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15 Language variation study in the classroom

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Introduction

In the mid-1970s in the Dutch town of Gennep a sociolinguistic
research project was set up to explore the relationship between the use of
dialect (as a mother tongue) and school achievement in primary education
(see Giesbers, Kroon & Liebrand, 1988). This project resulted in some
suggestions for improving the educational performance of the dialect-
speaking children involved in the study. Although the starting point of the
project had been the sociolinguistic difference theory, these suggestions
could not escape being 'therapeutic' in one way or another. After all, we
intended to 'help' dialect-speaking children to improve their performance in
teaching/learning situations where standard Dutch is the 'normal' means of
communication.

Taking the difference theory as a starting point in sociolinguistic
research implies that dialect and standard language are seen as linguistically
equal, highly structured, albeit different, language systems that are perfectly
adequate for the communicative needs of those who use them. Research
results from various countries (including the Netherlands; cf. e.g. Stijnen &
Vallen, this volume, chapter 8, and Giesbers *et al.*, 1988), however, make
abundantly clear that this linguistic equivalence does not prevent dialect-
speaking pupils from being confronted with specific problems in school and
society. As a consequence, the adherents of the sociolinguistic difference
theory have been searching for ways to prevent dialect-speaking children
from failure (cf. Hagen, 1981).

A critical observer could now point out that the latter position and the practice that emerged from the so-called deficit theory, which we explicitly rejected as a useful starting point in our research on linguistic and pedagogical grounds, are basically the same. They both take the notion of 'something being wrong' as a basis for pedagogical action. Apart from these two approaches (difference and deficit), however, there is still another way in which sociolinguistics and its research findings and insights can contribute to language teaching. Not the idea of 'something being wrong', but of 'something being right' lies at the heart of this contribution. This particular 'something' is the positive image of language variation as a feature of society and as a source for language teaching and learning for all pupils, whether they are pupils in multilingual or monolingual classrooms, whether they are dialect speakers or not.

Objectives and Organisation of Language Variation Study

In the Netherlands, as in many other European countries (cf. Herrlitz *et al.*, 1984), there is an old and ongoing debate about the pros and cons of traditional grammar teaching, and the concept of Language Study has been developed as an alternative for traditional grammar as part of the Dutch lessons (cf. Sturm, 1984). Language Study has been described as all those instances in the teaching/learning process in which the teacher and his/her pupils, in a structured and goal-oriented manner, look at, play with, think, talk and write about language and language use. Not only the language system itself, but also the way in which language is used form the object of investigation (cf. Nijmeegse Werkgroep Taaldidactiek, 1985). Because we think that this description makes it possible not only to pay attention to standard Dutch but also to incorporate other, for example non-standard, varieties in Language Study, we used it as a starting point for Language Variation Study as well.

In the early 1980s, inspired by publications such as *Language in Use* (Doughty *et al.*, 1971) and some predecessors of *The Languages Book* (Raleigh, *et al.*, 1981), we devised two courses of lessons on various aspects of language variation, to be used by teachers of Dutch in secondary education with 12–13 and 16–17-year-old pupils respectively (cf. Kroon & Liebrand, 1982 and 1984). In developing these lessons we tried to make use of language variation in an educational context without addressing ourselves simply and solely to dialect-speaking children and their supposed 'deficiencies'.

The objectives of our Language Variation Study courses are threefold.

1. Language Variation Study aims at providing all pupils with interesting knowledge about a phenomenon (language variation) they all have to deal with in every-day life because the Netherlands is a multilingual country (cf. Kroon & Sturm, 1985). Language Variation Study should reveal to pupils the richness of linguistic variation in classrooms and society and the relation of that variation to the written and spoken standard language (cf. Donmall, 1985). In our opinion, in the context of Dutch as a school subject, giving information about language variation in a broad sense is not less important than, for example, teaching a course on Dutch literature.

2. Language Variation Study aims at making all pupils aware of the negative opinions and prejudices that are often connected with dialect, the use of dialect and the people who speak a dialect. Language Variation Study has to challenge and eliminate linguistic prejudice and parochialism and feelings of antagonism and inferiority associated with language variation (cf. Hawkins, 1984). As a result children will hopefully be willing and able to overcome negative attitudes and behaviour towards language variation. Moreover, if they happen to be dialect speakers, they should know how to handle the consequences of such negative attitudes. In this sense we think Language Variation Study is a useful step towards equality of opportunity for dialect-speaking children.

3. Language Variation Study aims at increasing the pupils' insight into the phenomenon of language in general. According to Miller (1983) this insight into 'the nature of language and its role in human life' (Donmall, 1985: 7), or language awareness, leads to a greater readiness to learn language and, as a consequence, to an improvement of standard language proficiency for all pupils.

As far as the organisation of Language Variation Study is concerned, several approaches are possible. Sturm (1982), for example, has proposed an approach in which the teacher pays attention to aspects of language variation every time the opportunity occurs. If, for example, a pupil makes an error in standard Dutch that is caused by the dialect he or she uses as a mother tongue, the teacher should explain this error to the class, thereby referring to the dialect system in which such a construction is probably perfectly all right. This explanation could then be elaborated in the next lesson or lessons. Such an approach, which totally depends on what happens in the classroom and merely reacts to the 'contributions' of the pupils, has several disadvantages.

First of all we think that the pupils will get confused by the wealth of information that happens to come their way often in an unstructured manner. Secondly, the demand that is made on the flexibility and ready knowledge of the teacher hardly seems realistic to us. The advantage of a course on Language Variation Study, in contrast, is that it can be prepared by the teacher beforehand, and that it has a clear and explicit place in the curriculum.

In order to be able to make informed choices as to the aspects of language variation that could be studied in the classroom, we used Fishman's (1965) well-known description of sociolinguistics as 'The Study of Who Speaks What Language to Whom and When' as a general point of reference. In our lessons we therefore pay attention to speaker characteristics (who speaks), to the different language varieties that exist in the Netherlands (what language), to conversational and situational aspects of using different language varieties (to whom and when). Following Lasswell's claim that communication sciences should deal with the question 'Who says what to whom, how and with what effect', dating, incidentally, from the early 1950s (cf. Lasswell et al., 1952: 12), we paid additional attention to the question why people use different varieties and what are the possible consequences of using different varieties.

On the basis of this description we propose a didactically motivated four-step approach. The stages in this approach are: description (what exactly is being said/is written down), explanation (why is it said/put down as it is), evaluation (what is my opinion on that), and application (what can I learn from it for my future (language) behaviour). Depending on their classroom situation (pupils' age, language and social background, topic, etc.), teachers will, of course, have to decide themselves which of these stages they emphasise.

This brings us to a last remark here, concerning the activity of teachers in Language Variation Study. It will be clear that giving Language Variation Study lessons in the classroom is a very demanding task for the language teacher. He/she has to be well-informed not only about language as a linguistic and social phenomenon, but also about possible ways to convey this scientific knowledge to children, without trying to make them little (socio)linguists. In order to provide the teachers with the knowledge that they need we paid explicit attention to the various aspects of language variation in the presentation of our Language Variation Study course in teacher journals. Furthermore, we suggested a few books for further reading on sociolinguistics in general and language variation in particular that are acceptable in scope and in size for teachers to read after a tiring day of teaching (cf. e.g. for the Netherlands, Hagen, 1982, and Daan et al., 1985).

Some Examples of Language Variation Study

The lessons that will be presented in this section originated from every-day classroom experience; they had all been put into practice before we published them in 1982 and 1984 respectively.

The first course we designed was meant for 12/13-year-old pupils. It consists of ten lessons published in a booklet under the rather prosaic title 'Ten Lessons on Language Variation'. The following is a short description of the course.

In *Lesson 1*, by means of two mapping tasks, it is shown that the Netherlands is a multilingual country. First the pupils have to indicate on a map of the Netherlands where a number of different dialects played to them on a recorder come from. In discussing the results, mention is made of the existence of language variation, the existence of fairly homogeneous dialect areas with certain characteristics, and the existence of differences between (indigenous and non-indigenous) standard language, (regional and urban) dialect, and accent. In the second task the pupils have to indicate on a detailed map of the region in which they live, which neighbouring villages, in their view, speak the same dialect as their own town. The results of this task show that native speakers are able to distinguish a certain number of dialect differences within their own dialect area.

Lesson 2 provides an overview of the linguistic history of the Netherlands (cf. Donaldson, 1983). The pupils have to study this overview as background knowledge for the lessons to come.

Lesson 3 is about the linguistic characteristics of the dialect area under investigation as compared with standard Dutch. The children learn that the dialect has its own system as to phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon. Part of this system is demonstrated by means of a translation task. Furthermore, as homework, the pupils have to collect dialect texts in, for example, local newspapers and other written material.

In *Lesson 4* a comparison of the dialect texts that the pupils brought to school makes clear that dialects are non-standard languages in the sense that they are not standardised in, for example, orthography. That this does not mean that dialects are illogical, primitive or defective languages is shown by comparing some elements of the dialect morphology with the morphology of standard Dutch. The two systems turn out to be different, but these differences cannot be judged in terms of 'better' or 'worse'.

Lesson 5 makes clear that speaking a dialect as a mother tongue (and living in a dialect area) can cause errors in the production of standard

Dutch. This is done by having the pupils correct a written text containing a fairly large number of errors that stem from interference between standard Dutch and the dialect system. In our case these errors were collected from the writing of pupils we had worked with previously, but they can also be constructed by the teacher. It is very important that the teacher clearly explains afterwards which specific structural differences between the two language systems are responsible for the errors that occurred, in order to enable the pupils to prevent them on future occasions.

Lesson 6 is about functional differences between dialect and standard language. By filling in a questionnaire about the use of dialect and standard language in a number of different domains (writing a letter to be published in a newspaper, talking to your headteacher, to someone in a local shop, in a municipal office, in a radio game, etc.), the pupils find out that dialect is limited to regional/social use in mainly informal situations, whereas the standard language can be used on a national level (or even beyond) on formal and informal occasions.

In *Lesson 7* by means of a limited matched-guise technique with four voices, two of them being from the same speaker, who speaks a dialect and standard Dutch respectively, the pupils explore negative attitudes towards dialect and dialect speakers. Questionnaire responses to the 'different' speakers invariably point to a systematically 'worse' evaluation of the 'dialect speaker' with respect to schooling, intelligence, status etc., as compared with the 'speaker of standard Dutch'. It is hoped that the discovery that they have evaluated the same speaker differently according to the language variety he used, will convince the children of the incorrectness of arriving at conclusions about people only on the basis of the language variety they use.

In *Lesson 8* by means of a role-play, the pupils learn that there are occasions, as, for example, a job interview, in which the use of a dialect, and even an accent, is not accepted and can sometimes have severe consequences. The children learn that the use of dialect or standard should always be a matter of deliberate choice, depending on the situation in which they find themselves and the people with whom they communicate.

In *Lesson 9* a number of viewpoints on dialect, standard language and prejudices are discussed by the pupils in small groups. These viewpoints cover elements from all the previous lessons, and as such form a kind of rehearsal for the task that is presented in Lesson 10.

In *Lesson 10* the pupils have to write a letter to colleagues at another school, preferably in another dialect area, who have also worked with the

material. In their letter they have to explain what they did during the last nine lessons, and what they learned from these activities.

The second course, for 16–17-year-old pupils, has been organised in three parts.

In the first part (one lesson) the course is introduced through discussion of various aspects of language variation. Points of attention in this discussion include: which language varieties exist in the Netherlands? What are the differences between dialect and standard Dutch? In which situations are dialect and standard Dutch mainly used? At the end of this lesson, the pupils fill in a short questionnaire about their own and their parents' language background.

In the second part (two or three lessons) some basic information on language variation is provided. All pupils need to be in possession of this information in order to be able to carry out the optional tasks that are presented in part 3. The information in part 2 is arranged on the basis of the Fishman/Lasswell questions that were quoted earlier. It contains a mapping task involving different dialect extracts, a discussion on the basis of research findings about the relationship between speaking a dialect and socio-economic status, reading a text and some figures about situational, functional and attitudinal aspects of dialect use, and an inventory of educational and social problems that can arise as a result of speaking a dialect.

The third part of the course contains a number of assignments from which the pupils have to choose one to work on, alone or in small groups, during some four or five lessons. The results of this work have to be reported on in a written account and have to be presented to the class verbally.

The optional assignments are the following.

1. Making up a page of a dialect dictionary. Points of attention: What do (dialect) dictionaries look like? Which words do you choose? How do you collect them? Which orthography do you use?
2. Writing down a part of a dialect grammar as compared with the grammar of standard Dutch with respect to, for example, morphology. Points of attention: What do grammars look like? Where do you gather the data you need?
3a Drawing a map that contains a limited number of words that differ in different dialect areas in the Netherlands. Points of attention: Which words do you choose? How do you collect them?

3b Drawing a map of dialect boundaries in a limited area on the basis of asking a number of people which dialects in neighbouring villages they think are definitely different or definitely the same as their own dialect.

4a Making up an inventory of the various views people take of the appropriateness of using dialect or standard language in a number of different situations or domains and drawing conclusions from that inventory.

4b Collecting examples of dialect use in every-day life that, in your opinion, is not appropriate, interpreting these examples and asking other people their opinion.

5a Making up an inventory of prejudices towards dialect and speakers of dialect by means of a questionnaire for people you know, and a matched-guise technique in the classroom.

5b Making up an inventory of situations in which dialect speakers are likely to meet negative effects of speaking a dialect.

6. Reading some texts about dialect and primary education, and presenting the main findings to the class.

7. Investigating the thesis 'Speakers of a dialect generally receive lower status secondary education and meet more difficulties there than speakers of standard Dutch' by means of a questionnaire with pupils and interviews with primary and secondary school teachers.

8. Studying the position of the Frisian language on the basis of reading some texts on this subject, thereby paying attention to questions like: What is the difference between Frisian and Dutch dialects? What do you think of Frisian as a compulsory school subject in primary education? Why do you think Frisians are so determined when it comes to their language?

The reading texts that are mentioned in the assignments are taken from books that deal with language variation in a way that is suitable for pupils in the second half of secondary education. These books should be made available in the school library at the very beginning of the course.

Language Variation Study and Multicultural Education

The examples we have presented so far were limited to Dutch dialects. There is, however, no fundamental reason for that. On the contrary: the Netherlands is a multilingual country and it is obvious that this multilingualism

is not limited to indigenous varieties. Apart from the Dutch and Frisian standard language and their dialects, there is also a large number of non-indigenous languages and dialects spoken by members of the different ethnic minority groups that choose the Netherlands as their temporary or permanent place of residence, and that make up about 7% of the Dutch population (cf. Extra & Vallen, 1985).

In response to the permanent multi-ethnic character of Dutch society, the present Dutch Primary Education Act says that 'Education starts from the principle that pupils grow up in a multicultural society'. In our opinion, Language Variation Study is an excellent way to put this principle into practice.

The ultimate aim of what we would like to call Multicultural Language Variation Study is to develop the human capacity to communicate and get on with people of different ethnic backgrounds. If it is successful it will influence the pupils' actual behaviour. Linguistic differences and similarities are the starting point. To achieve this aim, a positive attitude towards 'being different' is essential. So, too, is a critical attitude that puts what belongs to one's own culture in the proper perspective as a basis for fighting prejudice, stereotypes, discrimination and racism. As far as language is concerned this means fighting against so-called lingocentrism as a counterpart of ethnocentrism (cf. Molony, 1980). Lingocentrism means that people think their own language and language habits to be superior and, at the same time, disrespect other languages and language habits, thereby consciously or unconsciously transferring these feelings of superiority and disregard to the people who speak other languages. 'That language is different' then quickly becomes 'That language is strange' or even 'The people who speak that language are strange' (cf. Giesbers & Kroon, 1986 and Kroon & Rasenberg, 1987). An anti-lingocentric attitude means that pupils can see their own feelings and values with respect to linguistic differences and similarities in perspective and can accept the feelings and values of people from other ethnic backgrounds. To achieve this end, it is vital that pupils should be informed about linguistic differences and similarities between people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

The intended relevance of Multicultural Language Variation Study for all pupils makes it necessary to link the study of indigenous variation (dialect-standard variation) and non-indigenous variation (ethnic minority languages) to each other (cf. V. Edwards, 1983). In order to reach as many pupils as possible, Multicultural Language Variation Study courses could demonstrate certain language and language use phenomena by comparing these phenomena in standard and non-standard, indigenous and non-indigenous varieties,

by applying the four stages of description, explanation, evaluation and application that were mentioned on p. 245.

In order to make these rather theoretical notions on Multicultural Language Variation Study somewhat more concrete, we will give three examples. The first one is on code switching, the second is on the semantics of diminutives, and the third is on foreigner talk. It should be pointed out here that these suggestions have not been tried out so far in a real classroom situation.

A mish-mash: Code switching

Code switching can be described as the alternate use of structures and/or elements from two or more languages or language varieties by the same speaker. Intrasentential code switching, in particular, is often thought of as language degeneration, language decline, language attrition, language loss, proficiency in neither of the two languages, language mish-mash, etc. (cf. J. Edwards, 1985). Only recently, as a result of code-switching research in Hispanics in the United States, has a more positive attitude towards code switching emerged (cf. Poplack, 1980). This position stipulates that code switching is in fact an indication of a very well-developed structural as well as pragmatic language proficiency.

A large number of possible topics for Multicultural Language Variation Study could be derived from this discussion. On the level of description and explanation: To whom and when L1 (home language; mother tongue; dialect) is used, and to whom and when standard Dutch? Which standard Dutch words are used always, even in the L1, and why? Which L1 words are maintained in standard Dutch, and why? What changes occur in L1 as a result of contact with standard Dutch, and what is your opinion about that? Under what conditions are both languages or language varieties mixed?

In the Netherlands, English words and expressions are very popular (more popular than in most other European countries (Donaldson 1983: 76); some people think of that phenomenon as language degeneration too). What about the situation in your class? Why is English so popular? What about German, often used as a kind of made-up language as an object of fun (cf. Peter Sellers' creation of Dr. Strangelove, and, more recently, the cartoon character Dr. Strange Snork)? Attention can also be paid to code switching within one language in terms of style or register shift. Note that children who attend kindergarten when talking to even younger children adapt their language to them.

Furthermore, it seems evident, that Multicultural Language Variation Study offers a good opportunity to pay attention to those negative attitudes towards code switching that are implicitly incorporated in expresssions like 'Spanglish' in the United States and 'Franglais' in France. Obviously, within this topic, Multicultural Language Variation Study enters the area of evaluation and application.

'Mannetjes' versus 'mannekes': Diminutives

Multicultural Language Variation Study can help pupils understand that, while languages express the same meaning, they also differ considerably as to the way in which they do so. This can be very well illustrated by examining diminutives. In Dutch, but also in German, Spanish and Italian, diminutivisation is possible by means of morphological rules. Some Dutch dialects show some variation in these rules, as for example in the occurrence of vowel change in words such as standard Dutch *popje* versus North Limburg dialect *pupke*, both meaning 'little doll' and derived from *pop.* (doll). On the other hand, there are languages like English and French that form diminutives by adding adjectives like *small* and *petit* (description). In all these languages, however, diminutives do not only express 'smallness' in terms of objective measurement: they can also be used to express depreciation, modesty, affection or euphemism. Italian, for example, has several ways to form diminutives depending on whether a neutral, positive or negative meaning is intended (e.g. *cavallo* — horse; *cavallino* — little horse; *cavallucio* — measly little horse). In Italian morphological endings are also used to express greatness, robustness (e.g. *una dona* — a woman; *un*(!) *donnone* — a robust woman). Multicultural Language Variation Study could aim at confronting all pupils with various possible ways of diminutivisation in the various languages that are present in the classroom, and acquaint them with different pragmatic aspects of diminutivisation in standard Dutch; pupils who speak languages other than standard Dutch as their mother tongue could do the same for their own languages. Perhaps the pupils themselves could discover that the Italian diversity exists in Dutch as well, albeit in a more limited way. The use of the regional diminutive suffix -*ke* in standard Dutch usually carries a totally different emotional value from the more neutral standard Dutch -*tje* (compare e.g. *moeke* versus *moedertje* (mother), *vrouwke* versus *vrouwtje* (woman), *manneke* versus *mannetje* (man), in which the former, when used in standard Dutch, generally speaking express more affection than the latter). Here the level of description gradually moves over to explanation and judgement.

Double Dutch: Foreigner talk

In a lot of children's books a very strange kind of Dutch is put into the mouth of 'foreigners'. In an issue of *Donald Duck* for example, the little Red Indian Hiawatha says to his little sister: 'Me be the driver of the big iron horse that crawl on steel snakes through the prairie and you be underdeveloped Indian that form an obstacle with your tepee', whereas Witte Veder (White Feather), the Dutch equivalent of Winnetou, in a book entitled *Arendsoog grijpt in (Hawkeye steps in)* says to his white friend: 'Meghalla's not be stupid. They now know Fort Blue Hill be warned. Think and say: soldiers first ride to battlefield. Then come to village. Then they lay ambush. Maybe we fall in ambush. Then they still more prisoners or . . .' (both in a literal translation). A description of this kind of Double Dutch could deal with questions such as: what exactly is wrong with it (strange words; different word order; infinitives; wrong words etc.)? How would you put it in regular Dutch, etc.? A further step would be to explain why Indians talk like that in books and comics and what Double Dutch expresses apart from content. This explanation leads to the conclusion that this Double Dutch does not show great esteem for other languages: apparently they are considered as inferior, ridiculous deviations. People are ridiculed by being made to talk in a very special way. This could be a starting point for fighting lingocentrism and ethnocentrism in the classroom.

Conclusion

While we recognise that categories such as class, sex and race are ultimately a question of political power (cf. for example Ball, 1987 and Banks & Lynch, 1986), we have been trying to show that in everyday classroom practice there are various opportunities for responding in a positive way to the multi-ethnic character of Dutch society. Multicultural Language Variation Study is à case in point. It aims at lingo-relativism as a basis for fighting prejudice, stereotypes, discrimination and racism, especially if we do not restrict ourselves to dealing with standard Dutch, but also incorporate indigenous and non-indigenous minority languages in language teaching.

Multicultural Language Variation Study is of course only part of the story of language education in a multi-ethnic and multilingual society. It is no doubt also very important to deal in a sociolinguistically sound manner with language diversity · in language teaching as well as in other school subjects, and to pay attention to both the teaching of Dutch as a second

language and to minority language teaching. A central difference, however, between these issues and Multicultural Language Variation Study is, that the latter is principally meant for all pupils, no matter what ethnic or language groups they belong to, whereas the former are addressed to specific groups of pupils. Multicultural Language Variation Study considers language variation and language diversity as a positive starting point for language teaching for all children, and not as a difficult obstacle in teaching children from ethnic minority groups.

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