

PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS AS  
A SOCIOLINGUISTIC VARIABLE FACTOR

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In this article I will report some findings from a research project on spoken language variation and language change in the region of Kvinesdal in the southwestern part of Norway. Until recently, the municipality of Kvinesdal has been a typically rural district. For the last 20 years, however, there has been a strong tendency of centralisation in the area, and this has led to the developing up of a half-urban community centre, Liknes, in the southern part of the Kvinesdal municipality.

Twenty five kilometres west of Kvinesdal, we find the small town of Flekkefjord (6,000 inhabitants), and 100 kilometres in the eastern direction lies Kristiansand, the biggest town on the southern coast of Norway (70,000 inhabitants).

In my investigation I have tape-recorded interviews with 41 young informants. The group consisted of 22 boys and 19 girls, and they were from 14 to 28 years old. I was interested in the correspondence between, on the one hand, the informants' social background, their language attitudes and views on the future, and on the other hand, the degrees of modification of their own spoken language. In addition to this, I also wanted to take a look at the urbanisation process in this district, and find out in what way this process affects the spoken language of the people.

Let me start by saying something about the urbanisation processes, broadly speaking. Urbanisation has both demographic, economic, social and ethnographic dimensions. Although all of these affect language, it is obvious that the last two aspects are of the greatest consequence for linguistics.

The impact of urbanisation on language is manifested at several levels: phonological, grammatical and lexical structure (both in the form of gradual change and dialect shifts); language shifts; language attitudes; pragmatics and communicative patterns.

Nils Lewan (1969) is referring to what he calls "covert urbanisation" (den "dolda urbaniseringen"). Behind this way of expression lie the many changes in economic and occupational structures that are observable in the rural districts today (c.f. Andersson 1987:36).

Another aspect connected with the process of urbanisation is what we may call the "mental urbanisation". This refers to "the urban way of thinking" that some people in rural districts adapt, and this "urban" thinking also effects these people's attitudes towards different lifestyles (Andersson 1987:36-37). In connection with this, I would like to pay attention to the famous statement made by Pahl (1970:101): "*Some people are of the city but not in it, whereas others are in the city but not of it...*"

In the free interviews with my 41 informants, and by means of two questionnaires, I asked them many different questions about their social background, their interests, their friends, social network, and so on. (...)

A lot of my questions were formed with the purpose to find out how the informants valued their local home district in comparison with the city of Flekkefjord and Kristiansand. I wondered if they intended to stay in Kvinesdal after finishing their education, or if they would like to move to the city of Kristiansand or Oslo (the latter is the capital of Norway). I also asked them to make a list with positive and negative factors connected with the "rural" and the "urban" way of living.

### Two personality types

During the many hours and many days it took to get through the interviews with my 41 informants, one particular thought became more and more dominant in my head: It was clearly possible to identify two "personality types" among these young people.

The first group consisted of individuals who were highly satisfied with their lives in Kvinesdal. They also wanted to settle down in their home district in the future. It was important for the young people in this group to get a job that fits in to the local labour market. They all had a wish (it was important for them) to live near their family. These individuals also had other characteristics: up to the present time they had not travelled much, whether abroad or in their home country, and they did not have the habit of visiting Flekkefjord every Saturday night. They had negative attitudes towards the life in the big cities, such as Kristiansand and Oslo. But they expressed a positive attitude to the local dialect, and gave negative statement about people who had distanced themselves from their local dialect when moving to the city.

The second group which I found among my informants seemed to have an opposing opinion of life in their rural home district. They focused more on negative experiences. Most of them said they wanted to move out and make their living in Kristiansand or Oslo, and some wished to settle down abroad in the future, for example, in Great Britain or USA. This group of people has always enjoyed travelling around. As school children, they travelled together with their parents, and as they grew older (teenagers), they travelled with their friends by "Inter rail" and so on.

Having observed these different "traits" in the personalities of my informants, I went back to the sixteen oldest of them, those who were from nineteen to twenty-eight years old. I now made an additional interview with this group to find out more about their attitudes towards what I would like to call the "rural" and the "urban" way of living. Having finished this round of interviews, I was strengthened in my opinion about the classification of my 16 informants in two "personality groups". I decided to give the two groups the following names: Persons belonging to the first group, I called "homo staticus", and those who could be classified according to the latter group's character traits, were called "homo dynamicus".

### Personality types and linguistic results

I now made an analysis of the spoken language of the two personality types, and I found marked differences in the use of local dialect forms. The figure below shows the result of the analysis:

Language: "homo staticus" and "homo dynamicus". Age: 19-28 years old  
(Average use of traditional local dialect forms)

"homo staticus" (8)	"homo dynamicus" (8)
58,3	36,9

Fig. 1

After having observed these language-differences between the two groups, i.e. "homo staticus" and "homo dynamicus", I decided to go back and also take a look at the rest of my informants (23 persons) to see if they also could be grouped according to my two established types of personality. However, I did not make a second interview with these informants, like I did with those between the age of 19-28. In trying to classify these 23 younger persons I therefore had to build on the first interview and the answers they had given on the two questionnaires, about their social background, their attitudes towards the local community and the city, their interests, their views on the future, and so on.

I found that 19 of the 23 young people could be grouped according to my two prototypes "homo staticus" and "homo dynamicus". (4 informants had answered so contradictory to my questions that it was impossible to classify them.) When I now put all the informants (37) together, and correlated their use of dialect with the groups "homo staticus" and "homo dynamicus", the following result appeared:

Spoken language: "homo staticus" and "homo dynamicus". All informants.  
(Average use of traditional local dialect forms)

"homo staticus" (19)	"homo dynamicus" (18)
59,5	37,2

Fig. 2

The table shows that there is a marked difference in use of traditional dialect forms from one personality group to the other.

### Personality types in the sociolinguistic literature

After I had established my theory about the two different types of personality, and also had found striking linguistic differences among the two groups, I decided to consult the sociolinguistic literature and see whether other researchers had reflected over the same questions as I had, i.e. the topic of personality types as a variable factor in sociolinguistics.

In the middle of the 1980s, the Swedish dialectologist, Mats Thelander, did a research project on language accommodation among persons who had moved from Northern Västerbotten (in the north of Sweden) to the Eskilstuna area in the central part of the country (a total of 23 persons).

Thelander found that the group of informants with the lowest use of local dialect forms from the north (their home area), at the same time were the one who to a very high degree accommodated their spoken language to the Standard Swedish variety.

On the other hand, those informants who to a great extent used forms from their local home dialect, also used many local dialect forms from the receiving area (Thelander 1985:75). Thelander says that *he seems to find two personality types among his informants*. He puts it like this:

"Behind these results one might suspect the existence of two types of personality, that after their moving to Eskilstuna resolves the problem of language accommodation in different ways" (Thelander 1985:76).

Also Brit Mæhlum thinks that personality characteristics can be a sociolinguistic variable factor:

"The aspect concerning the personality character of the language user is a dimension that has been almost totally neglected in most sociolinguistic investigations [...] It seems clear that circumstances connected to specific individual traits, or personality characteristics, to a very low degree have been used actively or gone into thoroughly in linguistic studies" (Mæhlum 1992:330).

Traditional sociolinguistic investigations have up to now been very formal and quantitative in their composition. It is therefore not surprising that "the personality factor" has not been introduced as a relevant *variable factor* in the scientific tradition of sociolinguistics, Mæhlum says (234:231). She is inclined to claim that the personality characteristics attached to the individual speaker is a vital component in the complexity of factors that will influence the language choices and language strategies he or she makes within a social community (Mæhlum 1992:331).

I would also like to mention Carol M. Scotton (at The Michigan State University, USA). She has written an interesting article entitled: "Explaining Linguistic Choices as Identity Negotiations" (1980:263). In this article she presents a negotiations model to explain code choices in verbal communication between people. In her model she is taking account of three sets of factors:

- a person's own personality system
- his/her group identities and group behavioural norms
- the dynamics of each interaction.

Like accommodation theory, Scotton's model stresses personal motivation strategies. But it situates these strategies within a clearly normative framework, something accommodation theory does not emphasise. Within this normative framework, all linguistic choices are distinguished as either unmarked or marked in terms of expectations of specific role relationships (Scotton 1980:262).

Scotton presents a set of hypotheses regarding the frequency of types of linguistic choices and the factors with which they are most closely associated. Concerning what she calls "weakly-defined role relationships", she puts it like this:

"In weakly-defined role relationships, which particular exploratory choices are presented for unmarked status will depend on the nature of the goals participants have for the relationship.[...] *Individual personality characteristics, including goals, will be better predictors of linguistic choices than are group identities or situational factors*". [emphasis mine] (Scotton 1980:262-263.)

In connection with my discussion regarding "personality types" in sociolinguistics, it is very interesting to note Scotton's statement about "individual personality characteristics" as predictors of linguistic choices (Scotton 1980:262-263.)

Peter Auer (Hamburg), Birgit Barden (Mannheim), Beate Großkopf (Hamburg) (1997) have reported some findings from a research project on long-term dialect accommodation in real time (c.f. also Barden and Großkopf, 1998). Informants were native speakers of the Upper Saxonian Vernacular spoken around/between Leipzig and Dresden, i.e. only in the former GDR. During or shortly after the collapse of the GDR, many East Germans left the country and settled in West Germany for political and/or economic reasons. Given the traditional very low prestige of the Upper Saxonian

Vernacular, the migrants were exposed to a high degree of pressure to accommodate the local dialect of the receiving area or the standard variety of German. The three researchers identified three *prototypical* ways of assimilation:

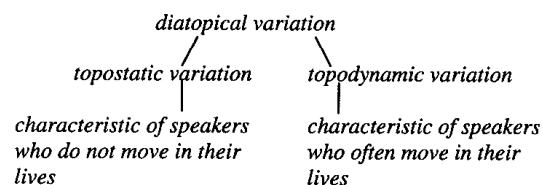
The first prototype, which they called the “cheerful soul”, foregrounds his or her positive experiences and forgets the negative ones. These informants are highly satisfied with their new living conditions in the West.

The second prototype, which they called the “cool one”, perceives and describes his or her experiences in the new environment with some distance. The usual attitude is that “things will develop the right way” without much active intervention on the part of the informant.

Finally, the third prototype, which they called the “fighter”, is highly dissatisfied with his or her life after migration. Negative experiences are foregrounded and positive ones are seldom mentioned. But unlike the “cool one”, the “fighter” is deeply involved emotionally in coming to grips with his or her situation (Auer et al. 1997:14–15).

The results from this project on long-term dialect accommodation in Germany may tell us quite a lot about different “types” of people and their linguistic strategies. We learn from this project that different types choose different language strategies. But we are also witnesses to the fact that very different “prototypes” of informants may choose quite the same language strategy, but their motives behind their strategies are far from the same.

Edgar Radtke (1997) reports about a research project on “Convergence and Divergence of Southern Italian Dialects”. He takes great interest in what he calls “topodynamic” or “topostatic” linguistic behaviour. He says that the monolithic dialect, which suppresses polymorphism in variation, fails to account for the fact that diatopic variation may depend on whether speakers display topodynamic or topostatic behaviour (1997:5). With reference to Harald Thun (1996), Radtke puts up the following figure showing diatopical variation:



Radtke tells us that the more the speakers move, the more they are in contact with other varieties, the consciousness of which forms the basis for a new linguistic behaviour. He states:

“[We] cannot afford to dismiss parameters like topodynamic and topostatic if the description of the variational range is to be adequately explained. We may expect a differentiation that does not concern the exclusive use of linguistic features but rather a preference in the choice of elements found along the polymorphism scale” (Radtke 1997:10).

According to Radtke, topodynamic speakers also reveal the tendency to refuse to adopt internal innovative features into their speech.

But, concerning my project in southern Norway, what can Edgar Radtke’s ideas contribute to my research? It is clear that Radtke’s postulated difference between topostatic-oriented and topodynamic-oriented speakers rests upon the fact that some people do not move in their lives, while others move very often. But in my opinion, we may also talk about a *mental* orientation to life, and thus two kinds of people with either a topostatic or a topodynamic way of thinking. They have different attitudes towards the local home place and the world outside, and they have different views on the future (for example, whether they intend to stay at a local smaller place, or move to the city).

### Contributions from the psychologists?

It is now interesting to take a look at what the personologists within the science of psychology can tell us about the personality and different personality types. Have they got a theory that may confirm and fit into what I above have named as two types of people: “homo staticus” and “homo dynamicus”?

Salvatore R. Maddi (1996) gives us this definition of what is “the overall nature” of personality:

“Personality is a stable set of tendencies and characteristics that determine those commonalities and differences in people’s psychological behaviour (thoughts, feelings, and actions) that have continuity in time and that may not be easily understood as the sole result of the social and biological pressures of the moment” (Maddi 1996:8).

Salvatore R. Maddi is stressing that the personologist tends to restrict attention to behaviours that seem to have psychological importance. He also tells us that the personologist is interested in all rather than only some of the psychological behaviour that shows continuity in time (Maddi 1996:5-8).

### Some important theories about the personality

According to Lawrence A. Pervin (1993), there are in psychology many theories about the forming of human personality. There are among the main theories at least three which I find relevant to my thinking about the types *homo staticus* and *homo dynamicus*. Below I want to give a brief presentation of these personality theories.

#### A. The *trait* theory

The basic assumption of the *trait* point of view is that people possess broad predispositions, called *traits*, to respond in particular ways. In other words, people may be described in the terms of the likelihood of their behaving in a particular way – for example, the likelihood of their being outgoing and friendly or dominant and assertive (Allport and Allport 1921; Pervin 1993:276)

Traits, say the personologists, do not refer to behavioural consistency across many different situations, but only to consistency within relevant types of situations.

Moreover, consistency doesn't mean behaving at some absolutely constant level (such as talking 60 words per minute). Traits are relative, not absolute, characteristics. A talkative person is simply someone who is more likely to talk, relative to the average person. It is this relative nature of behavioural traits that tells us what we might reasonably predict with a personality test.

Personality scores will *not*, according to the personologists, predict what you will do on a single occasion. Nobody can predict human behaviour that well with any method. Rather, personality scores are like batting averages (in base-ball). We can't predict what a 350 or a 250 hitter will do in one appearance at the plate, but we do know that, over the course of a season, a 350 hitter will hit safely 35 percent of the time, and a 250 hitter, 25 percent of the time. Similarly, we can't predict what a person with a high or low score on a sociability test will do on a single occasion. But we do know that, over time, someone with a high score will behave more sociably and will be seen as more sociable than someone with a low score.

We may wonder how stable behavioural traits really are. The personologists say that although moods and behavioural styles do fluctuate somewhat from day to day, they still hover around an average value that represents a person's typical mood level. This level is relatively stable over time.

### B. The *trait-type* theory

The *trait-type theory* was introduced by the psychologist, Hans J. Eysenck in 1947. Eysenck invented a method by which he was able to make adequate measures of traits, and to classify them (Pervin 1993:282).

Through some statistical procedures, Eysenck determined the basic dimensions that were underlying the factors or traits that have been found. These basic dimensions he called *types*. According to Pervin (1993:283), Hans J. Eysenck found *two* basic dimensions to personality which he labelled as *introversion-extroversion* and *neuroticism*. Thus, for example the *traits* of sociability, impulsiveness, activity, liveliness, and excitability can be grouped together under the *type concept of extroversion*.

Eysenck (i.e. Pervin 1993:283) tells us that the *typical extrovert* is sociable, likes parties, has many friends, craves excitement, acts on the spur of the moment, and is impulsive. In contrast to these characteristics, the introverted person tends to be quiet, introspective, reserved, reflective, distrustful of impulsive decisions, and prefers a well-ordered life to one filled with chance and risk.

Though the term "type" is used, it is important to recognise that in fact it is a dimension with a low end and a high end that is being considered, such that people may fall along various points between the two extremes.

According to Eysenck and his fellow "believers", there are also many other significant and theoretically meaningful differences in behaviour associated with varying scores on the *extroversion - introversion* dimension (Pervin 1993:286).

### C. The theory of the *self*

The third main theory of personality that I find interesting, and which is also relevant to my focusing on two personality types among the informants in my project, is the theory of "The Self", introduced by Carl R. Rogers in 1947 (in his description of personality) and in his book from 1961: "Becoming a Person" (c.f. Pervin 1993:169).

According to Rogers, the individual perceives external objects and experiences and attaches meanings to them. The total system of perceptions and meanings make up the individual's phenomenal field. The particular perceptions and meanings that appear to be related to us, to ourselves, make up that part of the phenomenal field known as *the self*. The self is an organised pattern of perceptions.

According to L.A. Pervin (1993:174), *the self* is not "a little person inside of us". The self does not "do" anything. The individual does not have a self that controls behaviour. Rather there is a body of experience symbolised by the self.

As a summary, I would like to focus on what I have already said about the *self*: *The self* is an organised body of perceptions that form our personality during our lifetime. And to end this presentation of the *self-theory*, I will also refer to the two social psychologists, W. Dowie and D. Mackie, who like Rogers stress the process of "becoming a person". They say:

"Cognitive development results not only from a simple interaction between the child and the physical environment, but more importantly from the active reconstruction of cognition which takes place in interactions between the child and other active social beings. Cognitive structures are developed first between individuals and only later become characteristics of the individual child" (Dowie and Mackie 1981:63).

### Summary

The brief survey presented here of what personologists and psychologists think about "types of personality" shows us that people *are* different. We have learnt that according to *trait* theory, there are natural, unitary structures in personality. *Personality traits* are the fundamental building bricks of the human personality (c.f. Pervin 1993:276). We may speak of traits like, *sociability, impulsiveness, activity, liveliness, excitability* etc.

When the personologist thinks of the behaviour connected to a person's traits, he is generally thinking about *overt* behaviour expressed in situations. Yet, of late, the trait concept has been broadened to include non-observable behaviour, emotions, motives and attitudes (c.f. Pervin 1993:333, who refers to McCrae and Costa 1990. *Personality in adulthood*. New York). Such non-observable traits (for example *attitudes*) are of special interest to a sociolinguist in his effort to explain linguistic choices.

So, after all then, *we are different people*, and we represent different "types". Some of us are talkative and outgoing, whereas others are quiet and retiring.

Thus, the personologists feel quite sure that people belonging to the same "type" of personality, will act, think and behave relatively similar to each other when being observed in the same situations.

Both the trait- and trait-type theory, and the theory about the building of *the self*, are fundaments on which I may build my theory about the *homo staticus* and the *homo dynamicus*. I therefore would like to ask: *If it is so that we are different types, with different "selves", why should not our language strategies be formed according to our personality, i.e. "who we really are"?*

As mentioned earlier, the Norwegian sociolinguist, Brit Mæhlum, thinks that personality characteristics can be an important sociolinguistic variable factor. And she postulates sociolinguistic studies in the future where the personality character of the speaker is being used as a relevant variable factor. I think that Mæhlum has pointed out a very relevant element in the science of social linguistics, and I hope that my investigation on language and personality in the community of Kvinesdal, could be a small contribution to further thinking about this subject.

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