

Stylistics and Language Variation in the L2 Classroom

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Abstract. The study of language varieties globally, especially in ESL context is wide spread due to its relevance for the teaching and learning of the language and learner's communicative ability development. Variety refers to a set of linguistic items which has similar features and distributions in human communication (speech or written) in sounds, words, grammar and so on. In the world today, there are numerous varieties of English co-existing with the idealized formal norm used in the educational setting. In the present work, we examine stylistics and other factors that are the causative agents to global language variation, and survey the value of same in ESL context which have immense benefit to speakers of the language worldwide.

Keywords: Stylistics, language variation, dialect, sociolect.

1. Introduction

In the midst of a daunting search for methodology, either universally or contextually to deal with an array of English used globally, the sociolinguistic reality of its existence is overwhelming. This complex phenomenon is not only a burden to L₁ but also to L₂ with a compounded multiple complexity. It is common place that the medium of instruction in formal learning the world over is the Standard English which is

either the Standard British (BrE) or the Standard American (AmE) version and exists side by side with other local varieties. In every English speaking community, there is a manifested colouring of English used and Strevens (1972) remarks that only a minority of people in such communities use the standard norm. This condition of proliferation rooted in a desire to know English for one or more obvious reasons led to the numerous variations of the language used today.

Then, there ensued the question among applied linguistics as to whether it is of any benefit to incorporate the teaching of such varieties of language into the learning programme of ESL speakers. Wolfram (2014); Bowen, J.D. (1963); Adger, et al. (2007) and others talk of the apparent need to accommodate the varieties of aspects of the English locally because of the inevitability of their existence. According to Wolfram (2014) their recent studies show how English Language learners in southern rural and urban regions of the US mid-Atlantic South, as well as ESOL learners in urban areas accommodate aspects of vernacular African American English (AAE) and how rural ESOL speakers in southern Appalachia were likely to adopt dialect traits from vernacular Appalachia English in the course of language acquisition. All over the world, these instances are rife thereby

making it expedient for the seeming incorporation and accommodation of language varieties in the ESL classroom.

Again, the existing condition of English in terms of the normative model for the formal instructional use and that of the localized in the various contexts makes it possible that virtually all ESL speakers use two types of the language-one is the idealized norm that is the basis of their formal instruction and the other the everyday variety which is ubiquitous in a local context (Wolfram, 2014). Similarly, Kachru, et al. (2006) note that there is much greater need for capturing the expanding fusions and hybridization of linguistic forms as global functions in world Englishes. All these point to the fact that language variation has a place in the pedagogical space in English as a global language and giving credence to the proposition that even thinking of a neutral dialect variety in ESL context is a myth.

2. Stylistics and Language Variation Studies

In this unit, we consider the interface between stylistics and language variation studies and conclude that the former just like the latter deserves a place in TESL classroom. Stylistics is the study of linguistic style, and that precisely means the choices language makes available to users to explore in the different mode of communication. The term style is used in different ways but here, we use it to refer to the manner of someone's writing or speaking. It is in the same vein that we chose to see style in language as distinctive linguistic expression (Verdonk, 2014). Similarly, Fabb (2016) notes that style is used in linguistics to describe the choices which language makes available to a user, above and beyond the choices necessary for the simple expression of a meaning.

In Fabb's definition, the choices which language offer are generated from available linguistic components consisting of phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, lexical, and so on with which specific meaning are encoded. To decode the message of a particular author, his style of delivery must be understood as stylistic choices are designed to have effects on the reader or listener. Style being a distinctive way of using language for some purpose and to some effect is included for study in areas such as: narrative structure, point of view and focalization, sound patterning, metre and rhythm, metaphor and other ways of indirect meaning and so on.

A person's distinctive linguistic habit in language use, as in Hemingway's or Achebian's style is known the world over. Similarly, such habits could be shared by a group of people within a given period as in Elizabethian style. In all, style relates to the manner in which prominence in linguistic features or devices occur frequently in a particular text which culminates in a variety of language use in a discourse. Ortega (2014) notes that the concept of style and stylistic variation in language rest squarely on the inevitable assumption that's within the language system, a particular content can be variously encoded in more than one linguistic form, hence the varieties of language. But it is not only stylistics that causes the phenomenon of language varieties in the environment. Others include the following according to Syal and Jindal (2012): Varieties due to language contact, varieties of dialect and varieties of register.

Yule (1996); Crystal (2003); Tamunobelesa (2011); Wardhaugh (1998). and Bailey (1973) are among those contributing to language variation purely in sociolinguistics perspective. Syal and Jindal (2012) write that when a language comes in contact with

another, it gives rise to new varieties that continue to co-exist along with the original languages known as nativised or indiginised varieties. That relates to why there are numerous regional varieties in the world which had contact with British civilization as in, for example with Indian English, with its sub varieties like Tamilian English and Bengali English. Language contact also results to pidginization and creolization. Crystal (2003) posits that pidgin and creole are two stages in a simple process of development. Whereas pidgin is a communication system which barely offers people to talk to each other, for example, for the purpose of trade, creole is a language which has developed from pidgin to the full resource of a language. Similarly, a significant difference between them is that pidgin is native language to no one, but creole is, such as Jamaican and Guyana creoles.

An empirical variation of language resulting from used situation is known as dialect (Tamunobelega 2011). It is occasioned by a speaker's social and geographical background. A dialect is linguistically referred to the description of features of grammar and vocabulary, as well as aspects of pronunciation. Accent, on the other hand describes aspects of pronunciation which identify where an individual speaker is from, regionally or socially (Yule 1996). Dialect and accent are common features around the world even in L₁ environment like UK where you have the popular Received Pronunciation (RP) for the upper class and the other varieties within the UK. In this case, dialects are determined socially and religion and caste are others. Syal and Jindal (2012) give an example of how within the same religion, dialectal differences are occasioned by caste, as in the case of the Namboodri (the highest Hindu, Brahmin of Kerala) dialect.

Education, age, and sex are identified by social linguists as significant factors in the making of dialectal differences which cannot be down played in a genuine account. Tamunobelega (2011) and Crystal (2003) for example talk of these aspects of social variation which seem to have particular linguistic consequences in the speeches and even written forms of various groups. Educational varieties refer to the variations which result from the educational level of the speaker. It is common to hear a speaker say, "Them boys throwed the balls on the tables" or "It is broke like a pack of cards". Contrary to this, when an elite speaks he is very easily identified with the Standard English and in most cases said to be speaking like a "professor". "Age, sex and socio-economic class have been repeatedly shown when it comes to explaining the way sounds, construction and vocabulary vary" (Crystal, 2003:365). Yule (1996:241) writes in relation to age that grandfather may still talk about the "icebox" and the "wireless", just like the granddaughters may want to introduce their reported speech using "like" as in "we are getting ready, and like he's like, let's go. And am like, no way I'm not ready, and he splits away, the creep.

It must be mentioned that attitude toward social variation varies from country to country. For instance the British attitude towards this is very clearly distinct as they have a clearly defined culture linguistically. When a social dialect or a class dialect used by the members of a particular group of a speech community is so identified, it is called "sociolect", but the difference found within a given dialect between individuals is called "idiolect". In a diglossia situation however, variation is applied rather differently. A speech community may have two uses of a particular dialect, namely, a 'high' and 'low' variety. The 'high' is used in a special, prestigious or formal occasions,

while the ‘low’ is the general and commonly spoken variety used by all (Wardhaugh, 1998; Yule, 1996; Syal and Jindal, 2012; Tamunobelega, 2011). Wardhaugh (1998, notes that there are four clearly identifiable situations which show the major characteristics of the diglossic phenomenon. They are Arabia, Swiss German, Haitian and Greek. He remarks that a key defining mark of diglossia is that each of the two varieties is kept quite apart with regards to its functions.

Register constitutes another complication factor in the study of language varieties. In the study of language, it is learned that individuals use different variety of a language depending upon use situation. According to Halliday and Hassan(1985/1989:38-39), register is a “ a configuration of meanings that are typically associated with a particular situational configuration of field, mode, and tenor”. A deduction from the aforementioned is the understanding that register relates to a set of linguistic choices associated with a particular situation. Wardhaugh (1998:48), not differing from Halliday and Hassan notes that “registers are set of language items associated with discrete occupational or social groups”, and gives such examples as surgeons, airline pilots, bank managers, sale clerks and so on.

Registers enable you to identify the domain of activity you are. For example, “two players were on yellow cards” identifies the discourse to be in soccer commentary, “prayer is the key” is religious, while “cure, diagnosis, ailment, HIV and so on relate to medicine. It is however difficult sometimes to demarcate a clear boundary between registers, as Flowerdew (2013:18) opines that register is “an idealized concept which allows us to make predictions about what lexicogrammatical features are likely to occur in any given situation”. Contextual

parameters in consideration, field of activity is significant in registers and it is the event of which the language activity forms a part. Consequently, register can be defined in terms of the subject matter, for example, politics, hospitality, religion, biology and so on. Registers can be identified according to tenor, meaning and relationships between the participants in a discursal event. A major consideration here is the identification of the degree of familiarity or unfamiliarity between language users and to respond accordingly. Flowerdew (2013) gives an illustration of a Ph.D applicant who wrote a letter addressing him- Hi Sir. On the other hand, mode is primarily concerned with spoken or written discourse with their numerous sub classifications in existing literation.

The foregoing discussions depict the phenomenon of language varieties in society and due to the fact that language users are not located in a single geographical region results into what is known as regional dialects. Examples of L₁ regional varieties are: In North America- Canadian English, Midland English etc. in Great Britain, eg London English, Irish English, Scots English etc, just as they are in India, South Africa and Nigeria. Other varieties are called social dialects, idiolects, varieties associated with Education and social standing, age, sex and language users, called register. At this point, it becomes pertinent to mention that learning a language involves mastering the language forms appropriate to specific functions and registers (Alo, 1995).

3. The Value of Language Variation in the ESL Classroom

Knowledge of language variation offers great opportunities for the ESL speaker in his relation to other speakers of English in the world. Courses in dialectal differences

enable the comprehensibility that languages are bound to have differences due to several factors, such as geographical, political, social, education, and others. Tamunobelema (2011) compares dialect to a fruit which dispersed through an explosive mechanism and which bears numerous fruits of its kind. Similarly, ESL speakers are aware of the dialectical differences even in their L₁, and the most important awareness that language is for the purpose of communication of which their variety is one. Consequently, dialect inferiority is eliminated and the feeling of boldness and confidence pervade the ESL speaker in his use of language in the diaspora.

Wolfram (2014) adopts Wolfram and Schillim- Estes,(2006); Adger, et al. (2007) and note that there are humanistic, scientific, and utilitarian reasons for incorporating dialectal awareness programmes into a curriculum which he applies in TESOL. At a level, language variation studies is beneficial to contrastive studies where the similarities and differences in human behavior is viewed as reflecting the socio- cultural realities of a people. Results from such investigations are relevant for pedagogical reasons where language differences enhance understanding of varieties of English language in the world.

The contribution of stylistics in this regard is no doubt mean in understanding language variation around the globe. Stylistics studies, whether of language or literature are critical studies which judgments are determined by real and concrete evidence established in a text. Based on the fact that the linguist's judgment is achieved on empirical evidence as to the greatness or otherwise of a work, authors become more studious in linguistics thereby deepening their study of Englishes in the world over. Through the study of comparism, authorship of works can be

revealed in line with their dialects in linguistics or works with similar features e.g works written in a genre or period. Syal and Jindal (2012) write that such works reveal the open-ended and creative aspects of language use and are found in areas such as politics, advertising, journalism and so on.

Among what is offered is the awareness that language is not homogenous and that plays a significant role in teaching and learning. One of these aspects is the identification of the learner's needs and to prepare a programme to meet the social situations he is going to participate in. In other words, having known the learner's need, the teacher has a design and specify the linguistic repertoire which the learner is likely to command and will form the basis of the syllabus. The study of language is so vast that it is not economical to teach an engineering student the register of law, journalism, architecture, or politics but to guide learners with the resources of their needs in view. Therefore, a need-based structure and vocabulary will keep the learners functional in their respective fields of activity.

Hymes (1972) communicative competence language theory is most appropriate with regard to language variety concept which encourages tolerance on the part of the teacher in relation to the students. Before now, grammar translation method of language teaching was largely used and it emphasizes written mode of learning, but recently, it is communicative competence approach which is essentially rooted in social interaction of different dimensions (Allwright, 1984). Most language learning environments are heterogeneous, of learners from various dialects, groups, social class, idiolects etc. Therefore, knowledge of language varieties on the part of the teacher, as well as the willingness to adopt recent

applied linguistics finding will spur him to be more tolerant in the classroom to accommodate all learners taking cognizance of their linguistics and social background. Syal and Jindal (2012:64) note that:

The teacher who knows this will be able to understand the difficulties of the learners in particular areas, some aspects of grammar or pronunciation, and give more attention to such item so that the learners move ahead in learning the language.

Furthermore, the learner is abreast of the fact that there is nothing bad or wrong in certain dialectal variety except for the context in which propriety of use is determined, for instance “I ain’t done nothing” which can be accepted in certain informal context but not all.

A significant value relating to the study of language varieties bothers on the opportunity it affords practitioners an intellectual inquiry on how language works. In their curiosity to understand language, such matters as: language change over time and space, how dialects arise, and factors that give rise to language varieties and so on are investigated. More still, a systematic investigation of dialect differences has led to the scientific process of observation of data, formulation of hypothesis, experimentation and confirming or rejecting of such language usage patterning. These metalinguistic rules about language varieties are potentially intriguing and interesting to curious students and researchers whose endeavors are signposts in the sociolinguistic domain.

4. Conclusion

In the foregoing survey, we have seen that a single monolithic idealized Standard English form as the model for language use in all contexts globally is a myth in itself. This is because of the existing reality of language

variation resulting from dialectal differences wherever English is used in the world. Some of these language variation causative agents include: geographical, political, social, education, age, sex, and so on. Then, the thrust of this exposition suffices, namely that language variation programmes is of value in the context of English as second language environment in the world and the following are outlined: The awareness of language variation as an inevitable reality even in L₁ situation; it results in the elimination of language inferiority among ESL speakers in the world; it encourages contrastive studies which elicits similarities and differences between dialects which reflect sociocultural and historical realities of the various people; style is a contributory factor through an indept study of works which deepens linguistic knowledge; an awareness is created in relation to the teacher who needs to tailor a need- based syllabus for the learner; being more tolerant in the learning environment in view of the differences in learner’s linguistic background; and finally, the practitioners in the field find fulfillment in their research outcomes which have thrown more light in many of the finely defined areas of the world.

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