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Idiolect – language of an individual

Idiolect (coined by linguist Bernard Bloch from Greek *idio* (personal, private) + *(dia) lect*) is a variant of the language used by one person, the distinctive speech of an individual, considered as a linguistic pattern unique among speakers of his or her language or dialect [6]. It is expressed in specific principles of word choice and grammatical features, as well as in words, expressions, idioms and pronunciation, specific to a given person. Each person has their own idiolect. Joining of words and sentences in speech is more unique than the use of certain specific words that nobody else uses. Idiolect can easily evolve to ecolect – a dialectal variant of the language, which is characteristic of one family [3: 23-40].

We each speak a language variety made up of a combination of features slightly different from those characteristic of any other speaker of the language, because each of us belongs to different social groups. The language variety unique to a single speaker of a language is called an idiolect. Your idiolect includes the vocabulary appropriate to your various interests and activities, pronunciations reflective of the region in which you live or have lived, and variable styles of speaking that shift subtly depending on whom you are addressing [8: 239].

Some scholars argue that idiolects in this sense do not exist, or even that the notion is incoherent, and use the word 'idiolect' to mean something else, such as a person's partial grasp of, or pattern of deviance from, language that is inherently communal. The substantial debate, here, is not over how to define a word, but over whether a broadly idiolectal perspective is to be preferred to a non-idiolectal one. Someone taking an idiolectal perspective on language regards idiolects as having ontological and/or investigative priority over social languages, which are conceived of as more or less overlapping idiolects. A non-idiolectal perspective reverses this priority.

Almost all speakers make use of several idiolects, depending on the circumstances of communication. For example, when family members talk to each other, their speech habits typically differ from those any one of them would use in, say, an interview with a prospective employer. The concept of idiolect refers to a very specific phenomenon – the speech variety, or linguistic system, used by a particular individual. According to Zdeněk Salzmann, those idiolects that have enough in common to appear at least superficially alike belong to a dialect. The term *dialect*, then, is an abstraction [8: 236].

A famous example for an individual's idiolect is Ernesto Guavera who frequently used the word "che" – meaning roughly "hey you" (and got his nickname through that).

The following example clearly shows the peculiarities of the idiolect of the main hero of the famous American cartoon "SpongeBob SquarePants":

SpongeBob: [Wearing underwear on his head and walking backwards] Mr. Krabs, hello. Do you how do?

Mr. Krabs: Why are you talking funny, man?

SpongeBob: I anything can't do right since because pickles.

Mr. Krabs: Nonsense. You'll be back working at the Krusty Krab in no time.

SpongeBob: I don't think ready back go to work, Mr. Krabs.

Mr. Krabs: You're doing just fine.

[*SpoongeBob walks through a closed door*]

Mr. Krabs: Well, maybe not. All you need to do is get your confidence back, so you can make me more money... er, I mean, patties. He-he.

SpongeBob: I how do that?

Mr. Krabs: It's like riding a bike. You never forget.

[*Sees a bicycle on a boiling pot in SpongeBob's stove*]

Mr. Krabs: Uh, I'm going to help you [5].

The obvious feature of his idiolect is leaving out words and wrong word order.

Based on work done in the US, Nancy Niedzielski and Dennis Preston describe a language ideology that appears to be common among American English speakers. According to Niedzielski and Preston, many of their subjects believe that there is one "correct" pattern of grammar and vocabulary that underlies Standard English, and that individual usage derives from this external system [1: 275].

Linguists who understand particular languages as a composite of unique, individual idiolects must nonetheless account for the fact that members of large speech communities, and even speakers of different dialects of the same language, can understand one another. All human beings seem to produce language in essentially the same way. This has led to search for universal grammar, as well as to attempts to define the nature of particular languages.

The scope of forensic linguistics includes attempts to identify whether a certain person did or did not produce a given text by comparing the style of the text with the idiolect of the individual. The forensic linguist may conclude that the text is consistent with the individual, rule out the individual as the author, or deem the comparison inconclusive [4: 12].

Key to the notion of an idiolect is the fact that the same natural language, L, can be individuated in either of two ways:

L = the language with specific (semantic, syntactic, phonological, etc.) properties.

L = the language possessed by a specific individual or population.

French, for example, is the language in which the red colour is expressed by the word *rouge*, which starts with a voiced uvular fricative. But French is also the commonest first language of residents of France, Belgium, Côte d'Ivoire, Quebec, various Swiss cantons, etc. There is no limit to the number of languages we could conjure up in the abstract using the first mode of description. But only a certain number of them will be realized, in the sense of being describable in the second mode as possessed, known, spoken, understood, or used by some individual or population.

Although the properties of *x*'s idiolect are tied stipulatively to intrinsic properties of *x*, this does not mean that two distinct individuals could not share an idiolect in principle, or have significantly overlapping idiolects in practice. Nor does it mean that one person's idiolect cannot shape someone else's. What makes a perspective on language idiolectal is commitment to an ontology of languages that may more or less overlap and may influence each other, but that above all have realization conditions that turn, somehow, only on the intrinsic properties of a single person. In contrast, non-idiolectal perspectives require an ontology of languages that can be grasped more or less adequately by its possessors, with the properties of the language itself depending on characteristics of the community and not any specific member of that community.

Chomsky and Davidson have different understanding of what it is for a single person to realize an idiolect, though how far these different emphases reflect distinct but compatible agendas rather than fundamentally competing visions is not immediately clear [2: 23].

For Chomsky, a language is realized in an individual if it is 'represented' in that individual's 'language faculty', a component of their brain. The goal of linguists working in the Chomskian tradition is to make what is represented explicit in the form of a theory. For all that, the brain properties that interest Chomsky are species-wide rather than unique to an individual. This seems paradoxical given the individualism that seems to follow from taking idiolects rather than social languages as one's focus. Chomsky's ambition has been to understand what it is about humans in general that enables them to develop adult linguistic competence. Thinking of languages as shared or communal objects does not, in his view, help in the development of an empirically plausible theory of this process. Rather, it is a distraction.

Central to Davidson's philosophy of language is his claim that the meaning of a language can and should take the form of a Tarski-like truth theory for that language. This raises the question of what it would be for a language for which we have a truth theory to be realized in a person or population. Davidson under the influence of Quine's behaviourism, is reluctant to attribute knowledge, tacit or otherwise, to speakers or their interpreters. But this disagreement is less interesting in the present context than Davidson's 1986 claim that there are in fact no such things as languages, or at least, not in the sense that philosophers have tended to suppose. In particular there is no structured entity, shared in advance by speakers and hearers that accounts for their ability to determine the truth-conditional meaning of one another's utterances [3: 33-39].

As a conclusion we can say that idiolect describes the unique and different characteristics of variety (or varieties) of language. These include voice; vocal and verbal habits; attitudes to speech and writing, personal language history, and how these affect your personal language. Of course, idiolect is also influenced by language a person shares with others: sociolects, family sociolect, whether a person uses an occupational sociolect, and whether a person can speak in non-standard dialect or other languages.

As we can see, the issues of defining idiolect still remain controversial. Researchers from different countries have different points of view on this problem. As a result the problem of idiolect is closely related to philosophy of the language.

Література
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