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# The Disappearance of the Geographical Dimension of Language in American Linguistics

Pius ten Hacken

Traditionally, a language such as English is conceived of as consisting of a number of dialects. The description of the geographical distribution of dialects has never had the same important role in American linguistics as in European linguistics. In his description of the European approach, Bloomfield noted a number of conceptual problems with the application and interpretation of isoglosses. Among the Post-Bloomfieldians, Hockett in particular developed an alternative approach based on mutual intelligibility of idiolects. In Chomskyan linguistics, the concept of language as a mental knowledge component resolves the problems noted by Bloomfield as a side effect of explaining a number of generally accepted properties of language. Thus, the geographical dimension of language can be seen to develop into an epiphenomenon in the history of 20th century American linguistics.

In the popular view of language, people in Yorkshire and people in Devon speak different dialects of the same language. The Yorkshire dialect and the dialect of Devon are markedly different, but they are both dialects of English. The division of languages into dialects, spoken in geographically restricted areas, is a familiar phenomenon for all European languages, not only for the larger ones such as English, German, and French, but also for minority languages such as Welsh, where the Northern dialects are quite different from the Southern dialects (King, 3f.). A corollary of this view is that languages have a geographical dimension, as formulated by Hall (135) in the title of his chapter covering dialects, "Language covers territory."

The treatment of this situation is rather different in European and American linguistics. I use the terms European and American linguistics here in the sense of Joseph, who studies in detail the interaction of dif-

ferent factors contributing to the opposition. In general, one may say that the European tradition has aimed to give scientific backing to the popular notion of language and dialects, whereas the American tradition has side-tracked the issue. European linguistics has produced major dialect and language atlases, whereas mainstream American linguistics has, as will be argued here, first put the focus on different issues, then abolished the geographical dimension of language altogether. This development can be followed by considering the positions of Leonard Bloomfield, the Post-Bloomfieldians, and Noam Chomsky.

### Dialect Geography in Bloomfield's *Language*

In many respects Bloomfield's *Language* is a foundational work of the American tradition in linguistics. It maintains a subtle balance between an overview of the achievements in the study of language as they were commonly perceived and accepted and the introduction of a radically new, behaviourist framework for the study of language. As described by Matthews (12-17), this balance resulted in a relatively unproblematic acceptance of the entire work, including the behaviourism it introduces, throughout American linguistics.

Bloomfield discusses dialect geography in chapter 18, following a chapter about the comparative method and preceding a number of chapters about language change. This indicates that, for Bloomfield, dialect geography is more directly related to diachronic than to synchronic linguistics. The study of dialect geography belongs to the subject of linguistics as perceived in the European tradition, and is in fact often motivated by the desire to understand the principles of language change. The examples discussed by Bloomfield are from European studies of European languages.

In his coverage of the topic, Bloomfield explains the main concepts and methods of traditional dialect geography and discusses how this area can be related to the in his view more central area of synchronic, descriptive linguistics he discusses in chapters 2-16. There are also some places in the chapters on synchronic linguistics where Bloomfield mentions information about dialect studies, in particular in chapter 3 on speech communities.

The study of dialect geography as discussed by Bloomfield raises three main problems. Although they are never systematically listed in

*Language*, Bloomfield's awareness of them can be inferred from more or less explicit remarks. They are listed in (1).

- (1) a. Assuming that a language consists of a number of dialects, how can it be determined that a dialect belongs to one language or another?
- b. How can the borderline between major dialects be derived from the study of isoglosses?
- c. What is the basic unit to which a local dialect can be assigned?

The problem referred to in (1a) is the well-known problem of the dialect continuum. Bloomfield formulates it as “[W]hat degree of difference between adjoining speech forms [i.e. dialects] justifies the name of a language border?” (54) and states that the only criterion with a relationship to language is the politically determined choice of a standard language. This problem is serious if we take the goal of, for instance, English linguistics to be the description of the English language. Although the case of English is less problematic than many others (e.g. German, Italian, Spanish), there are borderline cases such as Scots and Jamaican, for which the question arises of whether we are dealing with a dialect of English or with a separate language. For a case such as Galician, spoken in Northwestern Spain, there are three possibilities: it can be (and has been) considered as a dialect of Spanish, a dialect of Portuguese, or a language of its own.

The problem referred to in (1b) is of a very different nature. In traditional dialect geography, it does not arise. A modern example is Heestermans & Stroop's study of the West-Brabant dialect of Dutch. In order to delimit the dialect region, they choose isoglosses characterizing the main perceptual and geographic differences with the adjacent dialect regions. In their choice they are guided by the research carried out by A. Weijnen in the 1930s. Bloomfield, by contrast, sees finding the boundaries between major dialects or dialect regions as a problem, because “isoglosses in a long-settled area are so many as to make possible almost any desired classification of dialects” (340). The difference can be explained as a difference in research question. Whereas Weijnen and Heestermans & Stroop are looking for data on the basis of a hypothesis of what the West-Brabant dialect area is, Bloomfield wants the major dialect areas to emerge from the analysis method applied to the data. He does not accept a priori that West-Brabants is a major dialect, but wants this conclusion to arise from an operation applied to isoglosses, which is not specifically tailored to identifying this dialect. In this context

Bloomfield also notes that while bundles of isoglosses could be used as a criterion, careful inspection of the data usually shows that isoglosses are not bundled over their full length. He gives the example of the "Rhine fan" in the German-Dutch dialect continuum. East of the Rhine, a bundle of isoglosses separates medial and final stops (p, t, k), as pronounced in the Northern area, from fricatives (f, s, ch), used in corresponding positions to the South of this line. West of the Rhine, however, each stop/fricative pair has its own borderline.

The problem in (1c) concerns the collection of data as much as their interpretation. The minimal unit in dialect studies is usually taken to be a village. Depending on the settlement pattern, it may be difficult to determine what constitutes a village. Problems arise not only for scattered settlements, but also for towns and cities. A practical solution seems to be to consider a village to be a speech community in which people speak the same way. However, as Bloomfield notes, "If we observed closely enough, we should find that no two persons [. . .] spoke exactly alike" (45). Again, this seems to be a problem which does not bother dialect geographers to the same extent. They adopt a pragmatic solution, usually tacitly.

Although Bloomfield does not propose solutions to the problems in (1), the level of sophistication of his analysis can be appreciated when we compare it to Sapir's *Language*, which had appeared twelve years earlier. For Sapir, dialects are "something like an ideal linguistic entity dominating the speech habits of the members of each group" (148) and difficulties in drawing borderlines between dialects because speakers could be classified in either of two dialects presuppose "a conception of dialectic variation [which] does not correspond to the facts as we know them" (149).

### The Post-Bloomfieldian Approach to Dialects

Post-Bloomfieldian linguistics is the term used here, following Matthews (18ff.) and others, to refer to the school of linguistics around Zellig Harris, Charles Hockett, and Bernard Bloch. Inspired by Bloomfield, they were in many respects more radical in the pursuit of his ideas and dominated American linguistics in the 1940s and 1950s.

In Post-Bloomfieldian linguistics, the points in (1) were taken up in different ways. One perspective is illustrated by Harris's *Methods*, which

gives guidelines for the collection and analysis of linguistic data. In this context, the existence of dialects constitutes a problem to be defused. Harris discusses dialects briefly in the chapter on "Methodological Preliminaries" (9f.). For Harris "The universe of discourse for a descriptive linguistic investigation is a single language or dialect." This remark indicates on the one hand that the terminological difference between language and dialect is not important to Harris, on the other that differences between dialects as encountered in field work are considered only as a disturbing factor, not as an element of language to be described in its own right. The interpretation that variation in general can and should be ignored is supported by the remarks that "Even though any dialect or language may vary slightly with time or with replacement of informants, it is in principle held constant throughout the investigation" and "In most cases this presents no problem, since the whole speech of the person or community shows dialectal consistency; we can define the dialect simply as the speech of the community in question."

The picture emerging from these remarks is that an important current in Post-Bloomfieldian linguistics, represented by Harris, completely side-tracks the questions in (1). While (1a) and (1b) are deemed unimportant, (1c) is solved by assuming what Chomsky in *Aspects* calls "a completely homogeneous speech community" (3). While Chomsky presents this as an idealization (cf. discussion below), Harris claims this is what we find "[i]n most cases" also in practice.

As opposed to Harris's practical orientation in *Methods*, Hockett's *Course* addresses the question of dialects in a much more theoretical way. To Hockett, dialects are part of the nature of language and should be described accordingly. His starting point is the idiolect, "the totality of speech habits of a single person at a given time" (321). While conceding that people may possess two idiolects and that we cannot observe speech habits (but only speaking behaviour) directly, he assumes that idiolects are basically unproblematic. By taking idiolects as a starting point, Hockett answers question (1c) in a principled way.

With this notion of idiolect, Hockett then addresses question (1a). He considers both a language and a dialect as "a collection of more or less similar idiolects" (322), but "the degree of similarity of the idiolects in a single dialect is presumed to be greater than that of all the idiolects in the language." This degree of similarity is measured in terms of mutual intelligibility. Hockett (323f.) introduces the terms *L-simplex* and *L-complex* as defined in (2).

- (2) a. An *L-simplex* is a set of idiolects such that any pair of idiolects in the set is mutually intelligible.
- b. An *L-complex* is a set of idiolects such that any pair of idiolects in the set is linked by a chain of mutually intelligible idiolects.

After introducing the terms in (2), Hockett no longer mentions the terms *dialect* and *language*, but his examples show that common designations such as German, French, and Italian refer neither to *L-simplexes* nor to *L-complexes*. An *L-complex* corresponds to a dialect continuum rather than to a language. Thus, French and Italian together constitute a single *L-complex*. It seems safe to assume that Hockett considers an *L-simplex* as corresponding to a dialect, although the equation is not made explicit.

At first sight, replacing isoglosses by mutual intelligibility as a basis for distinguishing dialects seems to be at odds with the general goal of Post-Bloomfieldian linguistics to base the study of language on objective and observable criteria. It should be emphasized, however, that Hockett does not propose to describe dialects or *L-simplexes* as such, but proposes a deeper level of analysis to explain mutual intelligibility. At this level he introduces the terms *common core* and *overall pattern* (332-336), defined as in (3).

- (3) a. The *common core* of a set of idiolects consists of the shared features in the range of productive control.
- b. The *overall pattern* of a set of idiolects with a common core includes everything that is in the repertory of any idiolect in the set, productively or receptively.

In order to understand the definitions in (3) it is crucial to see that the idiolect of a speaker X has different ranges for productive control, speech habits used by X, and receptive control, speech habits understood by X. Features outside the receptive control of a listener constitute *code noise* for this listener. A certain degree of code noise can be catered for by redundancy in the language. To the extent that the receptive control of one idiolect overlaps with the productive control of the other, one-way intelligibility exists. In this way, the phenomenon of mutual intelligibility, including its asymmetric nature, can be explained in terms of speech habits in an idiolect.

Defining the object of linguistic description, Hockett now proposes three possible approaches: describing an idiolect, describing the com-

mon core of a set of idiolects as in (3a), and describing the overall pattern of a set of idiolects as in (3b). Each of these three notions can take the place of basic unit in (1c). The new terminology does not provide for the notions of dialect and language referred to in (1a). Although L-simplexes, described in their common core or overall pattern, can be compared to dialects, they are based on mutual intelligibility instead of isoglosses, so that (1b) becomes irrelevant. It is interesting to note that the relationship between the common core (or the overall pattern) and mutual intelligibility is the reverse of that between dialects and isoglosses. Whereas dialect and language are based on isoglosses, common core and overall pattern underlie mutual intelligibility.

### The Chomskyan Conception of Language

If we compare the appearance of dialects in Bloomfield, Post-Bloomfieldian works, and Chomskyan linguistics, the somewhat peripheral position in the first two approaches contrasts with a quasi-total absence in the last one, at least in the early writings. This does not mean that Chomskyan linguistics has no implications for the study of dialects, but that the study of dialects did not play a role in shaping the approach to language. For this reason, it seems appropriate to introduce the approach of Chomskyan linguistics first in a general way, before sketching its implications for the study of dialects.

Compared to Post-Bloomfieldian linguistics, Chomskyan linguistics is marked by a number of innovations. The most striking innovation in Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* is the scope of linguistic procedures. Bloomfield and the Post-Bloomfieldians considered a procedure for the analysis of linguistic data adequate only if it produced the same analysis independently of any input hypothesis, as formulated explicitly by Hockett, *Two Models* (232). Chomsky abandons this idea as unrealistic, proposing instead that the procedure should only test a hypothesis (49-56). This immediately affects problem (1b) as recognized by Bloomfield, because there is no longer an immediate need to have a procedure recognizing major dialects from isoglosses. At least on this count, Chomskyan linguistics would accept the common procedure in dialectology.

Two further innovations in the goals of linguistics are not so evident from Chomsky's 1957 publication, but appear quite explicitly in pro-

ceedings of conferences held soon after. The first concerns the nature of the object studied, the second the type of result expected from the study of this object. At the 1958 Texas Conference on Problems of Linguistic Analysis in English, in the discussion of his paper, Chomsky states that "The empirical data [. . .] are the native speaker's intuitions" (158). While Hockett (*Two Models*, 232) had banned any reference to the speaker's mind, thus reiterating Bloomfield's statements to this effect, Chomsky now places the concept of language, taken as the object of study in linguistics, in the mind of the native speaker. In *Aspects* (3), this is formulated in terms of the opposition between competence and performance. The adoption of competence as the object of description has far-reaching consequences for the basic unit of dialect analysis, Bloomfield's (1c).

The second major innovation introduced by Chomsky after *Syntactic Structures* concerns the goal of linguistics. At the 1960 international congress on Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science in Stanford, Chomsky expands on the discussion of procedures in *Syntactic Structures* and proposes that linguistics should not only be descriptive but explanatory. Among Post-Bloomfieldians, "descriptive linguistics" had been used almost as a synonym for "serious, scientific linguistics" (cf. Hockett, *Course*, 321). Chomsky introduces the explanatory goal as follows: "A general theory of linguistic structure [. . .] provide[s] an account of a hypothetical language-learning device and could thus be regarded as a theoretical model for the intellectual abilities that the child brings to language learning" (*Explanatory Models*, 535). The decision to aim for an explanation requires a phenomenon of language to be explained. The choice of language acquisition is motivated by the fact that the acquisition of a system which is so complex that linguists are struggling with its description is not an easy problem. Yet every child masters this problem without apparent effort, so that there must be properties in the human mind and the structure of language facilitating it.

Since these innovations, the framework Chomskyan linguistics established for the study of language has remained remarkably stable. It has survived a large number of theoretical innovations, which can be interpreted as progressive moves towards a solution of the problem. Although the terminology has changed somewhat, the recent *Minimalist Program* states "the primary goals of linguistics" (3) in terms which can immediately be traced to the descriptions developed in the late 1950s, as is seen in (4).

- (4) a. "To attain descriptive adequacy for a particular language L, the theory of L (its grammar) must characterize the state attained by the language faculty, or at least some of its aspects.
- b. To attain explanatory adequacy, a theory of language must characterize the initial state of the language faculty and show how it maps experience to the state attained." [Chomsky, *Minimalist Program*, 3]

In (4a), the "state attained by the language faculty" is the speaker's competence, a knowledge component of the mind underlying the data which can be gathered, including grammaticality judgements. The competence is described in a grammar, which explains the data. The phrase "or at least some of its aspects" emphasizes that the description of the competence need not be complete before aspects of it can be explained. In (4b), the "initial state of the language faculty" is the genetically determined predisposition for language acquisition. The language acquisition process is described as a mapping from this initial state to the state referred to in (4a), influenced by "experience," i.e. linguistic input from the environment. The language faculty is described in a theory of grammar, which explains the competence in the sense of how it can be a product of language acquisition. Cf. ten Hacken (1997, 2002b) for a more detailed treatment of the framework of Chomskyan linguistics and the differences from competing frameworks.

### Dialects in Chomskyan Linguistics

In a linguistic framework guided by (4), language can be studied at two levels. The descriptive adequacy in (4a) calls for the study of competence in the individual speaker's mind. The explanatory adequacy in (4b) requires the study of language as a property of the human species. These are the only two levels at which language is a real entity for Chomsky. There cannot be a single entity in the world which is spoken by a speaker in Yorkshire and a speaker in Devon. Nor can there be such an entity shared by two speakers in Yorkshire. In this sense, then, English as a language as well as the dialects of English are epiphenomena. This argument is elaborated in ten Hacken (2002a).

Calling dialects and standard languages an epiphenomenon does not solve the issue of why they are perceived as entities. The situation may appear somewhat similar to the one Hockett ends up in when he as-

sumes that idiolects are the only real basis for the study of language. It is therefore useful to compare the concept of idiolect for Hockett with the concept of competence for Chomsky.

There are two important similarities between idiolect and competence. First, both are restricted to a single speaker, in principle independently of the speech community. This can be seen as inherited from Bloomfield's observation that no two speakers have exactly the same language. The reference to the "completely homogeneous speech community" in *Aspects* (3) is not a counterargument, because Chomsky mentions it in a list of idealizations facilitating the study of language. There is no claim that such a community is indispensable (eliminating an idealization strengthens the theory) and even less that it exists in reality. A second property shared by idiolect and competence is that they are explicitly presented as opposed to performance. Hockett states this as in (5).

- (5) "We cannot even observe the *habits* of a single individual: all that is directly observable is the speaking *behavior* of individuals." [Hockett, *Course*, 322, original emphasis]

However, while Hockett's "speaking behavior" can be assimilated to Chomsky's performance, (5) also points to the most striking difference between idiolect and competence. Whereas an idiolect is a set of habits, competence is a component of knowledge. As a knowledge component, competence is realized in the speaker's mind. A set of habits is not a real entity in this sense because Hockett refuses to ascribe any properties to the speaker's mind.

One of the consequences of this difference between idiolect and competence is that a larger variety of data can be gathered in Chomskyan linguistics. Whatever indicates the nature of the knowledge component can be used. Sets of habits can only be observed as repeated occurrences in behaviour, but they can be manipulated in the sense suggested by Hockett's terms explained in (2) and (3). These operations are meaningless for competence. Although the competences of two speakers can be similar, it does not make sense to speak of a common core as in (3a), because competence is not defined as a set.

The kind of operations suggested by Hockett indicates that we are dealing with a type of what Chomsky, *Knowledge of Language* (19-21), calls Externalized or E-Language, as opposed to Internalized or I-Language, equivalent to competence. In its most prototypical form, an E-language

is a set of grammatical sentences human beings have an imperfect knowledge of standard languages such as English or French can also be thought of as E-languages. In the establishment of a standard, the analysis of usage plays an important role. Here, operations such as finding the common core or overall pattern of usage, properly weighted as to the types and contexts of usage considered relevant for the standard, can be performed meaningfully. In the role of standard language, used as a norm in evaluation, E-languages are important in language planning and language teaching. In one sense, then, languages such as English and dialects such as those of Yorkshire and Devon are E-languages, purely sociological and political phenomena, irrelevant to the study of competence.

There is another sense of language and dialect used in the context of Chomskyan linguistics, however, which is based on more theory-internal notions. In *Aspects* Chomsky observed that "As a long-range task for general linguistics, we might set the problem of developing an account of th[e] innate linguistic theory that provides the basis for language learning" (25), adding that "Clearly, it would be utopian to expect to achieve explanatory adequacy on a large scale in the present state of linguistics" (26). In the 1960s, grammars in Chomskyan linguistics were formulated in terms of rewrite rules and transformations. It is not difficult to prove that, given any set of sentences, there is an infinite set of different grammars generating them. It is remarkable, however, that children growing up in the same environment have a much more similar competence than can be predicted by a model of inferring a rule-based grammar from input sentences. Obviously, the acquisition process makes use of additional types of knowledge, not directly inferrable from the input data. For this reason, in the 1970s, Chomskyan linguistics gradually turned away from the formulation of individual rules to the adoption of more general principles. These general principles are hypotheses about the nature of the additional knowledge used in language acquisition. The child does not have to learn these principles, because they are valid for all languages and can be supposed to be innate.

If we replace specific rewrite rules and transformations by innate general principles, the problem shifts from the surprising similarity of competence acquired by different people to the question of how to account for the differences between languages. Important early work on contrastive analysis in Chomskyan linguistics was done by Rizzi for Italian and Kayne for French in the 1970s. They proposed a number of

parameters distinguishing English, Italian, and French. In *Knowledge of Language*, Chomsky gives an overview of the principles and parameters assumed in the mid 1980s. Although they are changed rather thoroughly in the *Minimalist Program*, the idea of general, innate principles with a finite number of parameters is still generally accepted in Chomskyan linguistics. Language acquisition can then be modelled as parameter setting.

On the basis of the principle and parameter model, Chomsky introduces a term *core language* which is quite different from Hockett's *common core* in (3a). As used in *Knowledge of Language* (147), *core language* contrasts with the *periphery* and refers to those parts of grammar which are determined by the principles with specific settings of the parameters. Thus, in the core language it is specified whether verbs need an overt subject, as in English (*she comes* vs. *\*comes*), or not, as in Italian (*viene* "he/she/it comes"). Which verbs are irregular in their past tense, however, is a matter of periphery. The exact distinction between core language and periphery is determined by the theory of the language faculty developed. Decisions as to the classification of particular phenomena as part of the core or periphery have empirical implications in the domain of language acquisition, but it would lead us too far afield to consider the exact relationship in more detail here.

Given this notion of *core language*, we can meaningfully speak of a language as defined by a particular setting of all parameters. The question is, then, how this notion of language relates to the familiar languages such as English, French, and Italian, and to dialects. There are a number of points to note here. First, the most prototypical difference between languages and certainly one of the most centrally studied differences among dialects is that they have different words to refer to the same entity, or even different ways of conceptualizing the world resulting in the well-known range of problems of translating individual words. The entire lexicon, however, is outside of the core language, because the core language is only what is determined by parameter settings. Second, the definition of core language is entirely independent of the concept of English, French, or Italian as a language. It is unlikely that any major European language would coincide exactly with a core language. The level of specificity is a matter of the theory, so that the Yorkshire and Devon dialects of English may come out as different core languages, but not the Northern and Southern dialects of Welsh – or the reverse. Third, the core languages found in this way are completely independent

of any geographical dimension. They are determined by and materialized in the competence of the individual speaker. The only place a language occupies in Chomskyan linguistics is non-geographical, in the speaker's mind.

### Conclusion

If we consider the concept of dialect in the 20th century history of American linguistics, we can distinguish three approaches.

The first approach is based on isoglosses. This approach assigns dialects a primarily geographical identity. The Yorkshire dialect is determined by isoglosses delimiting it from its neighbouring dialects. Dialect geography in this sense corresponds to the common practice in Europe and its main concepts are often tacitly assumed, e.g. by Sapir, but also by Hall, who gives maps with the geographical distribution of linguistic features (135-156). Bloomfield observes a number of problems with this approach, which caused the emergence of other approaches.

The second approach is based on mutual intelligibility. Here dialects are different speech habits determined only indirectly by geography. As Hockett (*Course*, 326) put it, "The ease with which people can understand each other, and the degree of resemblance of their speech habits, are both functions of the amount of talking that takes place among them, and this, in turn, is partly dependent on where and how they live – on geography." In this approach, the Yorkshire dialect could be arrived at by first selecting a number of speakers as prototypical speakers of this dialect, then determining the L-simplex they are part of, and finally describing the common core or overall pattern of the idiolects of these speakers.

The third approach is based on parameters as in Chomskyan linguistics. Here dialects are core languages. The Yorkshire dialect corresponds to a particular setting of parameters. It is not geographically determined but realized in the competence of the individual speakers, i.e. as knowledge components in their minds.

The temporal sequence of these approaches can be interpreted as reflecting progress in the understanding of the nature of dialects. In the first stage, social factors are subsumed in the geographical dimension. The emergence of the concept of mutual intelligibility marks the emancipation of the social factors involved in language variation. In

Chomskyan linguistics, the distinction between the use of language and the underlying knowledge by the users is accounted for. As far as the geographical dimension plays a role in language it is a highly subsidiary one. It is entirely subsumed in social factors. Social factors are important in language acquisition because parameter setting depends on the input a child gets at the relevant age. The input determines which core language is acquired.

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