2 Nonsegmental Phonology in Religious Modalities

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In order to clarify the relevance of the study of religious language to sociolinguistic theory and practice, it seems necessary to make a preliminary, broad identification of those foci of attention which are conditioning our ideas about priorities in contemporary sociolinguistic thinking. As perspective for what follows, then, I wish to isolate three current emphases, which I loosely label empirical, methodological, and theoretical.

By an empirical task within sociolinguistics, I mean the establishment of a detailed formal description of systematic covariation between linguistic features (of whatever kind) and social context.

By a methodological task, I mean the establishment of explicit criteria and techniques which will enable us to assess the factual validity of our observations about covariation and provide a basis for comparative analysis and research consistency.

By a theoretical task, I mean the establishment of as general explanatory principles as possible to account for the range and kind of covariation observed in terms of some sociolinguistic model of patterns, categories, rules, and the like. If the study of religious language is to be fruitful, it should be able to contribute to the advancement of any or all of these tasks. I feel that a threefold contribution of this kind is perfectly possible; and will indicate one area of religious linguistic studies in which this might be done.

I will concentrate on the empirical, for this seems to me to be the area in which the most urgent claims for sociolinguists' attention lie. Current literature displays ample theoretical speculation, and some well-developed methodological routines; but there are precious few facts. Hypotheses abound; but few have been adequately tested.

The paucity of facts is best reflected by the limited answers we can give to the question "What exactly constitutes the linguistic distinctiveness of the sociolinguistic category X?"—where X refers to any of the usually recognized range of social functions (ethnic, regional, class, professional, purposive, etc.). Putting this another way, one might ask, "What features in the physical form of an act of communication lead us to identify (to a stated degree of certainty) that act as a *token of a particular sociolinguistic type?*" Apart from a very few detailed surveys, this question cannot be answered for most sociolinguistic contexts, even in English. Doubtless this dearth of evidence makes so much of our present-day output seem like theorizing rather than theory; for there are some very important types of linguistic evidence which so far have been little investigated. Indeed, in the case of nonsegmental phonology, discussed below, the evidence sometimes has been ruled out as irrelevant on a priori "general" grounds.

If one holds the view, still widely maintained by structuralist-inclined linguists, that paralinguistic features and related features are not "language proper," then one will be unlikely to introduce them as parameters on which to plot sociolinguistic distinctiveness. Many studies have ignored them as a result. A critical examination, however, of the grounds on which the "language properness" concept was originally set up might lead one to disregard this premise and pay attention instead to the potentially highly significant use paralinguistic features have in constituting the sociolinguistic identity of a spoken text.[1]

The model of language presupposed by this discussion, in broadest outline, sets up three levels, or components: phonological, syntactic, and semantic. (This latter subsumes both lexicon and semantic discourse relations.) Clearly, a sociolinguistically distinctive use of language might make use of features which could be analyzed in terms of any or all of these levels. We are all familiar with papers that deal with the "syntactic" analysis of, say, scientific English, or the distinctive "lexis" of class-variation in English. The research literature, however, displays a remarkable concentration on the syntactic level alone. Apart from the recent work into segmental phonological matters (Labov and others) and a few scattered studies of lexis, the general feeling seems to be that most of the sociolinguistic distinctiveness of spoken language is syntactic in character. This feeling almost certainly derives from recent preoccupations with syntactic models of analysis. If one is told to investigate the sociolinguistic distinctiveness of a text, but given only a syntactic "knife and fork" to do it with, then naturally one's overall conclusions are going to be syntactic in character. I want now to argue that, in fact, the basis of most sociolinguistic distinctiveness in speech is phonological in character and nonsegmental phonological in particular.

By *nonsegmental,* I am referring to sets of mutually defining phonological features which have an essentially variable relationship to the segmental/verbal items of an utterance, as opposed to those features (vowels, consonants, syllabic structure) which have a direct and identifying relationship. Nonsegmental features contrast auditorily in pitch, loudness, duration, or silence, and they expound meanings of an attitudinal, grammatical, or social kind. I have argued elsewhere that these features are best viewed as being organized into prosodic systems of pitch-direction, pitch-range, loudness, tempo, rhythmicality, and pause. Intonation, in this view, is seen not as a single system of contours or levels, but as a complex of features from different nonsegmental systems, primarily pitch-range, pitch-direction, and loudness. Nonprosodic variability is referred to as *paralinguistic,* and subsumes such features as labialization, nasalization, and types of *supraglottal tension.*

My hypothesis, then, is that the distinctiveness of a spoken variety of language lies primarily in its use of prosodic and paralinguistic features. (A parallel hypothesis, arguing for the graphological distinctiveness of written texts in terms of lay-out, type-contrasts, etc. might also be made.) As evidence, I shall look at the nonsegmental properties of certain categories of religious language, illustrated from English.

There are a number of reasons why religious language makes an excellent area for testing sociolinguistic hypotheses.

Firstly, it presents a well-institutionalized area of sociolinguistic experience. Because of its formalized dependence on linguistic traditions (certain texts of old viewed as sacred or dogmatic) and the regular and frequent repetition of linguistic situations, it should be possible to make representative samples of usage much more easily than in many other areas of sociolinguistic behavior and to describe the "facts" of the variety relatively quickly. Indeed, the chimerical notion of an "exhaustive" analysis may, in such a restricted linguistic area, turn out to be a real possibility.

Secondly, although institutionalized, religious language is by no means homogeneous. It displays a number of well-recognized categories of linguistic variation: sermons, litanies, prophecies, etc. Accordingly, it permits an investigation of the classic theoretical question, "Are the following usage samples tokens of the same type (i.e., do they belong to the same variety) or are they not?" Putting the question another way, "Can all these samples be generated by the same set of rules, or not?" It must not be forgotten that the social conventions operating to produce this category of sociolinguistic behavior impose severe limitations upon the length of texts and the range of variability of the language they contain. With these data interesting questions about the generalizability of rules, the economy of descriptions, and the like, may be more likely to receive a satisfactory answer than in the case of many other sociolinguistic categories. There is less material, quantitatively and qualitatively speaking, to be accounted for.

Thirdly, and very clearly in the case of English, the features of religious language are by no means restricted to the analysis of religious behavior.

While the basis of religious language obviously lies in the specific practices of particular groups, the *effect* of religious language transcends this, affecting the community as a whole. Religious linguistic effects enter into other areas of sociolinguistic experience and give rise to questions requiring more general explanations. One sees this most clearly in the regular use of religious language features in literature; but it is also apparent in the various kinds of humor within a culture, especially satire and joke telling. There is, in a phrase, a "national consciousness" about the features (or at least, the most important features) of religious language, and this is far more marked than in the case of other linguistic varieties.

There are at least three reasons for this. To begin with, there is the length of the historical traditions of religious practice, stemming from the common Christianity of English-speaking cultures, which manifests itself in such matters as obligatory Bible instruction in state schools. Religious linguistic behavior is regularly taught, albeit not always practiced. Second, religious language has had a peculiarly pervasive influence on the development of the literary language and indeed the language as a whole (see Brook's 1964 study of the Book of Common Prayer from this point of view). Thirdly, the high degree of personal relevance of the language's purpose and the domesticity of much of its subject matter, makes it much more likely to enter into everyday life than, say, the forms of legal language, which display a comparable historical tradition. As a result, there is a clear stereotype of religious language in the community as a whole, part of the linguistic equipment of believers and nonbelievers alike. This seems to be far more marked than in the case of any other variety, and would seem to constitute an additional reason for investigating the properties of religious language.

Religious modalities

All sociolinguistic investigation commences by assuming on intuitive grounds that a particular category of language-situational covariation exists. The subsequent analysis is then intended to verify this intuition (or perhaps, more strictly, to falsify it). In the case of religious language, general intuition of the categories operating within this area would lead one to recognize several distinct "genres," or *modalities* (to use the term I have used in previous work): for instance, sermons, litanies, Biblical readings, blessings, invocations, spontaneous expressions of various types, individual and group prayer.

I shall restrict myself here to four modalities which were intuitively identified in a Catholic church in England over a period of two weeks—the only ones regularly used (excluding the confessional, where the participants showed marked reluctance to permit a tape recorder!). They were unison prayer, individually read liturgical prayer, Biblical reading, and sermon.

One hour of each category was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. I should like to emphasize that each sample was given a rating for "typicality" and "success." A number of participants were asked to say whether they felt that the samples were "abnormal" or "poor" in any respect, these labels not being further defined. Only utterances about which there was a consensus of "normality" were included in the final samples.

The reason for this procedure should be clear. There is little point in trying to discern general linguistic patterns if one's selection of data may be misleading, as when a sermon is felt to be too informal or too intellectual by the congregation. Some safeguards of this kind are prerequisite for satisfactory sociolinguistic generalizations, but they are rarely reported in the literature, and they often seem to be ignored. Analysts seem to make the invalid assumption that any selection of data (e.g., of scientific or journalistic or religious language) is bound to be satisfactory merely because it has been used.

Briefly, four points emerged in this investigation.

(1) Vocabulary was of little diagnostic significance. The range of vocabulary in the hour samples overlapped considerably between the different modalities. On the basis of a straight frequency count of items, or of item-combinations (collocations), it would be impossible to make valid predictions of a type-token kind with any great accuracy.

(2) Nor was syntax particularly helpful. The main syntactic features of religious language of this kind I have outlined elsewhere (see Crystal and Davy 1969, Ch. 6), and classified in terms of sentence type, sentence connection, clause structure, group structure (noun-phrase, verb-phrase), and word structure. Many features emerge at each "rank" in the analysis: for instance, the use of extensive vocative structures, archaic verb morphology, and other well-known characteristics. The point is that all of the important features of syntax and morphology are to be found in all modalities. Frequency and distribution of syntactic patterns display few important differences across the samples; and the differences which do emerge are not those which one would intuitively consider to be the defining characteristics of religious language. The syntactic parallelism of litanies would presumably be exceptional, but analogous sequences may be found in other modalities too, as in many Old Testament Biblical passages and in sermons. (Metrical phrasing is noticed in certain types of sermon, Rosenberg 1970.) In such cases phonological distinctiveness still obtains.

(3) Segmental phonology for all three speakers involved was identical on all recorded occasions. All used varieties of Received Pronunciation, and the vowel/consonant systems displayed no significant variations of a regional, class, or temporal character. There were certainly no grounds for discriminating between the modalities here.

(4) The nonsegmental phonology remains, and this, it emerged, was fundamentally different within each sample. The main differentiating characteristics of the four modalities are summarized in the following paragraphs.

Unison prayer.

This modality has the text available as a cue. Each punctuation group is a prosodic unit, but it is a prosodic unit of a rather different kind from the tone unit (or primary contour) found in all other varieties of spoken English. It requires only two obligatory prosodic features: a most emphatic syllable, and stress conforming to the distribution of lexical words within the unit. The introduction of variation in nuclear tone type (e.g., rising, falling-rising tones) or in pitch range (e.g., high-falling or low-falling) is optional, and usually not present. Any participant in a congregation may, if he wishes, articulate his words with as much feeling as possible, introducing a wide range of pitch patterns; but as far as the total, cumulative, auditory effect is concerned, such effort is unnecessary, and few speakers bother. A congregation—or any speakers in unison—has very much one voice. When a group speaks in unison, differences in the phonology of individual articulation become blurred and the outside listener is left with a "single voice" impression, consisting solely of variations in emphasis. The pitch level on the whole is low and monotone, though towards the end of a longer stretch of utterance than normal there may be a noticeable descending movement. This is absolutely predictable at the very end of a prayer, where the "Amen" (and often the words immediately preceding it) is given a marked drop in pitch. But otherwise pitch contrasts are regularly reduced to zero, leaving monotone and rhythmicality as the defining characteristics of unison liturgical prayer.

Individual liturgical prayer.

Whether spontaneous or cued by a text, this is marked particularly by a narrowness of pitch range, which affects all types of nuclear tone; level tones are more frequent than in other modalities of speech by individuals; there is a gradual descent of pitch towards the end of the prayer (as above), and a strong tendency to keep tone units short and isochronous. Of particular importance is the absence of the usual range of prosodic and paralinguistic variations (in speed, loudness, rhythm, tension), and the avoidance of any prosodic variability that might be construed as idiosyncratic. There is also the related point that this is one of the few cases where one is allowed to speak with little or no significant kinesic accompaniment. We find a minimum of facial expression and bodily gesture in this modality, a marked contrast with sermons.

Biblical reading.

The important point to note about this modality is the expected effect of the written language on the individual recitation, which obtains whether the person actually follows the text as he reads, or whether he has learned it by heart either in advance, or from some oral tradition. The regularity of the speed and rhythm, the tendency of intonation to follow the punctuation, the predictable occurrence and length of pauses, the avoidance of prosodic and paralinguistic features to express extremes of attitude or characterization (even where the narrative might justify them), the use of lengthy tone units and pitch-range "paragraphs" to

impose structural organization upon the text (as the prosodic organization of radio news reading)—these are the main features which place this modality at considerable remove from individual prayers and sermons.

Sermons.

Whether learned, much-rehearsed, or spontaneous, sermons display prosodic and paralinguistic variation (see Crystal and Davy 1969: 227ff). At times the variability is so marked that the utterance takes on some of the characteristics normally associated with a different communicative medium, song or chant (Rosenberg 1970; Marks, manuscript). Different degrees of prosodic expressiveness exist; but even the most "reserved" kind of sermon analyzed presents a considerable prosodic range. The point needs no laboring.

Even from these sketchy generalizations, it should be clear that nonsegmental features are easily able to demarcate the four modalities. There is very little overlap in terms of either selection or frequency of use. One might display a similar nonsegmental distinctiveness within other modalities also, such as the litany, or the confessional interchange and the point has been noted in the analysis of other rituals and other traditions. One would point also to the centrality of metrical and pausal systems in Rosenberg's analysis of the qualities of certain kinds of spontaneous sermon (1970); or Fitzgerald's (1970) listing of twelve outstanding characteristics of prophetic speech in Gã, nine of which fall within my definition of prosodic and paralinguistic features; or Goodman (1969), who pays particular attention to intonation and related features in her analysis of glossolalia.

There now seems to be an increasing body of evidence to support the view that nonsegmental factors are crucial in identifying the distinctiveness of religious modalities;[2] but as far as I know there has been no attempt to formulate any corresponding general hypothesis as an explanatory principle of widespread applicability, and points of methodological and theoretical importance have not been made. I conclude, then, with a mention of three more general points, one theoretical, one methodological, and one "rhetorical."

General observations

First, the range of nonsegmental variation manifested in the above modalities would seem to be better accounted for by postulating a concept of prosodic "code switching" rather than attempting to bring in the nonlinguistic background that accompanies these samples. In each modality, the speaker tends to adopt a fresh "articulatory setting" (cf. Honikman 1964 and the "voice-set" concept of Trager 1958). One can see this, for example, in the larynx-raised articulation of a preacher, or the laxness and low pitch range of the unison speaker, or the variations in the tone unit length which ultimately relate to breath group and emotional role.[3] It would seem difficult to handle all these modality differences within a single description of nonsegmental phonology. The system seems

radically different in each case. But to what extent is it theoretically acceptable to set up a "multiglossia" situation solely for one linguistic level? Diglossia situations as usually outlined normally assume that the linguistic distinctiveness operates throughout the whole of the language system, which is very far from being the case here.

The basic methodological point is to ensure that analysis of nonsegmental variability does not continue to be ignored or minimized in sociolinguistic investigations of speech. Its explanatory power seems to be considerable. Religious language makes the point clearly, in my view, but such analysis could also be shown to apply to other categories of speech (as is argued in Crystal and Davy 1969). To accept such claims, though, it is important to remember that nonsegmental variation subsumes far more than traditional models of intonation, stress and juncture would lead one to suspect. If one approaches the prosodic analysis of sociolinguistic variation using the simplistic model of four pitches, stresses and junctures, for instance, one will not get very far. Most of the interesting distinctions utilize a far wider range of nonsegmental contrasts, and an appropriately complex model must be used to demonstrate this.

In addition, there is the methodologically central question of ensuring that some psycholinguistic verification is provided for our sociolinguistic analyses—dealing with such matters as the perception of sociolinguistic distinctiveness, the rating of descriptive labels, and so on, but this goes beyond the bounds of the present chapter.

Finally, there is the rhetorical point that research of the present kind indicates the interdependence of sociolinguistics with other aspects of linguistics very clearly. In the process of selecting samples, obtaining popular reactions to them, evaluating intuitions, investigating perceptions and determining how to label what we perceive, we are much in need of the expertise of psycholinguistics, as already mentioned. In the objective statement of text similarities, we may need the help of statistical linguistics, with its suggestions for multivariate analysis, improved techniques of significance testing, and the like. In our search for descriptive generalizations, we need to use the concepts developed by fields such as literary criticism (especially in work on metrics, oral literature, etc.) and musicology. And of course there is the ultimate reliance on a metalanguage the validity of which general linguistic theory must ultimately assess. It is fashionable to talk of sociolinguistics as if it were a separate field, and attempt to define its boundaries. But its success is crucially dependent on progress in related fields, and attempting to isolate it too far can ultimately only be stultifying.

NOTES

1. A detailed critique of these positions may be found in Crystal 1969 (Ch. 4) and Crystal 1974.

2. And of course for other sociolinguistic categories too. See, Von Raffler Engel (1971) and Von Raffler Engel and Sigelman (1971) concerning the prosodic distinctiveness of black and white children.

3. This point has been made also in the context of urban dialect studies (Trudgill 1974), and is discussed in relation to social categories in general by Crystal (1971).

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