SOCIAL DIALECTS IN AMERICAN SOCIETY*

William J. Samarin

Wolfram's virtue is that he kept to the terms of reference specified for this colloquium. A discussant is not so severely constrained. Since he cannot possibly evaluate the whole of a paper, he can approach the topic with greater freedom.

My stance is therefore entirely different from Wolfram's and, curiously enough, from that of everybody else as expressed at this meeting. In approaching the study of social dialects, I should like to hear answers to the question, "Who are we?" I do not mean "we linguists," although this is that part of the colloquium devoted to the contribution that linguistics might make to this study. What linguists, as linguists, are interested in is not for us to discuss here. (Their problems are "linguistic" ones, and there is much that one could say about what they can get out of the study of social dialects to solve these academic problems.)

When I say "we," I mean, specifically, the American people. For me, therefore, the answer to the question, "Who are we?" will be based, in part at least, on linguistic data—in defining the languages we speak and in describing who we are who speak them.

I start with an urbanized, industrialized, multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multidialectal society. That is the macrosociety. From there we work down to the microsocieties, that is, the societies that have prestige or

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no prestige, societies that are large or small, conspicuous or invisible to the others—but all somehow marked by the use of characteristic forms of languages. These are the "social dialects" of our nation, because, as defined by Halliday, they are found among certain socially-defined users.

What Needs to be Done

What needs to be done is to disabuse ourselves of the notion that the most interesting or most typical social dialects are those spoken by the largest of the "socially deprived" or "marginal" members of our macrosociety, especially those who speak some form of nonstandard English. Equally worthy of investigation are the societies and the languages of indigenous Americans (the Indians), of "new Americans" (immigrants of all types), and of "old Americans" (like the Spanish-Americans, the chicanos).

If these are accepted as social dialects, to say, as Wolfram has, that nonstandard dialects have received little attention would not be entirely accurate. One need only mention the studies on the English of immigrant groups, for example; and some studies, like those of Haugen and Fishman are even sociolinguistic in nature. I would like to urge, therefore, that this literature, vast but not always of superior quality, be incorporated in the comprehensive study of American society.

What I am calling for is an examination of our "fences." In other words, what kinds of languages are used in the definition of ethnicity, of being chez soi? How is language (used here in the broadest sense) used symbolically to separate one "backyard" from another?

I shall suggest now the nature, if nothing more, of the answer to that question.

1. Wolfram deals with part of it. He discusses, from several points
of view, the structural correlates or signals of social dialects. Prosodics and paralinguistics might also be mentioned (see, for example, D. Crystal). These are the linguistic markers, to use the term linguistic in a broad sense. This is like talking about the form of language.

2. There is also function in this nicely-aged dichotomy. How, in other words, is language used by our different societies? Differences in function may be as significant as—and, theoretically, even more important than—differences in form. That they are more subtle, hence less easily studied, is no reason for our ignoring them.

As a matter of fact, there is implicit recognition of functional differences in some descriptions of, for example, the Black Society. "Sound-ing" and "rapping" are two examples, even though they may not be the private property of our Black co-citizens. There are suggestions in the present data that Blacks and other linguistic minorities may differ significantly in characteristic uses of language. (Therefore, even if it were demonstrated that certain forms of Black English are indistinguishable from, say, "Southern White" English, we would, on the basis of such functional differences, have to isolate two kinds of speech communities. Whether one wanted to call them "dialects" is another matter.) There is, of course, no suggestion here of any a priori inferiority of one set of functions as compared with another.

3. Such a study ought to include the investigation of interlingual contact. What happens when two languages confront each other at some point in time? What accommodations are made? It is inconceivable that speech is unaffected by the confrontation. (Does a Black waiter modify his speech when he serves an upper-class Black in an expensive restaurant?) There will, I believe, be gestures of exploration, feelers put out to see how the other person will receive the changes. Perhaps a diagnostic characteristic of
socially inferior societies is that their speech has more fluctuation, this itself being a function of practiced accommodation.

One way to approach this topic might be with the use of the concept of stress or strain. In what way, for example, is the language, as structure, of a nonstandard speaker under strain? In what way and under what conditions is the speaker as a user of the language under strain, and how does it affect his performance? There is some evidence that a "formal situation" constitutes such a context for many people, but the data are still scanty and they have not been adequately formalized.

What I am calling for, then, is a typology of American language use. It would, of course, include information about (a) "registers" (which Halliday, again, defines as forms of speech that are correlated with language use) and (b) genres of discourse. Do all of our societies have the same kinds of registers? Are some registers and genres preferred over others? What can be said about their status and frequency of occurrence within that society?

Cooperation Needed

A sociolinguistic goal of the kind I am suggesting cannot be realized by a group of people who narrowly define themselves as "linguists." It would need the help also of linguistically sensitive anthropologists and sociologists. This is suggested by the problem of explaining why Black women, even unmarried girls, are more sensitive to linguistic differences between Black and Standard speech than men are. Shuy has discussed this matter, and Wolfram, in his present paper, wonders if male linguistic conservatism is a symbol of masculinity among Blacks. Obviously, the isolation of cultural symbols is not within the domain of scientific
linguistics as many of its practitioners define it today. And when Wolfram asks if a linguistic model should incorporate context-sensitive rules whose environment is stated in extra-linguistic factors, he must, I think, necessarily ask, "Who will define these factors for us?" In answering, "The social anthropologist or someone like him," I would only be repeating what many have said before me. Finally, we must acknowledge that our language teachers (students of 'Miss Fiddidge' though they often are) and students of literature may teach us something about the use of language in the United States. We would do well to follow the example of Erving Goffman, who has used novels and etiquette manuals to study the structure of human behavior.

The Consequences

The sociolinguistic study of American society (notice how I avoid saying "the study of American social dialects") from the point of view suggested here would have several consequences.

First, it would provide us with better means to evaluate the "adequacy" of American languages. Perhaps it can be demonstrated, for example, that, given the ecology of our kind of urbanized nation, a microsociety can no more afford the luxury of its own language than traditional farmers in India can refuse modern tools and fertilizers. The linguistic situation could be looked at in terms of adaptation and survival (as Hymes has suggested). For example, Spanish-Americans are at some disadvantage without an abundant literature in Spanish—unless its function be only to mark the society's discontinuity with "Anglo" society. We must therefore see Wolfram's reminder of linguistic doctrine (that "all language systems are perfectly adequate as communicative systems for the members of the social group") in its historical, not scientific, context: as a caveat against people who look
down on, for example, Black speech because it is spoken by Blacks. Perhaps jet aircraft provides a better analogy than farmers: they are marvelous instruments, but they need adequate facilities for being launched.

Secondly, we might also learn that although the linguistic systems of some societies are equivalent, the people themselves show different kinds of skill in their uses. If it is clear, for example, that working class people show less skill in organizing narrative discourse, as some have claimed (Schatzman and Strauss), they might be better at writing poetry or drama, for all we know. Perhaps our measurements of linguistic skills preclude the demonstration of skills that are not favored by our middle-class, analytically-oriented society (as R. Cohen would suggest).

Thirdly, such a study might make us more sensitive to differences in the social meaning of language use. As responsible participants in our macrosociety, we must be aware of--and we must make others aware of--the social consequences of language use. This kind of information must be accessible to all Americans.

**A Humanistic Point of View**

The kinds of projects and problems I have mentioned in these few remarks are linguistic in nature, not only because the subject is speech but also because it is the discipline of linguistics that is most competent to study them. They are, however, something else. They are human problems. They touch on human self-identity, on aspirations, on hopes for self-fulfillment. Touching language is touching man deep inside him. This is why linguistics, when it studies social dialects, becomes humanistic. And its outcome is likewise humanistic: it leads to self-understanding, respect, and humility. Whatever might be the political and economic imperatives of
a modern nation, they must not subjugate the people who make up the nation. The structure is built, after all, with blocks of humanity, and language is only its mortar.

Bibliography


