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## Language in the Workplace: the Tobacco Farm

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The workplace is where a large part of the population spends up to one half of its waking hours, and much of its energy and attention. The office, farm, or factory is usually more than a purely economic or physical entity, it is also a social entity with its own jargon and rules of communication, and a conceptual structure, conceived of differently by the different people within it. The workplace as a speech community can be viewed as a microcosm of the larger outside speech community, with a similar but much simpler structure-- there are far fewer variables affecting the worker's linguistic behavior in the workplace than in the society at large, because of the limitations that the job places on types of social interaction. This means that patterns of linguistic behavior among workers should be easier to isolate in the small workplace speech community, while still hopefully being applicable to the larger surrounding speech community.

I will be discussing linguistic usage on one particular farm, located about 10 miles from Hartford, Connecticut in The Connecticut Valley. I single it out because I am already familiar with the linguistic situation there (having worked there six summers), and also because I consider it typical of a small, self-contained occupational speech community. The farm is family owned and operated, employing about 30 people year round and about 200 during the summer harvest. The tobacco is a special "shade grown" variety used for the outside wrappers of cigars, and is grown in fields of 25 acres or less enclosed in cheesecloth "tents" (to keep humidity in and direct sunlight and wind out.) The organizational hierarchy of the farm can be divided into three basic levels: Level I consists of the owner, the foreman, and year-round professional farmers (mostly middle-aged men) who make the high level decisions and work for a salary. Level II consists of the older and more experienced of the summer help (mostly high school and college students) who drive the vehicles, supervise laborers, and perform other tasks requiring some knowledge and responsibility. They get paid by the hour. Finally, Level III is lowest on the hierarchy, being the ordinary laborers, aged 14-16, who perform the most boring, repetitive tasks in the fields and sheds, and who get paid the least (also paid by the hour.) Level III includes both the boys who pick in the fields and the girls who prepare the leaves for hanging in the sheds-- I will concentrate on the former, since I know their

vocabulary better, although the same types of linguistic mechanisms apply in the shed. (Level III also includes about 40 Puerto Rican men who work as migrants, but my limited Spanish prevents me from saying much about them, just as their limited English separates them from the rest of the speech community.)

A worker's position in the organizational hierarchy is also correlated to his level of involvement in the job-- those at Level III only work an 8 hour day, and most only work one or two summers, if that long. Those at Level II work 10-12 hour days, have usually been with the farm for three or more years, and their jobs require much more responsibility and greater knowledge of farm operation than Level III workers. Those at Level I, of course, depend on the farm for their livelihood, and most have worked there for 5-10 years, if not all their lives. This stratification of age, experience, and level of involvement is reflected in the language in two ways. First of all, the higher a worker's level (and therefore the more experienced he is), the larger his lexicon of objective special vocabulary-- terms applied to the various implements, actions, and situations peculiar to this kind of tobacco farming. Some of these terms are restricted to tobacco farming, e.g. "drag hook", "bent" (as a noun), "mosaic virus" etc., but many are words of the ordinary language used in new or more restricted contexts-- "shed", "cloth", "drag", "hang". I refer to these terms as "objective" special vocabulary to differentiate them from the more stratified level-specific vocabulary. Level-specific vocabulary differs in terminology from level to level even when the referent is the same, and it serves to identify the level of the speaker in the hierarchy. A good example of level-specific usage is Level I use of "ton" with a zero plural morpheme, i.e. "three ton of fertilizer". Another example is the name "Big Ben" or "Ben" given by Level III workers to a certain field, which Level II workers call simply "across the river", and which Level I workers call "Phelps Lot" or "across the river".

Level-specific vocabulary serves to express solidarity of the group, and is usually richest in the particular group's area of main concern or responsibility. Level III vocabulary abounds in words relating to working conditions in the fields and in aspects of the supervisor-to-picker relationship (e.g. "scab out", "sack out", "ace"). Level II workers, being the supervisors, share some of these terms with Level III, and also have their own terms for evaluating workers ("whack-o") and concepts necessary for the supervision of a large crew ("ETD", "the Big Picture"). Level I speakers differentiate themselves by different names for many of the fields, use of the generic "vehicle" rather than a more specific term, the verb "work \_\_\_\_\_" rather than "do \_\_\_\_\_" for non-specified verbs (e.g. "work empties" instead of "do empties"), etc.

The three levels of speech are, however, by no means independent of or unrelated to each other. There is constant dynamic interaction between them, with workers using level of speech to seek status, assert their authority, demonstrate their competence, and evaluate other people's competence. Often such interaction is made explicit, especially among the Level II workers, who serve as intermediaries between the other two levels and therefore must understand to some extent all three levels of vocabulary. Level II workers often discuss usage among themselves, e.g. "Not 4 tons of corn, 4 ton of corn, especially when you're talking to Everett." There are two varieties of level switching, talking up (using the speech of a level higher than one's own) and talking down (using the speech of a level lower than one's own). Talking up is generally used to seek status or present oneself in a favorable light to the boss, talking down to assert authority (or simply make oneself understood), but always in accordance with the following rules:

1) A Level II worker who is talking down to a Level III worker will always make it clear that he is talking down (especially if an audience is present), thus focusing on the status difference between them. If objective special vocabulary is involved, the Level II speaker often uses a term that he knows the underling won't understand, and then explains it to him. This serves the dual purpose of informing the underling that there is a vocabulary that he should learn, and reinforcing the authority of Level II. (Level I workers, whose high status position is much more secure because of age and responsibility, seldom make their talking down so explicit.)

2) Workers at level II and III always correct errors in usage by people of the same or lower levels. This serves to increase the individual's status and increases in-group solidarity (at the expense of the person being corrected), and also helps maintain the integrity of the jargon against a constant influx of new workers. If no one took petty pleasure in correcting people who call a shed a "barn", within a few short years "shed" might disappear from all but Level I speech. The difference between correcting someone on one's own level and correcting someone on a lower level is use of sarcasm-- a Level II worker will be polite or joking in tone when correcting another Level II worker, but will often be extremely sarcastic when correcting a lower status worker (here again pointing up his own authority, and maintaining the solidarity of his speech group against uninvited newcomers.) Level I workers seldom correct the usage of those below them, but lower level workers feel that they are constantly being evaluated, and try never to make a mistake in front of the boss.

3) Ambitious people talk up as much as possible, especially to their superiors. Willingness to learn new ling-

uistic forms implies willingness to take on more responsibility and get more involved in the farm-- it's all a part of "playing the game", as both the supervisors and the ambitious workers realize.

4) Each level of speech defends itself against lower levels, either by correction or refusal to understand. (This happens most obviously between Level I and Level III, the two extremes.)

The motivations for these rules are pretty straightforward-- the desire of some of the lower status workers to demonstrate their involvement in and identification with the farm by using higher-level speech, and the desire of higher status workers to maintain their higher positions. The conflict between the "climbers" and those above them, and also the inherently conflicting roles of the three groups (Level I trying to get as much work done as possible; Level III trying to get away with doing as little as possible; Level II caught in between trying to please both sides) can also place constraints on level crossing. For example, it is extremely inappropriate for a (Level III) picker to tell a (Level II) strawboss that another picker is a "whack-o", even if the judgement is correct. The reason is that the term is a Level II term, used solely to evaluate Level III workers, and the picker in using the term is claiming unwarranted authority for his statement. (Such a statement would only be appropriate coming from another Level II worker.) Constraints on level crossing also work the other way, it being inappropriate (and in fact an insult) to talk down to a worker of comparable status.

Besides the use of objective special vocabulary and level-specific speech, two linguistic phenomena from the outside speech community are used to promote solidarity and/or differentiate status levels-- use of non-standard English and use of obscenity. Non-standard English is used by nearly everyone on the farm, especially at levels II and III, for purposes of solidarity (maintaining a casual atmosphere). The only time such a worker might say, for example, "They don't have any empties over at Fitch Lot" as opposed to "They ain't got no empties over at Fitch Lot" would be in a formal situation when talking to someone like the owner (the only person on the farm who drives a car instead of a truck, and who seldom gets his hands dirty.) Such a use of standard English to a fellow worker would invite ridicule, being a serious breach of the workers' camaraderie. The situation with obscenity, however, is not quite so simple. Obscenity is well respected and facilitates solidarity within each level, but between levels a distinction is drawn between formal and informal situations.<sup>2</sup> Obscenity can be used by either party in an informal conversation between levels as long as it is the higher status participant who initiates its use (in fact it is usually the use of obscenity, along with various non-verbal gestures, that signals to the lower status participant that the situation is indeed informal.) But obscenity is much less likely to

be used in a formal situation, and if used at all it will be by the higher status participant. (This is especially true if the higher status participant is of Level I, and can demand respect both on the basis of age and of authority.)

For the Puerto Rican men who work in the fields and sheds, group identification by language is the most complete. The men in the field work separately from the boys, under their own bosses, and hardly any of the English-speaking workers know more than a few basic words of Spanish (e.g. the words for water, baskets, leaves). The older men of Level I never speak to these men in Spanish, they seem to consider it beneath them to learn any of it, and while the pickers in the fields do borrow some Spanish words (mostly obscenities), few know enough of the language to converse. Consequently, only by learning at least a little English can a Puerto Rican worker advance to a more desirable job-- so I would assume that knowledge of English raises one's status among the men, though I can't say for certain. The general attitude on the farm, especially among Level I and Level III workers, is one of bigotry against the Puerto Ricans. Their inability to

speak English is often cited as evidence of their supposed stupidity, although the same people who hold this view will often also tell you that the Puerto Ricans can really understand everything you say, they only pretend not to understand when they're being told to do work. In short, the English-speaking workers on the farm on the whole show little understanding of or sympathy for those who don't speak their language.

Many of the differences in the language usage between levels of the hierarchy, although they serve a social stratification function, can be attributed to the different ways workers conceive of their work because of their different experiences on the job. A good example of such usage is the ways in which different workers refer to the farm vehicles. Level I workers, who are responsible for maintenance of the vehicles, assigning drivers, etc. usually simply use the term "vehicle" (e.g. "Take your vehicle over to Connors Lot", where "vehicle" could refer to a truck, a chassis, bus, or tractor). Many of the job experiences that these men have with the farm vehicles are the same for all the vehicles regardless of type (i.e. no matter what type of vehicle it is that might break down, they'll have to fix it.) Their higher degree of involvement in the farm also allows them a better view of situations in which different vehicles might be used in the same way, or the same vehicle used for a variety of different purposes-- their concept of a specific type of vehicle is not associated with specific job experiences, nor vice versa, therefore use of the superordinate category makes sense to them. Level III workers, on the other hand, never use the term "vehicle". They conceive of each type separately, and refer to each separately. Each has a particular, separate set of job experiences associated with it-- a chassis is something to load full baskets onto, a flatbed truck is something to take empty baskets off of,

and a bus is something to ride to work in. There is no unifying notion for their experiences of the farm vehicles, and therefore no need for a name for that notion.

A similar situation exists in terms of the completative--non-completative distinction. Level III workers, whose normal work experience consists of an endless succession of identical rows to be picked and dragged usually refer to their work activities in non-completative terms. ("What did you do today?" "I picked." or "I loaded.") The salient feature of the day's experience for such a worker is the process involved, not the results of the action-- there's no sense of having completed anything. But another worker, who has a higher degree of involvement in and knowledge of the farm (closer to Level II) might perform exactly the same actions in the course of the day's work, but refer to it completatively-- "We picked the back side of Pond Lot and part of Minister". The first picker perceives his job as an aimless activity that marks time between paychecks, while the second perceives it as a goal-directed activity.

This completative vs. non-completative distinction applies not just to verbs used without objects like "pick", "drag", "hang", but also to verbs that require an object, such as "fire a shed". Firing a shed is a complicated process that takes most of the day-- the shed must be emptied of equipment, raked out, the stoves set up, gas lines connected, holes in the walls patched, etc. before the stoves are finally lit up, and once a shed has been fired it won't be used again for months, after the tobacco in it has cured and been taken down. This leads the Level II worker, who is responsible for the firing of the shed, and who conceives of the firing of the shed as the culmination of all the previous harvesting activity, to refer to it as a completed action--- "What did you do today?" "Fired a shed" or "Fired she #22". On the other hand, the Level III worker, taken from the field to perform menial tasks involved in the shed firing, sees firing a shed merely as an easier kind of work than the field work he has temporarily escaped-- and stukk refers to it as a process rather than as a completed action-- "What did you do today?" "Fired sheds". (The use of the plural "sheds" here does not mean more than one shed was fired, it is simply the generic form used for this type of work.) The greater the worker's level of responsibility and involvement in the farm, the more he tends to think of it as a goal-directed unit (with his work actually accomplishing something), and therefore the more likely he is to talk of his actions in completative terms.

The most striking example of conceptual differences producing a difference in usage comes from a comparison of this farm with a neighboring smaller farm. The only difference of basic terminology that I found was that the action of moving the machinery from a filled shed to an empty shed (in preparation for firing the full one) is called "moving machines" on the larger farm, but "moving shed" on the smaller one. The reason that such

a difference would exist becomes clear when one examines the concept of "the shed". "The shed" doesn't refer to any particular shed, it refers to the shed or sheds being filled at the time, just as "the field" used in a particular way refers to the fields being picked at the time. But it would be wrong to say that these are merely deictic nouns of location, rather they are abstract concepts meaning something like "the focus or location of a certain type of activity at a given time." For example, "I took Johnson out of the field and sent him to the shed" doesn't imply any particular locations, it merely means that Johnson was a field-worker and I made him a shed-worker. Since the larger farm has a large enough crew to work two or three sheds at a time, this concept of "the shed" as "wherever shed work is going on" can be associated with two or three different locations at once. The smaller farm, however, operates only one shed at a time-- so that the concept "the shed" is only associated with one location at any given time. When the machines are moved on the smaller farm, "the shed"'s location also moves-- explaining why the smaller farm can "move shed" while the larger farm, never having a single shed as "the shed", can only "move machines".

I believe that the mechanisms discussed above that differentiate language usage along status hierarchy and cognitive lines exist in all occupational and special-interest speech communities-- truck drivers, polo players, jazz musicians, academics, TV repairmen, etc. The advantage to looking at a single workplace is that it is a compact and integrated speech community with a well-defined social structure and a controlled environment as far as the speakers' daily experiences are concerned. While being well aware of the limitations of an anecdotal and impressionistic study like this one<sup>3</sup>, my hope is that it can arouse the interest of linguists in occupational speech communities, and demonstrate that the interesting data in such communities is not merely the jargon as reflected in the dialectologist's word lists, but rather in the dynamic linguistic interactions that occur when workers use the jargon to communicate.

#### NOTES

1) Objective special vocabulary refers to terms specific to shade grown Connecticut Valley tobacco, which differs considerably in terms of implements and techniques used from other kinds of tobacco farming. A few basic terms are shared with Southern tobacco growers. (See Heap, 1966 for examples).

2) See Tway (1975) for a discussion of formal vs. informal situations in boss-worker interactions.

3) For a more controlled and systematic approach to similar social and cognitive phenomena among factory workers, the reader is referred to any of the works of Patricia Tway (see bibliography).

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## APPENDIX

Glossary of common farm terminology (Roman numerals indicate levels that make use of particular level-specific items)

- ace (n., II,III)-- an exceptionally good worker
- across the river (adv., I,II)-- a way of referring to the field also called "Big Ben" (III) and "Phelps Lot" (I)
- back side (n.)-- the side of a field away from the road
- basket (n)-- a canvas-and-wire-frame basket used to transport leaves from field to shed
- Ben, or Big Ben (name, III)-- see "across the river"
- Big Picture (n. II)-- used in strawbossing to refer to control over the total situation. Having the Big Picture means knowing where all your workers are and what they're doing at any one time.
- boss (n.)-- supervisor, usually "strawboss" (in the field) or "shedboss" (in the shed)
- (v.)-- to act as supervisor, e.g. "I bossed all day."
- chassis (n.)-- a truck or bus stripped of its body, used for hauling full or empty baskets

- cloth (n. ,II,III)-- the cheesecloth netting used to cover the fields
- drag (v.)-- to drag a basket down a row after picking and fill it with leaves
- drag hook (n.)-- hook used to pull basket while dragging
- drug out (adj.)-- of a row: dragged to completion
- empty (pl. -ies) (n.)-- empty basket
- ETD (n.)-- "estimated time of departure" -- time at which the picking crew is expected to finish one field and move to the next one
- fire (v.)-- "fire a shed": to clear out a shed and set up the stoves to cure the tobacco
- front side (n.)-- side of a field nearest the road
- hand (n.)-- a bunch of cured leaves, tied together by their stems
- hand drag (v.)-- to carry the leaves out of a row and fill the baskets outside the row. This is done when the plants are too low to allow passage of a basket down a row as in regular dragging.
- hang (v.)-- a job involving climbing up in the rafters of a shed and hanging the tobacco there to be cured
- haul (v.)-- (I,II)-- to transport by means of a vehicle--"haul tobacco", (meaning full baskets), "haul empties"
- haul ass (v. , II,III)-- to work as fast as possible (especially picking)
- the men (n. , I,II)-- the Puerto Rican workers (Level III workers say simply "the Puerto Ricans" or "the Ricans")
- lath (pl. "lath") (n.)-- wooden slats on which the leaves are strung, or "sewn" by the machines in the shed, in order to be hung
- move machines (v.)-- to dismantle and move the sewing machines and other equipment from a full shed to an empty one
- pad (n.)-- and orderly pile of leaves of a certain size. (Leaves are always handled in pads, otherwise they get bruised and lose value.)
- (v.)-- (III)-- as in "to pad someone's row"-- To take pads from the row you have just picked and put them in another person's row, in order to avoid having to drag them yourself
- press (v.)-- to compress the leaves together, or overload a basket, thereby damaging the leaves
- press marks (n.)-- bruises caused by the pressing of a leaf
- sack out (v. , II,III)-- to avoid doing work, usually by hiding in the middle of the field
- scab out (v. , II,III)-- to work especially fast, generally in hopes of getting a raise (usually applied to picking and suckering)
- set (v.)-- to transplant seedlings from the seedbeds to the fields
- set over (v )-- to go over a recently set field, replacing the plants that haven't survived transplanting

- shed (n.)-- large wooden structure in which the leaves are cured
- stove (n.)-- gas burner used to supply an even flow of heat to  
the tobacco as it cures
- sucker (n.)-- any stem on the plant other than the central stalk  
(v.)-- to remove the suckers from the plants (the worst  
job on the farm)
- whack-o (n., II)-- troublemaker on the crew (implies mental im-  
balance)