Testing variables of linguistic prestige in sociolinguistic questionnaires

Tobias Weber
Graduate School Language & Literature, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Germany

https://doi.org/10.36505/ExLing-2022/13/0047/000589

Abstract

This paper outlines a questionnaire to investigate the influence of sociolinguistic descriptions on language attitudes and prestige. It follows a design commonly employed in customer choice and market research: A (semi-)fictitious entity is presented to different respondents with a range of descriptors or values to test the effect of particular variables of interest. Respondents are then asked to rank or share their perception of the entity's different attributes. This design can be transferred to sociolinguistic descriptions regarding speaker numbers, degree of urbanity, institutional support, or historical importance. The goal is to learn more about sociolinguistic factors that influence language attitudes and to be able to quantify their effects. This knowledge can be used by activists and stakeholders when discussing language vitality.

Keywords: sociolinguistics, prestige, language attitude, ideology, survey

Introduction

Perceptions about languages, their prestige, formulated as attitudes or ideologies are difficult to operationalise. These concepts touch upon abstract understandings of language, identity, or speakerhood, which are equally complex in their formalisation. At the same time, many social sciences dealing with preferences and attitudes have long-standing traditions of measuring these for their research. This paper outlines a questionnaire type inspired by customer and market research that can be used to understand the formation of prestige and to quantify the importance of different factors. A pilot of the questionnaire is currently circulating.

Background

In the sociolinguistic research tradition, language regard or attitude research has been largely carried out through qualitative, ethnographic study on the one hand, or judgements of grammaticality and perception (e.g. the matched-guise test) on the other (cf. Garrett 2010). As a parallel development in the sociology of language (Fishman 1991), researchers using an abstract perspective on language and its users have attempted to describe the same phenomena based on quantitative measurements, such as speaker numbers, enrolment in language courses, or economic benefits. A prominent example can be seen in Abram de

Swaan's *Q-value* or *communication value* calculated for a range of official state languages (2001). While the communication value is not equal to linguistic prestige, qualitative sociolinguistic research confirms that speakers consider the notion of "usefulness" of a language when planning language acquisition or transmission (Vigouroux & Mufwene 2020). The approach presented in this paper aims to reconcile these research strands by offering a tool to operationalise and measure effect sizes for different variables that influence linguistic prestige and the perception of languages based on individual responses to a questionnaire.

Market researchers investigating consumer choice face a similar situation where they can either ask customers about particular products and brands or attempt to generalise decisions based on abstract attributes of the industry and its goods. While a company might be very interested to hear about its comparative prestige among competitors, the reasons for these differences may remain opaque because it is difficult to control for all variables in real-world examples. Likewise, a perception test or attitude questionnaire on a set of languages can produce very insightful reports on particular sociolinguistic settings, yet leave the underlying generative mechanism in parts to the investigators' interpretation. To provide deeper understanding of these mechanisms and the interaction between variables, market research also uses fictional cases to test hypotheses or experiment with particular variables – the same method can also be applied to sociolinguistic research.

Methodology

As indicated above, this research is based on a questionnaire, yet its central ideas may also be applied to interviews: A (semi-)fictitious sociolinguistic description is presented to the respondents who are asked to describe their attitudes towards the language and its speakers afterwards. The latter part can be conducted through the evaluation of declarative statements, estimation of similarity and social distance, likeliness to interact with the language (e.g. as a learner, in social activism, financial support), or through open-ended interview questions. The descriptions can be varied between different groups, in accordance with the purpose of the study. For the pilot study, these variables were speaker numbers, institutional support, Global North vs. Global South, and urban lifestyle. While some of these variables like speaker figures could be coded with their real values (for linear regression), these were treated as ordinal or binary data in the pilot to keep the number of experimental groups manageable (i.e. [larger] vs. [smaller], [+institutional support] vs. [-institutional support]). In addition, the marginal effect of speakers, schools, or village counts on perception and prestige cannot be calculated on this atomistic level beyond extreme cases such as languages with 0 or 1 speaker. Similarly, de Swaan's *Q-value* also uses a ratio of speakers for the calculation of communicative value.

It is important to note that the texts are purposely phrased in a way that can trigger stereotypes, emphasise aspects of ethnolinguistic vitality, or present generalisations about the language and its speakers. Many linguists, myself included, would contest this essentialist presentation of a sociolinguistic situation for any language. Subsequently, a stereotyped description of real-world examples can be considered unethical, as they replicate historical injuries. With fictitious examples, these descriptions exist within a grey area of ethics: the general style of presentation may be deprecated but the examples serve as a blank canvas for the experiment. There are certain boundaries that must be respected, even with fictitious languages; racial slurs, religious discrimination, or colonial stereotypes are to be avoided in all contexts. The text should rather evoke the impression of a travel guide or encyclopedia entry. Importantly, all participants are informed about the fictitious nature of the examples after completing the questionnaire, with further information on how existing language communities may be supported.

Table 1. Stereotyped statements about the sociolinguistic situation of the fictional case studies.

	Positive presentation	Negative presentation
Stereotypes of modernity	Most of the ___ live in **suburban areas** of the ___ **metropolitan area**. Although fishing had been of central importance in the traditional way of living, few community members follow this **traditional lifestyle**.	The ___ inhabit **forested areas** in ___ a part of a national park. Most of the ___ engage in **subsistence economy**, i.e. they produce most of the products they need themselves.
Institutional support and means of transmission	The ___ language is taught in **25** K-12 schools and **supported by the local government.**	The ___ language is mostly **transmitted at home** but also taught in **7** local schools.
Historical importance	Recent **archaeological findings** suggest that, in [before the colonisation], the ___ lived in a network of smaller city states.	–

Discussion

This section will discuss some insights from the pilot and participant feedback that will be used to improve the experimental design further. First, participants generally found this novel approach to be engaging, as it led to reflections about their own language use and linguistic attitudes. At the same time, the abstract nature of the questions caused some difficulties for some respondents who stated that "it was difficult for me to answer questions because I have not

heard of [these] languages". There is no straightforward solution, as most non-linguists will not be aware of many languages outside of their everyday lives. The presented approach using fictitious examples circumvents availability bias but requires more explanation of the task in the questionnaire.

Second, the questionnaire drew some criticism levelled at the ranking or explicit formulation of attitudes. This social desirability bias was especially prominent among student respondents stating that "no language is better or prettier than another […] I did not want to answer those questions". While I wholeheartedly agree with the sentiment ("I would love to see more people speak minority languages"), most respondents have studied a foreign language themselves and thus made a decision for or against some of the world's languages. This link to decision making could be used for an improved version of the questionnaire, where participants estimate the probability of learning the (fictitious) language or attending a cultural event of the community. Furthermore, a different presentation of the ranking questions may reduce reluctance to respond honestly.

Last, it was uplifting to see that respondents (mostly students in Germany) expressed an interest in learning more about linguistic diversity and minority languages. The experimental approach may help to broaden the range of languages studied in attitude surveys, as a set of languages the respondents know will always favour languages of wider communication and global languages. While the fictitious examples do not count as languages, they provide a reference point in the data for the vast majority of languages that are unfamiliar to the participants. To this end, the experiment aims to increase their visibility in research.

References

De Swaan, A. 2001. Words of the World: The Global Language System. Cambridge, Polity Press.

Fishman, J. 1991. Putting the 'socio' back into the sociolinguistic enterprise. International Journal of the Sociology of Language 92, 127-138.

Garrett, P. 2010. Attitudes to Language. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Vigouroux, C., Mufwene, S. 2020. Do Linguists Need Economics and Economists Linguistics? In Vigouroux, C., Mufwene, S. (eds.) 2020, Bridging Linguistics and Economics, 1-55. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.