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# The Individual

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## Individual

For the most part, linguistic theory makes statements about languages rather than about speakers, conceptualizing its object of study in such a way as to exclude from consideration individual voices and individuals' choices. The idea that language is most clearly seen as an abstract system, located in the social realm, has its roots in the foundational texts of twentieth-century structuralism. But anyone who thinks about linguistic variation and change is forced to confront questions about the relationships between individual speakers and languages. Some nineteenth-century comparative linguists, asking the still troublesome "actuation question" about how changes in linguistic systems get started, argued that change begins in creative choices by individuals. In the twentieth century, linguistic anthropologists such as Edward Sapir, Dell Hymes, and Paul Friedrich repeatedly stressed the importance of thinking about language from the perspective of the individual as well as from the social perspective.

Underlying this view is the observation that language is fundamentally the property of the individual. This is true whether language is defined as competence (no two speakers have the same set of experiences from which to generalize, so no two speakers could possibly have exactly the same knowledge of language) or whether language is defined as discourse (even in settings in which ideological individualism – the valuation of individuality and its expression – does not play the role it does in Western societies, different people speak differently and say different things). Emile Benveniste argued, in fact, that it is precisely language that creates phenomenological individuality: language makes subjectivity possible via (universal) systems of grammatical person, forcing us to categorize the world into self and others.

Thinking about language from the perspective of the individual means re-examining conventional wisdom about how utterances come to be and how they are interpreted. For example, theories of pragmatics typically describe the process of interpretation as based in conventions shared by communities: people can interpret utterances if they can parse them into allowable patterns, if they have heard them before, or if they depart from familiar struc-

tures or formulas in conventional ways. But while conventionality is without a doubt crucial in interpretation – we far more often decide what an utterance means with reference to familiar patterns of structure and use than completely *de novo* – speakers can and do cope with linguistic novelty. This happens most obviously in the context of verbal artistry, in interlinguistic or intercultural communication, and in early childhood. However, since no two individuals could completely share sets of conventions, interpreting forms and strategies that are completely new is an aspect of all meaning-making. If we take this aspect of discourse as fundamental, we need a theory of pragmatics that sees its basic task as explaining how general cognitive strategies for interpretation are deployed rather than just how pre-existing conventions are accessed. Rules and conventions, in this view, are convenient shortcuts to interpretations, useful in cases of relatively conventional ways of meaning, rather than being the basic mechanism by which meanings are computed.

Standard accounts of linguistic variation and change are also framed on the abstract level of the speech community. Individuals are operationalized as bundles of demographic characteristics, and, in the traditional variationist view, an individual's linguistic behavior is implicitly seen as determined by these characteristics. (Women speak the way they do because they are women, working-class speakers because they are working-class, and so on.) Some more recent accounts supplement this model with the important observation that ideologies – beliefs about what social and linguistic facts mean – play a key mediating role. But social facts and linguistic facts, ideologies and ways of speaking, are also mediated by individual speakers. The actual mechanisms by which variation comes to have meaning and patterns of language use come to change can only be seen in situated choices (often unconscious but sometimes not) by individuals creating unique ways to sound, to be, and to respond to specific rhetorical exigencies.

Thinking about variation from the individual outward rather than from the social inward means thinking about how individuals create voices by selecting and combining the linguistic resources available to them, resources which may be relatively codified, shared, and consistent (such as a school-taught standard variety or a stylized, out-group representation of a non-standard variety) or which may be highly idiosyncratic, identified with particular situations or people rather than with groups (“the way my mother talks,” for instance). Not all speakers have access to the same variety of resources. For example, the people in the relatively homogeneous, relatively isolated communities that were traditionally the focus of research by dialectologists, sociolinguists, and anthropological linguists may in some cases have had a relatively limited range of available ways of speaking and evaluating speech, and may accordingly have sounded more like one another and shared more norms for evaluating what variability meant. But completely homogeneous speech communities have always been a theoretical idealization, and even relatively homogeneous communities are less and less typical, so it is increasingly evident that our models need to describe speakers in more mobile, heterogeneous social worlds as well.

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Working outward from the individual also helps in rethinking questions about other concepts developed with reference to abstract collectivities and ways of speaking: What is a language, for example? What is a speech community? What does it mean to be bilingual? It is being increasingly suggested that the questions that define linguistics can only be answered in full with reference to the particular, by recasting questions about the social as questions about the individual, questions about language as questions about discourse, questions about rules and constraints as questions about strategies and resources. Taking the perspective of the individual on language and discourse means shifting to a more rhetorical way of imagining how communication works, a way of thinking about communication that incorporates ideas such as strategy, purpose, ethos, agency (and hence responsibility), and choice. It also means a shift to the sort of methodological particularity that A. L. Becker calls "modern philology," in which work in the bottom-up, inside-outward cases-and-interpretations mode supplements work of the more traditional sort.

(See also *acquisition, community, contact, crossing, ideology, improvisation, intentionality, maxim, names, reconstruction, relativity, variation, voice*)

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