Research Methods in Language Attitudes

Attitudes towards spoken, signed, and written language are of significant interest to researchers in sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, communication studies, and social psychology. This is the first interdisciplinary guide to traditional and cutting-edge methods for the investigation of language attitudes. Written by experts in the field, it provides an introduction to attitude theory, helps readers choose an appropriate method, and guides through research planning and design, data collection, and analysis. The chapters include step-by-step instructions to illustrate and facilitate the use of the different methods as well as case studies from a wide range of linguistic contexts. The book also goes beyond individual methods, offering guidance on how to research attitudes in multilingual communities and in signing communities, based on historical data, with the help of priming, and by means of mixed-methods approaches.

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Research Methods in Language Attitudes

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Foreword

In a short introductory sociolinguistics text, Edwards (2013: 31) wrote: ‘Even though most of us would not venture an opinion on the state of string theory in physics for example, few of us are without opinions about language. These opinions may be “amateur” views of language, but they often have immediate consequences in everyday life, regardless of their accuracy or sensitivity.’

Probably all of us, either in our earlier years or here now opening this book for their first glimpse of language attitudes research, have engaged in such amateur activities. I know I did. In my years as an undergraduate in North Wales, I noticed that, when speaking with my college peers (and particularly friends) who came almost entirely from south-east England, my Welsh accent switched to standard Received Pronunciation (their accent). This was significantly different from my accent usage in my homeland of South Wales, where I would emphasise a distinctive South Welsh accent when attending a rugby match but shifted to a very different Cardiff accent when spectating at a soccer match. I conjectured that perhaps I was different from other folk, and more of a ‘linguistic chameleon’. This intrigued me and, in my own major of psychology, I could find no explanation for such bizarre ‘accent mobility’ in that discipline, although I did come across, and was influenced by, sociolinguist William Labov’s (1966) influential work on contextual language shifting in New York City.

Inspired, I set forth to conduct doctoral research in social psychology and formulate a theory (communication accommodation; indeed, a framework of much relevance to language attitudes studies, see Giles and Powesland 1975; Hadley et al. 2020) of such phenomena at the University of Bristol in the late 1960s. I was lucky enough to be mentored by Henri Tajfel there – arguably the father of intergroup relations and a perspective that provides a useful theoretical frame for language attitudes (Dragojevic 2016) and, subsequently, in Canada as a post-doctoral fellow, mentored also by Wally Lambert – the socio-psychological father of language attitudes studies. It should not go unmentioned that Henri published a critique of Lambert et al.’s (1960) seminal language attitudes study a year before it appeared in print (Tajfel 1959)! The current volume is a fitting place and occasion to pay homage to Wally – an inspiringly humane scholar – and for his pioneering methodological and empirical legacies for the study of language attitudes; pictured in Figure 0.1 when we were together at the Linguistic Society of America’s Summer Institute in Oswego, NY, in 1972.
My journey has eventually brought me the honour of an invitation to write this Foreword from our editors (who, together with Marko Dragojevic, provided me with invaluable feedback on it). In a chapter for a recent award-winning Festschrift for Bob Gardner, Edwards (2020: 257) claimed the following: ‘[…] it is very pleasant to record that the study of the social psychology of language […] has provided a number of important windows through which to observe human social life’. Not only is it pleasant for me to echo this, in tandem with always having been an avowed interdisciplinarian, but Edwards had also written (2020: 252) that within social psychology ‘occupying an honorable and valuable position is the work on language attitudes […] in the broader study of perceptions, stereotypes, and so on’ (my italics). Yet, this has, perhaps, not always been the case, as while language attitudes studies across the social sciences and humanities flourished as novel in the 1970s, interest thereafter waned. Studies sporadically emerged descriptively and, mostly a-theoretically, often because the rationale for their conducting such work was merely that no such studies had ever been conducted in that region or nation.

However, I felt at the start of this century, there was a renaissance of work of this genre. Studies from a range of disciplines began to be published again with more tantalising sets of stimuli, mediating mechanisms, and outcome measures (e.g. Berl et al. 2020). This was a pattern that had been undocumented and could have been a fantasy of my imagination, given my roots and long-standing commitment to this area of inquiry. Hence, I thought this forum was a splendid opportunity to indulge in (admittedly) a more or less casual analysis of the number of studies appearing in two relevant journals known for airing work in this domain. For this purpose, I chose the Journal of Language and Social Psychology (JLSP) and the Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development (JMMD) as targets; while quite similar in their ability to attract language attitude submissions, they are also quite different in other respects (e.g. acceptance rates, number of articles published per se, cultural breadth of remit, etc.).
Gratifyingly, my intuitions were confirmed in that recent decades really have seen major increases in the number of language attitudes studies published, with a similar pattern emerging for both journals (see Figure 0.2); indeed, the JLSP saw more of these articles published in the first four issues of 2020 than the mean for the period 2000–2019.

Examining the proportions of language articles appearing in these journals (see Figures 0.3 and 0.4), it can be seen that these have also increased in the last two decades, and even more so in the JLSP.

In the JMMD, it could be argued that other topics, such as metalinguistic awareness, language motivations, language anxiety, language ideologies, language values, and ethnolinguistic group vitality also constitute dimensions of language attitudes research not figuring into the analyses here; indeed, Smith et al. (2018) reported that 75 per cent of group vitality studies had emerged in the last fifteen years.

In parallel, consider Table 0.1 for the variety of parameters inherent in, and the scope of, language attitudes foci, giving credence to the notion that "[t]here is no generally accepted definition of “language attitude”" (Grondelaers 2013: 586), despite the helpful and valued convergence of views of such found in this volume. Put another way, the growth of language attitudes studies over the last couple of decades could be exponentially greater than depicted in Figures 0.2–0.4 and of course could be explored further with refined categories and coding reliabilities.
Historically, and since the 1970s (e.g. Giles and Bourhis 1973), there has been much debate about the relative merits of, and defences for, measuring language attitudes in very different ways, which continues in more recent times (e.g. Garrett 2010; Dollinger 2015; Edwards 2017). Gratifyingly, the current, impressively comprehensive volume gives credence to the valued diversity of approaching language attitudes from multiple stances, ideologies, and disciplines. Clearly, the field has come a long way (see Xie et al. 2021; Dragojevic et al. 2021; Kinzler 2021) since we reviewed this area along methodological lines in the late 1980s (Ryan et al. 1988), not least with the advent of a contemporary move to analyse ‘big data’ sets (see Grondelaers et al. 2020) and talk about language attitudes on social media (Szitó 2020). Nonetheless, it is gratifying to see that the original organisational structure of language attitudes studies that we introduced more than 30 years ago (Ryan et al. 1988) has stood the test of time and been retained in this volume with the constituent rubrics of Parts 1–3. In addition to reflecting historically conventional areas of language attitudes study (e.g. matched- and verbal-guise studies, and perceptual dialectology), this book includes new areas, such as mediated communications (like print and social media). Moreover, this book provides insights into the study of language attitudes in different contexts, including semi-formal interviews, focus group discussions, and signing communities as well as advocating mixed-methods approaches.

The editors mentioned to me that they had wished they themselves had had access to such a volume as this when they first began their work in this area. How
true those words are for many of us! Arguably, most scholars—albeit not all (e.g. Pharao and Kristiansen 2019, and even more broadly, Angus and Gallois 2018)—are adherents to one or other limited constellation of quantitative or qualitative approaches. Besides attracting fresh faces to this field, my hope is that the innovative emergence of this book will excite and stimulate more seasoned language attitudinalists to triangulate and—ambitiously and somewhat courageously—incorporate many more methodological lenses into their own works than otherwise they may have taken. In other words, there is a need to move up out of our silos and methodological (ingroup) identities to learn from and appreciate each other’s approaches and establish a more interdisciplinary, superordinate category of language attitudes scholars. Put another way, the all-too-common allegiance to specific methodological identities is another hidden area of inter-group relations and communication (see Nussbaum et al. 2012) and such between-group barriers would benefit from being erased. Relatedly, there is an intricate interrelationship between method and theory that can be seen across the chapters following this, in that certain procedures lead to the construction of certain kinds of theories and interpretive stances, while the converse is also true.

Table 0.1 The diversity of factors examined in language attitudes studies

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<th>Language varieties or phenomena examined in the <em>JLSP</em> include:</th>
<th>Perceptual and evaluative outcome variables examined in the <em>JLSP</em> include:</th>
<th>Language attitudes and beliefs in the <em>JLSP</em> and <em>JMMD</em> that have been related to include</th>
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*a* Ordered alphabetically per column.
Currently, there is no companion handbook of theories in our area, and what is available (see e.g. Giles and Marlow 2011; for a recent model, see Drożdżowicz 2021) typically arises from – and is constrained by – a narrow set of methods. Hence, a move to embrace a creative rapprochement of the broad brush of methods manifested in this volume could, consequently, unleash a rich, novel set of multi-layered theoretical frameworks, as well as more far-reaching conceptualisations and definitions of what we refer to as language attitudes.

Finally, given their breadth and depth, the chapters in this book are unique in their remit and in their potential to produce quantum leaps in the study of language attitudes. It is no less than a brave new world that could likely yield what Schrodt (2020) differentiates between ‘great’ from ‘good research’, in that the former articulates more thought-provoking questions, producing newsworthy findings that advance theory, and is crafted for a wide-ranging and global audience.

Howard Giles
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