Factors affecting dialectic changes in conversation

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Abstract:

This study explores the idea that situational factors outside of a speakers discourse choices will have an affect on dialect choices. The data, which includes these situational factors and dialects, was collected from a twenty-four hour conversation log. The conversations took place between all male inmates and civilians in the Otisville Correctional Facility on Saturday March 11th. The Findings within the study revealed that several factors have the potential to affect a speaker's choices in dialect. Several of these factors accompanied a change in dialect 100% of the time. Causes that influence speakers to make these choices, and whether the choices were conscious or unconscious are discussed.

Introduction:

Language is an innate and distinctly unique tool humans possess that enables complex communications. There are around 6000 different languages currently spoken across the globe (Raloff, 1995). Of these 6000 languages, each can be subcategorized further into dialects. A dialect is a variant of a particular language distinguished by a certain punctuation, grammar or vocabulary. While dialect usually refers to regional varieties of a specific language, it can often be particular to a certain occupation or social group. Dialects of the same language often differ from one another through the use of different types of:

- Phonemes or the basic sounds of consonants and vowels.

- Syntax or rules that specify how we combine words to form sentences or phrases.

- Morphemes which are the smallest combinations of sounds in language such as, prefixes and suffixes.

- Semantics which specifies the meanings of words when they appear in different sentences or contexts.

Most individuals are capable and some others very deft at using, understanding and interchanging between dialects. The complexities that differentiate dialects from one another are often not taught to individuals and yet, most individuals seem to learn and use them naturally. Linguist Noam Chomsky (1957) believes humans achieve this feat by using our "innate program" of "mental grammar" which allows humans to learn the complex and difficult rules of language and grammar. Chomsky argued that, since children around the world go through the same stages of language development, then we

are all hardwired with the same type of mechanism to learn language called the "Language acquisition device." Other theorists believe even though we have an innate ability to use language it takes "significant social experience in order for it to be used effectively." (Goldberg, 2004)

Codeswitching is the term used to define bi/multi linguists switching between multiple languages in conversation (Lowi, 2005). Multi-dialectic individuals are similar to multi-linguists in that they both use changes in language as discourse tools, conversational boundaries and to establish rapport and identity. A discourse community, which in this study is a male prison, is made up by the identity that the individuals within it assign to themselves (Swales, 1990). The factors affecting conversations change as the shift in discourse communities change. This study explores what factors will effect a specific discourse choice such as dialect within a correctional discourse community. The extrinsic or situational factors that affect dialect changes in conversation are the focus of this study.

Methods:

The data used within this study was collected from a Twenty-four hour conversation log. The log included: the individuals involved in each conversation, where the conversation took place, which domain it took place in (reading, writing, speaking, and listening), which dialects were used and the situational factors involved in each conversation. The researcher chose and defined dialects and factors to be used within the research, they are as follows:

Dialects:

- **<u>Authoritive dialect</u>**, the use of strong tones in voice, emphasis on demanding words or phrases; commanding authority.
- **<u>Occupational dialect</u>**, the use of a particular vernacular used by individuals of a certain occupation, social group or cohort.
- **<u>Casual dialect</u>**, the use of standard language; the type of language most often used by that individual.
- **<u>Prison slang dialect</u>**, the use of words, phrases and/or alternate meanings common to those inmates within a correction institution.
- **<u>Academic dialect</u>**, the use of scholarly language that relates to education and is formalistic or conventional.
- **<u>Familial dialect</u>**, the use of intimate language expressed only to members of the same family or those considered family.

Factors:

- **<u>Time of day</u>**, a distinct portion of a twenty four hour period such as morning, night afternoon etc.
- **<u>Belief</u>**, A personal conviction or particular tenant accepted by a group.
- **<u>Area</u>**, a particular place such as cafeteria, courtyard or any other place with distinct surroundings.
- **<u>Outsiders</u>**, other individuals outside of the main subjects.
- **<u>Emotion</u>**, a physiological response effecting thought.
- **<u>Occupation</u>**, the occupation, social group or cohort of the individual speakers.
- **<u>Relationship</u>**, a connection or state of affairs shared between two individuals.
- **<u>Subject</u>**, a specific or distinguished topic or theme.

The researcher collected the data from 10 different conversations he was involved with among the inmates and civilians at the Otisville Correctional Facility on Saturday March 11th.

<u>**Results:**</u>

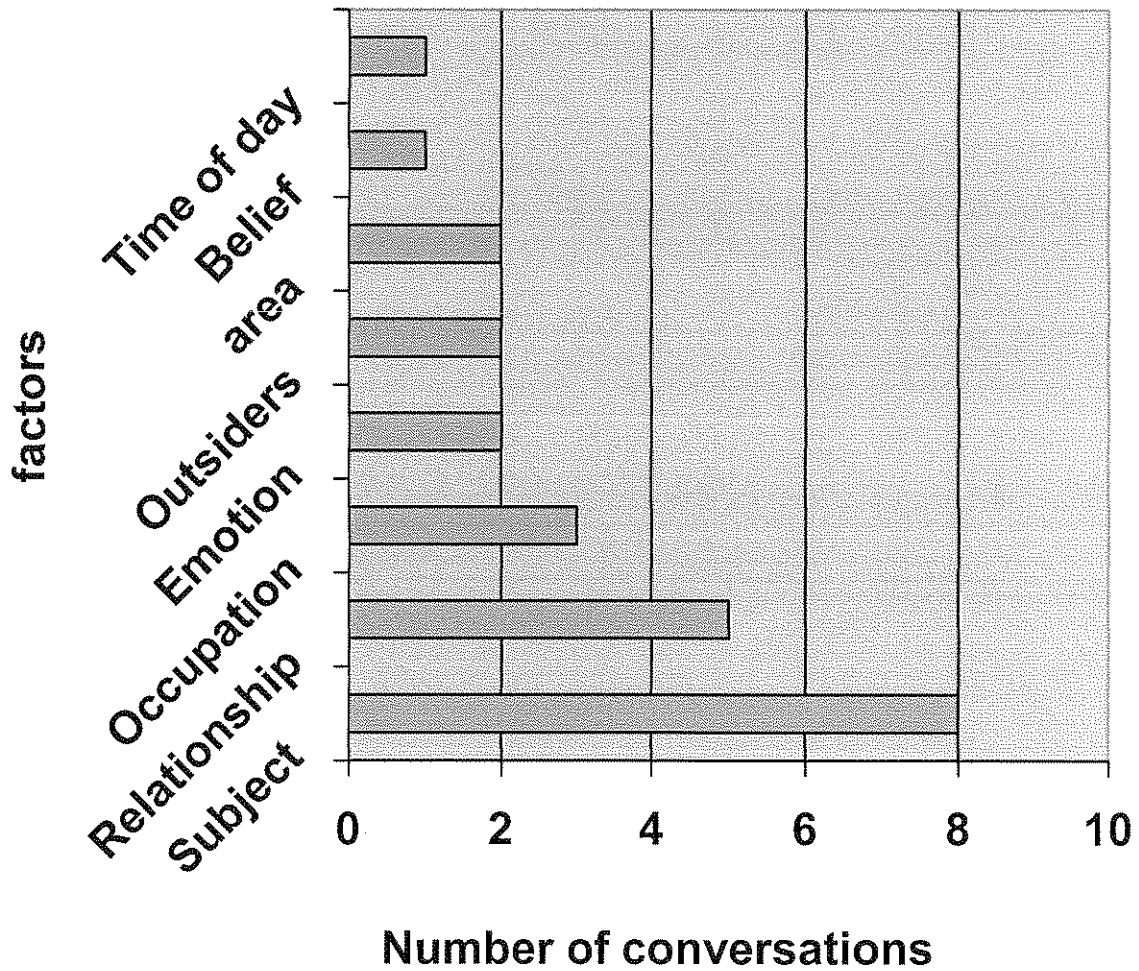**Fig. 1**

Dialects used in a 24 hour period
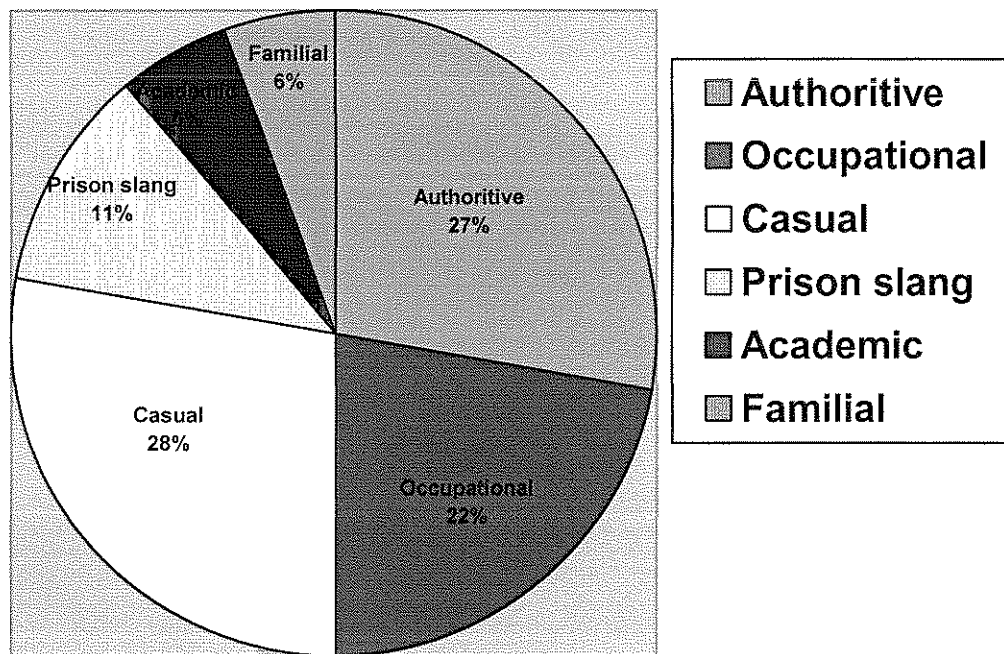
Note. This graph was constructed by the researcher using data he purposely collected for this study.

The percentages represented within this graph give a numerical and visual value to the dialects found within a correctional environment on a given day. Casual, authoritive and occupational dialects occur most often in our data. Prison slang only makes up for 11 percent of our statistical data.

Fig. 2

Occurance of situational factors

Note. This graph was constructed by the researcher using data he purposely collected for this study.

The occurrence of each factor in the ten recorded conversations is expressed within this graph. No one factor affected every conversation in the data. Subject had a high occurrence rate, 8:10. Time of day and belief's occurrence rates were both 1:10.

Table 2
<u>Distribution of factors for each dialect</u>

# of times each dialect was used	Dialect	Time of day	Belief	Area	Outsiders	Emotion	Occupation	Relationship	Subject
5	Authoritive	N/A	1	1	1	2	2	1	4
4	Occupational	N/A	1	1	1	1	N/A	3	4
6	Casual	1	N/A	1	2	1	1	4	5
2	Prison slang	N/A	N/A	1	1	N/A	1	1	1
1	Academic	N/A	N/A	1	N/A	N/A	N/A	1	1
1	Familial	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	1	1

Note. This chart was constructed by the researcher using data he purposely collected for this study.

This table represents how many times each factor was present when a dialect was being used or changed. Important to note is, a change to an occupational dialect was influenced by the subject matter 100% of the time. Other influential trends included subject/casual, subject/authoritive. There is an apparent lack of influential factors on familial dialect. This graph also expresses the overlap of factors for each dialect.

Discussion:

The purpose of this study was to obtain a list of the situational factors that can be correlated to dialectic choices and changes. Although the research was done on a small scale in a limited discourse community, it indeed revealed several factors have the potential to affect the user's choices in dialect. In **Figure 4** we are able to see several factors accompanied a change in dialect 100% of the time; subject accompanied both authoritive and occupational dialects 4 out of 4 times and casual dialects 5 out of 6 times; many other factors had more than a 50% accompaniment rate. Again in **Figure 3** we can see that subject and relationship have a profound effect on dialectic choices.

The data revealed that a substantial correlation can be made between the factors within prison as a discourse community and changes in dialect. If this is an indication of how other discourse communities behave, the idea of a discourse community should not only be thought of as the people who make up that community, but by the factors present within it as well.

The limited resources available to this study severely limited its scope. A greater list of both factors and dialects across a more diverse discourse community, including multiple languages would be necessary before any concrete connections can be made between which factors affect changes in specific dialects. An interesting experiment would be needed to asses each factors potential strength or how likely its presence is to affect dialect. An interview of each speaker after their conversation may help researchers reveal whether the speaker was aware of the factors present and chose dialects accordingly or the choice was in part unconsciously done. Although enough valuable data

was present to satisfy this inquiry into the use of language, future research into this

subject is needed to reveal more quantitative data

References:

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Addendum 1

Raw Data

Who	Where	What Domain	Dialectic and any changes	Factors
Myself and my Neighbor	In our cubes	Speech	Casual (English)	Time of day
Myself and another inmate	Bathroom	Speech	Prison Slang (English)	Area, occupation
C.O	Dorm	Speech	Authoritive (English)	Subject, area, occupation
Myself and a C.O	Visit Room	Speech	Authoritive to casual (English)	Subject, occupation, relationship
Myself and my father	Visit Room	Speech	Familial to occupational to business(English)	Subject, relationship
Myself and two C.Os	Visit Room	Speech	Authoritive to casual(English)	Subject, relationship, outsiders
Myself and my cooking partner and random strangers	Kitchen	Speech	Occupational to prison slang to casual(English)	Subject, relationship, outsiders
Myself and another inmate	Cube	Speech	Casual to authoritive(English)	Subject, emotions
Myself and two other students	Weight Pit	Speech	Academic to occupational to casual(English)	Subject, relationship, area
Myself and another inmate	Dorm	Speech	Occupational to authoritive(English)	Subject, emotion, belief

This table represents the raw data collected for the 24 hour conversation log.