Squibs

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Non-standard English: One or Several Systems?

Abstract

A language is a system, i.e. a set of relations or rules which are involved in the formation of sounds, word patterns, and sentences. A language is also learned, which means that it is governed by social and cultural conventions, and subject to individual appropriation. This study takes the example of English which has evolved into various forms. Linguistically, it is questionable whether we deal with several systems depending on the variety studied, or with a single system inside which any movement is reflected in the other relations of the set, and cause more or less major changes. It is then hypothesized that heterogeneous and personal linguistic facts allow the linguist to understand the relations between competence and performance. The paper's aim is neither to describe the origin of any given linguistic fact, nor to expose deviance. It addresses the issue of the underlying operations applied by individuals within a linguistic system to interpret and produce utterances.

Introduction[1]

The English philosopher John Locke, in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (Grants & Tarkov 1996: 126) claims that "languages were made not by rules or art, but by accident and the common use of the people", and that speakers must trust their memory and the habit of speaking by rote in order to communicate. It is true that imitation and repetition are ways of learning a language, but users of a common language have to rely on their ability to produce new combinations of signs and produce utterances, as

[1] I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers of this paper for their insightful comments and suggestions.

well as on their knowledge of the language, which, I argue, requires a long time to learn and arguably does not come naturally (Crystal 1969: 29).

For the structuralists, a language is essentially a system, a set of relations or rules which are involved in the formation of sounds, word patterns, and sentences. These relations form a stable arrangement in which the linguistic signs are defined by no other rule than their mutual relations within the language. The stability of the system depends on this type of determination. Any movement inside the system is immediately reflected in the other relations of the system. If the process is repeated, this may lead to a redefinition of all the signs and markers of the system. The structuralist view of language favours synchronic description, thus allowing varieties to be compared (McMahon 1994: 232), and the problem of dialect systematic differences to be approached (Chamber & Trudgill 1998: 33–44).

As English emerges as a transnational language, it is bound to develop into various linguistic forms which are determined by country, region, or class. These forms are usually called dialects or varieties of the language. Linguistically, there is an issue of whether we deal with several systems according to the varieties studied, or with one single system within which every modification affects the relations between the different elements (or categories), causing more or less important changes. Consider the use of *what* in the following examples:

(1) Well, the one what's my husband, he said, let her lay there, he said. (Norwich, quoted in Hughes & Trudgill 1996: 76)

(2) Well er they never spent no money but they got local talent … they got a lot of local talent what come up … you know like … out of the amateur side. (West Midlands, Hughes & Trudgill 1996: 87)

These sentences may reflect inadequate competence as regards Standard English, yet this type of performance would be recognized and interpreted, if not accepted, by a large number of English-speaking people. The aim is neither to describe the origin of a given linguistic fact, nor to expose deviance, but it addresses the issue of system congruity in contrast to the users' tacit or subconscious knowledge of their native language.

The following study, therefore, deals with the interplay between standard and non-standard varieties of English. Some commentators (Bauer 1994: 11; Burchfield 1985: 160; Crystal 1988: 11; Quirk & Greenbaum 1973: 2) argue that there is more than one English language, which implies

more than one system, or sub-system likely to diversify and develop into a family of new languages. On the other hand, since most English varieties are strongly related to Standard English, it can be justified to regard them as dialects, or non-standard forms of English rather than separate languages. From these two somewhat opposite viewpoints, I shall attempt to determine the elements that may help to tip the scales one way or the other.

1. A family of new languages

The adjective *several* derives from the verb *sever,* which comes from (Old) French *sevrer*, from Latin *separare*, 'separate'. In most dictionaries the adjective is defined as: separate and distinct from one another, relating separatedly to each individual involved, more than two but fewer than many. The term then may be used in reference to separation from a whole and heterogeneity. This is the idea evoked by D. Graddol, D. Leith and J. Swann in their book, *English, History, Diversity and Change* (1996: 166). They explain that "there are opposing tendencies, such as regional pride and interest in local dialects. The existence of such competing forces − which some scholars have called 'centripetal' (pulling in to the center) and 'centrifugal' (tending to pull away from the center and fragment) − is one reason why a single homogeneous variety of English will never be achieved". The internal structure of a language is governed by rules which are learned, but it is also virtual and can only be apprehended through speech. Speech is a social institution[2] which involves individuals and their own appropriation of the system, and which may be regarded as one locus of variation. There is indeed a constant interplay between so-called non-standard productions, i.e. the idiosyncratic way in which the verbal system has been internalized, and the grammar of the common language. This may create many kinds of communication communities including dialects. A dialect can be defined as the distinctive speech of a group within the language community, mainly determined by region or class. Some dialects

[2] Cf. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (1993 [1781]: 55): "… la parole étant la première institution sociale ne doit sa forme qu'à des causes naturelles." (" (…) speech being the first social institution, it only owes its form to natural causes").

triumph over others and achieve languagehood, thus developing their own conceptual system.

The Ancient Greeks, who took pride in their civilisation, used to define themselves in terms of language, and designate the other peoples whom they did not understand as 'barbarians', non-Greeks, peoples who could only produce onomatopoeic 'baa-baa' sounds. Following the example of ancient Greek society, each area where a dialect is spoken can also be defined in terms of language, and the people who do not speak the local vernacular referred to as 'others'. Otherness can not only be construed as the state of being different, but it may also imply a change in status. An existing language variety can then serve as the basis of a new system, mainly because some of its features are accounted an integral part of the values and lifestyle of a particular society (Ihalainen 1994: 199).[3] The codification of the selected variety will rest on new grammatical and lexical rules which will be enforced through education. The implementation of a language variety correlates with the emergence of one independent system, and this may be repeated for each of the varieties of a given language. From these distinct systems, one single, 'hierarchically' higher order is constructed, bringing forth differences and similarities. A sequence of examples taken at random in varieties of English in Britain, North America, and the West Indies will now illustrate the topic.

Let us first consider sentences in African American Vernacular English (AAVE). AAVE reflects a double linguistic heritage from Africa and Europe. It is a form of English which exists parallel to Standard American English. Like other language varieties it seems to have its own grammatical and phonological rules, together with specific expressions and style which make it unique. Here are the examples:

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[3] In his *Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724–1726), Daniel Defoe (1962: 253) comments on aspects of dialect, namely Somerset and Northumbrian English: "I must not quit Northumberland, without taking notice, that the natives of this country, of the antient original race or families, are distinguished by a shibboleth upon their tongues, namely, a difficulty in pronouncing the letter r, which they cannot deliver from their tongues without a hollow jarring in the throat, by which they are plainly known, as a foreigner is, in pronouncing the th: This they call the Northumbrian r, and the natives value themselves upon that imperfection, because, forsooth, it shews the antiquity of their blood." See also Ihalainen (1994: 198–199).

(3) "Why do like Shirley?"
"He a nice little girl." (Dillard 1971: 400)
(4) "We sat dere and we drinkin'" (Dillard 1971: 398)

In the AAVE grammatical system the forms *be* copula (3) or auxiliary associated with V-*ing* (4) seem to be identical and are deleted. The link is explicit in Standard English (as in *He is a nice little girl* and *we are drinking*) while in AAVE the juxtaposition of *he* and *nice little girl* (3), and of *we* and *drinkin* (4) is a syntactic feature which signals identity, even though in the case of sentence (4), the identification involves the time of a situation. As Labov (1969: 721) suggests, "the evidence given here points to an underlying copula and auxiliary *be* which is deleted". Although it is not marked superficially, the operation linking the subject to the predicate remains. Many languages share this feature with AAVE: Russian, Hebrew, the French Creole of the Caribbean, and English Creoles of the same area show no present copula. It is a linguistic invariant which is explicit in some languages (like German, Standard English, Standard French, etc.) and underlying in others.

Another grammatical feature of AAVE is the negative concord rule which in this specific variety of English has become almost systematic, so that the construction has lost some of its emphatic meaning. The generalization of this rule leads to changes in the expression of emphasis. Indeed, the repetition of a negative element may initially have been motivated by a desire for expression (Meillet 1912). One rule is the duplication of the negative particle, as in

(5) It ain't nobody can't sit here.

The negative particle is duplicated (cf. *can't*) in AAVE, so that sentence (5) corresponds to white non-standard English *there ain't nobody can sit here*. The second rule is the fronting of the negative:

(6) Can't nobody do nothing about that.

This example is the emphatic form of *nobody can't do nothing about that* (Labov 1971: 452).

Caribbean English shows some similarities with AAVE, like the deletion of *be* copula or the use of the double negative. There are, however,

grammatical features that characterize most forms of Caribbean English. For example, the lack of case marking in the pronominal and possessive system and unmarked verbs as in the following:

(7) (The mother recounts the events leading up to her son's death)
"Ten minutes after me hear my 19-year-old son cry out and she domething happen to Marlon. When me go in deh me see Marlon on the bed, me draw weh the baby from underneath the mother's arm and the uncle carry the baby a Children (Bustamante Children's Hospital). The baby dead a Children and Marlon dead inna him cousin arm in a him room." (*Weekly Gleaner*, Oct. 6, 2007, Kingston, Jamaica)

In this passage *When me go in deh me see Marlon on the bed* means 'When I went in there I saw Marlon on the bed' and *inna him cousin arm in a him room* means 'in his cousin's arms in his room'. This type of production is still intelligible, despite the apparent simplification.

The intensive iteration of forms, adjectives or adverbs, is a rather common feature in Caribbean grammar (but also in Pacific Creoles and South-East Asian varieties). Creole *big big*, for instance, means 'huge' (Holm 1994: 359), *fool fool*, means 'simple minded' or 'provokingly very stupid' (cf. the *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*). Correspondingly, this characteristic is bound to occur in exclamatory sentences. In example (8), the speaker is shouting in a woman's direction at the Linstead market (Jamaica). The repetition of the adjective *spotty* is here strongly expressive.

(8) "You see how yuh foot dem spotty spotty!" (*Weekly Gleaner*, Oct. 11, 2007, Kingston, Jamaica)

Of the numerous features that characterize Caribbean English, there is the deletion of *there* in existential sentences. The following is a mother's comment about the confusion at some schools in areas affected by a category four hurricane. One school was forced to close its doors:

(9) "Is pure chaos and confusion here this morning, because we weren't given any prior notice until today about the shift system." (*Weekly Gleaner*, Sept.11, 2007, Kingston, Jamaica)

Is in this passage can be translated into Standard English as *there is* (cf. 'There is pure chaos and confusion here this morning'). In our example,

only *be* is used to express the existence of the event. Existential *there* in Standard English has lost its locative meaning to become a function word, a syntactic subject, *chaos and confusion* being the real subject of the sentence and *here* the locative adverb. *Be* identifies the subject with the situation. Similarly, the pronoun *it* is also regularly deleted when in subject position as in the following:

(10) (The reporter asks a woman if the market is very busy every day)
"Yes, man, is Linstead this name you know. You never hear bout di song weh say, 'carry me ackee go a Linstead market?' Is we it singing about so we always busy over here. Hee, Hee! If you want peace and quiet you haffi go inna one a di likkle town dem. But which part you is standing is always busy." (*Weekly Gleaner*, Oct. 11, 2007, Kingston, Jamaica)

Phonologically, this phenomenon may be the result of elision, i.e. loss of an intervocalic consonant: i(t) is (cf. the *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*); linguistically, the missing pronoun without any previous mention has a 'deixis ad oculo' (Bolinger 1977: 80), a reference to the immediate situation. In the sentence *is Linstead this name you know*, the referent is the predicative item (i.e. Linstead) identified by this name; in the sentence *Is we it singing about*, the referent is *we*. The pronoun *it* (at the beginning of the sentence) being redundant is logically deleted.

The perfect aspect in Caribbean English is often rendered by the past participle *done* as in:

(11) She done know wha' goin' on. (Winford 1993: 153)

Here *done* is used as an auxiliary comparable with *have* in Standard English Present Perfect. In this system, however, *done* not only evokes a situation that still exists in the present time, but it also acts as an intensifier (Chevillet 1991: 194; Feagin 1995: 179):

(12) *me don nuo se im naa go* 'I know full well that he won't go'. (Jamaican Creole, Bailey 1966: 42; also in Feagin 1995: 181)

The translation into Standard English clearly shows that *don* has an intensive meaning (cf. *full well*) in addition to its perfective function. Again, Caribbean Creole shares this feature with AAVE and Southern White non-standard American English, probably because of language

contact between slaves and white small farmers over 100 years ago (Feagin 1995: 161). Feagin (1995: 183) also points out that there was a *done* in Middle English which had the same perfective meaning, but it was preceded by auxiliary *have.*

(13) An oratorie, riche for to see,
In worship of Dyane, of Chastitee,
Hath Theseus doon wroght in noble wyse. (G. Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales,* 'The Knyghtes Tale', stanza 7, also in Feagin 1995: 183)

This shows that in terms of system *done* is not strictly speaking an innovation, but a case of grammaticalization motivated by a need for expressiveness, which also concerns negative markers.

In Caribbean English, one of the most common ways of making a clause negative is to insert the operator *ain't* before the verb base as in

(14) I ain't see the car hit Leslie. I ain't know about the car P522 striking another car. (Barbados, Court Report , in the *Dictionay of Caribbean English Usage*)

(15) I turned to him and tell, James is three weeks that you ain't give me anything. You don't know how I living. (Barbados, Court Report, in the *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*)

Although *ain't* is widely felt to be non-standard, it appears to be a systematic feature in this variety. *Ain't* is no longer a contraction (cf. *isn't, aren't, hasn't, haven't*), but a kind of 'boundary morpheme', like *don't* in example (15), which establishes a direct relationship between the sentence and the speaker who negates the positivity.

All these dialects with their specific characteristics can be regarded as systems which are coherent in themselves, and which assign slightly different values to the markers they share with English. Indeed, most English varieties have diverged from English, but they have not quite achieved complete independence as separate national languages. Often enough, users are able to handle a dual system, the English system, and the 'New English' system which has developed from the former. Some of them are even recognized as languages: it is now the case of Scots in Scotland (McArthur 1998: 138–139) and Tok Pisin which enjoys official status in Papua New Guinea (McMahon 1994: 165). It can be argued, however, that although most English users speak non-standard varieties, they certainly recognize and understand Standard English, both oral and written. Already,

Standard English is not absolutely clear-cut and mutual comprehension remains in most cases possible from one variety to another (Trudgill 1975: 22). This means that speakers may refer to one common dynamic system within which relations are flexible enough to resist radical modifications. Change is a slow and gradual process; it spreads over dialectal boundaries, thus permitting intelligibility between generations and people from different areas. However remote a variety may be, it has in it a set of rules and features which are common to all varieties. The stage reached with the languages born from Latin (that are French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, etc.) or the Germanic dialects (like Dutch or German), for instance, has not yet been achieved with English dialects despite the geographical dispersal of the English-speaking communities (Quirk & Greenbaum 1973: 2).[4]

2. Varieties of one system

The generative approach assumes that dialects of one language share the same underlying representations, and are distinguished only in the form (McMahon 1994: 212).

(16) Move boy, or I go give you bois (http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Trinidadian English/Words and phrases)

This sentence in Trinidadian English can be interpreted with reference to the English system in that *go*, for instance, plays the same metalinguistic role as in 'I am going to give you bois'. *Go* does not indicate a movement toward a place, but a form of progressive location of the process relative to the subject. In both sentences it is used to predict the immediate consequence of the protasis *Move boy*. In addition to the definition of *go*, the words used in this utterance all belong to the English system and have the same meaning (except for the word *bois* which is borrowed from French and means 'a heavy stick'), and the syntax parallels that of Standard English. The construction *go + V* may be regarded as a distinctive syntactic

[4] At this point a parallel can be drawn with Arabic speakers who are referred to as diglossic, and use dialectal or 'colloquial' Arabic (which varies from one area to another) for everyday conversation and 'classical' Arabic (which is constant and standardized) for written and formal language (Mneimneh 1997: 18–19, see also McArthur 1998: 208–209, 234).

feature of Caribbean English, but examples can be found in Scottish English, in which *go* is predictive (cf. *will*):

(17) Good discussion! Thank you all very much indeed! I hope you've heard something that er meant something to you. If you need help, **I hope you go look for it**. (Scottish women: discussion about smoking, spoken part of BNC)

The socio-linguist William Labov (1972a) has distinguished three kinds of rules governing a language. There are first the categorical rules which no English speaker would ever violate.

(18) *Mary Peter loves
*Peter has going to Paris
*Mary dined a hamburger
*The government isn't agree with the Senate's decision
*The government is not the responsible
*Peter put the car

Such sentences are ungrammatical in the sense that any ordinary speaker of English would feel that something is wrong with them, that they somehow do not belong to the system and therefore cannot be accepted. These sentences may be produced by non-English speakers or learners who do not totally master the rules and use different ones as a basis to communicate. Aitchison (1991: 113) explains that "when people learn a new language they unintentionally impose their sound pattern and to a lesser extent, syntax", e.g. 'The government isn't agree…' will be pronounced by a Frenchman who will translate literally from *Le gouvernement n'est pas d'accord...* Native speakers do not make mistakes of this kind because they have learned their language from infancy, at a time in their lives when humans are programmed to learn languages (Andersson & Trudgill 1992: 110).

The second type include rules the violation of which can be interpreted socially, idioms that are considered to be vulgar or incorrect, such as the use of double negatives, the employment of *ain't* for *am not*, *isn't*, *aren't*, *hasn't*, *haven't*, or the use of *them* for *those.* These forms are regarded as bad grammar by the people who "judge them against the norms of writing or formal speech " (Milroy 1998: 101).

The systemic principles of the third type are variable rules which do not really affect the system and whose choice depends on circumstances. It is the case of the split infinitive or constructions ending with a preposition. A problem of acceptability may arise with expressions that appear grammatically unnatural, when there are for instance two coordinated subject pronouns, as in

(19) Where, when I start, Albert's He, I tell you want he doesn't do, I shouldn't let you hear, but, when he, **when him and me are arguing** when we were younger, and me dad used to wind Collin up, and wind me up, and I'd get madder and madder, and me dad used to love it. (Conversation recorded by 'Albert', between 1 and 6 Feb. 1992, spoken part of BNC)

(20) Well, the idea of farming was much the same but he certainly was not very much of a farmer. Mm and was his treatment any different? Slightly **but then him and me didn't get on**. He never wanted me there in the first place. (Orkney Library Sound Archive tape: interview for oral history project, recorded on 15 Mar.1987, spoken part of BNC)

There seems to be much freedom of usage between speakers as to this type of construction which cuts across dialectal boundaries and happens to be very much in use as an alternative to *him and I are arguing* (19)*/didn't get on* (20), or *he and I are arguing/didn't get on*. The order *I and he* is sometimes frowned upon, but it is a perfectly correct form in the English system.

There are, however, some dialectal features which can be seen as either systematic or unsystematic. The apparently random use of the third person singular *-s* inflection in the present tense, for instance, may appear to be unsystematic in the following:

(21) I says, all right then, good night, and I went to bed (Hughes & Trudgill 1996: 86)
He can gets hurt (Labov 1972b)
They starts bringing peoples in (Poplack & Tagliamonte 1989: 55)

In many dialects it is not a third person singular marker and it is not assigned any specific value in varieties other than Standard English, hence its mobility. It is in most cases superfluous and is probably going to disappear like the similar second person *-est* suffix.[5] On the other hand, the

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[5] In the East Anglian vernacular, for instance, the *-s* is no longer in use.

negative concord rule which has been stigmatized as 'illogical' and ungrammatical by prescriptivist grammarians establishes a series of systematic relations in the operation of rules governing the negative (Labov 1971: 452).

(22) I ain't done nothing (conversation)
I ain't nicked no car (in *Made in Britain*, a BBC film by D. Leland, 1982)
Can't nobody do nothing about it (Labov 1972b)

Thus, change or deviation do not depend on the breach of rules, but they may result from the possibilities that are open to users. People have many ways within a system of conceptualizing and expressing their thoughts according to the different contexts in which they speak. This is one of the reasons why the grammar of a living language is not one fixed and unchanging system. Although some of its aspects still correspond to Early Modern English usage (which shows that the system evolves slowly), others can be seen in original innovations which occasionally appear in marginal trends of the language like the *present perfect* used with past reference adverbials (Gachelin 1990: 221) as in

(23) These clearances have taken place some sixty years ago. ('Scottish Poor – Rural Improvement', *The Inverness Courier*, Aug. 20, 1845)

In his *Minimalist Program* (1995: 19–20), Chomsky opposes the core of a language and its periphery. The core system then rests on what we assume to be something analogous to "the pure instantiation of universal grammar", the actual instantiation of the English grammar. This refers to the internal competence of users and the systemic rules they would never infringe. There is indeed an underlying grammatical system which speakers exploit differently in accordance with their personal appropriation of it and communication needs. Conversely, the periphery concerns marked expressions (i.e. irregular verbs, agreement morphemes, grammatical constructions, …) which are likely to vary. To a certain extent, it can be argued that there are as many (sub-)systems as there are speakers depending on the individuals and the choices made:

> Try to list the varieties of English you are exposed to in a single day. You will hear, perhaps, the English of your family, localised or non-localised; of

> shopkeepers and bus-conductors, probably localised; if you are a student, you will hear lecturers using different Englishes, probably at least one of them having a foreign accent; you will read books and newspapers in international Standard; hear television new programmes, probably incorporating at least one American report; see a film using, perhaps, one or more varieties of American English; listen to pop-records, which may be genuine transatlantic, mid-Atlantic, Merseyside, Midland (but perhaps not RP); and chat with friends using different sorts of English. (Strang 1970: 19)

There are distinctions indeed, but they are not significant enough to affect mutual comprehension. Grammatical uncertainties which are visible at the morpho-syntactic level do not necessarily translate into systemic differences. These differences may be regarded by users as distinct systems all the more so since they are generally distinguished phonologically. But a linguistic system can only be apprehended from traces which are carried by sentences. A trace is the emergence of an underlying structure, that of the language itself. Only part of the emergence shows on the surface and for a given mental operation there can be several different performances from one individual or group of individuals to another. Therefore the system cannot be totally perceived from one surface representation. It is on the contrary useful to consider and exploit the various forms of the language. A standard language is only one aspect of the system, it is the centre, the 'common core' (Quirk & Greenbaum 1973: 1), the reference, the established norm, and the deviant-prone non-standard varieties an indication of the linguistic usage. What counts is the common mental representations that are conceived of, and this goes beyond the obvious surface structure.

3. Establishing boundaries

It is a very difficult task first to distinguish dialects from languages, and then draw a dividing line and decide exactly whether we deal with one or several systems since most varieties are regularly in contact and influencing each other (Trudgill 1975: 22). Indeed, the factors which define dialects and languages are not only linguistic. Swedish and Norwegian, for example, are mutually understandable because they are closely related, both linguistically and culturally. They are nevertheless regarded as different languages (they enjoy national status) and as such they are

perceived as different systems although the two languages are very similar (Chambers & Trudgill 1998: 3–14; Andersson 1998: 50). In this case, the boundary is political, not systemic.

In comparison with the phonological and lexical changes, grammatical variation may seem secondary and insignificant. Of course, there has been considerable grammatical change over the past centuries, but modern English grammar has shown little variation and is to some extent quite stable. Besides the fact that there are common features from one dialect to another, the rules on which no native speaker could be wrong and which constitute the basic structure that enables them to communicate are widely neglected. Indeed, this disregard relies on the assumption that there is one standard, one correct way of formulating the 'right' sentences, and departures from that are accounted mistakes. Except that native speakers do not make mistakes when they speak their own language. They may employ usages that are not taught, but which can be heard in their speech community. Some might react to a production and say: 'This is hardly part of English' or 'There's no such construction in English', but on the whole, save perhaps the basically unnatural (or abnormal) utterances, the changes which have been recorded do not affect the overall shape of the system.[6] It cannot be denied, however, that language diversification may eventually lead to increasingly important modifications and a gradual loss of inter-intelligibility. I think that there are at least two possible solutions to this kind of issue.

Closely linked to general acceptance and social graces is the conservative and prescriptive attitude to the language, in defence of a refined, perfect, logical standard, "a type of English which is neither provincial, nor vulgar, a type which most people would willingly speak if they could, and desire to speak if they do not" (Wyld 1934). It is a rearguard action. Generally, minor variations from one area to another are not significant enough to require correction, but any radical change that would hinder mutual understanding will sooner or later become an inconvenience, and in time develop into a new system with its own rules and prescriptions as could be seen with the diversification of Latin.

[6] The distinction between unnatural or abnormal use is not quite clear. Normal language corresponds to the linguistic behaviour of ordinary people. An abnormal use of language means that the utterance does not belong to an actual variety of the language (Andersson & Trudgill 1992: 28).

English-based Creoles, for instance, may fall into that category, even though they have not yet acquired complete stability. Admittedly, Creole is a distinct linguistic system with its own vocabulary, phonology, and regular morpho-syntactic rules. But because of language contact and mutual influence, it shares many features with the dialects brought from Britain. On the problem of deciding whether some varieties are closer to Creoles than regional varieties of English, John A. Holm (1994: 332) writes:

> On structural grounds a good case can be made for basilect Jamaican constituting a linguistic system quite different from English, while on the same grounds the acrolect is clearly the same language as English, with only negligible differences from the British standard in certain areas of lexis and intonation. Similarly, it is not at all clear that there is significant typological difference between very decreolised continua such as American Black English and English dialects such as Cockney just because the former retain rather more foreign elements.

The relative uncertainty of Creole, if any, stems from the fact that it results from the superposition of two (or more) different systems which have remained in close contact with their English parent. We may also consider that there are some universal grammatical principles which come into play in the structuring of languages and are involved in the expression of what Chomsky (1976: 29) calls “the essence of human language”. As a matter of fact, it will almost certainly depend on the degree of mutual comprehension between individuals, and the ability of the system to resist relational movements and at the same time be flexible enough to adapt to external conditions.

The second possible solution to address the issue of intelligibility relates to the institution of a new standard, which may be copied from the former, but on a global scale, a ‘super-reference’, a language to communicate and palliate difficulties in mutual comprehension. This is reminiscent of a linguistic situation analogous to that of the early 15th century. At that time, English was the sum of many diverse local dialects. For political, economic, and cultural needs a common language was to emerge. It contained the features of various dialects which were gradually codified and contributed to the making of Modern English.

Conclusion

A language is not a homogeneous monolith. It is a collection of several dialects which are all varieties of the same linguistic system with phonological, lexical, and to a lesser extent grammatical differences that do not cause severe structural disorders, or affect mutual comprehension. The system represents the core of the language, the necessary reference for users to communicate. Yet, the system is virtual, it does not provide ready-made sentences, but the rules to construct them. These rules may be quite flexible as long as they do not alter the stablity of the system. It is actualised through speech and permits intelligible exchanges between users.

Variation and change, on the other hand, are to be found in the practical usage, in the way people speak and write their language; it also involves their own appropriation of the system. The example of English shows that when we deal with a living language, we are dealing with a group of varieties (dialects or languages?) that have enough systemic relations in common to maintain mutual intelligibility. There is no objective boundary between varieties of the same language which exist in a context of a continuum and differ slightly from one area to another. This implies that the system is capable of absorbing changes inasmuch as they do not disrupt the continuum. Holm (1994: 332), then, is quite right in his assertion that "these are all questions of degree which can only be answered somewhat arbitrarily".

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