Socio-Psychological Aspects of Language Use

Prof. Deepti Gupta[1]
Dr. Hamzeh Moradi[2]
Department of English and Cultural Studies
Panjab University, Chandigarh, India

Abstract:

Social psychology is a key and central discipline of language attitude research. Linguists involved in the socio-psychological aspects of language production must be mindful of the psychological complexity of attitudes. While attitude research has a typical and important role in social psychology, the concept of attitudes has also become a main point of interest in sociolinguistics (Garrett et al., 2003: 2). Nevertheless, the exact nature of attitudes remains a highly controversial topic despite the wide interest that attitudes have received from various research fields. The present article reviews the socio-psychological facets of language use. It presents a clear description and evaluation of different components, functions and importance of language attitudes.

Key Words: language attitude, socio-psychological, cognitive, behavioral component

Introduction

In a second/foreign language context, there are different kinds of factors that influence the process of language learning and language use such as aptitude, motivation, age, personality, anxiety, attitudes, intelligence, etc (Lehmann, 2006). However, to be in line with Fakeye (2010), individual's attitude is acknowledged as one of the most significant factors which impact language learning and academic achievement.

Eagley & Chaiken, (1993) define attitude as a 'psychological tendency that can be expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor'. This definition of an attitude as a 'psychological tendency' implies that attitudes can make and establish a speaker-internal concept that consists of a speaker's ascription of different degrees of goodness or badness to a given entity; evaluative responses to an entity include, for instance, favor or disfavor, approval or disapproval, liking or disliking, attraction or aversion and approach or avoidance (Eagley & Chaiken, 1993: 3).

Social psychologists particularly refer to these entities as 'attitude objects' that they approximately define as anything that can be evaluated (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993: 4). Accordingly, attitude objects can be concrete (e.g., different kinds of food) or abstract (e.g., feminism) as well as inanimate (e.g., computers) or animate (e.g., people, groups of people) (Schwarz & Bohner, 2001: 241).

Attitudes

positive

pattern

negative
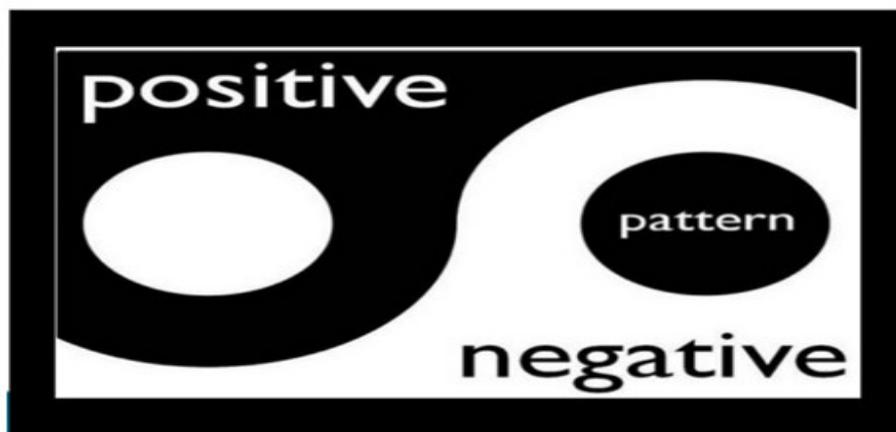
Because attitudes are internal-speaker and hypothetical, they cannot directly be observable, but they need to be inferred and evaluated from observable response (Eagley & Chaiken, 1993: 2). Researchers can obtain such observable responses by presenting individuals with a set of stimuli for example direct questions or questionnaire aiming at eliciting people's reactions towards particular attitude objects.

Components

According to Garrett et al, (2003: 3) attitudes contain affective, cognitive and behavioral components. As shown below:
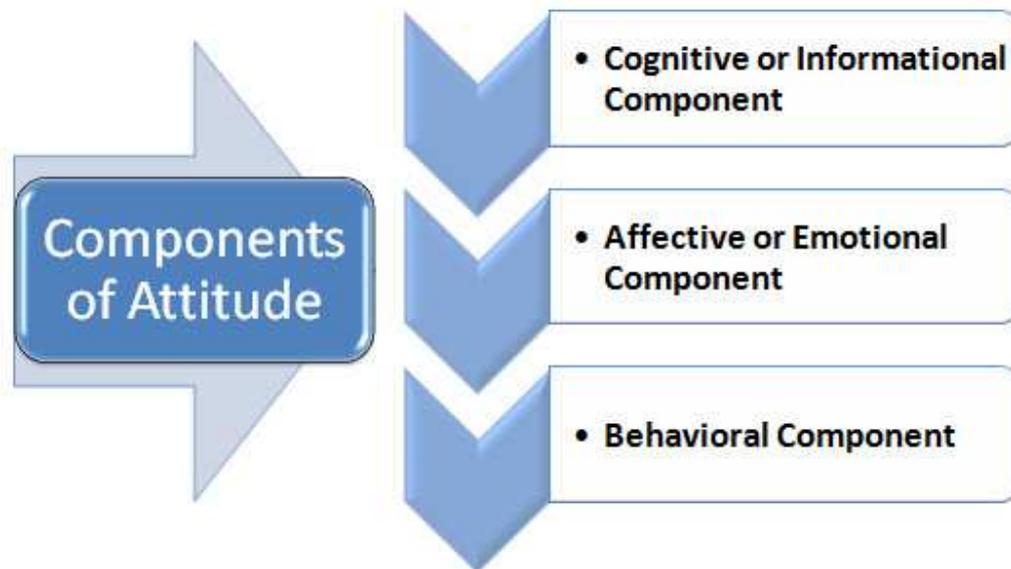
Eagley & Chaiken (1993) assert that individuals' evaluative responses to stimuli can be classified into three types – cognition, affect and behavior. Evaluative responses of the cognitive class are also referred to as 'beliefs' which include the associations and connections that people create between an attitude object and various attributes (Eagley & Chaiken, 1993: 11). Thus, cognitive component can be defined as beliefs about what is true and what is not true with regards to the attitude object.

Additionally Garrett et al., (2003: 3) explain that evaluative responses of the affective type, include feelings and emotions, for example, a person's feeling of exuberancy for a poetry written in the Welsh language. The affective component of an attitude can also be demonstrated in the form of 'sympathetic nervous system activity' which people experience when they are confronted with certain attitude objects (Eagley & Chaiken, 1993: 11).

On the other hand, some people may experience an emotion or feeling of anger when perceiving nuclear power stations, others may feel hope and optimism (Eagley & Chaiken, 1993: 11). The affective component of attitudes often establishes the focus of inquiry in attitude research (Fishbein, 1967: 257) and it obtains further importance because of its close association with the cognitive component (Garrett et al., 2003: 10). Garrett et al., (2003: 10) depict that albeit beliefs (i.e. cognitive component) are particularly free from affective content, they may be based on or even lead to affective reactions. Therefore, attitude researchers should bear in mind both people's beliefs (cognitive component) and their feelings (affective component) towards attitude objects.

Behavioral in nature is the third component of attitudes which is also referred to as 'conative', 'behavioral', or 'action' component (Eagley & Chaiken, 1993: 12; Fishbein, 1967:

259). There are various definitions for the behavioral component of attitudes. According to Eagley & Chaiken (1993: 12), behavioral component of attitudes can be both leading to overt actions and can reflect people's behavioral intentions. Based on this definition, a behavioral response does not necessarily result in actual behavior, but can merely demonstrate an individual's desire to act. Therefore, behavioral component is considered to be the inclination to do particular things regarding the attitude object.

Eagley & Chaiken (1993:1) state that the cognitive, affective and behavioral components of attitudes can all be depicted as 'evaluative' responses to an attitude object. On the other hand, disagreements about the association of 'evaluation' with all three attitude components remain among attitude theorists. A number of social psychologists specify affect and evaluation as identical concepts and they use the terms interchangeably. Current progress of research on affect and emotion and as well on attitude theory has demonstrated evaluation and affect as two distinct concepts (Eagley & Chaiken, 1993: 12). Based on this particular line of thought, individuals can easily convey evaluation through cognitive, affective and behavioral responses.

Functions

The particular substantial degree of intricacy found in the structure of attitudes likewise pertains to the functions of attitudes. Bohner (2004: 242-243) argues that in social psychology research, a distinction is generally made between four functions of attitudes: (1) utilitarian, (2) knowledge, (3) social identity and (4) self-esteem maintenance. As illustrated below:
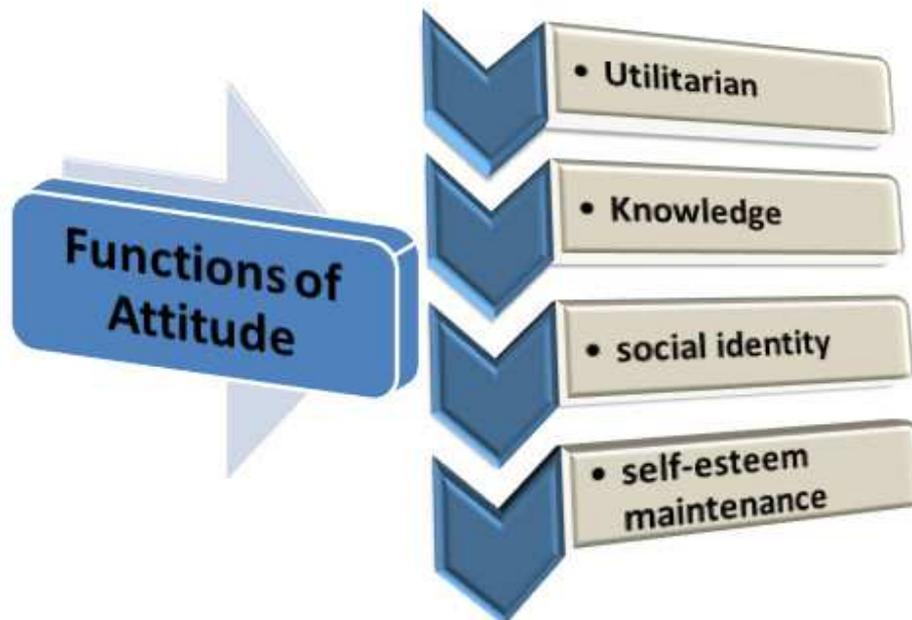
The utilitarian function can help people in attaining positive goals and avoiding negative outcomes. Bohner (2004: 243) gives the example of attitudes toward specific types of food and argues that 'one's attitude towards pizza should be based on the punishments (weight gain, high cholesterol level) and rewards (pleasant taste, repletion) associated with pizza'. Accordingly, people make a connection between particular attitudes and their positive and negative outcomes.

Attitudes can also fulfill a knowledge function composed of having a formulated attitude towards an object that can be recalled and retrieved every time the object in question is encountered. Attitudes are generally created as a result of processes involving cognitive learning once for the first time people encounter a particular attitude object. According to Bohner (2004: 242), when attitudes are formed, they are organized and stored so that whenever the same attitude object is encountered, the attitude can easily be retrieved without having to determine again how to behave towards it.

As Bohner (2004: 243) states, the social identity function of attitudes assists individuals to identify themselves with a particular social group through the manifestation of their attitudes; for instance, people may represent themselves as feminists or conservatives by having or perhaps indicating 'feminist' or 'conservative' attitudes.

Finally, with the self-esteem maintenance function of attitudes individuals can associate themselves with positive objects and distance themselves from negative objects. For instance, Bohner (2004: 243) depicts that individuals may hold negative attitudes towards minority groups, such as immigrants, due to a presupposition that this formation of distance can be helpful

for protecting them against the danger and negative connotations related to these groups. The different functions are highly interactional and are usually formidable to dissociate since attitudes frequently fulfill multiple functions at the same time (Bohner, 2004: 243).

Linguists have also demonstrated various functions for attitudes. The functions of language attitudes do not precisely reflect the socio-psychological viewpoint, but illustrate significant overlap. A distinction is often made between two kinds of attitudes with varying functions: instrumental attitudes and integrative attitudes (Baker, 1992:31).

Instrumental attitudes are generally influenced by utilitarian motives; for instance, individuals may perhaps have positive attitudes towards prestigious language varieties as a result of an assumption that this will grant them social recognition and economic advantages (Baker, 1992: 32). Instrumental attitudes are represented as 'self-oriented' and 'individualistic' (Baker, 1992: 32) and they are, hence, closely related to the socio-psychological utilitarian and self-esteem maintenance functions of attitudes.

Baker (1992: 32) mentions that integrative attitudes, however, are generally interpersonal and social in nature. According to Gardener & Lambert (1959), positive integrative language attitudes are usually motivated by individuals' willingness to develop social relationships. Therefore, a positive integrative attitude towards learning a new language is usually determined and influenced by an individual's need to make friendships rather than by an interest in the learning of the language itself. This kind of attitude is directly associated with individuals' effort to affiliate themselves with certain speech communities and to manifest resemblances between themselves and speakers of the language communities which they tend to be part of (Baker, 1992: 32).

Integrative language attitudes, thus, illustrate a significant overlap with the social identity function of attitudes established by social psychologists. Therefore, The socio-psychological definition of the functions and as well as components of attitudes have obviously affected language attitude research and have been integrated in an adjusted shape.

Garrett et al., (2003) state that besides fulfilling instrumental and as well as integrative functions, language attitudes additionally can function as both input and output. The dual function of attitude is regarded to be of peculiar importance in educational research, as it is explained by Baker (1992: 12); he mentions that a student's positive attitude towards learning a L2 may function as a significant input factor in language improvement.

In other words, positive attitudes towards learning a particular language positively affect and facilitate the acquisition of that language. On the other hand, a student's attitude towards a particular language may also change after attending a language course. In such cases, attitude functions as output (Baker, 1992: 12). Garrett et al. (2003: 6) indicate that the input and output

function of attitudes is usually referred to whenever describing the role of attitude in the production and reception of a language.

The Importance of Language Attitudes

According to Visser (2008), attitude is regarded as a crucial factor affecting language performance. Language attitude research mainly focuses on evaluating the reasons for favorability and unfavorability towards certain languages. According to Baker (1994: 30), the notions of favorability and unfavorability regarding languages provide an indication of the status of a language in a community or society. He believes that researchers should clearly define the objective and the target of their research questions, as attitudes can be assessed in regards to learning a new language, to a particular minority language, to the uses of a particular language, to language communities & minorities and to language preferences (Baker, 1992: 29).

Researches on language attitudes have been carried out at various levels of specificity. A number of studies have aimed at the evaluative meanings of specific phonological variations, while the linguistics research focus is much broader and it deals with attitudes towards the whole language (Garrett et al., 2003: 13). Garrett et al., (2003: 12) mention that studies of language attitudes try to reveal, for instance, whether language attitudes can cause a particular social group, such as speakers of a minority language, to be approximately successful, effective and productive in domains like the labor market or the educational system.

Conclusion

The findings of language attitude studies can have many important implications. Language attitude research is usually connected to language policy or language planning activities, because speech communities normally hold shared attitudes regarding appropriate language practices that have to be considered throughout the development and implementation of language policies. Education comes forth as a specifically essential domain for the study of language attitudes since it has been revealed that language attitudes can substantially affect students' academic achievements and career opportunities (Garrett et al., 2003: 19). Moreover, progress in a second language depends not only on mental competence, intellectual capacity or language skills, but also on the learners' perceptions and attitudes towards the second language and language learning.

References

Baker, C. (1992). *Attitudes and language* (No. 83). Multilingual Matters.

Baker, M. (1994). A model for negotiation in teaching-learning dialogues.*Journal of artificial intelligence in education*.

Bohner, G. (2001) Attitudes. In Hewstone, M. and Stroebe, W. (eds), *Introduction to Social Psychology*, 3rd edn. Blackwell, Oxford, pp. 239–282.

Eagly, A. H., & Chaiken, S. (1993). *The psychology of attitudes*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers.

Fakeye, D. (2010). Students' Personal Variables as Correlates of Academic Achievement in English as a Second Language in Nigeria. *Journal of Social Sciences, 22*(3), 205-211.

Fishbein, M. (1967). Attitude and the prediction of behavior. In: Fishbein, M. (Ed.). Readings in attitude theory and measurement, pp. 477-492. New York: John Wiley.

Gardner, R. C., & Lambert, W. E. (1959). Motivational variables in second-language acquisition. *Canadian Journal of Psychology/Revue canadienne de psychologie*, *13*(4), 266.

Garrett, P., Coupland, N. and Williams, A. (2003) *Investigating Language Attitudes: Social Meanings of Dialect, Ethnicity and Performance*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Lehmann, C. (2006). Motivation in language: Attempt at systematization. Retrieved from

http://www.uni-erfurt.de/sprachwissenschaft/personal/lehmann/CLPubl/

Schwarz, N., &Bohner, G. (2001). The construction of attitudes. In A. Tesser &N. Schwarz (Eds.), *Blackwell handbook of social psychology: Intraindividual processes* (pp. 436–457). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Visser, M. (2008). Learning under conditions of hierarchy and discipline: The case of the German Army (1939-1940). Learning Inquiry. 2, 127-137. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11519-008-0031-7.