

## Stylistic Variation in R.P.

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### 1. Aim

The best-known works on stylistic variation in phonology have been concerned with accents which are susceptible to influence from outside. Typically, a regional accent is modified in a formal situation to display characteristics of a prestige norm. My research was designed to discover what happens as formality varies in English in the case of R.P., a non-regional accent which would not be expected to undergo modification towards some external norm.

### 2. Subjects and speech context

The subjects whose speech was studied formed a linguistically homogeneous group. All were educated beyond secondary level; none had speech which showed any features of identifiable regional accents. In order to ensure that the variation observed would be strictly confined within the single accent, the subjects were recorded in conversation with interlocutors whose accent was also R.P. Since the basis of the investigation was empirical, there was no elicitation and no experimenter was present (as is the case in studies by Labov (1966) and Trudgill (1974), for instance). The presence of an investigator surely introduces an additional variable; and if the situations are to be controlled, there must be as few variables as possible.

Clearly the context which affects style is partly linguistic and partly non-linguistic. If the interlocutors are unknown *or* feel a lack of common ground, the social situation is a formal one. This is the type of non-linguistic context which gives rise to *formal* speech. If the interlocutors know each other *and* feel that they share common ground, the social situation is a casual one. This is the type of non-linguistic context which gives rise to *mixed* speech. So, in the text from the casual situation in particular, it is useful to investigate the variation caused by *linguistic* context. This was done by carrying out a close-context analysis of the type suggested by Joos (1968).

### 3. Method

There were six primary subjects, two men and four women, whose sponta-

neous conversation was recorded in casual and formal situations. To achieve the latter situation, two strangers would be introduced socially and then left alone together. At that stage they were unaware that their speech was being recorded and were solely concerned with making polite conversation. The same speakers were recorded in casual situations in familiar surroundings talking to sister, wife or friend. In these cases the subjects knew that they were being recorded but the first ten minutes of each recording were discarded and analysis never started until channel cues (see Milroy and Milroy 1977) indicated that the participants had relaxed into natural casual conversation. Each recording lasted for something between half an hour and an hour. One, in which the subject wore a radio microphone transmitting to a recorder elsewhere in the building, lasted for six hours. Altogether about twenty hours of speech were analysed, including some close-context analysis in the case of the radio-transmitted recording. A total of just over one and a quarter hours of these texts was transcribed narrowly for a detailed analysis of segmental and prosodic features.

Three of the subjects were recorded in monologue (broadcast talk, sermon and seminar paper) but this was discovered to belong to a different genre from conversation, as is maintained by Abercrombie (1963) when he talks of spoken prose. Monologue does *not* represent the most formal end of a speech formality cline. When, therefore, formal and casual speech are contrasted here, what is referred to is the spontaneous conversation of formal and casual situations.

### 4. Phoneticians' assumptions

It was expected that the data would illustrate textbook statements concerning the increased frequency of weak forms, linking /r/, assimilations and elisions as the speech becomes more casual. It was also expected that the occurrence of these features would increase with pace.

### 5. Analysis

The majority of *pauses* in casual speech are unfilled and occur at clause boundaries. Formal speech shows an increase of filled and mid-clause pauses.

*Intonation* patterns show no marked distribution in casual speech. Formal speech shows some concentrations of one pattern (perhaps a stretch of several tone units with fall-rise nuclear tones or a stretch with rising nuclear tones). Casual speech has more level nuclear tones than formal speech. Casual speech has longer tone units (with longer preheads and tails) and contains fewer stressed syllables than formal speech.

Owing to that fact, *weak forms* may be replaced by strong forms more often in formal speech. The alternation of strong and weak forms, however, is entirely regular in both styles: weak forms occur unless the grammatical

word is stressed. Since stresses are more frequent in the tone units of formal speech strong forms may occur more often.

*Linking /r/* is frequent in all styles of speech. Its occurrence is of no stylistic significance.

*Elisions* (which increase with pace) are less rule-bound in casual speech than in formal speech where they are almost entirely regular (e.g. alveolar plosives interconsonantly, initial /h/ in unstressed non-initial pronouns etc.). Casual speech contains unpredictable elisions, such as those of /l/ and /ð/ in 'Well that's all right because you...': [we`æts ə:raI?/ bIkəʒu: ...]

*Assimilation* shows no correlation with pace. It is more frequent in casual speech than in more formal speech.

*Pace* fluctuates more in casual speech than in the most formal speech. Since pace is relevant to the occurrence of elisions, perhaps the rates that were measured should be mentioned: the slowest pace measured was 89 sylls/min (3.1 sylls/sec or 7.6 segs/sec) and the fastest was 324 sylls/min (5.4 sylls/sec or 13.4 segs/sec).

*Plosive release* was one of the most stylistically significant variables. Casual speech had more inaudible releases than formal speech.

The types of figures involved are as follows: the speech of three speakers was examined. Of the 431 voiceless plosives occurring either prepausally or in a two-stop cluster, 395 were inaudibly released, i.e. 'usually' something like 8% of plosives are audibly released. When, then, it is found that 38% of plosives are audibly released in a formal text, it would be fair to say that this feature is marked for style.

## 6. Summary

No feature is unique to a variety though some features may be distributionally marked. Since assimilations, elisions and linking /r/ occur frequently in all situations whether formal or casual, it seems even more important than has hitherto been believed that foreign speakers of English should use these features whenever they speak English. Contrary to expectations, of these three features it is only elision that bears any definite relation to pace. Nor is there any clear relationship between pace and the degree of the formality of the situation in which the speech occurs.

These observations lead to the conclusion that in R.P. there is no shift from one distinct style to another but that gradual variation is to be seen as inherent in a unitary system.

## References

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