

Brief considerations on Language Standardization and Intra- Language Change

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ABSTRACT: *Despite the emphasis on change, both synchronic and diachronic, that Sociolinguistics has, language standardization is a process that starkly reveals the social and cultural dynamics and struggles of language use, such as nationalism, exclusion, political and cultural dominance, among others. Under this perspective, this paper explores the definition of language standardization, along with the conceptualization and characterization of two contemporary models: the rationalist and the romantic, with pertinent exemplification. Complementarily, definitions and examples of intra-language change will be explored, placing special emphasis on the discrimination between language usage and use.*

KEYWORDS: *Language standardization, romantic model, rationalist model, sociolinguistics, conventionality intra-language change, use, usage.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Sociolinguistics concerns itself with the study of language in relation to social factors such as geographical region, social strata, age, and gender. Under this perspective, linguistic variation has traditionally received the greatest attention in sociolinguistic research and knowledge development. However, language standardization is a process through which the social struggles and dynamics that influence language become clearly noticeable. Consequently, the paragraphs to follow present a brief description of this sociolinguistic phenomenon. This description encompasses an analysis of the definition of language standardization and its causes, along with an examination of two contemporary cultural models related to the concept: the rationalist and the romantic. Complementarily, and aligning with the mentioned sociolinguistic attention to variation, intra-language change is also explored and illustrated, especially in light of the contrast and interdependence between language use and usage.

II. DEFINING LANGUAGE STANDARDIZATION

Milroy, J. and Milroy, L. [1] define language standardization – also referred to as language maintenance – as “the process of consciously maintaining – if necessary by government intervention – a particular form of a language in a population where there is linguistic diversity wide enough to make communication difficult” (par. 11). The authors emphasize the fact that language standardization can be carried out through overt measures such as the development of pertinent legislations. On the other hand, language standardization is also likely to take place through less explicit means, e.g., education and literacy. Milroy, J. and Milroy, L. highlight as well that language standardization has two distinctive characteristics: it is a diachronic and continuous – that is, always incomplete – process; the reason is that a language, as long as it is alive, is permanently subject to change. For his part, Nordquist [2] characterizes language standardization as “the process by which conventional forms of a language are established and maintained” (par. 1). This author stresses the fact that language standardization might be naturally brought about by language development, or it

might – as Milroy, J. and Milroy, L suggest – be seen as a deliberate imposition of a particular dialect or language variety in a speech community.

In regard to the causes of language standardization, Nordquist argues that, as hinted above, the process can occur as a natural consequence of diverse social factors related to language development. For instance, the establishment of the East-Midland dialect of Middle English as the linguistic norm in England was effected by several social dynamics [3]. One of these factors was the very location of London – which, in the 11th and 12th centuries became the most important city in the island – on the northern bank of the Thames. Additionally, the standardization of the East-Midland dialect was prompted by the appearance of prominent books such as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Wycliffe's Bible translation, which were written in this dialect. Besides, the establishment of William Caxton's printing press in London and the publication of books in the East-Midland Dialect also contributed to this standardization process.

On the other hand, as suggested by Nordquist, Milroy, J. and Milroy, L., and Bright [4], standardization can be originated and developed through conscious and purposeful efforts to deter the changing nature of language. Under these circumstances, as Bright argues, literacy becomes a tool for language standardization by means of the development and propagation of authoritative dictionaries through which prescriptive grammars and codified orthographies are spread. Additionally, the author remarks that certain societies have established scholarly institutions, such as the Spanish Real Academia de la Lengua, in order to maintain and systematize a linguistic standard.

Furthermore, acculturation processes might trigger language standardization the reason is that, in Denison's [5] words, adults perceive the need to acculturate their children in the mainstream language in order to ensure survival in the mainstream culture. The author mentions the example of an Italian agricultural town located near the border to Switzerland, where adults overly manifest their desire to have their children develop native-like communicative skills in either Italian or German because that will allow them to work and trade. This, of course, is seriously endangering the survival of the regional language originally spoken in the town. Hence, one is reminded of the fact that language use does not remain neutral to societal power struggle. In other words, the dominant class is the one that establishes the linguistic norm [6].

Moreover, Nordquist states that language standardization has been characterized as a societal necessity "in order to facilitate communication, to make possible the establishment of an agreed orthography, and to provide a uniform form for school books" (par. 6). Complementarily, the NGO Garabide Elkartea [7], in its treatment of the Basque language, connects standardization to the very survival of languages. The activists claim that "it is very difficult for a language to survive unless it is used in education, cultural transmission, mass media, and public administration" (p. 14). For Garabide Elkartea, the only way in which this extended use can be achieved is through the development of a standard spelling that is not affected by dialectal variation. It is important to consider that Garabide Elkartea's assertions are directly linked to nationalistic ideals that see language as one of the most important dimensions of identity. A clear example of these last assertions is the standardization of Hebrew in Israel in the years preceding and succeeding the creation of the nation in the late 1940's. Governmental authorities – and later civil population in general – saw Yiddish as a reminder of the centuries of Jew exile. Therefore, Hebrew was established by governmental decree – and it is still used – as one of the most important unifying elements in the young nation.

III. THE RATIONALIST AND THE ROMANTIC MODELS

Once the definition and causes of language standardization have been addressed, it is proper to briefly describe two contemporary cultural models of linguistic standardization: the rationalist and the romantic. These

models are opposing and present conflicting outlooks of the concept. Geeraerts [8] states that, for the rationalist model, which finds its bases in the 18th century European Enlightenment movement, language standardization is a democratic ideal; the reason is the generality of standard languages, which unfolds into three dimensions: geographical, social, and thematic. Furthermore, the author reports that advocates of the rationalist model argue that, because of their neutrality, standard languages are an unbiased medium to achieve participation and emancipation.

Conversely, according to the romantic model, language standardization should be understood as a means of social exclusion. Geeraerts explains this perspective in a practical demystification of the alleged beneficial generality of standard languages. For instance, the author claims that “standard languages are supposed to be geographically neutral, but in actual practice, processes of standardization often have their starting-point in a specific region that is economically, culturally, and/or politically dominant” (p. 11). The author, moreover, remarks that the assumed general functionality of standard languages provides them with intellectual worth, while non-standard varieties are related to emotional and even exotic values. In the romantic perspective, the pervasiveness of standard languages can even cause overt negative connotations to be attributed to dialectical variations. One can consider, for example, the prejudice that many white Americans have against Ebonics, typifying it as an indicative of poverty and deficient education [9].

IV. INTRA-LANGUAGE CHANGE

To understand intra-language change, i.e., the structural and semantic variations within the same language, one needs to first explore the concepts of language usage and language use. Youman [9] understands use as the actual way in which language is employed in a speech community, as contrasted with language usage, which likewise denotes societal employment, but also includes normative notions, in other words, good or bad usage. The author, nevertheless, raises the question regarding who should make this decision. As seen above, linguistic standards frequently denote societal power struggles, and, therefore, they are often set by those in a dominant position. However, it is necessary to consider the influence of use over usage. As Lazar [10] argues, the rules of language – usage – are frequently broken in actual use. Furthermore, if a particular unconventional use gains popularity, that is, if it is employed by many people, in many contexts, that linguistic realization, despite its lack of conventionality, becomes good usage. Youman [9] illustrates this assertion with the accepted use of the objective case of personal pronouns after a copulative verb, as in the expression *It's me*, as contrasted with what conventional grammar prescribes, namely, that nouns and pronouns, when used as subject complements, should display their nominative case. Another example is the use of the same objective case, rather than the genitive case, before gerunds as in *I hope you don't mind me calling late*, as opposed to *I hope you don't mind my calling late*. Because of common use, the second sentences in each example will look strange to contemporary speakers. Therefore, it can be suggested that one important – if not the main – cause of intra-language change is the interaction between use and usage.

Notwithstanding, identifying the reason or reasons behind a particular unconventional use, which later might become the norm, is difficult, particularly, in terms of semantics. One explanation that has been proposed is the variationist construct of apparent time, which in Robinson's [10] words, “proposes that generational differences in language use reflect actual real-time changes in language.” Put in another way, an adult will use the forms he or she acquired at a younger age, particularly at childhood or adolescence. An example of this paradigm is the use of the quotative *like*, as in *The teacher was like “No way!”* D'Arcy [11] suggest that, currently, this particular use is significantly more frequent in speakers who would have been teenagers in the 1980s, when the use appeared and became popular. However, the instability of language does not allow for complete confidence in such assumptions; of instance, in Ecuador, the Spanish word *pelucón* – translated as *bigwig* – became popular to make reference to a well-to-do person because the president of the country during

the 2010's, on the basis of his socialist views, used and popularized the term. Referring back to the example of the quotative *like*, D'Arcy suggests that this particular use can be traced back to the stereotypical figure of the California Valley Teen.

In terms of structure, intra-language changes have also been linked to usage and its interaction with use. One study phenomenon, for instance, bleaching, understands structural intra-language change as the consequence of losing reference of the *borderlines* among the words that constitute very popular constructions. For example, the current accepted categorization of *instead of* as a phrasal preposition, acting as a single lexical item, originated in the popularity that the expression has gained, which has bleached the word boundaries that were formerly conventional, as in the expression *I did it in his stead*. Under these circumstances, one might argue, though not surely predict, that expressions such as *gonna* and *wanna* will, in a matter of decades, be accepted as single lexical items.

V. CONCLUSION

As concluding remarks, it should be noted that language standardization, either as an overtly deliberate effort or as more concealed endeavor, is a ubiquitous linguistic process in every community, especially in the education systems of societies with a well-established literacy tradition. Additionally, the natural causes of language standardization seem to subside in modern days before other – more social – factors. Furthermore, the arguments both for and against language standardization are varied and appear to be endowed with soundness and logic. Therefore, the position that individuals take on the issue considerably depends on their status in society. Hence, people who belong to the mainstream culture more readily embrace the rationalist perspective. Conversely, minorities are more prone to agree with the ideas of the romantic model. Be it as it may, the fact remains that language standardization is a relevant process that deserves attention in sociolinguistic research.

For its part, understanding intra-language change requires awareness of the differences between usage and use, and especially, their interaction. This discernment might facilitate the description of certain instances of intra-language change; nevertheless, pinpointing the precise reason for the origin of specific uses that later became popular and thus influence usage is significantly challenging, particularly in semantic variation, because of the plethora of social and cultural factors that cannot be predicted and/or explained. Thus, absolutist postures should not be the driving force of sociolinguistic research in this area, which, should focus on the description of specific phenomena as means of benefiting the understanding of language and society, rather than arriving at generalizations.

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