Affirming Differences, Valuing Variation and Dismissing Dialects in Modern Linguistics

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Abstract

Dialectology and sociolinguistics have given rise to the notions of dialect difference and sociolinguistic variation. An evaluation of these concepts in terms of usefulness to scholars, social relevance to laymen, and solid intellectual coherence and soundness yields high marks on the first two criteria, while pointing to problems with regard to coherence. The scientific and social contributions made possible by the concept of dialectal difference are clear, but serious questions must be raised as to the coherence of the notion of dialect. The concept of variation, while also facilitating important contributions, raises questions of its own on the criterion of coherence. Dialects can be safely dismissed from our conceptual repertoire, while dialectal difference and sociolinguistic variation should remain, demanding, however, that considerable effort be expended in finding a better fit with more traditional areas of research in linguistics. These areas are not exempt from the task, as their coherence too requires greater engagement with variation.

Terms of art that carve up fields of research within a discipline are valued to the extent that they succeed in generating conceptions of reality of usefulness to scholars, social relevance to laymen, and solid intellectual coherence and soundness. Since the area of dialectology and its more recent and expanded descendant, sociolinguistics, have given rise to the notions of dialectal difference and sociolinguistic variation, their evaluation depends on whether these conceptualizations have proven useful, relevant, and sound. The assessment of dialect difference and variation in terms of these three criteria addresses the solicited topic of this essay, namely the place of dialectology in modern linguistics.

The concept of dialectal difference, generally taken to refer to how certain language features are manifested or distributed differently across geographic locations, has amply benefited both the scientific community and the larger society. From the standpoint of usefulness to scholars, the notion of dialectal difference has produced pictures of languages as geographically complex entities that afford a much better approximation to reality than is provided when Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, Hebrew, English, Spanish, French, Arabic, etc. are conceived as homogeneous

entities. And from the standpoint of social relevance, the concept of dialectal difference has made it possible for speakers located far from the metropolitan centers of linguistic and cultural prestige to develop a sense of parity with colinguals that would be otherwise much harder to acquire. To be sure, neither the scientific nor the social benefit has spread far enough. One still regularly hears in many precincts of linguistics that, with respect to a certain feature, this is the way it works "in English" or "in French" or, more colorfully, that English does this, or that French does that, when in so many cases it is only *here* that English or French in fact does it in this way, whereas English or French *there* does it in some other way. Parallel to this provincialism still afflicting linguistics, laymen too often think that what the language does in the backyard, or in the nearest turf of prestige, is what the language does everywhere. But these facts, in themselves, do not diminish the value of the notion of dialectal difference, but tell us simply that it has reached only a fraction of the scientific and social terrain that it needs to cover.

The scholarly usefulness and social relevance of the notion of sociolinguistic variation does not take a back seat to that of dialectal difference. From the scientific standpoint, the concept of dialectal difference makes explicit an aspect of language, namely geographic differentiation, whose existence must have always been obvious to layman and linguist alike, and provides it with an espistemological status that it would otherwise lack despite its plainly evident existence. Much the same, but on a much larger scale, holds for the notion of sociolinguistic variation. For if the scientific accuracy of our picture of languages increases with the acknowledgment of geographic differences, much more so does it improve when sociolinguists take as their starting point the also obvious observation that there is no need to travel through space to register the heterogeneity of language; it is patently manifest across social, ethnic, occupational, sexual, and generational strata inside a single geographic area. The scientific benefit is even greater when the sociolinguist's work serves to crystallize the no less obvious notion of inherent variation, with its claim that even when place, generation, ethnicity, occupation, age, sex, income, level of education, or social class are factored in, linguistic variability is still not fully accounted for, since it is inherent in language and easily detectable in the speech of a single individual. Shifting our attention from scientific to social benefits, if the study of dialectal difference yields benefits for speakers of areas that, without dialectology, could not be guided toward conceptions of their speech-ways as anything other than marginal and asystemic, much the same can be said of sociolinguistic variation, which from its beginnings has been explicitly connected with efforts on behalf of speakers of less socially recognized forms of speech.

Turning our attention from the discipline as a whole to Hispanic studies, we find that the notion of dialectal difference has played a key role in deepening our understanding of both the medieval spread of Castilian and its subsequent modern transfer into the Americas. To give just one example, the notions of accommodation, leveling, and koinezation, so crucial for understanding the lexical

and structural outcomes of these expansions, rest crucially on the concept of the dialectal difference, its existence in some areas more than in others and its increasing or diminishing applicability at different points in history (Enguita Utrilla 1992, Frago Gracia 1992). The concept of the dialect difference, then, has enabled a view of a converging past, but of a still differentiated present, that is obviously much closer to reality than the view that would be offered by a monolithic and undifferentiated Spanish. And again here, that this has not gone far enough, that in many rooms in the house of Spanish Linguistics one hears references to how a feature works "in Spanish", when again it is, in far too many cases, only in Spanish here, and not there, that it works this way, does not detract from the achievement of Spanish dialectology in providing a synchronically and diachronically more accurate language picture of the Hispanic world than we would otherwise have. And as far as social relevance to the larger Spanish-speaking community, especially in connection with the medieval spread to Andalusia and the Renaissance push to the New World, dialectology has served to provide speakers of Spanish in less metropolitan parts of Spain and the Americas with the intellectual underpinnings for a sense of psychological parity with speakers in the North and Center of the Peninsula, and in the formerly Viceroyalty highlands of Latin America, that they probably wouldn't otherwise have. And again here, that this sense is still not deep enough, that in certain areas of the Spanish-speaking world, among certain social circles, there are many speakers who still think of the speech-ways of North-Central Spain as the true language, and of their own as not quite measuring up, does not detract from the relevance of dialectology to the social-linguistic well-being of both Peninsular and Latin American society.

Within Hispanic studies, as in linguistics as a whole, the usefulness to scholars of the concept of sociolinguistic variation matches or exceeds that of the notion of dialectal difference. The quantitative tools of sociolinguistics have been applied to the study of variation throughout the Iberian Peninsula and Latin America, and have generated considerable insight into the structure and history of Spanish (Penny 2000, 2006). The vast number of detailed studies on variable /s/ weakening in codas, as in the variation of *sie[s]ta ~ sie[h]ta, sie[0]ta* (Poplack 1980, Samper Padilla 1990, Terrell 1982), the analyses of variable *voseo,* as in *tú cantas ~ vos cantás ~ vos cantas ~ tú cantás* (Benavides 2003, Torrejón 1986), and the studies of the variable use of overt subject personal pronouns, as in *canto ~ yo canto, cantas ~ tú cantas, canta ~ él/ella canta,* etc. (Barrenechea & Alonso 1977, Cameron 1995, Enríquez 1984) are but three examples among many. And, supported by the variationist model, forms of Spanish in contact with indigenous languages in Mesoamerica and South America, with African and Creole languages in the Caribbean, and with English in North America, have received considerable attention, generated spirited controversy, and made important contributions to the development of our understanding of the ways that the language has been shaped by

external forces (Company Company 2005, Granda 1994, Klee 1990, Lipski 2005, Otheguy & Zentella 2007, Silva-Corvalán 1983)

When constructs like dialectal difference and sociolinguistic variation are evaluated with regard to our first two criteria, usefulness to scholars and relevance to society, we examine the scientific dialogue that trades in these concepts, count the number of scholarly interlocutors relying on them, and assess the size and quality of the research that the constructs have made possible. On these measures, the two notions at issue receive high marks. But when the constructs are to be evaluated with regard to our third criteria, namely solid intellectual soundness, a more nuanced picture emerges. In linguistics, as in science in general, scholars can improve their understanding of, and provide better approximations to, reality (and while doing so help laymen to better lives) making use all along of concepts that, ultimately, fail to make sense and need to be discarded. The assessment of scholarly usefulness is based on external criteria involving volume and quality of generally accepted, successful analytical activity. But the assessment of conceptual coherence is more personal, based on the scholar's individual perception of the extent to which the constructs really make sense. From this more demanding standpoint, the judgment on the notion of dialectal difference is more qualified, not because of weaknesses of its own, but because of fatal flaws in the subsidiary notion of dialect that it has spawned.

Clearly it makes sense to think of languages as permeated with dialectal differences; but it is much less clear that it makes sense to think of them as being subdivided into dialects. (And no gains on coherence are made by saying that they are subdivided into varieties; the terminological faint perhaps fends off misunderstandings by laymen, but doesn't help the cause of coherence for the linguist.) Yet the virtues of the concept of dialectal difference have given a grossly undeserved but nevertheless seemingly irrevocable patent to the concept of dialect. Among linguists, and no less among Hispanists than among others, the notion of the dialect or the variety (the geographic one and, more recently, the social one as well) as the name of a discrete compartment of the language that ropes in large groups of geographically or socially identified individuals is persistent to the point of invincibility. No matter, for example, how much within Spanish linguistics the studies of variable /s/ weakening in codas, or of variable use of *vos,* show clear differences between speakers in Buenos Aires and Montevideo (Elizaincín & Behares 1985), the notion of a River Plate Spanish lives on in the technical literature; no matter how much the analyses show the importance of local patterns of weakening coda /-s/, of local differences in the phonological and social treatment of coda /-r/, and of specificities in the treatment of duplication in the following consonant in all cases of coda deletion, the concept of Caribbean Spanish marches on (see Alba 1992; for overview, details, and references, López-Morales 1992). And alongside them, no more justified but no less vulnerable, march Andean Spanish, Mexican Spanish, Puerto Rican Spanish, Salvadoran Spanish (seemingly sometimes

one Spanish per country), to say nothing of the most persistent of all, Latin American Spanish and its sister concept, Peninsular Spanish.

Despite their popularity, the rating of the notion of dialect, when judged on conceptual coherence rather than on scholarly usefulness or social relevance, is as low as the rating of dialectal difference is high. Dialectal difference offers a granulated conception of language heterogeneity pegged at the level of the individual feature, slicing up the body of speakers in ways that both overlap and criss-cross geographic and cultural categories; that conception is fully coherent. But the big-box conception of differentiation provided by the notion of the dialect, residing at the level of the group, and taxonomizing the language into compartments, has not yet earned its way, and probably never will. With regard to some features, Havana resembles Buenos Aires more than it resembles Madrid, while with regard to others, sometimes within the very same paradigm, it resembles Madrid more than it resembles Buenos Aires. In familiar address, for the second-person plural Havana, with Buenos Aires, says *ustedes cantan*, while Madrid says *vosotros cantáis*; but for the second-person singular Havana, with Mardrid, says *tú cantas*, while Buenos Aires says *vos cantás*. Even such a quick and simple look at the facts must lead to the conclusion that Havana is at once part of both Peninsular Spanish and Latin American Spanish, and that the same is true of Madrid. Now, this conclusion makes so little sense that it severely calls into question the notions of Peninsular and Latin American Spanish. Yet it is an inescapable conclusion unless our Havana – Buenos Aires – Madrid example is new or far-fetched. But it is neither. Examples like it can be multiplied at will. We have always known that isoglosses don't bundle, and that the inductive derivation of dialects, which would be the requisite test of the notion, is a task still to be convincingly performed. There are grounds of course for grouping *habaneros* and *porteños* with each other on some feature, just as there are grounds for throwing into the same box Cubans and Dominicans, and into another one Mexicans and Colombians, and into yet another one Castilians and Aragonese, so long as we are looking at single features. There are, that is, single-feature partitions of ways of speaking into what one would have to call feature-level geographic or social dialects that are well justified; the trouble is that the controversial notion of the dialect, or the variety, has never remained at the level of the single feature, but has always explicitly involved collections of shared features. When, then, a new feature is considered, we are obliged to go back to our boxes and shift some countries out of one box into another, and go get a few more boxes too. The process will have to be tediously repeated every time a sufficiently large number of features is considered. A sorter would soon grow suspicious of the boxes.

When thinking of the place of dialectology in linguistics, then, it is still worth re-stating that in the vast majority of cases dialects or varieties are simply geographically or otherwise culturally determined a priori compartments for gathering speakers, whose speech is then characterized ex post facto with dialectal

features that are true of the people in the compartment (or at least of many of them), but that are also in many cases just as true of many speakers outside the compartment. No matter how secure the linguist may feel in the notion of the dialect, the comfort is misplaced. Dialects are not linguistic categories, but geographic and social ones that, once established on these non-linguistic grounds, receive a linguistic description. But the description does not make the dialect into a linguistic construct. Dialects could only be coherently regarded as linguistic concepts if one could derive them by means of linguistic analysis, without appealing first to geographic or social categories, and if these linguistic analyses would yield compartments that would be truly built from the ground up, on the basis of linguistic features. But it is very much worth re-stating that if we started from dialectal features rather than from dialects, that is, if we started with linguistic rather than demographic, geographic, or cultural data, we would end up, not with a neat perception of the language as divided into dialect-level compartments, but with messier, feature-level cells having both horizontal and vertical dimensions, having, that is, many geographic squares and slices, and layers and rows too, characterizing the linguistic landscape. Our Peninsular, Latin American, Caribbean, Andean, and River Plate Spanishes, and all the rest of them, would recede into the fields of culture, geography, and sociology where they belong, to be replaced by the feature-level analyses that would cross-cut them. The correspondence, should we want to establish it, between the linguistically defined squares, slices, layers, and rows, on the one hand, and our geographic, cultural, and demographic categories, on the other, would become an empirical question to be solved through analysis rather than the a priori and uninformative assertion with which we now try to make sense of the heterogeneity of language.

Assessed on a criterion of soundness and coherence, sociolinguistic variation is poised to get better marks, but it too has a ways to go. For one thing, sociolinguistic analysis often incorporates uncritically into its relatively new dispensation the old scripture of dialects and varieties, and the work thus suffers derivatively from the shortcomings just described. But that is not the only leak that wants plugging. Still without a satisfactory answer is the question of the nature of sociolinguistic theories. Are they fundamentally equivalent to those formulated by structuralists, generativists, and functionalists? Are they, that is, theories about the grammars that (admittedly, sometimes very indirectly) shape and enable usage but are not about usage itself? Or are they instead grammars of performance that directly theorize about the nature of usage (Guy 2005; Newmeyer 2003)?

Even when that problem eventually gets solved, a thorny question still remains as to what exactly one means by saying that two forms, in the phonology or the grammar, vary. This question is especially serious because it affects not only the conceptual coherence of variationist analysis, but the coherence of more traditional, general linguistic analysis as well. For just as the sociolinguists should not close their shop door and go home with their minds at ease until they can coherently

explain how they know that the features that occupied the day's work were variable, so too should the general linguists not call it a day until they can spell out the criteria that helped them restrict their labors to the non-varying features of language. The problem is not just that it is hard to coherently establish that a feature is variable; the problem is that it is just as hard to coherently establish that a feature is not variable, two facts which suggest that perhaps the difference between them is not as sharp as we may think. The presence or absence of word-final /s/ in *casa* and *casas* is certainly not a case of variation, whereas the presence or absence of word-final /s/ in *vierne* and *viernes* certainly is. But how do we know? In the first case, the final /s/ comes and goes depending on focusability and quantity (one or more than one), whereas in the second it comes and goes depending on group identification, presentation of self, and the call for more or less careful articulations. Our assessment of which one is, and which one is not, variation may simply be due to the greater handle that we have on one set of considerations, namely focusability and singularity, than on the other set, namely assessment of social context, acts of identity, and presentations of self. But nothing says that easily graspable factors should be privileged, in any deep theoretical sense, over more subtle considerations. And it won't do, of course, to simply assert that qualitative reference (to singularities or pluralities) is the realm of non-varying grammar while quantifiable subjectivity (in presentations of self and acts of identity) is the realm of sociolinguistic variation; speakers say *El viernes es el peor día en el trabajo*, presenting 'Friday' as a highly focused singularity, or *Los viernes son el peor día en el trabajo*, presenting 'Fridays' as a diffuse plurality, not because the referent is different, or in any objective way singular or plural, but because of a subjective decision to express the notion of *viernes* with more or less focus or singularity, a decision not in any obvious way different from that of offering a carefully articulated *viernes* that contributes to one kind of presentation of self or a casually pronounced *vierne* that contributes to a different kind. The need to work harder at establishing soundness and coherence concerning these matters is not limited, then, to variationist analyses because the findings of these analyses become facts for linguists of all kinds, not just sociolinguists. Saying it another way, developing a sound and coherent justification for saying that some facts of language are a case of variation and others aren't is a problem for the scholar who wants to rule those facts out no less than for the one who wants to rule them in. Acid rain generated by factory smokestacks in one state immediately becomes a problem for neighboring regions as well. The facts thrown up by the sociolinguist, and the vexed questions of what they are, where they fit, and how to think coherently about them, represent a problem not only for the variationist factory but for the non-variationist shops in the adjoining areas as well.

Situating dialectal differences and variation in linguistics is thus going to require that we think of them as integral with, and not appendages of, general linguistics. The alternations in coda /s/ that are not morphemic, as in *viernes* ~

vierne, are the responsibility of all theoreticians, not a parochial responsibility of those interested in variation. The reason is that, no less than the alternations in coda /s/ that are morphemic, as in *casas* ~ *casa*, the alternation in *viernes* has communicative consequences, most likely implicating speaker intent, and because neither alternation can claim a categorical correspondence, as we saw, with the hard facts of external reference.

The coming together of problems traditionally thought to be linguistic with those traditionally thought to be dialectal or sociolinguistic does not always involve turning the sociolinguistic problem into a problem for everyone. It is a merger, not a take-over. The linguistic problem, both before and after it is solved, involves almost always a sociolinguistic dimension that often remains unattended. The supposition that, when a successful linguistic analysis is produced, variation will disappear is not well founded. We may have, for example, a satisfactory analysis of subject personal pronouns in Spanish, and a clear understanding of the meaning of focus, encoded in these pronouns in all persons, and additionally of deixis, encoded in the third person (García 1975:73). And these meanings may help to illuminate many aspects of their distribution, including the alternation between pronouns that are present or overt (*él canta*), and those that are absent or null (*canta*). The meaning analysis may even account well for the fact that overt pronouns will be favored when the referent is discourse-new more than when it is discourse-old, when the referent is singular more than when it is plural, when it is specific more than when it is indefinite, when the verb is non-reflexive more than when it is reflexive, and when it is in a non-coordinate clause more than when it is in a coordinate one. But these perhaps well-understood tendencies (which in many cases would not have been noticed had it not been for the sociolinguistic analysis, but that's another story) are still grist for the sociolinguist's mill, since the structural or meaning analysis does not by any means exhaust the questions that need to be asked. Granted that all these tendencies make sense given deixis and focus, which is the stronger one, which the weakest? Is the occurrence and non-occurrence of overt subject pronouns conditioned to the same degree by the variable that represents type of reference (continuous or switched) as by the variable that specifies the definiteness, or even the person, of the verb? Are some of these variables more important than others? In other words, what is the variable hierarchy with regard to the appearance of overt subject pronouns? And are the factors inside those variables all equally strong? Acknowledging that the analysis of a subject pronoun as having meanings of focus and deixis accounts well for the preference for overt pronouns by both new referents and specific referents, and by non-reflexive verbs, we still don't know which of these pronoun-inducing factors has the strongest weight. What, in other words, is the factor or constraint hierarchy that ranks these promoters of overtness in pronouns? In addition, are these variable and constraint hierarchies the same in all speakers? Or do some speakers, or groups of them, differ with respect to the ranking of factors and variables? And finally, are these rankings susceptible to change under

contact, or do they remain intact even in situations of linguistic stress? (For some discussion, see Otheguy & Zentella 2007, Otheguy, Zentella & Livert 2007). The answers to all these sociolinguistic questions are analytically important, and more to the point, inseparable from the more linguistic questions of why the pronouns are seldom overt with existential verbs, weather verbs, verbs referring to animates or verbs hosted by subject-headed relatives (*hay tiempo, nieva mucho, se cayó [la pared],* and *el hombre que llamó* seldom or never have counterparts like *ello hay tiempo, ello nieva mucho, ella se cayó* or *el hombre que él llamó*).

Dialectology, then, claims pride of place as the discipline that, through the construct of the dialectal difference, has contributed to grounding linguistics in reality in ways that were unprecedented at its beginnings and indispensable today, and, on the negative side of the ledger, as the discipline that continues to license the largely incoherent notion of the social or geographic dialect. The expansion team, sociolinguistics and variation, makes a similar reality-based contribution, one that is in principle free of the big-box trap of dialects, and that should be seen as an integral part of structural attempts to account for the distribution of phonological and grammatical forms, while it struggles still with matters of definition that, when settled, will further enhance its usefulness and coherence.

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