

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

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Synchronic and Diachronic Variations

Synchronic language variation and diachronic language change are two ways languages develop over time and in within certain areas or groups of language users.

Synchronic language variations are distinctions in pronunciation, use, or vocabulary within the same language between groups of people, regions of the country, or contextual situations at the same time period in history.

Diachronic language changes are real transformations that occur in a language over stretches of time and for several reasons, including ease of production and ease of comprehension, and are wholly accepted by the users of the language.

Some Illustrations of Synchronic Variations

It is easier to comprehend the differences between synchronic language variation and diachronic language change by looking at several examples of each.

Synchronic language variation can be demonstrated well with American English. One example of language variation occurs between different ages of the speaker. Where someone in their sixties would probably say, "I will see you tomorrow, Sam," someone in their late teens might say, "Later, dog!" I have been known to say, "You go, girl!" whereas my mother would say, "That's great, good job."

In each of these examples, the speaker means the same thing semantically, but lexically, different words are chosen to meet the approximate ages of the speaker and audience.

Another example of synchronic language variation occurs when you listen to conversations in different geographic areas of the country. For example, in Oklahoma, it is fine to say "ain't" in a conversation, even in the workplace. In New York, many people would think you are uneducated if you said "ain't."

Also, some words are stressed differently in different areas of the country. In Oklahoma, the word, "insurance" is pronounced in-sure-ence, with the stress on the "in." Here in New York, the stress is placed on the "sure." The different stress patterns make the word sound completely different (a paralinguistic difference?).

One last example of synchronic language variation occurs when the speaker uses different registers of language when speaking in different social environments. A person will not use the same terms or vocabulary with their five-year-old daughter as they would to their physician or clergyperson.

For example, a person who treats sick people can be called a doctor, physician, medical practitioner, or even a quack, depending on with whom the speaker is conversing.

While English doesn't have differing vocabulary to distinguish "respectful word forms" from "non-respectful word forms," (like *vous* ((you with respect)) and *tu* ((you without respect)) in French, or *ni:nga* ((you with respect)) and *ni:* ((you without respect)) in Tamil), different vocabulary will be selected according to the particular social situation to show respect – you would call a courtroom judge "your honor," or "sir," and not "dude," or "dog."

Diachronic Language Change

Diachronic language change differs from synchronic variation in that the changes occur over long periods of time and tend to be accepted in the language as a whole, not just accepted by certain groups of language users.

ASL demonstrates well the concept of diachronic language change over its more than 225 year history. Signs researched back to the Abbe de l'Eppe from his 1776 publications show dramatic changes from then until now. Most changes seem to support ease of production and ease of reception.

For example, signs produced near the center of the face tend to have moved toward the perimeter of the face (ex. WRONG), and signs that required two hands near the face no require only one (HORSE). In contrast, signs that are produced in the lower mid-section area of the body that previously used only one hand, now require two (TRAVEL).

ASL also has experienced diachronic changes related to the geographical dispersion of language users, as ASL's history is from Old French Sign Language – a language which is not in use today (showing that French sign language also experienced diachronic changes). Many of the signs used in ASL still have the hand shape of the initial of the French word for the sign (LOOK-FOR - French *cherchez*). The dispersion of ASL from the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut, in the 19th century had a large impact on the "Americanization" of ASL.

Diachronic language changes are also seen in English through the creation of new words for technological inventions. Fifty years ago, no one had heard of personal computers, ZIP drives, or the Internet.

As time goes on and people need new words to describe new technology or inventions, new words will continue to be added to the English language (and others). Languages can be likened to living things in that they grow and mature over time and develop variations depending on which groups of people are using them at the time.

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