

Handout 6: Some Aspects of Grammatical Variation

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1. Simplification in non-standard grammar

Observation A: Many grammatical variants that are non-standard or confined to lower style levels are 'simpler' than the standard (high-style) variants:

- (1) Adverbs identical to adjectives (many varieties worldwide; arguably colloquial standard): *Come quick! He ran slow. He did it good.* (cf. *quickly, slowly, well*)
- (2) Colloquial 'singular' (actually: default¹) agreement with expletive *there* and postverbal subject. Agreement is harder to process (and crosslinguistically less common) if the agreed-with item is after the agreeing form (cf. French participles, discussed in class):
 - a. *There was two trees* (vs. *there were two trees; two trees were planted*)
 - b. *Where's my things?* (less common than (a))
- (3) Reflexive pronouns: *hisselvf, theirselves* (loss of irregular forms *himself, themselves*)
- (4) *who(m)*
- (5) Subjective/conditional:
If I was rich, I would stop working (widespread loss of *were* as conditional form of *be*; with all other verbs the conditional has the same form as the past.)
If he would have done that, he would be rich (*would have* replaces conditional *had*;
example of move to analytic form)
- (6) Many nonstandard varieties allow omission of subject relative pronouns (standard language only allows omission of object relative: *a person that I know*):
 - a. *That was the person that built the house*
 - b. *I know a man who'll do it for you*
 - c. *Ain't no hangman who is gonna put a rope around me* (Jimi Hendrix, *Hey Joe*)

Observation B: Cases where non-standard variant is more complex than standard variant are often cases where the complexity contributes extra information:

- (7) Plural forms of *you*: *youse* (e.g. Irish, working-class Australian); *y'all* (South USA)
- (8) Survival of *thou/you* distinction as a *traditional dialect* feature in some Northern and Southeast English dialects; corresponding verb inflection: *Tha cast 'you^{singular} can'*
- (9) Threefold deictic distinction (Scottish, Nth English)
here/there/yonder; these/those/yon books; (Scottish, Northern English; *yon/yonder* = neither near speaker nor near hearer)
- (10) African American Vernacular English:
 - a. i. *She married* "She is married."
 - ii. *She been married* "She is married and has been for a long time."
 - b. i. *She working* "She is working."
 - ii. *She be working* "She works (habitually, usually)."
- (11) *er ertrank* vs. *er war am ertrinken* (*wurde aber gerettet*) (e.g. Cologne)

Observation C: In other cases non-standard variants have distinctions that are as complex as the standard variant, but correspond to different semantic distinctions:

- (12) Some South West English traditional dialects: distinction between *they/them* etc. is not based on whether pronoun is subject, but on whether pronoun is stressed:
 - a. *She wouldn't do that, would 'er*
 - b. *They wouldn't do that, would 'm*
 - c. *We wouldn't do that, would us*
 - d. *No, give'n to she*
- (13) South West English trad. dialects: *he* (count nouns) & *it* (mass nouns):
 - a. Pass me the bread, it's on the table
 - b. Pass me the loaf, he's on the table
- (14) Use of perfect as alternative to narrative/historical present (e.g. some Australians):
I was walking down the street. Then these people have stopped me, and one of them's asked for some money.

- (15) Use of *us* as singular object pronoun (apparently only in imperative-like contexts and only indirect objects); roughly the same distribution as *gib her/zeig her*:
Give us (=me) my book back!; Can you show us it, please, I want to see it!

Discussion

- Untrained observers often take instances of Observation A as evidence that speakers using them are stupid or lazy. They forget the counterexamples given as Observation B above.
- It is correct that standard varieties are more likely to preserve distinctions that are not communicatively useful because they are reinforced by various forms of normativisation (school teaching, usage manuals etc.). Since these variables are encouraged by school teachers and usage books, they will be thought of as 'better', 'correct' etc., so people will infer that their non-use is a sign of laziness, lack of intelligence etc.
- Admittedly not all non-standard complexity makes additional semantic distinctions, but are the following examples worse than non-communicatively useful standard phenomena like subject-verb agreement:
 - (16) Non-standard deictic determiners: *this here book; that there book*
 - (17) Double comparison (various non-standard varieties)
my (most) bestest friend; the most roughest people; it was more better(er) the most unkindest cut of all (Shakespeare)

2. Case study: Non-standard inflection

2.1. Levelling/regularisation of inflection in various British varieties:

present	past	perfect
(18) see	see(n)	have seen
(19) come	come	have come
(20) go	went	have went
(21) write	writ	have writ
(22) draw	drawed	have drawed
(23) give	give	have give
(24) eat	et	have eaten/et
(25) do	done	have done

- This is no worse than verbs like *put* in standard English which have three identical forms.
- Case of Observation B: dialects formally distinguishing auxiliary *do* and lexical *do*:
 - (26) *You done it, didn't you?*

2.2. Third person -s

- Complete loss of third person singular -s (e.g. East Anglia):
 - (27) *She like him.*

In other varieties (also some American dialects, popular songs), this occurs with negated *do* (possibly to avoid consonant cluster in *doesn't*):

- (28) *She don't like that kind of behaviour; It don't do you no good.*

- -s as marker of present tense (North England, South Wales, some AAVE)

- (29) *We goes home.*
- (30) *I puts it in the garden.* (Present tense only, a distinction lost in standard variant)

- Some dialects (Scotland, Northern Ireland) use -s outside 3rd person singular in historic present only (another case where dialects make a distinction absent in standard language):

- (31) *I go home for lunch every day.*
- (32) *I goes down this street and I sees this strange man...*

¹ 'Default' = non-agreeing. Cf. *Who [was/*were] present?* (even if *who* refers to multiple people)