Varieties of Language (contd)

We have reached a juncture in our discussion of certain basic sociolinguistics phenomena to the distinction of two key terms: dialect and idiolect. No doubt, every individual who speaks a language does so differently when he speaks to different people: to a child, to an adult, to a mere friend or to an intimate one, to either a superior or subordinate work...

The interlocutor can be intimate, familiar, stranger, or near stranger. The speaker is at times relaxed and informal, while some other times, he is formal and distant.

Wallwork (1978 p 100) argues, in this connection, that we even speak differently to the same person when we meet him in different circumstances. At work, we speak the jargon of the office and on the golf course, for example, we switch to the different more informal jargon of the club house. The idea here is that we do not speak the same jargon in all situations, and we do not address all people in the same way. As speakers, we have to show a sort of adaptability to situations, and no two situations are identical. More than that, a single speaker is unlikely to produce two examples of the same utterance that are absolutely identical. This is so because within our own individual speech habits, many of us have a range of different types of language.

The speech variety of an individual speaker is what we refer to as idiolect. In other words, the particular, and idiosyncratic manner of speech of any individual is an idiolect and it is to be specified here that no two idiolects will ever be exactly the same in every respect.
When the idiolects of a given group of speakers are alike and they feel that they all talk the same way in a particular language, we refer to their manner of speaking as a dialect. Dialects, then, are language varieties spoken by a speech community, which is characterized by systematic phonological, lexical and grammatical features that distinguish them from other varieties of the language. Haden Elgin (1979:107) argues that "for the linguist, a dialect is simply the set of rules associated with the verbal behavior of a group of native speakers of a language".

We go on to say that when a number of different dialects have so much in common that their speakers all consider themselves to have a shared medium of communication, they define that set of dialects, as a language. At this point, it is essential to make certain generalizations also in the term dialect:

1. All languages consist of dialects.

2. There are dialect differences that emanate from (a)social situation, (b) geography, (c) education, (d) gender, (e) social situations. ie social status, but such differences are generally mutually intelligible.

3. Dialects are usually geographically socially and politically determined, hence, the label social versus regional dialects.

4. Non standard forms of dialect, are, as argued by Wallwork (1979) self-contained systems with their regular phonological, and syntactic rules.

The argument here is that idiolects, dialects and languages are closely related concepts and the three terms refer to the speech medium used by a given individual, usually in correlation with nationality, ethnic heritage, or of the geographic location of the speaker during periods of language acquisition. We bring here another term that refers to the mode of language use by a given individual: this is register.

A register differs from the other terms or concepts in the sense that it refers to the style of speech or writing, which can be demonstrated to be firmly linked to a particular social role, or situation. Aden Elgin (1979:108) gives the evidence that "It is common, for example, for an urban seventh grade student to have one
speech style force in the classroom, a second style of use in the home, and still at third style for use with his or her peer group on the city streets. She gave some examples:

a. Goodbye, Mr Martin.

b. See yaater, Mom!

c. Okay, man, I gotta split.

Registers can be distinguished according to three dimensions:

1. Field of discourse and it refers to the subject matter of the interaction. It could that of cooking, swimming, academic discussion or telling a joke, etc. and here we are given some examples:

a. **Medialanguage**: "At least two people were killed, and more than 250 were injured Wednesday night when rioting broke out at the stadium.

b. **A joke**: a. Darling, you mustn't leave me.

   b. But I can't leave you.

   a. Is that because you love me so much darling?

   b. No, it is because you're standing on my foot.

c. **The language of computers**: Use media sharing sites to upload individuals and use blogs to post online diaries.

2. Mode of discourse refers to the medium used for communication: writing or speaking. The style used generally is one that suits the situation. language of advertisement is always spoken and language of literature, for example, is a frozen language.

3. Style of discourse: refers to the style of participants. This suggests a distinction between literary and colloquial forms. It refers also to the level of formality and to the relationship between participants: superior or inferior.
**Measuring style characteristics:** Here we distinguish between five types of styles, frozen style, formal style, consultative type, casual style and intimate style.

- **Frozen style:** It is the style of writing or the static register, because it is not subject to change with interaction or wait time, and it is also considered to be the style of history language. It is also frozen because it is the style used in literature and where one has to observe strict rules of writing that have to do with correctness, grammaticality and appropriateness of use. It is also marked by a certain complexity of its constructions and difficulty of understanding some of its items and lexical terms and concepts.

- **Formal style:** It is classified as less rigid than the frozen style simply because here we can feel the impact of interaction that affects its forms and its constructions. It is a formal register which is used in professional academic or legal settings where communication is to be respectful, uninterrupted and restrained. No slang is used in formal style and no contractions, only in some exceptional cases.

- **Consultative style:** The style for courting or for coming to terms with strangers in some special circumstances. The consultative style is often used by speakers when interacting with someone who has specialized knowledge, or who is offering advice. It is generally respectful, but people may pause or interrupt one another, in some encounters TV debates.

- **Casual style:** The casual or informal style is used between people belonging to the same group: age, Profession, friendship, colleaguehood, etc. It is a style where you don't have to supply information all the time about everything you use or you speak about, because it is based on previous experience. It is characterized by ellipsis, that is to say, omission of words or syllables. It is also known by the use of slang.

- **Intimate style:** It is usually used between two people who know each other very well and share a lot. It is also known by the use of jargon that can sometimes be special with special meaning.
The movement from one style to another is generally rigid, and the mixture of them in the same situation is serious error not to be committed by any individual who is bound to respect the requirements of each situation. So, linguists say that the intimate style is the register, which is reserved for special occasions, usually between, only two people and often in private settings, intimate language may be something as simple as an inside joke between two college friends, or a word whispered in a lover’s ear.

We conclude by saying that knowing which register to use can be challenging for people, and especially for learners of a foreign or second language. Indeed, culture adds another layer of complication, especially if you’re not familiar with how people are expected to behave in certain situations or in special encounters.

Finally, we say that, by our language or register, we define the group, to whom we belong. We defined certain people as inside the group and we leave others out. Language comes to be an accurate map of the social and sociological division of society and it a real mirror of the social constitution of different speech communities, how they interact, what type of relationship they entertain with each other. It further gives us a real information about your origins, your social class, your profession or your carrier and your social rank within that society.

**Issues for discussion:**

a. You certainly belong to an ethnic group a, just like any member of your society, and you speak register that distinguishes you. Decide which ethnic group you belong to and which register you speak and state any systematic dialect differences that you notice when you compare your dialect to that of your interlocutors. State also your register distinguishing features.

b. In almost all languages, there are certain forms used to show the extent to which the participants in an interaction entertain relations of superiority or those of equality. How is this manifested in your language? What types of honorifics (titles like sir or Miss/Mrs in English and tu/vous in French) are used in your language for this end?
Further reading and references