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THE SOCIOLINGUISTICS OF LANGUAGE VARIATION: THE DIALECT OF THE CITY OF BIRMINGHAM

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GRAO EN INGLÉS: ESTUDOS LINGÜÍSTICOS E
LITERARIOS

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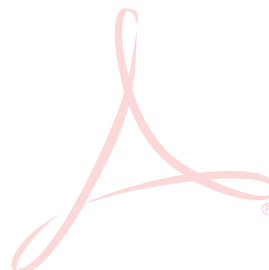


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1. Abstract

Language variation can be considered a representation of not only the linguistic reality of a community, but the development of socio-economic changes within a given society. These processes implement profound changes in communities and give people common features with which they can identify themselves. In essence, language variation determines a significant part of communities' sense of belonging to their specific geographical area, and the variety people use is, therefore, associated with it. This essay uses a range of academic sources which help in the definition of the concept of language variation and the types of divergence present in language use by speakers, from dialectal variation, dictated by the geographical area, to the social variation. Also, this project analyses the history of the diverse range of theories that have developed since their introduction to the field of sociolinguistics, from Labov's theory of Attention to Speech, passing through Giles and Powesland's Speech Accommodation and Bell's Audience Design to the most modern iterations of studies on this area of research, such as the Speaker Design model by S. McConnell-Ginet and P. Eckert. However, these theories leave unanswered questions which will also be addressed, and reinforce the reasons why developments in sociolinguistic behaviours are still being made to this day.

Further, speech communities help to enhance individuals' feeling of belonging to their environment, including the linguistic and physical reality of a certain area of the United Kingdom. Moreover, these speech communities not only emphasise the linguistic

behaviour of their population, but also the additional social factors which determine their creation or establishment, such as the moral and personal objectives of individuals within that particular context. The objective lying behind these concepts serves to explain the context in which the dialect of the city of Birmingham developed, which serves here as an example of these developments in the matter. This project will point out the morphological and lexical features present in the accent of this area, as well as the phonological ones, and how they relate to the projection of identities within the context of Birmingham, and the social meanings which these characteristics contain. Also, the essay will address society's mindset towards this dialect and the consideration it has across the country. In fact, the case study which this essay will explore will help the reader understand how important the accent is to that part of the United Kingdom's society in which it is present. In essence, the usage of academic sources is the main methodology used to create this project in order to provide proven backing to the contents to be discussed, as well as the determination of the objectives set for the essay. Finally, the conclusions will summarise the theories and ideas contained in the contents of the essay, as well as give an overview of the social consideration towards the case study, the Birmingham accent.

2. Introduction

Language variation is considered a consequence of the social changes that occur within communities. It reflects the reality that is around human beings as per the shifts in the socioeconomic backgrounds in which societies are based. Furthermore, this concept is closely linked to speech communities which locate geographically the different dialects existing in a nation, creating linguistic maps that allow scholars to study the behaviour of languages and their origins. The relationships surrounding these communities have had a relevant role defining the interactions between the different layers of society that still exist to this day, and language variation serves as the mirror with which humans can observe social change through the visual of language.

Language variation also shows us how people react in different social contexts, which is also reflected by the linguistic use of a given person in each situation. This means that language does not only change due to its geographical location and the communities that use it, but it also changes based on the conversational context. In addition, language variation is closely linked to dialectology by helping us determine where a person comes from, or their socioeconomic status just by paying attention to the variety of English an individual is using, and this phenomenon happens in every language. However, due to these occurrences, human beings might have to alter their linguistic usage based on the status of their preferred variety. As discussed in the previous paragraph, if language variation describes the social reality through language, it means that it also represents an image of the different layers of the social pyramid, which not only locates people, but their language varieties as well (Vickers, Deckert, 2011).

Based on the social dimension of language variation, linguists began to theorise about it, and, during the twentieth century, four approaches to the concept were developed. First of all, William Labov introduced his Attention to Speech in the late 1960s, which consisted of a series of sociolinguistic experiments across several department stores in New York City. His work was deemed a steppingstone for future developments in language variation theories. However, it was also considered unrealistic, for it only represented a small part of New York's linguistic reality and left unstudied a large part of the many cultures and ways of speaking English that exist in the city.

After the Attention to Speech theory, Howard Giles and Peter Powesland developed the Accommodation Theory approach to Language and Style. This study shows how the individual tends to adjust their speech towards the people being addressed, mainly to gain approval from them. However, the speaker can also steer away from the addressees, which means that users can converge with or diverge from the receivers in a conversation. Divergence in speech can be used to put distance between the interactors in each situation (Chambers, Schilling-Estes, 2004).

The third approach was developed by Allan Bell, who called it Audience Design. Although quite similar to the previous theory, Bell's work emphasises the effects that the addressees have on the linguistic choice that the speakers make. Thus, it is the audience which forces the variation on the user. The linguist used his studies on two radio broadcasts in New Zealand to illustrate his theory, showing the reasons why the presenters use a variety of English or the other based on the socioeconomic background of the audience (Chambers, Schilling-Estes, 2004).

The fourth and final approach is Speaker Design, introduced by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet. This study focuses on the linguistic choices made by individuals to fit themselves into communities. The authors of this theory explain in detail that the speakers use language to their advantage, their choice can be conscious or automatic and language choice can help determine identities within communities.

Speech Communities help construct identities as well. In fact, they locate dialects within the boundaries of nations and create linguistic bubbles filled with people with similar language characteristics and socioeconomic backgrounds. Also, they enhance the feeling of integration inside the different areas in which they are present and build identities. However, these communities delimit the differences that exist, and create a pyramidal system which can lead to linguistic discrimination amongst speech communities.

The dialect of the city of Birmingham is an example of this linguistic discrimination. In fact, it is an accent that has historically suffered social stigmatisation, as it represents the linguistic reality of a working class, industrial city, which does not have the same positive consideration as the main hubs of the United Kingdom, especially London, the most important cultural, political, and economic area in the country. However, the linguistic characteristics of this dialect make it quite unique in its nature and it has developed complex vocabulary and phonetic features that differentiate it significantly from the rest of the many dialects in the country.

This essay will explore the concepts of Language Variation and search for a definition of it, as well as explaining the four approaches which have developed through

the twentieth century. They attempted to provide reasons for the linguistic choices that human beings make in order to accommodate themselves to the surrounding environment. In addition, we will see how Speech Communities shape the different dialectal areas within the United Kingdom, with special attention to the area of the city of Birmingham, and, finally, the essay will focus on the characteristics of this dialect, as well as explaining the reasons why the accent exists and its struggle against the highly regarded varieties in the United Kingdom, while comparing it with the processes of Language Variation.

3. On Language Variation: The Definition of the Concept

Formally known as Variationist Sociolinguistics, the concept is central to the study of language use by the speakers of a given language. It refers to the regional, contextual, or social differences in the ways individuals use language. Variation is inherent to every living tongue to stay alive. Speakers of a given language will use different features of their dialect or adapt themselves to the conversational situation depending in the context in which they are. Variation is highly systematic, and the linguistic choice is often based on the social affiliation of the participants in the exchange, which sets the context for the conversation. The language choice can differ from the norm in pronunciation, morphology, or vocabulary. The factors that dictate the speaker's election may be based on the purpose that one of the users has during communication, the relationship existing between speakers, or as stated earlier, the social affiliation to which the individuals belong (R. Reppen, 2002).

Furthermore, there are two types of language variation: linguistic, and sociolinguistic variation. The linguistic part is constrained by the language elements

within a given linguistic context. However, the sociolinguistic part gives the interlocutors the choice of what elements they use inside the same linguistic context. In fact, it explains the non-linguistic factors that affect the conversation. This includes the level of formality, the socioeconomic background of the speakers and the setting of the situation (R. Mougeon, 2010).

Also, there is dialectal variation, which refers to the grammatical, phonetic and vocabulary differences between varieties of the same language. The divergence amongst dialects is considered a continuum, as varieties may present different features which distinguish them from each other and the norm (D. G. Ellis, 1999). In addition, this regional variation is not the only way speakers show differences between themselves. Language may vary due to the occupation of the users, as in the case of the word 'bug', which has a different meaning to a computer programmer compared to a plague control worker. Also, we can observe sexual variation, especially in the past, when gender roles were more prominent. Women were more likely to use certain pieces of vocabulary which differentiated female speech from the male one. Nowadays, this trend is changing towards a more inclusive and unified language choice as gender roles are not as relevant as they were centuries ago. Educational dialects exist as well, as people who possess higher education are less likely to show grammatical mistakes in their speech. Moreover, dialects of age are also present. We can see this by examining teenagers' speech compared to the way elderly people speak. Adolescents have their own slang, and the phonetic features which older speakers use vary within the same dialects. Finally, there are dialects of social context, which refer mainly to the degree of formality in a conversation (C. M. Millward, M. Hayes, 2012).

Language variation also includes a series of variables which dictate the choices made by the speaker. The introduction of sociolinguistic variables has meant that these have become central to the study of the variationist current of sociolinguistics. We can describe these variables as elements of linguistic use by individuals which may differ, and sometimes compete for prevalence within speech communities. In fact, it is fair to say variation has become the main vehicle for language change (R. L. Trask, 1999/2005). For example, lexical variables are the most common in linguistic choice. As long as a given study demonstrates that the two elements which are to be taken as examples, as in the case of the words 'soda' and 'pop' in American English, relate to the same linguistic entity, which in this example refer to carbonated beverages (S. F. Kiesling, 2011).

4. The Four Approaches to Language and Style: From the Beginnings to the Modern Iterations of Sociolinguistic Studies

When discussing the concept of Language Variation, it is necessary to include the relationship between language and style. The notion of style in sociolinguistic studies has always been present, but not central to research. In fact, the first studies conducted relegated style to a secondary level of relevance. William Labov developed his work with the differentiation in social class as the main channel of linguistic variation, suggesting that people use language differently depending on the socioeconomic context of a conversation. For example, individuals use variants linked to the upper classes in more formal situations, and the use of linguistic features associated with the lower classes in more casual settings. (Chambers, Schilling-Estes, 2004). Labov's work belongs to the so-called 'first wave studies'. However, as sociolinguistic studies evolved, style was given a more significant role, becoming a specific area of research which included social class

as well as other personal and demographic factors. In addition, researchers have realised that style is not only reactive to a change in the formality of an exchange, but it also shifts due to the creativity of the interlocutors, who affect the context of a conversation, including role relations between individuals. This creative potential has meant that group styles, such as dialects, have their origins in individual linguistic use, and these two combined, change constantly. Hence, when one is undergoing evolution, the other does as well, thus the specific works together with the global. This creates a close link between individual stylistic change and dialectal, communal variation (Chambers, Schilling-Estes, 2004).

As time progressed, other theories appeared, during the second wave studies, each improving over the previous one, or shifting the focus of research to attempt to portray linguistic reality as precisely as possible. After Labov's Attention to Speech theory, several other linguists recognised the importance of style in language variation and included it in their work. In fact, the creative side of linguistic choice was central to the development of Howard Giles and Peter Powesland's Accommodation Theory and Allan Bell's Audience Design research projects, which were developed during the 1970s and 1980s. These two theoretical frameworks gave style the role it needed to explain the linguistic behaviour of interlocutors. These two studies built upon Labov's work and added an improved framework with which the dimension of style became one of the leading features in variationist sociolinguistic projects. They focused on specific instances where social styles were resources at speakers' disposal, such as dialects, which meant that linguistic choice was indeed an active process, rather than a fixed reaction, as Labov's theory suggested (Coupland, 2007).

Furthermore, style was also given a leading role in the most modern project on language variation, which is Speaker Design, developed in 1985 by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet. This theory belongs to the third wave of studies and focuses extensively on the more local interactions linguistic features and social categories. This means that, although the social aspect of linguistic variation is quite relevant, the language and style choices that speakers make are even more relevant, as they help individuals to use language to their advantage in order to suit better their environment and build identity within their community as well. With this theory, stylistic variation is now at the very centre of language and style analysis, and means that we have moved from unidimensional, fixed reactions triggered by the stimuli surrounding individuals, to an active process of recognising the conversational context and use language to shape entire identities within communities (Chambers, Schilling-Estes, 2004).

4.1. First Approach: William Labov's Attention to Speech

The aforementioned William Labov was the first linguist to explore the concept of language variation and its relationship with conversational context and style. The author designed a series of linguistic experiments across department stores in New York City, and he called it Social Stratification of (r) in New York City department stores. It analysed the factors which forced the changes in linguistic use by the customers. The experiments took place in shops with differences in the socioeconomic background of the clientele, which would serve as the main factor affecting language choice. The objective was to explore people's natural speech rather than altered use because of an observer being present. In fact, Labov carried out sociolinguistic experiments in Lower East Side which served as a preliminary study (see Labov, 1966) before the department stores one,

when he interviewed people randomly on the street, asking them to read passages from books, exercises of minimal pairs and word lists (Chambers, Schilling-Estes, 2004). These interviews served to establish the linguistic variables that would be involved in the main experiment.

The main linguistic variable considered was the presence or absence of postvocalic [r], as in the cases of words such as ‘car’, ‘fourth’, ‘four’ or ‘card’. This feature was selected due to its sensibility in any conversational context and because it served as a social stratification factor in New York City at the time. This means that the focus of the study was stylistic change based on social class, assuming that the former depends on the latter in order to undergo shifting. In addition, according to Labov, the study of a specific linguistic variable can lead to a systematic analysis of language in anonymous speech events (Labov, 1997).

It would have been simpler to select other social stratification factors such as occupation, one of the most common indexes of differentiation amongst communities. However, such extreme examples would have gone no further than previous interviews carried out before the experiment, and the hypothesis behind it was able to show fine, subtle differences in social class as well as more general means of stratification. Thus, the experiment was undertaken in a single occupational group: department stores. Labov selected three stores, each representing a different step within the social pyramid, both in clientele and in price range. The author predicted that salesgirls and customers in the stores with the highest social ranking would tend to make more use of postvocalic [r], as it is considered the linguistic feature with a higher level of prestige, and the use of this element would steadily decrease as the experiment continued through the lower status

stores. The middle-class shop would show intermediate values of [r], and the lowest ranked one, the lowest values. The names of the three stores in decreasing ranking order are as follows: Saks Fifth Avenue, Macy's, and S. Klein (Labov, 1997).

The methodology used in the experiment was simple, as an interviewer, in the role of a customer, would ask one of the employees a question that involved one of the departments of the store, which needed to be on the fourth floor. Then, after the answer, the interviewer would ask 'excuse me?' This second question was used to obtain a more stylistically careful response from the employee. Hence, the final number of utterances of the pronunciation of postvocalic [r] was four. First response: *fourth floor*, and second response: *fourth floor* (Labov, 1997).

As the author predicted, the data compiled during the experiment proved the veracity of the hypothesis. Indeed, the results obtained in the highest ranked store, Saks, showed that although the first response to the question reflected some degree of disparity in the usage of postvocalic [r], the second reply uttered a higher level of use of the linguistic variable, which corresponds to the more prestigious variety. However, the values obtained are still high in both questions, which demonstrates that employees in Saks are more 'secure' in their linguistic use. The middle-ranked store, Macy's, shows lower values of postvocalic [r] than Saks, although similar in the second question, since the second reply is set in a more emphatic conversational context. The casual utterance is less careful than that of the previous store, however, and displays more natural speech by the employees, demonstrating that the results correspond with the linguistic use of the middle class. Finally, the lowest-ranked store, S. Klein, portrays the language use associated with the lower classes of New York City. The results from this shop show the

lowest rating of postvocalic [r] out of the three stores in the experiment. The first response to the questions displays very low values of the linguistic element, and the second, although it forces a slight increment in its use, does not reach the levels obtained in the other two stores, which reflects less care in language use by the employees working in the lower-class areas of the city (Labov, 1997).

Labov's studies were considered a stepping-stone for future sociolinguistic developments. However, his contributions were deemed insufficient and limited, as the study takes a unidimensional approach to stylistic variation: a non-standard and a standard element. Furthermore, the main reason behind the stratification of language use is social differentiation, which leaves other significant factors in a secondary role that affect language choice, such as genre, conversational control, audience, or topic. Finally, many linguists consider that Attention to Speech falls short of depicting the true reality of language variation in New York City as a whole. It only represents a small portion of the linguistic landscape of the area and leaves large communities out of the spectrum represented in Labov's studies (Chambers, Schilling-Estes, 2004).

4.2 Second Approach: Howard Giles and Peter Powesland's Accommodation Theory

After the Attention to Speech theory, Giles and Powesland developed the Speech Accommodation Theory, or SAT, as an attempt to improve upon Labov's work. The essential premise behind the reasoning for this theory is that linguistic variation partly depends on the person to whom an individual is speaking, the topic being discussed and the context of the conversation. This study focuses on the interpersonal aspects affecting

the interlocutors to explore language choice and speech diversity. In fact, the Accommodation Theory suggests that an individual may reduce the differences in speech to induce the other to favour him/her, creating a feeling of social approval. Moreover, identity is another factor to consider, as speakers would lose some degree of personal identity when accommodating to the other user. However, this behaviour would only be possible if there is a reward for doing so, as interlocutors are inherently reluctant to reject their identity for no apparent reason. Hence, the SAT can be considered a way of modifying the linguistic features which construct one's identity in order to make speech more appealing to the person being addressed (Giles, Powesland, 1997).

The main characteristic of SAT is linguistic convergence between the two interlocutors, and can be bidirectional, that is, it comes from both sides of the exchange. In addition, it does not merely happen to gain social rewards such as approval, but also to be better understood by all parts in the conversation. The more the sender accommodates him/herself to the receiver, the easier the message will be transferred. However, SAT occurs in situations of inequality between varieties of the same language as well as amongst completely different languages. This means that the person who uses a dialect which suffers from social stigmatisation, such as the accent of the city of Birmingham, is far more likely to accommodate his/her speech to the other half of the exchange, rather than the other way around, assuming the other side's speech enjoys a higher level of social acceptance. The most common example of SAT is found in the speech communities of Canada, where two languages coexist in the same country. It has been discovered that French Canadian speakers benefit from a higher degree of social consideration when they use English rather than French when exiting their communities and travelling around English-speaking areas of the country. This happens because Canadian English-speaking

citizens recognise the effort made by French speakers to cross the cultural bridge between their communities, which proves the principles behind this theory. French speakers gain social acceptance, and English speakers find themselves culturally and identity-wise closer to fellow Canadians. However, this language choice by French speaking Canadians comes at the cost of rejecting a part of their identity as users of a different language. Thus, it is fair to say that there is a trade between community identity and social validation by adapting to the conversational context (Giles, Powesland, 1997).

The multiple factors used in the elaboration of this theory allow for a deeper understanding of the reasons behind language variation. It includes a range of conscious and unconscious decisions taken by speakers, leading to the temporary dissolution of language and social barriers between people belonging to different communities. In fact, humans usually stay within their communities in order to strengthen their identity ties with it, but after leaving it, they will accommodate the way they interact with the surrounding environment, which includes linguistic choice. Hence, the focus of this theory is placed on the speaker's point of view and analyses the situational awareness of the user, and how the interaction occurs within the context in which the exchange is set (Giles, Powesland, 1997).

4.3 Third Approach: Allan Bell's Audience Design

Different, although similar in some ways, Allan Bell's Audience Design theory was developed shortly after the appearance of the SAT. Compared to the previous theory, this one changes the focal point of language variation and puts it in the audience side of the conversational context. This means that what forces the language choice by the

speaker is not the speaker him/herself, but the receivers of the message being sent. Furthermore, Audience Design gives style a more powerful position, and considers it the main vehicle of linguistic variation. Unlike what Labov did, that is, focus on small aspects of speech, such as the pronunciation of specific phonemes, Audience Design emphasises the ‘macroscopic’ aspects of language use, such as the above-mentioned style and context (Bell, 1984).

Bell developed his theory by studying the linguistic use of radio broadcasters in New Zealand to prove the effects of the audience on the speaker and how it forced a switch in language use. He took examples from two radio broadcasts which targeted audiences with different socioeconomic backgrounds. The first one (YA) was the prestige radio service of New Zealand, which was aimed at the upper classes of the country. The second one (ZB) was aimed at local communities with a lower social consideration, both radio stations being based in the same studio building. Bell observed that newsreaders changed the way they pronounced certain phonemes, such as intervocalic /t/. When a single newsreader broadcast for both radio stations, it was found that they switched their language choice consistently to suit their audience. Attending to the context, it can be stated that the main factor affecting these changes is the audience, as the attention being paid to the speech is always the same. The results obtained suggest that this theory can be correlated to face-to-face interaction, although the impact of the audience is less observable than in the case of radio broadcasters. Language shifts also occurs due to the necessity of the message sender to concur with the audience to a lesser degree (Bell, 1984).

It can be concluded that Audience Design assumes that style corresponds to the changes that people make to their linguistic use in order to respond to the social dimension of speech. Moreover, style depends on the affiliation of specific linguistic features, such as intervocalic /t/ in Bell's findings, to social establishments. This means that the links between social class and language variation are determined by society's assessment on a particular group's language use. These shifts respond to an active process of accommodation to the audience similar to what SAT promotes, rather than being a passive phenomenon. Audience Design also applies to multilingual situations, not only to divergences between varieties of the same language, which includes the complete repertoire of language use. Also, speakers have demonstrated an innate ability to change their linguistic use for a ranked system of addressees, which means that we can establish a pyramidal classification amongst the receivers based on a series of factors, such as whether addressees were previously known by the sender of the message or if they are being specifically targeted as receivers. Finally, we can assume that the linguistic features being used can be associated with a particular social group, which helps to construct deeper identification within communities of speech (Bell, 1984).

Despite the progress made by the Audience Design theory, there are questions which arose from its inception. Mainly, what forces linguistic shifts? The addressee speech patterns, language use based on demographic features or personal characteristics amongst audience members? In fact, we must recognise that contributions to the conversation are equally significant from both sides, the speaker, and the audience, and in the case of interviews for example, they are an interaction rather than a monologue by the interviewee. This sets the framework upon which future developments will build, focusing on the interactional nature of stylistic variation and identity as in the case of a

speaker and a set of listeners. Further, varieties and styles are indeed a creative process used to draw attention to the speaker. However, initiative style switching depends on the relationship between certain linguistic forms and its social considerations. It needs to be acknowledged that these two features work together in harmony and are co-dependent, since they define one another. Finally, we must discuss what is more appropriate, convergence with the audience, or the fulfilment of their expectancies? In the case of radio broadcasters, newsreaders use Received Pronunciation to address their upper-class listeners, instead of New Zealand Standard English, which is the variety they use most of the time. However, RP is the variety these listeners expect to hear, thus it can be considered an act of ‘proper’ language use by the radio announcers, rather than an actual Audience Design case (Chambers, Schilling-Estes, 2004).

4.4 Fourth Approach: Eckert and McConnell-Ginet’s Speaker Design

As a result of the questions that the previous theories were challenged with, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet devised the Speaker Design approach as an answer to the unturned stones left by the other variationist studies. This theory focuses on the qualitative aspect of the social meaning of stylistic variation; thus, style is placed centre stage, rather than being considered a secondary element. In fact, Eckert (2005) stated that as sociolinguistic studies progressed, increasing emphasis has been given to more specific settings of conversational discourse instead of the traditional, global correspondences between language variation and social class. Speaker Design serves the purpose of explaining how language choice helps to shape personal identities that are coherent to the communities to which people belong. This means that linguistic features associated with individuals hold

primacy over group traits, as both are interconnected, and group conscience becomes a fundamental part of the projection of identity (Schilling-Estes, 2004).

Moreover, Speaker Design states that specific linguistic variants imply association with particular social groups, such as the use of the ending ‘-in’ instead of ‘-ing’ in the south of the United States, which corresponds to an affiliation with the working class. However, this relationship exists because it has been used as a projection of the social meaning of this specific element, which relates to the hard-working nature of this societal group. This approach takes first order indexes (group-associated meanings) and considers them the derivative side of the conversational context; second order indexes, meanings associated with character projections, are placed as the determinant speech factor. Further, Speaker Design establishes that it is the speaker who has control over language use and can use it creatively and self-consciously in order to shape an identity trait which suits the linguistic environment surrounding the individual. In other words, the emphasis of this study does not reside in what influences linguistic choice, but rather in the intentionality of the speaker at the time of selecting his/her speech to strengthen the feeling of belonging to a social group. Finally, this theory considers listeners’ perception as well as the linguistic choice of the speaker, as language variation does not rely solely on what an individual is trying to induce into the listener’s view, but also on what the audience interprets during the exchange (Schilling-Estes, 2004).

Although it is appealing to assume that individuals are entitled to use language creatively, it needs to be accepted that there are rules and structures with which users must comply. For example, when a person is linguistically performing at a working-class level, he/she is situating him/herself within a socioeconomic hierarchy which is often

reinforced. Also, considering linguistic gender roles, when performing male or female language identity, there are traditional behaviours deeply embedded in language use within a gender order. Even in the case of Barrett's study on drag queens (1995), whose attitude towards language use is actively in pursuit of non-traditional identities, there are linguistic usages belonging to these traditional traits. Further, however important conscious linguistic decisions are, there is an element of automaticity in language choice. This automatic aspect is used mainly to avoid extra linguistic effort in a given situation, to keep stability in a conversational context or for the speaker to avoid centring attention on him/herself. Also, there is the issue of the absorption of the message by the addressee, who may not understand it the way the speaker intends it to be understood. Finally, to comprehend the true nature of stylistic variation, we must acknowledge the interaction between linguistic structures and their social consideration, individual creativity and initiative, and language limitation and responsiveness, and speaker intention and receiver comprehension (Chambers, Schilling-Estes, 2004).

5. Speech Communities

The concept of Speech Community lacks a clear definition; however, the common consensus states that it is a specific place of sociolinguistic exploration encompassing a targeted group of speakers. In fact, in variationist study, the linguist selects a community, meaning a well-established, long-lasting social construction, and a set of speakers embedded in this community. Lastly, the process involves researching linguistic use in the area. The community side can be described as a group of individuals who share common goals, morals and live in a defined area taking part in common activities. Following Cohen's elaborations (1985), people build communities which act as a symbol

of their projected identity and use them as a storage of the meaning of the linguistic features which characterise them. Furthermore, sociolinguistic studies are expected to follow the concept of community-as-value, as the role of language choice and social interaction help constructing and keeping these communities. We can distinguish four main characteristics of Speech Community study: socio-cultural structure as a fundamental building block of community, subjective nature of communal participation, the linguistic use which characterises the values of a given community, and the moral objectives of each community (Coupland, 2009).

These factors are easily identifiable in specific geographical areas such as the city of Birmingham or, as in Coupland's chapter in C. Llamas and D. Watt (2009), The Valleys, located in Wales. This happens because, as we have seen, there is a strong link between language use and a certain area of a country, and most of the time, people with similar socioeconomic backgrounds and, therefore, common objectives, tend to inhabit close by. Also, living near to each other contributes to strengthen the identity and class values of communities. These factors act as a breeding ground for accents to develop, including vocabulary traits shared amongst individuals with the same occupation. For instance, community members of The Valleys show similar indexes of area and social class, such as /h/ dropping, the use of schwa in the term 'want', or monophthongisation as in "go", which is pronounced with a long 'o' sound /o:/ in parts of southern Wales, features which tend to be associated with stigmatised varieties of English. Despite the social characterisation of this area of the United Kingdom and its dialect, the use of the Welsh accent in radio broadcasts targeting this specific audience has meant that it is a variety which enjoys a strong link with its community. It has helped strengthen the bond

between its users, and the community values it represents has enhanced the exposure of these people's hardships (Coupland, 2009).

Relating to communal participation, radio broadcasts in Wales have helped people to interact with each other and share their experiences within their community, in order to find support amongst their peers. The exposure these people have increases the chances of the Valleys' community to export their values to the broader public, which would reduce the degree of stigmatisation to some extent and validate the area more positively. Voice is another significant element, as the dialect of The Valleys has decreased in its traditional values after the deindustrialisation of the area. It is an accent deeply rooted in the character of its speakers, associated with their most common social consideration: silent, strong, and resilient. However, with the appearance of radio broadcasts airing the dialect, it has recovered some of its relevance, at least within the community, as everyone in the area can relate to the linguistic elements being used (Coupland, 2009).

Thus, it can be concluded that the expanded airing of The Valleys' dialect has meant that an entire reassessment of the situation has occurred through linguistic practice. It has brought together different identities to come to the realisation of the problems enveloping the society of the area, creating a community-as-value example by reformulating the social structure which already existed, thanks to individual action (Coupland, 2009).

6. Case Study: The Birmingham Dialect and its Sociolinguistic and Historical Context

The accent of the city of Birmingham is located in the West Midlands of England, belonging to the inhabitants of that same town. It is one of the most widely spoken regional dialects in British English, with approximately 3.7 million speakers in Birmingham and its metropolitan area. It is locally called Brummie, a term which derives from the ancestral name of the city, Brummagem. Furthermore, it is commonly associated with the dialects which surround it, such as Black Country English or the dialect of the nearby city of Coventry, due to the similar traits shared by these varieties, and is categorised as a northern accent despite its central location within the country. Also, it is a variety which suffers significant social stigmatisation, due to the historical role the city played. Birmingham used to be one of the most important industrial hubs of the United Kingdom, and therefore, it was largely populated by working-class citizens, who were commonly considered uneducated, and belonged to a low prestige step of the social pyramid. Although the social stigma started to diminish as the decades passed, dialect prejudice is still relevant today, according to Trudgill (2008). Hence, the Brummie accent can be considered a mirror of how society assesses its speakers and associates their dialect to the people who use it (K. Malarski, 2010).

Critics of this dialect attribute its negative conception to the falling intonation of sentences, which differentiate it from other industrial accents, such as that of the city of Liverpool. According to several studies (Hlebec, 2008; Van Bezooijen and Gooskens, 1999; or Lagefoged, 2006), intonation is relevant to the emotion and extra-conversational information being conveyed by the speaker. In the case of Brummie, its intonation

categorises it as a ‘lazy’ accent, and it gives its speakers that same reputation. Thus, this dialect has ranked significantly lower than its surrounding peers in terms of social consideration (K. Malarski, 2010). In fact, stigmatisation of the Birmingham accent is severe enough to force its users to switch their dialect towards better considered varieties in order to obtain a greater degree of social acceptance. The main reasons driving this language change are economic and political, which have implications in social order and education, which constitute the most important factors affecting the area of the city (U. Clark, 2013).

Despite the negative social connotations towards the Birmingham accent, it enjoys a good relationship with its speakers. People use the dialect as their main index of identity, as shown by the indexicality factor, that is, the relationship between place and way of speaking as means of discourse. Brummie is consistently used self-consciously by its speakers to reinforce the sense of belonging to the area. Indexical order establishes that certain linguistic usages correlate to specific demographic identities; thus, a listener can locate the area from which the speaker comes, based on language use. Such linguistic features become ‘enregistered’ according to Silverstein (2003), that is, they become embedded in a specific area’s speech. Speaker awareness is also relevant in this context, especially after the de-industrialisation process, as literacy levels increased. Social awareness of a regional dialect allows its users to manipulate their language use to their advantage. Nowadays, speakers of Brummie English may use their accent to convey their identity or may choose not to use it to avoid the still existing prejudices towards their variety, depending on the context of a given conversation (U. Clark and E. Asprey, 2013).

The media has also played an important role in the exposure of regional dialects of the United Kingdom as a whole. For example, television broadcasts have embraced vernacular varieties of English recently thanks to the expansion of public participation in national television. This platform gives speakers from all parts of the country a chance to project their identities through their speech and change the public's perception on some of the negatively perceived dialects such as Brummie, giving a new dimension to non-normative English (N. Coupland, 2007).

6.1 The Morphological and Lexical Characteristics of the Birmingham Dialect.

The Birmingham accent's vocabulary resembles that of Cockney English, in the sense that it is quite creative at using known places and word plays to build new structures. The city's colloquialisms have become a staple in the culture of the area, and thanks to the airing of the BBC and Netflix show *Peaky Blinders*, the identity which these terms project has spread around the country and the globe alike. In fact, the term 'Peaky Blinder' refers to a flat cap which industrial workers used. The series popularised it because gangs in the early twentieth century attached razor blades to the front end of the cap and used it to strike opponents in the face with them, which could lead to cuts in people's eyes, blinding them.

The following are the most common examples of the vocabulary present in the dialect. Firstly, there are phrasal examples in the accent, which are commonly constructed using features in the nearby terrain or places located in the area. For instance, the phrase *going round the Wrekin* uses the Wrekin Hill, found in Shropshire, as a reference. It refers to taking a long way to arrive at a certain destination or taking a significant amount of

time to complete a story. Another phrasal example would be: *It's a bit black over Bill's mother's*, meaning that the sky is dark and threatens heavy rain. In this case, 'Bill' is a reference to William Shakespeare, who lived in Stratford-Upon-Avon, southwest of Birmingham. Usually, weather from the Atlantic enters the United Kingdom from this direction, which completes the analogy. *You'll 'ave it dark* constitutes another idiomatic expression, meaning the day will end, or the sun is going to be set by the time a person finishes a task. This particular example features a phonological element of the dialect, which is initial /h/ dropping; however, that characteristic will be explained in the next point of the essay. Moreover, *A face as long as Livery Street* refers to an individual with a miserable facial expression. It uses the reference of this street of the city, which is quite long in extension. Also, *This ain't getting the babby a frock and pinny* is one of the most complete idiomatic expressions, meaning that a certain action (or inaction) is not achieving the desired result or that it is a waste of time. It combines different vocabulary traits from the accent such as "babby" (which will appear further down in the essay) and "frock and pinny", referring to clothes with which parents usually dress their children. Another expression, *got a cob on*, means to be in a bad mood. A way of using it would be 'He's got a right cob on this morning'. Further, *got a bob on him/herself* refers to people who think well of themselves. The term 'bob' is jargon for a shilling, which, before the conversion to the decimal monetary system, equalled twelve old pence. Back then, a shilling was a decent amount of money, and people thought positively about having a 'bob' in their pocket to spend. As a few final examples, it is necessary to mention expressions such as *go and play up your own end*, which is used to tell children who are disturbing people to go play in their own houses. *Never in a rain of pigs' pudding* refers to something which will never happen. Similar to the literally translated idiomatic

expression from the Spanish language *Until frogs grow hair*. Lastly, *tar-a-bit* is a local phrase meaning ‘see you later’ (Birmingham Mail, 2020).

Apart from phrasal and idiomatic expressions, there are a significant number of terms which are used in the Birmingham area. The following are some of these examples: *bostin’* which is used to describe something as excellent, or brilliant. It carries the same meaning as other colloquialisms such as *smashing* or *cracking*. As mentioned before, *babby* is a local term which refers to a baby. It can also be used in its short form *bab* as an affectionate term to a partner. *Wench* is used as a flirtatious remark to a young woman. Further, a *cob* refers to a bread roll, and it is used because the shape of these resembles that of the cobbles in some streets of the city. *Pop* and *fizzy pop* relate to soft and carbonated drinks respectively. It has the same meaning as the term *pop* in the south of the United States. One of the most recognisable sights of Birmingham is its canals system, which is also featured in the city’s vocabulary in the term *cut*. Furthermore, *cack-handed* refers to a person who carries out activities in a clumsy way, and to describe people who are left-handed. Also, locals of Birmingham and the surrounding areas use the term *island* for roundabouts and *the outdoor* refers to off-license shops, which are quite common in English cities. *Deaf it* is the Brummie version of the expression *to turn a deaf ear* meaning to ignore or forget something. As well as the last few examples, it is worth mentioning *barmy*, which refers to a stimulus that is bothering an individual, *gully* which refers to a narrow alley, and *bawl*, which is used to describe a child’s temper tantrum (Birmingham Mail, 2020).

6.2 The Phonetic Characteristics of the Birmingham Dialect

The Birmingham accent's phonological traits resemble those of the areas surrounding the city, such as Solihull or Wolverhampton. However, it features differences in intonation compared to the rest of the regional dialects of the United Kingdom. In fact, as mentioned before, many analysts blame this characteristic for the accent's bad reputation. Also, the dialect presents variation in the pronunciation of certain diphthongs and single vowels, which can be compared to that of northern varieties; however, the dialect comprises pronunciation characteristics similar to southern varieties as well, which make it a hybrid between northern and southern accents (K. Malarski, 2012). Concerning consonants, there are distinctive features as well as in the cases of the /r/ sound, and initial /h/ dropping and alveolarization processes in words featuring the consonant cluster “-ng”.

The Birmingham accent's intonation is fairly monotonal until the end of sentences, where there is a sudden rise in tone compared to Received Pronunciation, which features a falling tone instead. For example, in the phrase ‘It's a double album’, the tone at the beginning is low, and it drops even lower in the nucleus ‘double’ to then rise for the term ‘album’ suddenly, where it stays that way until the end of the phrase. Alongside this rising tone, Brummie English also displays a ‘slump’ in longer phrases. For instance, in the phrase ‘He's got some animals’, the tone is the same in the first syllables until the last word. The tone rises for ‘animals’; however, it drops for the last syllable, creating a slump in the tone with which the phrase is intonated. The Birmingham accent is commonly thought to have falling tones instead of rising ones, which give the dialect its negative perception, especially considering the ‘rise-plateau-slump’ tones used,

even though the tones technically rise. The small tonal drop is enough to consider the accent as a tonal falling one, which led to the perception of being a ‘lazy’ accent (K. Malarski, 2010).

With regard to vowel pronunciation, the Brummie accent is a hybrid between southern and northern varieties. For example, terms such as ‘kit’ and ‘dress’ are pronounced the same way in Birmingham and in the south of the country; however, most vocalic sounds differ in Brummie, and resemble that of the north. In the ‘trap’ and ‘bath’ split, there are differences in the dialect; whereas the northern part of the city pronounces ‘bath’ with a short /æ/ sound, the southern areas of the town pronounce it with a long /ɑ:/ sound. Further, words such as ‘mud’ and ‘cut’ differ from the standard form /ʌ/. In the Birmingham accent, this vowel is pronounced /ʊ/. Considering diphthongs, Brummie shows a high degree of disparity with Standard English. For instance, there is diphthong shifting in cases such as /ei/ as in the term ‘face’ which becomes /aɪ/ in Birmingham English. Also, the diphthong /əʊ/ becomes /aʊ/ as in the case of the word ‘goat’. Another example of shifting in diphthongs corresponds to the case of the standard realisation of /aɪ/, which in Brummie is pronounced as /ɔɪ/ as in the famous example ‘I quite like it’. Moreover, the diphthong /aʊ/ also shifts in Birmingham English and is pronounced /æʊ/ as in the word ‘mouth’. As a final example of diphthong shifting, it is necessary mentioning the creation of the /eɪ/ vowel group at the end of words finishing with a short /i/ sound, as in ‘happy’ (K. Malarski, 2012).

Moving on to the consonant characteristics of the Birmingham dialect, as with vowels, it shares features with other British varieties of English. In fact, consonant variables make this accent a blend between northern and southern varieties as well as

vocalic elements. The main consonant differences are as follows: glottal stops are quite common in Birmingham. This feature refers to the dropping of /t/ sounds both in intervocalic and final positions. Examples of glottal stops are: ‘what’ /wɒt/ which becomes /wɒʔ/ (final position), and ‘getting’ /ˈgɛtɪŋ/ which becomes /ˈgɛʔɪŋg/ (intervocalic position). Further, Brummie features tapped /ɾ/ which is produced by vibrating the tip of the tongue against the palate, as the case of ‘alright’. In fact, this example not only has consonant variation, but also vocalic, as the diphthong in the word becomes /ɔɪ/ instead of /aɪ/. Also, the Birmingham dialect displays dropping of the /h/ sound in initial position, as in the example analysed in the vocabulary section of this essay, *You’ll ‘ave it dark*. This characteristic means that this sound is completely omitted and not produced in any way or form, unlike the glottal stop, which sound is produced by a sudden stop of the airflow passing through the vocal cords. Finally, the last relevant consonant variation in this accent is the pronunciation of the consonant cluster -ng. The phonetic realisation of this consonant group in Brummie is /ŋg/, which forces the pronunciation of all elements in the cluster, whereas in the Received Pronunciation counterpart, the phoneme is /ŋ/, as in the word ‘singer’ /ˈsɪŋə/ (Brummie Accent Wordpress).

7. Conclusions

To summarise this essay, it is fair to state that variationist sociolinguistics is central to language choice and applies to regional, contextual, or social differences which may exist between individuals during linguistic exchanges. It relies on the different features of dialects and adaptation skills of users to contribute to the longevity and health of languages as living entities. The concept follows a highly systematic model which

affects the speaker's linguistic choice based on a series of social factors, such as the user's intention and the pre-existing relationship, if any, between them, or the social affiliation according to R. Reppen (2002). Furthermore, there are two main types of language variation, which can be either purely linguistic, or rely on sociolinguistic aspects. The linguistic type refers to the language elements being used in a conversation, whereas the sociolinguistic factors reference the interlocutors' language choice within the context, including the level of formality, the socioeconomic background, and the setting (R. Mougeon, 2010). Also, there is dialectal variation which refers to the phonological, morphological, and lexical features that differ from the Standard form of a given language (D. G. Ellis, 1999). Language use may also vary depending on other factors such as occupation, gender, education, age, or social context (C. M. Millward, M. Hayes, 2012). Language variation includes a series of variables and elements which dictate the linguistic choice of the speaker, competing for prevalence in the process (R. L. Trask, 1999/2005). The most common variables found are lexical, which give studies acceptance as long as the variables convey the same idea (S. F. Kiesling, 2011).

Language and style are concepts which work together harmoniously; however, the former has historically been more relevant in sociolinguistic studies. Style became central as decades passed as it has been found to keep a close relationship with language variation (Chambers, Schilling-Estes, 2004). Four main theories were developed during the twentieth century which tried to explain the reasons behind the linguistic choice made by speakers. The first one, Labov's studies on New York City's department stores was carried out during the 1960s. This was named Attention to Speech Theory, and it included a series of interviews of employees across three stores, each one located in different areas of the city and associated to different social classes as well. The results showed how a

specific linguistic variable (postvocalic /r/) indicated language variation based on social class stratification (Labov, 1997). Labov's work was considered a steppingstone for future developments in the field; however, it was deemed insufficient, as it did not cover much of the linguistic reality of New York (Chambers and Schilling-Estes, 2004).

After the Attention to Speech approach to language variation, Giles and Powesland developed the Speech Accommodation Theory, or SAT, which assumes that a given speaker may adapt his/her speech to that of the listener in order to obtain a social reward such as acceptance. It can occur in two directions, either convergence amongst interlocutors, or divergence, to keep a distance between both sides' identities and speech. SAT can also occur between two different languages as well as within varieties of the same tongue. In fact, French speakers in Canada often use English when they exit their communities to be better understood and accepted by English speakers across the country; however, it comes at the cost of rejecting the use of their language, one of the most important traits of their communal identity (Giles and Powesland, 1997).

In addition, Allan Bell designed his own theory on the field and called it Audience Design. This theory establishes that it is the listeners who force style and language change. The author attempted to prove his theory by analysing the speech of newsreaders in two radio stations in New Zealand, which targeted two different audiences belonging to opposite sides in the social structure. When a single newsreader was broadcasting for two different stations, his/her language choice shifted consistently to suit the expectations of the audience using a set of linguistic elements to detect variation in speech, which proved the validity of the theory (Bell, 1984). However, questions are left unanswered which would set the scene for the next variationist study.

The Speaker Design approach is the most modern iteration of variationist studies. Created by Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, it focused on style as the primary conveyor of social meaning during discourse. It serves the purpose of explaining how language choice interacts with identity projection. This theory puts the speaker in control of language use and assumes that choices are self-conscious. However, there is an element of automaticity, determined by certain linguistic rules and structures with which the speaker complies unconsciously, such as linguistic gender roles (Chambers and Schilling-Estes, 2004).

Further, Speech Communities play a significant role in defining the identity traits which characterise a certain social group. The factors within the study of Speech Communities can be easily identified in specific geographical areas such as the city of Birmingham. These spaces can be considered “bubbles”, or storage units containing the social meanings of the linguistic features which belong to these communities, such as the vocabulary traits of a given accent (N. Coupland, 2009).

The case study of this essay is a clear example of a well confined speech community. In fact, the accent of the city of Birmingham displays some of the most recognisable identity characteristics among the dialects of the United Kingdom through its vocabulary. It resembles Cockney English in the creativity of the local expressions and uses nearby terrain features as references. Some of the most famous expressions in Brummie English are *going round the Wrekin Hill*, *it's a bit black over Bill's mother's*, *He's got a bob on him/herself*, and lexical items such as *cob*, *the cut*, or *island* (Birmingham Mail, 2020). Furthermore, The Birmingham accent is considered a hybrid between southern and northern varieties of English within the country. While some

sounds are produced in the same way as in their southern counterparts, the differences with these are noticeable. Some of the most recognisable phonological features include diphthong shifts, as in the word ‘goat’, which is pronounced as /aʊ/ in Birmingham, instead of /əʊ/, or as in the case of the diphthong in the term ‘face’, which is produced /aɪ/ instead of /eɪ/ to name a few examples. Also, the dialect has variation in consonant pronunciation as in the word ‘alright’ in which the /r/ sound is tapped, similar to the Scottish accent. Moreover, the Brummie accent features glottal stops as in ‘getting’ which is produced /'gɛʔɪŋg/, and initial /h/ dropping as in the phrase *you'll 'ave it dark* (Brummie Accent Wordpress). The intonation is different in Birmingham as well, as it features a ‘rise-plateau-slump’ scheme which many critics of the accent blame for the bad reputation of its speakers. In fact, this dialect ranks amongst the worst considered regional varieties of English in the United Kingdom. Its intonation makes the listener think the speaker is being lazy in his/her speech and giving the feeling of lack of education from the user’s side. The social consideration towards the dialect leads to speech accommodation processes from the speakers in order to gain social acceptance and also to be better understood, as the local expressions are not known outside the speech community of Birmingham. As a final note, despite the more tolerant nature of modern society compared to that of the past, Brummie speakers are still considered less educated and impolite based solely on their language use when compared to their more “privileged” peers (K. Malarski, 2010/2012).

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