



2 | Language variation, language vitality and institutional use: Managing the interplay and tensions

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INTRODUCTION

The duality of language as a tool for communication and as an expression of identity is at the heart of the field of sociolinguistics: the study of language in its social context. Some sociolinguists are interested in the fundamental study of how languages vary and change, while others have developed interests at the intersection with other scientific disciplines, e.g., language choice (sociology), language attitudes (social psychology) and language policy and planning (legal studies, political sciences). In this paper we will point out some directions how, with language variation as the core concept, scholars of the Institute for Language Sciences and the strategic theme Institutions for Open Societies can join forces to tackle current societal and scientific issues at the intersection of language in institutions and language as an institution.

A UNIFORM STANDARD LANGUAGE

In the formation of nation states, a uniform language was often propagated and/or imposed. Dutch in the Netherlands or French in France have developed into such a standard language; i.e., a variety of the language that has been selected, uniformized, codified (in dictionaries, grammars, standard pronunciation rules), and accepted, often as an outcome of a long

historical process. These languages possess an official writing system (with a script and spelling rules), which is sometimes reviewed when the language itself, the language ideology or the conceptualizations about the best way to write the language are changing.

As a result of these historical and political processes, a lot of societies are equipped with a societal and ideological conception of language as a uniform, shared and well-defined entity. Standard languages have become a (top-down) regularized institution, allowing to manage communication in institutional contexts (e.g., administration, education, news media). In general, a uniform standard language is considered crucial in educational contexts, as it provides a clear model for the children, which can be defined as ‘correct’, ‘grammatical’, without ‘spelling mistakes’, deprived of dialect influence, etc.

At the same time, societies with a uniform standard language ideology often possess a range of governmental bodies and private institutions that act as language regulators or ‘gatekeepers’ of the language (e.g., Académie française for French, Euskaltzaindia for Basque, Nederlandse Taalunie for Dutch). Institutions like broadcasting stations and newspapers are (mostly) non-official regulators, but are often seen as models or embodiments of the standard language.

LANGUAGE VARIATION IS EVERYWHERE

The conception of language as a uniform instance that regulates society and creates equality among speakers is an idealized and naive point of view. In this section, we explain why this view does neither fit reality, nor the needs of twenty-first century societies. Variation is a core feature of language and every individual speaker makes use of variation constantly: by using different words, different constructions, or by having an accent related to the place where one grew up or to which social groups one belongs to or identifies with. The interest for language variation has been present from the cradle of linguistics as a scientific discipline: variation between languages (e.g., typology, language families) and within languages (dialectology, language change). Furthermore, variation in language use defines us as an individual and helps to express our identity in relation to our own and other groups. Speakers might switch between different forms or registers (between a dialect and the standard, between a colloquial and formal variety), but also between languages. Variation as a core feature of language stands in direct tension with the standard language ideology. We want to demonstrate this with two present-day tensions:

(1) THE STATUS OF LANGUAGE VARIATION IN A DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE SOCIETY

While it is popular belief that a society needs a strong and clear standard language, there are large differences in standard language ideologies in Europe. In language areas with a strong standard language ideology (e.g., France, Flanders), it becomes increasingly obvious that the prevailing ideology maintains inequalities between and creates threats to individual citizens. At the same time, the beginning of the twenty-first century is characterized by a shift in attention paid to individuals within society, in all their diversity and identity. In Scandinavia and Switzerland for instance, the local, regional or social dialects are used in both informal and formal spoken settings (e.g., newscasts, parliamentary debates, university lectures). We have entered a process of raising awareness, addressing and even tackling inequalities between societal groups, either modern equalities (e.g., natives vs. migrants, rural vs. urban) and historical inequalities (e.g., inherited from the colonial past). Holding to standard language ideologies prevents us from moving this agenda forward. We currently need to understand how language variation influences e.g., job selection, judiciary decision-making, contact with the police, health care, and education. And even if one is ready to abandon standard language ideologies, there are many questions to be answered. How can language institutions adopt a variationist and sustainable language policy, fitting the

sociolinguistic situation and the needs of the citizens? How to create support for such a new language policy? Which variation patterns should be incorporated in grammar books, and how can they be labeled? How can they be implemented in teaching? How does such a variationist language policy shape literary texts? And how can it be applied in mass media?

(2) THE CASE OF MINORITY AND REGIONAL LANGUAGES

In many countries with a well-defined standard language (ideology) the dominant language coexists with one or more minority or regional languages (e.g., Frisian, Low-Saxon or Limburgian in the Netherlands; Basque, Breton and Occitan in France). Language activists and policy makers keep striving for the vitality of minority languages and stronger linguistic rights in the context of domestic (local, national), regional (e.g., European) and international laws and regulations, as all citizens should have the right and the means to use their mother tongue in the public space. It is crucial to investigate how language laws and regulations affect the vitality

of these languages, and how language affects conflicts world-wide (as a cause, a propaganda tool, or a solution).

Language activists commonly strive for language uniformization processes (e.g., banning dialect words and pronunciations, introducing a standard spelling system, normative language tools, etc.), even for languages that have never been written before and only exist – as most of the world's languages and language varieties – in spoken form. However, we now know that doing so reduces the variation within these languages and alienates part of the language users from this new standard variety. Why do language activists generally stick to conservative ideas? And why do local language activists so often disagree on what should be done? This results, somewhat ironically, in threatening the vitality of these languages. How can present-day societal and technological developments cope with this paradox? Can developments in artificial intelligence and speech technology help to embrace variation and to bypass the need to uniformize language to maintain it?

Variation as a core feature of language stands in direct tension with the standard language ideology.

CONCLUSION

We observe that traditional language institutes are in crisis. One of the main reasons seems to be the blind adherence to a language ideology inherited from nation building in the nineteenth century. This paper aimed to demonstrate the tension between language ideology, present-day societies and the needs of speakers (individuals and groups). The burning question is how to create a language ideology matching the twenty-first century global world in all its complexity and diversity.

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