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Changing English, Linguistic Identity and ELT

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Abstract

A crucial part of knowing a language is knowing how to interpret variation-- what it means if someone uses one form rather than another to say the same thing. This paper examines four ongoing changes in spoken English, and what it means to be a user of the old form or the new one. We interpret the identity of the people with whom we speak based upon these minor differences, and we often assess the truth or validity of what they are saying based on our assessment. In this sense, the linguistic identity of speakers cannot be separated from the meaning of what they say. The paper goes on to explore some of the implications of these observations for the future development of ELT.

1. 'The thing is is it's like just so irritating?' Some ongoing changes in contemporary English

The sentence that appears in the heading of this section, *The thing is is it's like just so irritating?*, is not a question but a statement. Its written standard English equivalent is *It is irritating*. It would not be considered non-standard in spoken usage to say *The thing is, it's irritating*. Certainly I can imagine myself uttering that sentence. But as I have constructed it in the title, it embodies four other features which I do not believe I ever use or would ever use, but which I hear frequently and which have been attested by others in the speech of middle-class native speakers from across the English-speaking world, the frequency increasing as the speaker's age drops from 50+ to 40 to 30 to 20 or younger.

The first feature is the doubling of *is* in phrases such as *The thing is*, *The trouble is*, *The problem is*, and so on, producing *The thing is is, The trouble is is, The problem is is*. These phrases always occur at the beginning of sentences. This began to be remarked upon by linguists on The LINGUIST List, the internet bulletin board, around 1991, and is now very well attested. There have even been reports of hearing *The*

thing is is is, etc. However, the phenomenon is limited to a specific type of structure; people who use it do not accept, for example, *What I want to know is is*, or *The trouble with Harry is is*. On 13 December 1999, my son Julian, then aged 6 years 2 months, asked me at dinner to retell a story we had made up earlier that day. Shortly after I began he interrupted me, upset, saying *You're telling it the way it wasn't was*, then repeated this with greater upset when I reacted by laughing. My wife also found *You're telling it the way it wasn't was* funny, even though she regularly says *The thing is is*, which structurally is 'not English' in just the same way as *it wasn't was* is 'not English.'

On 19 January 2000 my colleague Dr. Mitsuhiko Ota, a native speaker of Japanese who grew up in Singapore and England and whose English is fully native-like, was telling me a story about an incident that occurred at Georgetown University when he was a postgraduate student there, and introduced his explanation of the incident by saying, *The thing was was*. I have also heard speakers say *The thing was is* and *The thing is was* in the same narrative circumstance.

The second feature is the use of the word *like*, followed by a glottal stop and a pause, between a form of the verb *to be* and a following independent clause, which is often reported speech or pseudo-reported speech, as in *I'm like, are you serious?* But this *like* + glottal stop + pause can follow most verbs and precede most types of verbal complements, as in the heading of this section, where it precedes an adjective clause. This feature began to attract notice from linguists including Suzanne Romaine in the mid-1980s; see particularly Blyth et al. (1990).

The third feature is more subtle, because it represents, not a new grammatical structure, but the spread in use of an existing one, a spread so extensive as virtually to bleach it of meaning content. This is the use of *just so* in expressing a value judgement, without it being emphatic in any way. Some speakers seem rarely to express a value judgement, however anodyne, without *just so*: *It's just so nice that you could come, I'm just so happy to see you, We just had so much fun, It's just so cold out today.* Although I have not seen this usage remarked upon, linguists have noted what appears to be its predecessor, the use of *so*, often with a striking lengthening, raise in pitch and increase in volume: *I'm SO happy to see you*, etc. There are other variations too, such as *just such* in *They just had such a rotten time.*

While I have characterized this usage as occurring with value judgements, I am not entirely sure about this, since it may oblige me to say that 'just-so' speakers, a group which again includes my wife, treat an extremely wide range of statements as value judgements. Some of the 'just-so' speakers I have observed in conversation on personal topics appear automatically to begin utterances as *I just, You just, He just*, before pausing and then picking up with a predicate that will usually include *so* or *such*, as though with an implicit expectation that every statement of a personal nature needs to be treated as a value judgement.

The fourth and final feature is again well attested: the use of rising intonation at the end of declarative sentences, making them sound like what in Standard English

would be questions. *My computer crashed? I don't know what to do? I'm just like, so frustrated?* This usage is said to have been first attested in Australian English, but certainly spread throughout the English-speaking world at a time when the only exported Aussie soap was *Neighbours* and the characters in it did not use this structure, as I can report from personal observation of the first few series. How exactly it spread is a mystery, though numerous accounts have been offered of what it represents in functional terms, usually some kind of softening or attenuation, so that new information or opinions are not put forward in what might strike the listener as an aggressive and uncooperative way.

2. Modes of explaining the changes

The interest of applied linguistics in features such as these are rather straightforward. The very fact that they strike us as innovations and are already widespread means that they are unlikely to be transitory features of the language. That gives them an undeniable importance, whether we like it or not, and therefore a claim on our attention. We want to know how to analyze them, why they have come about, where they originated and how far they have spread. The answers to these questions will have implications for the teaching of EFL, and indeed of Standard English generally. If it is unlikely that any of us would want to teach a foreign learner to make statements on the order of *The thing is is it's like just so irritating?*, some of the features may become acceptable in 'standard spoken' usage in the next ten or twenty years. Indeed, they may become so normal in spoken English that their absence would mark a speaker as lacking a native-like proficiency, and 'sounding like a book,' as Italians often tell me I sound when I speak Italian.

If a particular feature has a cogent functional explanation -- for instance if we can be shown that the use of post-verbal *like* expresses some nuance of meaning that is not there in its absence -- I am more likely to believe that this is an innovation worthy of the name, and something that will endure, and not something more akin to a speech defect. Perhaps what it expresses is an attitude, one which people of my generation tend to have more than people twenty years older and less than people twenty years younger. That sort of explanation we might term **micro-semantic**. It is different from the account of the rising intonation as functioning to soften or attenuate statements, which is a **pragmatic** explanation. There are also what we can call **meta-pragmatic** accounts, according to which the non-standard elements are there as space fillers, to give the brain time for verbal processing, or else in order to help manage the tempo and turn-taking in the conversation.

Linguists also construct purely **structural** explanations. For example, we might propose that the case of post-verbal *like*, in giving English the ability to express state-of-mind predicates by reported or pseudo-reported speech, is simultaneously increasing the language's overall flexibility in constructing predicates, a **syntactic** change, which in turn may simply be furthering an already latent tendency in the language to break down and merge grammatical categories, **a morphological change**. I could also imagine a hypothesis of **prosodic change**, in which the presence of

just and *so* creates a regular rhythmic pattern that English sentences are moving into.

There is another mode of explaining these changes which, almost without exception, linguists do not engage in, namely to treat them as **vicious**. Such an account would be easy to construct for the cases at hand. I, and I expect most other linguists, would simply have to take seriously our personal, visceral reaction to these structures when we hear them, which is that they are illogical (*The thing is is*), stultifyingly repetitive (*like*), clutter speech with meaningless noise (*just so*) while eliminating meaningful distinctions such as the rising-falling intonation pattern of interrogative and declarative sentences.

For some reason, we allow ourselves to be judgmental in this way only about structures that are not used by significant groups of people. Thirty years ago saying *The thing is is* would have been prima facie evidence of stuttering or some related speech defect. To call it so today, now that it has been so widely observed, would be unacceptable for a linguist speaking or writing in a public context. And yet, publicly, it would be unacceptable for someone to teach it, though again that could change in time. It did after all become acceptable in French to ask, as the equivalent of English "What is this?," *Qu'est-ce que c'est que cela?*, literally "What is this that this is that this?," a structure which grammarians of the 17th century disdained as ungrammatical, illogical, vicious nonsense. Interesting too that once something is unequivocally established as standard in a language, linguists are again free to point out its "illogicality," as I have just done.

3. The identity-based explanation

Finally, I want to explore a rather different explanatory strategy — different because it considers neither the structure of the sentence nor how it is managed nor what it expresses in terms of meaning content, at least as we usually conceive it. It is that **the use of the structure *The thing is is* marks one as a member of the sub-community of English speakers who say *The thing is is***. And likewise with the other features. Belonging to this sub-community has a potential identity value to it for just so long as not all members of the larger community say *The thing is is*. In other words, the place to look for the primary explanation of change is not the language, but the speakers — the whole language-producing human beings, not patterns of what they produce that have been abstracted away from them.

Research into linguistic identity has emerged as one of the most dynamic areas of sociolinguistics and applied linguistics in recent years. Studies include Arteaga (1994), Benjamin (1993), Ben-Rafael (1994), Duranti (1994), Edwards (1985), Fishman (1999), Ghaleb & Joseph (1999), Johnstone (1996), Joseph (1999a & b, 2000, forthcoming a & b), King (1994), Kuipers (1998), Lafont (1986), LePage & Tabouret-Keller (1985), Mühlhaüsler et al. (1990), Schiffrin (1996), Suleiman (1996, 1999).

What this perspective suggests is that the "meaning" of any innovative feature in language is first and foremost what it means to be someone who does or does not use it — how such persons are perceived by themselves and others. The primary difference between *The thing is, it's irritating* and *The thing is is, it's like just so irritating?* is in the speaker, not the text.

This is not to claim that the two sentences 'mean' exactly the same thing as sentences. The pragmatic force of some of the extra elements might be very significant. But however we characterize the difference in their meaning as sentences, this is secondary to the totality of how we interpret speakers x and y themselves on the basis of their use or non-use of these pragmatic elements.

Let me give a brief example of a somewhat different order. In 1995, when I was at the University of Hong Kong, an inter-disciplinary programme in Cognitive Science was established between the Faculties of Arts and Science, and the linguists, spread across various departments, were asked to identify their work as "cognitive" or not, with no particular consequences attached to their answer. The results did not align in any apparent way with what the individuals taught or researched. Out of curiosity I informally queried nearly all of them about why they did or did not consider their work to be "cognitive." In the end it became clear that the "cognitive" label defined precisely that group of people who wanted to be part of a group calling itself "cognitive," and the "non-cognitive" label defined just those who did not want to be part of such a group, with no other variable being significant.

The obvious difference between this case and the linguistic changes I have been discussing is that no one ever asked me whether I wanted to be a user of *The thing is is*, etc. But then, one thing which linguistic pragmatics has made us very aware of is the commonness of "indirect speech acts," such that we do not for example usually bring conversations to a close by saying "I've talked to you long enough, goodbye," but by switching from asking questions to making comments on the conversation itself, shortening our utterances, and so on. In languages which have an active *tu/vous* type distinction, the "invitation" to switch from the formal to the informal form may come as a direct invitation ("I think we've known each other long enough to use the *tu* now"), but is at least as likely to come indirectly through one of the persons simply starting to use the *tu* to the other. The reverse shift, from informal to formal, *always* comes, to my knowledge, indirectly; that is, I often hear people report their dismay when a childhood friend starts using the *vous* with them, but have never heard of someone being invited directly to make this switch.

What I am suggesting is that when someone in conversation with me says *The thing is is*, this is an indirect invitation to me to say it as well, just as the use of *tu* is. Admittedly the case of the pronouns is special because it has been so strongly institutionalized and ritualized as marking the precise nature of the relationship between two people. With the innovations, it is instead a matter of marking one's group or sub-community belonging, which of course still impacts on the relationship with the interlocutor. In both cases, the issuing of the indirect invitation may or may not be something the issuer is aware of — one can slip into the *tu* without ever planning to or even realizing it, though again the likelihood is greater here than with the innovations because of the ritualistic factor. But finally it does not matter; for if the uttering of *The thing is is* is "unconscious," then even if the perception of it, the response to it, the perception of the response to it, and the response to the perception of the response to

it are all unconscious, they are all happening at the same level and there is no reason to think that all these unconscious processes are somehow insulated from one another.

If I accept the "indirect invitation" to say *The thing is is*, I mark myself as belonging to the same group as my interlocutor. If I do not accept, I mark myself as not belonging, which my interlocutor may interpret as a deliberate refusal or a failure from ignorance, or may not interpret at all. But it is extremely unlikely that the sum total of all the acceptances or refusals I give, together with all the other signals I send intentionally and unintentionally, is going to escape interpretation. Indeed, it is from them that the other person is going to construct her image of who I am, at a deeper and more powerful level than from the "rational" contents of the words I speak.

There is an underlying assumption that "the group of people who say *The thing is is*" have a great deal more in common than that particular phrase. The linguistic innovation itself, like linguistic identity generally, is a kind of emblem that people use to interpret whether they will have the same likes and dislikes, can understand and trust each other, or more crassly, how much they can get from the other. Together with other animal species, we have evolved into what I call **instinctive overinterpreters of underspecified data**. This means that we determine a lot more about each other on very little contact than a rational analysis would permit us to know; indeed, a lot of what we determine in this way is wrong, but a phenomenal amount of it is accurate enough for our purposes. When I hear someone say *just so* in two or three successive sentences, I instinctively draw a lot of conclusions about him or her, that will vary tremendously according to how well the general associations I make with *just-so* speakers accord with how this individual looks, dresses, speaks and otherwise behaves. **It is largely on this basis that I will evaluate the truth or falsity the assertions they make to me in the words they utter.** This, again, is why linguistic identity matters so much. It comes into operation *before* the functioning of language as a tool for representation and communication, and *determines* that functioning, rather than being some kind of second-level gloss.

It must be recognized that the overinterpretation that is intrinsic to the functioning of linguistic identity operates with a considerable amount of logical circularity. For instance, suppose I associate final rising intonation in declarative sentences with "powerless" speakers, because my experience has been that non-professional people use it more than professional people. I then hear it used by an expert medical witness in a legal case, and my reaction is that he is less sure of his facts than he purports to be. I may be right or wrong, but my reaction is based on a faulty chain of reasoning, as follows: I have heard non-professional people say *x*, therefore anyone who says *x* is unprofessional.

I am not saying that the judgements made in this way are wrong. The complexity of linguistic identity may be discerned from the fact that, although untenable by strict logic, such judgements may nonetheless be perceptive and astute and, in the courtroom context, help to prevent miscarriages of justice. On the other hand, they may

sometimes be silly and misguided and help bring about miscarriages of justice. Such is not only the complexity of linguistic identity, but its power. Viewed from this angle, the most basic and meaningful elements in my title are the words *The thing is is*, *like* and *just so*, plus the non-interrogative rising intonation. The elements *it's irritating*, by not lending themselves so immediately to overinterpretation because of their straightforward semantic content, are less important.

4. Implications for ELT

The implications of "language variation" for language teaching and learning have been spelled out at length since the 1980s (see e.g., Bayley & Preston 1996; Tarone 1988,). What research on linguistic identity has revealed is the full extent to which we interpret linguistic variations in evaluating the people with whom we communicate, and assess the truth or reliability of what they say. Traditional approaches to language teaching are very partial, focusing on the "rational" elements within productive skills -- which makes practical sense up to a point, since not everything can be taught at once. But what is worth noting is that the ideal end product of ELT would not be a student who says and writes *The thing is, it's irritating*, if he or she cannot also interpret a great deal from other people saying either this or *The thing is is, it's like just so irritating?*, and even make use of some of these innovative elements if it suits a particular purpose. A student who lacks all this knowledge is, for many purposes, less competent in English than one who can make the necessary interpretations but who himself says *Thing is, is irritating.* This knowledge needs ultimately to be incorporated into ELT. At this point we are still imagining how this might be done because we have barely begun to understand how linguistic identity functions for native speakers. The imperative for including such understanding within ELT and the teaching of other languages means that the whole area of language and identity is a top priority for applied linguistic research at this time.

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