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Language Attitudes in Intergroup Contexts

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Although there is no consensus as to what *precisely* an → attitude is, language attitudes may be defined as embodied dispositions toward various and wide-ranging language behaviors (e.g., intensity, politeness, rate, accent, dialect; → Language Varieties). Correspondingly, language attitude research represents a broad-scale, multidisciplinary effort to assess diverse reactions to language behaviors (Cargile & Bradac 2001). Within intergroup contexts, language attitudes often represent the indirect expression of prevailing intergroup attitudes and relational norms. Thus, both a response in Catalan to a query made in Spanish and the characterization of mainstream US English speakers as “intelligent” by African-American respondents epitomize the terrain of language attitudes in intergroup contexts.

Language is a human capacity that evolved to aid in the reduction of uncertainty (→ Linguistics). This *informational function* of language is critical and yet complemented by an equally important *communal function* – language plays a central role in both creating and maintaining community. A common language binds people together often more effectively than other markers of group identity (e.g., skin color, dress, artifacts, etc.) because language behaviors are attributed “internally” (as conscious decisions about how to self-project) rather than “externally” (as historical accident). For example, that is why, despite his Croatian ancestry, Spanish-speaking Joseph Morgan was allowed to reign as godfather of the Mexican mafia in Los Angeles.

At the same time that language helps draw pro-social group boundaries, it also erects barriers. Linguistic *shibboleths* help separate the ingroup from the outgroup, friend from foe. When the Soviet empire crumbled along nationalistic fissures marked by language, the central press reported that a young Russian was murdered in Kizil after failing to reply in Tuvinian to the question, “Do you have a smoke?” Language can be used to gatekeep not only individuals, but also entire groups. Language policies (e.g., *NBC handbook of pronunciation*) can be set to exclude nondominant “others” from political or economic access in a practice termed *elite closure*. Because language is a malleable dividing line, outgroup members may find the high-prestige language or dialect an ever-shifting target to pursue (Chambers et al. 2002).

Since language is central to (inter)group life, attitudes toward its use typically function as a heuristic summary of intergroup relations. If two groups are antagonistic competitors,

the chances are that members will not be favorably disposed to the others' way of talking (e.g., Israelis and Palestinians). Conversely, if two groups share favorable relations (e.g., Australians and British), or if one group's subjugation is obscured by a dominant ideology (e.g., Mexican-Americans in the US; → Cultural Imperialism Theories), then ingroup members may be inclined to favor outgroup language behaviors, at least in certain circumstances (Preston 1989). Although the actual macro-context is complex and multifaceted (not to mention complicated by factors in the immediate social situation, e.g., the hearer's emotional state or formality), the study of intergroup language attitudes has normally relied on two relevant, interrelated socio-structural dimensions: standardization and ethnolinguistic vitality (Giles & Coupland 1991).

Standardization is a relatively static dimension, and it describes the extent to which norms for correct usage have been codified, adopted, and promoted for a particular language variety. *Ethnolinguistic vitality* is more dynamic, and reflects the range and importance of functions served by a given language variety and the social pressures toward shifts in language use. Although both dimensions are conceivably "objective," language attitudes are affected by the interlocutor's "subjective" or perceived assessment of such factors. Generally, the more standardized and vital a language variety is perceived to be, the more likely it is that speakers of that language will be judged favorably on traits related to competence, intelligence, and social status. Conversely, the less standardized and vital the language, the less likely these same judgments will follow. It is important to note, however, that speakers of such a subordinate language variety may be judged favorably on traits related to kindness, solidarity, and overall attractiveness if the dominant group's ideology includes the *tokenism* of nondominant groups. *Ethnolinguistic identity theory* explains how individuals respond to and negotiate this terrain of judgment depending on their group membership and perception of the macro-context.

If language attitudes represent a predisposition informed by the history and character of intergroup relations, what do they predispose us to? With its modern inception in the 1960s, language attitude research, like most intergroup research and theory, has been motivated by practical problems (e.g., strained relations between French and English Canadians). Consequently, using a variety of research techniques (→ Field Research; Experiment, Laboratory), studies have explored outcomes of judgment and a host of other pragmatic behaviors associated with these predispositions. Such behaviors include communication convergence/divergence, cooperative assistance, language policy planning, employment and housing decisions, and modes of classroom instruction. For example, De la Zerda and Hopper (1979) found employment interviewers in Texas less likely to hire Mexican-American applicants with nonstandard (Chicano English) accents as supervisors, but more likely to hire them as unskilled workers compared to applicants who spoke standard US English. Of course, the relationship between our language attitudes and our behaviors is never quite so simple or direct (→ Attitude–Behavior Consistency). Even so, the study of these predispositions reminds us that *how* we say something is equally if not sometimes more important than *what* we say.

SEE ALSO: ► Attitude–Behavior Consistency ► Attitudes ► Cultural Imperialism Theories ► Experiment, Laboratory ► Field Research ► Language Varieties ► Linguistics

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Language and the Internet

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Language and (or “on”) the → Internet refers to human language (or language intended to be human-like, such as the linguistic output of artificial intelligence agents) produced and displayed through computer-mediated communication (CMC) systems that are mostly text based and mostly reciprocally interactive, such as email, listserv lists, newsgroups, chat, instant messaging, text messaging via mobile phones (SMS), blogs, and wikis. The term “Internet language” is somewhat of a misnomer, in that some of this communication takes place on intranets and some is mediated by mobile technologies, rather than by the global networked infrastructure known as the Internet per se (→ Internet, Technology of). “Internet” is used here in an extended sense to include these related communication technologies. Variant terms for Internet language include computer-mediated language, computer-mediated discourse, online discourse, and electronic discourse (→ Technologically Mediated Discourse). All of these are intended to distinguish language- and discourse-related phenomena as a focus of interest from the broader phenomenon of computer-mediated communication, of which they form a part.

INTELLECTUAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Language in the form of typed text is one of the most pervasive and visible manifestations of Internet use. Internet language has attracted the interest of scholars, educators, and the general public, and has been at the center of controversies in each domain. Linguists have argued about how it should be classified; ethnographers and ethnomethodologists have grappled with how to apply the methods of their disciplines to it (→ Ethnography of Communication); and sociologists and communication scholars have debated the status