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# The School Teacher’s Role in Children’s Acquisition of Linguistic Variety

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Within any society, language varies in a significant number of ways, whether referring to different accents, “uneducated” forms, dialects and even entirely different languages. Some of the most socially relevant and intralinguistically salient forms may be collectively called “registers,” referring to often-overlapping varieties used in different social situations. In this thesis I was interested to explore the developmental aspects of intralinguistic variation and how the school environment could be used to support students’ acquisition of register, and over the course of research the scope expanded to include variation more generally. My research questions were “How do children acquire different varieties of language?” and “How can teachers support the acquisition of those different varieties?” Research shows that learning to make use of linguistic variety develops hand-in-hand with language acquisition, from the very beginning of life. Throughout their life, people’s conception of their identity and how they should use language evolves according to a wide range of social and cultural factors.

This thesis takes a positive and descriptive approach to variation of all kinds, seeing students’ own languages as resources for improving learning and self-image, especially when these do not conform to the local or national standard language. Teachers should therefore be sensitive to the linguistic needs of their students and teach knowledge about language, including the social effects of different varieties. In so doing, they will create a more inclusive classroom as well as helping contribute to a more equitable society.

Keywords: register, dialect, language acquisition, linguistic variation

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# 1 Introduction

Finland has a strong system of regional and local dialects, and they occupy a prominent position in public discourse. In addition to these there exists the formal standard (*yleiskieli*, hereafter "SF" - Standard Finnish) and the written standard *(kirjakieli*, hereafter "WSF" - Written Standard Finnish*)*, as well as a general informal spoken variety (*puhekieli,* hereafter "GSF" - General Spoken Finnish) (*Yleiskieli ja asiatyylit [SF and styles of formality]*, n.d.). Many Finnish adults are able to make use of all three – at least one variety of local dialect, the formal standards and the informal. In much scholarly literature, learning how to use these varieties of language happens naturally through the course of one's life. Multiple studies have emphasised the importance of schooling for the learning of standard language varieties such as that of Finnish (e.g. Marcilese et al., 2019 for Brazilian Portuguese and Sophocleus & Wilks, 2010 for Greek in Cyprus). This is in part due to the fact that such varieties are typically artificial in nature, which is certainly the case for SF (Kolehmainen, 2005). It should be noted, however, that simply going through schooling does not guarantee acquisition of the standard variety (Hakulinen et al., 2009, p. 9).

Children acquire language socially, and teachers tend to serve as linguistic role models in that they are a significant source of formal and other language teaching (Agha, 2003). In this respect, the language which teachers employ in their interactions with students may constitute an important influence on students' linguistic growth. The Finnish National Agency for Education's (FNAE) 2014 National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (hereafter "the NCC") includes the learning of "different levels (varieties) in mother tongues, other tongues, and their dialects" as part of plurilingual competence as a skill (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 198). Language choice is frequently conscious, and teachers I have interviewed in the past have spoken of their intentionality in choosing how they interact with their students. Furthermore, people frequently unconsciously make linguistic choices based on the situation and the social message which they wish to convey (e.g. Hurtig, 2012). The teacher's place in helping children to acquire linguistic variety is of interest in this theoretical literature review.

# 2 Purpose & Research Questions

I lived in Italy for some years in the late 2010s and taught English at a local institute of applied sciences. One year, one of my students was a Cameroonian immigrant to Italy, one of whose primary languages was English. He chafed at being forced to take my course and when he

complained about his marks on a test, I explained to him that I was teaching a variety of English which is different to his. This did little to satisfy his complaints, and he soon dropped out of the program through which he took my course (and though it was not primarily because of my class, I suspect it had something to do with it). I have often thought about his case in the last few years and wished that I could have served his linguistic needs better.

The choices alluded to in the introduction about what variety of language to use, made consciously or not, have implications for students in the present as well as in their future. Their framing and implementation, as shown with my Cameroonian-Italian student, do, too. Overuse of certain styles of language may have exclusionary effects on those students less exposed to or well-equipped to deal with them (e.g. for non-L1 students) (Mac Ruairc, 2011). All too often, certain aspects of language use, or indeed entire varieties, may be targeted as being "bad language," when, in reality, the usage is simply a less overt means of criticizing the person for their lower social class compared to the general population (Peterson, 2018, p. 58). I believe that school is a place where equality and equity should be encouraged, and that it is important for teachers to be aware of their own ideas, prejudices and ideologies regarding linguistic variety and how it interfaces with schooling. Most of all, they should be aware of their role as a social mediator in addition to that of a linguistic role model. With the awareness of this dual role, they must strive to create a classroom which is safe for people no matter what variety of language they may speak while at the same time preparing their students for a future in society, in which they will need to employ different styles of language in different situations. In this respect, the teacher plays a crucial role in promoting social mobility and the health of society as a whole.

As someone with a background in linguistics and language teaching, I am interested in the role that Finnish dialects/accents play in the interactional life of the Finnish language and especially on how they fit into the system of formal/standard vs informal/nonstandard. Taking all these varieties as registers, I seek to explore how children learn to make use of the various linguistic tools which are local to their community, and the role that teachers can play in helping them to learn the less-native registers such as the artificial standards of SF and WSF, in addition to non-formal varieties. My initial training in linguistics was strongly influenced by Chomsky's Universal Grammar, which no doubt colours some of my views and assumptions in this research.

Teachers, especially of primary school, tend to be underequipped to deal with linguistic diversity (Edwards, 2014, p. 409; Nevala, 2022). The NCC was revised in 2014, and changes in it with the intention to improve the scope of multilingualism have been similarly slow to reach the classroom, with nearly half of teachers cautious about it (Suuriniemi et al., 2021). There is a continuing need for general research and spread to the school level of knowledge about multilingualism and linguistic diversity, so it is my hope that this paper can help raise awareness of this fact and may potentially contribute to an amelioration of this difficulty, thereby improving schooling (and teaching) experiences in this regard.

My primary research questions are therefore as follows:

- How do children acquire different varieties of language?
- How can teachers support the development of register/variety acquisition?

# 3 Concepts & Terminology

Spoken and written communication are in focus, although non-linguistic communication in the form of body language, styles of dressing, etc. also play important roles in language variation and semiotics. Meaning in all forms of communication is socially co-constructed – that is to say, groups of people collectively agree to associate audible or visual forms with meaning. For example, there is no empirical reason that, in English, the sounds /d/, /o/ and /g/ together in that order refer to the furry, four-legged animal which humans now keep as pets and work animals – it was simply collectively and implicitly agreed upon and continues to be in common use. That this is not an empirical inevitability is borne out by the fact that no other language in the world uses that collection of sounds for that concept except, by chance, for the Mbabaram language in northern Queensland in Australia. New words are regularly invented and accepted by ever wider subgroups, and range from what we may perceive as entirely normal words such as Shakespeare's inventions "bandit" and "a sorry sight" to current Generation Z / internet slang such as "yeet" and "press the slay button." The continuing life of language happens through people's use and learning of thereof and is happening constantly.

Because meaning in language is socially co-constructed, language learning must be social, too. No one would argue that a particular language is innate to someone, since international adoptees

do not necessarily learn to speak the language of the location they were adopted from. Instead, it is through a community (in all its varied forms and definitions) that a language is defined, used, changed and passed on to new speakers (Van Herk, 2018). Indeed, it would not be too strange to consider a language to be, in some respects, as alive as the speakers who use it.

## 3.1 On Linguistic Variation

Language is as variable as its speakers are (Johnson & White, 2020). No two people speak exactly the same way, even peers in school or members of the same family. They interact with different people in their daily life and do different things, which can impact their vocabulary, pronunciation, prosody, etc. (Hakulinen et al., 2009, p. 39). Differences may be as minute as precise frequency at which a certain vowel is pronounced. Perhaps you have noticed yourself or others imitating aspects of others' speech, consciously or not; this is part and parcel of the process of language exchange. Because no two people speak exactly the same, one could argue that everyone speaks a different language (Hakulinen et al., 2009, p. 192), but that the differences are minimal enough between two speakers of any given "language"/"dialect"/"accent" that they have almost no difficulty understanding one another. Figure 1 below provides a visualisation of this.

A comparison of two speakers' English

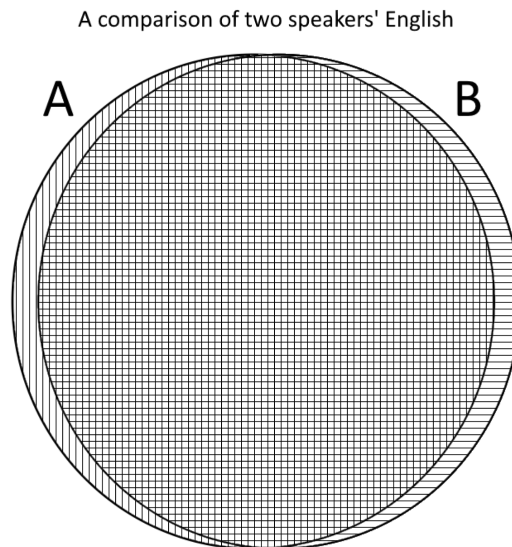


Fig. 1

The Venn diagram depicts the Englishes of two people: person A, who in this example will be me, and person B, who in this example will be my father. As two native speakers of English who lived together for many years in the same place, there is significant overlap in our knowledge

about English – our vocabulary; our pronunciation of its sounds; and how we use pitch, tone and stress – and this is represented by the gridded section in the middle. On the left, in the section with vertical lines, person A has some aspects of his English which are not in common with person B's English – he has lived in different places, interacted with different people, worked in different professions, etc. All of these have had an impact on his particular variety of English, which, although it may still be called Standard American English, is not exactly the same as that of person B. That person's English, represented by the horizontal lined section on the right, is different for the same reasons: he has lived in different places, interacted with different people, worked in different professions, etc., all of which have given him knowledge of specific vocabulary, ways of speaking, pronunciation, and so on. If person B were to use his linguistic resources from the non-overlapping section – say, to discuss the finer points of how to protect computer systems from hacking attempts – in speaking to person A, he will likely not be fully understood because besides the non-linguistic conceptual knowledge which person A lacks, he will be using vocabulary which is unfamiliar – indeed, as a child, person A (I) witnessed person B and my mother speaking about computer-related topics and I commented frequently that I was sure they were just inventing words. This example mentions only vocabulary, which is perhaps the most illustrative example. Prosody is another situation in which differences may cause misunderstanding, such as situations where a language learner places the stress of a word in the wrong place, causing confusion in another listener. People are usually resilient to ambiguity in language and through exposure to other varieties may increase their experience, and thereby be able to understand other speakers better.

At this stage, it is important to make a point which underlies a good deal of my philosophy and logic: when referring to groups of people, the term "monolingual" is one of convenience rather than fact. This stems from the abovementioned fact that no two people speak exactly the same language, and differences grow with time, generation, distance, lifestyles, etc. It is important to accept this fact in a classroom especially, where home languages and situations may vary greatly, and so not making assumptions of monolingualism may help students to acquire variation better.

It is also crucial to understand that language varieties, dialects, registers, etc. are not discrete units. Variation in language is a continuum, and there is no hard boundary between the names we have applied to its varieties, be it linguistically, socially or geographically. If informal and

formal English are taken as examples, one can imagine a spectrum, where at one end sits my informal Standard American English (SAE) and at the other end sits my formal SAE. When ordering food informally, say, at a fast-food restaurant, I might say "Can I get a burger?" If in my life I ever have the opportunity to order food at a 5-star restaurant, however, I will turn to my formal English and say something to the effect of "I would like to order the filet mignon, please." Yet there exists a middle ground, which could be at a normal restaurant, where I may choose a more neutral phrase such as "I'll take the salmon, please." There are elements of overlap even in this short phrase with the two previous examples. Many other phrases to order food exist which are more formal or less so than this. Thus, variation in terms of formality may be seen as a spectrum or continuum within any given language – any given utterance could be ranked based on its formality, placed somewhere on a scale from "highly informal" to "highly formal." There are nearly limitless continua like this within and among languages, which poses difficulties for researchers attempting to classify languages and learn more about what language is through their research in linguistic typology (e.g. Stassen, L. in Song, J. J., (2011)).

This variation applies in Finland, too, where dialects and other varieties exist on a continuum. This makes it difficult to define precisely what constitutes the "Rauma dialect," for example, as different speakers of this Western dialect will have differently varying characteristics. Similarly, variations on SF/WSF exist as local and regional influences make themselves felt (Hakulinen et al., 2009, p. 39). This increases the difficulty in defining one true "standard," despite the ideal that the standard language is nationally universal. In English, too, there exists a "continuum" of standards and, for example, most definitions explain what SAE is not (Bateman, 2021). In this respect, it is not accurate to speak of a single standard in English or in Finnish, but nevertheless "SF/WSF" and "Standard English" are terms that are used – and will be used in this text – to refer broadly to formal varieties, or *registers*.

## 3.2 What is register?

The term "register" refers to a specific variety of language used in a particular social context (Crystal, 1991, as cited in Biber & Finegan, 1994, p. 4). The way one speaks with one's friends when out on the town will differ to how one speaks in the office and to how one speaks to a local politician. Registers communicate social information such as the station of the interlocutors

(Wagner et al., 2010). It is important to reiterate that register, like all language, exists on a spectrum and thus it is not necessarily possible to say where one register ends and another begins – they bleed into each other.

As language is socially acquired, so too are the various applications of registers and the societal implications they may carry for users. Most people learn how to use register unconsciously through observing and taking part in interactions with other language users. In this respect, learning to use variety happens as a function learning to use language (Ikeda et al., 2018; Piippo et al., 2016). However, the formal or national standard is frequently taught explicitly, both for L1 and L2 users. Compulsory schooling is one of the most common places for this, and this is a key point for the motivation of this text.

Distinct from the concept of register is that of dialect, given that, in many languages, these are the primary vehicles of communication already. Typically, dialect is something innate to the user, to some degree immutable, while register is chosen based on the listener (Ikeda et al., 2018). In the Finnish context, however, dialects are frequently mutually intelligible enough that they can be used almost anywhere in the country and still be understood. There have come to be stereotypes attached to these dialects (Piippo et al., 2016, p.86-87), and some people modify to what degree they use dialectal features in their speech depending on the situation (Piippo et al., 2016, p.101-102). For these reasons, in public discourse they have taken on register-like characteristics, a process Asif Agha (2003) referred to as *enregisterment* (p. 233). Agha details how Received Pronunciation (RP), the high register of British English (see section 4.2.2.), has changed from a dialect (or more specifically, a highly prestigious regional sociolect which originated in medieval southeastern England) into a register: those who use it show themselves to be of a high class, well-educated, and proper. RP thus carries socioeconomic and cultural information which listeners use to draw conclusions about its users, which falls in line with the definition of a *register* established above.

While the Finnish situation is not so drastic as the difference between RP and other forms of English spoken in the UK, I will take all of the above as justification to incorporate dialects in this text under the aegis of "register" in Finnish. While much of the literature in this thesis focuses on dialect, its findings are applicable to register, given their similarity in the Finnish

context. Throughout this text, I will use the term "register" and "variety" more or less interchangeably, the latter being a neutral term currently in vogue in linguistics to capture the variation I have described above (Van Herk, 2018). Furthermore, much of the research and concepts cited here will be applicable to register as well as to less mutually intelligible forms of variety. This can be further justified by longstanding acceptance in the field of sociolinguistics that changing from one variety or style to another happens by the same processes as codeswitching between languages (Bell, 2001, p. 145). For these reasons, I will tend toward the use of the term "variety."

### 3.2.1 High and low registers

The "high" register is how the most socially privileged speak – the upper classes, royalty, the academia, etc. – and because of their social power they are able to dictate to others in their society what is "correct" and what is not (Peterson, 2019, p. 59). The high register is associated with efficiency, a high level of education, ambition and wealth (Nardy et al., 2013). The features of the speech of lower socioeconomic classes are more likely to be associated with features of lower registers, which may, in turn, be termed "incorrect" (Finegan & Biber, 2001, p. 235). In multilingual societies, such as post-conquest England (1066 onwards), register differences tend to be expressed in mutually unintelligible languages. In "monolingual" societies, too, as much of northern and western Europe has been for most of its modern history, the low register or registers are those of the poor, the uneducated, the rural and the geographically distant – think of the association of British English varieties such as "chav," "Brummie" and "Scouse" with the lower classes. Speakers of lower registers may be discriminated against, consciously or not, given the association with socioeconomic class (Bateman, 2021). We will return to the topic of linguistic discrimination later. Yet not all discrim

No discussion of sociolinguistic variation can be complete without mention of prestige, a concept which William Labov's landmark 1966 study in New York City used to quantify the degree to which sociolinguistic features of language use are seen as socially favorable or stigmatized (Rickford & Eckert, 2001, p. 2). As mentioned previously, the most (socially) puissant in society tend to be the ones who speak the most prestigious (variety of a) language, even if they are relatively few in number. Yet, the minority population in all societies, even if they are of higher

prestige, may in time assimilate into the majority population, their languages influencing another. This is quite visible in modern English, where the names for farm animals are of Germanic descent (cow, calf, sheep, pig), reflecting Old English's Germanic language family heritage and the fact that the farmers who raised them spoke that language – the low prestige language in post-conquest England. However, the names for those animals' meat, typically consumed by Norman French-speaking lords and other upper-class members of English society, are recognizably French-influenced (English/modern French: beef /*boeuf*, veal /*veau,* mutton /*mouton*, pork /*porc*) - as Norman French was the language of high prestige. Today, of course, the upper classes in England speak English, not Norman French, a testament to their assimilation into the majority, although the language continues to reflect their past influence, given the large-scale replacement of Germanic-root words with Romance-root ones (Gramley & Pätzold, 2004, p. 29).

In "monolingual" Finland – so called here because, unlike post-Conquest England, modern Finland does not have significant, relevant language conflicts among classes –, various dialectical influences may be seen in SF. This situation, however, differs due to the history of that variety: as the upper classes didn't use Finnish prior to the 19th century, there simply didn't exist a high register, and so one was created to "fill the gap" (Koivusalo, 1997, p. 16; Kolehmainen, 2005). This meant necessarily that low registers influenced the artificial register of *SF*, and those influences can still be traced today.

Even within the "same" language, low registers can and do influence high ones. In modern English, words which were originally considered slang, such as "glib" and "mob," have made their way into general use as an acceptable word even in high registers (Van Herk, 2018). All of the above points to evidence that registers influence each other, which is part and parcel of the ever-evolving nature of language.

Finegan & Biber (2001) propose that high and low register differ depending on the degree to which the fulfil the mandates of clarity/elaboration (more closely associated with higher registers in English and in Finnish) and ease/economy (more closely associated with lower registers in English and in Finnish) (pp. 244-256). Such mandates should be understood as unconscious restrictions on speech to allow for successful communication, and they are dependent on the type

of speech needed by the community using the register – high registers require clarity to ensure that, as they move from situation to situation with a range of people, they are understood without pre-existing shared background information or social context (Biber & Finegan, 1994, p. 339). By contrast, low registers are observed to be confined to somewhat more insular communities within which a shared context allows economization of speech without loss of communicative ability.

### 3.2.2 Communication Accommodation Theory

Howard Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) is useful for understanding how people use different language in different situations. CAT holds that people accommodate their language when speaking with others, and notice (sometimes unconsciously) when they do so (Giles, 1991). This is done for a wide variety of motives, including winning interlocutors' approval, demonstrating group solidarity or loyalty and improving communicative efficiency (Nardy et al., 2013). Schoolchildren tend to use more informal registers (e.g. in Finland the local dialect and/or GSF), given their lack of knowledge in more formal, academic ones. As accommodation tends to be unconscious, Hurtig (2012) writes, the schoolteacher's (often unconscious) choice of informal registers can be seen as an attempt to be more friendly, and an attempt to win students' approval for the service of a particular agenda. A teacher therefore cannot help but mix registers, though this effect can be lessened with significant conscious effort. This mixture of registers may contribute to students' own learning of the effects of different registers and their ability to use them, being that it comes from someone who typically (at least in the Finnish context) consists as a sort of linguistic role model.

Accommodation can also go in the direction of increasing clarity: cross-linguistically language users use a variety with better enunciation and simpler language when communicating with people whose language skills they judge not to be up to par (Piippo et al., 2016, p. 228). This applies to children, non-native speakers, the injured and even pets.

This theory is useful for understanding the mechanisms of linguistic variation in different social contexts and it has impacts on language choice and the forms of language to which learners are exposed.

### 3.2.3 Register, school and academic success

People are socially "trained" to use different varieties of language in different situations (Giles & Coupland, 1991, p. 60). This "training," a term of my own invention, happens through society and one's own learned expectations. It should not, therefore, come as a surprise that some teachers may confine themselves to a formal register due to the social and professional implications of their job. For some, it may also have to do with their personal philosophy on teaching and thus be part of intentional usage of language – that their use of the formal register is a means of enforcing authority and expressing their professional personality (as registers are socially laden) as well as a means of helping students to learn the use the formal register, which is typically unfamiliar from non-school contexts.

As previously mentioned, school is for many one of the first steps out of the home circle environment. It is a place where children encounter peers who speak differently to them, and it represents a first step into a greater linguistic world. Due to the differences with the home environment, new schoolgoers may lack some shared context which facilitates conversation at home, thereby causing some measure of difficulty in communicating (Finegan & Biber, 2001, p. 241). It is a new context in which a different register may therefore be needed to communicate successfully.

School has a normalizing effect on children's language, imposing the standard. In Finland, this derives from the old idea that SF is the correct language (Piippo et al., p. 125). Since the implementation of compulsory schooling in Finland in 1921, this has been broadly successful in reducing regional socioeconomic and linguistic differences (Hakulinen et al., 2009, p. 38). One of the main tasks of the mother tongue subject is to give students the tools to be able to express themselves precisely, and success in developing this skill supports further studies as well as the acquisition of other languages (Hakulinen et al., 2009, p. 59-60; Nevala, 2022). If learning the standard variety, such as SF, which is not most children's home variety, helps with this, then surely all experience with all varieties is useful, too.

Standard language is, as previously stated, frequently the high register. The association of higher socioeconomic classes with the higher registers of a language may have implications for acquisition, too. Mac Ruairc (2011), working in the British context, notes that the academic register tends to favour middle- and upper-class children at the expense of lower-class ones. This is understandable: children who are exposed to the academic register at home – perhaps their caregivers are white collar workers who need the register in their working life and so bring it home, too – will naturally be more familiar with it when beginning school and will not need to learn as much as those who have less exposure to it. This is borne out by Van Kleeck's (2014) research finding that the children of mothers who use more academic language have advantages in learning and using it, too. Turning to the Finnish context, Hautamäki et al. (2008, as cited in Hakulinen et al., 2009) indicate that the children of academics perform better in mother tongue classes than those of non-academics for similar reasons. All of this can be taken as evidence for the variation in uptake and usage of higher registers in school among children of different socioeconomic backgrounds.

That children of higher socioeconomic classes tend to be better predisposed to learning and using high registers is important in that it helps to explain academic success. It can thus be seen to be a facet of privilege, and the Finnish education system has long worked to raise the level of the less-privileged to reduce inequality. Effective acquisition of SF is an important part of the education by which Finland has sought to accomplish this.

# 4 Q 1 How do children acquire different varieties of language?

Despite all of my studies and learning heretofore, it remains tempting for me to think of languages as distinct beings, whose acquisition happens in separate "compartments," uninfluenced by each other. The reality is that taking a compartmentalization approach to viewing languages and child language acquisition cannot fully capture the complexity of the acquisition process and of languages themselves. In the same way, it seems simple and natural to think that a child first learns "English" and then learns its varieties, but, indeed, this is too simplistic.

Learning to use different varieties of language is, in fact, part and parcel of learning to use language in general, and not merely a side effect, a secondary process or as question of sequence (Piippo et al., 2016, p. 225; Ikeda et al., 2018; Nardy et al., 2013; Johnson & White, 2020). This section will focus on the acquisition of variation, and other texts should be consulted for a fuller description of how children acquire language in general.

## 4.1 Previous Research

Sociolinguistics is a relatively new field of study, with just over half a century of work, with relatively little of it on this topic. Nardy et al. (2013) provide a comprehensive review of work examining sociolinguistic variation in children, covering research from the second half of the 20th century through to the early 2000s. William Labov was one of the first to propose a developmental model of language acquisition from a sociolinguistic perspective across a person's lifespan. In this model he theorized that children first acquire the basics of grammar of the language, followed by acquisition of the local vernacular, during which the friend group's language supersedes that of the family's in the child's language patterns. Into adolescence, he posited, people come to be aware of variations in language, and eventually, learn to tailor their own language to make use of variation for pragmatic purposes (Labov, 1964, as cited in Nardy et al., 2013). Labov thus implies that children are monostylistic until adolescence, and that they learn the sociolinguistic aspects of variation before learning to make use of that variation. However, evidence shows that children make choices about register even from the age of three (Nardy et al., 2013; Johnson & White, 2020). Patterson (1992, as cited in Nardy et al., 2013) determined "that children acquire patterns of stylistic variation as soon as they participate in daily family interactions." Her study examined how American children aged 4, 6 and 8 pronounce the English "-ing" and found that they tended to pronounce it [ɪn] in more informal situations and [ɪŋ] when telling stories or talking about pictures, but that they weren't formally aware of the fact that they were doing this or why. It was also noted that the situation and the interlocutor had effects on which form they chose to use. She concludes that it is register variation usage which precedes understanding of the social implications of those registers (Patterson 1992, as cited in Nardy et al., 2013). Clearly then, our understanding of the process of variation acquisition and how children learn to fit into the complex and ever-evolving landscape of linguistic variety has improved over time.

## 4.2 Variation Geographically, Socially and Diachronically

As previously implied, language is inherently variable – how it is used depends on factors such as the immediate context (social and environmental), the broader social situation, the mood of the interlocutors and the speaker's own characteristics and personality (Fischer, 1958, as cited in Nardy et al., 2013). Children are able to grow into and contribute to this variation despite its instability and the complexity that comes with social structure.

Language learning begins from learning to interact while the brain develops enough to allow a baby to understand and produce comprehensible speech (Piippo et al., 2015, p. 221-2). Because babies interact with a rather small number of people who are quite local to them (some kind of reference to the increasing size of the world for children as they grow up), they will learn how to interact in slightly different ways to everyone else. As babies learn from the immediate local environment, it is understandable that a child growing up in Oulu may speak differently to one growing up in Kotka, because people speak somewhat differently in those places.

While the above example considers wider geographic variation, there is typically variation even within the child's local environment. Henry (2016) indicates that, when it comes to variable forms in a language, children may make use of all the forms to which they are (sufficiently) exposed. In her study of children growing up in Belfast, she demonstrated children heard and successfully acquired variability in subject-number agreement and negation. Below are examples, and both sentences in each pair are grammatically acceptable in Belfast English:
1a) The doors is open.
1b) The doors are open.
2a) They saw nothing.
2b) They didn't see nothing.
Children are thus tolerant of diversity within their own variety, and Henry found that the children in her study used both a) and b) forms proportionally to the amount to which they were exposed to them. We will return to this later for its implications for schooling and teachers.

Children are able to recognize differences in register early, as early as 18 months of age (Piippo et al., 2016, p, 255; Johnson & White, 2020). At an early stage they also notice the different social context and learn to associate varieties to specific situation (Piippo et al., 2016, p. 226). Piippo et al. reference a study by Smith et al. (2013, in Piippo et al., 2016) in the Scottish town of Buckley which was illustrative of this, and noted that such differences only occurred in typically Scottish dialectal situations, such as with the use of words like "aye" ("yes") and "ken" ("know") (p. 226-7). It is important to note, however, that these differences occurred in part because the adults were aware of such a variation. For other aspects of their language (which may well not have been standard English), adults spoke to children the same way they did to adults - that is to say, that awareness of sociolinguistic differences may lead to the standard being used in places where it's deemed to be more correct, but a lack of awareness of difference (or perhaps overt acknowledgment of that difference) to the standard can produce and perpetuate sociolectal differences in children's language.

It is also important to note that language the language learning process is never complete, nor does language usually fossilize into one form permanently. Language is acquired through various contexts and experience during the course of a life, and all people function (consciously or not) as learners and as teachers constantly, simply by function of social interaction (Piippo et al., 2016, p. 207). A person's linguistic repertoire is fluid, as new aspects of language usage are learned and unlearned throughout one's life (Blommaert & Backus, 2013). Increasingly, however, language learning in general is not separated into formal and informal phases (Piippo et al., 2016, p. 205). In Finland today, children come into contact with a wide variety of languages, and so are no longer dependent on schooling for this, be it standard Finnish, its registers, or other languages entirely – it now happens both in and out of the classroom (Piippo et al., 2016, p. 205).

All of the above points to the fact that children learn to use variety as part of their linguistic growth. There has been significant research in recent years as the various interested fields become more aware of factors which influence that acquisition (Johnson & White, 2020). However, in the Finnish context, most research on language acquisition has focused on its applicability to teaching of grammar in the school sense (Minna Sääskilahti, personal communication, 1 June, 2023). I will assume that broadly the same mechanisms affect all humans with regards to variety acquisition, regardless of the features of the variety being

acquired. That is, the process of acquiring a variety of Mexican Spanish is by and large the same as that of a variety of Swahili, given that language is acquired in a wide variety of social contexts. There is evidence that acquisition may take longer in languages which are more complex morphologically (as Finnish is), phonologically (as Danish is) or in other ways, but ultimately the process itself appears to be similar. This assumption, simplified though it may be, will allow me to apply the general trends and tangential evidence.

# 5 Q 2 How teachers can support the acquisition of variety

## 5.1 The changing role of the teacher

There has been much discussion about the evolving role of the teacher in the classroom and in the school context. In Finland in the past century, the role of the teacher has shifted from a "civilizer" to a "mentor" to what is now ostensibly a "guide." In the past, then, the Finnish teacher was expected to be the role model of good citizenship, correct behaviour and proper language (Rantala, 2022). These ideas have been slow to fade, and, for many, "proper language" refers to SF (Piippo et al., 2016, p. 125). Yet, in a trend ongoing since the 1980s in the country, the hitherto less prestigious varieties of the language – GSF as well as various degrees of "strength" of local dialects – have been making inroads into the public sphere once inhabited exclusively by SF. This has happened in the field of education as well, and the end of the general expectation that a teacher use only SF is just another nail in the coffin of the "civilizer" role model conception of the teacher. Thus, it is common that the average teacher in compulsory school will use a variety of registers based on the varied situations which present themselves in the classroom (Hurtig, 2012). As it is no longer the case that the teacher is the epitome of (linguistic) "correctness" and "civilization," s/he is then free to take a more liberal approach to language education.

## 5.2 Content over form

In this section I will argue that the successful, linguistically-aware teacher teaches about variation and values content over "correctness." In many languages, such as Brazilian

Portuguese, the differences between the high register and others are such that it may be useful to consider the target register in schooling to be similar to learning an additional language (Marcilese et al., 2019). It is unclear whether this is the case in Finnish, but it may be fruitful to take such a perspective regardless. Such an approach will lend itself to the formal teaching of variation and high varieties, in that it will not be assumed that there is only one correct or valid variety.

Researchers such as Snell & Cushing (2022) have examined the value of dialogism in classrooms as a means of creating learning advantages for students. In this method, the content of the classroom talk is important – it is dialogue which "stimulates thinking, makes thinking public and refines thinking" (Lefstein & Snell (2011), as cited in Snell & Cushing, 2022). Resnick & Schantz (2015, as cited in Snell & Cushing 2022) note using the "correct" register is not emphasized in dialogism. Correcting "incorrect" language without proper explanation and /or at the wrong time – e.g. when a student is contributing to a discussion – has a tendency to shut down discussion and discourage the "mistake maker" from contributing, which has marked effects on individual students' learning and sense of self-confidence.

However, simply speaking in and exposure to the target language / variety does not necessarily lead to "improvements" (Snell & Cushing, 2022). Even learning the many rules of the formal standards, as one does at school, does not guarantee successful and "correct" acquisition of the formal, and it is entirely natural that different people may leave school with different conceptions about the standard and the rules that constitute it (Koivusalo, 1997, p. 133; Hakulinen et al., 2009, p. 9). Indeed, no matter how good one's teacher(s) may be, no student can ever fully acquire the standard or any other variety of language (Koivusalo, 1997, p. 104) - there will always be something new or different to challenge a language speaker of any age. Rather than making the teaching of language and its varieties seem to be an impossible task, this should be seen as a liberating truth of the world: teachers need give only a general look at the target language, enough for students to succeed in the school context and the immediate contexts that follow it. Teachers should not, therefore, be seen to be or feel that they are individually responsible for the maintenance and teaching of different varieties.

The presence of significant numbers of people who have never mastered the higher register of Finnish during their schooling (Hakulinen et al., 2009, p. 91) indicates that it is far from a given that children will learn it simply from attending school, to say nothing about their ability to

acquire it without schooling. It is interesting to note that Hakulinen et al. seem to imply that S2 learners released into “normal” Finnish-language schooling will naturally pick up more and more of the high registers, which, again, is not a given (p.92).

Variety usage choices may have an ideological element to be aware of. SF is seen to be clearer, more commonly used and less loaded (i.e. more neutral) than other varieties of Finnish (Piippo et al., 2016, p. 228). This combined with slow, clear speech forms a frequent part of teachers' language usage, and is in part learned already from when teachers are themselves students (Piippo et al., 2016, p. 228).

Mac Ruairc (2011) indicates that a strong disconnect between the register of instruction and the register of casual speech can lead to severe difficulties when the latter is seen as not valued or to be suppressed, given the close association between language and identity (Edwards, 2014, p. 414). How someone chooses to speak says a great deal about who they choose to be (Johnson & White, 2020). Suppressing certain varieties – and thus, identities – leads to feelings of exclusion, and thus a “rejection of a considerable amount of school experiences because of the manner in which language functions to mediate the cultural meaning system of school” (Mac Ruairc, 2011). Linguistic capital functions symbolically in school and beyond, and the ability of someone to control the correct register(s) there has important implications for the power they can wield (Bourdieu 2000, as cited in Mac Ruairc, 2011). It is thus crucial that students’ languages be valued, and this may demand systemic change within the school or education system. It is, of course, also important for students’ future success that they learn the higher registers that society will require of them, and so teachers and the education system must walk a fine line to nurture learning and understanding of the one while valuing the other in contexts where students’ language diverges significantly from the higher dialects (e.g. urban centers in the anglophone world).

Returning to Henry’s (2016) findings that children are able to acquire and use varied forms (e.g. subject-verb agreement) in proportion to their exposure thereto, it seems plausible to extend it from variation within a variety to variation among varieties; that is, that children can acquire different registers in proportion to the degree of exposure they have experienced. Quam & Creel (2021) indicate that exposure to other varieties has highly variable effects on the acquisition process of certain aspects of language, but in the long run, increases ability to switch between dialects. It would appear that it is at least *possible* that children will be able to acquire higher

registers of their language based on pure exposure – that is, without explicit education. However, given that higher registers tend to be confined to specific situations in which children are not frequently involved, it seems likely that children would be exposed to too little and, therefore, acquire too little, to meaningfully make use of on demand. Explicit teaching of the high register thus seems justified.

Teaching for different registers in recent years has been following developments in foreign language teaching, which has seen a shift away from the drilling, memorization and explicit grammar instruction which for many readers may be familiar. Malcolm (2015, p. 437) notes research which advocates for communicative instruction, emphasis on meaning rather than form, the incorporation of elements of James Asher's Total Physical Response method, and even attempts to make ways of thinking more accessible. This latter topic, which current research has explored most for forms of AAVE versus SAE, is the subject of much of Malcolm's discussion of the cultural-conceptual dimension of second dialect learning. Cognitive linguists, who investigate the ways in which language is a shared means of structuring and expressing experiences, argue that investigating and understanding *construal*, that is, the "ways in which elements of experience are mentally captured to enable them to be transformed into language," is crucial to bridging gaps in communication and learning of different languages and dialects (Malcolm, 2015, p. 437-8).

## 5.3 The impact of policy

Public educational policy, conceptualized here as "whatever government chooses to do or not to do" in the field of education, naturally has a significant impact on the work of educators (Dye, 1992 in Rizvi & Lingard, 2013, p. 4). Usually taking the form of legal documentation published from a central source, policy is an ideal which is then implemented at various levels, as we shall shortly see. That implementation, or practice, is never perfectly in line with the policy document, given various complex factors. Rizvi & Lingard argue that both the document and the implementation must be together considered the policy. Policy attempts to steer behaviours and practices as a means of allocating values. In this respect, policy should be seen to be reflective of the values of the publishing body, and in the case of public policy, of the populace which a

government represents (Rizvi & Lingard, 2013, p. 5-8). Teachers, as one of the main implementers of educational policy, navigate the complexities of fitting policy ideals with classroom realities.

The NCC is the primary policy document in Finland for language teaching of all forms, and its design is such that it functions more as a guide than as an instruction. It gives teachers a great deal of leeway to make their own curricular decisions, making teachers the primary interpreters of policy. Municipalities publish their own local curricula based on the NCC, and some of these are narrower, defining what topics should be taught in what year of school (e.g. Espoo's curriculum, see City of Espoo, 2014). Each school also publishes its own, narrower version based on the municipality's. Even in these more locally-specific curricula, however, the teacher is given the primary responsibility in making decisions on how to teach.

In the NCC, objectives for instruction are grouped together into content areas. Through its definition of content areas for languages, the NCC covers variation, with increasing complexity and direct references to formality-informality as the level of schooling increases. At the grades 3-6 level, each of the four content areas (Acting in interactive situations; Interpreting texts; Producing texts; and Understanding language, literature and culture) contains at least oblique references to linguistic variety, such as "different communication environments), reading and producing a wide variety of texts, "attention is paid to the differences between written and spoken language" and "pupils explore the way language varies according to the situation..." (FNAE, 2016, p.174-175).

Based on the above, it may not come as a surprise that the NCC does not take a stance on how teachers should speak. This is not a universal trait of policy documents, as the following example shows. In Cyprus there exists a more extreme situation as regards linguistic variation: Modern Standard Greek (MSG) is the official language for political and historical reasons, but Cypriot Greek (CG) is the local vernacular. CG has no official place in education in Cyprus. MSG is therefore the local prestige language, and differences between the two are great enough linguistically that most children are seen as having CG as their mother tongue when beginning schooling. A 2002 circular sent by the Cypriot Ministry of Education and Culture indicated that teachers at all levels of education were to use MSG during class time and confined CG to

specific use cases, again, for political and historical reasons. In their study of kindergarten teachers, Sophocleous and Wilks (2010) found that teachers tended to emphasise the use of MSG when there were large class interactions or when students were listening to a teacher-student interaction: it was used "when generally teachers perceive it as important for children to pay attention to *what* is being said and *how* it is being said" (p.63). Sophocleous and Wilks also indicate that teachers have varying ideas about what is important as regards MSG vs CG in school, which arises from unclear policy (p. 64-65). It should be noted that, due to the inherent variability of perceptions of what exactly constitutes standard and non-standard, formal and non-formal and what is and is not a particular variety of language, this is to be expected.

It is my opinion, then, that no amount of policymaking or style guide writing could ever satisfactorily address the issue of defining the standard language for teaching. In this respect, the Finnish approach, which is fairly hands-off, seems preferable, in that it lays out merely what students should be able to do.

## 5.4 Teachers and variety

As the NCC and more local versions do not lay out specifically *how* students should be spoken to, teachers have a great deal of leeway in making these decisions themselves. In my experience and based on informal interviews which I have conducted, Finnish teachers tend to favour speaking to students in a manner which comes naturally to them, preferring authenticity to whatever potential benefits might arise from an artificial speaking style. However, as Hurtig (2012) found, this style involves making use of the teachers' ability to use different varieties of language to communicate different social messages.

Despite changes in scholarly thinking and a move away from the conception of "correct" and "incorrect" languages, in Finland and many other countries, there persists a so-called "one language ideology" (Dufva et al., 2011; Malcolm, 2015, p. 434). These countries, for whom language was an important part of the forging of a national identity – the majority of countries in the global North – in the 18th and 19th centuries, worked to standardize their citizens' language in all public spheres, especially in and through school. That approach is by and large no longer in use, with many today favouring the knowledge economy and the economic/capitalistic competitiveness of their citizenry in the global sphere. Yet the fact that the one language

ideology lingers means that some (or, perhaps, many) students whose teachers actively correct their use of different varieties or registers, may find their identities called into question, and thereby be excluded (Edwards, 2014, p. 411). Dufva et al. (2011) advocate for a Bakhtinian dialogical approach which recognizes the heteroglossia of language, and that normalizing texts (language textbooks, dictionaries, grammars, etc.) are part of this. Our goal for schoolchildren, they write, should be to give them the tools to learn to thrive in different linguistic and learning environments, and to learn to make use of different forms of language, including the "correct" ones.

Edwards (2014) recommends indirect interventions (p. 415) to avoid provoking, however accidentally, negative feelings by causing the student to perceive their own variety of language as less useful than the target variety. He favours the role model approach, noting that all students, whether they speak the language of instruction (but simply a different register) or not, must learn the formal register. He notes studies that show that there tend not to be significant differences between "native" and "non-native" students in formal writing exercises (p. 415). Yet most important of all is the creation of a positive atmosphere in which children are not made to feel self-conscious about how and what they speak.

# 6 Recommendations for teachers

An important goal for myself in writing this thesis was to create a list of concrete tips for my future teaching career, so as to serve my students, who will be increasingly varied in their multilingualnesses, better. To that end, I have identified several *attitudes* and *actions* for a linguistically sensitive and aware teacher. It is my hope that someone who internalizes these will be more successful in approaching multilingualism in the classroom and supporting all learners to acquire a variety of linguistic varieties. This will encourage a more just learning environment for all learners.

## 6.1 Attitudes

I have chosen the term “attitudes” rather than “knowledge” because I believe that they are separate ideas. When it comes to sociological knowledge, it is easy to understand something on a surface level without truly internalizing it. This may be seen with other contemporary hot topics such as racism – most people would agree intellectually that people should not be discriminated against or profiled based on their skin colour or origin, but it is another matter entirely to internalize non-/anti-racist views, especially if one belongs to the majority. This concept, unconscious discrimination, requires constant self-reflection and vigilance.

Firstly, it is crucial to combat unconscious linguistic discrimination (Bateman, 2021). One must understand and internalize the idea that non-standard dialects and registers are not some substandard form of the main variety. Rather, they should be treated as equally valuable to the standard, and simply used in different contexts (Edwards, 2014, p. 410). In the same way, speaking a non-standard dialect is not a mark of deficiency. Indeed, different languages and different varieties should be seen as resources and part of the user’s linguistic repertoire rather than distractions or detractors (Bommaert & Backus, 2013; Dufva et al., 2011). A student’s repertoire can constitute an asset for acquiring other languages, varieties and registers, if only the teacher is aware and able to make use of them.

It is also important to understand that language exists in many forms, and the “correct” form is not the only categorically acceptable form. What is normal or acceptable depends on the context, so help students to learn to use the appropriate register for the situation. This includes the different modalities of communication (spoken, but also written and non-linguistic) (Dufva et al., 2011).

Avoid linguistic discrimination. Giles & Coupland (1991) note that teachers are not immune to jumping to conclusions about their students based on speech patterns, and that these conclusions and pursuant behaviour toward students who speak non-standard dialects may inadvertently cause students to behave in such a way as to match stereotyped expectations (p. 45). It is therefore important to be constantly aware of this unconscious process. Teachers should constantly critically examine their own thinking about language, correction, correctness and connections between these and identity, learning and children’s future.

Some useful questions to ask oneself are:

- (Why) is it important to teach high and academic varieties?

- In what situations are different varieties important?
- What constitutes good language in my classroom?
- To what degree is my opinion about students shaped by how and what they speak, and how can I work to make my processes of perception formation more just?

Finally, it should be remembered that, as stated previously, it is simply impossible for one schoolteacher to completely educate students in the use of language and its varieties, and thus all teachers should work simply to do their part, following the guidance of policy, curriculum and their own opinions. After all, a teacher is but part of society, which educates children in the use of varieties of language. The pressure that many teachers feel in this regard to always do more and do better should be tempered by such knowledge.

## 6.2 Actions

Actions require that the teacher *do* something, in effect acting on or together with the attitudes listed above.

Firstly, and something which may be taken as a given based on the demands of the teaching profession, is understanding and communication. It is important to understand students who speak non-standard varieties, and this can be accomplished through genuine communication with them, their caretakers and their communities. Teachers should get to know their students and learn what they and their family wish for them linguistically. Fostering good relationships is crucial in educational contexts, and it is important to remember the linguistic aspect of this, too.

In a similar way, teaching should be done in such a way that it fosters active dialogue. As in current foreign language teaching, a "positive pedagogy"-type approach seems best for this: teachers should not focus on what was wrong, but on what was correct or good in students' speech.

When it feels necessary to correct a student based on varietal differences, explain those differences. As Snell & Cushing (2022) demonstrated, it is not enough merely to correct the error and assume the reasoning behind it has been understood. This requires a measure of intellectual empathy on the part of the teacher – it is easy to assume that, because some aspect of knowledge is natural for the teacher, it is also for the student. This is, however, frequently not the case. It

may thus be important to give corrections in context: if correcting non-standard grammar to the standard, include the information that “this is how you would say it in a formal situation,” for example, and explaining why this is the case.

Finally, teachers should give their students exposure to and practice with a wide variety of language, but not merely passive exposure from various forms of media – it will require teaching, too. While this may not be relevant in all teaching situations, this means it is important to shift away from a “proper language, traditional texts approach,” as it will be more likely to appeal to students (Clark, 2013).

# 7 Discussion

In this thesis, I have explored how children learn language and its near-infinite variety and attempted to examine how teachers may play a role in the learning process. More recent research has shown that children learn language of all sorts concurrently and learn slowly to associate different types of language to different situations. This learning, like that of language itself, happens through exposure to diverse social and pragmatic situations. As time in and around school constitutes a significant part of a child’s life, and it is the place where s/he is to learn and grow into a functioning member of society, it is an important area of language learning, and especially of variety learning.

While the role of the teacher has changed from the “sage on the stage” to the “guide on the side,” s/he still plays an important part in a child’s acquisition of variety, as a linguistic role model and through organization of teaching and classroom interactions. Teachers are well-placed to promote a more just sociolinguistic atmosphere in the classroom if they can recognize – and help their students recognize – and make use of the multilingualness of every student and the resource for learning which that represents. By promoting more open attitudes toward ways of speaking and varieties of language, the teacher may both facilitate children’s acquisition of variety and encourage a more positive approach to the topic in society at large.

## 7.1 Shortcomings and scope

The original scope of this text was simply register in the Finnish education system and generally how register is acquired. During the course of my research, however, I came to the conclusion that there is little research on the explicit teaching of register in either Finnish or English (both as languages of research and targets of teaching). For this reason, my scope expanded. It may be that the lack of research on this topic has to do with fact that the teaching of mother tongue subjects is not generally conceived of as a subject in which one needs to teach about variety, as perhaps there is a perception that a "Finnish" student needs just to learn how to write and speak "better" in such a subject. The NCC indicates that one of the tasks of mother tongue as a subject involves students learning "*different levels* in mother tongues, other tongues and their dialects" (emphasis added). The concept of teaching children explicitly about variety and how to make use of it in different social situations appears generally to be tangential to what may be perceived as more important subjects, especially given that people tend to learn this through all use of language. School, especially, given its role as a place where more formal language is used as compared to home (Marcilese et al., 2019), may be taken for granted as a vehicle for informal acquisition of formal varieties, such that teachers do not see it necessary to emphasize the explicit teaching of variety.

## 7.2 Future research

Future research on this topic could involve examining popular mother tongue textbooks to see to what degree Finnish publishers prioritize variety and what ideas about variety they communicate through their content. Of greater relevance, however, would be gathering the opinions of teachers and other actors on questions such as the relative importance of teaching linguistic variety (basic variety of register usage, especially), about linguistic variety (understanding that different varieties are used in different situations) and linguistic metaknowledge (e.g. understanding why different varieties are used in different contexts). While it is out of the scope of an education-based master's thesis, it is of personal interest to examine people's metaknowledge about variety, given the number of people that are able to make use of a variety of varieties without thinking about it. It would also be interesting to understand more about actors' thoughts about variety and on methods for teaching it.

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