Cultural Attitudes Toward Language Variation and Dialects

ROBERT BAYLEY AND DAN VILLARREAL

Framing the Issue

The study of *language attitudes*—affective, behavioral, or cognitive reactions that listeners hold toward varieties or features—emerged in the 1960s out of research in social psychology. Since then, language attitudes have been recognized as an important area of study in sociolinguistic research. This entry focuses on attitudes toward language *varieties*, an umbrella term that includes languages and dialects but avoids the negative connotations of the term *dialect*. In particular, we describe global varieties of English using Braj Kachru's (1985) influential "circles of English" model, which classifies the countries in which English is spoken in terms of three concentric circles. *Inner-circle* countries, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, are predominantly English-speaking; *outer-circle* countries, such as India and Nigeria, contain a small proportion of proficient English speakers (often a cultural elite) and a larger proportion of non-proficient English speakers or non-speakers of English; and *expanding-circle* countries, such as Russia and Japan, contain a smaller proportion of proficient or non-proficient English speakers.

Among the more widely accepted findings of sociolinguistics is that attitudes toward varieties reflect attitudes toward the people who speak them (Preston, 2013). US southerners, for example, with their elongated vowels, may be stereotypically thought by many non-southerners to be slow thinkers. Speakers of vernacular varieties throughout the English-speaking world, where negative concord, for example, "I don't got none," may be prevalent, are sometimes assumed to be too dim to realize that two negatives make a positive. Listeners can also hold language attitudes toward specific linguistic features, such as the *-ing* ending of words like *working* or *running*, which has two *variants* (linguistically equivalent versions): *-ing* or *-in*. Listeners typically judge speakers who consistently use the *-in* variant of this ending to be less intelligent and articulate than those who use the *-ing* variant (in fact, this holds true even when listeners are not

The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching, First Edition.
Edited by John I. Liontas (Project Editor: Margo DelliCarpini).

DOI: 10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0297

judging two different speakers, but merely two different versions of the same recording). In this case, *-in* is classified as an *informal* variant and *-ing* as a *formal* variant.

Making the Case

As linguists we know that all languages and all language varieties are systematic, equal in complexity and expressive power. Southern American English is just as useful for communication as Midwestern American English, and there is no correlation between intelligence and vowel duration. The principle that "two negatives make a positive" holds true in mathematics but not in grammar; multiple negation is required by the grammatical rules of Spanish, Serbian, and even Middle English. Speakers who prefer saying *runnin* are no less intelligent than those who prefer to say *running*, and from the standpoint of linguistics, the *-ing* and *-in* variants are linguistically equivalent.

Nevertheless, misguided though they may be, language attitudes have real-world consequences. For example, children who come from homes where African American English is spoken are more likely to be referred for speech therapy. To cite another example, Baugh (2007) studied the relationship between accent discrimination and fair housing. He found that speakers who were perceived as sounding African American or Chicano were less likely to be offered appointments to see apartments they called about than speakers who were perceived as white. In reality, Baugh, a tri-dialectal African American professor of linguistics, was the speaker in all cases. In both these examples, language attitudes reflect the differential social value that listeners afford to standard versus vernacular varieties, despite the fact that these varieties are equal in terms of inherent linguistic value.

With few exceptions, language textbooks assume that a standard variety is the target of acquisition for all students. Moreover, research in a number of contexts has shown that teachers' classroom discourse is often more standard than the language of most native speakers (e.g. Li, 2010; Mougeon, Nadasdi, & Rehner, 2010). For example, Mougeon et al. report that French immersion teachers in Toronto use informal variants at a much lower rate than native speakers of Canadian French, favoring formal and hyper-formal forms instead. While the overuse of formal variants in the classroom and the avoidance of informal variants are understandable and may well reflect teachers' views of their roles as models of correct usage, such overuse and avoidance can also militate against students' use of the target language among peers. Immersion students who are equipped only with a version of the target language that matches overly formal classroom discourse, rather than the more informal language typically used among peers, often resort to their native language both outside and inside the classroom.

Finally, it is not at all clear that the standard is the only target for language learners. Goldstein (1987), for example, shows that the use of African American English (AAE) features by New York Puerto Rican learners of English is influenced by speakers' degree of contact with African Americans and by situational factors.

Goldstein offers a number of examples that show that speakers of English as a second language are able to distinguish between different English varieties and to shift between one variety and another. For example, she quotes Luis, a teenage Puerto Rican who was enrolled in an ESL class: "In class, we have to speak nice, you know, but not on the street … when some people in the street talk bad, you have to speak bad to him [*sic*]" (1987, p. 417). Goldstein's study is one of many over several decades that show clearly that despite being stigmatized in the general society, many non-standard varieties, including AAE, may constitute the target for some learners of English. Moreover, if learners are not provided with opportunities to acquire and use informal variants, research shows they tend to resort to their first language in peer–peer interaction.

Language attitudes exist at the individual level, and different outer-circle and expanding-circle varieties enjoy differential levels of status. Hence, it is impossible to identify a single attitude toward all non-inner-circle varieties. Broadly speaking, however, attitudes toward varieties of English outside of the inner circle typically locate these varieties as subordinate in some way to inner-circle varieties, especially British English and American English. These attitudes can be said to exist along a continuum. According to some views, non-inner-circle varieties are simply less appropriate for international communication in English or less aesthetically pleasing, although there is nothing inherently wrong with them; to others, non-inner-circle varieties are inherently less intelligible (with an inverse relationship between the intelligibility of a variety and the number of inner-circle features it lacks); and to others, non-inner-circle varieties represent degraded or impure forms of English lacking in legitimacy, grammaticality, and the expressive power of the "real" English spoken in the inner circle. However these attitudes may vary, inner-circle English is almost always positioned as the "neutral standard" against which other varieties are measured, and never the other way around. Language attitudes are, at their core, a reflection of power relations, and even the most strident defender of a local variety would not be able to deny the global power of American or British English.

As we have seen in the previous section, these attitudes do not accord with linguistic reality. Nevertheless, the fact that all varieties of English are grammatically coherent, intelligible within their speech communities, and replete with lexicon and grammar does not preclude negative attitudes from being held and fiercely defended by the wider population. It is also *not* the case that language attitudes' divergence from (socio)linguistic facts renders them irrelevant; on the contrary, as we will discuss in the "Pedagogical implications" section, it is precisely *because* language attitudes exist outside of sociolinguistic reality that teachers must pay attention to them.

Although language attitudes are held at the individual level, mass-media depictions of certain varieties not only have the power to define and circulate attitudes for a large audience, but also demonstrate how attitudes are embedded within cultural systems. For example, the quasi-Chinese-accented Siamese cats in the 1955 animated Disney film *Lady and the Tramp* describe their mischievous, deceitful

behaviors in ungrammatical sentences such as "Maybe we could reaching in and make it drown" and "Where we finding baby, there are milk nearby" that are not grammatical in Chinese English or other varieties. These characters depict Chinese English speakers as shifty and frame their speech as a disordered form of English. Lippi-Green's (2011) analysis of over 400 characters in 38 full-length animated Disney films provides the most comprehensive study to date of popular depictions of the accents of World Englishes. Lippi-Green found that whereas 79% of American English-speaking characters had positive motivations, only 37% of non-inner-circle English-speaking characters had positive motivations. This trend is highlighted by the films that are set in locales outside the United States, such as *The Lion King* in Sub-Saharan Africa, *Beauty and the Beast* in France, and *Aladdin* in the Middle East; in these films, the "good guy" protagonists—the characters such as Simba, Belle, and Aladdin, with whom the audience is meant to identify and emulate—are overwhelmingly Standard American English-speaking in spite of the films' settings. Non-inner-circle accents are used in stereotypical ways, with French-accented speakers in service positions (e.g., Lumière, the candlestick maître d' in *Beauty and the Beast*, and Chef Louis in *The Little Mermaid*). Lippi-Green argues that Disney, an American company with a global audience, plays a role in reinforcing sociolinguistic norms that privilege American English speakers.

Whereas Lippi-Green demonstrates language attitudes toward World Englishes that come from outside, norm enforcement and the positioning of non-inner-circle varieties can also come from within. Of particular interest in this regard is Singapore's Speak Good English Movement, a government initiative to "encourage Singaporeans to speak grammatically correct English that is universally understood" (http://www.goodenglish.org.sg/site/category/movement/about-us.html) rather than Singlish, an English-based creole spoken widely in Singapore. The government's materials about the movement (including the above quotation) identify Singlish as "broken," lacking in grammatical rules, unintelligible, and simply "bad English." Despite these strong negative signals from the government about the acceptability of Singlish, secondary school students in Singapore do value Singlish and disagree with the statement that Singlish is "bad English." In fact, they associate speaking Singlish with Singaporean identity to a greater extent than even Singaporean food. While these students overwhelmingly believe in the importance of speaking Standard English, they put a Singaporean stamp on the notion of "Standard English." In one study, a Standard English speaker with a Singaporean accent was rated higher on friendliness, intelligence, and (especially) fitness to be an English teacher than was a Standard English speaker with an American accent or a Singlish speaker (in reality, all three were the same speaker) (Tan & Tan, 2008). Nevertheless, non-inner-circle varieties are stigmatized across the English-speaking world not only by inner-circle speakers but also by their own speakers.

As discussed above, language attitudes themselves exist solely "in the head," but, as we have seen, they can lead to real-world consequences in the form of language discrimination. When speakers interact with interlocutors toward whom they hold negative language attitudes, they are typically less inclined to treat these

interlocutors as equal partners in the interaction and may report that the interaction as unsuccessful when it actually was not. This effect is especially found with inner-circle speakers' negative attitudes toward non-inner-circle speakers. In a revealing study, students hearing a lecture from an "Asian" instructor found her less comprehensible and rated her as more accented than students hearing a lecture from a "Caucasian" instructor—despite the fact that the audio for both lectures was identical (a native English speaker from Ohio) and the only cue to ethnicity, an image projected on a screen, was nonlinguistic (Rubin, 1992). In other words, the intelligibility of a certain speaker is mediated by the listener's language attitudes, with negative attitudes impeding intelligibility. In the context of World Englishes, where non-inner-circle varieties may be favorably judged in local settings but broadly thought to be subordinate to the "neutral standards" of American or British English, many proficient speakers struggle to be recognized as intelligible.

Pedagogical Implications

Language attitudes present teachers with a dilemma: do we orient toward American or British English as a standard and risk introducing or reinforcing the negative attitudes that position other varieties as inadequate? Or do we encourage our students to embrace the identity-promoting function of local varieties and risk setting them up to be judged as illegitimate users of English? Teachers who acknowledge the existence of negative attitudes toward local or other vernacular varieties but who sense that they have a role in changing them may feel that they are caught in the middle. We propose, however, that teachers can mitigate negative language attitudes among their students while remaining realistic about the negative attitudes that exist outside of the classroom. Although classrooms differ greatly, we propose several recommendations that should apply in many cases:

- *Embrace variation*: Language attitudes that locate non-inner-circle or other vernacular varieties as subordinate are predicated on the standard language ideology, a belief system that includes (among other things) the idea that "when there are two or more variants of some word or construction, only one of them can be right" (Milroy, 2001, p. 535). It is not hard to see how, when taken out to its logical conclusion, this belief can inform language attitudes; for example, if the word *tone* is [tʰoʊn] in American English and [toːn] in Indian English, only one of them can be correct, and if it is presumed that American English is "neutral," then there must be something wrong about Indian English speakers who say [toːn] rather than [tʰoʊn]. In reality, variation is a natural part of all human languages, a point that bears repeating in the language classroom. Rather than labeling certain variants as "the correct way to say things," acknowledge forms that are used differently (and legitimately) by different speech communities—both inside and outside of the inner circle.
- *Pay attention to students' attitudes*: Regardless of their level of proficiency in English, students will enter the classroom with at least some attitudes toward

English, if not toward specific varieties of English. Non-native speakers of English can be even harsher critics of "bad English" than native speakers, so students who express negative attitudes toward certain varieties can be gently reminded that there are many valid ways to use English and that English is spoken "authentically" by speakers around the world. Moreover, some teachers may assume that all students are orienting toward a standard of American or British English, and, while this is likely, it is not always the case; as demonstrated above, some students may prefer a more local version of "Standard English" as a pronunciation model. Paying attention to students' attitudes also means mitigating their insecurity about speaking non-inner-circle or other vernacular varieties; speakers of even well-established varieties like Nigerian English or Indian English may harbor doubts about the legitimacy of their English at the same time as they are embracing their sociolinguistic identities.

- *Pay attention to your own attitudes*: Even the most linguistically sensitive teachers are not immune to holding language attitudes, and we do not argue that teachers are obligated to lose all subjective judgments about language. However, consistently expressing negative views about language variation can be counterproductive in the language classroom. In this classroom, the teacher is the source of linguistic authority, the gatekeeper to English; in labeling certain varieties as substandard, in expressing aesthetic distaste for certain varieties, or in implying that inner-circle varieties hold a monopoly on intelligibility or grammaticality, the teacher may well be perpetuating these negative attitudes among the students.
- *Understand student purposes and the linguistic ecology of the worlds they live in*: Like all of us, students use languages for a multitude of purposes. Many students, particularly immigrant students in inner-circle countries, are more likely to interact with speakers of vernacular dialects than with speakers of the most standard varieties. The more that we as teachers understand about the linguistic ecology of the worlds our students inhabit, the more we will be able to assist them to acquire the different registers they will need to achieve their own goals.

SEE ALSO: African American English in the United States Culture and Classrooms; Globalization and the Dilemmas of Linguistic Identity; Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Stereotypes in Teaching English

References

Baugh, J. (2007). Linguistic profiling. In R. Bayley & C. Lucas (Eds.), *Sociolinguistic variation: Theories, methods, and applications* (pp. 338–48). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Goldstein, L. (1987). Standard English: The only target for nonnative speakers of English? *TESOL Quarterly*, *21*, 417–36.

Kachru, B. (1985). Standards, codification, and sociolinguistic realities: The English language in the outer circle. In R. Quirk & H. Widdowson (Eds.), *English in the world: Teaching and*

learning the language and literatures (pp. 11–30). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press and The British Council.

Li, X. (2010). Sociolinguistic variation in the speech of learners of Chinese as a second language. *Language Learning*, *60*(2), 366–408. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9922.2009.00560.x

Lippi-Green, R. (2011). *English with an accent: Language, ideology and discrimination in the United States* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Milroy, J. (2001). Language ideologies and the consequences of standardization. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, *5*(4), 530–55. doi:10.1111/1467-9481.00163

Mougeon, R., Nadasdi, T., & Rehner, K. (2010). *The sociolinguistic competence of immersion students*. Bristol, England: Multilingual Matters.

Preston, D. R. (2013). Language with an attitude. In J. K. Chambers & N. Schilling (Eds.), *The handbook of langauge variation and change* (2nd ed.) (pp. 157–82). Maldon, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Rubin, D. L. (1992). Nonlanguage factors affecting undergraduates' judgments of nonnative English-speaking teaching assistants. *Research in Higher Education*, *33*(4), 511–31. doi:10.1007/bf00973770

Tan, P. K. W., & Tan, D. K. H. (2008). Attitudes toward non-standard English in Singapore. *World Englishes*, *27*, 464–79. doi:10.1111/j.1467-971X.2008.00578.x

Suggested Readings

Charity Hudley, A. H., & Mallinson, C. (2011). *Understanding English language variation in US schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Lindemann, S. (2002). Listening with an attitude: A model of native-speaker comprehension of non-native speakers in the United States. *Language in Society*, *31*(3), 419–41. doi:10.1017/S0047404502020286