VARIABILITY AT GROUP LEVEL VS. VARIABILITY IN INDIVIDUALS[1]

Abstract: *Different authorities have taken different perspectives with regard to the issue of variability, its existence and form. Some have claimed that variability exists in individuals and is either systematic or non-systematic. Others propose that variability as an individual phenomenon occurs only in its systematic form. Yet, a third position claims that variability in individuals does not exist, rather it occurs only at a group level.*
In this paper I discuss the latter two positions. First, I discuss the position that variability exists only as a group phenomenon. Then, I present a counter-argument for systematic variability in individuals. The argumentation is based on empirical findings.

Keywords: *variability, Tarone, Bickerton.*

Résumé: *Des autorités différentes ont adopté des points de vue différents par rapport à la question de la variabilité, de son existence et de sa forme. Certains ont affirmé que la variabilité existe chez les individus et qu'elle est soit systématique ou non systématique. D'autres proposent que la variabilité en tant que phénomène individuel n'apparaisse que dans sa forme systématique. D'autre part, il existe une troisième opinion selon laquelle la variabilité n'existe pas dans les individus, mais se produit uniquement au niveau de groupe.*
Dans cet article je discute les deux derniers points de vue. Primo, je discute la position selon laquelle la variabilité n'existe qu'en tant de phénomène de groupe. Ensuite, je présente un contre-argument pour une variabilité systématique dans les individus. L'argumentation repose sur des données empiriques.

Mots clés: *variabilité, Tarone, Bickerton.*

1. Introduction

Although variability in language has not been extensively studied and there have been very few studies aiming exclusively at that phenomenon, different streams of thought have developed making grounds for lively discussions in this area. More specifically, different authorities have taken different perspectives with regard to the issue of variability, its existence and form. Some have claimed that variability exists in individuals and occurs in two forms being either systematic or non-systematic. Others propose that variability as an individual phenomenon occurs only in its systematic form. Yet, a third position claims that variability in individuals does not exist, rather it occurs only at a group level.

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In this paper I will focus on the latter two positions. First, I will briefly discuss the position that variability exists only as a group phenomenon, as represented by Bickerton (1975 in Ellis 1985a, 1985b and Preston 1996). Then, I will present a counter-argument and show how things can be viewed from another perspective. Specifically, I will present Tarone's arguments for systematic variability in individuals. The argumentation will be based on her (1985, 1988a) findings.

2. Variability at a group level

Bickerton's claims about variability as a group phenomenon are based on the dynamic paradigm to variability in language. Therefore, in order to understand his position better, before discussing it and its arguments, a brief description of the dynamic paradigm is in place.

2.1. The Dynamic Paradigm

The phenomenon of variation has been investigated in several different paradigms. The dynamic paradigm, also known as wave theory (Bailey 1974 in Preston 1996), is one of them. According to this paradigm, language variation is a result of rule-changes taking place over time. On this view changes of language rules spread within a community like waves, gradually covering different groups of speakers[1]. For example, following Preston (ibid.), a certain change first appears within one group of speakers and in the course of time slowly continues to spread in another group within the same community. As it spreads across the second group of speakers, the group that first began the language change introduces a second rule. While this second rule is spread among the second group of speakers and the first rule continues to spread within a third group of speakers, a third rule appears in the first group, which is in turn spread gradually across other groups. Thus, in a continuous process rules of change spread within the community from one group of speakers to another in waves such that a certain group of speakers is always ahead of the ones picking up change later than it does. That a group has picked up a rule is determined on the basis of the mean scores of all speakers within the group (Preston ibid.). This leaves space for variation between speakers of a group, as it is perfectly possible for one speaker to accept the rule before another.

2.2. Variability in creole languages

Taking these assumptions as a starting point, Bickerton studies creole languages thinking that they present favourable ground for such spread of rule changes. Using the implicational scaling technique[2] and assuming that language presents a set of

[1] A group of speakers is defined in terms of social similarity or geographical location (Preston ibid.).

[2] A good example of how the implicational scaling technique works is Dittmar's study (1980 summarised in Ellis 1985a).

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intersecting idiolects, he identifies three idiolects in Guyanese creole: acrolect, mesolect and basilect (Ellis 1985a). According to him they constitute a continuum: the acrolect being closest to the standard and the basilect being furthest from it, with the mesolect somewhere in between. Having classified the speakers in groups based on the frequency with which they used particular forms, Bickerton found out that there is a hierarchy of features found in idiolects. Notably, the presence of a feature in an idiolect entails the presence of other features, moreover, the presence of some features in one ideolect implicates the presence of others in other idiolects. For example, following Ellis (1985a), if features A, B and C are found in the acrolect, then features A and B are found in the mesolect and feature A is found in the basilect, or if a feature D is present in one person's idiolect, than features E and F are present, too. Based on such findings about the spread of features, i.e. rules, Bickerton concludes that there is variability within groups of speakers. According to him speakers differing only by one rule may belong to the same group, that giving rise to within-group variability. He argues that there is no variation within individuals, rather variation occurs only when data from several speakers are gathered together (Preston ibid.). Bickerton admits that when change takes place in a certain speaker, some features may perform the same function competing with each other. However, he states that the transition from one rule system to another is very brief and the individual variability occurring in that period is short-lived, if not only apparent (Preston ibid.). The greatest variability that seems to appear is the shifting between different idiolects along the continuum depending on the social situation. Thus, a person may use an acrolectal form on one occasion and a basilectal one on another. Both forms are used for the same function, however, one is a marker of high education and social prestige, while the other a tool for preserving close links with the community. As long as these systems are viewed as separate grammars this code-shifting is not subject to variable rules (Preston ibid.). The conclusion that Bickerton makes is that individual variability is apparent and the individual systems are relatively nonvariable. The only real variability occurs at the group level when data from several speakers are 'lumped together' (Preston ibid.).

3. Variability at an individual level

However, there are other authorities who do not agree with this argument and offer evidence against it. Tarone (1982, 1983, 1985, 1988a, 1988b) is the most influential one. Developing her work based on the Labovian paradigm on variability, her central claim is that alternative forms in a learner language do not occur randomly, rather they perform different functions and their use is always systematic. She argues for systematic variability within individuals supporting her position with empirical evidence.

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3.1 Tarone's basic assumptions

Tarone's (ibid.) basic assumption is that a learner's interlanguage consists of a continuum of styles ranging from vernacular to careful. Following Labov, she defines the vernacular as the style in which learners pay the least attention to the forms they use, while the careful as the style in which learners pay the most attention to language forms. According to her, the vernacular style is characteristic of the ordinary conversational language and the careful one is typical of more formal situations. In her 'capability continuum', a learner's competence is measured against both ends of the linguistic continuum and in order to be considered capable in a given language, a learner must have good command of both the vernacular and careful styles, as well as all the styles in between.

On this view, interlanguage is seen as highly systematic. Its systematicity lies in its rule-governed and consistent nature. Namely, according to Tarone (ibid.), the interlanguage system is describable by a set of variable and categorical underlying rules and is internally consistent. Of all the styles in the interlanguage continuum, the vernacular is the most consistent one. It is the most systematic and stable style as it is not susceptible to influence from other language systems. As opposed to the relative invariability of the vernacular, the careful style is highly variable in the sense of being more influenced by invasion of native and target language forms.[1]

Tarone (ibid.) states that style-shifting in learners occurs as a result of the variance in the amount of attention paid to language forms. When there is shifting between styles, there is a change in the status of rules with some categorical rules becoming more variable and some variable rules becoming more categorical. On this position, in order to track variability learners should be observed in different situations where the amount of attention they pay to forms varies. Thus, examination of utterances when least attention is paid will provide information about the vernacular, whereas observation of learner utterances when most attention is paid will offer data about the careful style. In the context of interlanguage research, Tarone (ibid.) assumes, that the two different kinds of information about the learner's competence can be provided by two different tasks. A task in which the learner is involved in meaningful communication where the language is used as a tool to achieve a communicative goal will elicit information about the vernacular, whereas a task asking for learner's intuitions about grammaticality where language is the object of observation will provide data about the learner's careful style (Tarone 1982). In addition, she hypothesises that the level of accuracy in performance will correlate with the level of attention paid to language form.

[1] For a more detail study on and evidence for this phenomenon see Beebe 1980.

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3.2. Evidence for individual variability

Bearing these assumptions in mind, Tarone (1985) conducted a study in which she asked ten Arabic and ten Japanese second-language learners of English to perform three different tasks ranging from careful to vernacular: a grammaticality judgement task, an oral interview and an oral narration task. She has assumed that the grammaticality judgement task required most attention to language form, the oral narration task the least attention and the oral interview, intermediate level of attention to form. She tested occurrence in obligatory contexts of third person singular present tense –s, the article, the noun plural –s, feminine gender of pronouns, third person singular direct object pronouns and third person singular subject pronouns. The data analysis showed that most of her assumptions were correct. Basically, the results showed that there is systematic variability in learners' production of some forms. It was shown that learners' performance on the same form was different in different tasks. Moreover, the performance ranged along a continuous dimension with more than two styles and the styles identified correlated with the amount of attention paid to language forms. It was also possible to see that each style contained some variable and some categorical rules. However, there was one aspect of the results that was not expected and could not be explained with the factor attention to form. The production of the article and the direct object pronoun was least accurate in the task requiring most attention to form and most accurate in the task requiring least attention.

Thus, in order to find an explanation of this unexpected development, Tarone & Perrish (1988a) reanalised the data, looking more closely at the article and the functions it played in different tasks. It was found out that it is used differently in different tasks depending on the communicative demands of the task. Thus, in the oral narration task in order to produce a comprehensible and coherent text learners use the article more extensively and more accurately. On the other hand, in the grammaticality judgement task, where the learner does not have a communicative goal, the use of the article and the accuracy rate decrease. Such results indicate that there is systematic variability in learners. Depending on the communicative demands and the level of cohesiveness they want to achieve in order to convey a comprehensible message, they use different forms. This kind of form-function mapping shows that there is variability in individuals and that it is systematic.

4. Conclusion

As can be seen from the above discussion there are disagreements about the issue of variability in individuals. Bickerton and Tarone have come up with contrasting views on this matter, the former claiming that variability exists only at a group level with individual variability being apparent, the latter arguing that individual variation occurs regularly and in a systematic manner. Basing her analysis on empirical evidence, Tarone refutes Bickerton's claims that variability is apparent.

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Rather, she shows that, being systematic, individual variability exists as an inherent feature of interlanguage development.

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