

Language Ideology, Attitude and Discrimination

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Abstract

This study discusses three interrelated concepts: language ideology, language attitude and linguistic discrimination. Drawing on past theoretical backgrounds and empirical research, the current study endeavours to demonstrate the causal relationship between language ideology and attitude, elucidating how they collectively contribute to the emergence of linguistic discrimination. The present study stresses that while attitudes are linked to individuals, ideologies are associated with groups. These two forces can work together, enabling dominant individuals and groups to linguistically discriminate against less dominant ones. One example is the right to be educated in one's mother tongue, which is often undermined by the 'standard language ideology' that dictates all children must be instructed in the official language, which is almost always the standard variety. Moreover, the global hegemony of English shapes the attitudes and ideologies of educational systems and labour markets worldwide. In essence, English continues to exert an imperialistic influence over education and the labour market.

Keywords: ideology, attitude, discrimination, Arabic, English

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1. Introduction

Language varies and changes ceaselessly both diachronically and synchronically in all speech communities the world over. The traditional linguistic theory assuming the existence of an ideal speaker-hearer in a perfect homogeneous speech community has long failed to account for such language variation. Nevertheless, in any speech community there seems to be a general image of how one should speak properly. The notion of the appropriateness of speech in various speech communities is often "measured against the legitimate practices, i.e., the practices of those who are dominant" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 53). When speaking to strangers over the phone, we gradually start forming opinions about them from the way they speak. Depending on the varieties they use, we might have "strong ideas about whether they are 'nice', 'friendly', and 'competent', whether they are 'rude', 'disinterested' and 'stupid' (Meyerhoff, 2006, p. 54). By the same token, the people on the other end of the line form opinions about us because each time we talk "we cannot avoid giving our listeners clues about our origins and the sort of person we are. Our accent and our speech generally show what part of the country we come from, and what sort of background we have" (Trudgill, 1983, p. 14). Such strong opinions emerge from our attitudes towards different linguistic varieties. Language attitudes might be positive or negative. When the attitudes towards a particular language variety are positive, its speakers often gain advantage over the speakers of other varieties. On the other hand, when the attitudes towards certain language varieties are negative, their speakers often suffer a disadvantage and may be subjected to linguistic discrimination. Linguistic discrimination manifests itself in various domains, such as schools and labour markets. To illustrate, in educational settings, students who speak stigmatised language varieties may face prejudice from teachers and peers, leading to unequal treatment and lower academic achievement. This is equally true in the settings of the labour market where speaking stigmatised varieties might affect speakers' employment opportunities and career advancements. Moreover, interlocutors may even use some linguistic clues to identify the religious affiliation of interlocutors and subsequently favour or disfavour them (Darwish & Bader, 2014).

The terms attitudes and ideologies "overlap in that they both consist of evaluations ... and it may help to keep in mind 'attitudes as more unconscious assessments' and 'ideologies as more constructed assessments'" (Myers-Scotton, 2006, p. 110). Dyers and Abongdia (2010, p. 119) clarify this distinction by stating that attitudes are "more rooted in individuals' subconscious thoughts and emotions, while ideologies are ... constructed over time as particular societies respond to socio-historical forces." However, Myers-Scotton (2006) admits that sometimes these terms are used interchangeably depending on the writers' theoretical stances.

This study discusses language ideologies, language attitudes and linguistic discrimination. Despite the fact that these three concepts are interrelated, in this study each one is discussed separately. Discussion of each concept is supported with various theoretical and empirical previous studies. I start with language ideologies followed by language attitudes and finish the study with discussion on linguistic discrimination. My intention is to relate the discussion of each concept to language variation and change.

2. Language Ideology

Language ideology can be defined broadly as “shared bodies of commonsense notions about the nature of language in the world” (Rumsey, 1990, p. 346). Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2006, p. 9) provide a similar definition of ideology as “ingrained, unquestioned beliefs about the way the world is, the way it should be, and the way it has to be with respect to language” (see Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994 for detailed definitions of language ideology). Language ideologies are often held by groups not individuals. As speech communities are heterogeneous in nature, the beliefs of the dominant groups often prevail either overtly or covertly. The dominant group is often characterised by power and elitism. Language ideologies reflect themselves in language policies. For instance, making a particular linguistic variety the official language and advancing it as a national language involves language policies in which many parties are involved, such as politicians, grammarians and school teachers. Once a linguistic variety is codified in dictionaries and grammar books, it becomes the standard language against which proper use is judged. In other words, it “becomes the theoretical norm against which all linguistic practices are objectively measured” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 45).

This situation affects the natural language variation that exists in speech communities. For example, if the speech community has people whose native variety is not the official one, they are deprived of many rights, such as the right to be schooled and educated in their native variety and the right to get elite official jobs. A case in point is the status of African American Vernacular English in the United States of America. William Labov (1982) reports on the Ann Arbor case where African American students speaking ‘Black English’ faced academic difficulties in Michigan schools due to the differences between their native variety and standard English. The parents filed a lawsuit against the school district, claiming that their children were being discriminated against due to their language. The court ruled that schools must recognize ‘Black English’ as a legitimate dialect and consider it in their teaching methods, highlighting the importance of linguistic diversity in education.

As language ideology is associated with ‘unquestioned beliefs’ about language, it can be said that what some people believe about a language variety might be different from what others believe about it. Even standard English is viewed differently in the United States of America and the United Kingdom. A case in point is Milroy’s (2001) study on how standard varieties in Britain and the United States are ideologised differently. Milroy (2001) discusses the so-called ‘standard language ideology’ which stresses the belief that there is only one correct form of a language; that is, the standard. This belief, Milroy argues, triggers the ‘moral panic’, i.e., the panic of the grammarians, newspaper writers, television presenters and even the majority of the public about the decline and misuse of the standard language in the USA and Britain. Unfortunately, stressing the importance of the standard variety often rationalise linguistic discrimination against speakers of marginalised varieties.

Milroy (2001, p. 82) argues that in both Britain and the USA, the ‘standard’ is viewed as a “neutral reference point for all description of variation. Also, in both countries a belief in a single correct form of the language figures prominently in popular cultural models.” In Britain, Standard English is often referred to as Received Pronunciation (RP), BBC English, Oxford English and Queen’s English. This particular variety is class-marked as it is historically associated with the educated elites. In contrast, standard English in the USA is often referred to as Mainstream United States English (MUSE), Network American English or Broadcast Standard. Unlike its British counterpart, the American standard is not associated with any social class accent. It is rather associated with “levelled dialects of the Northern Midwest” (Milroy, 2001, p. 58); that is, varieties “shorn of those ideologised grammatical and lexical forms that index social, regional, or ethnic groups” (p. 82). In other words, ‘standard’ in Britain means to have a pronunciation similar to that of the high-class educated elites, whereas in the USA it means to avoid socially stigmatised grammatical structures and lexical items, such as ‘double negation’.

What do these language ideologies about the ‘standard’ entail as far as language variation and change is concerned? In Britain, deviation from the ‘standard’ means stigmatised associations with low-class speech. In the USA, similar deviation is associated with stigmatised ethnic groups. In other words, in both cases language variation and change is viewed as deviation not as natural, necessary and functional. Milroy (2001, p. 63) admits that within the standard language ideology “language change equates with language decay, and variation with

‘bad’ or ‘inadequate’ language.”

In the context of migration, Joo, Chik and Djonov (2021) examine heritage language maintenance among Korean migrants in Australia, focusing on how language ideologies impact heritage language retention across generations. While Australia’s linguistic diversity has grown with increased migration, many communities abandon their heritage languages in favour of English. Korean migrants, however, maintain Korean at relatively high rates. Despite this, a generational language shift to English is observed, and there is a decline in Korean language school enrolment among high school students. Using interviews with Korean-speaking primary and secondary students, the study finds that heritage language ideologies differ by age, shaped by contexts in which they use the heritage language and how they see themselves within these spaces.

The linguistic situation in the Arab world, which consists of 22 Arabic-speaking countries that are members of the Arab League and are primarily located in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, is an interesting example of language ideology. Each Arab country consists of a diglossic speech community where speakers use Standard Arabic within (Standard Arabic is used throughout to refer to both Classical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)) restricted formal domains and their local dialects for everyday communication. Diglossia, as a sociolinguistic phenomenon, refers to the co-existence of two language varieties in a speech community where one is considered a ‘high’ (H) and the other a ‘low’ (L) variety (Ferguson, 1959; Fishman, 1972). Interestingly, the functions of the two varieties are strictly specialised (Trudgill, 1974) that any attempts of a speaker to use the ‘high’ variety in everyday communication will be met by estrangement and/or laughter.

Al-Wer (1997) provides a detailed explanation of how diglossia developed in the Arab world as a result of the intertwined history of the Standard Arabic language and Islam. Standard Arabic, being the language of the Holy Quran, has held immense cultural and religious significance, symbolising the unity of the Islamic world. However, as centuries passed, the use of Standard Arabic began to fade in favour of regional dialects that reflected the everyday spoken language of different Arab speech communities. Despite numerous attempts to standardize one or more of these regional dialects and promote them as the new linguistic norm, these efforts consistently failed. This failure is largely attributed to the deep-rooted connection between Standard Arabic and the Arabs’ collective memory of their cultural and religious heritage. The prestige of Standard Arabic, tied to its use in religious texts and historical legacy, made it difficult for any regional dialect to replace it as the primary language of education or official discourse. In fact, there were attempts in the opposite direction, i.e., attempts to revive and promote Standard Arabic and make it suitable for all domains. The proponents of the ‘standard’ thought that through education, the ‘standard’ would “ultimately replace the spoken varieties in all domains” (Al-Wer, 1997, p. 254). Unfortunately, this did not happen. Al-Wer (1997) presents empirical evidence from Jordan that there is no relationship between the level of education and the use of the ‘standard’. She investigates the pronunciation of the ‘standard’ variants [θ] and [dʒ]. The findings of Al-Wer’s study indicate no correlation between the level of education of the speakers and their use of the ‘standard’ pronunciation of the variants under investigation in three Jordanian cities, namely Sult, Ajloun and Karak.

This persistent language ideology to use Standard Arabic as the medium of education at Arab schools and as the official language of all Arab countries despite the fact that it has no current native speakers neglects the natural process of language variation and change. In addition, it deprives children from being taught at school in their mother tongues, i.e., their spoken Arabic varieties. It is important not to view this as a criticism of the current linguistic landscape in the Arab world; rather, it is a description of the existing reality, where the ideology of preserving the Islamic Arab heritage is deeply rooted in the preservation of Standard Arabic. This effort to maintain Standard Arabic is driven by the desire to protect the religious and cultural legacy of Islam. However, Standard Arabic is not only significant for Muslim Arabs but also for Christian Arabs, who view the language as a vital connection to their Eastern Arab heritage (Darwish, 2012; Darwish & Bader, 2014; Darwish & Al-Damen, 2022; Darwish, Abu Ain & Bader, 2023).

Ideology plays important roles in translation too. Translation is not a mere “process of substituting a text in one language for a text in another” (Catford, 1965, p. 1); rather, it is a “rewriting of an original text” (Lefevere, 1992, p. xii). It goes without saying that “rewriting is basically determined by ideology and poetics” (Long, 2013, p. 110). Baker (2005, p. 4) “questions one of the narratives that dominate our disciplinary and professional discourses on translation, namely the narrative of translation as a means of promoting peace, tolerance and understanding through enabling communication and dialogue to take place.” She argues that scholars have long idealised the role of translators and the role they play in “mediating conflict, especially at times of international political upheaval” (p. 1). Political and cultural ideologies influence translators, whether intentionally or unintentionally, when they translate from one language into another; they may translate ‘demonstrations’ into ‘riots’, ‘The Arab Gulf’ into ‘The Persian Gulf’ and ‘Palestine’ into ‘Israel’ depending on the ideologies they

hold or the ideologies their employers hold (see Darwish, 2010 for manipulations related the Arab-Israeli conflict). Darwish and Sayaaheen (2019) discuss how book titles are manipulated in translation:

Manipulations are often motivated by multiple linguistic and non-linguistic reasons. For example, some titles are changed because the grammar of the target language does not permit the structure of the source title. Religious, economic (marketing), political, social and cultural reasons are always unavoidable when it comes to rendering new publications. Overall, different agents do play a role in deciding the publishable target titles. In other words, publishers and translators do not need to gamble with a risky target title that violates any religious, political and social norms in the receiving culture that might result in censoring it. (pp. 244-245)

Indeed, not only book titles are manipulated in translation, but also agreements, contracts, decisions and declarations. A case in point is how Arabs still insist on translating Balfour Declaration 1917 as waʿd (promise) not iʿlaan (declaration) (see Darwish and Sayaaheen, 2018 for more details). Even audiovisual translation is not free of cultural ideology. Darwish and Al-Yasin (2023) discuss how cultural adaptation is at play in transnational audiovisual remakes, such as movies, series and programmes.

3. Language Attitudes

Attitudes and ideologies “overlap in that they both consist of evaluations ... and it may help to keep in mind ‘attitudes as more unconscious assessments’ and ‘ideologies as more constructed assessments’” (Myers-Scotton, 2006, p. 110). Dyers and Abongdia (2010, p. 121) simplify the distinction by stressing that language ideologies are held by groups while language attitudes are often held by individuals. They further explain that while individuals are born in societies with language ideologies already in place, they “have the choice of either accepting the dominant ideologies or resisting them, and shaping their own attitudes towards languages.”

Dyers and Abongdia (2010) examine the attitudes of Francophone students in Cameroonian high schools towards English and the motivations behind learning it. Forty students were interviewed in order to obtain their attitudes towards English. A further 20 students were asked to write essays answering the question: “Do you like English?” In Cameroon, French dominates language use in official and unofficial domains, such as government departments, business, radio and television. The results show that the majority of students hold negative attitudes towards English and positive attitudes towards French. Positive attitudes towards English appear only when the respondents show a desire to work outside Cameroon emphasizing the power of English as a global language. The positive attitudes toward French are triggered by socio-political and economic factors in addition to strong links with identity. Dyers and Abongdia (2010) conclude that existing language ideologies in Cameroon might have affected the students’ responses. In other words, it seems that Cameroonian high school students accept the prevailing language ideologies in Cameroon that have been constructed under the influence of socio-political and historical factors over a long period of time.

Kirkpatrick, Kirkpatrick and Derakhshan (2024) explore the connection between Japanese students’ attitudes towards learning English and their academic motivation. Despite extensive research on motivation in educational settings, the impact of students’ attitudes on their motivation remains underexplored. To address this, a survey was administered to 417 Japanese elementary and high school students, with follow-up interviews conducted with teachers. Findings indicate that most students held positive attitudes towards learning English, which they felt significantly enhanced their motivation. These insights contribute to understanding the relationship between attitudes and motivation and offer practical guidance for educators in fostering motivation in language learning contexts.

Saidat (2010) investigates the attitudes of Jordanians towards Standard Arabic, on the one hand, and towards the Jordanian local varieties, on the other. His research tools include: phone calls, interviews and questionnaires. He does not specify the number of phone calls or interviews conducted. Nevertheless, he states that 119 questionnaires have been filled. The results show that 75% of the sample thinks that Standard Arabic reflects positive societal values. Second, 88% of the sample agrees that Standard Arabic unites all Arabs. Third, 56% of the respondents admit that the grammar of Standard Arabic is difficult. Fourth, 74% of the respondents contend that they felt well-educated when using Standard Arabic. Finally, 82% of the respondents think that Standard Arabic should replace all other local varieties in the 22 countries of the Arab World. When asked about their reasons for wanting the standard to replace all other regional varieties, the respondents provided numerous explanations in favour of Standard Arabic, such as: 1) it is the language of the Holy Quran; 2) it unites Arabs; 3) it is the language of the past generation (heritage); 4) it is the language of the educated, and 5) it is very beautiful-sounding.

The findings of Saidat (2010) resonate with the findings of Al-Wer (1997) reviewed earlier. It is obvious that the respondents in Saidat (2010) were influenced by the prevailing language ideology in the Arab World; that is, Standard Arabic reflects religious and social values of the Arabs; therefore, it should be protected to protect the Arab identity and to preserve the language of the Holy Quran.

Ever since its independence in 1956, Morocco has adopted one language policy that has emphasised Arabisation; that is, restoring the status of Standard Arabic which has been impacted by French for a long period of time. Moroccan politicians and language planners wanted to eradicate French from the official life in favour of Standard Arabic. However, in 2000, the “Charter for Educational Reform recognized the value and necessity of other languages already present in Morocco, and set out guidelines for improving the teaching and learning of these languages in Moroccan schools” (Marley, 2004, p. 25). To investigate the attitudes of students and teachers towards this new Charter, Marley (2004) conducted a study using a questionnaire that was distributed to 159 school students and their teachers. The findings show that “Both students and teachers appear to be widely in favour of a return to Arabic–French bilingualism within the education system, and approve decisions to introduce foreign languages at an earlier stage in the curriculum” (p. 25). As for the attitudes towards Standard Arabic, they were mainly positive, but there was a “general consensus that Morocco will benefit from increased bilingualism” (p. 25).

4. Linguistic Discrimination

Linguistic discrimination can be defined as the “unfair treatment of an individual or a group of individuals on account of their language or speech features such as accent” (Ng, 2007, p. 106). Strong language ideologies in favour of the dominant group’s varieties in any society often lead to linguistic discrimination. For instance, the influence of the ‘standard language ideology’ discussed earlier manifest itself in the form of linguistic discrimination against speakers of non-standard varieties. Milroy (2001) illustrates that the variety in New York is negatively evaluated as a non-mainstream variety. A possible explanation for such negative evaluation, she suggests, might be due to the fact that New York was the first destination for the poorest immigrants. The language varieties associated with “disfavoured ethnic minority groups are saliently foregrounded in this position in the ideological system ... the American ideological system thus provides for such negative attitudes towards Southern English” (Milroy, 2001, p. 82). African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has been discriminated against in the USA on the basis of colonial history and racial slavery. Although one might argue that it started as a pidgin and then developed into a creole before it gained native speakers and became a legitimate variety in the USA, it has always been looked down at as broken English. Other languages spoken by immigrants, such as Spanish and Chinese are always thought of as threats to the ‘social fabric’ of the American society; thus, they are often discriminated against in schools and the labour market (Milroy, 2001).

In Britain, the urban accents of the industrial cities (especially in the north) are often associated with low class and thus considered ‘bad English’. As a result, speakers of non-RP accents find it very hard to find good jobs in Britain. Smith (1997, p. 6) humorously advises that “if you have a Liverpool, Glasgow or Birmingham accent, and you are really keen to get that job, then learn sign language before your interview.”

Educational systems all over the world present ample examples of instances of linguistic discrimination. First, schools often use the standard form as the medium of instruction. This prevents children whose native languages or dialects are not ‘standard’ from being taught in their native tongues. A famous case for such a linguistic discrimination at American schools is the one reported by Labov (1982). As pointed at earlier, a group of African American parents at a mainly white school filed a law suit against the Ann Arbor School Board, because they thought their children were stigmatised and discriminated against because of their language differences. The teachers at that school had placed most of the African American students in ‘special education’ classes because they thought the students were ‘linguistically retarded’. The parents and their lawyers argued that the students were not ‘linguistically retarded’ but had language barriers as their native tongue was AAVE not Standard English. They also argued that the teachers did not make any efforts to bridge that language barrier because of their preconceived negative attitudes and biases towards the abilities of African American students. The court ruled in favour of the parents and Judge Joiner asked for a “plan defining the exact steps to be taken to help the teachers (1) to identify children speaking Black English, and (2) to use that knowledge in teaching such students how to read standard English” (Labov, 1982, p. 193).

A second instance of linguistic discrimination in the educational system comes from higher education. In many countries, universities often impose language requirements in particular languages as a condition of entrance (Ng, 2007). In Jordan, for instance, Jordanian students cannot succeed without learning English because it is a

compulsory subject at General Secondary Education Certificate Examination. In other words, failing the English language exam means failing high school altogether. In addition, passing the TOEFL is a must for the entry of graduate studies at all Jordanian universities even if the student wants to study Islamic Sharia or even Arabic language and literature! In my opinion, this violates some rights and presents what Ng (2007, p. 108) calls a “linguistic justification for a legalised discrimination.”

The media plays an important role in spreading negative stereotypes based on language variation. Lippi-Green (1997) reveals a relationship between foreign accents and the portrayal of good and evil in animated movies. He viewed 24 animated movies trying to establish a link between the varieties the 371 characters speak and their dramatic characterisation as good or evil characters. He concludes that “the overall representation of persons with foreign accents is far more negative than that of speakers of US or British English” (p. 92). In a similar study, Shaheen (2003) viewed 800 Hollywood movies. His findings show that Hollywood movies often portray Muslims and Arabs as heartless, brutal, uncivilised and religiously fanatic. Linguistically, Hollywood often shows Arabs with ‘thick accents’. Arab women are often mute in Hollywood movies. Shaheen (2003, p. 184) proclaims that “not only do the real Arab women never speak, but they are never in the work place.”

5. Conclusion

In this study, three interrelated concepts are discussed, namely language ideologies, language attitudes and linguistic discrimination. It has been shown that language ideologies and attitudes sometimes lead to linguistic discrimination. The ‘standard language’ ideology, for instance, favours the dominant group over the dominated and limits their chances to get good jobs in the labour market, get good education or even live a non-stigmatised life. Perhaps one of the most influential studies related to language discrimination is Phillipson’s (1992) book titled *Linguistic Imperialism*. In this book, Phillipson discusses the growth of English as a global language. He argues that the dominance of English all over the world is a continuation of the British Empire that once ruled the world. He considers the hegemony of English nowadays as a new form of imperialism. He contends that linguistic imperialism is one form of cultural imperialism that involves despising the language of the conquered and promoting the language of the conqueror or. Indeed, if people all over the world want to succeed in their lives nowadays, a mastery of English would be a great asset. Unfortunately, this is unfair and leads to the erasure of other varieties.

This study recommends that educators and policymakers adopt inclusive strategies to address linguistic discrimination, beginning with integrating multilingualism into educational settings to validate and respect all students’ linguistic backgrounds (Cummins, 2001). Language awareness programmes could be established to help both students and educators recognize and counteract biases arising from “Standard Language” ideologies, fostering a critical understanding of language norms (Lippi-Green, 1997). Revising language policies to support bilingual or multilingual documents and signage can also normalize linguistic diversity, challenging the hegemony of dominant languages like English (Phillipson, 1992). In assessment practices, educators should focus on students’ knowledge and communication abilities rather than penalizing non-standard language features, creating a more inclusive evaluation environment (Delpit, 1995). Finally, comprehensive training for teachers on language ideology and its effects on classroom dynamics is essential for building a more equitable and linguistically diverse learning environment (Fairclough, 1989). These approaches contribute to a more inclusive educational setting, which challenges linguistic biases and promotes social equity.

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Appendix A: Glossary of Terms

Language	“A system of conventional spoken, manual (signed), or written symbols by means of which human beings ... express themselves” (Britannica, 2024).
Dialect	A range of “a language that signals where a person comes from. The notion is usually interpreted geographically (regional dialect), but it also has some application in relation to a person’s social background (class dialect) or occupation (occupational dialect)” (Britannica, 2024).
Variety	A neutral term used to refer to any style or variation within one given language (Trudgill, 1974).
Language Discrimination	It is the prejudice or the unfair treatment towards individuals based on the language or dialect they speak (Lippi-Green, 1997).
Language Attitude	Language attitude is part of a set of beliefs and feelings towards different language varieties (Dragojevic, 2017).
Language Ideology	“A significant language ideology associated with the formation of modern nation-states constructs certain ways of speaking as “standard languages”; once a standard is defined, it is treated as prestigious and appropriate, while others languages or dialects are marginalized and stigmatized” (Britannica, 2024).
Speech Community	Is a group that shares values and attitudes about language use, varieties and speech in general (Morgan, 2014).
Ethnic Groups	“A social group or category of the population that, in a larger society, is set apart and bound together by common ties of race, language, nationality, or culture” (Britannica, 2024).