

# Language Variation, Language Attitudes and Linguistic Discrimination

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## **Abstract**

In our daily lives, people instantly form positive or negative language attitudes towards others judging by the accent with which they speak. This essay will demonstrate that people who speak with an unpleasant accent will encounter social consequences, whilst people who use language correctly receive numerous opportunities; this is because decisions are made based upon the speakers' speech. As a result, language attitudes express the linguistics preference based on which people are judging other's speech. The purpose of this paper is to define language variation, language attitudes and linguistic discrimination within the field of sociolinguistics and to discuss the relationship between the mentioned concepts. The article will focus on studies that offer real life situations in which people linguistically judge others, including cartoon movies in which the main characters use a Standard English accent, whilst the other characters have foreign accents (Lippi-Green, 2012). The same issue is apparent within the workplace where linguistic discrimination is present as employers are more likely to hire people that speak in a pleasant manner (Garrett, 2010).

**Keywords:** Language Attitudes, Linguistic Discrimination, Language Variation

## **Introduction**

The literature in the field of sociolinguistics has covered the analysis of language variation, language attitudes and linguistic discrimination. The purpose of this essay is to explore and define the relationship between the previously stated concepts, using relevant examples from studies which have focused on analysing daily conversations. In order to determine this relationship, several authors have explained the importance of language variation, language attitudes and linguistic discrimination. In addition to these explanations, examples from Disney cartoons have been utilised in order to illustrate the noticeable relationship between the stated concepts. Furthermore, other studies have been conducted in order to demonstrate that people maintain different language attitudes towards other languages and to identify the relationship between the three concepts within the workplace.

## **Language Variation**

Language variation is a subject that has been analysed not only in the field of sociolinguistics, but also in psycholinguistics and linguistics (Krug and Schluter, 2013). However, this assignment will focus on the analysis of language variation within the field of sociolinguistics. Language variation is related to the manner in which language varies and the elements which lead to the employment of one form of the language instead of another (Krug and Schluter, 2013). In this case, Stockwell (2007) has determined the most important factors which lead to language variation including occupation, age, sex, class, and ethnicity. Furthermore, Wardhaugh (1986) admits that each language has its own variations and that language variation is influenced by social factors such as the social group and the geographic zone. Moreover, Bell (2014, p. 103) has explained that “a variety is a relatively distinguishable form of a language, often based on geographical or social differences”. For example, taking England into consideration, it can be noted that there are language varieties such as Standard English, Oxford English and London English (Wardhaugh, 1986). This proves that one language has distinct language varieties.

Several definitions have been formulated in order to explain language variation. For example, Labov (1972, p. 323) defines language variations as “different ways of saying the same thing”. In this case, “runnin” and “running” are two distinct versions that express the same idea (Bayley & Lucas, 2007).

Similarly, Hudson (1996, p. 22) defines language variation as “a set of linguistic items with similar distribution”. Furthermore, Lippi-Green (2012, p. 38) explains that “we exploit linguistic variation available to us in order to send a complex series of messages about ourselves and the way we position ourselves in the world”. It can be argued that individuals identify variation in the conversations of others and this is used to create an opinion about that person (Lippi-Green, 2012). As a result of this latter definition, language variation leads to language attitudes.

### **Language attitudes**

Allport (1954) defines an attitude as “a learned disposition to think, feel and behave towards a person in a particular way”. This definition suggests that an attitude is not inherent, but learned and that individuals have mastered attitudes throughout the process of becoming part of society, thus making the person react towards the social world in a favourable or unfavourable way (Sarnoff, 1970).

It can be noted that language attitudes are a social phenomenon. Garrett (2010) explains that language attitudes have the role of creating opinions about other speakers, by judging their speech. Furthermore, Garrett, Couplanf and Williams (2003) have studied the origins of language attitudes; they have admitted that attitudes are formed based upon the language varieties and have also found that language attitudes create either advantageous or disadvantageous opinions surrounding the speakers. Similarly, Garrett (2010) has focused on determining from where language attitudes arise. He has mentioned that a variety of factors including the individual experience and the social surroundings create language attitudes. The literature in this field emphasises the fact that there are two types of attitudes: positive and negative (Garrett, Couplanf and Williams, 2003). In this case, Gerard (2012) explains that people are likely to believe that the manner in which they themselves speak is the correct way; hence the other varieties are wrong. As a result, these attitudes are classified into positive attitudes and negative attitudes. The negative attitudes lead to linguistic discrimination amongst speakers.

### **Linguistic Discrimination**

According to Pool (1987), linguistic discrimination is related to an unequal treatment of languages, thus creating unequal linguistic attitudes. This concept is related to the discriminatory treatment of a person based upon their utilisation of a language. It can be argued that one form of language discrimination is linguicism. Skutnabb-Kangas and Cummins (1988, p. 13) have defined linguicism as “ideologies, structures and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language”. Furthermore, Rubagumya (1991) has argued that the effects of the linguicism are related to the fact that majority languages of many developed countries are imposed, whereas minority languages are ignored.

Lippi-Green (2012) explains that the Civil Rights Act created Title VII in order to ensure that employees could not be discriminated against due to aspects such as age, sex and ethnicity. In addition to this rule, the employer is not allowed to discriminate against applicants based on their own attitudes toward the language variation that the applicant uses. However, it has been accepted that “an adverse employment decision may be predicated upon an individual’s accent when – and only when – it interferes materially with job performance” (Lippi-Green 2012, p. 150). As a result, an employee cannot be rejected on the basis of linguistic discrimination. However, this is not the situation in the workplace. Taking into consideration the situation in the United Kingdom, numerous examples within the workplace relating to linguistic discrimination can be noted. However, people who are linguistically discriminated against in the workplace have adapted and so it does not occur unexpectedly.

In order to illustrate linguistic discrimination at the workplace, the General Accounting Office conducted research which reported that 461,000 nationwide companies admitted that when they hired people, they had linguistically discriminated against the employees with foreign accents (Lippi-Green 2012). Moreover, a research related to the discrimination of the applicants for advertised jobs has proved that the employers initially conduct telephone interviews in order to detect whether the applicant has an accent (Lippi-Green 2012). These evidences have been also highlighted in Carroll versus Elliott Personnel Services (1985), where it is argued that one employee

of a recruitment agency was asked to screen all the candidates over the telephone in order to detect the persons who had a relevant accent (Lippi-Green 2012).

### **The Relationship between Language Variation, Language Attitudes and Linguistic Discrimination**

Taking into consideration the discussions and the definitions provided above about language variation, language attitudes and linguistic discrimination, it can be argued that their particularities are related. Giles and Coupland (1991) have emphasised the fact that language attitudes and language variations cannot be regarded separately because a stable relationship exists between them. Language attitudes are usually constructed by assessing the speakers' language variety, including dialects and accents due to the nature of language. Similarly, Meyerhoff (2006) has argued that attitudes concerning distinct varieties of languages may lead people to have different attitudes towards individuals that use those language varieties. As a result, the concept of language attitudes is a social, not linguistic, phenomenon and has a strong relationship with language variation (Giles and Coupland, 1991). Moreover, Gerard (2012) explains that language attitudes demonstrate the linguistic preferences which people hold and on which they judge other peoples' speech. Similarly, Meyerhoff (2006) argues that people make assumptions about others by judging the manner in which they speak. As a result, language attitudes can be classified based upon a person's language variety and this will be further discussed in the following sections.

Lippi-Green (2012) has identified examples from daily life in which the relationship between language variation, language attitudes and linguistic discrimination is visible. An example in this case is related to Disney cartoons that utilise language variation in order to reinforce different attitudes about each character's speech. In Disney cartoons, characters are linguistically discriminated against due to the language variation that they use. For example, main characters in cartoons possess the so-called "Standard American/English accent", whereas the other characters have different accents. This leads to the conclusion that said characters may not be regarded as significant as those characters that possess a British or US standard accent (Gerard, 2012).

An opening line from the animated Disney movie *Aladdin* was accused of discrimination. The line, "Where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face/ It's barbaric, but hey, it's home", has since

been changed (Lippi-Green, 2012 p. 107). Although the line was altered, the accents remained the same. Furthermore, Precker (1993) explains that the positive characters within *Aladdin* talk with an American accent, whilst the bad and marginal characters have heavy Arabic accents (Lippi-Green, 2012): 'This pounds home the message that people with a foreign accent are bad.' (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 107).

Lambert et al. (1965) conducted a study in which Arabic and Jewish students were required to rate readers in terms of their personality characteristics. The readers were two bilingual speakers and they were reading the exact same text in several different languages including Arabic, Yemen Hebrew and Ashkenazi Hebrew. The ratings prove that people maintain different language attitudes towards another language than their own; this study illustrates that both Jewish speakers and Arabic speakers rated each other as less sincere and less friendly. In another study, Purnell et al. (1999) used different varieties of English, including a Standard English accent, a Hispanic accent and an African American accent, in order to book an appointment with landlords. All the callers began with the following sentence: 'Hello, I'm calling about the apartment you have advertised in the paper' (p. 153). The results of the research showed that in 70% of cases the speaker with the standard American English accent received an appointment, contrasted against only 30% for the other accents (Gerard, 2012).

It can be argued that language attitudes have social impact at the workplace (Bauer & Trudgill, 1998). According to Garrett (2010), language attitudes have also been studied in the employment area. Most of the employment decisions were based upon the speakers' accent. However, other elements such as speech rate have been studied. In this case, employers preferred speakers with a regular or quicker speech rate than their own. Hopper and Williams (1973) have first studied the language attitudes in the job interviews (Garrett, 2010). Different varieties of English were rated such as the standard form, south white English dialect and the 'Black English' dialect. People working in the recruitment process are more likely to give the job to the person that has the most pleasant manner of speaking. By this logic, if someone with a Glaswegian accent and someone with a Standard English accent were applying for the job, the English candidate would get the job. Speaking with an unpleasant accent has social consequences. It is society that judges the speakers of different language varieties.

Distinct varieties of English are viewed differently. In England, researchers have discovered that various accents around the country are viewed as vulgar, such as accents from areas of London or Birmingham<sup>1</sup> (Lippi-Green, 2012). However, other accents, mostly from the rural zone, are described as delightful. Every person possesses his/her own personal preferred language or dialect sound according to Bauer and Trudgill (1998). Some dialects have a better reputation than others. This is how people in power reinforce standard varieties. People are taught that the manner in which they communicate is the main element to represent their identity. Moreover, educational academies denigrate the way in which certain ethnic groups and people that originate from low working class families speak.

Preston (2002) demonstrated in a research how states are rated for the language pleasantness, character and correctness (Gerard 2002). In the research, people from Michigan State rated their speech as the most correct and most enjoyable. However, they rated Alabama State the lowest. Although those from Alabama did not regard their own speech as the most correct, they believed that it was not worse than others states such as Michigan. This research proves that both people from Alabama and Michigan have distinct language attitudes towards language varieties (Gerard 2002).

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between the concepts of language variation, language attitudes and linguistic discrimination. This study has identified the relationships by using relevant examples from the literature. The first three parts of this assignment have presented the findings about the concepts stated above. As a result, it can be noted that each of the above concepts is related to the others because language attitudes are related not only to language variation, but also to linguistic discrimination.

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<sup>1</sup> Brummie accent named the least attractive in the British Isles - Birmingham Mail <<http://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/brummie-accent-named-least-attractive-8278112>>.

In order to explain the above theory, Giles and Coupland (1991) have argued that language attitudes, which are a social phenomenon, and language variations cannot be regarded separately. Furthermore, Meyerhoff (2006) suggests that language attitudes are created based upon language variation. As a result, language attitudes can be classified into positive attitudes toward a language variation, or in negative attitudes towards a language variation. The positive language attitudes are usually the standard language variation used by the person who is judging. In contrast, Gerard (2012) explained that the negative language attitudes are directed toward the language varieties other than the standard. This might lead to linguistic discrimination amongst speakers.

Lippi-Green (2012) has argued that even in cartoon movies, the main characters use a Standard English accent, whereas the other characters hold different accents. Thus, different accents reinforce negative language attitude. Moreover, Lambert et al. (1965) have conducted a study in order to illustrate that people are likely to create a negative language attitude towards those who use languages other than their own. Furthermore, Garrett (2010) has explained that a negative language attitude, which is linguistic discrimination, is present in the workplace because employers are likely to hire people towards whom they have a positive language attitude. As a result, people who speak the standard language variety have numerous opportunities in contrast to those who do not speak this language variety, because decisions are usually based upon the speaker's speech. Furthermore, each person has his/her language variation preference which leads to different language attitudes. Based on the above discussion it can be argued that the relationship between language variation, language attitudes and linguistic discrimination is symbiotic and socially formed.

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