varieties of language, but the terminology of social linguistics remains ambiguous and somewhat confusing. Thus, the key concept of social linguistics – “sociolect” – is polysemic and is particularly difficult for researchers, causing a number of contradictions (including its terminology since some linguists use the term “social dialect”). One of the misconceptions includes the idea that any social variety of the language can be named a “sociolect”, the example of this is the case of Estuary English.

The purpose of this paper is to establish a clear set of criteria that help identify a given language variety of the national language as a sociolect. The verification of these criteria will be held on the example of two phenomena – Estuary English and U-speak/ “Posh” sociolect (the sociolect of British upper-class), the hypothesis being that Estuary English cannot be called a sociolect due to its discrepancy with the key features of sociolect. To fulfill this purpose, a study of foreign literature on the notion of sociolect has been carried out, its common features (both linguistic and extralinguistic) have been established, and the overall definition of this term has been clarified and updated. A number of methods has been used in the course of the study, mainly descriptive and comparative research methods, as well as an analytical review of theoretical provisions. The

study is based on British English, which is a national language with a number of its own variations, both geographic (dialects) and social (sociolects).

### **Approaches to defining sociolects and their extralinguistic features**

In English-language literature, the terms “sociolect” and “social dialect” are often considered interchangeable, however, the term “social dialect” is preferred by a number of British and American researchers: E. A. Seligman (1931), R. A. Hudson (1996), S. Romaine (2000), J. Holmes (2001), J. R. Rickford (2002). In particular, Rickford [15, P. 9] defines social dialects as “varieties distinguished according to the social groups who use them”, naming such group-unifying factors as belonging to the same social class, sex/ gender, age group, ethnicity/ race, and being a part of one network. Romaine continues to develop the term “social dialect”, which differs from the regional dialect, since it serves as a marker of the speaker’s social status. According to her, these varieties “say who we are” [16, P. 2] and “what our status is” [16, P. 21]. J. Holmes [9, P. 139] introduces a new term “social accent” which “conceals a speaker’s regional origins” and signals belonging to a certain social class. She further suggests a broader concept – “dialect”, which includes regional and social varieties of the language, distinguished by vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation features [9, P. 246]. This idea is further developed by Wardhaugh, who believes that each dialect can be both regional and social in nature, since speakers refer themselves not only to a certain regional location, but also to a “social class, religion, and ethnicity” [21, P. 49].

This approach seems unjustified and excessive, since the notion “dialect” is more appropriate for regional variations of national language, and the possible use of the term “social dialect” contributes to the further ambiguity of the general terminology of social linguistics. Moreover, dialects are used by certain groups of people living in the same territory and can sometimes “feature as a sociolect, often a low sociolect, in a speech community” [13, P. 28]. That idea reveals that sociolects and dialects can overlap, however, sociolects, unlike dialects, are not limited to regional boundaries. The division of the national language into sociolects does not contradict the traditional regional division into dialects, since these two language varieties co-exist within one national language.

Other researchers focus on the factors that enable to distinguish sociolect among language varieties. Thus, Peter Trudgill, defines the concept of “sociolect” as “a variety or lect which is thought of as being related to its speakers’ social background rather than geographical background” [19, P. 122]. In other words, sociolects are distinguished from the national language on the basis of the speaker’s social affiliation and are not related to a specific region. That is, sociolect is a language variety which “determinants include such parameters as: gender, age, occupation, and possibly a few others” [12, P. 61]. Other unifying factors include ethnicity and religious views [2, P. 106]. Thus, Honko [10, P. 69] cites the example of the existing sociolects of the “urban working class”, “white collar workers”, “private schools”, which are clearly related to the social stratification. Speakers can switch between different registers, analysing the situation and mixing “two sets of forms, thereby creating a mixed output” of sociolects and a standard language [20, P. 33]. In summary, dialects and sociolects have a common characteristic – they are the language of private communication. The speakers of both of these varieties can engage in code-switching, thus adapting their speech to the context and choosing between standard language constructions and stylistically marked dialectal and sociolectal units. However, they reflect different aspects of the speakers’ speech activity and are explained by different factors, which substantiates the propriety of the term “sociolect” rather than “social dialect”.

In British linguistics, the issue of the future existence of regional dialects is acute. For example, Trudgill argues that the traditional division of dialects is gradually losing relevance and at the moment the main differences are drawn between the speech of the English and the Scots [19, P. 17]. Sociolects, on the contrary, are gaining popularity and becoming a determinant of the speech of their native speakers: many people are beginning to determine themselves precisely on the basis of belonging to a certain social, rather than regional, group.

Naturally, sociolects are deeply connected with the life of linguistic communities and are a way to determine the social origin of speakers, their level of education, gender, age, profession, etc. However, it is not entirely legitimate to assume that “each social group has its own sociolects” [3, P. 90]. A distinctive feature of the sociolect is its close relationship with a certain consolidated social community of people who consider the sociolect as a marker of their identity. Sociolect “is a function of who the speaker is” [8, P. 157]. In other words, not all social varieties of language can be considered a sociolect due to the fact that not all social groups are closely united by a common worldview, history and traditions.

Summarizing all above-mentioned facts, it is possible to highlight the following extralinguistic features of sociolects:

- 1) they exist within the system of national language and can overlap with regional varieties (dialects);
- 2) their existence is related to such social factors, as gender, age, education and occupation, belonging to a certain social group/ subculture, ethnicity, religious views;
- 3) they reflect the speaker’s identity and occur solely in close-knit communities, the members of which share a common worldview.

### **Linguistic features of sociolects**

Sociolects exist within national languages and have their own system. Speaking about the structure of the sociolect, it is important to emphasize that it manifests itself at all language levels: phonetic, lexical, grammatical. These specific features of sociolects are “developed within group language according to the frequency of their interactions” [14, P. 519]. Thus, the development of sociolects and their system depends on the regular communication of its speakers and the history of their social group.

Phonetic features of any sociolect establish themselves through the accent, which signals that the speaker belongs to a certain social group/ class. In British English, the distinction is drawn between upper-class and working class representatives’ speech. The most striking sociolect marker is the use of post-vocal sound [r], peculiarities of pronouncing consonant and vowel sounds. For instance, British upper-class does not use the post-vocal sound [r] [16, P. 69]. The speech of British lower-classes is characterized by reduction of ‘h’ (‘ospital’ instead of ‘hospital) and ‘t’ (‘ke’le’ instead of ‘kettle’). By contrast, British aristocracy tends to reduce vowels, so they are more likely to pronounce “hpstn” opposed to ‘alf past ten’ by the lower class

instead of the standard “half past ten”. The vowel sound ‘i’ is also pronounced by representatives of different classes in different ways: the working class replaces it with ‘oi’, the aristocrats with ‘or’ [7, P. 30].

The most striking distinguishing feature of a sociolect is its vocabulary, which is pragmatically conditioned: different social groups have different interests and fields of activity. However, sociolect is not limited by the lexical level and cannot be called a “specialized vocabulary” [14, P. 518]. Nevertheless, social factors have a major impact on the vocabulary used by the speaker, and in British English the vocabulary can be approximately divided into two groups: “u words” used by the upper-class and “non-u words” used by other classes. For instance, the aristocracy uses the word “house” to identify the place where they are living, while middle- and lower-classes use the words “home”/ “property” [7, P. 32].

The grammatical features of a sociolect are more difficult to identify, but they are the basis of the social stratification of society [5, P. 51]. The use of non-standard grammatical structures (double negation, structural changes of phrases, variations of reflexive pronouns, plural and singular nouns), as a rule, is a sign of a less privileged background. The language of the upper class, on the contrary, is strictly regulated by the norm and can even be perceived as “colorless” due to its over-correctness.

Moreover, sociolect includes extralinguistic factors, as it is a kind of “the repository of society’s myths and are represented by themes, commonplace phrases and descriptive systems” [10, P. 69]. Sociolects go beyond merely linguistic features and manifest themselves in such paralinguistic elements as tone of voice, body language and facial expressions, which allows to study them from audiovisual point of view and consider their use for creating humorous effect for the audience of television series and films [18, P. 116]. Sociolectal speakers use them as specific codes that express their identity, help reunite with like-minded people, and relate to other people’s words.

Sociolects affect the entire language system, therefore they can develop their own functional styles: official, journalistic, scientific, literary, colloquial [4, P. 263]. This allows speakers of sociolects to adjust their speech depending on the situation and code-switch accordingly. In recent years, Internet activity has been steadily gaining its popularity, and many people actively partake in social media discussions, sharing their ideas, following new trends and getting peer feedback [1, P. 944]. It is noted that many young speakers join various online-communities and create new sociolects that are evidently distinctive both from the Standard English language and other sociolects.

In summary, linguistic features of sociolects include the following factors:

- 1) expression at all language levels, including paralinguistic manifestations;
- 2) dependence on the regular communication of their speakers – it further shapes the peculiarities of a given sociolect and solidifies its system;
- 3) development of their own functional styles and code-switching.

#### **Assessing language varieties: the matter of “U-speak” and Estuary English**

The conducted study and review of the theoretical provisions on the matter of a sociolect makes it possible to clarify this term: a sociolect is a variety of national language or lect determined by the speaker’s affiliation with a united social group which shares worldviews and traditions and communicates on a daily basis; it manifests itself both linguistically (at all levels) and extralinguistically. Sociolect is a marker of the speaker’s identity and an expression of his/ her pride in belonging to this social group.

To represent this idea more clearly and simplify the analysis of different language varieties regarding the legitimacy of their affiliation with this term, the present study suggests the following questionnaire:

- 1) Is the language variety based on the speaker’s belonging to a certain social/ demographic group rather than geographic boundaries?
- 2) Is this social group consolidated and united by their history, traditions and similar worldview?
- 3) Is this variety present at all language levels?
- 4) Does it have paralinguistic expression?
- 5) Does it serve as a marker of the speaker’s identity, reflecting a unique mindset?

The paper will compare two language varieties – “Posh” (“U-speak” used by the British elite) and Estuary English – following the presented plan and will attempt to determine whether they can be called sociolects.

Firstly, it is important to establish the origin of these varieties and see the factors that influenced their emergence.

The term “Estuary English” was coined in the late XX century in accordance with a specific regional variety of British English that occurred in the south-eastern England and is named after “banks of the Thames and its estuary” [11, P. 73]. The origin of Estuary English is localized to a specific region, and is of a geographic rather than social nature.

Sociolect “Posh”, which is commonly referred to as “U-speak”, is a direct reflection of British social hierarchy that dates back centuries. This particular language variety is “associated with upper-class groups” [17, P. 3]. It clearly illustrates the social nature of this language variety

Secondly, it is necessary to establish the groups that currently use these languages variety and the level of their consolidation.

Being relatively young, Estuary English is growing in its popularity, and is spreading to different social groups. This, it is spoken “in the House of Commons, the City, the Civil Service”, by the south-east authorities and media, professionals from different spheres, and even some of the member of the Royal family [11, P. 73]. It shows a great diversity of the speakers and can hardly signal their unity by common traditions and a shared history.

Unlike Estuary English, “U-speak” is spoken by one social-economic group – the British elite. Social stratification in Britain has existed for centuries, and the upper-class representatives have a long shared history, approaches to education, rules of behavior, and even free-time activities. These people communicate on a daily basis and clearly have a common worldview supported by their traditions.

Thirdly, the language varieties must be analyzed according to the language levels they exist at.

The notion of Estuary English is often followed by a word “accent” and is placed “on a continuum between Cockney and the idealised set of linguistic values for RP” [6, P. 7]. This signal the phonetic manifestation of this language variety, proving that it does not have clear lexical and grammatical features.

When considering “U-speak”, the researchers mark that it has clear phonological and grammatical features as well as lexical features that manifest themselves in different stylistically marked language units [7, P. 29-33]. It shows that this language variety is present at all language levels.

The next factor is the paralinguistic expression of a given language variety.

While Estuary English is mainly limited to its phonological expression and does not have paralinguistic manifestations, “U-speak” is codified by strict rules of etiquette that determine gestures and facial expressions, tone of voice and intonations.

Finally, there is a factor of identity marker that reflect the influence this language variety has over the speakers.

Considering Estuary English, it is hard to state whether it really can serve as an identity marker. Many speakers switch between their innate language varieties and Estuary English to mask their belonging to a certain region or a social group. The example is the discussion in British tabloids of Prince Harry’s switch to Estuary English as an attempt to highlight the broken connections between him and the Royal Family.

“U-speak” includes multiple factors of the social upbringing of its speakers: their education, traditional vacation spots, stance on life and many social phenomena. The native speakers of “U-speak”, when choosing this language variety, make a deliberate attempt to emphasize their origin and social status. Therefore, it serves as a marker of their identity.

The study conducted on the basis of the proposed questionnaire made it possible to draw a clear conclusion: Estuary English cannot be called a “sociolect” due to lacking sociolect-determining factors, which correspond to the hypothesis proposed in the Introduction. On the contrary, “U-speak” revealed a conformity with the key features of a sociolect and proved to be one.

### Conclusion

The current study introduced a generalized summary of social linguistic terminological apparatus and revealed certain discrepancies in its terminology. It proved the inexactness of the term “social dialect” that creates confusion and further misconceptions regarding this social variety of a national language. The paper proposed to confine to the term “sociolect” and clarified a number of problematic and vague aspects of its identification.

The investigation of linguistic and extralinguistic features of sociolects led to the following conclusions:

1) Sociolect is a direct reflection of the diversity and heterogeneity of the social structure of society, it is a kind of communication code for certain social classes and demographic groups.

2) Sociolect is expressed at all language levels (possibly including paralinguistic elements), with vocabulary and accent remaining its main distinguishing features.

3) The use of the term “sociolect” should be restricted to those language varieties which are used by highly united social communities that communicated on a daily basis and view sociolect as a marker of their identity.

The last factor is the novel addition to the ontological status of a sociolect that is crucial to the further understanding of this term and identification of social language varieties as a sociolect. It is important to emphasize that not all social groups can be named highly united – this fact greatly limits the use of this term and proves the illegitimacy of its excessively wide application.

The designed questionnaire which includes this parameter clearly proves that Estuary English is considered to be a sociolect incorrectly, since it does not correspond to the above factors: it is not clearly a social variety of a language, it is mainly limited to the phonological expression, and it does not represent a group-uniting factor and manifestation of their unique mindset. By contrast, “U-speak”, used by British aristocracy, is compliant with all these factors (it has linguistic and paralinguistic manifestations, it is used by this particular social group and reflects their long history, traditions and self-identification) and can, therefore, be called a “sociolect”.

The combination of the above-mentioned factors allows us to clarify and update the definition of a sociolect: it is a language variety (or lect) that reflects the speakers’ social background and serves as means of their self-identification and identity marker; its use is not limited to solely phonetic or lexical language levels, rather, it is distinctly present at all language levels.

### Конфликт интересов

Не указан.

### Рецензия

Все статьи проходят рецензирование. Но рецензент или автор статьи предпочли не публиковать рецензию к этой статье в открытом доступе. Рецензия может быть предоставлена компетентным органам по запросу.

### Conflict of Interest

None declared.

### Review

All articles are peer-reviewed. But the reviewer or the author of the article chose not to publish a review of this article in the public domain. The review can be provided to the competent authorities upon request.

### Список литературы на английском языке / References in English

1. Ahmad Sh. Sociolect and the Cognitive Development of Youth / Sh. Ahmad, S. Haroon, Gh. Hafsa // Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry (TOJQI). — 2022. — 13. — p. 937–945. (accessed: 14.03.2024)
2. Arhire M. The Translatability of Negative Structures with Sociolectal and Stylistic Value / M. Arhire // Revisit Transilvania. — 2018. — 11. — p. 105–112.
3. Benklakdar M. A Sociolinguistic Exploration of Sociolects in Translation / M. Benklakdar // Altralang Journal. — 2020. — 1. — p. 88–99.

4. Bustanov A. K. The Russian Orthodox and Islamic Languages in the Russian Federation. / A. K. Bustanov, M Kemper // Slavica Tergestina. — 2013. — 15. — p. 258–277.
5. Chambers J. K. Sociolinguistic theory / J. K. Chambers — Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1995. — 284 p.
6. Cole A. The search for linguistically coherent accents: Unsupervised clustering of diphthong variation in Southeast England / A. Cole, P. Strycharczuk // English World-Wide. — 2024. — 41. — p. 1–29.
7. Fox K. Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of the English Behaviour / K. Fox — London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2005. — 157 p.
8. Halliday M. A. K. Language as Social Semiotic: the social interpretation of language and meaning / M. A. K. Halliday — London: Edward Arnold, 1978. — 256 p.
9. Holmes J. An Introduction to Sociolinguistics / J. Holmes — Harlow: Pearson Education, 2001. — 732 p.
10. Honko L. Textualising the Siri Epic / L. Honko — Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1998. — 695 p.
11. Khachatryan Ye. Estuary English and its linguistic features as an accent / Ye. Khachatryan // YHU Scientific Journal. — 2023. — 8. — p. 73–78.
12. Lewandowski M. Sociolects and Registers – a Contrastive Analysis of Two Kinds of Linguistic Variation / M. Lewandowski // Investigationes Linguisticae. — 2010. — 20. — p. 60–79.
13. Platt J. T. Sociolects and their pedagogical implications (1st ed.) / J. T. Platt // Regional Language Staff Center Seminars. — 1978. — 9 (1). — p. 28–38.
14. Puertas E. Detection of Sociolinguistic Features in Digital Social Networks for the Detection of Communities / E. Puertas, L. G. Moreno-Sandoval, J. Redondo // Cognitive Computation. — 2021. — 13. — p. 518–537.
15. Rickford J. R. How Linguists Approach the Study of Language and Dialect / J. R. Rickford — Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002. — 31 p.
16. Romaine S. Language in Society: An Introduction to Sociolinguistics / S. Romaine — Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. — 235 p.
17. Sandow Rh. J. How ‘U’ are ‘U’ words? Exploring variation in the usage and perception of class-based lexical shibboleths in British English / Rh. J. Sandow, G. Bailey, N. Braber et al. // English World-Wide. — 2024. — 45 (1). — p. 94–124.
18. Sierra J. J. M. Exploring Sociolects in Audiovisual Texts. A New Concept? / J. J. M. Sierra // Hikma. — 2022. — 21 (2). — p. 91–123.
19. Trudgill P. A Glossary of sociolinguistics / P. Trudgill — Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003. — 148 p.
20. Vollmann R. Standard Language and Dialect: Sociophonological Perspective / R. Vollmann // Akustische Phonetik und ihre multidisziplinären Aspekte. — 2022. — 30. — p. 33–48.
21. Wardhaugh R. An Introduction to Sociolinguistics (fifth edition) / R. Wardhaugh — Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006. — 426 p.