

# The Attitude of Teachers towards Varieties of a Language and Its Effects on Learners' Education and Self Esteem

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## Abstract

There are different varieties within the same language. It is argued that all varieties of a language are equal and none of the varieties are superior or inferior to the other varieties of the same language as far as their linguistic features and functions are concerned. However, in many languages the varieties are associated with prestige, power and prejudice of the society they are serving. It is generally said that societies have positive attitude towards the standard variety and negative attitude towards the non-standard varieties. In addition, the attitudes that speakers hold about the language varieties is reflected in academic setting. For this reason, attitudes towards varieties of a language have been an issue in education contexts. Besides, the attitudes towards language varieties can affect their use in education and can have an impact on students' learning and self esteem. Therefore, this article will explore the attitude of teachers towards varieties of a language and the effects of teachers' attitude on the students' self esteem and education.

**Keywords:** Attitude, Education, Language Varieties, Self-esteem, Students,, Teachers

## 1. The Basic Meaning and Categorizations of Language Varieties

The notion of 'variety' in language is complex and controversial. In a broad sense, 'variety' refers to a number of different languages; in a narrow sense, it is used to refer to differences within a language. In this article, 'variety' is considered in its narrowest sense. In specific terms, a 'variety' of language refers to the different manifestations or realizations of a language (Hudson, 2001). A language shows variations in the specific way of speaking or writing (style), the social group or geographical area where it is spoken (dialect) and the specific human activity where it is used (register) (Coupland and Joworski, 1997; Hudson, 2001). Among these specific varieties of a language, teachers' attitude towards the use of dialects in education and its effect on students' education and self-esteem are the focus of this article.

There are different varieties of the same language. That is, naturally a single language exists in different varieties (Wolfram et al., 1999). It is argued that all varieties of a language are equal and none of the varieties are superior or inferior to the other varieties of the same language as far as their linguistic features and functions are concerned (Trudgill, 2001). However, in many languages the varieties are associated with prestige, power and prejudice of the society they are serving.

The varieties may be also at different level of development, status, legal recognition, used for various purposes and in different contexts. Thus, the language varieties spoken in certain community can be classified as standard and non-standard dialects. The standard dialect is a prestigious, codified variety that has the highest social status and used in formal occasions (Holmes, 2001; Sailzmann, 2007). The non-standard dialect is any variety of language which is not standardized and lacks prestige (Cook, 2003). Sometimes the standards variety is considered as a language, whereas the non-standard variety is considered as a dialect (Downes, 1998). Such perception lead to the formation of deficit and difference views of language varieties.

## 2. Deficit and Difference Views towards Language Varieties and the Effects of the Views on the Use of the Varieties for Instructional Purposes

Around the 1960s and 1970s, two contradictory views regarding the nature and characteristics of language varieties were emerged. Deficit hypothesis is one view that considers the non-standard varieties as inadequate for communication. Wolfram et al.,(1999:20) explained that, "In terms of language, proponents of the deficit position believed that speakers of dialects with non-standard forms have a handicap-socially and cognitively-because the dialects are illogical, or sloppy, or just bad grammar." In connection to this, Kangas(1999) stated that the speakers of the non-standard varieties themselves and their characteristics are seen as a problem in deficiency theory. This view advocates the eradication of the use of dialects in schools favoring the standard dialect. This is because the non-standard varieties are considered as inappropriate for instruction purposes (Romaine, 2000). Thus, in a classroom the use of dialects are prohibited and students are expected to use only the standard variety. For this reason, students from the non- standard background are forced to attend their education through the standard dialect ignoring their own variety.

The differences hypothesis, on the other hand, argued that all languages and dialects are regular and have rule-governed system. The advocators of this view claimed that there are no linguistic grounds for arguing that one variety of a language is superior to the other variety of the same language (Cheshire et al., 1989).

Wolfram et al,(1999:20) expressed the position of difference hypothesis saying, “Because no one linguistic system can be shown to be inherently better, there is no reason to assume that using a particular dialect can be associated with having any kind of inherent deficit or advantage.” In addition, Romaine (2000) said that different groups of people have different ways of using their own language. Hence, the non-standard dialects are not deficient; rather they are different way of expressing ideas. This hypothesis advocates that the non-standard varieties can be used for educational purposes.

These views have been reflected, implicitly or explicitly, in educational policies and particularly in teachers’ classroom practice. For example, teachers negatively respond to the dialects used by African American students and correct dialects forms when used by students (Washington, 2001). In America, it was also found out that teachers encourage the style and dialects used by white students and discourage the language varieties of the black students (Romaine, 2000). However, in some countries, like in Switzerland and Italy, dialects are used for classroom instruction. This shows that the two points of view have been influencing the practice of educational programs and affecting the learning, positively or negatively, of the dialect speakers.

### **3. The Social Evaluation of Language Varieties and Its Impacts on the Selection and Use of the Varieties for instructional Purposes**

The varieties of language used by members of a society vary from group to group and place to place. Though all varieties are linguistically equivalent, speakers of a language often assign social value to the linguistic forms used by certain groups (Holmes, 2001). By attaching social value, the speakers categorize the language variants as socially prestigious or socially stigmatized. Wolfram (1998:84), described the two as “socially prestigious variants are those forms that are positively valued through their association with high status groups as linguistic markers of status; whereas, socially stigmatized variants carry a stigma through their association with low-status groups.” This indicates that social value is given to the language variants considering the social status of a speaker. Most of the time the standard variety is taken as the prestigious variety; whereas, the non-standard variety is lacking prestigious and hence, taken as a stigmatized variety (Milroy, 2007).

In addition, considering the power (both economic and political) of the speakers, the varieties are given different values by language users. Accordingly, the standard variety is often considered as ‘strong’, ‘correct’, ‘superior’ and ‘better’ form of a language; whereas, the non-standard varieties are considered as ‘weak’, ‘wrong’, ‘incorrect’, ‘dirty’, and ‘illogical’ forms of a language (Cook,2003: Chambers,2008). However, linguists argue that all variants of a language are equal in terms of their linguistic system as well as the functions they serve. Various scholars (Hudson, 2001: Adger and Chirstian,2007: Reaser and Adger, 2008) indicated that the non-standard dialects are systematic and rule governed as the standard dialect, having their own sound features, lexical items and grammatical patterns. It is also argued that no dialect is better or worse than the other dialect (Romaine, 2000). That is, the variants are preferred or stigmatized on non-linguistic grounds. Such social evaluation of the language varieties has its own impact on the selection and use of the varieties for instructional purposes.

### **4. The Selection and Use of Language Varieties for Instructional Purposes**

As explained in the above section, the varieties of a language are given different values by language users. The variants of a language are preferred or stigmatized on non-linguistic grounds. Thus, practically selecting and compromising standard and non-standard varieties in different spheres of life such as in education, politics, social, etc., seems complex and controversial. For example, Cook(2003:12) described the situation of practically using the two varieties in academic setting as follows:

*At the heart of the aspiration to relate theory to practice is a constant tension between language as viewed by ‘the expert’ and language as everyone’s lived experience. The two are by no means easily reconciled and...are likely to be aggravated by an attempt to impose insensitively an ‘expert’ view which runs contrary to deeply held belief. Nowhere is this more apparent than in our attitudes to the language education of children, and the belief which they reflect about the ‘best’ language use. These provide a good illustration of the kind of problematic issue with which applied linguistics enquiry engages.*

Theoretically, the experts should value the different dialects of a language while preparing textbooks and National Exams. But as shown in the above extract, the variety used by experts is considered as a ‘good’ variety that can be selected for education. In multidialectal society, the issue of dialect and education in general and the issue of choosing the variety to be used as a LOI in particular has been a great concern to linguists, educationalist and researchers for a long period of time (Yiakoumetti,2007). This is because selecting the variety to be used as a LOI in multidialectal society is difficult as well as controversial. However, in most countries, the standard variety has been only used and taught in schools (Cheshire, 2005). The non-standard dialects have been officially unacceptable in schools (Rosenberg, 1989). For many years, the non-standard dialects have been not used in schools. Until the 1960s, attention was not given to the use of dialects in education. On the other hand, students

go to schools from both standard and non-standard varieties (Cheshire, 2007). Thus, there has been a mismatch between the varieties used at schools and those used at home.

After the standard dialect began to be used in education, it has been shown that the non-standard dialect speakers face challenges in their education. For example, Rosenberg (1989:62) stated that “The existence of specific educational difficulties experienced by dialect speaking children is, thus, by no means a recent discovery. Various studies concluded that dialect speakers face difficulties in schools where only the standard dialect is used as a MOI or taught as a subject.

Currently, educational issues concerning dialectal variations have received popular attention worldwide (Papapavou and Pavlos, 2007). It is argued that the varieties of a language play an important role in an academic setting. Learning is claimed to be better and more successful when conducted in the variety spoken by students (Cheshire, 2005). Cheshire (2007: 22) further noted, “There is general consensus, in fact, among educationalist and sociolinguistics alike, that valuing dialect in the classroom makes real difference to educational achievement of speakers.”

Derebsa (2006) also argued that the use of the students’ variety in education enables the students to use their own potential and helps them to achieve ‘deep learning.’ Besides, the consideration of dialects in education enhances the social, cognitive, emotional and linguistic development of learners’ in and out of school. For these reasons, it is argued that the varieties of a language deserve respect and recognition in schools. Despite such arguments in favor for the use of language varieties in education, the selection and use of language varieties for instructional purposes is affected by the attitudes of teachers. Hence, it is necessary to assess teachers’ attitudes towards the non-standard varieties and its impact on students’ self-esteem and education.

##### **5. Teachers’ Attitudes towards the Non-Standard Varieties and Their Speakers**

The attitudes of teachers’ and other concerned bodies towards the non-standard varieties and their speakers have been a topic of discussion in academic setting. However, it is reported that the attitude of teachers, educational authorities and students is not similar. In some countries, there is positive attitude towards dialects and their use in education. For example, Rosenberg (1989) explained that in Switzerland, there is a greater tolerance of dialect usage in education. Besides, in South Tyrol, Italy, dialect has a much wider acceptance and a dialect-oriented school textbook has been introduced by the government. In addition, Neberg cited in Jorgensen and Pedersen (1989), said that teachers have positive attitudes towards dialects.

In other countries, however, the attitude of teachers and educational authorities is not positive. For instance, in Holland, teachers believe that only the standard dialect speakers would be received to heaven (Sturm, 1989). In Britain, speakers of the non-standard dialects were characterized as having ‘evil habits of speech’ (Hollingworth, 1989). In connection to this, Rosenberg (1989) stated that dialects have been considered as a bad habit that should be cured as soon as possible. Besides, Craen and Humblet (1989) indicated that educational authorities in Belgium have an opinion that students should strive as far as possible towards the standard variety and avoid the use of the non-standard dialect as much as possible. Mohammed(2002) also stated that teachers give Standard English high regard and did not agree with using Ebonics, which is a non standard dialect spoken by black people, in English classroom.

The attitudes of teachers and students towards language varieties can be influenced by different factors. Both students and teachers are from a society that holds positive outlook to the standard variety and/or negative attitude to the dialects and their speakers. Consequently, students and teachers go to school with the beliefs and attitudes of their society (Maybin, 2007). The school also plays an important role in shaping the attitudes of teachers and students towards language varieties. Besides, educational authorities who had attempted to ignore the varieties of a language could make students and teachers to develop negative outlook towards dialects (Craen and Humblet, 1989).

In educational setting, the negative attitude towards dialect has been reflected in different ways. For instance, Jorgensen and Pedersen (1989) noted that in Denmark, dialects are placed with examples of misspelling or other grammatical errors in language skills exercises. In some cases, dialect is seen as an opposite to normal language use. Then, learners are made to develop the impression that dialect is incorrect or/and abnormal language form. In other areas, teachers correct the non-standard forms as if they are errors. In some countries, like England, students are ridiculed for using certain dialect forms (Cheshire and Trudgill, 1989).

The attitudes of teachers, educational authorities and students towards the non-standard varieties play an important role in the learning of students. Their attitudes have significant implications for the use of dialects in the classroom as it can determine the value and emphasis given to the dialects in education. However, the attitude of teachers is more important because teachers can directly affect the students’ learning and achievement. In addition, teachers’ attitude play crucial role in shaping the classroom environment, which has an impact on a students’ self-esteem and behaviors (Dooley, 2005).

## 6. The Impacts Teachers' Negative Attitude on Students Self-Esteem and Education

The negative attitude of teachers can affect the perception of the students. Students speaking dialects could develop the impression that their dialect is inferior. The learners feel inferior when their dialects are not considered and valued in education (Jorgensen and Pedersen, 1989). In such areas, the psychological and social frustration of students is very high (Hudson, 2001). If a student's uses a non-standard dialect and the teacher frequently mark it as "incorrect", the student will be scolded for using his/her own home dialect. In relation to this, Romaine (2000) stated that constant correction of dialects may make students lose their self esteem. The negative reaction of teachers towards dialects can make students to lack self-confidence and motivation to learn. The misperception of dialects as errors can discourage students from attending their education and can bring academic failure (Reaser and Adger, 2008).

The attitude of teachers could also lead to misperception and wrong assessment of the dialect speakers. For example, in a study conducted in West Germany (Rosenberg, 1989), it was found out that teachers and students held a view that dialect speaking children have lower academic potential than students speaking the standard dialect. In addition, Taylor (1983) found out that teachers' attitudes affect their assessment of non-standard varieties. In the study, teachers evaluated two samples of an oral reading performed in both Black English and Standard English. After analyzing the evaluation made by teachers, Taylor (1983: 667) reported that "---young Black English speakers are rated lower in reading comprehension than equivalent Standard English speakers" This shows that teacher' negative attitude can affect their assessments.

The negative attitude of teachers towards the non-standard dialect can affect the expectation of teachers. According to Romaine (2000), teachers' expectation is closely related to achievements of students in that teachers already tend to have negative expectations of the non-standard dialects speakers. Because of low expectation of teachers, the students could be assigned to lower ability class group. When a child is placed in a lower ability group, it could lead to a **self-fulfilling prophecy** of academic failure (Hudson, 2001). If a teacher has lower expectations and underestimates learners' ability because of dialects they speak, the student will perform less in classroom and may have lower academic achievements (Wolfram et al., 1999). When students failed to achieve the objective they intended to achieve because of the attitude and expectation of teachers, the learners may assume their efforts are hopeless, which may lead to lower achievements of students.

## 7. Conclusions and Recommendations

The above research findings showed that the negative attitudes of teachers towards dialects can affect the learning and performance of dialect speakers in different ways. For this reason, it is argued that developing positive attitudes to all varieties is useful. Wolfram et al., (1999) noted that there should be a change in attitudes toward linguistic diversity. The speakers of standard dialect should change their prejudice about non-standard dialects and develop respect and tolerance for dialect differences.

In addition, teachers need to know and appreciate language diversity (Jorgensen and Pedersen 1989). The knowledge and understanding of language variations can improve the negative attitudes. Wolfram et al., (1999:31) stated that "Knowledge about dialects can reduce misconceptions about language and the accompanying negative attitudes about some dialects..." Currently, negatives attitudes and erroneous assumptions about non-standard dialects have not totally disspread from schools, but there are some instructional approaches that use the non- standard dialects in schools. Hence, the attitudes towards language varieties can affect their use in education and can have an impact on students' learning and achievement.

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