LANGUAGE IN SOCIETY

ATTITUDES TO LANGUAGE

Language Attitudes

The feelings people have about their own language or the language of others.

(Crystal 1992)

Attitude research

- What languages do we like/find pleasant?
  - Research shows: patterns only in case of familiar languages or varieties of language.
  - Responses to unfamiliar Ls and Ds form no pattern, randomly distributed.
  - →→→ No inherently ugly or beautiful languages, nothing inherently good or bad about linguistic items.
  - →→→ Evaluation depends on *how we feel about the speakers of the particular language or variety.*

Attitude research (cont.)

- What words do we like / dislike?
  - *Swallow?* Nice or not? Depends on what it means, bird or activity after chewing.
  - Hungarian: „Ez nem *kő*, hanem *márvány*."
  - E' nem *kő*, ilyen má(n) van.

  →→→*How we feel about linguistic items is not determined by their intrinsic qualities, but eg. context.*

SUMMARY

We have prejudice towards certain linguistic features, +/-, but it is not grounded in linguistic reasons, but political, social ones.

We have prejudice towards people, not language, but as language reveals / reflects a lot about people, we think we are prejudiced against language.

LINGUISTIC PREJUDICE

- **On societal level**:
  clearly seen in survey about Danish, Swedish and Norwegian languages in 1950s

- **Individual level**:
  our attitudes towards language of gypsies

EFFECT OF ATTITUDES

- *On comprehensibility* (intelligibility) of languages: people think it is easier to understand languages and dialects whose speakers they think positively about, who they like or admire
- *On learnability*: it is easier to acquire admired languages, where we have high motivation.

- *Attitudes* often change: *sensitive to political and social changes*. Can be seen in
  - Wales
  - Canada
  - Scandinavian situation
  - Belgium
  - Somalia, etc.

COVERT AND OVERT PRESTIGE

- **Standard Variety** in a community has **overt** prestige

- Vernacular variety, eg. local accent has covert prestige, as it expresses group identity and solidarity.

Speech rating exercise

	1	2	3	4	5	
1. pleasant						unpleasant
2. attractive						unattractive
3. self-confident						un-self-confident
4. likeable						unlikeable
5. fluent						not fluent
6. reliable						unreliable
7. sincere						insincere
8. ambitious						unambitious
9. friendly						unfriendly
10. intelligent						unintelligent
11. good sense of humour						no sense of humour
12. leadership skills						leadership skills
13. highly educated						uneducated
14. high status job						low status job

Differences in ratings

- Vernacular is rated *less highly*, (especially by older listeners) on status-related features like *confidence, ambition, intelligence, leadership skills, education and high status job*

- Local accents rate more highly on solidarity related features: *sincerity, friendliness, reliability, sense of humour,* and among young people

ATTITUDES TO STANDARD ENGLISH AND RP

"*English ought to be the queen of the curriculum to any British child. It is one of the things that define his or her nationality*." (Editorial in *The Times*, 30/4/88.)

Standard English has an enormous legacy of overt prestige.

Has a preferred status, gives its users social advantages and increases their life chances.

ATTITUDES TO VERNACULAR FORMS

- Speakers of *vernacular forms do insist on using their own variety* because of covert prestige
- Lower working class and minority children do the same, do not want to sound like their teachers = representatives of middle class values.

SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND EDUCATION

- Basil Bernstein's restricted and elaborated code(1970s, UK)

  – Elaborated code: accurate grammar and syntax, complex sentences, range of ling devices to express variety of (temporal, spatial, etc.) relations, rich vocabulary, esp. adjectives and adverbs.

Restricted code

- Short, simple, unfinished sentences, grammatically incorrect, syntactically poor, limited range of vocabulary

- Language of intimacy of familiars, everybody uses it on certain occasions, thus everybody has access to it

- BUT not all social classes have equal access to elaborated code, let alone working classes and their children.
- Lower class children at a disadvantage in school, where elaborated code used extensively.
- School trying to develop child's ability to use elab code → → negative effect → → likely educational failure.

Vernacular dialects and educational disadvantage

- Middle class children do better at school, have better exam results. Similarly, mainstream culture children do better than minority groups.

- → → Children who use a vernacular are linguistically deprived. (???)

BUT

Is the vernacular really the cause?

Can we really talk about linguistic deficit of these children?

Shall we condemn the vernacular and force children to abandon their local / vernacular home variety?

Conclusions

- Rather than condemn and stereotype varieties, we should learn to accept and appreciate them, through accepting and appreciating their users.

- Instead of changing vernacular varieties, change teachers' / society's attitude to users of vernacular forms.