

VARIATION IN LANGUAGE — ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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Nearly ten years ago Professor J. Donald Bowen presented a paper to the National Council of Teachers of English entitled "Linguistic Variation as a Problem in Second-Language Teaching" (Bowen 1963). Since its presentation the paper was issued in Professor Harold Allen's collection *Teaching English as a second language* in 1965. Yet recent discussions of the relevance of sociolinguistics to foreign language teaching and learning seem to ignore the fact that such concerns have been treated rather explicitly in the past. Part of the recent reconcern for sociolinguistic matters in the field is understandable, for a rather significant amount of sociolinguistic research has taken place since Bowen's address. However, I believe popularity rather than availability has made such concerns appear important again and that a great deal of the time and space given sociolinguistic matters in consideration of foreign language pedagogy is unnecessary.

I should like to examine what I believe to be the three causes for the recent popularity of sociolinguistics and evaluate the place such research has in modern foreign language teaching, particularly in the area of English as second or foreign language. First, social pressures in the United States, and, to a lesser extent, in Great Britain, have directed linguists' attention to problems of minority group speakers. The fantastic output of articles on Black English in the United States is only a small segment of the proof of such concerns. I am not in the least suggesting that research on socially stratified dialects should be curtailed, though I must admit that I am not as fully impressed with the care and scholarly expertise brought to many of these reports as I would like to be. Nevertheless, social concerns have clearly contributed to the popularity of sociolinguistic research in language teaching.

Second, language teaching is going through another revolution, this time in the wake of generative-transformational grammar and cognitive psycho-

logy. Although neither discipline provides language teachers with the explicit advice that they should touch more on language and society in the classroom, they both deplore the audio-lingual, habit-formation activities of our last revolution. By doing so they seem to stress such items as the "creative aspect of language use" and "meaningful learning", both fast becoming catch-phrases which direct us towards sociolinguistic concerns, though the first phrase, a technical one from Chomsky's *Aspects of the theory of syntax* (1965), is as far from urging sociolinguistics as one should imagine. But as statements leave their theoretical contexts, particularly statements in linguistics, they find strange friends and produce bizarre results.

Third, in the wake of both these influences, we now find methodologists and teacher trainers providing the final, exhortative blessing for sociolinguistic concerns. Through such phrases as "Special English" and "limited language objectives", persons closer to the field of foreign language teaching are providing a supposed practical justification for attention to sociolinguistics.

Let us call these three influences the "hip", the "cool", and the "needy" — "hip" because condition number one is socially relevant and shows us to be concerned with the plight of the less fortunate among us; "cool" because condition number two proves to us that we are not laggards in catching on to the most up-to-date pronouncements of modern linguistics; "needy" because condition number three shows us to be vitally concerned with the variety of needs displayed by those seeking to learn a foreign language.

Now in themselves these are all worthwhile concerns, some of them vital, and I certainly don't want to feel the wrath of those honestly concerned with social rehabilitation, theoretical grammar, or curriculum planning, as diverse as those interests are. However, a certain amount of exaggeration is involved in our search for sociolinguistic factors in foreign language teaching, and I should like to move on to a discussion of that over-concern.

Our first concern, the "hip" one, is easily dealt with in the general situation of foreign language teaching—it is totally irrelevant, but the interests of teachers of English as a second language, at least in the United States, have been significantly modified by this developing social concern in linguistics, and we may not push aside so easily all consideration of social dialectology. The data drawn from such research have been utilized in a new area of language instruction which we may identify as teaching Standard English as a second (or alternate) dialect. The three main targets of this concern, so far, have been Afro-Americans, purported to be speakers of "Black English", a socially stratified but non-regional dialect; Appalachian Whites, speakers of a regional dialect at its lowest social realization, complicated, supposedly by problems of historical preservation; and native Spanish speakers, often speakers of a variety of English known as "Spanglish", actually a language-contact phenomenon, complicated by factors of lower-class social dialect (or sociolect).

To be fair, I must note that some linguists would describe the Black English sociolect as a language-contact phenomenon, deriving, eventually, from the maritime Portugese-West African pidgins which were subsequently creolized in the New World and then, at a later stage of more extensive contact with white speakers, "decreolized".

There is not, of course, a cadre of teachers already prepared for Standard English as a second dialect, and the suggestion that secondary teachers have been doing this sort of thing for years would bring a long, painful cry from those who are concerned that such instruction be based on a full understanding of both the native dialect and the target dialect. In short, those who advocate Standard English dialect instruction in a quasi-foreign language teaching setting insist on at least contrastive fluency. Their larger concern is a more easily understood one: that those involved in such language instruction have a healthy attitude towards social and regional varieties of English. That, however, is surely an attitude we would like to foster in all teachers of English.

With the apparent decline in the importance of contrastive analysis, it is difficult to see the relevance of extensive studies in social dialects to even those programs specifically involved in second dialect instruction. So far the major contributions appear to be attitudinal rather than linguistic. Such articles as William Labov's "The logic of nonstandard English" (Labov 1970) have improved our understanding of the inherent fluency and good sense of social dialects and are doubtless important moulders of teachers' attitudes to the language backgrounds of their pupils. On the other hand, the entire range of "technical" articles on Black English—from those which study detailed features of the sociolect, including ones which touch on deep structural differences between Black English and the community standard, to those which respond that there is no such thing as Black English, arguing that it is only a displaced, lower-class regional dialect—has contributed, I believe, very little to the classroom teacher's understanding of his job, if that job is the providing of an alternate dialect. Such articles have contributed even less, I would argue, if we are to extend at least the spirit of communications from foreign language teaching to native language instruction as well, for the insistence on lock-step procedures, developed from carefully laid out contrastive statements in the native tongue, can lead only to a stifling of whatever language abilities the native dialect speaker brings to the classroom. Hopefully, some few articles which have begun to touch on the importance of motivational factors in second dialect learning, stressing that such factors are even more significant than in second language learning, will begin to share importance with those studies which emphasize the cultural validity of nonstandard dialects. Coupling a realizable upward mobility with alternate dialect instruction is an obviously better strategy than the implicit threat involved in teaching a native speaker his own language over again. Furthermore, all the

time spent with standard speakers in developing fluency and diverse communicative skills is lost for the speaker who must achieve minimal fluency in a second dialect. Such a plan strikes me as the perpetuation of second-class citizenship for millions rather than a release from it. There is no need for serious linguists to stop research in the area of social dialects, but there is a serious and urgent need to prevent the feeding of such contrastive data into language programs which will pattern themselves on foreign language practices now being seriously questioned.

It may seem a paradox to turn from a challenge to older schools of language teaching and attack condition number two, the "cool", for it is that condition which, more than any other, has brought into question the major practices of audiolingual, habit-formation language teaching. Nevertheless, I believe enough statements from theoretical linguistics and cognitive psychology have been misunderstood to make those fields guilty by association in the quest for too much sociolinguistic data in modern foreign language teaching.

I take the two major offenders to be such statements as the following:

...the creative aspect of language use... (Chomsky 1965:6)

The acquisition of large bodies of knowledge is simply impossible in the absence of meaningful learning. (Ausubel 1968:6)

Of course other villains could be selected, but I think both "the creative aspect of language use" and "meaningful learning" have been significantly misunderstood enough as representatives of these positions to let them serve fairly well here for investigation. Both "creative" and "meaningful" refer to scientific concepts of schema, and both have little or nothing to do with "creative" or "meaningful" social situations. Chomsky's "creative" refers specifically to the human language capacity to produce sentences never heard or produced before and to understand sentences never produced or heard before. It is a more or less metaphorical paraphrase of Humboldt's dictum that human language "makes infinite use of finite means". It is, quite simply, a part of Chomsky's belief that sentences in any human language are infinite in number and that a grammatical device which is capable of accounting for such competence in the native speaker must, necessarily, reflect such infinite properties. In short, recursive devices, related to adjusting transformations, must be a part of any grammar which seeks descriptive adequacy. The misunderstanding has arisen from the use of "creative" and other such figurative expressions which Chomsky has chosen from time to time to put this idea across. Applied to language teaching, it has seemed to grant authority to "creative" situations, to the extensive use of games, role playing, dramatization, and operations in a variety of social contexts in the new language. In the search for even more "creative" devices for classroom use, various

reports of sociolinguistic data have been called on. I would not personally deplore any of the above practices in the foreign language classroom, but I do deplore the suggestion that they are somehow *uniquely* productive in foreign language teaching or that they are related in even the vaguest way to "the creative aspect of language use".

So it is with Ausubel's "meaningful learning", a term chosen to contrast that kind of acquisition of knowledge which is associated with existing concepts with the alternative acquisition of pieces of information which find no associative structure in the mind. The latter, this nonassociable information, may be acquired, but it is acquired by "rote", Ausubel maintains, and is not as significant or lasting. This view is even easier to bastardize than Chomsky's, for we might assume that social situations (sociolinguistic data) constitute meaningful mental structures. Unfortunately, the learner of a new language could have no such structures present in terms of the new language unless they have been put there previously by the teacher or directly associated with structures present from the native language or from some deeper, perhaps universal, set. So, again, "meaningful" does not refer to social situations which are "full of meaning" in the new language and culture.

These criticisms do not, by the way, suggest that neither generative-transformational grammar nor cognitive psychology has anything to offer foreign language teaching and learning. My assertion is, quite simply, that neither offers explicit justification for selecting sociolinguistic detail as the primary data for foreign language achievement. Both theories are rich in suggestion for differing strategies in the presentation of target language material and both, it seems to me, suggest strategies of organization of grammatical material which can appeal to innate or previously learned cognitive-linguistic structures.

Last, let me focus on the "needy", those appeals from persons primarily concerned with foreign language methodology which suggest that careful sociolinguistic selection can make our jobs more effective and better suited to the varieties of learners' goals. Quite honestly, I have yet to find any of these suggestions any more sophisticated than the set of assumptions provided in Bowen's article (1963) mentioned at the beginning of this paper. He spoke of five variables in language—temporal, spatial, registral, formal, and stylistic—though his terms were rather more idiosyncratic than the ones I choose here. Temporally we have no problem; at least I have not yet encountered teachers of English using Moore and Knott or Mossé for validation of current grammatical forms. Nevertheless, I recognize that in some areas non-native speakers may continue to emphasize out-of-date notions of usage or archaic lexical items, but that is simply a matter of continuing information and teacher retraining. At any rate, there is no appeal to "Special English" along the historical front.

Spatially, which I shall take here to include social as well as geographical dialects, though Bowen intended no such conflation, we have rather more of a problem. Professor Harold Allen found it necessary to reiterate data from American dialectology at the recent 3rd International Conference of Applied Linguistics to substantiate the view that excessive work on certain features, particularly those of pronunciation, forces learners of English to achieve a level of proficiency different from that already maintained by millions of native speakers (Allen 1972). Though there is a flaw in the reasoning which suggests that any sound produced by any native speaker of English will do for any learner (for phonology *is* a system), it is nevertheless sound judgment which suggests that unnecessarily exact work is going on with speakers who have already achieved a level of proficiency which matches an acceptable standard in the English-speaking world. Social dialects as they influence second dialect learning have already been discussed, and their relation to learners of English as a second language is minimal.

I skip registral differences for the moment, for that is precisely the area which has drawn most attention from foreign language methodologists in their search for relevant sociolinguistic data.

By formal differences Bowen means simply differences between the spoken and written forms of the language. That should be enough to convince us that even ten years ago we were not all so thoroughly convinced of the notion that "language is speech" that we did nothing to differentiate the skills in foreign language teaching. Of course, many would readily admit to an over-emphasis of one skill or the other, depending on the front's being held by audio-lingualists or grammar-translationists, but the fact is that foreign language methodology has held throughout its history a rather healthy and, I believe, essentially correct view of the basic differences between speech and writing. The subsequent confusion of the skills, or, rather, the putting aside of writing as a "secondary symbolic system derived from the primary" during the heyday of audio-lingualism was only a temporary and now overthrown setback.

Stylistic differences, as well, have been long a part of concern in foreign language methodology, and, although recent statistical and generative studies of style have yet to influence foreign language teaching, there is no reason to assume that advanced stylistics for advanced students will not, sooner or later, reflect the best that is being done in the study of style.

Having dismissed all these, some perhaps too quickly for your personal tastes, let me apologize and move on to what I believe to be the prime offender in the search for relevance among sociolinguistic data. I shall re-define register here to refer not only to differences in situation and appropriateness as they relate to both senders and receivers of messages but also to differences in lexicon and intension as they might influence speakers of different sexes, members

of different occupational groups, or even persons who play strictly limited roles in a foreign language.

Let us examine the precise nature of such sociolinguistic data and evaluate its relevance to foreign language methodology. In a recent publication we are told that the top ranking verbs according to frequency, in a certain field of endeavor, match a set taken from the general frequency list by the score of only four out of fifteen. This should be significant, except that the remaining twenty-two verbs are all ones which would appear on even an intuitive listing of the "one-thousand most useful verbs for an intermediate learner of English", yet this list is purported to have some utility for advanced students of English who might enter the fields from which the data were taken. First, I would argue that such data do not constitute sociolinguistic research and are only vague stylistic markers of occupationally stratified habits. Second, and more importantly, I would want to be convinced that the writings selected represented an optimum of performance in the area approached by the non-native speaker. (In fact, this is not the case. In this study and in others like it, we are assured that the samples have been selected at random). In short, although we have no desire to make the non-native speaker perform better than the native speaker, we are under no obligation to hold up to him models of mediocre or even weak performance.

The crux of the argument concerning the "needy" is simply this: sociolinguistic data comes, necessarily, from unedited, field-work (some would say "old-fashioned") data collecting. Although it may provide us with numerous insights into the language behavior of various groups, statistical operations performed on the raw data cannot reveal carefully chosen, optimum avenues for language instruction. In fact, such data-related instructional techniques may hold back an advanced student whose communicative talents would have otherwise drawn him into a field of activity as a unique contributor, one not bound to the same principles and tiresome practices as all the other practitioners of the art around him.

In fact, the primary importance of registral data seems to derive from just such exclusive considerations as those expressed above concerning geographical dialects. Levels of formality (or informality) are particularly important to advanced and even intermediate learners, and some decision regarding such levels must be made even for initial presentation. Martin Joos' study of levels in *The five clocks* (1967) is an excellent background for such decision, and its relevance to English as a second language has already been pointed out (Troike 1971). Unfortunately, Troike's reading of Joos does not strike me as accurate, particularly at the "consultative" and "formal" levels (Joos' terms). For example, Troike cites

He's going to town.

He is going to town.

as indicative of the difference between "formal" and "casual" though he admits that the first sample might exist in "the more informal shades of the consultative style" (Troike 1971: 43). It is precisely the distinction among "casual", "consultative", and "formal" which is most interesting to the learner of English as a second language, and Troike's conclusions are correct though his examples do not agree with my interpretation of Joos' labels.

When Troike says that the best choice for the learner in English is the consultative variety, I agree, but I do not agree at all that consultative English is free from ellipses and phonological reduction, or "that its sentence structure is frequently more complex than in private styles" (Troike 1971: 42). Troike's reasoning in selecting the consultative is twofold: first, he correctly observes that the consultative is simply most useful for the foreign learner, that he is more likely to make his first extensive contacts in the new language in that variety. Second, he defends on transformational grounds, the introduction of "full forms" before contracted or elliptical ones at both the phonological and syntactic levels. I find, however, these two pieces of argument strange bedfellows, for in my consultative style, and, I suspect, in most other native speakers', contraction and ellipses are quite regular. It is only in "frozen" public style that I find many such devices absent in ordinary American English, though I readily admit that casual and intimate varieties offer more reduction than the consultative. The problem, however, is specifically this: If we argue that "full forms" are transformationally justified for initial presentation, we must then move to at least the formal style to obtain such forms in normal speech. To help clarify the discussion and to make clear what I perceive as the essential differences among these levels, I offer the following variations of the same discourse. The spoken language is represented in every case, though the "frozen" variety may be best thought of as read from a prepared script. The social context is an academic conference; the last presentation of the morning has just been given. Conference participants have been given tickets which will allow them to attend a luncheon in the hotel dining room free of charge. These tickets, however, must be presented before 1:00 or they become invalid. This information is not printed on the tickets.

No. 1. Frozen: (An official of the convention steps to the microphone at the speaker's rostrum).

Official: Excuse me; may I have your attention, please? Ladies and gentlemen, please observe that your green tickets, which you received along with your conference registration materials, entitle you to lunch today in the main dining room of the hotel on the mezzanine. Those tickets, however, must be presented at the door of the dining room before 1:00 or they become invalid. Thank you for your attention.

No. 2. Formal: (I meet Professor Przepaśniak, a distinguished semanticist

I was introduced to at a formal dinner the evening before. I know he has not heard the announcement).

Me: Excuse me, Professor Przepaśniak. You must be sure to be in the dining room before one o'clock. The meal tickets are not valid after that time.

No. 3. Consultative: (I meet Professor Jameson, a colleague of mine from another Department. He hasn't been to my house and I haven't been to his.)

Me: Bob, you'd better hurry to the dining room. These meal tickets are no good after one o'clock.

No. 4. Casual: (I meet Professor Dougall from my Department; we have been to each others' houses.)

Me: Hey, Dick. Get on down to the dining room. Those tickets aren't any good after one.

No. 5. Intimate: (I meet my best friend.)

Me: /skwit slet/.

It should be obvious from this that *spoken* consultative English does not carry the full array of non-elliptical forms Troike asks for in initial presentation, but that is decidedly the most normal, and hopefully, the most useful form for a learner of English as a second language. I emphasize, *spoken*, since written consultative might, in many cases, display the forms Troike seeks.

I do not find this disjunction upsetting. There is yet no sound experimental information which justifies the idea of presenting "full forms" first. That is, we have not yet proved that a person moves more easily from *he is* to *he's* or *going to* to *gonna* than vice versa. Since such information is lacking, it seems unjustified to select stylistic levels of lower frequency for instruction, unless such selection is specifically justified by individual or group learner goals.

More importantly criticized from such information as has been discussed here under the term "register" is the faulty association of level and performance in large numbers of dialogues prepared for non-native speakers. The criticism here is not of the "dramatic" or "situational" lack in many dialogues, though that is another area of common failure. Here I specifically refer to the fact that many situations which must be thought of as casual are vehicles for consultative or even formal English. Consider the following dialogue which is supposed to take place between two young schoolmates:

Tom: What are you going to do tomorrow?

Fred: Don't we have to go to school?

Tom: No, we don't. Tomorrow is the holiday.

Fred: Oh, I forgot about the holiday. What are you going to do?

Tom: I don't know. What are you going to do?

Fred: Well, let's go to the movies.

Tom: No, I don't want to go to the movies. I don't like to go to movies on holidays. Let's go on a trip.

Fred: O. K. Where do you want to go?
 Tom: Let's go to the country. It's pretty in the spring.
 Fred: How are we going to get there?
 Tom: On our bicycles. Lots of people go on bicycle trips in the spring.
 Fred: Good. Let's leave early in the morning.

(*English this way* 1963: 57)

Schoolmates do not, of course, talk to one another this way. In fact, the "full forms" and repetitions of the discourse indicate a high consultative or even formal level. This is even more confused by the infrequent attempts to lower the level of the dialogue through certain markers (*Well* and *O.K.*). It is important to remember that the constructions of the dialogue are not being criticized here. In fact, this level of English is probably appropriate to most foreign learners' needs. What is confusing however, is the fact that the accompanying picture (and the use of bicycles for travel) makes it clear that young persons are involved, and it is clear that they know one another. Why a casual (possibly intimate) situation was chosen as a vehicle for consultative (possibly formal) English is not explained. There is no justification for such mixtures since millions of potential consultative situations, more likely of use to the foreign learner, are available for presentation in dialogue form. In particular, one would think that topical dialogues which touch on likely involvements of the learner in English-speaking contexts (the vast majority consultative) would be of more value.

The reverse of the overformal errors happens often enough in reading selections, where one would expect that formal (or at least consultative) would best serve the learner. Although the following reading selection does not really use casual or intimate language, it is not at all representative of the formal or at least consultative style that characterizes most English writing.

"Throw me the ball!"

"Here! Throw it to me!"

The boys are playing basketball. They play every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon. There is a big field near the school. Some of the boys are playing baseball. They play other games, too. The girls play on the field every Monday and Wednesday afternoon. They play volleyball and other games.

"My brother is going to give me his baseball shoes," says Tom. "My father is going to buy him some new shoes".

"Oh, that's fine. What size are they?"

"They're size seven. That's my size. They're too small for my brother".

"When is he going to give them to you?"

"When he gets his. That's going to be next month, I think. Come after supper and see them".

"O. K. See you then".

"Good-bye".

(*English this way* 1963: 116 - 117)

As there is little reason in the first-quoted dialogue to include primarily consultative language in a casual situation, there is no reason to include casual and consultative language in a reading selection. It is surely well-known that reading, for most foreign language students, involves decoding expository prose, prose which is marked by a characteristic lack of dialogue. In fact, this "reading" selection not only mixes levels of the registral sort discussed here but also confuses the appropriateness of forms. While it was once fashionable (under the aegis of structural linguistics) to speak of writing as a poor cousin of speech, there is now good reason to believe that the forms support mutually exclusive lexical patterns and syntactic structures, at least distributionally exclusive if not absolute. There is no good reason, then, for students to "read" speech when their most likely use of the reading skill in a foreign language will involve very little of such activity.

Admittedly excluded from this general survey of appropriateness is any consideration of students who learn foreign languages for such specific purposes as travel or reading in a particular field. The vast majority of students of English however, learn English for "general" purposes, and there is little doubt that consultative speech and formal reading best suit such a purpose. Also excluded from this paper are relevant observations from sociology and social psychology. Unlike sociolinguistic data, such factors as language loyalty, ethnocentrism, "folk linguistics", and self-assessment may provide powerful models of learner orientation in foreign language learning. Such concerns are, obviously, beyond the scope of this paper. For a discussion of some of these issues see Jakobovits (1970).

In conclusion, sociolinguistic data may reveal strategies of operation within groups useful to the new speaker and may, in that way, feed foreign language teaching. However, if we are serious about fostering communicative skills, we will not allow the currency of social dialectology, misunderstandings of statements from related sciences, or raw sociolinguistic data to restrict the full achievement of communication in English as a second language.

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