

LANGUAGE VARIETY

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INTRODUCTION

Language must be regarded not as an undifferentiated whole but as a heterogeneous, dynamic and changing system. As a result we must of necessity concentrate on variation in language. A language variant can be regarded as an inconsistency or deviation which a linguistic item shows in comparison with an abstract standard.

How clear are the boundaries between language varieties?

According to the family tree model it should be possible to divide a language into smaller and smaller varieties until personal varieties or *ideolects* are reached. This does not, however, seem to be possible.

REGIONAL VARIETIES AND ISOGLOSSES

One indication that this division of language varieties is not possible can be found in the investigation of regional or geographical dialects. According to the family tree model, clear borders (or isoglosses) exist between geographical varieties. For example, Afrikaans has two r-sounds - the trill [r] in the North and the fricative burr (bry) r [ʁ] of Malmesbury, Caledon, Riviersonderend, and so on. One would expect that the isogloss for [ʁ] and that for the raising of [oə] to [u] and [eə] to [i] in the so-called "Boland Afrikaans" would be very similar. The [ʁ] also occurs, however, in the Transvaal. We cannot determine a clear boundary between where the one variety occurs

and where the other occurs: "... each item has its own distribution through the population of speakers" (Hudson 1980: 40). All that Hudson can establish is that there are not clear dialect boundaries but that there are only people and linguistic items.

DIFFUSION AND THE WAVE THEORY

The wave theory is based on the assumption that a language variety has a locus or starting point and then spreads outwards from there. The rounding of the [ɔ] sound in Afrikaans - [pra:t] → [pro:t] - possibly just occurred in Pretoria East. From there it spread to other suburbs and then to surrounding cities. This process comes to a stop when a person (or, particularly, a group of people) does not want to identify with (in this case) Pretorians (Hudson 1980: 42). The spread of a variety is therefore to a large extent dependent on the social status of the people responsible for its innovation.

SOCIAL DIALECTS

Some language varieties are associated with people who live in a particular region. Other varieties are associated with speakers who have a particular social background. These varieties are grouped together under the term *sociolect*. Like regional dialects, sociolects are identified by differences (which diverge from the hypothetical standard) with respect to vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. The term *accent* is used to refer to pronunciation differences only, while the term *dialect* refers to differences with respect to vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation (cf. Trudgill 1974: 17).

The difference between a regional dialect and a sociolect can be very subtle (cf. Fishman 1972: 16 - 17). If a particular area shows little economic or cultural development, the speakers of this area will be regarded as "less sophisticated" by other speakers. The stigmatised group's regional dialect will now acquire social connotations and it will be regarded as a sociolect rather than as a regional dialect - particularly if speakers move from the "poor" area to the city or a better area in search of work.

Whereas regional dialects arise to a certain extent as a result of geographical distance, sociolects arise (partly) as a result of the social distance between people with different social backgrounds:

"... and social distance may have the same sort of effect as

geographical distance: a linguistic innovation that begins amongst, say, the highest social group will affect the lowest social group last, if at all" (Trudgill 1974: 35).

Dialects are not necessarily language varieties from which speakers attempt to move away. As is apparent from the study of the dialect in Martha's Vineyard (Trudgill 1974: 23) speakers sometimes make use of the possibilities of their dialect to project their social identity.

If a variety is spoken by a particular group of speakers who (as a result of their own choice or by law) intermarry within their community and maintain their own usages, then these speakers can later come to regard themselves as a separate society. It is also possible for this group to be regarded as a unit by members of other social groups. The group will itself (or in the eyes of other people) develop its own dialect (or ethnolect). In South Africa, so-called "Coloured Afrikaans" is regarded as an ethnic dialect although many features of this ethnolect also occur in the Afrikaans of other ethnic groups, and the Coloureds do not form a clear social group.

The boundaries between *accent* and *dialect* are vague. Boland Afrikaans and Eastern Cape English show many accent differences when compared with Transvaal Afrikaans and (for example) Durban English respectively. There are also slight vocabulary differences. Does one therefore speak of a Boland accent or a Boland dialect? Namaqualand Afrikaans, on the other hand, shows greater vocabulary differences and should therefore rather be regarded as a dialect.

The boundaries between regional dialect and sociolect are also vague. The change of [a:] to [ɔ:] occurs in Pretoria but just in the language of people with a particular social background. Is it characteristic of a regional dialect or a sociolect? Hudson (1980: 44) thus (not unexpectedly) rejects the concepts 'social dialect' and 'accent' just as he does the concept 'regional dialect'.

TYPES OF LINGUISTIC ITEM

Hudson is in the process of developing a new view of language in which traditional opinions and traditional categories no longer have a place. A background assumption delimits the domain within which a theory can investigate problems. It appears, too, that the categories with which the researcher works also partly determine which types of problems he can identify. If these categories are wrong it is therefore possible that the scientist could be dealing with non-existent problems. If the

categories language and dialect are too global or too general and do not refer to definitive units in reality it means that attempts to define a language as such are futile because 'language' is a vague concept.

In this section Hudson begins to move closer to a description of the category *linguistic item*. Because sociolinguistics is concerned with socially determined language varieties, or linguistic items, Hudson must ask the question whether all linguistic items are exposed to variation in the same way (Hudson 1980: 44).

Accent (as a linguistic item) apparently has a different social function from other linguistic items. Accent is used to indicate a speaker's origin or group membership. A conservative South African English accent normally serves to indicate that the speaker belongs to the educated middle class. The rounding of [a:] to [ɔ:] in Pretoria Afrikaans probably also indicates that the speaker belongs to the educated middle class.

The question is now whether morphology and syntax show the same amount of variation as accent (Hudson 1980: 46). The impression that one gets is that there is little innovation (and thus variation) at these levels. The difference between morphology and syntax is also, incidentally, relatively vague. A concept which is expressed as a complex word in one language is expressed as a syntactic construction in another. The Eskimo word *takuba* a for example, is expressed in English by the syntactic construction *he sees me*.

Hudson (1980: 48) formulates a tentative hypothesis on the basis of these findings:

Syntax is the marker of cohesion in society, while vocabulary is the marker of divisions in society and pronunciation reflects the permanent social group with which the speaker identifies.

This hypothesis opens up other research domains, particularly because it deals with new categories and relationships between them.

REGISTER

Hudson (1980: 48) begins this section with a definition of the term *register*. I consider Bell's definition (1976: 114) is better:

"... a role-related code, i.e. a change in register is the formal linguistic marker of a change of role and the converse".

Compare also the definition of Ferguson & Health (1981: 532): They define *register* as

"A variety of language characterised by features of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation which is used in special settings for special purposes, such as legal talk, classroom register, baby talk."

It appears as if the so-called "rule-governed creativity" of speakers is not as limited as linguists believe. A register is chosen, not only because the situation demands that a particular register be used, but also to define a situation (cf. Hymes 1974: 162). Someone will, for example, use a formal register simply to indicate that he now wishes to speak about official matters. Hudson (1980: 49) formulates the difference between *dialect* and *register* very aptly:

"... we may say that one's dialect shows who (or what) you are, whilst one's register shows what you are *doing* ..."

One might say to a colleague in informal register:

"We sent the pile of fish to the lab."

In a formal, written report the same message would probably be phrased as follows:

"The fish was transported to the laboratory in unbreakable containers."

(Note the use of the passive and of the more formal verb.)

In the following example the formal register is used to create a distance between the two speakers:

"How about a quick snort?"

"I have no desire to imbibe at the moment, thank you."

Predictably, Hudson has problems with the term *register* and he considers that this term, like the term *dialect*, does not refer to an actual condition. It is therefore possible that a speaker can, in one sentence, use linguistic items which belong to different registers. Note, too, the overlapping of the terms *style*, *register* and *dialect*. As against the traditional va-

riety model of sociolinguistics, Hudson (1980: 51) suggests an item oriented model. I think that he is quite correct in saying that it is not the task of (socio)linguistics to describe language variety, but that the linguistic item must be described. In this model the central question, therefore, is:

To what extent can we make generalisations about linguistic items both within the language of one individual and across individuals?

One factor which the occurrence of linguistic items determines is linguistic conventions. This theme is dealt with particularly clearly in Hudson (2980: 52 - 53) and I shall therefore not go into it further. In some speech communities (I cannot work without this term) it is the convention to use one dialect or even one language in formal situations and another dialect or language in informal situations. The phenomenon is dealt with in the next article.

A typical diglossic situation exists in Southern Germany where each area speaks its own regional dialect. Schwabisch in Wurtemberg, Bayerisch in Bavaria and Schwyzerdeutsch in Switzerland. None of these dialects is stigmatised, but not one is used in the written language (High German) - although the difference between the dialect and the written language is sometimes very great:

Schwabisch	: [nə mɪr ɡarɔt hɔʊm]
High German	: nein ich gehe nach Hause

In official discussions High German is used, but the words are often pronounced dialectically. High German is used in the courts and in the schools. We have, therefore, to do with a formal or high variety (H) which is written and spoken in all formal situations, and an informal or low variety (L) which is spoken in informal situations.

Two definitions of the term *diglossia*:

- (i) "*Diglossia* is a particular kind of language standardization where two distinct varieties of a language exist side by side *throughout* the speech community ... and when each of the two varieties is assigned a definite social function" (Trudgill 1974: 117).
- (ii) "A language situation in which two very different varie-

ties of a language are functionally complementary, one (H) the 'high' variety) being used for written and formal spoken purposes, the other (L, the 'low' variety) for ordinary conversation" (Ferguson and Heath 1981: 528).

In Southern Germany, Switzerland, Austria and in the Arabic speech communities which Hudson (1980: 54) describes, we are concerned with diglossia which consist of two dialects. Bell (1976: 35) refers to this as *diglossia with bilingualism*.

In South Africa we have two official languages which are often used in different situations and most speakers know at least these two languages. An Afrikaans speaker tends to use English in restaurants and in certain shops; an English speaker tends to speak Afrikaans when speaking to a government official. This is not diglossia but *code switching* - the shift from one language to another according to the demands of the situation. A diglossic situation demands that the speakers must agree (a convention must arise) that the one variety is a formal of high language and that the other is an informal or low language. This situation definitely does not exist in South Africa today. During the development of Afrikaans, however, a diglossic situation did exist: Afrikaans was spoken at home while Dutch was the written language and spoken in official situations.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have put before you the following view of language:

"as a set of role-related, and in part role-defining, codes, grouped together as the repertoire of an individual, the combined repertoires of a group and perhaps as the sets of repertoires of formally or functionally related languages" (Bell 1976: 110).

We must see the language user as someone who can choose between different codes. These codes can be individual linguistic items, regional varieties, social varieties, accent varieties or stylistic or register varieties. Seeing that the language user can, within the same sentence, change register or switch from one dialect to another (diglossia), our starting point must be the linguistic item rather than global categories such as language, dialect or register.

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