Linguistic Variation in English: A Systematic Review

Zhao Yue

College of Foreign Language, Qufu Normal University, Jining, China
Corresponding author: 20202351@stu.hebmu.edu.cn

Abstract:

This paper aims to review the study of linguistic variation in English. The paper examines three main parts: the founding and significance of linguistic variation and its compartmentalization, the dialectical variation in lexical, phonological, morphosyntactic, and pragmatic facets, and linguistic registers. The first part investigates how linguistic variation thrives as a systematic and theoretical study and how it plays an important role in current linguistic study, especially in initiating the sociolinguistics study. Then, the various variations are reviewed progressively in four dimensions: phonology, lexis, morphology, and syntax. The second part examines the dialectal variation in lexical, phonological, morphosyntactic, and pragmatic angles, each of which is vital to drawing the outline and fulfilling the connotation of dialectal variation. The third part discovers the definition and variation of registers. Registers are a prevalent linguistic phenomenon and occur in miscellaneous situations as an indexical indicator to imply the sociocultural background of individuals. This paper is of high value as a systematic review of the differentiable forms and functions of linguistic variation in English, be that variation lexical, phonological, morphological, or syntactic, and could further be a cornerstone contributing less or more to the future variationist research, via offering rudimentary modules to sketch out a framework, inspiring resourceful perspectives of exploring all sorts of variations or imparting a succession of enlightening experience.

Keywords: Linguistic variation, dialectal variation, registers.

1. Introduction

Since William Labov pointed out a revolutionary direction to place linguistics into practical usage, get rid of the Saussurean synchronic view, and subsequently initiate the concept of linguistic variation, variationist linguistics has thrived and progressively reached its maturity as a newborn and dynamic study. Linguistic variation has been transferred from the former empirical and descriptive study to the current theoretical and systematic study. This transference has marked the milestone that linguistics is free from the stereotype of ending with the appearance of the linguistic phenomenon and is thereby capable of diving into the inner level of linguistic law or, for further exemplification, of becoming a tangible participant in linguistic legislation. Based on this theory, although the linguistic variation presents no drastic alterations in categories of language, it still casts an indispensable influence on the daily usage of language, especially of English in an angle and a way to gain perception of language and in the conception of phonology, lexis, morphology, and syntax. From this perspective, the significance of dialectical variation can then be drawn. Dialectal variation is, as the most common variation, of mighty power to affect the linguistic performance of individuals in a noteworthy way. It places emphasis on a person's most external linguistic behavior, namely utterance, and the variation of utterance after that increases the discursive linguistic patterns, triggers a succession of variationist discrepancies, generates further chain reactions in the field of linguistics, and eventually offers miscellaneous possibilities to develop the omnipresent linguistic variation. Meanwhile, registers are an evidential indicator to suggest the differentiable environment of where and how personal language habits are acquired and, as such, how it modifies the English-speaking proceeding. In this paper, the panorama of linguistic variation is hopefully presented, and the author is acutely aware of its current development, yet as an infant subject with a history of less than 60 years, plentiful facets may remain some uncertainties to be explored.

2. Lead-in to English Variation

2.1 .Founding and Significance

Variationist linguistics was founded by the linguist William Labov in the 1960s [1]. He criticized the former linguists for being so blind that they underestimated the significance of social environment in language evolvement, and he subsequently affirmed a theory that embodied the qualities to correlate language study with interactive soci-

ety. It, to some senses, swerved the forefront of linguistics to the facet in which interlocutors play a role, which is currently called sociolinguistics, according to Walker. J. A. William Labov initiated a research program that aimed to study so-called "free" variation systematically by correlating the variable realization of different phonological forms with social differences among speakers, stylistic differences among situations, and differences in linguistic contexts [2]. As such, in variationist linguistics, variation is regarded as an inherent property of language; in other words, no language could exist without variation. Linguistic variation, however, due to its utterance-based characteristics, manifests itself more in the everyday dimension, so different characteristics naturally occur in speech. However, the linguistic variation is not exclusively materialized in the colloquial dimension but recurs in plentiful aspects including phonological, lexical, morphological, and syntactic ones.

2.2 .Sorts of Variation

Variation showcases how language modification manifests itself on a large level in society. From the linguistic point of view, it progressively occurs in the dimensions of phonology, lexis, morphology, and syntax. First and foremost, the phonological changes are quite pervasive and often mentioned recently, i.e., the occurrence of glottal /t/ sound in words like mother, better, bottle, etc., or the occurrence of rhotic /r/ sound in words like sister, formal, ginger, etc. These potential agreements of pronunciation are linguistically variable. Also, there are distinctions at the linguistic level, i.e., in British English, the lifting device consisting of a platform or cage is called a "lift," whereas in American English, it is called an "elevator." This variation is triggered by differences in regions, not only between countries but counties as well. In addition, the morphological variation is perceived via different spelling of the same word, i.e., color and color refer to the same meaning and are replaceable; another example is that in some regions, the reflexive pronoun "himself" will be spelled and pronounced as "himself," in a nonstandard but acceptive way. As for the syntactic variation, or grammatical variation, the demonstration focuses more on the general sentential framework, i.e., in British English, the word "have" can be used in a question like "Have you any tea?"." In contrast, in American, or another English spoken regions the sentence "Do you have any tea?" is more likely to be acceptable. Also, banking on the carrier of language, the variation largely occurs across spoken and written registers, according to a study on cognitive variation in language; for instance, a higher pronoun density and ambiguous quantification are utilized in a spoken situation, whereas the written environment entails specific

and concrete information [3]. Besides, from the individual point of view, linguistic variation intricately fluctuates in an amicable way by a wide range of personal factors such as gender, age, education, class, income, region, personality, and so on [4].

3. Dialectal Variation

3.1 .Lexical Variation

Dialectal variation is the exemplification of regional variation of language, which could be classified as four scales: lexical variation, phonological variation, morphosyntactic variation, and pragmatic variation, and each of them could still be further classified into several aspects. Also, the stereotype is the natural companion of these variations, so nowadays, it behooves people to get rid of the negative facet of it as much as possible [5]. Lexical variation consists of three main aspects: word selection, loanwords, and coinages. Word selection, as mentioned before, is straightforwardly interpreted as the phenomenon in which people use different words to indicate the same object or express the same idea due to the different external environment. For instance, American people prefer to use the word apartment whereas British people use flat. Also, loanwords are another unavoidable aspect. It refers to a phenomenon that a target language has the potential possibility to absorb some of the vocabulary of the native language, and these loanwords are subsequently transformed from a sort of interlanguage to a part of the target language, such as tsunami from Japanese, opera from Italian and shampoo from Hindi. In addition, coinages could also be ascribed to a sort of dialectal variation. For instance, the word "been-to" in some areas refers to a person who returned from overseas, yet in other areas, usage of this word might trigger unnecessary misinterpretation.

3.2 .Phonological Variation

In this day and age, phonological variation is regarded as the most common trait of dialectal variation and the most distinctive property of linguistic variation. Accent and dialect are, to some sense, attributed to interlanguage, which is regarded as an indexical symbol to have a potential connotation to imply a person's cultural and individual background, being indispensable in phonological variation, and recently, the accent seems to be of vital importance in the second language learning proceeding. One prominent phenomenon is that many language learners would willingly pursue target accents. This phenomenon is the so-called "selling accent." On a national level, accents are often considered a precious component of a citizen's national identity and are highly valued. Therefore, a commercialized accent market is created. Language learners

have the tendency and capacity to choose a particular accent to endow themselves with a fresh cultural identity. For example, a Chinese could choose to practice and acquire an American accent to become fully integrated into a local community in America or more likely to be trusted by an American commercial partner. This sort of phonological variation offers the possibility to reconfigure the model of individual identity and transfers accent from the indigenous identity to a worldwide indexical characteristic. In this case, a particular accent could be a tool, a language, or a medium. As such, an accent would be a target language rather than a variant of interlanguage.

3.3 .Morphosyntactic Variation

The morphosyntactic variation occurs in some specific regions, i.e., the word "yous" in some regions functions as the plural form of "you," and the word "they" sometimes be used as the gender-neutral singular pronoun instead of "he/she." In addition, using adjectives to substitute adverbs in some fixed phrases is widespread, like "drive safe" or "eat healthily." Morphosyntactic variation is not the pivot of dialectal variation. Yet, it is rather common in the linguistic category, and its symbolic process is also embodied in other languages [6].

3.4 .Pragmatic Variation

The last type straightforwardly manifests itself. Pragmatic variation often occurs when the interlocutors have not familiarized themselves with the target language. For example, a specialized interlanguage, Chinglish, is commonly used in China when language learners cannot make their opinions precisely clear [7]. Students prefer to inject several Chinese words into the proceeding when they are trying to utter a complete English sentence when they have to mention a stuff or a state beyond their vocabulary, instead of managing a sort of synonymous sentence with the basic vocabulary they have mastered. This phenomenon showcases the mobility of linguistic resources, which are typically regarded to present characteristics of being fragmentary, complicated, dense, scaled, and mobile; each of them has its application scenarios.

4. Registers of Language

A register is how a speaker uses a language differently in different circumstances. It is a variety of language used in a particular social setting or to describe a person's speech based on a situation [8]. Registers are recurring variations in language use depending on the social situation and the function of language and demonstrate both social and functional variation of linguistic variation [9]. A register offers indexical differences to the speakers or language

learners, which refers to the model that nuances of linguistic distinction are cast to different scales of society, including social, cultural, and political values. The indexical difference puts speakers in a category of identity, which means a person would be able to judge the individual background of a speaker via the particular register of the speaker. Indexical order offers perception and has a predictable direction. As such, a register enables people to analyze the model of the utterance of a certain group of people and subsequently be aware of the implicit background, though admittedly, this sort of judgment would be easily stuck in the stereotype trap. Indexical order is normally referred to as the organizational principle behind pragmatics. In the level of social variation, differentiable registers take place when the class, occupation, gender, or age of an individual are different, such as the doctor register or lawyer register [10]. Being noteworthy, the burst of COVID-19 engenders, or to say magnifies another type of register: the Internet register [11]. This register symbolizes the specificity of Internet terminology, openness of stylistic elements, diversity of language style, and creativity of collocations. As one of the forefronts of register study, the Internet register showcases the enduring dynamism of linguistic variation.

5. Conclusion

This paper has made a systematic review of the evolution of linguistic variation from four distinctive facets: phonology, lexis, morphology, and syntax, analyzed the internal logic in dialectical variation banking on its influence on the common language usage, and made a brief generalization on how a register as an indexical indicator showcases the individual difference and alters the learning habits and subsequent English-speaking proceeding in a super invisible and nuanced way. This paper has reviewed the linguistic variation in a systematic framework within a complete range of linguistic categories and synthesized this study with the awareness and methodology of individual English-speaking. Moreover, this paper would notably contribute a lot to academic researchers or anyone who actively cherishes the interest of gaining further comprehension of linguistic variation and be a fundamental step for those to proceed further in this field. However, the society would evolve, and so would the linguistic variation. Language itself and the subject of linguistics have made giant strides, and at this astounding rate, there would be plentiful factors and potential influences to be discovered. This review paper would hopefully be an invitation and subsequently prompt the readers to participate in the variationist study and fill in the blanks on this subject.

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