



Attrition of Isfahani dialect: social class and age effects

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ABSTRACT

Language attrition is the loss of a first or second language or a portion of that language by individuals. This paper examines the effects of social class and age on attrition of some old words and expressions of Isfahani dialect. To obtain the results, we distributed a questionnaire among 120 male/ female citizens from three social groups each including 40 upper-social class, 40 middle-social class and 40 low-social class with an age range of 25 to 65. The questionnaire involved 20 old words and expressions of Isfahani dialect, given to different social classes with different age ranges to evaluate the effects of these variables on the attrition of Isfahani dialect. The results show that the lower the age, there is the less knowledge about the meaning of words, on the contrary, the lower the social class, there is more knowledge about the meaning of the words. So the age and social class are two main factors contributing to the attrition of Isfahani dialect of Persian.

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Introduction

Language attrition can be defined as the loss of first or second language or a portion of that language by individuals. It has often been pointed out by Schmid and Köpke (2008) that L1 attrition usually first manifests itself in the lexicon. The 6,809 languages estimated to be spoken in the world today represent less than half of those spoken 500 years ago and more than twice the number that may be spoken by the end of the century (Janse & Tol, 2003, p.ix). A number of causes have been suggested as the reason for language loss and eventual language death. Since Giles published his notion of ethnolinguistic vitality in 1977, "status factors, demographic factors, and institutional support factors have all been objectively and subjectively studied as important determinants of a language's future strength or decline" (Harwood, Giles and Bourhis 1994, p.167). The decision to abandon one's own language always derives from a change in the self-esteem of the speech community. In the cases of language shift one could observe that members, very often the younger generation of minorities, regard their own community as being inferior. Those members frequently try to change their negative social identity by adopting the language (and social identity) of the dominant group. Language shift thus has to be understood as one possible strategy for members of minority groups who have developed a negative social identity to change their inferior position. In cases where this strategy is chosen by all members of a minority speech community we could expect the extinction of the old vernacular. (Zinger, Heine & Sommer, 1991, p.38).

Literature Review

There are many parts of the world where, if we travel from village to village, in a particular direction, we notice linguistic differences which distinguish one village from another. Anderson (1973) indicates that sometimes these differences will be larger, sometimes smaller, but they will be cumulative. The further we get from our starting point, the larger the differences will become.

Dialectologists long ago established that language varies from place to place. Sociolinguists have pointed out that language can also vary from person to person in the same place. For both dialectologists and sociolinguists, it is not the mere fact of linguistic variation that is important. According to Kurath (1972), what is important is that variability correlates with other factors, as certain variants are more closely associated with one village than another, or with laborers more than managers, or with people speaking to close friends rather than to strangers, or with some other factor.

A recent investigation, focusing specifically on the age effect in L1 attrition, lends further substantiation to the assumption of a qualitative change around puberty. Bylund (2009, p.706) investigates the L1 of 31 Spanish speakers who emigrated to Sweden between the ages of 1 and 19 years and concludes that "there is a small gradual decline in attrition susceptibility during the maturation period followed by a major decline at its end (posited at around age 12)". All available evidence on the age effect for L1 attrition therefore indicates that the development of susceptibility displays a curved, not a linear function. This suggests that in native language learning there is indeed a Critical Period effect, and that full development of native language capacities necessitates exposure. One of the basic predictions of psycholinguistic research with respect to L1 attrition is that language loss can be attributed to language disuse (e.g. Paradis, 2007; Köpke, 2007). According to this prediction, attrition will be most radical among those individuals who rarely or never speak their L1 in daily life, while those speakers who use the L1 regularly, for example within their family or with friends, will to some degree be protected against its deterioration. This assumption is based on the simple fact that rehearsal of information can maintain accessibility. The amount of use which a potential attriter makes of her L1 strikes most researchers intuitively as one of the most important factors in determining the attritional process (e.g. Cook 2005; Paradis, 2007). Obler (1993) believes that less-frequently used items are more difficult to retrieve. The speed of retrieving a correct form

or the actual production of an incorrect form is not indicative of loss but may be retrieval failure instead. In other words, what appears to be lost is in fact difficult to retrieve. There is, however, little direct evidence that the degree to which a language system will attrite is dependent on the amount to which the language is being used in everyday life. Two early studies report that those subjects who used their L1 on an extremely infrequent basis provided more attrition over time (de Bot, Gommans & Rossing 1991, & Köpke, 1999). There is also some evidence for a negative correlation, suggesting that the attriters who used their L1 on a daily basis actually performed worse on some tasks (Jaspaert & Kroon, 1989).

Of course, if speakers give up the use of some traditional dialect form, they have to replace it with something else that has been the prime focus of a great deal of contemporary variationist dialectological research all over the world. This interest has perhaps been increased by the fact that 'something' is also usually not a pre-existing standard variety. Geolinguistic diffusion and intra-regional koineisation are two main sources of new dialect forms replacing many of the traditional local structures.

The diffusion of a linguistic form from a community in which that form is the norm to a community in which it is foreign necessarily involves dialect contact between speakers of the old and new forms (Trudgill 1986). Sometimes the new form seems to win straightforwardly, but sometimes the diffusion of the innovation leads to linguistic compromise or a re-evaluation of the social meaning of the incoming form.

One plausible explanation for linguistic variability based on Ogura's (1990) ideology, focuses on the fact that whenever there is class differentiation in a linguistic variable, it is the variant used by the higher classes that is ascribed more status or prestige than the other variants. As a result, in situations in which attention is directed towards speech, speakers of all classes will tend to increase their use of the higher-status variants. Stylistic variation, by this explanation, is a direct result of social-class variation. Differences in social class give rise to the assigning of value judgments to particular linguistic variants, and formal situations lead to a greater use of the highly valued pronunciations.

Since diffusion depends on contact, it is not altogether unsurprising that where breaks in contact frequency are found, we also find that linguistic breaks – isoglosses or dialect transitions- occur (Chambers & Trudgill, 1998). These breaks often arise because of physical barriers to inter-regional communication. They are also shaped, however, by routinized human activity within speech communities. Giddens (1984) has argued that routines form "the material grounding for the recursive nature of social life" (p.xxiii), and channel everyday human behavior into a set of self-perpetuating socio-geographical 'grooves'. Intra-regional mobility, whilst breaking down networks and routines at the very local level, reinforces *supra-local* structure. *Supra-local* dialects, characterized very often by the use of regionally widespread, non-local yet non-standard forms, have emerged reflecting this shift from the local. This supralocalization is not new, of course.

In sociolinguistics, the patterned nature of the relationship between social class and language variation has been a longstanding focus, with research questions that typically ask how social class, in relation with other social and stylistic factors, affects language use. In Labov's (1966) study, a respondent was given a score on a socioeconomic index

constructed as part of a sociological survey; it accounted for the person's years of education, the occupation of the family bread winner, and family income. Wolfram's (1969) study employed Duncan's (1961) Socioeconomic Index (SEI). Data on individuals' occupations, income, etc., are easy to obtain. Once these data are transformed into a score that can be used to measure individuals' places in the occupational hierarchy (and thereby approximate their social class), this information can be correlated with data from other variables and tested statistically. For example, Labov used respondents' socioeconomic index scores to assign them to one of four social classes. In the entry on social class in the (2003) *Encyclopedia of Social Theory*, Erik Olin Wright proclaims that few concepts are more contested in sociological theory than the concept of "class," and confusion exists over what class means. In general, "class" invokes understandings of economic inequality below. Class as subjective location entails an examination of how people locate themselves and others in a social structure of inequality. In this formulation, Wright explains, classes are social categories sharing subjectively salient attributes. As such, class groups are like other status groups, and class is one salient dimension along which to evaluate other people (in both economic and non-economic terms). In this regard, attributes of class vary contextually; class subjectivities may also be highly influenced by perception and even at odds with people's economic standing. Class as the relational explanation of economic life chance, is defined by people's relationships to various income generating resources or assets. While these locations may relate to people's subjective class-related tastes and lifestyles, it is the relationship to resources that is seen as defining classes and affecting people's life chances—just like gender, race, citizenship, etc.

Isfahani dialect is one of the dialects of Persian language that in the past had many individual words and expressions which were lost or are going to be lost. This old Isfahani dialect is not only different from the Persian of other parts of Iran but also differs markedly from the speech of some new generation of Isfahan. In particular, this dialect is characterized by older Isfahani words that some are no longer in use and religious terms borrowed from Arabic. In other words, Isfahani people, nowadays, prefer to use Standard Persian language and little by little only the accent of Isfahani will be remained. This study aimed to examine, whether the social class, which determined by place of residence, and age of people have any effects on the loss of some old words and expressions of Isfahani dialect of Persian.

Methodology

Participants

We distributed a questionnaire among 120 male/ female citizens distributed in different parts of Isfahan from different social status background based on the residential region including upper-social class, middle-social class and lower-social class with an age range of 25-65. The information concerning dividing Isfahan into different social status groups were obtained from National Organization for Civil Registration, Isfahan Branch and was approved by Organization for Registration of Real Estates and Isfahan Municipality. Participants of upper social class were selected from Mardavij, Chaharbaghala, Nazar, Sheykh Saddoogh, and Tohid streets; while participants of middle social class were chosen from Sheykhbahai, Azar, Bozorgmehr, Ferdowsi, and Tayeb streets; and lower social class were selected from Zeynabiye, Haftoon,

Atashgah, Ahmadabad, Ashrafi Esfahani streets. For controlling gender factors, each group consisted of equal number of males and females. (Table 1. summarizes the participants' demographic information.)

Material and procedure

A questionnaire consisting of 20 old words and expressions of Isfahani dialect was the main tool of data collection in present study (see the appendix). The questionnaire was taken from Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization Documentation Center, Isfahan Branch. Each participant wrote the meanings in front of the words if they knew them. The questionnaire had also questions on the place of residence, age and educational background of participants on the demographic section. They were supposed to answer the questionnaire at the moment without any discussion with friends or family members.

Results

The data obtained from the questionnaire are presented in Table 2, including means and percentages of each group.

35% of the first group, upper social class, 55% of the second group, Middle social class, 85% of third group, lower social group, 75% of fourth group, over-forty years old, and 30% of fifth group, below-forty years old, knew the meaning of the words.

Considering (P-value= 0.010) and results from t-test to compare the effect of gender on the relationship between Social Status and knowledge of Isfahani old expression, we can say that there is a significant difference between upper, middle and low social status groups, as the scores obtained by low-social status are higher than those two social status groups.

Based on the P-value = 0.006 concerning the difference between the participants from two age range of over and below forty, we can definitely say that there is a significant difference between these two groups of participants as those below forty have less knowledge of the words and expressions included in the questionnaire.

Discussion

Based on the results, it is obvious that people in upper social class were less familiar with old words and expressions of Isfahani dialect (35%). Moreover, the knowledge of middle social class were more than the first group and were around 55%, and people in lower social class were the most knowledgeable among groups. It is also necessary to mention the effects of age on knowing old words, as the results show, persons who were over-forty did the task better than those who were below forty. Thus, it shows that attrition of Isfahani dialect among people in upper social class and young people is more evident than among other groups. In other words, they tend to speak standard Persian and are unwilling to identify themselves with Old Isfahani people, as a person from Isfahan with individual dialect. In this respect, the other 3 groups have a good command of old dialect of Isfahani although they avoid using words and expressions in daily conversations. The most interesting finding of this study is that the words and expressions in the questionnaire are only used by old people in lower social class and other people who know the meaning of the words do not use them and claim that using these words endanger their prestige. They believe that using standard language increase their social class and using old words and expressions may cause others think they are illiterate.

Conclusion

This paper was an attempt to explore the effects of age and social class on attrition of some old words and expression of

Isfahani dialect (of Persian). The findings of the study are based on the data gathered from 120 participants from different ages and different social classes. The findings show that young people and people in upper social class do not have enough knowledge about old words and expression of Isfahani dialect, therefore little by little these words and expressions will be lost and Isfahani dialects will change to Isfahani accent. There is a matter of prestige-seeking in avoiding the Isfahani dialect among younger generations. And this is partly because people generally tend to consider the standard accent to be the one mainly common in Tehran as it seems to be more impressive and prestigious! Therefore, no wonder why younger generations try to avoid the dialect in other cities.

As Opler (1993) pointed out disusing a language leads to attrition of that language. Media programs in Iran has some effects in this respect, making comedies by using words of Persian dialects, specially Isfahani dialect, has lead people to form negative viewpoints about dialects and made people speak standard language to avoid identifying themselves with the associated negative social identity. Gathering all old words and expressions, publishing them, and using them in local media and programs are among many approaches to prevent language and dialect attrition.

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Table1. participants' demographic information

Name of groups	Name of streets	Male	Female
Group1: Upper social class	Hezarjarib St.	4	4
	Chaharbaghbala St.	4	4
	Sheykh Sadoogh St.	4	4
	Mir St.	4	4
	Tohid St.	4	4
Group2: Middle social class	Sheykhbahai St.	4	4
	Azar St.	4	4
	Bozargmehr St.	4	4
	Ferdosi St.	4	4
	Tayeb St.	4	4
Group3: Lower social class	Zeynabiyeh St	4	4
	Haftoon St.	4	4
	Atashgah St.	4	4
	Ahmadabad St.	4	4
	Ashrafi Esfahani St.	4	4

Table2. Means and percentages

Name of groups	Means	Percentage
Group1: Upper social class	14	35%
Group2: Middle social class	22	55%
Group3: Lower social class	34	85%

Table.3 Group Statistics of Social Status Differences

	Social Status	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Score	Up. Soc	40	3.9890	.46061
	Mid. Soc	40	4.2765	.30810
	Low. Soc	40	6.2345	.21956

Table.4 Independent Sample t-test

	t-test for Equality of Means		
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Score	2.696	50	.010

P-value = 0.010

Table.5 Group Statistics of Age Differences

	Age	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Score	+ 40	70	102.44	1.103
	- 40	50	94.88	3.133

Table.6 Independent Sample t-test

	t-test for Equality of Means		
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Score	2.857	50	.006

P-value = 0.006