

UNIT 1 LANGUAGE VARIATION - THE CONTEXT OF SITUATION

Structure

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

Our aim in this Unit is to make you understand the field of stylistics in terms of fundamental questions, such as

- 1) What is language?
- 2) The nature of language variation: dialect, style, register.

In other words, we are placing **stylistics** in the context of the situation

1.1 INTRODUCTION

What is stylistics? It is a study of languages used for a particular purpose, generally for a literary purpose, though it is of course possible to do a stylistic analysis of the language used in advertising, or even in casual conversation. Stylistics is an attempt to characterise the nature of the linguistic features occurring in a particular piece of text (whether spoken or written, though usually the implication is written text). A piece of writing is distinguished from other pieces of writing, not only because of its content, or what it is trying to say, but by how it is said, that is, by the choice of linguistic features, and how these are arranged in the text. Stylistics is concerned with analysing the choice of linguistic features and their arrangement in the text.

But before we embark on a study of stylistics, it is important to begin right at the beginning – with the fundamental questions : **What is language?** A lot of what is discussed in this unit will be repetitive – but it is essential to our discussion, and will help you understand the concepts better.

1.2 WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

The concept of what language is has to be closely linked with what it means to know a language. Knowledge of a language, or language proficiency can be thought of in terms of the distinction between 'competence' and 'performance' made by Chomsky. Competence relates to the potential for language ability that the child is born with and

which matures with age. Performance is the expression of this language ability in actual speech and writing.

Competence, being concerned in essence with the ability on the part of the child to produce language as such, is thus, when the competence is narrowed to the knowledge of one specific language, further narrowed down to the representative forms of that language, namely, the standard dialect, or the standard version of the language. Thus, knowledge of the language is knowledge of its standard version. This version is what is codified in dictionaries and grammar books, and is the form used for wider communication.

Secondly, the notion of competence is basically linked with knowledge of syntax, for syntax is the backbone of language. The realm of syntax is the simple sentence, within which operate all the aspects of syntax. The relationship of one sentence to another, to the paragraph in which it occurs, and the total text of which it is a part is not the concern of syntax.

Thirdly, competence relates to **potential for use**, not use itself. Thus, it leaves out of consideration a major aspect of language in use, namely, the use of language in context. Since the only form of language that language users know is language in context, any theory of language which ignores this aspect of language in use cannot be entirely satisfactory.

Shortly after the Chomskyan revolution, sociolinguists like Gumperz, Ferguson, Fishman and so on, became aware that merely the theory of language without the use of that language was not of much value, and hence they insisted that at the very least, any notion of language must include i) non-standard forms of the language, ii) the linguistic context in which it appears and, iii) the speech context in which it is used. Thus language was made to move out of its ivory tower of the isolated sentence into the hurly burly of life in the marketplace. Speech and writing, as they actually occur in their linguistic and sociolinguistic context, and in the dialect / style / register in which they occur was now to be considered language. Control of all these aspects was considered to give rise to 'communicative competence'. Thus, there is a marked distinction between the concepts of 'competence' (linguistic; sentence-based; based on standard variety of language) and 'communicative competence' (sociolinguistic; text- and context-based; based on different varieties of the language).

1.3 LANGUAGE VARIATION

What are these different varieties of individual languages?

Linguistic conventions develop in different social groups, and these serve to separate one language from another. But, over the years, as social groups migrate and change their cultural characteristics, the language spoken submits to change and variation. Linguistic change can also be of another kind - language variation down the centuries. This variation can be 'synchronic' (variation within one time period, in terms of region, class or caste) or 'diachronic' (variation due to time factors).

We are aware of the **diachronic variations** of English. For example, the English used by Chaucer differs radically from that used by Milton and both these are different from that of T.S. Eliot. However, many of us are not aware of **synchronic variation**. Look at the following specimens, all of twentieth century English :

1. "Not me," Lump says, "Jedge tole me ef I get caught swipin' any more stuff out'n stores, he'd send me to state's prison sure 'nough" (an uneducated American dialect)

2. Dickie : 'I'm on mother's side. The old boy's so dodderly now he can hardly finish the course at all. I timed him today. It took him seventy-five seconds dead from a flying start to reach the pulpit, and he needed the whip coming round the bend-----'

(Dickie, an adolescent (hence the slang) in Terence Rattigan's play 'The Winslow Boy')

3. Let us propose, then, as a tentative hypothesis, that a great many items appear in the lexicon with fixed selection and subcategorization features, but with a choice as to the features associated with the lexical categories noun, verb, adjective. (Chomsky: technical writing in linguistics)

4. There the smoke of the camp was redolent with the scent of burning gum leaves, there was the splash of the lizard taking to its water, the twittering birds in the trees (literary prose)

All the above are samples of twentieth century writing, yet they vary considerably in terms of the social class of the speaker, his age, the region he comes from, and the type of register he is using, whether literary, technical or otherwise. **These distinctions involve synchronic variation, which is of three kinds: variation of Dialect, Style, and Register.**

1.3.1 Dialect

Dialects may be i) regional or ii) social class/ caste varieties of a language. British and American English are regional dialectal varieties, just as within Britain, also, there are numerous dialects of English- the Lancashire dialect, the Scottish dialect, the Yorkshire variety and so on. The flower girl in Shaw's *Pygmalion*, for example, uses the Cockney dialect :

" There's manners f'yer ? Teoo bunches of voylets tred into the mad"

Dialectal differences may be phonological, morphological, syntactic or lexical in nature. For example, a feature of the phonological difference between General American English and British R. P. (Received Pronunciation) is the vowel sound in the words 'last' and 'dance' in the two dialects as shown below.

	British R.P.	American English
Pronunciation difference		
last	/la:st/	/læst/
dance	/da:ns/	/dæns/
Syntactic difference:	different from I'll meet them	different than I'll meet up with them
Lexical difference:	petrol	gas
Morphological difference:	dived	dove

Idiolect

We are aware of how any two speakers will differ in their use of English with respect to points of syntax, phonology or vocabulary. For example, some speakers may pronounce 'uncle' as /ʌŋkl/, others may say /ʌŋkəl/ or /ʌŋkil/. One speaker may use 'you know' in each sentence, while another might say, 'See what I mean?', or perhaps no filler at all. The term 'idiolect' is used to indicate the dialect of one person.

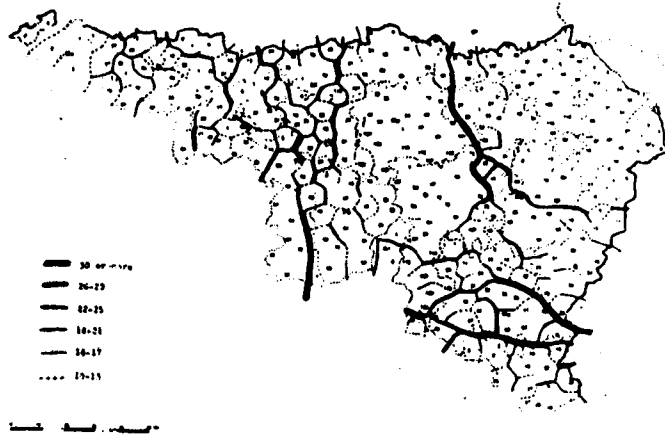
Such differences in phonology, morphology, syntax as they occur in the dialect of specific geographical regions may be marked by what are called dialect boundaries.

Thus in an imaginary state in India where some people use the word 'sigri' for stove and others call it 'sigli', the map may indicate the dialect boundary as follows (where 'x' indicates the use of 'sigri' and 'o' indicates the use of 'sigli'):

Isogloss

The boundary-line which demarcates the 'sigri' area from the 'sigli' area would be called an 'isogloss'. An isogloss is an imaginary line which divides two areas which differ in the use of a linguistic item.

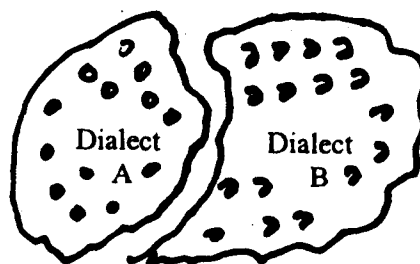
We can draw a number of isoglosses in a similar fashion indicating other differences, e.g. an initial /s/ and an initial /sh/ in the same word or a terminal /i/ or terminal /e/ in the same word. The isoglosses need not coincide and the map would show a criss-cross of isoglosses as follows:



Bundling of isoglosses

Somewhere in the middle, a number of isoglosses tend to come together. Such a grouping of isoglosses is referred to as 'bundling'. Such a bundling of isoglosses is generally considered as a dialect boundary, as shown below:

DIALECT BOUNDARY



Dialects and Languages

What are the criteria by which we may identify dialects of the same language or distinguish one language as different from another? Why do we say that Bhojpuri and Avadhi are dialects of Hindi and that Punjabi and Hindi are two different languages?

The concept of **mutual intelligibility** is a partial answer. If two speakers of different dialects are mutually intelligible to each other in their day to day communication, then they are speaking the same language. However, this is not a totally valid criterion. Two languages like Hindi and Punjabi may be so closely related that there is bound to be some mutual intelligibility between speakers of the two languages. On the other hand, speakers of two dialects of the same language may not be mutually intelligible as happens in the case of some varieties of Chinese (e.g. Pekingese and Cantonese), as also of Konkani and Marathi.

A dialect is raised to the status of a language through non-linguistic considerations: it gains separate status when it becomes politically and socially powerful.

Haugen (1966) indicates two clearly distinct dimensions involved in the understanding of the terms 'language' and 'dialect': structural and functional dimensions.

The **structural** dimension is descriptive, analysing the structure of languages; the **functional** is concerned with the use the speakers make of the codes, and this falls within the domain of the sociolinguist. In the modern world, says Haugen, "technological and political revolutions have brought Everyman the opportunity to participate in political decisions to his advantage. The invention of printing, the rise of industry and the spread of popular education have brought into being the modern nation-state, which extends some of the loyalties of the family and the neighbourhood or the clan to the whole state. Nation and language have become inextricably intertwined. Every self-respecting nation has to have a language, not just a 'vernacular' or a 'dialect' as a medium of communication, but a fully developed language. Anything less marks it as underdeveloped." Haugen goes on to say that he would rather call underdeveloped languages 'vernaculars' and not 'dialects', because dialects are viable linguistic codes, which are language varieties in their own right, and not at all underdeveloped.

It is, in any case, important to remember that all dialects of a language are equally efficient for purposes of the communication for which they are intended. The dialect which becomes 'prestigious', because it is used by the political leaders and the upper socio-economic classes, becomes the medium of instruction, is used by the press, and for purposes of national communication. Such a dominant dialect can be called the **standard dialect**. However, it is in no way superior to the other dialects, which though non-standard, are not sub-standard in any way. In a village, it might be more appropriate to use the regional variety if one wants to mingle with the people on terms of equality. One of the reasons why the Indian family planning propaganda has failed so miserably in the villages is that speeches are usually made in very stilted, formal language of the standard dialect variety. The regional variety is what would have been appropriate here. For one thing it would have been understood.

Accent

This refers to the peculiarities of pronunciation used by the speaker, or to phonological variations in dialect. Thus, English may be spoken with a British, American or Bengali accent. The standard British accent is known as Received Pronunciation (R.P.). An Indian may speak English with a regional Indian accent or use what has come to be codified as General Indian English (G.I.E.) by Bansal (1969), with pronunciation differences as shown in the examples below:

<u>Word</u>	<u>R.P.</u>	<u>G.I.E.</u>
gate	/geɪt/	/ge:t/
home	/haʊm/	/ho:m/

1.3.2 Style

Dialectal variation, as we have seen, is governed by differences in social class and region. But linguistic variation can also arise because of the nature of the **speech context** or **social situation**. This type of variation is called 'style'. The same individual has the ability to use different stylistic varieties of the language depending on his/her purpose, or the situation in which it is to be used. Talking to your wife or a friend will be different from talking to your boss. Thus there are formal and informal styles. It is possible to consider a continuum of styles ranging from the Intimate to

the Casual, to the Consultative (Informal), then Formal, and finally Frozen. The more formal the style, the less possibility there is of variation. The extreme of formality is 'frozen' style (e.g. 'Smoking is prohibited'; 'Trespassers will be prosecuted') where the expression is fixed by convention. From the informal to the intimate range, there is scope for considerable variation. We are not required to mind our words so much when speaking informally.

An example of a statement worked through the various styles will make the distinctions clear.

Frozen: Visitors should use the two exits at the rear on their way out.

Formal: Visitors should leave by the exits at the rear.

Consultative: Would you mind leaving by the exits at the rear?

Casual: You could leave by the doors at the back.

Intimate: Out you go by the back door!

Style is required to be appropriate to the speech situation in which the interaction takes place. Various factors are at work to create a speech situation. Firstly, there are the participants in an interaction. The relationship between the participants is of importance. Are they equal in status, or is one considered superior and the other inferior, whether in terms of age, sex, or social status. It may even be that, in the given situation, one person has the upper hand. This factor will affect the language used by the 'superior' and the 'inferior' individuals.

In some situations, the difference is not just of style, but even of dialect or, perhaps, a different language altogether may be required to be spoken by the person perceived as 'lower'. Lower castes, for example, were not allowed to use the upper caste dialect in interacting with the upper caste. They were supposed to indicate their inferiority by using the lower caste dialect. Even if the lower caste person had studied in the city and used the upper caste dialect with facility, on his return to the village, he was expected to return to his old position and signal this by the linguistic code he used. Thus, the distinction between style and dialect is not always clear. It gets blurred in actual contexts of use, where, particularly in multilingual societies, change in style is expressed through change of dialect.

The style of language employed would differ inevitably if a large group was being addressed, or if it was only one or two people. Interaction, moreover, can take place between a person and an unknown group, or a group that is not even present, for example, the readers of a newspaper. Here, again, the style would differ considerably from personal communication, even in writing.

Again, there might be age-based differences in certain cultures and sex-based differences. A younger person might be expected to be more polite than the older one. Similarly, a female, regardless of age, might be expected to be more polite to a male, or *vice versa*.. Recorded conversations or dialogue in novels or plays can provide useful data for study in this regard. Norms of politeness are culture-specific, and emerge clearly in interaction situations.

If the expectations of appropriateness of language vary between the two participants in an interaction situation, then tension can arise. This can be observed in both real life and literary uses of language. Lack of appropriateness can lead to rudeness, whether intended or otherwise. It can also lead to lack of comprehension, when one participant assumes some background knowledge on the part of the other, and this does not actually exist. The presuppositions that are expected are missing. Shared

background knowledge and conventions of what requires to be specified in speech are culturally conditioned.

The second important factor relates to time and place. When and where does the interaction occur? Words used at dead of night might take on a different meaning from the same words spoken in broad daylight. Similarly there are occasions for saying things and changes in venue can affect meaning. Court room discourse, when the lawyer is addressing the judge, necessarily makes different demands on the speaker from a casual conversation in the corridor regarding the same matter, and carries a different associative meaning.

Thirdly, the nature of the topic that is being discussed can affect the type of language used. If it requires intellectual discussion, the style may become formal, but if household matters are being discussed, the style may be casual. A different dialect or even a different language may even be used in these circumstances. In India, many people discuss ideas in English, and household matters in their mother tongue. Certainly, there would be a change in the linguistic style, even if dialect or language change was not used to indicate the change in style.

The medium of the discourse, that is, whether speech or writing, can also determine style. A personal letter will be different from a face-to-face interaction, even though the participants and the topic remain the same. Writing does introduce a greater degree of formality than speech. Style varies also according to the mode of the interaction, e.g. telephone conversations, radio and television shows. In the last two modes, the style may again vary depending on whether the show is a newscast, a chat-show, a documentary or a pot-boiler. In the written mode, telegraphic messages, personal/business letters, newspaper articles or scientific treatises will all use different stylistic varieties of the language.

Register

Register refers to linguistic variation determined by subject matter, e.g. scientific writing is a register which is distinguished by the increased use of the passive voice, formulae, technical terminology, etc. For example:

“Neuraminic acid in the form of its alkali-stable methoxy derivative was first isolated by Klenk from gangliosides and more recently from bovine sub-maxillary gland mucin and from a urine muco-protein, its composition being C H NO or perhaps C N NO.”

Again, the peculiarity of a piling up of adjectives, strings of prepositional phrases, and relative clauses, even though the information so conveyed is frequently not properly relevant to the rest of the discourse, is common to the register of Journalism. For example:

“Mr. John William Allaway, a 46-year old plumber, his wife, Florence, aged 32, and their 15 year old son John, escaped unhurt in their nightclothes after a fire broke out at their 200 year old home, Rose Hill Cottage, at Gallows Hill, King’s Langley, Herts.”

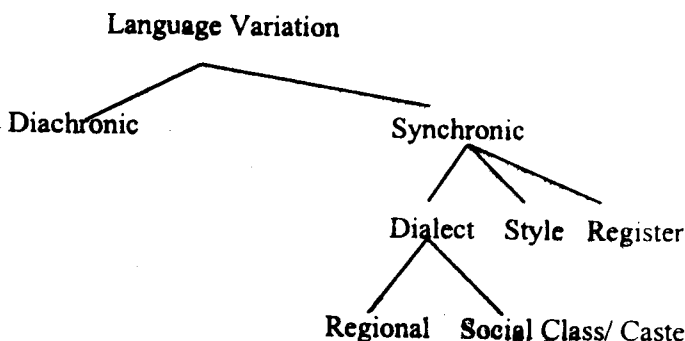
Literary register, on the other hand, is distinguished by its “precision and elegance”, to use Quirk’s compact phrase, its ability to depict a situation through language that reflects it accurately.

1.4 LET US SUM UP

1. Language can be thought of as a set of linguistic patterns or structures. The field of the operations of linguistics is the simple sentence, isolated from the context in which it occurs. It is also the study of the ‘ideal’ language, i.e. the

standard version of the language. This is the Chomskyan view of language. The development of sociolinguistics led to an alternative view that is very different. This is that language is basically text- and context-based, and takes account of language variation.

2. Language structure tends to change or introduce variations over time and across space, i.e. both diachronically and synchronically, in response to changing social needs. Language variation may be represented diagrammatically as follows:



3. 'Style' is conditioned by the following components of the speech situation:
 - a) The nature of the participants
 - b) Time, place of interaction
 - c) Topic of conversation
 - d) Medium, mode of communication

1.5 KEYWORDS

Competence:	an abstract idealization of a speaker's knowledge of his/her language, excluding such factors as slips of tongue, memory limitations and distraction.
Performance:	The actual linguistic behaviour of particular individuals on particular occasions, including any hesitations, memory lapses, slips of the tongue, etc.
Communicative Competence:	The ability to use a language appropriately in social situations.
Accent:	a particular way of pronouncing a language.
Style:	any particular and somewhat distinctive way of using a language.

1.6 QUESTIONS

Answer briefly in about 50 to 100 words:

- (1) What is meant by 'competence' and 'performance'?
- (2) What are the three ways in which linguistic competence is characterised?

- (3) What is 'communicative competence'? What are the three ways in which it is a break away from the notion of competence? Why is this concept important?
- (4) What are the two kinds of language variation? Exemplify these.
- (5) Explain briefly how a dialect boundary is determined .
- (6) Distinguish between dialect and language . How does a dialect achieve the status of 'language'? Explain briefly.
- (7) What is meant by 'non-standard' dialect ? How does it relate to a 'standard' dialect?
- (8) What are the three main types of synchronic variation? Define them briefly.

1.7 REFERENCES

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