LSA.376: Introduction

1. English syntax, and syntax in general – variation – language ideology – advice literature on language, and in general the regulation of language

2. Woolard & Schieffelin 1994:57, citing Silverstein, Heath, and Irvine:

Linguistic/language ideologies have been defined as "sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use" ... with a greater social emphasis as "self-evident ideas and objectives a group holds concerning roles of language in the social experiences of members as they contribute to the expression of a group" and "the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests" ... and most broadly as "shared bodies of commonsense notions about the nature of language in the world."

Woolard, Kathryn & Bambi Schieffelin. 1994. Language ideology. Annual Review of Anthropology 23.55-82.

3.1. Step 1. There are variants, alternative expressions that are believed to be equivalent – to "mean roughly the same thing".

3.2. Step 2. Unless variants can be discriminated, they should not be tolerated.

[Ideology] There should be One Right Way.

3.3. Step 3. What counts as discrimination?

    a. semantic differences: *partly/partially. seasonal/seasonable, father/further*

    b1. stylistic/social-contextual differences:
        FORMAL or neutral, vs. informal
        WRITTEN or all-purpose, vs. (specifically) spoken
        [note: "colloquial" ≈ informal spoken]

    b2. social differences:
        STANDARD vs. nonstandard
        GENERAL vs. restricted (by region, ethnic group, etc.)
        ESTABLISHED vs. innovative

    [note: other sorts of linguistic differences, in particular, differences in discourse function, are not even contemplated. More ideology: sentences have meanings; the meanings of discourses are a matter of stringing together the meanings of sentences.]

3.4. Step 4. In general, favor the "higher" variant (in small caps in 3b above), and disfavor the lower. Axe non-standard and regional variants across the board; banish specifically informal

variants from formal contexts; bansh specifically spoken-language variants from written contexts; be wary of innovative variants, wherever they come from.

[Ideology] Higher is intrinsically better. Established general standard formal written (egsfw) language is the "true" language; everything else is a failure to reach this standard, and is likely to be characterized as "lazy", "uneducated", or simply "mistaken". (In fact. the components of EGSFW are often lumped together, as constituting "standard" or "correct" language.)]

3.5. Step 5. Otherwise, we are apparently looking at "free variation", and should pick a variant on other grounds.

4. Bolinger's Dictum [original version]: A difference in syntactic form always spells a difference in meaning.

Bolinger's Dictum [AMZ's hedged version]: Lexical and syntactic variation is unfree; variants usually have (subtly) different meanings or discourse functions, which can be observed in certain contexts (though these differences might not be of consequence in many contexts).

The hedged version allows for cases where a variant is chosen for stylistic or social reasons, or for its phonological/prosodic properties, or for its utility in processing – serving ease in production or clarity in perception (especially by explicitly marking structure or discourse function). But Bolinger's Dictum encourages you to look seriously for semantic and/or discourse-functional differences.

5. Back to 3.5. What other grounds?

[note: there's ideology in each of these. And all of these reasons have been given as justifications for avoiding variants that are not egsfw.]

5.1. Pedagogical reasons, especially of the "if they do it too much, they should be told not to do it at all" variety (http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/003721.html). Example: don't begin sentences with coordinating conjunctions (*and*, *but*, *or*, *so*), because novice writers do it too much; instead, choose a discourse-connective adverb (*also*, *however*,...) or combine the sentences into a single one (punctuated with a comma or semicolon). Example: avoid the intensifier *very*, because many writers (and speakers) use it too much; instead, choose a more specific intensifier, like *extremely*, or use no intensifier at all.

5.2. Communicative reasons, especially avoidance of potential ambiguity. Example: don't use logical *since* and *while* (*Since you're here, let's talk. While I appreciate your difficulties, I can't give you an extension of the deadline*), because these words might be misunderstood as temporal *since* and *while*; instead, use (respectively) *because* and either *whereas* or *(al)though*. Similarly (http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/004552.html) for logical *then* (*If that's what you think, then you're crazy*), which might be misunderstood (Davidson) for temporal *then* (*I put my coat on, then my gloves*); omit logical *then*. Example: don't use subordinator *once* (*Once you've finished writing the file, save it*), because it might be misunderstood as frequency-

adverbial *once* (*I did it not once, but twice*) or past-time *once* (*I once had a beautiful oak dining-room table*); instead, use *after* or *when*.

Also, avoidance of "vagueness". Very frequent content words (like *very* and *nice*) are often condemned as vague; so are expressions that are perceived to be colloquial, like determiner *a lot of* (*A lot of shrubbery was growing in front of the house*) vs. *much* (*Much shrubbery was growing in front of the house*); and so are expressions that are perceived to be innovative and/or used primarily by the young, like quotative *like* (*She was like, "No way*) vs. *say* (*She said, "No way"*).

5.3. Aesthetic reasons, turning on someone's judgment that one variant "sounds better" than another, is more graceful or stronger or whatever. Example: don't begin sentences with discourse-linking *however* (*I got to the station on time. However, the train was late*), because it's ponderous and over-emphatic; instead, use *but* (or re-word in other ways). Example: don't begin sentences with coordinating conjunctions (*I got to the station on time. But the train was late*), because they're weak; instead, combine the sentences into one sentence (*I got to the station on time, but the train was late*). Example: don't use logical *then* after a subordinate clause with *if* (*If that's what you think, then you're crazy*), because omitting it (*If that's what you think, you're crazy*) is "more forceful" (Evans & Evans) than using it, or because it is "often an encumbrance to grace and elegance" (Fiske). Example: don't use passive voice, because it's weak, lacking in vitality, static, and/or evasive; instead, use active voice.

5.4. Theoretical reasons.

5.4.1. Economy. Shorter is better. In particular, Omit Needless Words (Strunk). Yet another reason (Davidson, Fiske) for omitting logical *then*. Also for omitting *or not* with *whether* (*I don't know whether I'm coming or not*). Also for omitting *of* with prepositions: *I looked out of the window* vs. *I looked out the window*.

Brevity is frequently appealed to as a justification of condemning "low" variants, like the innovative *of* of exceptional degree marking (http://www.stanford.edu/~zwicky/exceptional-degree-markers.pdf): *how big of a dog* vs. established standard *how big a dog*.

5.4.2. "Logic", in particular by reasoning from (assumptions about) the nature of the parts of speech. Example: I am sometimes told that stranded prepositions (*Which article did you take that from?*) are, of course, unacceptable because prepositions are called that because they come BEFORE their objects (*pre-*); prepositions must be fronted with their objects (*From which article did you take that?*). (There's a list of Language Log postings on preposition stranding at http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/003141.html.) Example: objections to possessives as antecedents for personal pronouns (*Einstein's discoveries made him famous*) – see, inter alia, http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/000027.html – are sometimes based on ambiguity avoidance, but often are justified on the grounds that possessive modifiers are ADJECTIVES, and pronouns are replacements for NOUNS, so possessives can't be antecedents for pronouns. (Various replacements are suggested: *Einstein's discoveries made Einstein famous*; *His discoveries made Einstein famous*; *The discoveries of Einstein made him famous*.) Example: objections to the summative pronouns *that*/*this* (*Kim said we had to go. That/This made me angry*) and *which* (*Kim said we had to go, which made me angry*) are based on the

claim that, having no antecedent noun, they are (unacceptably) vague – which, in turn is based on the assumption that pronouns literally replace nouns. (The usual suggested fix is to add a noun: *... That/This assertion made me angry*; *... which assertion made me angry*.)

On occasion, the appeal is to a bald assertion that some lexical item does not belong to a particular category. Example: the assertion that *than* is not a preposition (meaning: it should not be used as a preposition, in addition to its use as a subordinator), so that *Kim is taller than me* is unacceptable; you must either live with *Kim is taller than I* or provide the syntax for subordinator *than*, in *Kim is taller than I am*. Example from the *Microsoft Manual of Style*: "*Then* is not a coordinate conjunction and thus cannot correctly join two independent clauses", so that *I put my coat on, then my gloves* is unacceptable; you must supply *and* (*... and then my gloves*) – Include All Necessary Words – or reword in some other way.

Such assertions are frequently appealed to as a justification of condemning "low" variants, like the innovative (and still non-standard) use of *fun* as an adjective (*That was so fun. Kim's parties are funner than mine*), as well as as a noun (*That was so much fun. Kim's parties are more fun than mine*).

An extreme version of condemnation-by-assertion is the claim that an item simply is not a word at all, a claim invoked in condemning "low" variants, like innovative *trepidatious* (http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/001652.html) and non-standard *ain't*.

5.4.3. "Logic", in particular by reasoning from assumptions about the relationship between form and meaning in language. Example: objections to "singular *they*" (*Everyone was taking out their laptops*) rest on the claim that, in languages in general, anaphors must agree with their antecedents in (GRAMMATICAL) person and number; you must live with *Everyone was taking out his laptop* or *Everyone was taking out his or her laptop* or provide a plural subject: *All the students were taking out their laptops*.

In a variant of this appeal to "logic", the appeal is to the structure of other languages – most commonly, Latin – which are believed to have an ideal relationship between form and meaning. This was the original objection (by John Dryden) to stranded prepositions, and is often cited as a justification for condemning split infinitives in English (*Profits are going to almost double this year*). (You have to either live with *Profits are almost going to double this year* or *Profits are going almost to double this year* or re-word so as avoid the infinitive construction: *Profits will almost double this year*. See http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/000901.html.)

"Logic" is frequently appealed to as a justification of condemning "low" variants, like the non-standard multiple negation (a.k.a. negative concord) in *I didn't see nobody*: logically, two negatives make a positive, so this sentence must mean 'I saw somebody'.

6. Finding variants.

6.1. Advice about grammar, style, and usage provides a rich source of information about variants. All such advice begins with a proscription, and people don't tell you not to do

something unless a lot of people do it. (Then comes a prescription, a suggestion as to how to replace the proscribed usage.)

Many of the items on the list of variants for this course come from the advice literature. Most of them are old standards, appearing in one manual or handbook after another. But every so often I discover new ones, like a prohibition against *fast* used as an adverb (*They all talk fast* vs. *They all talk quickly*), or against the adjective *hard* denoting difficulty (*It's a hard problem* vs. *It's a difficult problem*), or against logical *then* (above). Or, from McCracken & Sandison, *Manual of Good English* (1917), p. 126:

> He loves them, so much *so* that he gives his life for them.
> The pageant was a great success, so much *so* that it is to be repeated.

NOTE.--The second *so* in *so much so* should refer to an adjective, not to a verb or noun. The following are correct:

> He *loves* them, *so much* that he gives his life for them.
> He is *devoted* (*loyal*) to them, *so much so* that he would give his life for them.
> The pageant was a splendid *spectacle*, *so splendid* that it is to be reapeated.
> The pageant was *successful*, *so much so* that it is to be repeated.

.....

2. The descriptive literature on the syntax of a language is another rich source of information about variants. "Optional variants" are treated extensively in this literature, sometimes when the advice literature treats them rarely or not at all: in English, the dative alternation (*give me the book* and *give the book to me*), the verb-particle alternation (*I gave up the fight* and *I gave the fight up*), alternations between zero-marking and overt marking in complements (*I know* (*that*) *the earth is flat*) and relatives (*the dog* (*that/which*) *I saw*), etc.

3. Finally, you can stumble across things, often suspecting at first that they are just errors. Here's an example of a type I first came across a few weeks ago, with the surprising part bolded:

The actors (always all male) **would have not have** worn costumes as such, instead they tended to wear clothing cast off by the aristocracy and sold on by ...
http://www.angband.demon.co.uk/Globe/history1.html

This turns out not to be an inadvertent doubling of *have* or an inadvertent blending of *would have not worn* with *would not have worn*, but a systematic (and explicable) doubling of *have,* one of several different types of such (non-standard) doublings.