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Lingual biography and linguistic variation

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One of the important things Pete Becker keeps telling us is that language is fundamentally particular, fundamentally the property of individuals. In this he echoes and elaborates on a powerful and persistent line of linguistic thought that connects him to Wilhelm von Humboldt, who saw language change as arising from aesthetic choices; to Walt Whitman, who characterized 'real grammar' as what happens when people break rules and make up new ones; and to Edward Sapir, who defined language as 'the collective art of expression' (1921, p. 231). 'Languaging' is what happens when real people talk or write or read or translate. In graduate school and after, Pete showed us how the structuralist metaphor that underlay most of our previous and concurrent training as linguists, the metaphor of language as shared code, really described only an *ex post facto* abstraction. Language in this sense—language as structure and rule, language as external to speakers and independent of them—is just 'a summary of thousands upon thousands of individual intuitions,' as Sapir put it (*ibid.*), or, in Pete's words, 'only a weak precipitate of expression' (Becker, this volume).

I have spent years learning this. Each encounter with a new subfield of linguistics reminds me of the necessity for particularity, the necessity for countering questions about what languages, dialects, genres, varieties do with questions about what people do.¹ A recent encounter has been with dialectology and variationist sociolinguistics. I got into these areas by moving to Texas, where the first thing a linguist notices is variation. Within three months I had listened to Spanish and Tex-Mex and Country-Western and classical music announcers on

¹ The image of languages doing things, like dropping pronouns or simplifying their case systems, seems odder and odder to me as I move further away from the linguistics of language and closer to the linguistics of speakers. Sapir made this point precisely, through linguists' readings of Sapir don't thematize it: 'In linguistics, abstracted speech sounds, words, and the arrangement of words have come to have so authentic a vitality that one can speak of "regular sound change" and "loss of genders" without knowing or caring who opened their mouths, at what time, to communicate what to whom' [in Mandelbaum, 1949, p. 579].

the radio, heard rural African Americans' speech for the first time, noticed that Anglo Texans could sound Southern or Appalachian or Western and that rodeo boots and cowboy hats and pick-up trucks went with a certain way of talking, and surprised myself by addressing a bunch of trick-or-treaters as 'y'all'. Competence in multiple ways of speaking was clearly part of what it meant to be a Texan (for me as well as for native Texans), and Texans were irresistible research subjects for a linguist interested in discourse and place.

As I started to explore the vast literature about Southern speech (by far the most intensively studied variety of American English: see McMillan and Montgomery 1989 for thousands of references) and to read the work of quantitative sociolinguists more carefully than I had before, I began to be bothered by the implicit determinism of the current approaches, both those of the Labovians and those of the more ethnographically-minded interactional sociolinguists. The underlying idea seemed to be that people's speech behavior was a result of people's social class, gender, ethnicity, place of origin, and so on, or at least that the ways actual speakers deviated from what would be expected of them for social reasons were uninteresting. Pete taught me to study texts, and when you work intensively with bits of real language you can't help noticing how they are massively constrained (to put it mildly) by the fact that particular people came up with them in particular circumstances. So after thinking for a while about 'linguistic individuals' in general (Johnstone 1996), I decided to see what I could find out about variation in Texas by listening to individual Texans rather than by looking at populations, neighborhoods, or random or representative samples. I chose ten Texans (all women) and I am trying to see how each uses the linguistic resources that are available to her.

In exploring the usefulness of case studies in sociolinguistics I am not being as particular as Pete might like. Trying to take half of Texas (its women) into my purview, I am trying to do too much. But the multiple perspectives and the specificity that are required in a thorough case study recall a recurring metaphor of Pete's for particularity: biography. My 'lingual biographies' of Texans aim for the thickness and texture of Pete's 'Biography of a Sentence' (Becker 1995: 185-210), the complexity and rightness that I hope will make all my Texas women say, as one did, 'Yes. I didn't know you could see that.'

Quantitative studies of variation have mostly been carried out in relatively tightly-knit communities like Labov's New York or the Milroys' Belfast, in which most speakers have similar ideas about what variants sound good and bad, high-class and low-class, 'one of us' or 'one of them,' even if they don't all talk exactly the same way. For Labov, a 'speech community' is precisely a group of speakers who share such evaluative norms. Researchers have assumed either that all speakers inhabited communities that were like working-class Belfast or the New York of native New Yorkers in the important ways, or that the models of variation and change that worked in communities like these would also work elsewhere. Sociolinguistic research in the American South, beginning with the dialect atlas projects, has also focussed almost exclusively on relatively isolated, close-knit populations, often rural. For most of the South's history, the common-

sense notion that people talk the way they do because of where they come from actually could explain things, since people for the most part stayed where they were born and interacted with the same people in their community, and few people from outside it, all their lives. But fewer and fewer Southerners live in tightly focussed speech communities analogous to those of Harlem or inner-city Detroit.

Students of variation in linguistically and culturally heterogenous settings have found it much more difficult to correlate ways of talking with demographic variables such as income, sex, and ethnicity or to see speech style as primarily a function of one's level of self-consciousness. Accordingly, they have had to think again about the fundamental reasons why people don't all talk alike. In sociolinguistics, the best-known example is the work of LePage and Tabouret-Keller (1985) in the 'multi-dimensional social space' of the Caribbean. In a setting in which there were many possible ways to talk (ways usually labelled 'English,' 'Spanish,' and 'Creole,' but also ways that combined the three), LePage and Tabouret-Keller found that how a person actually spoke in a given situation was a result of choice, an 'act of identity,' momentary or ongoing, with one group or another.

As in the Caribbean, there are many different resources available in Texas for creating and displaying ways of being and sounding, and the many Texans who interact with people outside their immediate communities, either privately or in more public media, have access to varying sets of these resources. Not all Texans are equally resourceful: not all have access to the same number or the same set of possibilities. But the educated, mobile, middle-class people we are studying, people whose social ties to one another and to some of the people they seek to influence are public rather than private, create distinct, sometimes changeable individual voices by selecting and combining resources provided by multiple regional and social models.

Some of these resources have names: 'English' or 'Spanish' or 'speaking mixed' or 'sounding country' for ways of talking; being 'friendly' or 'independent' for ways of being that have implications for talk. Though the Texas women we have talked to do not like having their behavior explained as the result of gender, ethnicity, or class (see Johnstone, 1995), there are widely disseminated models associated with such attributes. Southern white women, for example, can accept or make a point of not accepting the 'Southern Belle' image, the 'iron fist in the velvet glove' associated linguistically with displays of politeness, indirectness, and respect, and with elocutionary diction in a Lower Southern accent. Barbara Jordan could and did draw on the African American 'man of words' preaching tradition. Models for talk and action are often much more particular, too ('my mother's teacher genes') or much more universal (God). Another important source of influence on an individual's speech is the need for self-definition and self-expression: just as socially-constituted groups of speakers differentiate themselves linguistically, so do individual speakers.

The ten women with whom Judith Mattson Bean and I have been working are from various parts of Texas. Some are white, some African American, some Hispanic. There are rural women as well as urban ones, and there are women of a

variety of ages. All are people who use language publicly: an attorney, a politician, a journalist, a singer; teachers, writers. Our data consists mostly of speech and writing that is relatively public: elaborated, non-intimate, planned. We are not trying, in other words, to elicit only or even mainly 'vernacular' speech. This is because we are interested in how speakers make use of the whole range of their linguistic possibilities. We think that relatively 'performed' speech (Bauman, 1977) is more likely than relatively vernacular speech to reveal how people organize diverse linguistic resources; in fact, studying only private, unplanned, vernacular discourse might mask the full range of people's sociolinguistic competence.

We are interested in variability of all sorts: phonological (whether, for example, *right* is pronounced with a diphthong or a monophthong, a variable that has been correlated with people's feelings about Texas [Bailey, 1992]), morphological, syntactic, pragmatic. We think, for example, that sounding like a Westerner can mean telling stories a certain way, that a small-town identity may be displayed through the use of private speech genres in public contexts, that sounding urban may involve various strategies for sounding detached. We are trying to let our research subjects identify the linguistic models on which they draw, rather than identifying them ourselves on the basis of distinctions that may not turn out to be emically relevant. For example, many 'bilinguals' in Texas deny that they speak Spanish, since Spanish, to them, means correct, formal Mexican or Castilian. And although Anglo Texans have only a fairly vague idea of what is involved in sounding 'Southern' (the linguists' term), they can talk about what 'sounding country' is (their own term).

We have talked to all these women but one, and collected examples of their writing (or singing, or public speech). Our goal is to describe each individual voice, drawing out each woman's particular reasons for languaging the way she does. This, we think, will help us understand how variation really comes to be.

The voice I want to describe here is that of Molly Ivins, humorist, syndicated columnist, and sometime television commentator. Ivins was born in California; her parents were from Illinois.² Moving to Texas as a young child, she grew up in River Oaks, an exclusive Houston neighborhood. Ivins attended private school, earned her B.A. at Smith College in Massachusetts, studied political science in Paris, and received an M.A. from Columbia School of Journalism. She first worked as a journalist in Austin and Houston, then moved to Minneapolis, Denver, and New York before returning to Texas to write for the *Dallas Times Herald* and the *Fort Worth Star Telegram*. It should be noted that this background, if social and regional provenance were all that were relevant, would not lead one to expect Ivins to sound particularly Texan at all, especially not markedly so. Urban Texans, particularly ones whose parents were not from Texas and who were raised and educated in elite settings, rarely use the country-sounding speech features that identify people with the state. However, as anyone who has heard her speak or read her writing on the subject of Texas politics

² Information about Ivins' life is from Schwartz 1992.

would attest, Ivins does sound distinctively Texan. In her writing, syndicated nationally in newspapers and collected in two books (Ivins, 1991, 1993), Ivins often plays the role of 'professional Texan', using features of speech associated with the state as resources for ironic commentary on Texas and national culture. Ivins is not simply adopting a foreign voice for purposes of entertainment; her stereotypical Texas speech makes fun of stereotypical Texans, but it also identifies her as a Texan. Far more liberal than most Texans, Ivins uses language to position herself simultaneously as an insider and an outsider, both identifying with Texas culture and rebelling against mainstream, conservative Texas. She shifts in and out of her Texas voice between clauses and within them, using it, sometimes in humor, sometimes for ironic criticism, to express her regional and individual identity. Shifts away from Texas-sounding speech tend to be into very formal, elevated standard language that marks her as educated and cosmopolitan. Ivins also expresses in her speech her *rejection* of another of the possible models for the action and speech of a white female Texan, that of the Southern belle.

Ivins is keenly aware of regional stereotypes and role models for the South, the West, and Texas. She comments humorously, for example (Ivins, 1991: 165–170), on the limited roles available for aspiring Texas women: cheerleader, beauty queen, or traditional Southern lady. Rejecting them all, she identifies herself through speech (as well as through dress and behavior) with the independence and freedom mythically associated with the frontier, the cowboy, and the Western woman. Ivins is explicit about her identification with the West, writing, for example, 'I have spent most of my life in the West... The people I admire most in our history are the hell-raisers and rabble rousers, the apple-cart upsetters and plan old mumpish eccentrics' (Ivins, 1993: 114).

Four features of Ivins's discourse can be identified particularly with her expression of a Western regional identity: highly performed narrative involving marked non-standard forms and comedy; speech play including humorous invective and poetic turns of phrase; figurative language; and directness, including swearing and earthiness of diction that especially mark Ivins as resisting the model of the Southern belle.³ Using these features at all marks Ivins as a Texan and a Westerner; her strategic, idiosyncratic choices about how to deploy Texas-sounding talk express her individual identity. Ivins's writing is characterized by sudden, unexpected changes of register, from rural Texas talk to highly stylized, almost hypercorrect standard written style. Ivins's fluency in switching in and out

³ Two groups of white Americans originally settled in Texas: plantation owners, mainly from the coastal South, and poorer people from the piedmont and mountain South. Each group brought its own dialect of English, Southern in the case of the former group and South Midland in that of the latter, and settled in different parts of the state, the planters mainly in the better-watered eastern part of the state and the South Midlanders further west. The speech patterns associated with the culturally and geographically western part of Texas, roughly west of a line connecting Dallas, Austin, and San Antonio, are based in those of the South Midland. J. Frank Dobie (1974: 45) suggests that the culture, and thus much of the language use, of traditional West Texas, is rooted in the 'realism of southern folk,' in contrast with the idealism of the slave-holding aristocrats.

of this style displays verbal sophistication and virtuosity and lays claim to another identity, with an 'external reference group' (Bell, 1984: 183, 191) of well-educated liberals. Like many 'dialect' writers, Ivins is appealing to readers who do not themselves speak her regional dialect and who will identify with her linguistic sophistication perhaps more than with her regional realism.

One notable feature of Ivins's Texas style is dramatic storytelling. As she herself claims, Texans 'tell good stories well' (1991: 7). Here, for example, she describes a debate in the state legislature over a redistricting bill. She writes that in 1971, State Representative Guy Floyd of San Antonio,

a good ol' boy who had been shafted by the bill, rose to remonstrate with the chairman of the Redistricting Committee... 'Lookahere, Dell-win,' said Floyd, much aggrieved, 'look at this district here. You've got a great big ball at the one end, and then a little bitty ol' strip a' land goes for about 300 miles, and then a great big ol' ball at the other end. It looks like a dumbbell. Now the courts say the districts have to be com-pact and con-tiguous. Is that your idea a' com-pact and con-tiguous?' Delwin Jones meditated at some length before replying, 'Whaell, in a artistic sense, it is.' (Ivins, 1991: 15)

Ivins represents several widely-held stereotypes of West Texas speech here. She depicts laconic conversational pacing through the use of discourse markers *whaell*, *lookahere*, and *now* at the beginnings of sentences and the long 'meditation' before Jones's reply. The nonstandard South Midland phonology that characterizes West Texas speech is represented by 'eye-dialect' (*ol'*, *a'*) and the expression *great big ol'* and *little bitty ol'*; South Midland morphophonology is represented in *a artistic* and South Midland syntax in *a strip a' land goes for about 300 miles*.

In framing the story, Ivins's narratorial voice is sometimes depicted as using standard, even elevated, speech. However, even here Ivins shifts styles. For example, she begins the redistricting story with colloquial phrasing: 'a good ol' boy who had been shafted by the bill', then switches to more formal diction in the verb phrase, 'rose to remonstrate with the chairman of the Redistricting Committee'. She goes on to identify him as a man 'much aggrieved'. Through formal lexical choices such as *remonstrate* and *aggrieved*, Ivins makes an implicit claim to the intellectual authority of outsider observer and critic. Through phrasing such as 'good ol' boy' she invokes and satirizes a regional stereotype, at the same time displaying her identity with it through her fluency in it.

Ivins's writing is also full of speech play of a kind that sounds particularly Texan. She draws on the West Texas tradition of creative insult, for example, in her political commentary: about a state agency she writes (Ivins, 1992), 'I once suggested that the Public Utility Commission be razed to the ground and salt strewn in the field where it stood—seemed like the only sensible solution'. The elevated, literary diction and hyperbole in the first part of the statement contrast with the straightforwardness of the second, again displaying Ivins's multivocal identity.

Other elements of Ivins's speech play that display verbal dexterity are poetic turns of phrase and the use of sound patterns such as alliteration. For example, she writes that the Texas senate was so 'racist and reactionary' that it was enough to make one 'despair of democracy' and describes one politician as a 'peerless parliamentarian' and another as being 'as cantankerous as he was conservative' (Ivins, 1991: 18, 19).

Another discourse feature associated with the West is creative, unconventional figurative language.⁴ Ivins alludes explicitly to this in her own description of how Texans talk (1991: 7): 'Texans invent their own metaphors and similes, often of a scatological nature, which is kind of fun'. Ivins's incongruous comparisons, often phrased in colloquial diction, frequently contrast with otherwise standard syntax, creating style shifts within sentences. For example, Ivins associates herself with a legendary Dallas Cowboys football player to display her stance as insider and outsider in Texas when she writes that, being six feet tall, she was 'the Too Tall Jones of my time' (Ivins, 1991: xiv). She describes her liberal political philosophy in a conservative state by writing that she felt the need to explain the 'odd hitch in my gitalong' (*ibid.*), softening the offense of exceptionalism by placing it in a framework that evokes Texas mythology–Western eccentricity and individualism.

A fourth element of Ivins's Texas style is the directness associated with earthy diction and swearing. Ivins draws on a tradition of tough-talking, self-reliant Western women and men who do not mince words. In recreating the style of 1970s Texas politicians debating a 'Clean Crapper bill', for example, she directly challenges norms for genteel Southern women's speech: 'the delights of peeing' against the back wall after a good whisky drank were limned with excruciating detail' (Ivins, 1991: 3–4). Here again is Ivins's characteristic style shifting. 'Were limned with excruciating detail' creates a contrast with the earthy language of the sentence's subject noun phrase, and, by implication, a contrast between two voices. This pattern is repeated often, sometimes accompanied by overt statements of Ivins's ambivalence towards Texas.

What Molly Ivins calls 'speaking Texan' has a more personal function as well: displaying public freedom of expression and forthrightness sometimes denied the traditional Southern woman. Through her linguistic choices, Ivins simultaneously asserts her toughness and her sense of play. Linguistic resources associated with region (the West) and gender (maleness) give Ivins a way of emphasizing her convictions; the resources of class (standard speech) give her a means of grounding her intellectual analysis. Together, Ivins's choices from and juxtapositions of the resources available to her allow her to establish a clearly individual discourse style with which to express a clearly individual identity.

Theories of language use that begin with groups rather than with individuals, like theories of language that begin with languages and dialects rather than with speakers, make it difficult to hear particular voices and harder to take them seriously as part of the explanation for variation. As one textbook on

⁴ See Collins and Clayton (1991: 135–37) on figurative language in West Texas folk speech.

sociolinguistic theory puts it, 'truly idiosyncratic speakers have never emerged from our researches...no sample population to date seems to have included one. [F]or the most part, people sound the way you would expect them to sound given the facts about their class, sex, age, and region' (Chambers, 1995: 100–101). The standard approach to contextual variation, too—the Labovian characterization of 'style' as resulting from a speaker's level of self-consciousness (Labov, 1972: 70–109) or accommodation theory's (Giles and Powesland, 1975) descriptions of the ways speakers systematically adapt to their interlocutors—are also based on abstraction away from individual speakers. In both of these models, different speakers in equivalent contexts are ideally expected to behave exactly the same way.

But contexts are never equivalent, because no two speakers could possibly be linguistically identical. In the inevitable sense that no two people speak alike, every speaker is idiosyncratic. Class, sex, age, region, the nature of the linguistic task and the makeup of the audience all have an important bearing on how people sound, but they do not determine the way people sound. These social facts, along with other factors such as ethnicity, ideology, and identity, provide (or withhold) resources among which individuals choose as they decide how to be and talk. Individuality mediates between social facts and linguistic ones, and though it is the least tractable variable of all—not quantifiable, very hard to describe—it is an essential part of how the details of variation come to be.

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