

LANGUAGE VARIATION AND GRAMMATICAL CHANGE

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Abstract: This paper discusses the problems of language variation and grammatical changes in English. Language change has been the object of numerous researches and it is often applied for studying the nature of systematic variability. The author attempts to prove that the interest in language variation focuses mostly on differences that have some social significance. A key term in the study of linguistic variation is the notion of linguistic variable. The paper gives insight into the methodology of eliciting, analyzing and evaluating the data for the analysis of language variation and change. Also some preliminary results are suggested explaining grammatical variation within the forms of nominal number.

Key words: language change, variation, linguistic variable, sociolinguistics, grammatical change, the noun, the category of number

Introduction

Present-day linguistics clearly demonstrates a growth of attention to the study of language variation. It was Sapir who first stated, “Everyone knows that language is variable.” (Sapir, 1921: 147). However, “it was not until the advent of sociolinguistics a half-century ago that the admission of language variation became more than a footnote to linguistic description” (Wolfram, 2006: 333). Nowadays, the study of variation is a highly productive field of research. In this paper I consider the notion of language variability in general and define the linguistic variable as a part in the analysis and description of grammatical variation proper. My aim is also to suggest a critical review of how the English language has been changing recently, focusing especially on grammatical changes of the recent decade. Finally, I attempt to discuss grammatical variation within the system of English nouns, namely in the grammatical forms of number.

1. The Notion of Variability

In order to meet their communication needs one and the same person may alternate different elements in different circumstances which is sometimes referred to as *intraspeaker variation* (Meyerhoff, 2009: 203). Such a type is commonly discussed in linguistics and it involves taking all the social and linguistic factors into account. Besides, researchers mention that the study of language variation is central to the solution of fundamental problems in linguistic theory (e.g. Bailey 1973; Labov 2001). Variation also facilitates differentiation among individuals, social or regional groups and nations.

Variability can be observed everywhere in language, at all levels, in different dialects and different registers. In the past linguistic tradition grammar was assumed to be a fixed, unchanging system. However, different writers and speakers use this system differently. It is recognized by many scientists that language variation concerns differences that could have some social significance, such as speech behaviour of certain social groups (communities), socially meaningful aspects of individual speaker performance, etc. In other words, we can say that linguistic variation is functionally motivated, related to different purposes, influenced by different communicative tasks, produced under different circumstances.

Wolfram (2006) claims that “in traditional linguistic description the notion of variation within structural units has often been analysed as “free fluctuation,” “optional rules,” and “free variants.” Nevertheless, according to David Crystal (2003: 189), this type of variability

has been determined as “an area of little importance”. One of the essential elements in the study of linguistic variation is the notion of *linguistic variable*. It can be defined as “a structural unit that includes a set of fluctuating variants showing meaningful co-variation with an independent set of variables“ (Wolfram, 2006: 334). The linguistic variable was first introduced in early variation studies by William Labov (1966), who is considered to be a founder of language variation studies. Researchers all over the world have adapted his set of methodological innovations to track how language use varies according to social factors (e.g., speaker’s gender, ethnic group or age), how it is influenced by social and regional dialects (e.g., certain local community or social group) or by the register (e.g., particular context of use). Some of them even believe that taking into account identifying aspects of people's lifestyles can lead us to be more innovative or conservative as speakers.

The notion of the linguistic variable can be applied to different levels of language. However, in sociolinguistics history, in synchronic and apparent time studies a vast majority of works deals with studying and explaining phonological and morphosyntactic variation, whereas syntactic variation was especially important in diachronic studies. In synchronic and apparent time studies on variation natural conversational interviews were usually used as primary databases. For this reason syntactic variation was not the object of such researches, since in natural conversation syntactic phenomena are not observed at sufficient frequency levels which makes it difficult to conduct meaningful quantitative analyses of systematic variability.

2 Variation and Language Change

As David Crystal mentions (1996: 15), language change is unpredictable. We can be aware of our linguistic past, but no one is able to predict our linguistic future. A static view on language denies the existence of change, makes us believe that standard English is fixed, with little or no variability at all. There are certain prescribed rules which cannot be neglected, the standard allows just of one variant of grammatical feature and speakers may conclude that only one alternative is the correct choice. However, “a dynamic view on language recognizes the existence of change, informs us about it and focuses on those areas where change is ongoing“ (Croft, 2000: 45-48).

According to Biber (1988: 32-33), the change is to be found in variation, i.e., in the alternative usages to be found at all linguistic levels. Scientists focus their attention on actual patterns of use and try to explain the possible reasons for their usage. Furthermore, one should be aware of basic differences between the variability within standard English and non-standard dialects. The former are shared generally by the members of all linguistic communities, while the latter are restricted to particular social or regional dialects. As a matter of fact, all these - international and intranational, regional and social accents and dialects, occupational varieties, features which express contrast of age, gender and formality, features which distinguish speech from writing – may be potential diagnostic points for future linguistic change (Sankoff, Labov & Kroch, 1989: 78-80).

The diachronic analysis of systematic language variation gives a researcher a unique opportunity to observe language change in progress. It also provides a kind of proof for examining the empirical validity of different models of language change. This approach, suggested by Pintzuk (2003: 513), illustrates the “sequential actuation” of change, when it starts in one more favoured linguistic environment and then spreads to a less favoured one. However, sometimes there may be cases when speakers create some new forms at the same time in different environments (so-called “simultaneous actuation”). These cases are known to provoke language change, or even accelerate it.

A great many of researchers have discussed different models in an attempt to represent the systematic properties of language changes and their heterogeneity. Thus, Bailey, for example, claimed that change started variably in a limited, natural linguistic environment and then spread from it to other environments (Bailey, 1973). According to Wolfram (2006: 339-340), Bailey's model assumed that "the variable change in the earliest environment would ideally show greater variability than changes in other environments where the change started later". Thus, in many cases the variation we observe in today's speech might be a cause of tomorrow's change.

Early variationists (e.g., Labov 1969; Cedergren & Sankoff 1974) came to the conclusion that variation was inherent within a language system. Moreover, it proved to be relevant for the speaker's competence. It was also emphasised that such studies should be incorporated into the domain of grammar. These ideas were implemented in variable rules, which included ordered constraints and probabilities associated with grammatical variation. Later, as Fasold mentions (1991: 3-4), variable rules were abandoned because there was a shift in linguistic paradigm towards the formulation of universal principles rather than specific language rules. Meanwhile, new grammatical teachings appeared which revised the theories about the assumed inherency of variation. They emphasised that variation consists in alternative settings of the parameters and speakers have at least two grammars, set in different ways. Accordingly, it appeared that "variation in this tradition is not distinguished from bilingualism; such speakers have two more nearly identical grammars and can produce utterances reflecting either or any of them." (Fasold, 2003: 232).

In present-day linguistics there is still much dispute over the problems of variation analysis, the representation of speakers' language capabilities and the role of systemic variability in a grammar of language. Moreover, in a large number of modern researches variation is often interpreted as grammatical competition between two distinct options which, under regular circumstances, do not allow any optionality (Pintzuk, 2003). These options correspond to contradictory settings of parameters. In this case variation is treated as the outcome of speaker's alternation between different competing grammars.

Some representatives of functional linguistics also doubt the hypothesis that variation can be a part of grammar. They consider variation to be the result of slight differences in the manner of expressing one's point of view, i.e., depending on how speakers feel about what they are talking about, or who they are talking to. Linguistic variables are believed to be realised by variants with the same meaning. In other words, variation for them indicates some social or linguistic difference in meaning (e.g., Biber 1988).

3 Research Methods in Language Variation and Change Analysis

The analysis of grammatical variation can be multi-faceted and multi-purpose. Present-day science encourages us to use different methods of eliciting, analyzing and evaluating data for the study of language variation and research is continually being undertaken in the field.

Meyerhoff (2009: 204-205) claims that researchers usually need quite large corpora of spontaneous or natural data to draw on some reliable, statistically relevant conclusions. The more factors that the linguists intend to investigate, the more data they will need to undertake in their study. One of the oldest and most common methods adopted for natural spontaneous speech analysis is the sociolinguistic interview. As a means of eliciting data, it has been employed in since the nineteenth century and was the fundamental instrument of dialectology. A collection of interviews comprises a sociolinguistic survey. The resulting corpus of speech seems to be similar to a dialect survey, but the data gathered are less subject to interference to standardized norms. The anthropological technique of participant observation is rather

successful in gaining qualitative and quantitative data, but researchers consider that it requires too much time.

Therefore, in recent years sociolinguists have adopted a new methodological paradigm and started to make use of other methods for defining the correlation between social factors and language variation. One of the most fruitful approaches proves to be corpus analysis. It helps to provide a systemic representation of overall changes both in general language and in different registers. Firstly, the primary concern in this domain is to accurately describe distributional patterns of the target grammatical structure and to define its functions (Biber et al, 1999: 35). Secondly, quantitative findings can be assessed, such as frequency counts and percentages. These are intended to answer different research questions (e.g., how common the feature is and its proportional use). They help to define the most prominent tendencies in language variation. Since the size of corpus is usually large, it is easier to achieve statistical significance and to account for even small differences. Nevertheless, sometimes even smaller corpora may be used to document ongoing grammatical changes.

However, a more interpretive approach is also necessary when a scientist makes an attempt to provide functional considerations and interpretation of quantitative findings. Despite the importance of complex computational and quantitative techniques, human analysis should be central in studying language change and variation. Language data can be properly assessed only by considering factors which are important to describe the use of any language variable. The identification of such factors is based on human understanding of communicative functions and discourse characteristics, as well as situational and social distinctions. Functional analysis results from prototypical categorical features, it helps to disclose the target unit functional potential and substantiate the transformations within the system of language.

4 Grammatical Changes in English

Grammar is believed to be the level on which English has changed most radically in the course of its recorded history. However, studies of change in the past years generally focused more on phonological and lexical phenomena.

Why is grammatical change so difficult to perceive? This may be explained by admitting that grammar is not so easily audible or visible. In the middle of the last century many linguists believed that the actual process of language change cannot be observed – what is possible to detect is only the results of language change (Bailey, 2002: 312). Similarly, David Crystal (1996: 15-16) claims that

it is next to impossible to be definite about the changes which take place in grammar. These changes are in any case extremely slowly moving, and restricted to very small points of grammatical construction. There hasn't been a major change in English grammar for centuries. But it is possible to tell which grammatical features are in the process of change, because there are variations which give rise to controversies over usage.

A lot of grammarians have been interested in the study of grammatical changes in English (e.g., Veichman, 2002; Leech et al, 2009). One of the recent trends in this field also involves meaning (i.e. semantics-pragmatics). Most of these studies are based on grammaticalisation theory — named after the phenomenon of grammaticalisation, defined as the development of grammatical constructions out of more lexical expressions (Hopper & Traugott, 1993: 19).

In this paragraph I attempt to suggest some preliminary results of my research and describe the phenomena of English grammar which haven't been paid enough attention in

existing practical grammars. The data were gathered from modern fiction, newspapers and periodicals (Financial Times, New York Times, Newsweek, The Guardian), the Internet and latest dictionaries (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary). The linguistic explanation is based on the studies referred to in the previous paragraphs.

4.1 Grammatical variation and functional changes in the forms of nominal number

Countable nouns in English have both singular and plural forms, referring to one and more than one entity respectively. Number in English is marked not only by inflection, but also by the concord between the subject and verb, as well as co-occurrence patterns between determiners. The material of the research clearly demonstrates the prevalence of such tendencies:

- Latin and Greek borrowings in present-day English mostly keep their foreign plural. However, the results of the data observation show that there may be variations with regular plural forms.

e.g., *formulae/formulas* - the choice between these two alternatives is functionally predetermined, since the target audience of the foreign plural are the members of academic community and it is especially common in scientific use, while the political discourse admits of the use of the regular English plural morpheme *-(e)s*:

*Russia and Ukraine stepped back from the brink once more yesterday agreed on new **formulas**, but not on the precise mechanisms for future deliveries.* (Financial Times – 6.03.2008)

There are also some other words consistently taking some regular plural endings, such as *apparatus, syllabus, corpus, etc.*

e.g. *The entire **corpuses** of Milton's and Barn's works were analysed by senior students of Linguistics Department from Ohio University.*

It is a common practice to use such forms even in the academic discourse:

e.g. *Evaluation and Construction of Training **Corpuses** for Text Classification: A Preliminary Study* (in [Natural Language Processing and Information Systems](#), 2002)

Furthermore, the Greek borrowing ending in *-is*, *crisis*, also takes the regular plural ending *-es*, e.g., as in the lyrics title by Alice Cooper – “Identity **Crisises**”, or

*Rwanda: Kagame Speaks Out On Third Term, Drones, **Crisises*** (The Independent – Kampala – 7.02.2013)

*However, the two sides had similar **crisises** in the last two years.* (Financial Times – 6.03.2008)

*Taliban had similar **crisises**.* (Voice of America – 24.05.2001)

Another source of grammatical variation can be illustrated by the foreign plurals *data* and *media* which have become dissociated from the original Latin singular forms *datum* and *medium* and are variably treated either as singular or plural nouns.

e.g. *Anger is exhausting. It eventually subsides, memories fade and the **media turn away** to chase another ambulance.* (New York Times – 23.11.2013)

*Your article completely ignores the adverse effect that a hostile **media has** on the situation here.* (Newsweek - 2002)

***This data was** collected from 69 countries.* (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary)

In this use the noun has the meaning of the *information*.

The process of functional change has not finished yet, which may be proved by the use of the plural pronoun and singular verb:

e.g. *It is true that the Russian **media is** not sincere in **their** reporting of threatened supplies to Europe.* (Financial Times – 8.03.2008)

Criteria and *phenomena* are occasionally used as singular forms. This process began more than half a century ago when the singular *criteria* was used only in speech. Nowadays it is observed both in speech and writing and its use seems to be increasing:

e.g. *Dark matter is another criteria that is examined.* (Universe Today – 22.01.2011)

The phenomena of his rapid rise to power is difficult to explain. (The Guardian – 6.01.2008)

The zero plural is commonly observed with the nouns, like *foot* and *pound*, after numerals, while the standard variant requires the use of *feet* and *pounds*:

E.g. *Their shanks usually weigh about two and a half pound.* (Longman Grammar of Written and Spoken English, 1999)

- Some uncountable nouns occur as plural nouns: e.g., *moneys (monies), musics, understandings, knowledges.*

e.g., *The banks are requested and authorized to open accounts in the name of the Company as may be considered appropriate for the receipt of the Company's moneys.* (legal document, meaning “sums of money”)

All these different musics on TV have strong influence on youth (meaning “musical pieces”). (New York Times – comments section)

Her techniques of encouraging wholesome motivation for mastery of critical skills, habits, knowledges... are rather ... eccentric. (J. Hersey)

All these examples clearly demonstrate that grammatical variation leads to the semanticalization of the plural forms (similar to those of *pains, colours, efforts, etc.*)

- Another tendency is to treat regularly countable nouns as uncountable ones.

E.g., *If you buy a Volvo you get plenty of car for your money.* (Advertisement)

Thus, the uncountable reference is achieved with the use of quantifiers.

- There is also some kind of variability in the subject-verb agreement with different collective nouns. In some cases such nouns are used with the singular verb, whereas in others – with the plural counterpart:

e.g. *...the only other team that could approach the deciders with any degree of confidence were Lazio, 2-0 visitors in Stuttgart.* (UEFA Europa League Season Review)

e.g., *Now the elite want to steal that money and privatize the profit in private investment "opportunities" that benefit themselves only.* (New York Times – comments section)

...even though they know that the public is against it and that the public PAID for this public insurance program through out their lives. (New York Times – comments section)

This variation can be accounted by the fact that in American English collective nouns usually agree with the singular verb. Thus, under the influence of this variant standard British English admits of the use of both singular and plural verbs. Besides, in the latter example we can see the use of the plural pronoun while the verb is used in the singular form.

- There is some evidence in the data to demonstrate the variation between the singular and plural forms in similar contextual situations and with the same communicative purpose: e.g., in British hotels one may observe the notice *NO VACANCIES*, while in New Zealand the singular form is more common – *NO VACANCY*. It can be assumed that such a type of grammatical variation is regionally predetermined, i.e., depends on the use by the speakers of different regional variants of English.

Conclusion

Summing up, this research substantiates the claim that language varies historically, contextually and socially. Now it is commonly accepted that language change may be regarded as the variation over time. My critical survey of works on language change has proved that its nature has to be analysed, taking into account different contexts of usages, the attitudes of speakers, as well as regional and social varieties. This clearly places such studies in the area of sociolinguistics.

In this paper I attempted to present some overview of theoretical considerations on the problems of language variation and to define the prevailing tendencies in the alternative uses of singular and plural nouns. The examples illustrated above clearly demonstrate that the system of the noun, namely the category of number, is in the process of ongoing changes. However, the findings of this paper are rather general and quantitative analysis is needed to verify their systemic properties. Further research is suggested with the application of both the methodological collection of data and a corpus analysis.

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