3.1: Variation in Language

The English language, a phrase heard very frequently, gives the impression that English is one uniform system of communication used by all its native speakers. Nothing could be further from the truth. The English spoken in the British Isles is recognizably different from that spoken in North America; within the British Isles, the English of Scotland is not the same as the English spoken in England; within the United States, the English spoken in New York can be very different from the version of English spoken in Atlanta, Georgia, or Austin, Texas. The English language, like all human languages, varies in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation according to a number of social and cultural factors, including the region where a person grows. Socio-linguistics, the scientific study of that variation, seeks to observe, record, describe, explain, and ultimately predict its occurrence.

It is possible to distinguish two main types of variation. The first of these, which can be called between-group variation, includes the sort of geographical or regional varieties mentioned in the preceding paragraph. A between-group variety refers to that version of a language that marks a person as belonging to a specific social group, e.g., as a native of New York City. Between group varieties also include varieties associated with social class, with gender or sex, and with ethnic group. Other varieties, which have been less extensively studied, are those associated with age and occupation.

Most people take it for granted that regional varieties, or dialects, exist in all languages. What might be surprising to some readers is that there are also distinctions between the English used by men and women. Research, however, has confirmed that such differences do exist. Researchers have found, for example, that in both British English and American English, men tend to use the nonstandard and informal pronunciation [-in] of the -ing ending more often than women do. Men also tend to use nonstandard grammatical forms (e.g., I didn't see nothing instead of I didn't see anything) more often than women.

The second main type of linguistic variation can be labeled variation within the individual. This variation occurs within the English of one individual and is associated with factors that may change as the social situation changes. These factors include the different roles an individual might play (e.g., as a teacher, as a parent or child) and
the relationships with the person or persons to whom the individual is speaking, (e.g., a close friend, a colleague, a subordinate, or a stranger). The individual's English will also vary with the topic of the interaction (e.g., a topic related to a job or a topic related to the individual's personal life) and with the physical setting where the interaction occurs (e.g., at a professional meeting, in a classroom, in a restaurant). Variation within the individual is also referred to as style-switching; in it, the speaker moves between levels of English that are perceived to be more formal or more informal.

This second type of linguistic variation becomes very clear in forms of address, the names or titles used by an individual when he or she speaks to another. Theoretically, for example, you could address a professor called Mary Williams, who is also a close family friend and not significantly older than you, in one of two ways: Dr. Williams or Mary. Your choice of address form, however, is clearly determined by the factor or factors mentioned in the previous paragraph that are relevant for the situation you find yourself in. If you speak to Mary Williams in a class you are taking from her, your role is that of a student.

3.2: The Scientific Study of Language

The goal of linguistics, the scientific study of language, is to describe linguistic competence, the unconscious knowledge a native speaker of a language must have in order to speak it comprehensibly and understand others when they speak it.

To assist them in their investigation of language, linguists have traditionally divided this complex phenomenon into at least three major areas of study. The first of these, phonology, is concerned with the sounds of language. Phonologists analyze the sounds and the sound patterns of a given language and then attempt to describe the components of a native speaker's phonological competence. This knowledge would include, for example, a list of all the consonants and vowels of English and how to produce them. It would also include information about how to combine certain sounds into sequences and about how to modify certain sounds in certain circumstances.

The following piece of conversation will help illustrate what is involved in phonological competence:
Steve: You look worried, Mary.

Mary: We've got our first economics test tomorrow.

Steve: Well, I could help you study for it. I'm free all afternoon.

In addition to being able to pronounce all the single consonants and vowels of her answer, Mary is able to produce sequences of three consonants—for instance, [rst] at the end of the word first. In the words test tomorrow, she knows she can omit either the final [t] in test or the initial [t] in tomorrow so that the two words sound like [testomorrow]. She also knows that she should weaken the first and last vowels of tomorrow (but not the vowel in the second syllable) so that the word sounds like [tiMAWRil]. As a native speaker of English, Steve will still understand her without difficulty; however, students who are just beginning to learn English as a second language will have problems.

Phonological competence allows you to understand and produce sounds in sequence. As a description of linguistic competence, however, it is clearly not sufficient. Consider this version of Mary's response to Steve's opening remark:

got first tomorrow our ve test we economics

In spite of the random word order, your competence in English will probably enable you to work out what this sentence means—provided you have both sufficient time and a written version of it. Imagine, however, listening to a person who was producing utterances like this at a normal rate of speech. You would find the conversation totally incomprehensible.

What is shown by our inability to process utterances like the one above? Clearly we also know how to put words together into meaningful sequences. This knowledge, often referred to as grammatical competence, includes a knowledge of syntax—what grammatical category each word belongs to (e.g., noun, verb, adjective, etc.) and the rules for combining words into phrases and phrases into sentences. It also includes a knowledge of morphology—the rules for adding elements to words to change their meaning in some significant way.

The third traditional area of investigation for linguistic research is semantic competence, our knowledge of word, phrase, and sentence meanings. Our example conversation would be impossible to understand if we did not know what type of actions
or states, people, and concepts the words in it refer to. Steve knows, for example, that
the meaning of we and our includes I (i.e., Mary) and mine (Mary's) and that tomorrow
means "the next day," not "some day in the past." His semantic knowledge allows him to
continue the conversation meaningfully. Without such knowledge, Steve might respond
to Mary's news about the coming test in ways that we would find very peculiar, for
example:

Well, have you got the results yet?
or
So what has this test got to do with you?

1) Exactly 13 clauses are underlined in the two textbook sections. Examine these
clauses carefully, and determine which ones contain complete sentences and which
ones contain fragment sentences (they are missing either a subject or an object).
Label the complete sentence clauses CC (for "complement clause") and the
fragment clauses RC (for "relative clause") using the following table:
(*Hint: you should find 8 CC-type and 5 RC-type.)

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a. Why do you think the CC-type clause occurs most frequently in the essays?

b. What do all of these clauses have in common?

2) Examine the clauses that you classified as CC-type, and notice what parts of speech
come before each clause (you may have to examine several words and phrases).
Try to categorize each clause using the following chart, and write in the correct
clause numbers in the spaces provided. *HINT!- omit occurrences of “for example”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CC-type</th>
<th>Clause number</th>
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<td>verb + that clause</td>
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<td>be verb + that clause</td>
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<td>verb + object + that clause</td>
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<tr>
<td>verb + object + prepositional phrase + that clause</td>
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a. What part of speech occurs most frequently immediately before these clauses in
the essays?
b. What other parts of speech occur before these clauses in the essays? __________

______________


c. What is the function of these clauses in the text? ________________________________

______________


d. Is the function the same or different depending on the part of speech that occurs before these clauses?___________ If different, in what ways?___________

______________

______________

3) Examine the clauses that you classified RC-type.

What part of speech occurs immediately before each of these clauses in the essays? ________________________________

______________


a. What is the function of these clauses in the text? ________________________________

______________


NOTE: At this point, study the grammar rules for complement clauses and relative clauses.

4) Sometimes, that can be left out of a that clause, and the sentence will still sound good and keep its original meaning. Examine the same 13 clauses from the two textbook sections and decide which 6 CC-type and 1 RC-type clauses don’t sound good if that is left out. Put the clauses in the following chart:

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a. What do you notice about the CC-type that clauses that cannot have that removed? (*Hint: look at what comes after that.) ________________________________

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b. What do you notice about the RC-type that clause that cannot have that removed? (*Hint: look at what comes after that.) ________________________________

______________
c. There are only two *that* clauses in the textbook sections where *that* has been left out by the authors. The first one is an RC-type in the fourth paragraph of the first essay on page 1:
   “…the different roles an individual might play…”

The second one is a CC-type in the fourth paragraph of the second essay on page 2:
   “…she knows she can omit…”

Considering what you found out in 4a. above, why do you think *that* can be left out in these two cases? __________________________________________________________

Do the sentences sound better with *that* included or left out? ______________

Why do you think these are the only two clauses like this in the essays? ______

__________________________________________________________

**NOTE:** At this point, study the grammar rules for omitting *that* from these clauses.

5) Looking at the draft of the paper you wrote, notice **if** and **how** you used CC-type and RC-type *that* clauses:
   o Find and number each occurrence of CC-type and RC-type *that* clauses.  
   o How many CC-types and RC-types are in your paper? What kind of CC or RC are they? Are they used correctly? Fill in the following chart:

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<th>CC-type #</th>
<th>Kind</th>
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<th>RC-type #</th>
<th>Kind</th>
<th>Correct?</th>
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   o Try to edit CC-type and RC-type *that* clauses in your paper.  
   o Try to use CC-type and RC-type *that* clauses in future papers.