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THE SOCIOSTYLISTICS OF MINORITY DIALECT IN LITERARY PROSE

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Most linguists in the 1980's would not agree with Bloomfield's view that written language is a "direct representation of speech" (1933:21). They would prefer to regard it as a special register of language (cf. Halliday 1978), characterized by its own syntactic and pragmatic constraints. These special constraints derive from a number of factors, including lack of immediate interactional feedback, lack of direct access to gesture and tone of voice, presence of visual, graphic cues, and so forth. However, few linguists other than those engaged in studies of literacy or of linguistics in education appear to be particularly interested in the extent of the differences between written and spoken language, or in the degree to which these differences may potentially lead to problems in communication. In this paper I will discuss an extreme case of the difference between written and spoken language: the case of dialect use in minority, especially Afro-American, literature. Although linguists do not often consider literature as a locus of criterial examples, preferring to attempt to illuminate literary analysis with linguistic tools (cf. Sebeok 1960, Freeman 1970, Banfield 1973, Kiparsky 1974, Kuroda 1976, Traugott and Pratt 1980), it is one of many varieties that needs to be subsumed under the emerging sub-field of sociolinguistics known as "sociostylistics".

One of the key concepts in recent studies of linguistic pragmatics is that of "indexicals", the various kinds of pointers used in language to key what is said to the context, whether linguistic or non-linguistic. The subset of indexicals known as "shifters" or "deictics" (cf. Jakobson 1971, Fillmore 1971, Silverstein 1976) key what is said to the context of speaker and addressee (_I_ vs. _you_ vs. third person or "other") or to place of utterance (_here_ vs. _there_), time of utterance (_now_ vs. _then_), place in the text (_latter_ vs. _former_, _above_ vs. _below_), and so forth. They also key what is said to the social status of speakers and hearers, whether already known to exist or established by the speech act. Thus _tu-vous_ and other categories such as indicative vs. subjunctive, _perfective_ vs. imperfect and so forth can be used as social deictics (Brown and Levinson 1978). Use of dialect vs. standard can have a similar function to the use of _tu_ and _vous_, (cf. Gumperz 1976), except that dialect operates at a higher level of discourse than the pronouns. The use of non-standard dialect indexes a social status which is socially or educationally inferior (in this case it is the language of those addressed with low-status _tu_), or it can function dynamically and signal familiarity and in-group solidarity (equivalent to the intimate _tu_). Standard dialect, on the other hand, indexes either social or educational superiority (in which case it is the language of those addressed with high-status _vous_), or it can signal public, non-intimate relationships

(as is the case with distant vous). In other words, dialects, whether regional or social, can reflect the norms of the speakers statically or can be used dynamically to define relationships.

As has frequently been said, deictics signal a speaker's orientation, or "point of view". While the study of point of view is fairly recent in linguistics, it has a slightly longer tradition in literary criticism. But for the most part, linguists and literary critics have not meant the same thing by "point of view", nor have they thought it possible that they might mean the same thing. I will suggest that in fact considerable insights can be gained on both sides if what is traditionally known as point of view in fiction is treated as a set of deictic phenomena.

Literary critics have tended to focus on individual parameters of what they call point of view. Best known among these parameters are first vs. third person narrative (e.g. Brooks and Warren 1961), present vs. past tense (e.g. Hamburger 1973), and to some extent colloquial vs. formal style (e.g. Bridgman 1966). A somewhat different set of parameters, telling vs. showing (e.g. Lubbock 1921) and discours vs. histoire (cf. Todorov 1966) have been developed, and have been shown by different critics to coincide in different ways with the other parameters (for a summary, see Ringler 1981). In general, histoire, the "story" (or sequence of "propositions") is aligned with showing ("pure", objective statement, in which the speaker/narrator is only minimally involved, if at all), and also with third person past tense. Discours, on the other hand, is associated with telling, and is considered to be either the mode of representation (the way the proposition is uttered or written), or a mode of representation. In the latter case, discours and telling are associated with "subjective" language, and aligned with first person present tense. The issues are enormously complex (cf. among others Booth 1961, Chatman 1978, Cohn 1978 on supposed presence or absence of narrators, types of narrators and so forth, and Weinrich 1971 on types of tense) and cannot be gone into here, but a linguistic perspective may illuminate them without grossly oversimplifying them. As any theory of pragmatics tells us, the speaker/narrator's point of view can never be totally absent. "Pure" statement, and "absence of a narrative voice" are impossibilities; there can be no narrative that is pure showing, none that is pure histoire. Discours must be the way of representing the story, not a way. A narrative may involve more or less of the speaker's point of view and the hearer/implied reader's presence may be more or less indexed, but almost no utterance (other than a generic) can totally exclude the speaker/narrator (or implied author). For example, in English, a tense-marker must be present on the verb, and therefore a deictic relationship is necessarily set up between speaker/narrator and hearer/implied reader. Furthermore, the parameters of person, tense,

and style can all be accounted for in terms of proximal and distal deixis, as outlined in Figure I:

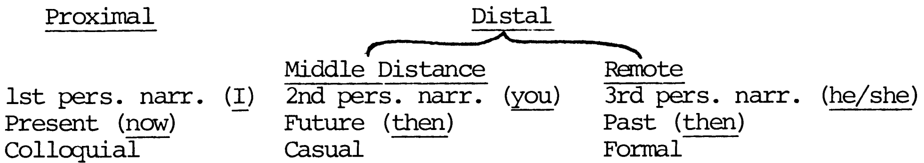

FIGURE I[1]

The usefulness of claiming that point of view in fiction is a general deictic phenomenon, rather than a property of one particular parameter, is that we can readily see the possibility of any individual work involving different categories either throughout the work or in sub-parts. Thus a narrative could be third person past tense formal or first person past tense formal, or third person present tense colloquial, and so forth.

The deictic relations discussed so far conform in general to those observed in everyday use. When we turn to use of dialect, however, we find a radical difference. In every-day life, use of the minority dialect or of the minority language rather than the standard frequently indexes intimacy and in-group solidarity (cf. Gumperz 1976, LePage 1977, Muysken forthcoming, Rickford 1980). In literature, however, the indexing is reversed. Standard dialect is the norm for written language--so much so that we hardly know how to represent regional and social dialects. In a classic paper entitled "A Theory of Literary Dialect", Ives (1971) has pointed out that the use of dialect (as opposed to colloquial language) is a distancing phenomenon. Dialect is often used by mainstream writers for humor. It is also used for realism. If it is used for realism one might expect that "dialect" (understood as non-standard in some sense) belongs in the "proximal" column. But Ives emphatically points to the opposite alignment:

> When representing a dialect these authors [for example Joel Chandler Harris, Mark Twain, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings]ECT have been acutely conscious that they were depicting something peculiar...The characters who speak "dialect" are set off, either socially or geographically, from the main body of those who speak the language. (Ives 1971:147)

In other words, the standard is proximal, the dialect is distal, or "other". Ives' paper is an important study of how dialect is represented. It also touches on the question of the reliability of dialect writing as linguistic evidence, a topic recently investigated at far greater depth by Sullivan (1980) with respect to drama. Neither Ives, nor Sullivan, nor indeed most authors considering the use of dialect in literature really come to grips with the fact that dialect is one of the key devices that can be

used to create point of view in fiction. Nor do they address the question of the role of standard vs. non-standard dialect in the writing of non-establishment authors, especially those minority writers whose language has a distinctly politico-cultural function, such as Black English. Some important steps in this direction have, however, been made by people working on minority languages rather than minority dialects, for example, on pidgins and creoles in standard contexts, or on the development of distinct varieties of African or Indian English. Among the most recent of such studies are Angogo and Hancock (1980) on West African literature, and Jean D'Costa (1980) entitled "The West Indian novelist and language: a search for a literary medium".

One might suppose that the task of the minority writer would in essence be to change the establishment identification of standard with Proximal, and non-standard with Distal as in 1):

1) Proximal: Standard Distal: Non-standard

to the identification of non-standard with Proximal and standard with Distal as in 2):

2) Proximal: Non-standard Distal: Standard

If so, the search for a literary medium might not be hard. But as we shall see, the switch from 1) to 2) cannot be made without loss of identity as a minority writer.

The history of fiction by Black writers tells us much about the search for a medium and about the difficulties of switching from 1) to 2). One of the first major Black writers, Charles Chesnutt chose to use a White Northerner as the narrator of tales as told to him by a former Black slave in his collection called The Conjure Woman, in direct imitation of Joel Chandler Harris' Uncle Remus stories. Chesnutt was faced with a turn of the century audience expecting standard English narrative. How could he have represented a Black narrator, even in third person, using Standard English and not betray his own values? Some recent writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker solve the problem by using the standard language throughout, but with imagery, vocabulary, and rhythms of Black English (BE); in other words, they have chosen not to use dialect to any extent, even in the dialog. Others, like Toni Cade Bambara in her short story "Gorilla, My Love", and Al Young in his novel Sitting Pretty have explored turning the tables and have developed narrative in a variety of written BE that is recognizably BE, but more standard than the dialog, as in these brief excerpts:

> ...Not that Scout's my name. Just the name Granddaddy call whoever sittin in the navigator seat. Which is usually me cause I don't feature sittin in the back with the pecans. Now, you figure pecans all right to be sittin with. If you thinks so, that's your business.

> But they dusty sometime and make you cough. And they got a way of slidin around and dippin down sudden, like maybe a rat in the buckets. So if you scary like me, you sleep with the lights on and blame it on Baby Jason and, so as not to waste good electric, you study the maps. (Bambara 1960:13-14).

> A hour coulda oozed by or maybe just a minute or two. I got off into one of them things where you kinda dead but you still alive, I mean, you be dreamin funny little untogether things, things that sorta mean somethin the moment you dreamin em but they keep changin and meltin into somethin else. Yet at the same time all this be happenin it still look like you wide awake and keepin tracka what's goin on in the room you settin in only that's parta the dream too. (Young 1976:7-8).

In Al Young's Sitting Pretty, it is the standard speakers who are clearly odd, and indexed as "other" by their pomposity.

Bambara and Young's narratives are, it is important to notice, 1st person narratives. Wherever there is a contrast between the language of the narrative and the language of the dialog, a certain distancing necessarily takes place, and a fair degree of code-switching can be observed. First person narrative allows for a more subtle distinction between the narrative and the dialog because of the traditional connection between first person and colloquial style. When first person narrative is itself partially dialectal, the identification of dialect with "other" becomes blurred. Many instances of this can be found in William Faulkner and most especially in novels like Ken Kesey's Sometimes a Great Notion where as many as five different points of view expressed by five different voices, some first person, may interlock. This is what makes it possible for Al Young to partially move toward identifying Proximal with dialect.

The use of third person narrative in the dialect is, however, extremely restricted. The only author I am aware of who has used third person BE narrative is June Jordan in her novella His Own Where about two Black teenagers' retreat into a private world where making love in a grave-yard symbolizes both the positive qualities of jointure between the teenagers and alienation from the rest of the world. The first paragraph clearly indexes BE, with the invariant iterative-habitual marker be in otherwise it be embarrassing:

> First time they come, he simply say, "Come on." He tell her they are going not too far away. She go along not worrying about the conversation. Long walks take some talking. Otherwise it be embarrassing just side by side embarrassing. (Jordan 1975:1).

Can this be considered to be "dialect literature", "dialect in literature", or a diverging new literary language? Note the spelling is standard, hardly what one would expect in "dialect literature". It is the syntax and morphology (and also the semantics and the rhythms) that are BE. Furthermore, there is virtually no distinction between the narrative and the dialog. It appears that June Jordan is in fact experimenting with a new minority literary language in which BE is used as a standard that functions like Standard American English--that is, as a language which is proximal.

Virtually no writers have followed Jordan's example. It is tempting to blame the publishers, who are notoriously unwilling to promote minority language; and it is tempting to blame politics or even the authors' nature desire to reach wide audiences. But the problem is really a sociolinguistic one. If a non-standard dialect has the social role of supporting and reaffirming a particular subidentity within a culture, then it will of necessity be at odds with itself *as a minority dialect* if it comes to be a new standard (that is, a *language suitable for* written third person narrative, or, in the extremest case, non-literary prose: the medium, in other words, of public rather than private language). In her book *Give Birth to Brightness*, Sherley Anne Williams has identified *the Black hero as different* from the White hero because he symbolizes "the distinctive fusion of rebellion *and* [italics mine]ECT group consciousness" (1972:214), working against mainstream society and wedded to the subculture (p.206). Integration within his group as a subculture is an essential goal of the Black hero. The linguistic problem is that if BE were used for third person narrative that identity would be lost not by acculturation, but by establishment of a linguistic norm or standard which is truly "other" because it is separate, and not a subpart of the whole. This is in part surely why many minority writers seeking to legitimize Black culture as a full-blooded, fully visible but subcultural entity, choose *not* to use dialect.

A particularly telling example of the use of SE as the medium of the minority voice can be found in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, where the many languages of the Lower East Side of *New York City* play a large role. Yiddish, the language of home, in-group and respect, is represented in Standard English. English, however, is represented in a vast array of dialectal varieties from Yiddish-English to Italian-English, to street-gang English, all indexing an alien world.

Studies of code-switching, whether from one language to another, or one dialect to another, have in the past focused on such variables as who the addressee is or what the topic is. In discussion of diglossia (cf. Ferguson 1959) some reference has also been made to genre as a variable. To my knowledge, in no case has a double bind of the sort discussed in this paper been a major issue. It is hoped that sociolinguists will pay closer attention to double binds in the choice of language varieties in their search for an accurate account of strategies and problems of communication.[2]

NOTES

1) The "Middle Distance" and "Remote" sub-categories of Distal deixis correspond to the distinction between Latin iste (close to second person), and ille (associated with third person). In literary narrative, second person and future tense are rare, and almost entirely restricted to recent experimental novels in which the spatio-temporal coordinates are deliberately scrambled. An excellent example is to be found in Fuentes' novel The Death of Artemio Cruz. In this novel the dying Artemio Cruz recounts his experiences on his death-bed in first person present tense, looks back to his past actions in third person past, and recounts the interpretations and consequences of those past events in the second person future. (I am indebted for this example to Mary Pratt.)

2) As Jane Falk pointed out in discussion of this paper, the double bind operates on readers as well as narrators--in so far as "majority" readers might become totally involved in the minority point of view expressed by the third person narrative, they would lose their identity as members of the majority to whom the fiction is in part addressed, and again the dynamic outlined by Williams would be lost.

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