Avoidance language and the limits of register

Alice Mitchell

University at Buffalo, USA

In several languages across the African continent, women use specialized vocabulary to adhere to a naming taboo forbidding them from uttering any words that sound like the names of their in-laws. Such phenomena are generally referred to as ”avoidance registers”, although we also find the terms ”women’s language of respect” (Finlayson 2002), ”deferential styles” (Irvine 1992), and even ”dialect” (Msibi 2013:265). Using data from a previously undocumented avoidance register of Datooga (Nilotic; Tanzania), this paper argues that the phenomenon of linguistic avoidance provides a useful angle from which to critically examine sociolinguistic classification of speech varieties, and particularly the notion of register.

Traditional definitions of register, rooted in Western cultures, are based on the observation that speakers employ distinctive linguistic features as they inhabit different social settings (e.g. Biber and Finnegan 1994). Adopting this sense of ‘register’ for Datooga avoidance is problematic for two reasons. First, married women’s metapragmatic characterizations of avoidance make little reference to shifts in time or space. They report using avoidance language in almost all social settings throughout their lives. Second, a woman employs only those alternate lexemes she needs to avoid her own particular constellation of taboo names. This means that while speakers have extensive passive command of the parallel avoidance lexicon, an individual only uses a fixed subset of avoidance words. Use of avoidance language therefore exhibits minimal variation, both contextually, and in the forms speakers select.

To address these difficulties, I consider avoidance varieties in light of Agha’s (2007) concept of register as reflexive models of language use. By focusing on speakers’ metapragmatic classifications of speech, this reframing of register enables us to relate linguistic forms not only to aspects of context but also to ”images of personhood” (Agha 2007:199), an idea which is central to understanding the sociolinguistics of in-law avoidance.

Keywords: African sociolinguistics, linguistic avoidance, register.