

types are equally interesting, and some are obviously very trivial; but in the last resort the importance of any abstract category of this kind depends on what we are going to make of it, and the significance of the notion of 'context of situation' for the present discussion is that some situation types play a crucial role in the child's move into the adult language. For example, if a mother or father is playing with a child with some constructional toy, such as a set of building bricks, this type of situation is likely to contain some remarks of guidance and explanation, with utterances like *I don't think that one will go on there; it's too wide*. The context of situation for this utterance is one in which the child is gaining instruction relating to his handling of objects, and although any one instance is not by itself going to make much difference, an accumulation of experiences of this kind may be highly significant. And if it regularly happens that the remarks relate not just to *this particular* tower that is being built with *these particular* bricks, but to tower-building in general – in other words, if the context of situation is not limited to the actual physical surroundings, but extends to more general and less immediate environments, as would be implied by a remark such as *the smaller ones have to go at the top* – then language is now serving a primary function in this aspect of the child's development. Hence he will have a strong sense of *this* use of language, of language as a means of learning about the physical environment and about his own ability to interact with it and control it.

The types of situation which seem to be most central to the child's socialization have been identified by Bernstein in the most general terms. He refers to them as 'critical socializing contexts', using 'context' in the sense of a generalized situation type. He identifies the 'regulative' context, 'where the child is made aware of the rules of the moral order, and their various backings'; the 'instructional' context, 'where the child learns about the objective nature of objects and persons, and acquires skills of various kinds'; the 'imaginative or innovating' contexts, 'where the child is encouraged to experiment and re-create his world on his own terms'; and the 'interpersonal' context, 'where the child is made aware of affective states – his own, and others' (Bernstein 1971, 181, 198). These turn out to be already anticipated in the developmental functions through which the child has first started to build up a linguistic system of his own: the instrumental, regulatory and so on, described in section 3 above. For example, those types of situation which involve explanation and instruction, Bernstein's 'instructional context', typically pick up the developmental thread that first appeared in the form of a 'heuristic' function, the child's early use of language to explore his environment. They are therefore critical also in the child's learning of *language*, since it is through using language in situations of these types that he builds on and expands his meaning potential.

This is where the notions of context of situation, and situation type, become important for the school. The school requires that the child should be able to use language in certain ways: first of all, most obviously, that he should be able to use language to learn. The teacher operates in contexts of

situation where it simply has to be taken for granted that for every child, by the time he arrives in school, language is a means of learning; and this is an assumption that is basic to the educational process. Less obvious, but perhaps no less fundamental, is the assumption that language is a means of personal expression and participation: that the child is at home, linguistically, in interpersonal contexts, where his early use of language to interact with those emotionally important to him, and to express and develop his own uniqueness as an individual (the interactional and personal functions), has in the same way been taken up and extended into new realms of meaning. No doubt both these assumptions are true, as they stand: every normal child has mastered the use of language both for entering into personal relationships and for exploring his environment. But the *kind* of meanings that one child expects to be associated with any particular context of situation may differ widely from what is expected by another. Here we are back to Bernstein's codes again, which we have now approached from another angle, seeing them as differences in the meaning potential which may be typically associated with given situation types. As we have seen, these differences have their origin in the social structure. In Ruqaiya Hasan's words, 'the "code" is defined by reference to its semantic properties' and 'the semantic properties of the codes can be predicted from the elements of social structure which, in fact, give rise to them' (Bernstein 1973, 258).

Now the very young child, in his first ventures with language, keeps the functions of language fairly clearly apart; when he speaks, he is doing only one thing at a time – asking for some object, responding to a greeting, expressing interest or whatever it is. When he starts learning his mother tongue, however, the contexts of situation in which he uses it are already complex and manysided, with a number of threads of meaning running simultaneously. To vary the metaphor, we could say that all speech other than the protolanguage of infancy is polyphonic: different melodies are kept going side by side, and each element in the sentence is like a chord which contributes something to all of them. This is perhaps the most striking characteristic of human language, and one which distinguishes it from all other symbolic communication systems.

6 Register

This last point is a reflection of the contexts of situation in which language is used, and the ways in which one type of situation may differ from another. Types of linguistic situation differ from one another, broadly speaking, in three respects: first, what is actually taking place; secondly, who is taking part; and thirdly, what part the language is playing. These three variables, taken together, determine the range within which meanings are selected and the forms which are used for their expression. In other words, they determine the 'register'. (See table 1, p. 35.)

The notion of register is at once very simple and very powerful. It refers to

the fact that the language we speak or write varies according to the type of situation. This in itself is no more than stating the obvious. What the theory of register does is to attempt to uncover the general principles which govern this variation, so that we can begin to understand *what* situational factors determine *what* linguistic features. It is a fundamental property of all languages that they display variation according to use; but surprisingly little is yet known about the nature of the variation involved, largely because of the difficulty of identifying the controlling factors.

An excellent example of register variation (and of how to investigate and describe it) is provided by Jean Ure in a paper entitled 'Lexical density and register differentiation' (1971). Here Jean Ure shows that, at least in English, the lexical density of a text, which means the proportion of lexical items (content words) to words as a whole, is a function first of the medium (that is, whether it is spoken or written – written language has a higher lexical density than speech) and, within that, of the social function (pragmatic language, or 'language of action', has the lowest lexical density of all). This is probably true of all languages; but whether it is or not, it is a basic fact about English and a very good illustration of the relation between the actual and the potential that we referred to at the beginning of this section. We could say, following Dell Hymes, that it is part of the speaker's 'communicative competence' that he knows how to distribute lexical items in a text according to different kinds of language use; but there is really no need to introduce here the artificial concept of 'competence', or 'what the speaker knows', which merely adds an extra level of psychological interpretation to what can be explained more simply in direct sociolinguistic or functional terms.

It is easy to be misled here by posing the question the wrong way, as a number of writers on the subject have done. They have asked, in effect, 'what features of language are determined by register?', and then come up with instances of near-synonymy where one word differs from another in level of formality, rhetoric or technicality, like 'chips' and 'French-fried potatoes', or 'deciduous dentition' and 'milk teeth'. But these are commonplaces which lie at the fringe of register variation, and which in themselves would hardly need any linguistic or other kind of 'theory' to explain them. Asked in this way, the question can lead only to trivial answers; but it is the wrong question to ask. *All* language functions in contexts of situation, and is relatable to those contexts. The question is not what peculiarities of vocabulary, or grammar or pronunciation, can be directly accounted for by reference to the situation. It is *which* kinds of situational factor determine *which* kinds of selection in the linguistic system. The notion of register is thus a form of prediction: given that we know the situation, the social context of language use, we can predict a great deal about the language that will occur, with reasonable probability of being right. The important theoretical question then is: what exactly do we need to know about the social context in order to make such predictions?

Let us make this more concrete. If I am talking about gardening, I may be more likely to use words that are the names of plants and others words

referring to processes of cultivation; and this is one aspect of the relation of language to situation – the subject matter of gardening is part of the social context. But, in fact, the probability of such terms occurring in the discourse is also dependent on what I and my interlocutor are doing at the time. If we are actually engaged in gardening while we are talking, there may be very few words of this kind. Jean Ure quotes an amusing example from some Russian research on register: 'The recording was of people frying potatoes, and frying potatoes was what they were talking about; but since, it seems, neither frying nor potatoes were represented lexically in the text, the recording was a mystification to all who had not been in the kitchen at the time.' The image of language as merely the direct reflection of subject matter is simplistic and unsound, as Malinowski pointed out fifty years ago; there is much more to it than that, and this is what the notion of register is all about.

What we need to know about a context of situation in order to predict the linguistic features that are likely to be associated with it has been summarized under three headings: we need to know the 'field of discourse', the 'tenor of discourse' and the 'mode of discourse'. (See Halliday *et al.* 1964, where the term 'style of discourse' was used instead of 'tenor'. Here I shall prefer the term 'tenor', introduced by Spencer and Gregory (Enkvist *et al.* 1964). A number of other, more or less related, schemata have been proposed; see especially Ellis 1965, 1966; Gregory 1967.) John Pearce summarizes these as follows (Doughty *et al.* 1972, 185–6):

Field refers to the institutional setting in which a piece of language occurs, and embraces not only the subject-matter in hand but the whole activity of the speaker or participant in a setting [we might add: 'and of the other participants'] . . .

Tenor . . . refers to the relationship between participants . . . not merely variation in formality . . . but . . . such questions as the permanence or otherwise of the relationship and the degree of emotional charge in it. . . .

Mode refers to the channel of communication adopted: not only the choice between spoken and written medium, but much more detailed choices [we might add: 'and other choices relating to the role of language in the situation'] . . .

These are the general concepts needed for describing what is linguistically significant in the context of situation. They include the subject-matter, as an aspect of the 'field of discourse' – of the whole setting of relevant actions and events within which the language is functioning – for this is where subject-matter belongs. We do not, in fact, first decide what we want to say, independently of the setting, and then dress it up in a garb that is appropriate to it in the context, as some writers on language and language events seem to assume. The 'content' is part of the total planning that takes place. There is no clear line between the 'what' and the 'how'; all language is language-in-use, in a context of situation, and all of it relates to the situation, in the abstract sense in which I am using the term here.

I should here make a passing reference to dialects, which are part of the picture of language and social man, although not primarily relevant in the

educational context except as the focus of linguistic attitudes. Our language is also determined by who we are; that is the basis of dialect, and in principle a dialect is with us all our lives – it is not subject to choice. In practice, however, this is less and less true, and the phenomenon of ‘dialect switching’ is widespread. Many speakers learn two or more dialects, either in succession, dropping the first when they learn the second, or in coordination, switching them according to the context of situation. Hence the dialect comes to be an aspect of the register. If for example the standard dialect is used in formal contexts and the neighbourhood one in informal contexts, then one part of the contextual determination of linguistic features is the determination of choice of dialect. When dialects come to have different meanings for us, the choice of dialect becomes a choice of meaning, or a choice between different areas of our meaning potential.

Like the language of the child, the language of the adult is a set of socially-contextualized resources of behaviour, a ‘meaning potential’ that is related to situations of use. Being ‘appropriate to the situation’ is not some optional extra in language; it is an essential element in the ability to mean. Of course, we are all aware of occasions when we feel about something said or written that it might have been expressed in a way that was more appropriate to the task in hand; we want to ‘keep the meaning but change the wording.’ But these are the special cases, in which we are reacting to purely conventional features of register variation. In the last resort, it is impossible to draw a line between ‘what he said’ and ‘how he said it’, since this is based on a conception of language in isolation from any context. The distinction between one register and another is a distinction of *what* is said as much as of *how* it is said, without any enforced separation between the two. If a seven-year-old insists on using slang when you think he should be using more formal language, this is a dispute about registers; but if he insists on talking about his football hero when you want him to talk about a picture he has been painting, then this is equally a dispute over registers, and one which is probably much more interesting and far-reaching for both teacher and pupil concerned.

Thus our functional picture of the adult linguistic system is of a culturally specific and situationally sensitive range of meaning potential. Language is the ability to ‘mean’ in the situation types, or social contexts, that are generated by the culture. When we talk about ‘uses of language’, we are concerned with the meaning potential that is associated with particular situation types; and we are likely to be especially interested in those which are of some social and cultural significance, in the light of a sociological theory of language such as Bernstein’s. This last point is perhaps worth stressing. The way that we have envisaged the study of language and social man, through the concept of ‘meaning potential’, might be referred to as a kind of ‘sociosemantics’, in the sense that it is the study of meaning in a social or sociological framework. But there is a difference between ‘social’ and ‘sociological’ here. If we describe the context of situation in terms of *ad hoc* observations about the settings in which language is used, this could be said

to be a ‘social’ account of language but hardly a ‘sociological’ one, since the concepts on which we are drawing are not referred to any kind of general social theory. Such an account can be very illuminating, as demonstrated in a brilliant paper published twenty years ago by T. F. Mitchell, called ‘The language of buying and selling in Cyrenaica’ – though since the language studied was Cyrenaican Arabic and the paper was published in a learned journal in Morocco, it was not at first widely known (Mitchell 1957). But for research of this kind to be relevant to a teacher who is professionally concerned with his pupils’ success in language, it has to relate to social contexts that are themselves of significance, in the sort of way that Bernstein’s ‘critical contexts’ are significant for the socialization of the child. The criteria would then be sociological rather than simply social – based on some theory of social structure and social change. In this respect, the earlier terms like Firth’s ‘sociological linguistics’, or ‘sociology of language’ as used by Bernstein, are perhaps more pointed than the currently fashionable label ‘sociolinguistics’.

Table 1 Varieties in language

Dialect (‘dialectal variety’) = variety ‘according to the user’	Register (‘diatypic variety’) = variety ‘according to the use’
A dialect is: what you speak (habitually) determined by who you are (socio-region of origin and/or adoption), and expressing diversity of social structure (patterns of social hierarchy)	A register is: what you are speaking (at the time) determined by what you are doing (nature of social activity being engaged in), and expressing diversity of social process (social division of labour)
So in principle dialects are: different ways of saying the same thing and tend to differ in: phonetics, phonology, lexicogrammar (but not in semantics)	So in principle registers are: ways of saying different things and tend to differ in: semantics (and hence in lexicogrammar, and sometimes phonology, as realization of this)
Extreme cases: antilinguages, mother-in-law languages	Extreme cases: restricted languages, languages for special purposes
Typical instances: subcultural varieties (standard/nonstan- dard)	Typical instances: occupational varieties (technical, semi- technical)
Principal controlling variables: social class, caste; provenance (rural/ urban); generation; age; sex	Principal controlling variables: field (type of social action); tenor (role rela- tionships); mode (symbolic organiza- tion)
Characterized by: strongly-held attitudes towards dialects as symbol of social diversity	Characterized by: major distinctions of spoken/written; lang- uage in action/language in reflection