

The interaction of policy, attitudes, and vitality: evidence from three bilingual communities.

Abstract

Active language policy and the fostering or maintenance of positive attitudes are fundamental components in the prevention of language shift (e.g. Fishman, 1990). This, together with recent methodological developments in sociolinguistics (Kircher & Zipp, 2022) calls for a more holistic approach to the measurement of language attitudes and their relationship with exposure levels. In this paper, we present three large studies investigating the relationship between early exposure, language attitudes, and different bilingual language policies in three European communities where a minority/endangered language co-exists with a sociolinguistically dominant language.

The bilingual communities under investigation are Lombard-Italian in Italy, Moselle Franconian-German in Belgium, and Welsh-English in Wales, exemplifying fundamentally different types of language policy as well as systematic variation in both opportunities for and amount of early exposure. The Welsh language receives full socio-political recognition, and there exist ample opportunities for people to be exposed to Welsh either in the family or broader community. Lombard, on the other hand, is in a situation of benign neglect, not benefitting from any active policy and with rather scarce opportunities for exposure except for those who grow up in a predominantly Lombard-speaking family. Moselle Franconian is somewhat in between: while not officially recognised, its speakers are considered a German-speaking minority. Importantly, however, due to a situation of diglossia (Ferguson, 1959), it is Moselle-Franconian – rather than German – that is regularly spoken in daily communication, hence providing ample opportunities for early exposure.

To investigate the relationship between these different sociolinguistic situations and the effect they may have on speakers' attitudes, we collected data from 338 participants aged between 24-36 years, employing three different methodologies that varied in degree of explicitness: the Attitudes towards Languages Questionnaire (Schoel et al., 2012), the Matched Guise Technique (Lambert et al., 1960), and the Implicit Association Test (Greenwald et al., 1998).

Data from each method will be investigated in relation to several indicators of early exposure collected through a linguistic background questionnaire, as well as to extralinguistic variables – notably gender – while attitude dimensions such as status and solidarity will also be explored.

Preliminary results suggest potential links between bilingual language policy and speakers' attitudes, with possible interactions between types of exposure and some of the attitude scores. This research can provide insight into how different policies may affect language attitudes, and the role of early exposure as potential mediator.

References

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