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Field of study: **Language Sciences**

Level: **Master One**

Module: **Sociolinguistics**

Lecture**: Language Attitudes**

1. **Introduction**

Language attitudes is a term used in sociolinguistics for the feelings people have about their own language or the language(s) of others. These may be positive or negative: someone may particularly value a foreign language (e.g. because of its literary history) or think that a language is especially difficult to learn (e.g. because the script is off-putting) (Crystal, 2008: 266)

Among the various definitions of language attitudes, we refer to that of Crystal which states that it is: a term used in sociolinguistics for the feelings people have about their own language or the language(s) of others. Crystal (2008: 266). Earlier works on attitudes like that of Allport (1935, qtd. in Garrett 2010: 19) claimed that the concept of attitude was considered as a crucial component in the field of social psychology. He further states that this concept has also been essential in sociolinguistics since Labov‘s (1966) influential work on the social stratification of speech communities whose languages might be driven to change due to prestige and stigma as forceful factors towards some linguistic features existing in the speech of these communities. Since Labov‘s work, attitudes have become prominent in understanding social behaviour and thought (Garrett, 2010). Thus, attitudes are learned through human socialisation and are less influenced and more persistent, such as language attitudes that are acquired in early life and do not change in later life (Sears, 1903, qtd. in Garrett, 2007: 116).

The parent discipline of language attitude research is the social psychology of attitudes. It seeks to bring together: a record of overt [and covert] attitudes towards language, linguistic features and linguistic stereotypes‖ Labov (1984: 33).

Language attitudes studies have differed from each other in terms of the subject under study. Fasold (ibid: 148) summarizes three trends in language attitudes study: one trend includes studies focusing on attitudes towards language itself where the investigator may ask questions about whether a language or a language variety sounds nice or harsh, poor, ugly, rich, beautiful, old-fashioned, modern or the like. Another trend which covers studies that go beyond this level of language attitudes investigation and ask questions about the speakers of a language or a language variety: Some groups are believed to be ordinary, honest, hard-working, and intelligent: some groups are believed to be lazy, insolent (Preston and Robinson: 2005). On a broader scale, the third trend stresses the importance of language attitudes towards language maintenance and language planning (Ryan, Giles and Sebastian: 1982).

1. **Components of Attitudes**

The three components that ‘attitude’ comprises are:

**Attitudes**

**Behavioural component**

e.g. actions

**Cognitive component**

e.g. thoughts, beliefs

**Affective component**

e.g. emotions

1-To give an example, ***the affective component*** of a positive attitude towards a linguistic variety such as the Queen’s English could be expressed verbally with a favourable evaluation.

2-Thinking that the Queen’s English is the only correct language variety, for example, would therefore be considered an expression of the ***cognitive component[[1]](#footnote-2)***.

3-The ***behavioural component*** of a positive attitude towards the attitude object, the Queen’s English, could be realised in the acquisition of the variety.

Attempting to separate the three components in empirical studies, the affective and cognitive components have been found difficult to distinguish (Ajzen, 2005, p. 20). These three components together need to be borne in mind when devising tests to measure attitudes.

1. **Research Approaches to the Study of Language Attitudes**

Three main research approaches developed to study language attitudes in general: the Direct Approach, the Indirect Approach and the Societal Treatment Approach.

**3.1 The Direct Approach**

The direct method is overt and involves the use of a series of explicit and direct questions written in the form of a questionnaire designed to large groups of people. These questions can be also in the form of interviews in which the researcher asks the respondents individually (Garrett, 2010, p. 39; McKenzie, 2010, p. 37) It targets respondents’ cognitive, behavioural and affective levels as they are expected to express their attitudes overtly. An example of its application is MacKinnon’s (1981) study of the attitudes of Scottish people towards Gaelic. Using a questionnaire with questions targeting the explicit opinions of Scottish people towards Gaelic and its use illustrates this Direct Approach, which is, however, often considered to be intrusive and thus could lead to biased and distorted responses (Garrett, 2004, p. 1252).

**3.2 The Indirect Approach**

By applying complementary, less direct and to some extent deceptive techniques, the application of the Indirect Approach aims to obtain language attitudes in a different manner (Garrett, 2010, p. 41). As opposed to the Direct Approach method, explicit questions are avoided since the validity of language attitudes obtained by the application of direct methods has been questioned. An advantage of the Indirect Approach is that its application enables the researcher to retrieve sensitive data, such as people’s attitudes towards foreign accents, which, if directly asked for, could cause respondents to answer in a manner they would consider to be socially appropriate

or desirable.

Thus, being covert and seeks to investigate the speakers‘attitudes without informing that they are being investigated (Fasold, 1987: 149), the researchers who use this method often rely on the matched guise technique, first introduced by Lambert and colleagues in the 1960s where he makes the informants in the investigation listen to audio recordings, usually a passage read in different languages or language varieties by bilingual speakers. Then, they are asked to describe the individuals reading the same passage, while in fact, it is only one person who performs the readings.

**3.3 The Societal Treatment Approach**

This approach is a content analysis of already existing data (Garrett, 2010, pp. 46–48). As opposed to the Direct Approach method, attitudes are not elicited but are inferred by the researcher by examining already existing attitudinal expressions (McKenzie, 2010, p. 41). The data can, for example, be compiled by newspaper letters-to-the-editor expressing the reader’s views on language (Schmied, 1991; Lukač, 2016) or speech behaviour exhibited in literature or films (Walshe, 2009). By choosing texts as a data source, this approach can be qualitative and quantitative and seems to provide immense possibilities to study language attitudes. Despite the vast amount of already existing data, the Societal Treatment Approach has been frequently overlooked in the past (McKenzie, 2010, p. 41), which could be due to specific research topics and questions, as well as to the perceived danger of inferring attitudes from the data resulting in subjective interpretations by the researcher. The researcher’s individual disposition to the texts and experience with the subject matter, therefore, can influence his or her perception of the data, which may ultimately result in the researcher’s own personal attitude being reflected in the results.

**References**

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1. This component has often been described as a “mental and neural state of readiness” (Allport, 1954, p. 45) or “inner component of mental life” (Oppenheim, 1982, p. 39), which highlights their cognitive dimension i.e., the mentalists’ view [↑](#footnote-ref-2)