The changing dichotomy between informal and formal utterance : summary

In: Chloupek, Jan. *Dichotomie spisovnosti a nespisovnosti.* Vyd. 1. V Brně: Univerzita J.E. Purkyně, 1986, pp. 117-121

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Summary

Everyday language relations between national communities, as also linguistic analyses, are founded on the formal language. This form is the basic construction of the national language and, as such is, without doubt, representative of the nation. In contrast, within the national language there is a continual tension between the formal and informal constructions which creates an obvious dichotomy — the role of which in communication is, nevertheless, subject to change with the passing of time. The term *informal* language is usually conceived as partly the traditional territorial dialect — with its highest level of development, interdialect, and partly the colloquial, coined, speech. Common to all is that they derive from the base of the territorial vernacular or directly form that base, whereas the *formal* language, as far as concerns national territorial cohesion, gradually becomes distanced from it. Linguistics deals almost entirely with the purely structural character of the informal language and mostly provides evidence, especially in the case of the traditional territorial dialect, of its "rigid norm" (Horálek, Trost, Chloupek). In the end, however, this evidence is contingent on the convincibility and reliability of the methods and aims of dialectology — in which a search is made to deduce the oldest preserved language form from which to begin unwinding the process of dynamic innovation — and is becoming more and more at variance with communication in common practice where a variety of means in the national language frequently intermingle — without maybe even losing any of their structural characteristics, that is, they remain, as the case might be, literary, dialectal and so on. Our interpretation of the changing function of the dichotomy of formal and informal language attempts to embrace these variables of common, everyday utterance while at the same time not expanding the structure of the national language by further structural or functional levels within the bounds of the linguistic situation — that is, between the formal written language and the traditional territorial dialect (apart from the generally accepted conception of the colloquial tongue or interdialect).

1. The dichotomy of formal — informal means of expression in the first place had to do with the actual, original differences between the written and spoken forms (as borne out by the etymology of the term "writen", Czech "spisovný" = inscribed, O. E. *writon,* which in its sense development cannot be too far removed from that of the attributive terms *cultural, literary* language). Both in idiom and functionally the delineation between the written and the spoken language was very distinct. A somewhat marginal example of this was the purely ceremonial rhetoric — but even this originally depended upon the written text and inasmuch bore the basic characteristic features of the written language. The dichotomy began to reveal itself plainly only when the vernacular became no longer just a spoken tongue but developed also into a written language. This came about in the Czech-speaking territories, and later in

Russian territories, after Old Church Slavonic ceased to exist as the cultural language of the time.

Factors leading to this contradiction between the written and spoken forms showed themselves consistently over the ages from the commencement of the development of these events and through to their maturity, and ultimately when it came to be evaluated. This was a period when the written language existed as the rare activity of a few intellectuals and was anyway read by the very few. Typical of this dichotomy were the sayings from antiquity *the written word endures* and the colloquial *he speaks as his beak grew* (meaning: he speaks naturally, informally, in the vernacular), and then on the unter paradox *he talks like a book* — proving the exception to the rule. The style of classical literature represented one of the corner-stones of the formal language — and this over the ages has been the principal endeavour of the literary scholars, that is, to emphasize the "literariness" of the language (J. Hrabák's term), and most particularly was this to be manifested through the linguistic terms selected. There prevailed the inclination to grandeur, bookishness, emotionalism... in literature (and certainly in one respect of artistic activity it asserts itself to this day). As far as linguistics was concerned, it was incapable of contributing to the knowledge of any particular autonomic laws.

2. With the advance in the political and cultural climate and also in the basic conceptions of science, particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century, public activities, even against the will of the ruling class, were inevitably made accessible to the common man; education was made more democratic — there even began to appear some systems of adult education in, such as, political education for the working class. The written language began to take on more meaning in the everyday life of the people.

The dichotomy of formal—informal has already changed its function. In addressing the public, i.e. official communication, even semi-official, the formal language serves as the only means and, on the other hand, the informal serves the confidential, the intimate; the former is important to the community, the latter is a matter of the personal. Under favourable conditions the formal language comes to be used for the welfare of the community, it becomes planned, institutionalized. The new contradiction is already less sharp: the signal for the changeover is the "causal language" becoming specialized and already showing stylistic features. The greater part of the population is of necessity diglossal and is beginning tendentiously to select, to varying degrees and according to the type of utterance, means of expression within the scale of the official — intimate, from the bookish to the folk-speech (and vulgar).

In classical literature, and almost exclusively in dramatics based on contemporary life, there is beginning to apply the tendency to depict life as it really is in terms adequate ("faithful") to the communication in this or that situation. This has its roots in the democratization of art, and the literary style is beginning to approximate the speech of the common man and his everyday language experience. To define the exact chronology o events leading to this new direction in art is not simple, it did not come about with the changing of generations of scholars: a new direction in itself does not always bring with it a higher level of artistic value.

The former divisions of the dichotomy are beginning to merge. First of all there appear areas of transition between the written and spoken language — compare, for instance, a case of a mother leaving an improvised message on a scrap of paper for her family, a television discussion on a specialized subject where those taking part on such an occasion adopt a more exclusive vocabulary, or again the taped spoken language, relatively permanent. Which language quality (written or spoken) will dominate, for exemple, in the speech of an experienced teacher who, almost certainly from memory, presents to his pupils knowledge gained from textbooks, that is, from written texts?

Functional dichotomy of formal — intimate communication allows us an understanding of the hierarchy from the formal to the territorially-confined usage, into clearly defined or marginal areas of communication. For example, the formal used in diplomatic language, in political documents (where the terminology adopted may be especially indicative of the measure of unanimity of opinion and unity reached), in weather forecasts, in official forms; and on the other hand the speech of the young generation which is of an informal nature. However, in areas of specific communication or those inconsistent with the dichotomy formal — intimate, such as in reports from certain working environments, in interviews and so on, we frequently find a preference for the informal with interference from the colloquial speech, and professional lan-

guage with slang. This manner of expression "anti-authority" is inherent in working environments. In addition, the complexity of social intercommunication, due to the theme of the utterance — which effects the choice of the means of expression and is, without doubt, a very important stylistic factor — may often lead to a concealed dichotomy.

3. We can be justified in assuming that in every idiolect this mutually complementary disglossis will deepen, sharpen, and become more precisely defined. It is also possible to assess just what role the dichotomy of formal—informal language will play when experience has confirmed that the well-meant compaign for the preservation of the formal means of expression has inevitably succumbed to time and that the informal means, even for the future, remains a medium for local and regional cohesion. The quality of contemporary and future expression, as far as concerns formal——informal, can perhaps best be described in terms of the functional dichotomy of modality as opposed to non-modality.

The informal relates to non-modality, that is, speech that is more or less improvised. It concerns everyday affairs and is carried on between speakers on an equal footing (position, age, sex) or on an equal social footing in given situations in life — or at least relatively equal (such as returning to one's hometown after an absence of several years). It is to a great extent reflex, improvising in nature and has no social value, usually depends on the situational context and reflects that situation without aesthetic deliberation.

Modality relates to the purely, consistent formal language, and is employed, in particular, where there is a social or age difference between the speakers, where the communication refers to specialized subjects (including that on language), where the address — and also the disputation — is intended for the public, when the hearer is being persuaded of or informed, where it follows that the aim is to impress hint aesthetically (this, of course, is not valid in all cases) — in short, the language used on all such occasions formulates his spech from both the material and spiritual background of his national culture.

Models of communication result above all in automatism in the specialistic style and that of negotiation: the style of test papers, that of form-filling (requests and announcements), of brief biographical records, of official and commercial correspondence, that of testimonials of character, qualification and ability, coded data for computers, the exclusive style used in the sciences, then the more or less fixed style of newscasts and reports — in the last decades, for instance, there has arisen to a great degree an established model for short political reports, the language of the "Black Chronicle" (a short newspaper article on accidents and other misfortunes), the minutes from meetings according to the nature of the organisation, adverts for jobs, official festivals and ceremonies, the metalanguage metonyms that have become established use (*a full stop to the news, a full stop to the harvest, a full stop to the school year*, i.e., a finish to these things). The style of classical literature constructed on the accepted model is not, it is true, anything new to our times, but literary patterns have radically changed. We find noteworthy from our point of view, the penetration of many elements of journalese into fiction, compare *culture was given the green light, the breeze ruffled her chequered imported skirt, in a dress elegant abave the norm, a "deprivedly" — mean present from the trade union ...*

Not infrequently the situation is complicated by the interaction of more models of communication, some on the one hand lending mutual support, some again creating a mutual contradiction: thus models of familiarity, emotiveness, belonging somewhere, project into public speech elements of professional language, slang, and sometimes even territorially-coloured components. In journalese these models assert themselves at many levels; for example, confinement to the recognised political jargon, showing respect for the social consciousness of the time by the choice of accepted terms, emotive appeal made directly to the reader by a measured degree of figurative expression (for ever growing old, for ever being renewed), language adopted to working and sporting environments with the intention of rendering the situation more vivid and thus more closely involving the reader; in all newspaper articles and journals the direct approach is exploited. In other words, it is meant to reach a broad section of the public and this leads to a more generous tolerance of the inclusion of elements of informal expression. In specialistic articles a rational (notional) and impersonal model (where the doer of the action is relegated to the background) is held to. The preference for this model should, in all reasonableness, lead to the finding of a common language in science and research — especially where the views expressed

enjoy a world-wide unity of opinion, thereby forming an ideological model... except that there are here at the same time disintegrating models at work which specify the language and style. There may, for instance, among other things, be a purposeful departure from scholarly tradition: the creation of a new school of thought, a change of priority in an experimental discipline. The scientific style altogether intensifies the general features of specialistic language and therefore entirely excludes the use of informal terms. Popularized scientific language has also partly adopted the device of purposeful, direct appeal to the receiver in presenting to him the complexity of the problem (this is the reason for a certain amount of over-statement, etc.). Neither must the model of "anti-officialese", folk-speech, be overlooked. This is employed by some intellectuals in communicating with the layman, although when speaking on a subject more or less specialized he will keep to somewhat exclusive terms. We are also acquainted with the model confined to members of certain working institutions who have a preference for using loan-words of foreign words where there already exist domestic terms — which anyway would be more preferred by the general public. Finally, there may penetrate into a discussion between friends of long standing the attempt to use terms with a regard to the social "niceties" (that is, expressions of pleasure, comfort, and others). And in contrast, a scholar may project into scientific speech informal terms as a means, for some reason, of expressing his emotion — perhaps for having for a while returned to his native town for the purpose of delivering a public speech.

The attempt to obtain a true picture of the internal structure of a national language does not actually end with an analysis of the formal as opposed to the informal utterances in the act of communication. From a comparative examination of the problems involved there emerges also the question of the typology of various language areas. For instance, P. Ivić (1980) stated that the German and Czech languages — and here perhaps might also be included Slovene — form a compact area in Central Europe where the informal language, meaning the ordinary colloquial language (Umgangssprache) plays an important role. "This situation does not exist in other areas of Slavonic-language usage. Every Moscow citizen speaks formal Russian and never a colloquial tongue; in Belgrade everyone speaks formal Serbian. This would represent an important typological difference between these parts of Europe. But then, in France we are met with a situation basically resembling the East European style." B. A. Serebrennikov and coll. (1975), reports the appearance of a "common speech" (Gesamtsprache) in Russia as early as the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and adds: "The use of the formal tongue in Russia was originally confined to Old Church Slavonic, and it was not until the beginning of the eighteenth century that this bilingualism was done away with". We ourselves do not see, however, a contradiction between these two opinions. In Russian-speaking territories communion is, true enough, achieved through the higher level of the formal language (that is, according to our terminology, modality of communication), the lower level being represented by dialect, but here it is not a matter of the codified, purely formal language but has more to do with the "standard" form derived from living form in Russian — and it is just this that Serebrennikov had in mind. E. Haugen (1980) holds absolutely in doubt the possibility of being able to speak in purely formal terms (in written terms) and it would seem that it was not just the term itself that interested him.

In respect to syntax with features of the spoken language, of emotional vocabulary (consider the word, for instance, *madhouse*), Slovak linguists (1980) clearly consider the development of the Czech "common" tongue and the standard form of Slovak as the basic means in general language communication: "Formal Slovak at the beginning of this century featured the spoken tongue as formed in the Martin Period." ..."Today, side by side with the formal norm there is developing another, more tolerant norm used in general communication." In contemporary Slovak there exist individual concrete forms, that is, formal and standard. It goes without saying that the internal relations between constructions in the national language in some Slavonic languages, throughout the whole extent of communication, are in practice complicated by the interaction of these different languages. This is valid in the direct contact of peoples of border areas, as also in the effect of social and political factors. In this respect, the relationship between Czech and Slovak is particularly exceptional: a Czech and Slovak citizen conversing together will keep, in the main, to their own tongues. For the hearers both languages function similarly, the alternating of the languages going, on the whole, unnoticed, linear and without switching over of codes (F. Kopečný).

The language-conscious citizen of our time on the one hand embraces the automated means of expression for everyday communication, that is, for daily-repeating events and, on the other hand, applies his own power of expression when meeting with a new situation. In the flood of information, instructions, the relating of events, reminiscing and planned activities speaker will select from the language, both formal and informal, those means which will directly assist him in fulfilling the aims of communication. Therefore stylistics is bound to concern itself with the function of the informal means of expression and its elements in the text in the same way as, when making an evaluation it does not apply the postulate of exclusiveness only to the formal speech.

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1. We should include here the opinion that the somewhat later well-known contention between the younger Czech authors of the interwar period and the then puristically oriented linguists, was evoked by the prejudiced attempt on the part of the linguistic critics to preserve just this grandeur in the structure of the classical literature and its consistent dependence on the historicaly-founded codification of the written language, and was due to the unwillingness to recognise any other aesthetic value but that of the "confirmed".

2. On our subject see contributions from *A. Jedlička, J. Bělič, V. Křístek:* Čs. přednášky 1978, Lingvistika, 5—33; further, *M. Krčmová:* K šíření obecné češtiny na Moravu, SPFFBU (A 27) 1979, 69.
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B. A. Serebrennikov and coll.: Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft 1. Berlin 1975, 413;
P. Ivić: Dialekt und Dialektologie. ZDL Beihefte, Neue Folge 26, published by *J. Göschel, P. Ivić, K. Kehr,* Wiesbaden 1980, 175.