

5 Language in use

5.1 Regional and social variation

The three other types of variation are regional, social and personal. A great deal of this variation is to enable language to perform its function of expressing identity – something that is very different from the ideational function of language discussed above. The study of regional and social variation is the province of sociolinguistics.

Regional identity is shown through languages (including pidgins and creoles), dialects and accents: they tell listeners where in the world a speaker is from. The distinction between accent and dialect needs to be appreciated: accent refers to features of pronunciation that convey regional information; dialect refers to features of grammar and vocabulary. It is often identified as a separate branch of sociolinguistics: dialectology. 'Regional' also has to be interpreted both nationally and internationally, in the case of a language which has international or global reach.

Because we are dealing with identity, accents arouse emotions and give rise to value judgements. Stereotypes of accents exist (such as associations of criminality or unintelligence with particular accents) and people judge others accordingly. This is one of the areas where a linguistically informed perspective can be of great use in providing a corrective.

This perspective places great store on the notion of accommodation: accent variation in speakers influenced by the speech of those they are talking to. Accents both converge (when rapport is strong) and diverge (when it is not). I give a personal illustration of my own accent changing in a convergence situation.

Attitudes have changed too, with some regional accents (such as Edinburgh, Yorkshire and South Wales) now viewed more positively. On the other hand, some urban accents still have highly negative stereotypes within Britain.

The study of social variation includes a wide range of factors that impinge on identity, such as age, gender, kinship, class, occupation and role. This is where we would explore such

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issues as whether men and women speak differently, and how kinship relations might influence one's choice of language (as in the so-called 'avoidance' speech found in some Australian aboriginal languages). Instead of 'which part of the country are you from', these factors identify 'which part of society do you belong to', either permanently (as typically with gender or class) or temporarily (as with particular social roles).

Everything said about accents and dialects also applies to languages, when viewed as markers of identity, for it is plain (from reports of language activism in many parts of the world) that people feel strongly if they perceive their language to be under threat. This is the place, too, where we study the endangered and minority languages of the world, bearing in mind that we have a crisis, with some half of the world's 6000 or so languages so seriously endangered that they are unlikely to survive the present century. A language is dying out every two weeks or so.

A major tenet of sociolinguistics is the recognition of multilingualism in society, and bilingualism in the individual, as the normal human condition. Three-quarters of the human race is bilingual. Children, as we know, acquire languages naturally. The 'language acquisition device' postulated in their brains is better thought of as a 'multilingual acquisition device'. The only downside to child bilingualism that I can think of is when a scrap of a child knows more languages than you do!

5.2 Personal variation

If we imagine two people with identical regional and social origins, their spoken and written language will still display differences of a personal kind, and these are usually summarized under the heading of style. Style is often studied solely with reference to literature (Shakespeare's style, James Joyce's style), but a linguistic perspective finds style in everyone. People sometimes talk about 'linguistic fingerprints', but the analogy is not exact, as style develops and changes. We use different styles (eg formal versus informal) according to circumstances.

The term style is also applied to the distinctive language someone uses when performing a particular role. In this way, we can talk of the style of scientists, lawyers, sports commentators, auctioneers and so on, or the style of literary genres such as the novel or

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poetry. The subject as a whole is called stylistics; but due to an overlap of interests in different academic traditions, these language varieties are sometimes investigated within sociolinguistics (for example, as occupational dialects).

The study of how individuals use language has several important areas of application. In forensic linguistics, the investigation of personal identity is relevant in many cases, such as forgery, bribery and libel. Voiceprinting and handwriting analysis are especially important areas.

In the study of children and adults with language disability, the focus is on establishing the individual features of listening, speaking, reading or writing, which constitute a personal pattern of delay or disorder. Therapists (pathologists) work in a one-to-one way, and language profiles and tests are a routine part of diagnosis and treatment.

In the study of literature, the focus is on the features that identify an author's style, and especially on how this style changes over time and in relation to such literary dimensions as genre, character and atmosphere. For example, we might explore stylistic differences between the comedies, tragedies and histories of Shakespeare, investigate why characters switch between poetry and prose, or plot the evolution of his poetic style over time. Writers with particularly idiosyncratic styles (such as E E Cummings and James Joyce) have attracted more attention than others, but literary stylistics can add insight into the way any author uses language.

Personality manifests itself chiefly in the various kinds of language play. Ludic variation is found in both speech and writing, illustrated by pun sequences and crosswords. We find it most of all in literary linguistic originality, in what Robert Graves described as the 'bending and breaking' of rules. The close link between language and literature is illustrated by the use of questions as threats in everyday speech, put to dramatic use by Harold Pinter in *The Birthday Party*.