



Michael Rosen - Idiolect

Michael Rosen explores 'idiolect' - a personal language map.

I don't speak English in exactly the same way as anyone else in the world. This is quite exciting when I want to prove to myself that I'm unique, but sadly, being unique in this way is not unique. No one speaks in exactly the same way as anyone else. As American chat show hosts always remind us: we are all unique

Here's something you can try at home. It's not dangerous - you can do it without your parents. However, doing it with them will be quite useful but only if you're still on talking terms with them. It's an investigation into why you speak in exactly the way you do.

You put yourself in the middle of a piece of paper and identify the many influences there have been in making you the user of language that you are. You can put each of these influences in the style of a speech bubble leading back to you in the middle. Likely candidates will be: mother, father, brother, sister, other relations, best friends, school (maybe different schools), different TV and radio programmes, clubs you belong to, religious, political and sporting organisations.

I wrote: 'speak in exactly the way you do,' but that needs refining. The easiest features to spot are individual words and phrases. You can ask yourself, for example, where did I get this or that expression from? Why do I say, 'well safe'? Why do I call it a 'sofa' whilst other people seem to call it a 'settee'? Perhaps you can speak more than one language and parts of other languages. Who did you learn those from?

But what about your accent? Probably it's at least two accents: one for informal situations and the other for formal. But maybe you have others: say, informal with people of the same age, informal with older people. And what about dialect? Almost certainly you use some expressions and phrases that are confined to your age group, to your locality, even to your school

But then you might also have some phrases that have come to you through your family that originate in other localities. In each of the bubbles you could give an example of what you think you've acquired from each of your influences. Many of the examples you look at may well come at you from several bubbles. In other words, something you acquired in one speech community is confirmed by another, or several others.

The great thing about this kind of investigation is that it's absolutely fascinating because it's about the one thing that you find really interesting - you. Unfortunately, it may not be quite as interesting to anyone else. Bearing that in mind, here's me: I learnt my main, basic language, English, from my parents and my brother. I also speak quite good French which I learnt from my father, many holidays in France and school. Same goes for German, but much less well. But there's another language, or part of a language: Yiddish. That's the language that was spoken by Eastern European Jews. There are many, perhaps hundreds of Yiddish words and phrases that I know. They came to me mostly from my

parents and my mother's parents but were confirmed by knowing other Jewish people here and in America: 'shlump', 'chutzpah', 'shmerel', 'in shtuch'1 and so on.

There are specific phrases, expressions, jokes, quotes from plays, catch-phrases, rude and jokey ways of twisting the language and the like that I can trace to individuals: 'you must be out of your mind' - my father; calling the broken dishwasher 'the wishdasher' - my mother. At school in North West London there were games and rituals which are called different things elsewhere: 'he', 'kingie', 'fainites', 'dobbing' for 'it'. 'Dets' were school detentions. When my own children use different words I have to ignore mine.

Some of our language comes to us as a result of education: there are the schooling words like 'subjects', 'invigilation', 'Year 9 SATs'. In my day there were 'O levels'. There are academic words like: 'quadratic equation', 'metaphor' and the like. The odd bit of literature might have rubbed off on you - anything from Roald Dahl's 'snozzcumbers' to Shakespeare's 'whirligig of time'. For brief periods I find myself using catch-phrases I hear from TV like the 'waassuuuuup' from the Budweiser ad, and some of Harry Enfield's lines. You may not know it but, thanks to your parents and grandparents, you might use old catch-phrases from previous eras, like 'Nice one, Cyril!'

But what about my dialects and accents? My main voice is what used to be called 'suburban cockney' but is now called 'Estuary English'. This comes from my school friends. My main dialect I would identify as informal standard English. Unlike my children, I don't say 'ain't', 'we was' and 'he come through the door'. But I do say, 'Me and Joe were in the car'. When I'm broadcasting, I know that I tend to formalise my dialect - ('Joe and I...'), and switch the accent from Estuary to 'Received Pronunciation'.

More subtly, you might try to identify features like your different tones of voice (how you show that you're angry, afraid, certain, excited etc.); intonation pattern (the music of your speech, the ups and downs); hesitation pattern (where you pause); your use of filler sounds and expressions like 'er', 'mmm', 'you know what I mean?' Same again for all the different ways in which you say yes and no. You might need other people to tell you how all this sounds. Quite often, people er sound like one or other of their parents! One test for these features of language is to find out if people sometimes think you are someone else when you answer the phone.

By the time you've done all this, (and you can go on and on making it more complex and more specific to you) you will end up with what is a personal language map. As you might expect, linguists have a name for it: your 'idiolect'. To investigate it, chart it and to uncover the processes involved in how you acquired it is to engage with the very heart of how language really works.

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