

## Varieties of Language and the Quest for Excellence in its Teaching and Learning

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### Abstract

Human beings are different from animals in being able to organize the range of sounds produced by body mechanism into a highly efficient system of their identical language-based communication which has a network of varieties along with space, time, and social classes, deciding the identity, lexis and structural aspects of that variety of language known as a dialect. When one person uses one dialect in his own unique way, it is called his idiolect but different roles and situations decide the register and style of that dialect which is used as a standard dialect, no less than a language in itself. Every language has its own sounds, words, sentence patterns, and semantic meanings which need to be taught and learned. For this, three variables namely, the students, the methods/ approaches, and the teachers should be given due attention for further exploration in the field of academic study (teaching and learning) of the English language.

**Keywords-** Parameters, Dialect, Idiolect, Isoglosses, Intelligibility, Linguistics, Preponderance, S-R associations, Assumptions

### 1. Introduction

Language is a human phenomenon, which is a network of varieties. There is no such thing as 'English' or 'Hindi' or Tamil'; they are labels used to refer to abstractions. What we refer to by Hindi, English or Tamil is a network of varieties; varieties of English, varieties of Hindi, and varieties of Tamil. British English, American English, Indian English for example are regional varieties of English. Language may be said to vary along with these different parameters: (a) Varieties along with space (b) Varieties along with time and (c) Varieties along with social classes

### 2. Dialect

Each language variety has certain distinguishing phonological and lexical features. These varieties of a language are called its 'Dialects'. A variety spoken in a geographical area is called a regional dialect. For example, Braj Bhasha and Khari Boli are regional dialects of Hindi. From a temporal point of view, we have such varieties as Old English, 16th century Hindi, and Modern English, Modern Hindi, and so on. Varieties based on social groups are called sociolects, class-dialects, and caste-dialects, for example, the upper-class dialect, the Brahmin or the Vaish dialect, and so on. A dialect that is accorded special prestige by the language community as a whole comes to be regarded as the standard language in that community.

It should not, however, be inferred from the above description that dialects are, in any way, a lesser language, or that the term 'Dialect' is used in any pejorative sense. Dialects of a language are no less organized than the so-called standard language. Dialects are not, in any way sub-standard. In fact, they are potential languages. Braj Bhasha, for example, is no less organized and no less rich in lexis than Khari Boli, the standard language.

Dialect distinctions can be plotted on a map. Lines demarcating areas exhibiting one

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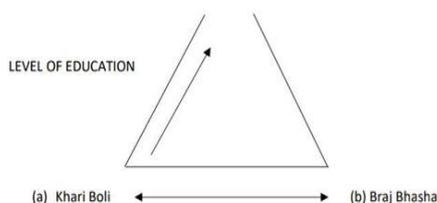
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type of features cutting of areas exhibiting other types of features are called isoglosses. Isoglosses crisscross, overlap, and diverge yielding bundles of isoglosses. One variety shades off into another variety so that we never know where one ends and the other one begins. For example, Khari Boli shades off into Braj Bhasha over a long area extending, say, from Meerut through Bulandshahar to Aligarh to Mathura. The whole phenomenon of change from one variety to another is gradual, graded, and complex.

Dialectal differences tend to lessen by an interaction between two dialect communities. The greater and closer is the interaction the lesser will be the divergence. Thus areas farther in space tends to have greater divergence than areas less distant. In the same way, caste and class interactions tend to lessen caste and class divergence in variety. Also, as the level of education goes up the divergences tend to lessen in proportion, though never being completely eradicated.

This phenomenon bears upon the degree of mutual intelligibility between the two dialects. The greater the level of education of the speakers of the two dialects, the greater will be the mutual intelligibility and the lesser pronounced will be the differences. This phenomenon can be shown through the following **pyramid diagram**:



The diagram illustrates that as the level of education goes up; the divergence between two

dialects comes down, but it never ends completely to join together. The habits and systems picked up in childhood can never be fully obliterated - whatever is the degree of education or the magnitude of interaction.

### 3. Idiolect

In fact, no two speakers speak exactly the same dialect. Each speaker has certain characteristics features reflected in his way of speaking. This individual variety within a dialect is known as the individual's idiolect. The dialect of one person is called his idiolect.

Idiolect differences are mainly phonological, that is they show differences in suprasegmental features (accent, stress, tone and rhythm). Certain families are seen to share common phonological features of a dialect as different from the phonological features shared by other families. A dialect, in fact, is a complex network of its idiolects, as a language is a complex network of its dialects. And to study language from the viewpoint of its infinite potential for variations is really very exciting and linguistically productive and profitable.

### 4. Register and Style

We all speak many languages and play various roles in our life. Through the course of the day which changes our linguistic gears as many times as we enter into different personal and professional relationships.

“ By register we mean a variety correlated with a performer's social role on a given occasion....when a professor's wife tells him to 'stop talking like a professor' she is protesting at the misuse of the register” -Catford, J.C., (1965), 'A Linguistic Theory of Translation', Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.89

We may operate as professors of linguistics, lecturing to our postgraduate students, we may be members of political parties discussing politics, we may be husbands talking to their

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wives, we may be fathers talking to children or playing with other children, we maybe football players talking to other players or we may be buyers buying articles and so on.

Thus we play a number of roles in a number of contexts and have to select such varieties of language as are topically relevant to the situations in which we are operating. We can range from shop talk to bad baby talk, from abstract linguistic lectures to kitchen gossip. These situational conditioned, 'field-of-discourse' oriented varieties of language are called 'Registers'.

Newspaper writing, Scientific writing, Literary writing, Legal writing, Commercial writing, the language of buying and selling, the language used by announcers on the airport, the language used by telephone operators, etc. may be labeled 'Registeral Varieties' of a language.

Every speaker has different styles of speech that he uses in different situations. According to his relationship with the addressee, he selects formal or informal ways of speech. In fact, there are different degrees of formality and informality. These stylistic variations interact with registral varieties and can be classified on a scale moving from spontaneous, intimate speech to almost frozen modes of talking and writing.

1. According to F.L. Lucas, "Style is a means by which a human being gains contact with others; it is personality clothed in words, character embodied in speech."
2. Longinus has a very beautifully defined style by saying, "Elevation of style is the echo of a great soul."
3. Jeremy Warburg has defined style with a practical example, " Good style, it seems to me, consists in choosing the appropriate symbolization of the experience you wish to convey, from among a number of words whose meaning are is roughly, but only

roughly the same (by saying cat for example, rather than pussy."

The following text has one register but different varieties of style:

**Formal-** Visitors should go up the stairs at once.

**Casual-** Time you all go upstairs now.

**Intimate-** Up you go, chap!

**Consultative** - Would you mind going upstairs, the right way, please?

Registers are marked by a preponderance of sets of lexical items. The register of physics, for example, is characterized by a technical vocabulary typical of Physics. In addition to these technical terms, registers have a number of marked syntactic and phonological features. The language of Cricket, commentators, public speakers, priests, hawkers, auctioneers, announcers at the Railway station and airport have special phonological features. The users of these varieties of language exploit the phonological resources of language to appeal to or draw the attention of, the hearers.

The teaching of the Second Language is a process of helping out pupils make appropriate 'Register- choices' out of their total 'Register range'. This can be done by exposing them to a sufficient number of examples of different varieties of the language they are learning so that they recognize the basic principle that different occasions and situations demand different language conventions. If they are not helped to know their 'lines', they would be of no use in 'the play'.

### 5. Innovation in the Study of English Language

In the introduction of his book, *Innovative Approaches to Language Teaching*, Robert W. Blair has highlighted the three variables which language teachers need to attend for effective language teaching. These variables are the students, the methods/ approaches, and the teachers which play a very

important role in academic language teaching and learning. He stresses the use of innovation which will give language teachers or learners a basic description and a positive rationale for several innovative methods of language teaching and learning. The same can be implied for teaching and learning of English as a foreign language.

In 1942, Leonard Bloomfield, an eminent American linguist, had written a short treatise on language learning that had enormous influence in guiding language teaching for decades. In it he stated:

“It is helpful to know how language works, but this knowledge is of no avail until one has practiced the forms over and over again until he can rattle them off without effort. Copy the forms, read them out loud, get them by heart, and then practice them over and over again day after day until they become entirely natural and familiar. Language learning is over learning; anything less is of no use.”

And two decades later (1964), Nelson Brooks, a professor of foreign language education at Yale, had written:

“The single paramount fact about language learning is that it concerns, not problem-solving but formation and performance of habits. The learner who has been made to see only how language works has not learned any language; on the contrary, he has learned something he will have to forget before can make any progress in that area of language.”

In 1965, Noam Chomsky gave his celebrated address to the Northeast Language Teachers' Association, in which he said:

“A good deal of the foreign language instruction that's going on now . . . is based on a concept of language. . . (which assumes) that language is a

system of skills and ought to be taught through drill and by the formation of S-R associations. I think the evidence is very convincing that that view of language is entirely erroneous, and it's a very bad way—certainly an unprincipled way—to teach languages. If it happens to work, it would be an accident for some other reason. Certainly, it is not a method that is based on any understanding of the nature of language. Our understanding of the nature of language seems to me to show quite convincingly that language is not a habit structure, but that it has a kind of creative property and is based on abstract formal principles and operations of a complex kind.”

Robert W. Blair, the editor of ‘Innovative Approaches to Language Teaching’ has stated:

“ It became clear to me at that time that lesson content, as well as every teaching technique and every classroom strategy and tactic used by a teacher, is, consciously or not, based on decisions that derive from the teacher's and/or the course writer's assumptions about the nature of his subject matter, about learning and pedagogy, and indeed about the nature of man and social groups, Perceiving the absence of any scientific theory capable of motivating many decisions on course design and content, and not trusting traditional practices and principles, concluded that language teaching and course development would be best experimental, principled eclecticism which would explore various combinations of assumptions and approaches. I presumed that such experimentation with different combinations of "mixes" could lead to

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finding out eventually how to "put it all together" in an optimum program formula tailored to each learner's needs."

In 1970, Robert W. Blair was guided by the principals based on assumptions drawn from his own interpretation and elaboration of ideas of different people who stimulated his ideas on language learning, not only this, his ideas and intuitions inspired him to enumerate and list his assumptions about language learning which have become a landmark list of historical interest as far as the matter of language teaching and learning are concerned. Even after fifty years, these assumptions can be identified as the rich fruit of his search for effective ways to overcome language learning deficiencies. For the sake of originality, genuineness, and the magic of wisely selected words and terminology, all fourteen assumptions made by Robert W. Blair in his article 'A Search (1950-1981)' are given hereunder with due indebtedness :

1. A language makes use of finite means (rules and items) to generate infinite ends (the total set of sentences of the language). Though it is manifestly impossible to memorize the set of sentences one may need, it is possible to gain intuitive control of a set of rules by means of which one can generate an infinite number of well-formed sentences. (From Chomsky.)
2. The sentences a language user must generate, whether listening or speaking, cannot be acquired through course work. Most of the sentences needed cannot be practiced, much less memorized.
3. One learns a language no faster than one generates and tests—in "reposeful, motivated use—one's own hypotheses about the language. This means that the learner is central in the learning process. All other things: the instructional

program, the instrumental paraphernalia, even the teacher, exist only to facilitate the learner's task of generating and testing hypotheses about the language through motivated use.

4. Just as a child must derive information for his hypotheses from both his "hits" and his "misses" as he confronts actual communication situations, so the adult learner must learn language by meeting situations and problems head-on, taking profit from his mistakes as well as his successes.
5. The principal job of a language program is to create a rich and varied learning environment such that the learners can efficiently generate and test hypotheses through purposeful language use. In-class activities should emphasize contextually meaningful tasks and problems rather than pattern rehearsal, communication strategy rather than recitation.
6. Language learning is not best viewed as simply a linear, additive process with each well-defined learning task sequenced neatly from beginning to end in a planned syllabus. We should not attempt to hold the learner responsible for mastery of all the content of all the materials of the course—or even for a large portion of it. To do so will seriously compromise the richness of the learning environment.
7. Students should not be expected to learn simply by mass repetition; they will learn only what they are ready to learn. They will perceive only what they are ready to perceive. The central problem of training is not the arrangement of reinforcement contingencies. It is rather the identification and exploitation of learning hierarchies. (From Gagné.)

8. Cognitive understanding of structure may enhance the enjoyment as well as the success of language learning for many students. There is no reason to assume that language learning must be approached inductively. It doesn't matter how a student comes up with a satisfactory response or with a hypothesis, whether by induction or by deduction. In learning a skill, conscious of its critical features, and understanding them will often facilitate learning.
9. Language learning is much more than the acquisition of a broad repertoire of psychomotor habits, but that aspect of language learning cannot be left out of the account. The practice of patterns is necessary, but its place in the instructional process will be greatly changed. Pattern drill per se in the classroom is out.
10. Students will learn best by and purpose for them. They will retain only what they experience what they perceive to be useful to them. Habit strength is a function of not how many responses are emitted, but of how many responses emitted contain reinforcement power for the student. (by Stevick)
11. The performance criterion for pronunciation and grammatical accuracy should not be so high during the first weeks of training that students come to feel that "the only purpose of speaking is to avoid making mistakes," as Stevick puts it Relaxing performance standards at first can buy time and the disposition for the students to use the language in motivated communication.
12. An instructional program should not attempt to teach everything. There is no end to the study of multiple word meaning, idiomatic usages, etc. Much will necessarily be left to the teacher and the students to fill in on their own as the need and occasion arise.
13. Recognizing the extreme discrepancy between proficient language learners and low-performance language learners, it may be wrong to attribute the discrepancy to differences in "language aptitude, intelligence," or other supposedly unchangeable native endowments. The differences in performance may be due rather to one or more factors that are subject to change. It may be the case that more efficient language learners know something or do something or have acquired something that the less efficient do not know or do not do or have not acquired Assuming this to be so, we should seek ways to help less proficient learners acquire some of whatever it is their more successful peers have in the way of cognitive knowledge, foundational skills, or strategies in language learning, positive attitude, etc.
14. There is already such an enormous accumulation of experimentation and experience in adult language training that, despite the claims of some, it appears unlikely that a methodological breakthrough is imminent such that the learning performance of all learners can be very substantially, consistently, and immediately increased through the introduction of methodological innovations. Rather it is more likely that significant improvements in language training will be incremental and will apply to only certain learner profiles. Posing researchable questions about certain learner problems, such as those of inept language learners, would seem a more promising activity at this point than searching for one eminently superior, a universal methodology for all."

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### **6. Conclusion**

Language is a human method of communication. Through the expression of thoughts based on its features and various factors there exist language varieties within the language code which is an 'arbitrary, prearranged set of signals'. It has a wide range of dialects and styles. A teacher, with special reference to a teacher of English language, needs to be aware of the basics of varieties of language and should develop his instructional plan so that effective and innovative methods can be devised and implemented for making language learners proficient. Moreover, language learning must be simplified and joyful by applying the concept of cognitive understanding of structures which are an integral part of all four language skills namely-reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

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