

Diachronic and Synchronic Approaches to Linguistic Variation: A Critical Overview

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Abstract:

Language is a system of rules or conventions because a single word or an alphabet does not tell much beyond its immediate meaning. Human beings usually use these conventions or regulations together to form meaningful sentences. Apart from this description of language, the scholars, critics, and linguists have tried to define language but they have not yet been able to find a standard definition of 'language.' Aristotle defines language as a speech sound produced by human beings to convey ideas, feelings and emotions. He argues that only, in contrast to animals, human beings can use "language" to indicate the right and the wrong, while animals can only emit voice to indicate painful and pleasant things. Animal speech originates from the sensation faculty, while human language involves not only the sensation faculty, but also a higher faculty of the soul, namely thinking faculty or the experience of mind. Noam Chomsky argues that language is the inherent capability of the native speakers to understand and form grammatical sentences. There may be different definitions of the term 'language', but all agree that language is a system of communication and the human beings use it to communicate and interact with each other in their everyday life. The most striking feature of language is that it is used only by human beings. Animals also communicate, but their communication is limited to a small number of messages, e.g. hunger, thirst, fear and anger. The human beings, on the other hand, can transfer unlimited messages and ideas to their fellow beings. It is language that enables them to store knowledge, and transfer it to the next generation. It helps them to yoke the present, past and the future together. Another significant feature of language is its flexibility, i.e. it gets changed with time. Here, we need to remember that language is always in a state of flux, and it is a natural process. In this continuous process, a user of language not only uses the language heard or learnt previously but also adds something new to the language acquired by him. It means he recreates the language to make it suitable for his/her community. The change in language is a natural process, and human beings show a natural tendency to use something new and peculiar to make their language different from the previous generation. For instance, the language used by Chaucer is different from the language of T.S. Eliot. Even the meaning of the words gets changed according to the context and time. Chaucer wrote his *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* in the 14th century in which he mentioned that 'April' is the season of re-birth, revival and regeneration. In the 20th century the social conditions changed and T.S. Eliot in his *The Waste Land* wrote that 'April' the cruellest month. The thinkers and readers are supposed to know the different variations of a language for better understanding and critical evaluation of a work of art. This paper, thus, is an attempt to understand variations of English Language, particularly Diachronic and Synchronic- the two critical dimensions of language change.

Keywords: Language, grammatical, communication, flux, arbitrary, inherent, variations

Introduction:

The origin of language has been a subject of speculation for several centuries, and it is still a mystery to locate the place and find the community where language evolved for the first time. In fact, language evolved naturally like life, and it is challenging task to define both life language. The Philosophers, religious preachers and anthropologists have tried to capture the essence of human life, but life is so complicated that it further gives new challenges. Human life is understood by mentioning the characteristics of human behaviour concerning his surroundings. In the same way, language is also understood better in terms of its properties and features. Human beings have a natural urge to communicate and many a times use gestures, nods, sirens and so on to convey a message, but the language has made it possible to transfer ideas from one generation to another in a better and permanent way. Over time, human beings developed a scientific approach towards language and today we observe that modern language is not chaotic or disorganised but a systematic arrangement of words. The most striking quality of language is that it is used only by human beings. Animals also communicate, but their communication is limited to a small number of messages, e.g. hunger, thrust, fear and anger. The human beings, on the other hand, can transfer unlimited messages and ideas to their fellow beings. Language helps them to store knowledge and transfer it to the next generation.

Language is a means of the transfer of historical, political and cultural knowledge of the past. Simultaneously, it also passes the words, sounds, structures and styles of the language to the next generation. The language of a particular period is influenced by many factors, including social and political. It has been noticed that the language of peaceful times uses the harmonious and straightforward words, whereas language at the time of war becomes more forceful and attacking. This feature establishes a direct connection between the language and the society. Another significant feature of language is its flexibility, i.e. it gets changed with time. Here, we need to remember that language is always in a state of flux, and it is a natural process. In this continuous process, a user of language not only uses the language heard or learnt previously but also adds something new to the language acquired by him. It means he recreates the language to make it suitable for his/her community. The change in language is a natural process, and human beings show a natural tendency to use something new and peculiar to make the language different from the previous generation. The language used by Chaucer is different from the language of T.S. Eliot. Even the meaning of the words gets changed according to the period. Chaucer wrote his *Prologue to Canterbury Tales* in the 14th century in which he mentioned that 'April' is the season of re-birth, revival and regeneration. In the 20th T.S. Eliot, considered 'April' to be the cruellest month. The critical thinkers and readers are supposed to know the context of language use and different variations of a language for a better understanding and critical evaluation of a work of art. This article explores the

variations of English Language focusing on the two essential dimensions of language change - Diachronic and Synchronic.

Diachronic Variations:

Diachronic literally means *across-time*. The diachronic approach traces the historical development of the language and records the changes that have taken place in it from the past to the present. For instance, the first example is of the change in the pronunciation of vowel sounds. From 15th to 17th century, the long vowel sounds were pronounced by further forward in the mouth. It resulted in the higher pitch in pronunciation in comparison to the vowel sounds produced in the middle ages. This was a major change in the pronunciation of long vowel sounds. However, the pronunciation of short vowel sounds remained largely unchanged. The change started in the beginning of the 15th century and continued up to the beginning of the 18th century. This kind of vowel shift has been observed in many other languages, but the change in the English language was sudden and occurred in a short period of time. The pronunciation of the middle English differed a lot from what we pronounce in modern English. At that time, the word 'sheep' was pronounced like 'shape', 'me' was uttered as 'may' and 'mode' as 'mood' of the modern times. Another change is visible in the context of rounded and unrounded vowels. In early English sounds, there were front rounded vowels, but in modern English language, the front vowels are not rounded. For example, /i/, /ɪ/, /e/ and /æ/ are the four front vowels of modern English and described as unrounded vowels.

Apart from the shift in pronunciation, many new words and phrases are added to the language as every language goes through intense generative activities. The writers of different periods add many new words to a language. English language, like all other languages, enriched itself over time. English was rarely used for scientific or scholarly works up to the 17th century, as it was considered to be a weak language in comparison to Latin and French. We know that Newton, Thomas More, William Harvey and many more scholars wrote their masterpieces in Latin. But a shift was at the threshold, and Sir Francis Bacon wrote both in English and Latin. He took inspiration from Greeks and coined many Scientific words like 'pneumonia,' 'skeleton,' 'thermometer,' 'encyclopaedia' etc. Newton also moved from Latin to English and wrote his *Opticks* in English and introduced the words such as 'refraction', and 'lens.' The next example of a change in language is of Shakespearean time. By the second half of the 16th century, a subject-verb-object pattern had developed fully with the use of auxiliaries but 'to be' was a common auxiliary instead of 'to have.' For example, 'I have come' was written as 'I am come.' Past tenses were in a state of change, and it was accepted to write 'clomb,' as well as 'climbed,' We can compare a passage of *King Lear* in the First Folio (1623) with a modern edition to show the changes which took place in language:

Sir, I loue you more than words can weild ye matter - Sir, I love you more than word can wield the matter.

Deerer than eye-sight, space and libertie - Dearer than eyesight, space and liberty.

The spellings of the words 'loue,' 'weild,' 'deerer,' and 'libertie' explicitly indicate the changes which took place in the English language. The modern reader may face difficulty in understanding the words, but a close look at the words and their comparison with modern terms makes the words and their meanings clear. These diachronic changes of language are natural and occur in all other languages. So, a reader is to acquaint himself with the diachronic changes of a language for grasping the meaning of the works written in the past.

A proper observation and analysis of phonetic, phonemic, morphological, syntactic and semantic changes helps a lot in understanding and evaluation of a work of art. Semantic or change in the meaning of a word takes place in languages. For instance, in old English, the word 'girl' referred to both man and woman, but in modern language, the word stands for a woman only. In olden days, the term 'pen' was used for 'feather', but its meaning got changed gradually. Syntactical changes are also observed in the English language. Old English had its own system of forming questions as the question was formed by inverting the subject and the verb. In modern English, an auxiliary or 'do' is used before the subject to create a query. In modern English, the sentence "You know him" is changed into a question like this "Do you know him?" It shows that 'do' has been used to form a question. One more example is of Shakespeare's time, "what thinkest thou" in modern English it is written as "what do you think?" We see here syntactic change (word order), morphological change (verb endings), and lexical change (thou). Let us now take the case of a phoneme. In modern English /v/ is a phoneme itself whereas in old English 'v' was regarded as an allophone of /f/. There are numerous examples to prove that language is always in a state of flux and modifications in words, meanings and structures are apparent in across time, and these changes are studied as diachronic variations

Synchronic Variations:

The Synchronic (syn-same; chron-time) approach to the study of language focuses exclusively on a language at one point in time. This state of language is an accumulation of all the linguistic activities that a language community engages in during a specific period. To study language by adopting a synchronic approach, the linguistics generally collect samples of this language as it exists at a particular time regardless of any historical considerations which may have influenced the language at any previous time. The two ways of studying language have caught the attention of the scholars and linguists, and a debate also ensued about which of the two approaches is important and relevant. Saussure, who made this distinction, "gives priority in linguistics to the

synchronic approach and observes that the two approaches must be kept separate. This is because, as he states, what strikes us first when we study the facts of language is that their succession in time does not exist as far as the speaker is concerned. For instance, a speaker is not concerned with the language as it existed in the middle ages. The speaker is confronted with a state of being that is the language as it exists for him at a given time.”(Syal 2007) As mentioned above, language is bound to get changed according to time, place and culture of the people, and these variations can be studied under the following headings:

1. Dialect
2. Idiolect
3. Register

(i) Dialect:

Linguists define dialect as a variety of language. As language is not a biological aspect of human life, it is shaped by the people of society. Language is an acquired skill rather than innate skill. That is why variations in language use are but natural. Changes in language are observed not only among individuals but also in the sub-sections of a community. The geographical regions also show variations of a language. A dialect or variety of a language can be distinguished from other types of the same language by its grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, discourse conventions, and other linguistic features. “Dialects are rule-governed systems, with systematic deviations from other dialects of the same language.” (Crystal, 1997). The linguistic studies of dialects have found that these dialects are “as complex and as regularly patterned as other varieties of English, which are considered more standard” (Farr & Ball 1999). The term ‘dialect’ is generally used to define the variety of the language of a particular social group or of a geographical region, but in a real sense, each individual speaks a dialect, and even standard English is one of the many dialects of English. In fact, each language has a network of variations within it, and we have varieties of English, Hindi, Telegu and so on. Language broadly speaking may be said to vary along three parameters- Regional, Temporal and social class.

A regional variety of language is related to the physiographic province of the speaker. British English, American English, Indian English, Australian English, Canadian English, are the regional variations of English. British English refers to the English language spoken by the people of the United Kingdom. Then there is American English or U.S. English, which is a variety of English. The study of these two languages show many differences due to regional settings. The following spellings of the two variations of the same language prove the point:

British English (Spelling)

Colour
Behaviour
Metre
Analogue

American English (Spelling)

Color
Behavior
Meter
Analog

The differences are also found in vocabulary and Grammar of the English language used in England and America. In British English, the word 'flat' is used to denote a place of residence, but in American English, the word 'apartment' is used for it. Grammatical differences are also noticeable in both varieties of English. The British use formal speech such as 'shall' whereas the Americans prefer the more informal 'will' or 'should.' Similarly, the differences between British and Australian words in English are also found:

British English

Postman
Lady
Vegetables
English person

Australian English

Postie
Sheila
Vegies
Pom or Pommie

Indian English emerged due to the British colonisation, which continued for more than 200 years. The Indian speakers and writers follow the British rules of grammar and pronunciation even then there are many examples of differences between the two varieties of the same language. In Indian English, we use 'bus stop' whereas in British English we use 'bus station.' The Indian speakers pronounce RP /ei/ as /e/.

Temporal variations of language refer to such differences as Old English, Middle English and modern or contemporary English. Then the changes are also found in the use of language by the people of different social, economic, occupational and cultural groups in the same language. For instance, 'upper' and 'non-upper' dialects of English in England; and 'Brahmin' and 'non-Brahmin' dialects of Kannada in India. Hence, A dialect refers to a regional, temporal and social variety within the same language. It is sufficiently different from being considered as a separate entity but not different enough to be categorised as a distinct language. A dialect differs in vocabulary, pronunciation and to some extent in grammar from other dialects of the same language. But a dialect is not a separate language because the speakers of all the dialects of a language share the same broad framework of vocabulary, grammar and usage. The criteria of 'mutual intelligibility' is applied to distinguish a dialect from a language. So long as two speakers, despite clearly marked differences in their language use, can understand each other, they may be said as using different dialects of the same language. When mutual intelligibility is lost, the speakers are seen as speaking the different languages.

(ii) Idiolect:

An idiolect is defined as language of an individual. It is a variant of the language used as a dialect by the speakers of his community or class. The two speakers of the same dialect differ in the actual use, and this difference is called an idiolect. It is found in the choice of words, grammatical features, pronunciation, idioms and phrases of a speaker. Thus, each person has his/her own specific idiolect. The joining of sentences, pronunciation of words, tone, accent and rhythm of a person is different from the people of the same group. Some scholars believe that the idiolects in this sense do not exist and they take it as an individual's partial deviance from the language. The debate may continue, but there is hardly any doubt that all the speakers make use of idiolects. "Idiolect is the individual's personal variety of the community language system." (Crystal 1978) The use of idiolect becomes individual-specific, and some words and phrases of that person are seen as an unconscious mannerism. For instance, when family members or colleagues talk to each other, their speech habits differ considerably. A notable example of idiolect is the word "che"- meaning "hey you"- used by Ernesto Guevara. Another example is from Charles Dicken's famous novel *David Copperfield* in which Uriah Heep repeatedly uses the word 'umble.' This word becomes a mark of identification for that character. In this way, idiolect defines the unique and different characteristics of a variety of a language. These characteristics include verbal habits, voice, style of writing and speech, and how those features impact the personal language of an individual. Thus, idiolect refers to the differences of expression among individuals within a given dialect. However, the issue of idiolect is still controversial, and the researchers may further work on this aspect of language for a more specific definition.

(iii) Register:

In linguistics, the register is defined as the use of language according to situation or circumstances. The same individual uses the language differently while discussing an issue with a friend, wife, and a colleague. This use of language as per situation is termed as register of that language. A person behaves and acts differently at home, party or in a meeting. The occasion, context and purpose influence an individual's mind and the speaker consciously or unconsciously modifies his words and sentences. For instance, if a person goes to meet the President of India, he would probably say: "It is an honour to meet you", and if he meets his friend, he would like to address him by saying: "Hey, John." In the first case, the speaker is using formal language, whereas in the second case, he is using informal language. The language we use when talking to our friends is not the same language we would use when meeting someone as important as the President of India. This difference in language formality is called register.

Registers are marked by a variety of specialized vocabulary and turns of phrases, colloquialisms and the use of jargon and a difference in intonation and pace. Registers are used in all forms of communication, whether it is spoken written and signed. The rigidity

and intimacy of the register depends upon the use of grammar, syntax, and tone. Halliday defines register in the following way: “Types of linguistic situation differ from one another, broadly speaking, in three respects: first, as regards what actually is taking place; secondly, as regards what part the language is playing; and thirdly, as regards who is taking part. These three variables, taken together, determine the range within which meanings are selected and the forms which are used for their expression. In other words, they determine the *register*.”(Halliday1978) For Linguists, register is about variation in language and the difference in the use of register can be at two levels- variation based on the user of language and variation based on the use of language. The proper understanding of categories of registers, i.e. the registers used in different situations can be of great help in interpreting the literary and other pieces of writing. When we read literature, it helps us to know that the use of register gives a unique style to a literary work. Literary language can be both formal and informal. The knowledge of these variations helps in highlights the context of the use of language.

Conclusion:

The variations of language, thus, can be understood by focusing on the diachronic and synchronic aspects of language. The diachronic approach traces the historical development of the language and records the changes that have taken place in it from the past to the present. The Synchronic approach focuses exclusively on a language at one point in time. This state of language is an accumulation of all the linguistic activities that a language community engages in during a specific period. These two approaches towards the study of language have made scholars and linguists to comment on their importance. Saussure gives priority to the synchronic approach and believes that the language as it exists in the present is important and relevant. But it doesn't mean that he discards the diachronic approach. In fact, he argues that we should keep the two approaches apart because language is a complex system, and in the absence of proper distinction, we may find it challenging to understand the variations of a language properly. In this paper, we observed that the two approaches-diachronic and synchronic are different from each other. The Proper understanding of both the variations of English language is required to understand the past and the present works of art.

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