A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF METATHESIS IN PERSIAN

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Abstract

Review of literature shows that metathesis, as a phonological process, has not been studied from a sociolinguistic perspective to date. Thus, the present study seeks to investigate the relationship between extralinguistic parameters such as sex, age, and social class and the use of 'metathesis' in modern Persian. Along these lines, data were elicited from four socioeconomically different groups of Persian speakers in Tehran. The statistical analyses of the data indicate that there is a high correlation between sociolinguistic variables and the use of 'metathesis' in Persian.

It is widely held that language is primarily a social phenomenon and that an intimate and reciprocal relationship exists between language and society (Labov, 1966, 1972; Hymes, 1964, 1974; Gumperz, 1971; Trudgill, 1983; Chailka, 1990; Hudson, 1990; Holmes, 1992; Wardhaugh, 1993). According to Trudgill (1983) two aspects of language behavior are significant from a social point of view: first, the function of language in establishing and maintaining social relationship; and second, the role played by language in conveying information about the speaker, i.e., the 'clue-bearing function' of language. Both of these two aspects of linguistic behavior are reflections of the fact that there is a close inter-relationship between language and society.

When people use language they do more than just to get another person to understand the speaker's thoughts and feelings. Interlocutors in a speech event use language in subtle ways to define their relationship to each other. Such sociosymbolic subtleties in language use serve as emblematic functions: they identify the speaker as belonging to a particular group, or having a particular social identity (Guy, 1988).

The sociolinguistic literature is rich in the studies that seek to relate linguistic data to extralinguistic variables and contexts, thereby the verbal behavior to the social characteristics of language users. However, there is a difference between the early studies and the recent ones in that the latter employ modern scientific methods of investigation. What follows is a report on two pioneering efforts that have been made to identify the social correlates of linguistic behavior in English-speaking communities namely Labov (1966) and Trudgill (1974).

The contemporary sociolinguistics owes much of its disciplines and directionality to the American sociolinguist William Labov. In fact, no other scholar has been so influential in the field. By introducing a new stylistic and methodological matrix, he set an example for the coming scholars. What Labov did was to focus on a small area of New York which is mainly a working-class district. He selected nearly 200 people as a representative sample of the social classes in the district. Interviewing the subjects individually, he engaged them in a range of language activities including casual talk, formal speech, reading a passage, and reading word lists and minimal pairs aloud. The speech of each subject included a number of key phonemes. For example, the phoneme /r/ as in 'bird' and 'floor', the vowel in 'pass' and 'dance', and the vowel in 'caught' and 'dog'.

Labov's central finding was not simply that members of different classes pronounced these sounds in different ways, but that the differences related systematically to social class background of the speakers. At the same time, the sounds showed variation within any given class according to the formality of the speech activity. He also found that certain forms of the key sounds are regarded as more prestigious than others. The patterns of high and low prestige were the same for all the informants. An important conclusion of his study was that women show much more concern for the correctness of their speech than men do.

In another part of this study in New York City, Labov showed both stylistic and social stratifications of /θ/ as in 'thing' and 'think'. There are three possible variant forms of /θ/ namely /t/, /tθ/, and /θ/, the last being standard, the first being the least standard or the most stigmatized, and the middle an internal variant. He concluded that in careful speech, women use fewer stigmatized forms /t/ and /tθ/ than men and are more sensitive to the prestigious form /θ/. It was also observed that the lower social classes used more stigmatized forms than the upper classes.

The next significant quantitative sociolinguistic study was conducted by Trudgill (1974). In his

Norwich, England, study, Trudgill examined three consonantal and thirteen vocalic variables. The consonants were /h/ as in 'happy', /ŋ/ as in 'walking', and /t/ as in 'better'. The vocalic variables were the vowels used in words such as 'bad, name, path, tell, here, hair, ride, bird, top, know, boot, and tune'. Many of these consonants and vowels have more than two variants. Therefore, the study aimed at specifying the least preferred (the most non-standard) and the most preferred (the most standard) variants. Trudgill concluded that the use of these variables is closely related to social class and the degree of formality of speech. It was shown, for example, that people of higher social class use the variants /ŋ/, /t/, and /h/ more frequently than the corresponding /n/, /?/, and /Ø/. Also in the case of /ŋ/, its use is related not only to social class but also to sex, with females showing a greater preference for /ŋ/ than males.

Trudgill kept the style constant and observed that the lower the social class the greater the occurrence of non-standard forms. By keeping the social class constant, he found that the less formal the style, the greater the occurrence of non-standard forms.

Review of literature shows that, to date, a large variety of linguistic features have undergone sociolinguistic investigation. In other words, sociolinguistics is rich in studies that seek to relate linguistic data to extralinguistic variables thereby the verbal behavior to the social characteristics of language users. There are in fact few issues that have escaped the attention of researchers in the field and metathesis seems to be one of them.

What is metathesis?
'Metathesis' is a phonological process that refers to the transposition of speech sounds, i.e., alteration in the normal sequence of two adjoining sounds in a word. The effect may be heard when people say, for example, *aks* for *ask* in some dialects of English, or *purty good* for *pretty good* in the speech of some American cowboys (Yule, 1988). Further examples of metathesis include *perscription* for *prescription*, *prespiration* for *perspiration*, and *perserve* for *preserve*. In these examples a metathesis rule switches the two adjacent sounds in certain contexts.

Although 'metathesis' is an important phonological process it seems to be a neglected area. For instance, no mention is made of metathesis in popular books on phonetics and phonology such as Gimson (1992), Clark and Yallop (1990), Roach (1983), and Kreidler (1990). Some have considered 'metathesis' as synonymous with 'spoonerism'. For instance, Sadler (1970, p. 269) has defined 'metathesis' as follows: "Metathesis is the technical term for that perennial blooper, the

transposition of sounds within a word or words. The popular name is Spoonerism, for the good Reverend Spooner of Oxford". Examples of 'spoonerism' cited by Sadler include 'Mardon me, Padam. . .' for 'Pardon me, Madam. . .', 'May I sew you to another sheet?' for 'May I show you to another seat?', and 'hissing my mystery lectures' for 'missing my history lectures'. However, it is our conviction that 'spoonerism' differs significantly from 'metathesis' in that the former is normally a performance phenomenon and hence a random deviation from the norm which is unrelated to any system; whereas, the latter is related to linguistic competence and as such is systematic and rule-governed. Metathesis is an important linguistic phenomenon which is internally principled and free from arbitrariness; whereas, spoonerism is transient and due to external conditions (e.g. fatigue, strong emotions, memory limitations, lack of concentration, etc.) which are typically random and can be corrected by the language user if brought to his attention. On the other hand, cases of metathesis are permanent linguistic features, at least for a period in one's life span, and are related to non-linguistic parameters such as social class, education, age, and sex.

'Metathesis' is also a noticeable feature of language history: Old English *hros* becomes Modern English *horse* (Crystal, 1992). As Richards, et al (1989) note, when a metathesized form becomes commonly and regularly used by most native speakers of a language, it may lead to a change in the word. For example, the Modern English *bird* developed by metathesis from Old English *bridd* 'young bird'.

Children's speech also shows many cases of metathesis such as *animal* for *aminal* and *pusketti* for *spaghetti* (Fromkin and Rodman, 1988). These features of child language, of course, are later corrected as the child approaches the adult grammar.

Many instances of 'metathesis' can be found in Modern Persian, such as /qolf/ for /qofl/ 'lock', /taski/ for /taksi/ 'taxi', /mardese/ for /madrese/ 'school', and /noxse/ for /nosxe/ 'prescription'. However, apart from its phonological reality, 'metathesis' is of sociolinguistic significance in Persian since a strong social stigma is attached to its use in this language. In fact, metathesis in Persian can be considered a good indicator of educational and social class background as it occurs only in the speech of the uneducated and members of the lower classes of the society. As a result, education in this study is considered as one of the main determining factors of social class membership.

Significance of the study
Review of literature shows that this intriguing microlinguistic phenomenon (i.e., 'metathesis') has only

been studied from a purely linguistic perspective, dichronic as well as synchronic. (See, for example, Webb, 1974; Stonham, 1991; Lipski, 1992; Koorbanoff, 1993.) The significance of the present study, therefore, lies in the fact that it is the first attempt to investigate 'metathesis' from a sociolinguistic point of view as an evidence for the relationship between language and society.

Research questions

This study is based on the assumption that the social characteristics of speakers in a speech community will determine the syntactic and phonological forms of the utterances they produce. According to this line of belief, speakers of different age, sex, and social class speak differently. Thus, the present study seeks to answer the following research question:

1. Is the use of 'metathesis' related to the age of speakers?
2. Is the use of 'metathesis' related to the sex factor?
3. Is the use of 'metathesis' related to social class?

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Method
Subjects

The subjects of the present study were 120 Persian speakers living in different districts of Tehran. They were randomly selected from different strata of society. That is, stratified sampling, which is a common procedure in socio-linguistic research, was employed.

On the basis of the information elicited in the questionnaire, the subjects were categorized into: (a) three age groups (18-29, 30-45, and 46-over); (b) two sex groups (Male vs Female); and (c) four social-class groups (Upper Middle Class, Lower Middle Class, Upper Working Class, and Lower Working Class).

The main criteria for establishing social class membership were based on the subjects' education, occupation, and socio-economic status. That is, the informants were asked primarily about their own education and occupation as well as the education and occupation of their parents and their spouses, if they were married. They were also asked questions about their monthly income. However, since some subjects are normally reluctant to provide information about their income, some indirect questions were included in the questionnaire to arrive at a reliable estimate of their economic status. These indicators included questions about the subjects' monthly expenses, the amount of money they spent on housing in case they did not own a property, the kind of automobiles they drove, and the amount of money they spent on their children's education. Therefore, an individual's social class was established by his combined rank on these scales.

It is worth pointing out that private cars and properties can be considered as good indicators of one's wealth since only the rich can afford to drive expensive cars and own decent properties. The last question was also included on the assumption that only the affluent can afford to send their children to private schools since the tuition fee in such schools is very high.

Measuring instruments

Two measuring instruments were used in this study. First, a questionnaire was designed whose purpose was to elicit information about the socioeconomic background of the informants as well as their age and sex. Second, the informants were given pictures of objects and were asked to name them while being tape-recorded. They were also provided with scenarios and asked to react verbally. As an example, they were asked what they would say if they bumped into a passerby in the street. The expected response here was /ʔzr mixam/ 'Pardon me!'; however, this expression is likely to undergo the phonological process of metathesis in the speech of some Persian speakers and change to /ʔrz mixam/.

Procedure

Prior to the administration of the questionnaire and actual data collection, the research assistants were instructed to approach the informants in a friendly manner and try to gain their cooperation and confidence. They were also asked to explain the goals of the research to the informants and to assure them that the personal information they reveal in the questionnaire will not be disclosed. In order to ascertain this point, the subjects were not asked to write their names in the questionnaire. Therefore, they felt convenient in responding the questions.

After the data were collected, the subjects were categorized into different social class and age groups on the basis of the information provided in the questionnaires. Next, the tape-recorded data were carefully transcribed and the tape-scripts of words and expressions with the likely occurrence of 'metathesis' were analyzed. Finally, the frequency of occurrence of metathesized words and expressions was calculated. The interaction of extralinguistic variables with the linguistic variable 'metathesis' will be illustrated by means of histograms.

Results and Interpretations

As stated earlier, since no research has, to date, been carried out on the relationship between nonlinguistic

parameters and the use of 'metathesis', an experiment was conducted to investigate whether extralinguistic factors such as age, sex, and social class had any impact on the use of 'metathesis' in Persian.

The corpus of the data upon which our analysis rests consists of 1680 occurrences of words and expressions with the likelihood of 'metathesis' in the speech of Persian speakers. The subjects' pronunciation of the words and expressions they produced was tape-recorded and analyzed. Then, variation in the use of 'metathesis' was carefully examined and the following results were obtained. In order to show how each group of subjects performed on the verbal tasks, the mean score of each group was given to graphic displays as presented in the relevant figures.

With regard to the first research question concerning the relationship between age of the subjects and the use of metathesis, a significant relationship was found between age and the frequency of occurrence of metathesis. Put more specifically, among the three age groups, the youngest (18-29) produced the fewest number of metathesis. The total percentages of the occurrence of metathesis for the first age group (18-29) was 20.72, for the second group (30-45) 28.84, and for the third group (46-over) 50.44. That is, with growing age the frequency of occurrence of metathesis increases. Put differently, the younger the age, the fewer deviations from the norms of correctness the speakers have. This finding goes against the general conclusion drawn from other age-related sociolinguistic studies (cf. Downes, 1984; Romaine, 1984; Labov, 1966, 1972; Bailey, 1973; Trudgill 1988; Chambers and Trudgill, 1980) which indicate that younger people make more frequent use of vernacular and stigmatized forms. For instance, Downes (1984) found that the frequency of vernacular forms tend to peak during adolescence when peer group pressure not to conform to society's norms is greatest. Summarizing social dialect research with regard to age, Holmes (1992) concludes that "as people get older their speech simply becomes less dialectal and more standard" (P. 184). She further adds that ". . . there is general agreement that in their 'middle years' people are most likely to recognize the society's speech norms and use the fewest vernacular forms. . . . they are most likely to use more standard forms" (P. 186). This may be true of European societies, but in Iran, as the results of the present study show, an opposite trend seems to be the case, i.e., stigmatized forms are found more often in the speech of the older generation than the younger. This might be largely due to the fact that education amongst the younger generation nowadays is far more widespread than in the past and educated people usually tend to avoid the use of stigmatized forms. Another contributory factor might be the influence of mass

media which emphasize correct speech. Nowadays, special radio and T.V. programs are devoted to encouraging people to use standard Persian and observe norms of correctness. However, it must be realized that with the older people it is more difficult to change the speech habits as some erroneous and stigmatized forms may have become fossilized.

The relationship between age and the use of metathesis is graphically represented in Figure 1, below.
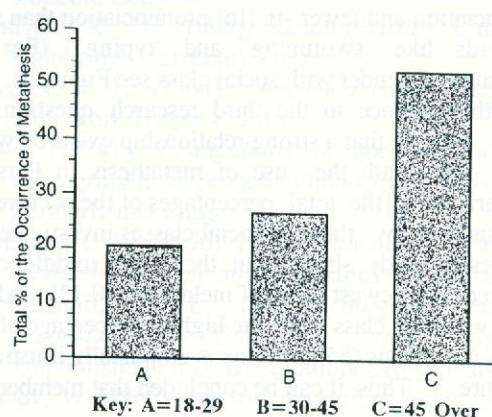
Figure 1. Use of metathesis by different age groups

With regard to the investigation of the second research question concerning the relationship between the sex of the subjects and the use of metathesis, in all cases the frequency of occurrence of metathesis was higher in the speech of males than that of females: the total percentage of the occurrence of metathesis by male subjects was 55.81 compared to 44.19 by females. This is graphically shown in Figure 2.
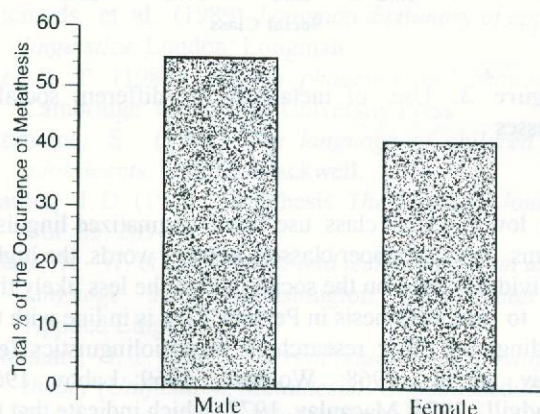
Figure 2. Use of metathesis by male and female subjects

These results are in line with the general conclusion draw from other sociolinguistic studies (Cheshire, 1982; Coates, 1986; Coates and Cameron, 1988; Holmes, 1985, 1988, 1990; Graddol and Swann, 1989; Mulac, et al., 1986; Trudgill, 1983b) that women are more sensitive to the prestigious variety and tend to avoid stigmatized forms more than men of the same social class do. For instance, as Holmes (1992, P. 167) notes, in all the English-speaking communities where speech data has been collected women use more -ing [Iŋ] pronunciation and fewer -in [In] pronunciation than men in words like 'swimming' and 'typing'. (For the interaction of gender with social class see Figure 4).

With reference to the third research question, the results indicate that a strong relationship exists between social class and the use of metathesis in Persian. Comparison of the total percentages of the occurrence of metathesis by the four social classes investigated in the present study shows that the upper middle class produced the fewest cases of metathesis (0.12), and the lower working class had the highest percentage of the use of metathesis (55.56). This is graphically illustrated in Figure 3. Thus, it can be concluded that members of
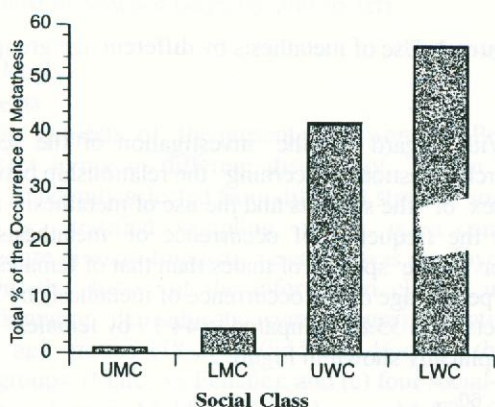

Figure 3. Use of metathesis by different social classes

the lower social class use more stigmatized linguistic forms than the upper classes. In other words, the higher individuals are on the social ladder, the less likely they are to use metathesis in Persian. This is in line with the findings of other researchers in sociolinguistics (e.g. Shuy, et al., 1968; Wolfram, 1969; Labov, 1966; Trudgill, 1974; Macaulay, 1977) which indicate that the lower the social class the more stigmatized forms are used. As an example, Trudgill (1974), in his Norwich study, found that the presence or absence of /h/ as the initial sound of words such as 'house', 'horse', and

'heavy' is socially determined. That is, the more middle class the speaker, the more likely s/he is to produce the /h/, and conversely, the more working class the speaker the less likely s/he is to do so.

As the final analysis of the data, the interaction of social class and sex with the linguistic variable 'metathesis' was investigated. As Figure 4 shows, with
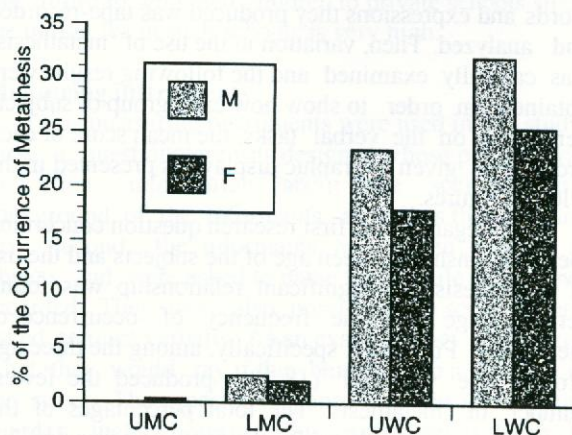
Figure 4. Interaction of social class and sex

the exception of the UMC, in all other social classes the frequency of the use of metathesis by male subjects was higher than that by females. Another pattern that emerged is that females' speech in each social class is closer to that of the males in the same group than that of females in other groups. This is similar to the results found by Trudgill (1983a).

Conclusion

As a general conclusion, the findings of the present study confirm the claim that a close relationship exists between language and society. That is, through studying the linguistic behavior of individuals in a speech community one can obtain a great deal of information about the social characteristics of those individuals. In other words, social structure is reflected in language structure and language use. In the word of Chailka (1988), language mirrors society. More specifically, the findings of this research indicate that a significant relationship exists between extralinguistic variables such as age, sex, social class on the one hand and the use of 'metathesis' as a phonological process, on the other. With regard to social class, the present investigation confirms the findings of previous studies that the lower the social class the more stigmatized forms are used. The findings are also in line with the general conclusion drawn from other sociolinguistic

researches that women are more sensitive to the prestigious variety and tend to avoid stigmatized forms more than men of the same social class. However, with reference to age, the findings of the present study go against the conclusion drawn from other age-related studies which indicate that younger people make more frequent use of vernacular and stigmatized forms. This shows that although non-linguistic parameters affect linguistic behavior of individuals in different societies, the nature and extent of their effect may vary from society to society.

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