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Can one person's speech be better than another's?

Not all speakers of a given language speak the same. Speech variations abound on television. Maybe you've seen the movie or the play *My Fair Lady*, in which Henry Higgins believes that the Queen's English is the superior language of England (and perhaps of the world). So the question arises whether one person's speech can be better than another's, and this question is subsumed under the larger question of whether any language is intrinsically superior to another. While we focus on speech here, analogous issues arise for sign.

Before facing this issue, though, we need to think about another matter. Consider these utterances:

Would you mind if I borrowed that cushion for a few moments?

Could I have that pillow for a sec?

Give me that, would you?

All of these utterances could be used to request a pillow.

Which one(s) would you use in addressing a stranger? If you use the first one, perhaps you sense that the stranger is quite different from you (such as a much older person or someone with more stature or authority). Perhaps you're trying to show that you're polite or refined or not a threat. Pay attention to the use of the word *cushion* instead of *pillow*. Pillows often belong behind our heads, typically in bed. If you wanted to avoid any hint of

intimacy, you might choose to use the word *cushion* for what is clearly a pillow.

Consider the third sentence. It's harder for some people to imagine using this one with a stranger. When I help to renovate urban housing for poor people with a group called Chester Community Improvement Project and I am pounding in nails next to some guy and sweat is dripping off both our brows, I have no hesitation in using this style of sentence. With the informality of such a sentence, I'm implying or perhaps trying to bring about a sense of camaraderie.

Of course, it's easy to imagine a scene in which you could use the second sentence with a stranger.

Which one(s) would you use in addressing someone you know well? Again, it could be all three. However, now if you use the first one, you might be insulting the addressee. It's not hard to think of a scenario in which this sentence carries a nasty tone rather than a polite one. And you can easily describe scenarios for the second and third sentences.

The point is that we command different registers of language. We can use talk that is fancy or ordinary or extremely informal, and we can choose which register to use in which situations to get the desired effect. So we have lots of variation in our own speech in the ways we phrase things (syntax) and the words we use (lexicon or vocabulary).

Other variation in an individual's speech involves sound rules (phonology). Say the third sentence aloud several times, playing with different ways of saying it. Contrast *give me* to *gimme* and *would you* to *wudja*. When we say words in a sequence, sometimes we contract them, but even a single word can be said in multiple ways. Say the word *interesting* in several sentences, imagining scenarios that differ in formality. Probably your normal (or least marked)

pronunciation has three syllables: “in-tres-ting.” However, maybe it has four, and if it does, they are probably “in-er-es-ting.” The pronunciation that is closest to the spelling (“in-ter-es-ting”) is more formal and, as a result, is sometimes used for humor (as in “very in-ter-es-ting,” with a noticeably foreign flair to the pronunciation of *very* or with a drawn-out “e” in *very*).

So you have plenty of variation in your own speech, no matter who you are, and the more different speech communities you belong to, the more variation you will have. With my mother's relatives, I will say, for example, “I hate lobsters anymore,” whereas with other people I'm more likely to say, “I hate lobsters these days.” This particular use of *anymore* is common to people from certain geographical areas (the North and South Midland, meaning the area from Philadelphia westward through southern Pennsylvania, northern West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois to the Mississippi River) but not to people from other places, who may not even understand what I mean. With my sister, I used to say, “Ain't nobody gonna tell me what to do,” but I'd never say that to my mother or to other people unless I were trying to make a sociolinguistic point. This kind of talk signaled for us a camaraderie outside of the socioeconomic group my mother aspired to. In a speech to a convention of librarians recently, I said, “That had to change, for I, like you, do not lead a charmed life,” but I'd probably never say that in conversation to anyone—it's speech talk. Also, think about the language you use in e-mail, and contrast it to your job-related writings, for example.

Although we cannot explicitly state the rules of our language, we do choose to use different ones in different contexts. We happily exploit variation, which we encounter in a wide range from simple differences in pronunciation and vocabulary to more marked ones that involve phrasing and sentence structure. When

the differences are greater and more numerous, we tend to talk of dialects rather than just variations. Thus, the languages of upper- and lower-class Bostonians would probably be called variations of American English, whereas the languages of upper- and lower-class Londoners (Queen's English versus Cockney) would probably be called dialects of British English. When the dialects are so different as to be mutually incomprehensible and/or when they gain a cultural or political status, we tend to talk of separate languages (such as French versus Spanish).

There's one more point I want to make before we return to our original question. I often ask classes to play the game of "telephone" in the following way. We line up twenty-one chairs, and volunteers sit on them. Then I whisper in the middle person's ear perhaps something very simple such as "Come with me to the store." The middle person then whispers the phrase into the ears of the people on both sides, and the whisper chain goes on to each end of the line. Finally, the first and twenty-first persons say aloud what they heard.

Next we do the same experiment, but this time with a sentence that's a little trickier, perhaps something such as "Why choose white shoes for winter sports?" Then we do the experiment with a sentence in a language that the first whisperer (who is often not me at this point) speaks reasonably well and that might be familiar to some of the twenty-one people in the chairs—perhaps something such as "La lune, c'est magnifique" (a French sentence that means 'the moon is wonderful'). Finally, we do the experiment with a sentence whispered initially by a native speaker of a language that none of the twenty-one people speak.

Typically, the first and twenty-first persons do not come up with the same results. Furthermore, the distance between them seems greater with each successive experiment.

Part of the problem is in the listening. We don't all hear things the same way. When we haven't heard something clearly, we ask people to repeat what they said. However, sometimes we don't realize we haven't heard something clearly until our inappropriate response is corrected. At times the other person doesn't correct us, and the miscommunication remains, leading to various other difficulties.

Part of the problem in the experiment is in the repeating. You may say, "My economics class is a bore," and you begin the second word with the syllable "eek." I might repeat the sentence but use my pronunciation of the second word, which would begin with "ek." If you speak French well, you might say *magnifique* quite differently from me. In high school or college language classes, the teacher drilled the pronunciation of certain words over and over—but some people never mimicked to the teacher's satisfaction. A linguist told me a story about a little girl who introduced herself as "Litha." The man she was introducing herself to said, "Litha?" The child said, "No, Litha." The man said, "Litha?" The child said, "No, no. Litha. Li-tha." The man said, "Lisa?" The child smiled and said, "Right." Repetitions are not exact and lead to change.

Imperfections in hearing and repeating are two of the reasons that language must change over time. When the Romans marched into Gaul and into the Iberian Peninsula and northeastward into what is now Romania, they brought large populations who stayed and spoke a form of street Latin. Over time, however, the street Latin in Gaul developed into French; that in the Iberian Peninsula developed into Portuguese along the west and Spanish along the east and central portions; that in Romania developed into Romanian. Moreover, the street Latin spoken in the original community on the Italian Peninsula changed as well, developing into Italian.

Other factors (besides our imperfections in hearing and repeating sounds) can influence both the speed and the manner of language changes—but the fact is that living languages necessarily change. They always have and they always will.

Many political groups have tried to control language change. During the French Revolution, a controlling faction decided that a standard language would pave the way for unity. Parish priests, who were ordered to survey spoken language, found that many dialects were spoken in different geographic areas, and many of them were quite distinct from the dialect of Paris. Primary schools in every region of France were established with teachers proficient in the Parisian dialect. The effect of this educational reform was not significant until 1881, when state education became free and mandatory, and the standard dialect (that is, Parisian) took hold more firmly. Still, the geographic dialects continued, though weakened, and most important, the standard kept changing. Standard French today is different from the Parisian dialect of 1790. In addition, new varieties of French have formed as new subcultures have appeared. Social dialects persist and/or arise even when geographic dialects are squelched. Change is the rule in language, so variation will always be with us.

Now we can ask whether one person's speech can be better than another's. This is a serious question because our attitudes about language affect the way we treat speakers in personal, as well as business and professional, situations. In what follows I use the term "standard American English" (a term riddled with problems that will become more and more apparent as you read)—the variety that we hear in news reports on television and radio. It doesn't seem to be strongly associated with any particular area of the country, although those who aren't from the Midwest often call it Midwestern. This variety is also more frequently associated with the

middle class than with the lower class, and it is more frequently associated with whites than with other races.

A few years ago one of my students recorded herself reading a passage by James Joyce both in standard American English pronunciation and in her Atlanta pronunciation (she is white and from Atlanta). She then asked strangers (adults of varying ages who lived in the town of Swarthmore, Pennsylvania) to listen to the two readings and answer a set of questions she had prepared. She did not tell the strangers that the recordings were made by a single person (nor that they were made by her). Without exception, the strangers judged the person who read the passage with standard English pronunciation as smarter and better educated, and most of them judged the person who read the passage with Atlanta pronunciation as nicer and more laid back. This was just a small, informal study, but its findings are consistent with those of larger studies.

Studies have shown that prejudice against certain varieties of speech can lead to discriminatory practices. For example, Professor John Baugh of Washington University directed a study of housing in which he used different English pronunciations when telephoning people who had advertised apartments for rent. In one call he would use standard American pronunciation (i.e., white); in another, African American; in another, Latino. (Baugh is African American, grew up in the middle class in Los Angeles, and had many Latino friends. He can sound African American, white, or Latino at will.) He said exactly the same words in every call, and he controlled for the order in which he made the calls (i.e., sometimes the Latino pronunciation would be used first, sometimes the African American, and sometimes the standard). He asked whether the apartments were still available. More were available when he used the standard pronunciation. Thus, it is essential that we examine carefully the question of "better" with regard to language variety.

When I knock on a door and my friend inside says, “Who’s there?” I’m likely to answer, “It’s me,” but I don’t say, “It’s I” (or, even more unlikely for me, “It is I”). Do you? If you do, do you say that naturally, that is, not self-consciously? Or do you say it because you’ve been taught that that’s the correct thing to say? If you do it naturally, your speech contains an archaism—a little fossil from the past. We all have little fossils. I say, “I’m different from you.” Most people today would say, “I’m different than you.” My use of *from* after *different* was typical in earlier generations, but it’s not typical today. Some of us hold onto archaisms longer than others, and even the most linguistically innovative of us probably have some. So don’t be embarrassed by your fossils: They’re a fact of language.

However, if you say, “It’s I,” self-consciously because you’ve been taught that that’s correct, what does “correct” mean in this situation? If that’s what most people used to say but is not what most people say today, you’re saying it’s correct either because you revere the past (which many of us do) or because you believe that there’s a rule of language that’s being obeyed by “It’s I” and being broken by “It’s me.”

I’m going to push the analysis of just this one contrast—“It’s I” versus “It’s me”—quite a distance because I believe that many relevant issues about how people view language will come out of the discussion. Consider the former reason for preferring “It’s I,” that of revering the past. Many people have this reason for using archaic speech patterns and for preferring that others use them. For some reason, language is treated in a unique way here. We certainly don’t hold up the past as superior in other areas, for example, mathematics or physics. So why do some of us feel that changes in language are evidence of decay?

If it were true that the older way of saying something were better simply because it’s older, your grandparents spoke better

than your parents, and your great-grandparents spoke better than your grandparents, and so on. Did Chaucer speak a form of English superior to that spoken by Shakespeare? Shall we go further back than Chaucer for our model? There is no natural stopping point. We can go all the way to prehistoric times if we use “older” as the only standard for “better.”

The latter reason—believing that “It’s I” obeys a rule that “It’s me” breaks—is more defensible, if it is indeed true. Defenders of the “It’s I” school of speech argue that, with the verb *be*, the elements on both sides of it are grammatically equivalent—so they should naturally have the same case.

I’ve used a linguistic concept here: case. To understand it (or review it), look at these Hungarian sentences:

Megnézhetem a szobát?	May I see the room?
Van rádió a szobában?	Is there a radio in the room?
Hol a szoba?	Where’s the room?

I have translated the sentences in a natural way rather than word by word. Can you pick out the word in each sentence that means ‘room’? I hope you chose *szobát*, *szobában*, and *szoba*. These three forms can be thought of as variants of the same word. The difference in form is called case marking. Textbooks on Hungarian typically claim that a form like *szoba* is used when the word is the subject of the sentence, a form like *szobát* when the word is the direct object, and a form like *szobában* when the word conveys a certain kind of location (comparable to the object of the preposition *in* in English). So a word can have various forms—various cases—based on how it is used in a sentence.

English does not have different case forms for nouns (with the exception of genitive nouns, such as *boy’s* in *the boy’s book*). So in the English translations of the preceding Hungarian sentences, the

word *room* is invariable. However, English does have different case forms for pronouns:

I like tennis.

That tennis racket is mine.

Everyone likes me.

These three forms indicate the first-person singular: *I*, *mine*, and *me*. They distinguish subjects (*I*) from genitives (*mine*) from everything else (*me*).

Now let's return to "It's I." Must elements on either side of *be* be equivalent? In the following three sentences, different syntactic categories are on either side of *be* (here "NP" stands for "noun phrase"):

Bill is tall.                      NP be AP

Bill is off his rocker.        NP be PP

Bill is to die for.              NP be VP

*Tall* is an adjective (here, an adjective phrase (AP) that happens to consist of only the head adjective). *Off* is a preposition, and it's part of the prepositional phrase (PP) *off his rocker*. *To die for* is a verb phrase (VP). Thus, the two elements that flank *be* do not have to be equivalent in category.

Still, in the sentence "It's I," the elements that flank *be* are both pronouns (*It* and *I*), so maybe these elements are equivalent in this sentence. Let's test that claim by looking at agreement. Verbs agree with their subject in English, whether that subject precedes or follows them:

John's nice.

Is John nice?

However, *be* in our focus sentence agrees with the NP to its left (which happens to be a single word, filling the NP), not to its right:

It's I.

\*It am I.

No one would say "It am I." Therefore, the NP to the right of *be* is not the subject of the sentence, which means that the NPs flanking *be* are not equivalent—*It* is the subject, but *I* is not.

Perhaps you think that the equivalence that matters here has to do with meaning, not with syntax. Let's pursue that: Do *It* and *I* have equivalent meaning in "It's I"? Notice that you can also say:

It's you.

In fact, the slot after *It's* can be filled by several different pronouns. *It* in these sentences is not meaningful; it is simply a placeholder, similar (though not equivalent) to the *it* in sentences about time and weather:

It's four o'clock.

It's hailing.

However, *I* is meaningful because it refers to a person (the speaker). Therefore, *It* and *I* are not equivalent in meaning in the sentence "It's I."

In sum, it's not clear that the elements on either side of *be* in the sentence "It's I" are equivalent in any linguistic way. We can conclude something even stronger. We noted that *It* in these sentences is the subject and that the pronoun following a form of *be* is not the subject. But the pronoun following *be* is also not a genitive. Given the pronoun case system of English discussed earlier, we expect the pronoun to take the third form (the "elsewhere"

form), which is *me*, not *I*. In other words, our case system would lead us to claim that “It’s *me*” is the grammatical sentence.

I am not saying “It’s *I*” is ungrammatical. I want only to show that the issue may not be as clear-cut as you might have thought. Indeed, the conclusion I come to is that more than one case system is at play here. Those who say “It’s *me*” are employing regular case rules. However, those who say “It’s *I*” have a special case rule for certain sentences that contain *be*. The important point is that both sets of speakers have rules that determine what they say. Their speech is systematic; they are not speaking randomly.

That is the key issue of this whole chapter. When we consider variation in language, we must give up the idea of errors and accept the idea of patterns. Some people produce one pattern because they are following one set of rules; other people produce a different pattern because they are following a different set of rules. (For several different types of language variations in English, visit the websites of the West Virginia Dialect Project: <http://www.as.wvu.edu/dialect>.) From a linguistic perspective, asking whether one person’s speech can be better than another’s would amount to asking whether one system is better. But what standards do we have for evaluating systems? What standards do you, as a speaker of the language, employ when you judge varieties of speech? To answer that question, consider variation in your own speech. Do you consider some varieties better than others? And which ones? If you’re like most people, you consider formal or polite speech to be better. However, that standard concerns behavior in society—behavior that may reveal or perhaps even determine one’s position. We tend to think that the speech of those who hold cultural, economic, or other social power is better, but this has little to do with linguistic structure.

Now ask yourself what standards you are using to judge the speech of others. Such questions often boil down to your poli-

tics (who do you esteem?) or to your experience (what are you familiar with?) but not to your grammatical rules. Consider the common claim that some varieties of speech are lazy. Try to find a recording of English speech that you consider lazy. Now mimic it. Some people are good at mimicking the speech of others, but accurately mimicking the speech of anyone else (anyone at all) takes a good ear, good control over the parts of your body that produce speech, and mostly a grasp of the sound rules that are being used. So the speech you thought was lazy wasn't lazy at all. Rather, different rules are being employed in these varieties of speech. What makes each variety distinct from others is its inventory of rules.

Consider learning a foreign language. People who feel confident about their ability to speak and understand a foreign language in a classroom often visit a place where that language is spoken only to find that no one is speaking the classroom variety. One of the big differences is usually speed: Ordinary speech can be quite rapid. Again, some claim that fast speech is sloppy, but fast speech is notoriously hard to mimic. It is typically packed with sound rules, so it takes more experience with the language to master all of the rules and to be able to produce fast speech.

Among American speakers a common misconception is that British speech is superior to American English. Part of this belief follows from reverence of the past, already discussed. Part of it follows from the misperception that American upper-class speech is closer to British speech—so British speech is associated with high society and with politeness. In fact, the speech of the British has changed over time, just as the speech of the American colonialists changed over time. Therefore, modern British speech is not, in general, closer to older forms of English than American speech is. Pockets of conservative varieties of English occur both in the

British Isles and in the United States, but most varieties on either side of the Atlantic Ocean have changed considerably. Also, British society is stratified, just as American society is, and not all British speech is either upper class or polite.

Linguists claim that all varieties of a language—all dialects and all languages, for that matter—are equal linguistic citizens. Linguists have recognized that all languages are systematic in that they obey certain universal principles regarding the organization and interaction of sounds, the ways we build words and phrases and sentences, and how we code meaning. However, this doesn't mean that all language is esthetically equal. I can recognize a beautiful line in a poem or a story, as I'm sure you can (though we might not agree). However, that beautiful line might be in archaic English, formal contemporary English, ordinary contemporary English, very informal contemporary English, African American Atlanta English, Italian American Yonkers English, Philadelphia gay English, Chinese American Seattle English, or so many others. Within our different varieties of speech, we can speak in ways that affect people's hearts or resonate in their minds, or we can speak in ways that are unremarkable. These are personal (esthetic or political) choices.

In chapter 12, I outline some possible effects of the goal of the English-only movement (EOM) of minimizing language variations in the United States. However, even if English were declared the official language of the United States, variation would not be wiped out. What would be threatened would be the richness of the range of variation most speakers are exposed to. Once that exposure is lost, Americans might start thinking that English is a superior language simply because they would no longer hear other languages being spoken by people they know personally and respect. They might become severely provincial in their linguistic

attitudes, and given the necessity of global respect these days, such provincialism could be dangerous.

The fact that variation in language is both unavoidable and sometimes the result of aesthetic and/or political choices does not mean that educational institutions should not insist that children master whatever variety of language has been deemed the standard—just for purely practical reasons. There's little doubt that linguistic prejudice is a reality. The adult who cannot speak and write the standard variety may encounter a range of difficulties from finding suitable employment to achieving social advancement.

At the same time, all of us—and educational institutions, in particular—should respect all varieties of language and show that respect in relevant ways. Look at one notorious controversy: In 1996 the school board in Oakland, California, declared Ebonics to be the official language of the district's African American students. Given funding regulations for bilingual education in that time and place, this decision had the effect of allowing the school district to use funds set aside for bilingual education to teach their African American children in Ebonics, as well as in the standard language.

The debate was particularly hot, I believe, because of the sociological issues involved. Many people thought that Ebonics should be kept out of the classroom purely because the dialect was associated with race. Some of these people were African Americans who did not want their children to be disadvantaged by linguistic prejudice; they were afraid that teaching in Ebonics would exaggerate racial linguistic prejudice rather than redress it. Many good books written about the Ebonics controversy for the general public look at the issue from a variety of perspectives (see the suggested readings). However, from a linguistic perspective, the issue is more a question of bilingual (or bidialectal) education than anything

else. If you care about the Ebonics issue, I urge you to read chapter 12, keeping Ebonics in mind.

In sum, variation in language is something we all participate in, and, as a linguist and a writer, I believe it's something we should revel in. Language is not a monolith, nor can it be, nor should it be, given the complexity of culture and the fact that language is the fabric of culture. Some of us are more eloquent than others, and all of us have moments of greater or lesser eloquence. However, that range in eloquence is found in every language, every dialect, and every variety of speech.

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### Further Reading on Ebonics

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### Keywords

AAVE

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