

## **Difficulties face researchers in measuring language attitudes and the different approaches to study language attitudes**

**(\*)By Seham Abohelfaya**

**WWW.S.abhelfay@asmatya.edu.ly**

### **1. Introduction**

In sociolinguistics, language attitudes are important as they reflect how people use language, how they acquire linguistic varieties and how languages loss or gain their status over time. Language attitudes generally lead to language shifts as positive attitudes enrich it while negative attitudes tend to decline it and these attitudes include attitudes toward language itself, its speakers, its users, its cultural connection, its policy and planning, its structure and whether it is difficult or easy to be learnt. Attitudes can be divided into three parts: cognitive which deals with beliefs and stereotypes, affective which deals with feelings and evaluations and behavioral which deals with actions and external behavior. However, studying language attitudes are sometimes challengeable and difficult because of their dual nature as they can be overt or covert and they can sometimes be reflected only in how people evaluate speakers of other languages. This essay will discuss why it is sometimes difficult to measure language attitudes and then, it will give a brief introduction about approaches that are used to measure language attitudes.

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(\*)Assistant lecturer at English Department, Faculty of Arts, Al-Asmariya University (Libya).

## **2. Difficulties face researchers in measuring language attitudes**

Studying language attitudes is important to understand various linguistic phenomenon. However, it is sometimes difficult to study language attitudes due to many reasons. Firstly, one of the difficulties that may face sociolinguists in studying attitudes toward a language, or a variety is that the participants may hide their real attitudes and feelings. In other words, implicit attitudes cannot sometimes be directly inferred and they can only be reflected through the external behavior. Moreover, language attitudes are sometimes hold subconsciously and individuals themselves are unaware of their attitudes. There are some studies showed that people hide their attitudes in case they are asked explicitly about them. For example, Pantos and Perkins (2012) ask American explicitly about their attitudes toward foreigner and American accented speech by using questionnaires. The findings show positive attitudes toward foreigner accented speech. However, they remeasure the attitudes of the same participants implicitly toward foreigner and American accented speech to know whether they will have the same positive attitudes. The results surprisingly show that the participants hold negative feelings toward foreigner accented speech. It seems that it is better to study the same attitudes both explicitly and implicitly and then compare the results to make the findings more reliable.

Secondly, language attitudes are difficult to study because they are sometimes ambivalent. That is, beliefs and external behaviors may be inconsistent with each other and subsequently the external behavior will not give a reliable judgment of internal language attitudes (Bohner and Wanke 2002: 59). For example, according to Committee on Irish Language

Attitudes Research (1975 cited in Edward 2010: 126), Irish people have high attitudes of their own language but they do not use it very much. Garrett et al (2003: 9) suggest that ambivalence between attitudes and the external behavior might be due fail in collecting reliable and valid data i.e. the real attitudes are not reached. Thus, the ambivalence between attitude's components needs to be taken into consideration as it may make studying language attitudes tricky.

Moreover, language attitudes are sometimes changeable. Liebscher and Dailey-O'Cain (2009: 217) say language attitudes are not always firm and speaker's attitudes can be easily changed from positive to negative or vice versa over different times. They also say "language attitudes are context dependent in at least two ways: they emerge within the context of the interactional structure, and they are expressed under the influence of the situational context". Moreover, Baker (1992: 17) says, to get reliable findings, the same level of generality or specificity of the attitudes should be used in re-studying the same language attitudes at different situations to get consistent, patterned and comparable findings. There are many factors which may lead to change in language attitudes such as personal or social motives, looking for security or social status or getting some profits such as jobs, success or reward and knowledge of a language, an accent or a dialect may also lead to change in attitudes toward them (Baker 1992: 105). For example, Woolard and Gahng (1990) measure the attitudes toward Catalan language in Spain in 1980 and 1987. They find out that there is a change in attitudes toward this language. In 1980, participants show negative solidarity values for speakers who are not native of Catalan language,

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whereas in 1987, this language stops to be seen as an ethnic language reserved for native Catalan speakers. Language attitudes may be influenced by age, community effects, peer, school, parents, mass media and rituals. What makes it more difficult to study language attitudes is that these attitudes may change very slowly and gradually and then it will be difficult to track the reasons behind these changes.

**3. Approaches used in measuring language attitudes**

Measuring language attitudes is not an easy task. These difficulties should be taken into consideration and the appropriate approach should be chosen to study language attitudes. There are three broad approaches to study language attitudes: societal approach (also known as content approach), direct approach and indirect approach (also known as speaker's evaluation paradigm or the matched-guise technique (MGT). Each of these approaches has advantages and disadvantages.

**3. 1. Societal Treatment Approach**

Societal treatment approach depends mainly on the analysis of the content and it thus has qualitative nature rather than quantitative one. In societal approach, sociolinguists usually collect their data by depending on the participant's observation and analyzing the context of different sources such as public texts, language policy and planning records, archival records, advertisements and various media texts (Liebscher and O'cain 2009: 51). Dave (2012) uses societal approach to study the stereotypical attitudes of the society and gender bias which are reflected in the language of matrimonial ads in four different countries. Also, Haarmaan (1989 cited in Garrett 2010: 143) uses societal approach to study the multilingual

commercial advertisements in Japan, though the products - about which the advertisements - are made in Japan not in the countries whose languages are used in these advertisements. He says that languages used in Japanese advertisements have stereotypical features, though most Japanese do not understand these languages. For example, English tends to reflect high elegance, high quality, confidence and practical lifestyle, French tends to reflect high elegance, attractiveness and refined taste and German tends to reflect commodity and pleasantness of rural life.

Societal approach has merits and demerits. According to Garrett (2010: 51), one of the main advantages of this approach is that it gives deep insights and understanding of social and stereotypical attitudes to languages and their varieties and it is more suitable when there is a limited time and space to access participants directly. It is also useful to track ongoing language change (Holmes 2013: 421). On the other hand, Garrett (2010: 51) says this approach tends to be informal and gives general findings which cannot represent the larger population. In other words, its findings do not give sufficient indication of how widely these attitudes are shared in a society and it may reflect only the attitudes of the institutional language as its sampling depends mainly on texts from media, literature, governmental and educational documents and so forth. Additionally, it may give unreliable findings as the bias of the researcher may affect the results. However, societal approach can function as introductory to boarder statistical survey as it can give some hypotheses to be investigated by using more formal approaches.

### **3. 2. Direct Approach**

Language attitudes can also be measured by using direct approach. Direct approach is a simple way to measure overt attitudes by using questionnaires and interviews to ask the respondents directly about their opinion and their evaluation toward a language and its speakers (Bohner and Wanke 2002: 22). In this approach, the informants know that they are being asked about their attitudes. According to Kristiansen et al (2005: 22), there are two kinds of questions which can be used in studying language attitudes, namely open questions and closed questions. Closed questions are difficult to be constructed but they can be analyzed easily. Unlike closed questions, open questions give chance to the participants to answer in their own words which may give more details about their attitudes. Also, this kind of questions may reveal new issues and hypotheses about language attitudes which the researcher do not expect. For example, open questions enable Garrett et al (1999) to discover further insights of attitudes about how people in Northwest and Southwest in Wales consider each other in terms of “Welesness”. Questions vary according to their context and they should be well-formed to avoid misinterpretation and they should also have many response alternatives to avoid ambiguities (Fazio and Petry 2008: 35). In other words, these questions should work as conversational devices between the participants and the researcher. On the other hand, in open questions, the participants may turn away from the target point and ignore what the researcher is really investigating. Furthermore, in using either open or closed questions to investigate language attitudes, participants' responses may be affected by researcher's age, gender, ethnicity or nationality (Holmes 2013: 422). To trickle these

limitations in interviews, it seems that the researcher may ask the help of other people, who are similar to the participants in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and nationality, to interview the participants. Shortly, open questions need less time to be constructed and more time and effort to be analyzed while closed questions need more time to be constructed and less time and effort to be analyzed.

Questionnaires can also be used in investigating direct language attitudes and they can include either closed-ended scales or open-ended scales. In closed-ended scales, there are usually only two choices and the informants should choose one of them while there are many choices in open-ended scales. Using open-ended responses reinforce the internal reliability of the target attitudes (Baker 2002: 17). However, Bohner and Wanke (2002: 25) say, although the findings of the multi-item scales are more reliable than the findings of single-item scale, the latter one is more common in investigating language attitudes because they are easy to form. They also add that single-item questions are criticized because they have a high chance of what is termed “a random error” i.e. chance fluctuations in measurement such as informant's misreading or misunderstanding of questions and sometimes, there is no correlation between the responses if the study is replicated. The common multi-item scales are semantic differential, Likert and Thurstone scales. Shortly, multi-item scales tend to be more reliable, valid and with less chance of random error, contrasting single-item scales.

Collecting data in direct approach can be then achieved in two techniques: 'word-of-mouth' responses as in interviews or 'written responses' as in

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questionnaires (Garrett et al 2003: 25). They also add that 'word-of-mouth' responses are more suitable with the participants who are children or illiterates or if the researcher wants to avoid the ambiguity of some responses and to control the anticipated response rate. On the other hand, written responses have uniform nature. That is, the questions are formed in the same way to all participants while in interviews, there is a high chance of changing the form of the questions from one participant to another which may lead to unreliable results. It seems that questionnaires are better than interviews in terms of controlling researcher's influence on the participants, researcher's bias and reaching inaccessible population. Questionnaires also give a chance to a study to involve a larger number of participants comparing to interviews.

According to Garrett (2010: 45), to make direct approach more proficient and effective, the researchers should avoid asking hypothetical questions, strongly slanted questions, multiply questions, social desirability and acquiescence bias. Huguet et al (2008) use direct approach to measure student attitudes in Aragon toward three regional languages (Aragonese, Spanish and Catalan) and also their attitudes toward English and French which they study as compulsory subjects in their curriculum. Shortly, direct approach is more formal than societal approach. In direct approach, the informants themselves give their own language attitudes whereas in societal approach, the researcher infers the language attitudes from different text sources or by observing the behavior of their informants toward the target language or a variety. Moreover, direct approach can



reflect the attitudes of different groups of population, contrasting societal approach which reflects only the attitudes of specific groups.

Folk linguistics is considered to be one of direct approaches to study overt language attitudes. In other words, it focuses on non-linguists' opinions and feelings toward languages, accents or dialects. For example, Milobog and Garrett (2011) use folk linguistics to study attitudes toward regional varieties of Polish. They asked their informants, who are from two different regions in Poland, to outline the main regional varieties of Polish on a blank map. This approach is used mainly to study perceptual dialectology. Also, Garrett et al (2005) use folk linguistics to measure attitudes toward English as a native language in USA, New Zealand, Australia and the UK. This approach gives deep insights of how people evaluate speakers of other languages or language varieties and it also helps in understanding stereotypical attitudes and language ideologies (Milobog and Garrett 2011: 277). This approach may lead to discover new issues toward language attitudes which are not expected and it appears to be an ethical approach to understand the hidden attitudes.

### **3. 3. Indirect Approach**

When people are asked directly about their language attitudes, they sometimes tend to hide their real attitudes. In other words, they only display the attitudes which they think they should have rather than the attitudes that they really have (Kristiansen et al 2005: 11). As a result, indirect approaches are introduced to track covert language attitudes. Although this approach has helped to understand the covert attitudes, it introduces other problems. That is, its findings are subjected to be

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unreliable and invalid i.e. the informants do not give their language attitudes explicitly and thus, they may misunderstand the questions. Also, its findings are general and subsequently they are difficult to specify to individuals and these measurements tend to be unethical as they clash with using informed consent (Bohner and Wanke 2002: 36).

Moreover, indirect approaches suffer from artificiality, contrasting direct approaches which are natural. However, there are some researchers tried to avoid this problem by trying to make their techniques as natural as possible. For example, Masterson et al (1983) study attitudes toward three Irish accents: Standard, Rural and Dublin and they focus on how rater's accent and the degree of linguistic experience influence on evaluating accents. To avoid artificiality, they record native speakers of these accents reading the passages in their normal reading voice to make them as natural as possible for their listeners. According to Garrett (2010: 58), although indirect approach is useful to understand language variation and it confirms the relationship between "sociolinguistic and social psychology of language", its findings may be unreliable as there are some doubts about the accent, mimicking and style authenticity and any subtle inaccuracy will affect the results. It seems that to get more reliable results, it is better to study language attitudes using both direct and indirect approaches and then compare the results.

Indirect approaches include match-guise technique (MGT), implicit association test (IAT) and personal narratives. MGT is a technique used to measure covert language attitudes of individuals or communities. Its participants are asked to evaluate the personality of speakers rather than

evaluating the language or the variety itself. According to MGT, participants are asked to listen to recordings of two different languages or varieties played by the same person or sometimes by different speakers and the informants do not know that they are listening to the same person. Then, they are asked to evaluate those speakers by matching out some potential variables such as intelligence, voice quality, kindness and educational level (Ihemere 2006: 19). However, there are some doubts about GMT as it is an off-line measure. In other words, there is a temporary delay "between the presentation of the linguistic stimulus and the attitudinal behavior response" (Loudermilk 2013: 144). Also, because the speakers give their evaluation in public, they may not reveal their real feelings. According to Ihemere (2006: 196), the participants may judge the speakers according to their reading performance rather than judging the language those speakers are using. It appears that it is better to use casual spontaneous speech in recording the stimulus to avoid artificiality and to make sure the participants judge the language or variety to which they are listening instead of judging the reading style.

MGT is first used by Lamber and his colleagues in Canada in 1960 and then it is used by many researchers. For example, Sender (2014) uses match-guise method to measure attitudes toward Trasianka language (a mix between Russian and Belarusian) in Belarus and then she compares these attitudes to the attitudes of the same participants toward Russian and Belarusian. Also, Garrett et al (1999) use the same approach to measure Welsh attitudes toward Welsh language. They record some students of six regions of Wales aged 15-16 years telling personal stories and then they

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ask another group of students and teachers to rate these audio-recorded speakers in a scale includes some features such as affiliation, status and Waleseness.

Moreover, implicit attitudes can be measured by using implicit association test (IAT). According to Campbell-Kibler (2012), in IAT, the participants are asked to categorize two stimulus quickly in two target categories with an attribute. In this test, participants deal with two response keys; the highly associated items share one key and less associated items share another one and the participants should press the appropriate key each time they hear or see the word. Although the findings of IAT tend to be quite unreliable, it shows high internal consistency and it can infer latent language attitudes (Bohner and Wanke 2002: 45). This approach is used by Pantos and Perkins (2012) to measure language attitudes toward foreigner and American accented speech in US. Also, Bohner and Wanke (2002) use implicit association test to study the implicit attitudes toward Irish versus English in Ireland.

Personal narrative stories can also be used to measure covert attitudes. The participants are asked to tell personal narratives about the target topic and then the researcher infers the speaker's attitudes toward the target language or variety from these stories. Garrett et al (1999) use spontaneous personal narratives to measure language attitudes toward English language in Wales. According to Kristiansen et al (2005: 22), using personal narratives is ideal to discover the language attitudes which the speakers themselves hold unconsciously. For example, Labov (1974) uses this approach in his study on Martha's Vineyard. He asks his informants about their personal

life, their families and their friends to investigate their attitudes toward their own language and he then discovers that Vineyarders use centralization unconsciously to express their positive attitude toward their own language. It appears that personal narratives and IAT are great to discover subconscious attitudes. Shortly, indirect approach is used to study language attitudes using deceptive techniques rather than simply asking the participants straight questions about their attitudes which they may deliberately hide or just unaware of them. However, they are less favorable than direct approaches because direct approach are easier to apply, more precise, more reliable and valid and more ethical.

#### **4. Conclusion**

To sum up, studying language attitudes depends mainly on participant's cooperation and honesty. These attitudes can be measured explicitly i.e. unobtrusive or implicitly i.e. obtrusive. Nevertheless, measuring language attitudes is not an easy task because some people try to cover their real attitudes toward some issues. Participants may hide their attitudes because they pretend that they are polite, to give social desirable attitudes or the participants themselves hold these attitudes subconsciously. This essay has discussed these difficulties and how they may affect studying language attitudes and it has also discussed the common approaches to study these attitudes namely societal approach, direct approach and indirect approach. To get more reliable results, it may be better to use both of direct and indirect approaches to measure the target language attitudes.

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