Language Attitudes

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Humans are social creatures who employ their voice to reduce uncertainty and make connection. Voices produce both linguistic and paralinguistic behaviors which, together, constitute language. When language is spoken, both types of behaviors carry information that can be used to coordinate interaction. However, these information signals are useless if individuals are socially naive or are otherwise unable to read them. Thus, in this context, language attitudes may be understood as a manner in which to evaluate the socially relevant features of signals given off when speaking (or, more rarely, writing).

Language attitudes are a subset of the general attitude concept—an idea central to psychology and one with a long history of study. Although debate continues regarding the precise attributes of an attitude, psychologists agree that object (or entity) evaluation is its defining feature. When individuals respond either positively or negatively to some object in their environment, an attitude is the concept assigned responsibility for the prejudice to respond in a particular way. Originally, attitudes were considered to be stable representations of objects. In this way, a person could "have" a negative attitude toward dogs, for example, which would subsequently engender a negative (cognitive, affective, and/or behavioral) response to every dog encountered. More recently, however, an emerging connectionist paradigm within psychology suggests that attitudes are particular states in a connected (neural) network. Individuals thus do not "have" attitudes, but instead have networks that are constructed and conditioned in ways that engender a similar pattern of responses across different exemplars of the attitude object (e.g., different dogs). This paradigm does not insist that attitudes be perfectly consistent because they are constructed in each instance based on a unique configuration of stimuli. In addition, it has also encouraged consideration of the ways in which both controlled and automatic processes may interact to engender a pattern of responses.

Although the attitude concept can be attached to any object or entity imaginable, in the case of language attitudes it is limited to language behaviors. Even so, such behaviors are numerous and include both "macro" attitude objects (e.g., dialects, accents, code-switching) as well as "micro" attitude objects (e.g., lexical, grammatical features). Language attitude research thus investigates the patterned evaluative reactions individuals have to a wide variety of language behaviors. In most instances, these patterns are the result of conditioning by extant social forces and relations, yet there is some evidence to suggest attitudes that ground human responding to certain paralinguistic features may be universal.

In his book *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals*, Charles Darwin hypothesized that some human facial expressions, those that communicate emotion, are spontaneously generated and universally recognized. Over a century after its publication, the evidence in support of this hypothesis with respect to six so-called basic emotions is quite robust. More limited evidence suggests that paralinguistic behavior might also signal these same emotions for all human beings. Most of this evidence is based on cross-cultural investigations of affective prosody—the vocal expression of emotion that occurs with speech. However, one study tested affective vocalizations—more "pure" and less constrained paralinguistic expressions of emotion—using a sample of Himba participants (a seminomadic group living in isolation from other cultures and people) (Sauter, Eisner, Ekman, & Scott, 2010). Because of the study's design, the finding that both English and Himba participants recognized each other's basic emotion vocalizations makes a strong evidentiary claim that not all prejudgments of all language behaviors are socially constructed. It seems that the initial reading of certain paralinguistic signals is hardwired, and perhaps even much of the subsequent evaluative responding as well (e.g., happiness is positive, disgust is negative). Of course, it is expected that cultural conditioning will interact with this initial responding to shape downstream (cognitive, affective, and/or behavioral) reactions (e.g., happiness qua schadenfreude may be negative).

Even though attitudes toward certain paralinguistic behaviors may be hardwired, the vast majority of language prejudices are socially constructed. The investigation of socially relative evaluations is thus the customary terrain of language attitude study. This research tradition has sought to map appraisals that listeners make about speakers based on their language behavior alone. With precursors going back to at least the time of Aristotle, modern language attitude study began in the early 20th century with the work of dialect geographers who mapped variation and called attention to language varieties that were either stigmatized or accorded prestige. The social evaluation of language was presumed to account for the changes that were charted (e.g., dialect leveling), though little attention was given initially to direct study of these appraisals. Since this time, language attitudes research has chronicled appraisals using three investigative techniques. First, content analyses have examined the public treatment accorded to language varieties as a means of inferring their relative standing. Second, researchers have directly assessed language evaluations by openly asking for people's judgments in the context of interviews or surveys. Of course, such direct measures are subject to biases of social desirability, thus a third technique of indirect measurement was developed in the 1960s and has since become the most widely used approach.

Known as the speaker evaluation technique, this method invites participants to judge presented speakers and subsequently attributes these judgments to the speaker's language behavior. Of course, such causal inferences are only appropriate under conditions of high experimental control, thus the matched guise technique was developed in which speakers are crossed in all conditions of the study so that any manipulated difference in language behavior can be assigned causality. Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner, and Fillenbaum (1960) conducted the earliest matched guise study by using four balanced bilingual speakers. Each speaker recorded a prose passage in both French and English and respondents then rated each speaker on 14 evaluative scales. The average

rating of the four speakers in the English-speaking condition was higher than in the French-speaking condition across several traits, including perceived kindness and intelligence, thus suggesting that respondents had more favorable attitudes toward English than French.

Despite its enhanced internal validity, the matched guise technique does suffer from threats to external validity as the speaker recordings are not naturalistic and are often presented acontextually. Methodological innovations have developed to mitigate these concerns, such as digital editing and computer simulation. In addition, a methodology with less experimental control but enhanced realism—the verbal guise technique—has also been deployed. In verbal guise studies, speakers are not forced to cross all conditions, thus they can speak more naturally. Although this introduces additional cross-condition variation (e.g., speaker pitch and tone), it provides a more robust basis for generalization, as each condition is comprised of two or more speakers employing typical language behaviors. Together, studies using these techniques as well as others have revealed a striking pattern to "macro" language attitudes across a wide variety of groups.

As already discussed, language attitude study investigates reactions to all forms of language behavior, including "micro" forms such as speech rate and lexical diversity. However, most investigations have been directed at reactions to "macro" language behaviors—those that are tied to social group membership (e.g., accent, dialect). Although the meaning and evaluation of such behaviors does differ between social groups, a consistent pattern has nevertheless emerged across groups around the world. In it, standard language speakers are almost universally favored on traits related to both status (e.g., wealth and intelligence) and dynamism (e.g., enthusiasm and liveliness), though evaluations of warmth-related traits (e.g., friendliness) are generally mixed. Given the consistency of such evaluations, the notion of a standard language is worth brief consideration.

Quite remarkably, human languages typically meet countervailing demands for both change and mutual intelligibility. They can be adapted for use in new circumstances while retaining common ground among speakers. In this context, language standardization can be understood as a process that countervails change through codification and prescription, though not always in the interest of mutual intelligibility. The notion of a standard language is that from among many different ways of speaking a language (e.g., different dialects), there is one unique and correct way that can and should be shared by all members of the collective language "nation." For example, among different varieties of US English (e.g., African American Vernacular English or Appalachian English), only mainstream US English is the so-called standard. Similarly, among all natively spoken, international varieties of English (e.g., Singaporean or Indian English), only speakers from the United Kingdom and the United States are considered standard-bearers. This last example, however, points to an often-overlooked feature of language standardization: It is driven more by ideological myth than linguistic necessity. How else to account for the fact that two varieties of English have come to represent the (single) standard?

As Lippi-Green (1997) contends in her influential book *English with an Accent*, mutual intelligibility does not require a single standard. Variety in language is

omnipresent and speakers of so-called standard languages already manage a wide variety of extant differences. Thus when individuals and institutions argue or act to exclude certain languages or variations, they more often serve ideological interests rather than those of mutual intelligibility. Language standardization operates through mechanisms controlled by dominant social groups (e.g., media production or employment criteria). These groups normalize and elevate their own language variation, but not that of other, nondominant social groups. Thus, standard language speakers are accorded higher status not because their language is inherently superior, but because their language is representative of the group that has achieved social dominance.

Indeed, standard languages around the world are consistently accorded higher status, but their perceived warmth is decidedly mixed. Although explanations for this evaluative pattern have varied, the concept of complementary stereotyping offers a promising new account. In a modern era in which old-fashioned (i.e., explicit) prejudices have given way to more subtle forms of bias, it is argued that evaluations of greater warmth help compensate for and distract from low status appraisals—which would otherwise appear prejudicial. Complementary stereotypes (e.g., high status + low warmth, or low status + high warmth) thus justify the social order by presenting a patina of fairness. They imply that nonstandard speakers face no more prejudice than standard speakers because both groups are favored and disfavored in some manner. However, favoring nonstandard languages only on certain traits may not be cause to celebrate the end of bias. Instead it may only indicate the shifting shape of language prejudice, from total denigration to paternalism.

Language attitude research began as a largely descriptive enterprise, but as use of the complementary stereotype concept suggests, it has shown increasing interest in processes that potentially undergird evaluative reactions to language. For example, studies now employ reaction time measures (e.g., use of the affective priming paradigm or implicit attitude measurement), thus encouraging consideration of the role that automatic processes play in language attitude expression. Other techniques (e.g., cultural frame-switching) are also being employed to better understand how contextual cues help shape language evaluations. And although language carries perhaps the most (important) social signals, fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) data and other studies are beginning to reveal how these signals are processed in relation to other person perception cues, such as facial expressions. Together, these new data and continued theory development promise a richer understanding of the patterned evaluative reactions we all have toward that most central of all human behaviors: language.

SEE ALSO: English Hegemony; English as an International Language; Identity and Intercultural Communication; Ideology and Interethnic Communication in the United States; Intergroup Communication, Overview; Prejudice and Discrimination; Stereotypes

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Further readings

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