

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE VARIATION IN SOCIAL CONTEXT AND ITS IMPORTANCE IN TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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ARTICLE INFO.

Keywords: language variation, dialect, idiolect, linguistics, nonstandard variation, communicative isolation, features, unclassified languages, genetic relationship, postvocalic position.

Abstract

It is obvious to say that any language has seen considerable changes throughout the centuries. The reasons of it can be seen in raising immigration and migration rates, introducing technological development, providing governmental, political, economic, educational and geographical changes in a country. These language changes and variations should be taken into consideration during teaching process, as learners need to know how language has changed and what effects it can have on their live abroad in the future. Finegan and Rickford (2004) state that people would judge others relying more on the language variety rather than on the information which was given by their speakers. This article will discuss about the reasons of developing language variation in society and present results of Labov's study on language variation in his two research work.

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Language variety can be defined as a term that shows the form of language variation within a certain language. This variation occurs in any language as a result of existing social, regional and contextual differences. The term language variation covers some important linguistics aspects, ranging from the notion of idiolect, dialects, accent, speech community and other forms that reflect on language differences.

According to Oxford Dictionary, idiolect is a way how a certain person uses a language. This means that people can speak one language, but their way of using this language can be different. As each of us lives in different social groups, families, working environment and other different spheres, we create our own unique style of presenting a language that distinguish from other speakers. According to Klammer, Schulz and Volpe (2007), people's idiolect includes vocabulary that they find suitable for them, pronunciation that show their regional belongings and style of presenting information depending on listeners with whom these people speak.

The example of idiolect can be presented in the way how child speaks with his/her parents and peers. When children speak with their peers, their speech can be presented in different ways: their intonation, vocabulary, style of speech and even using different grammar form.

Another important aspect in language variation is considered to be dialect. Despite the fact that dialect seems to get negative attitude, it does not connect to nonstandard variation. Dialect is term that describe condition when people from one particular language speak differently from another group in the same

language. Analyzing these two aspects of variation: idiolect and dialect, we can distinguish them in this way: dialect is a variation of language which is presented by a group of people; however, idiolect is a unique variation that each person acquires and differs from other people.

It is clear that these two language variations are really important to reveal in the teaching foreign language classroom. As teachers can often hear from their learners that their speech is not good and their way of speaking differ from native speakers. However, in fact, these identical similarities cannot be existed. Each learner is individual so these differences occur and it does not mean that their language skills are low.

Another aspect that needs to be discussed is the role of communicative isolation in language variation. According to Wikipedia, language isolation is language that cannot be classified into large language family. Communicative isolation occurs when people regionally isolated from another world. In communicative isolation society, there are not any changes in using the language. According to Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998), geographical factors play a tremendous role in the development of dialects, because rivers, lakes, mountains and others features reflect on the people's life and language development. One of the examples of isolated language can be seen in Nihali language. Nihali is one of isolated languages that is spoken in India. This language is used by Nihal tribe who lives near Tapri river.

The term that people often mismatch with isolated languages is unclassified languages. Unclassified languages are languages that demonstrate no genetic relationship to other languages. Information about their belonging to one of large family languages are not defined.

If we compare isolated languages and unclassified languages, we can observe one main difference. Despite the fact that communicative isolated languages are languages that isolated from outer factors, but these languages came from other languages, they are like branches that stop developing because of geographical or political isolation. However, the root of unclassified languages cannot be defined that is why their development is not clear and cannot be presented in form of isolated language. It is clear that language can vary not only because of its speakers themselves but also because of geographical position of an area where this language is used.

We can observe examples of language variation in many research. One of the greatest research projects in language variation can be seen in two Labov's works. In his first work (1963), Labov investigated the reason of a sound change among local people in the island of Martha's Vineyard. In his work, Labov mentioned three main problems to explain why these linguistic variations can occur. They are the problematic aspects to identify the root of these language variations, how they spread among people and their regularity in a certain place. Labov underlined the impact of social and historical background on these language variations. These language variations can be observed among Martha's Vineyard local people in pronouncing diphthongs /ai/ and /au/.

The island of Martha's Vineyard is located in Dukes County, Massachusetts. Although, the area was separated from mainland, it contained great amount of geographical and social diversity for deeper investigation. The population of the island included four main ethnic groups: old families of English stocks, Portuguese descent, Indian remnant and separate group of different origins (Canadian, French, English, Polish and others). Turning to specific linguistic variations, Labov revealed the considerable amount of distortion of the sound on the island. These changes have showed long-term sound changes for the past decades. Comparing the origin of diphthongs /ai/ and /au/, it is presented that /ai/ diphthong dates back to 16-17 centuries, whereas diphthong /au/ became to develop later. According to Labov, as a result of declining centralization in 1930's, the increasing first element of /ai/ went to the first element of /au/. It proves that both diphthongs have mutual reflection on each other and became the reason of both changes. However, the research data demonstrated the high popularity of usage /ai/ diphthongs in comparison with /au/ results. Turning to the way of research conduct, Labov used several techniques to

gather information: questions, reading, formal interview in different social places (the main purpose to observe real communication) and took target group of 69 local people from different ethnic groups, age, occupation and educational background.

Another linguistic variation that was also investigated includes /r/ sound and its retention at the end and before consonant. But this linguistic variation was not preliminary focused to observed on the Vineyard Island. Similar research was held in New York where Labov tried to observe phonological variations within three department stores.

The second research was conducted in New York in three different department stores: Saks, Macy's and S.Klein. Labov described the stores according to their status ranking and how this ranking status reflected on social stratification. The location of the department store played an important role in this survey. Saks department store was located in a fashionable shopping district with other high- prestige stores. Macy's department store was nearby garment district and was considered to be a middle-range store in prices and prestige. Finally, S.Klein store was near the Lower East Side that is presented in a low-ranked store. The number of participants accounted of total 264. The linguistic variation was focused on observing the presence and absence of sound /r/ in postvocalic position. To conduct this survey, the interviewer asked the same question twice which answer was *fourth floor*. The purpose of it was to analyze how stores staff pronounced sound /r/ in casual speech and when they emphasize the phrase *fourth floor*. The survey was held anonymously, people were not aware about their participation. This method helped to observe sound changes in realia.

Comparing two researches, it can be underlined some similar patterns. In both researches, the participants were taken from different subgroups that made observation more explicit and broader. In Martha's Vineyard, four ethnic groups participated in research. Similarly, in New York survey, departments store presented three ranking statuses (high class, middle class and working class). However, Martha's Vineyard demonstrated more variety of participants who belongs to different ethnic groups; vary in historical, cultural, occupational and educational background. In addition, the first Labov's work included detailed explanation of age difference among participants and how their interests reflected on the results of the research. Another difference can be seen in location. Vineyard Island is a separate area whose local people tried to keep uniqueness of the place and accepted certain way of communication style. In contrast, New York department stores demonstrated variety of people from different regions who could produce various language styles. Finally, although these two research showed similar patterns in analyzing certain linguistic variations (/r/ and /ai/ or /au/), they represented different results in using these variations in realia. While Vineyard population relied on their historical and ethnic variety in pronunciation /ai/ and /au/, department stores participants showed similar results in pronunciation approximately the same word.

Over the past decades, linguists try to understand how language changes can occur and what can become the main reason of these changes. Labov was presented as one of the key representatives in this study, his investigations helped to observe the language not only through its structural, phonological, lexical and morphological aspect, but also how social factor can reflect on the language variations. In fact, Labov discovered that language change can be unconscious and conscious (Mather, 2012). Labov made a great discovery on understanding of the reason of language variations and gave the way for further investigation in this field.

To conclude it can be said that language variation is part of our everyday life that need to be taken into account while teaching foreign languages. Learners may face difficulties to speak in a foreign language, and in this case, teachers need pay attention to language variations. By understanding these differences, teachers and learners can develop necessary skills for improving their skills in a foreign language.

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