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Language Attitude Research in Indian Context: An Evaluation of Research Techniques

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to discuss theoretical ground of language attitude and its relation to the suitability and feasibility of the research technique particularly in India, as this territory is characteristically different from the European and the Latin American countries, where this field of study has flourished a lot. Language attitude is a relatively less explored field of study in the Indian context. It is a sub-discipline within realm of dynamic sociology of language under sociolinguistics. Conducting research in this area, thus, inevitably involves theoretical considerations of three main disciplines, namely linguistics, sociology and psychology. The truth that the Indian Subcontinent is a socio-linguistic giant makes the task of effective research in language attitude all the more complex and challenging in this country. It is, therefore, crucial to adopt and, if required, devise a method to test the actual attitude of the people towards language (s). The matched-guise technique is considered highly suitable for obtaining the actual attitudinal response of subjects, followed by the survey questionnaire method that gained popularity later on in the European countries. The methods used in these countries do not prove helpful in India, as their underlying principles have their own limitations. The relatively more appropriate method of research in this area should combine the participant observation and the qualitative questionnaire methods in a judicious manner in order to obtain and explicate the attitudinal responses in the Indian context, which has witnessed several language controversies and conflicts, including the Sanskrit-German controversy of late.

Key Words: Attitude, language, sociolinguistics, cognition, self-perception, social research, the participant observation method, survey questionnaire, the matched-guise technique

Language Attitude and Sociolinguistics:

The language use in a society corresponds to the social structure of that particular society at various levels. Individuals' preference of one language or language variety over the others is, thus, determined by several socio-cultural aspects of the society the individuals belong to. Sociolinguistics attempts at answering the questions of how linguistic choice is related to patterns of social behaviour and how members of one particular speech community perceive the language of those belonging to the different speech communities. To answer these questions would mean to describe

various relationships between language and society – one of them being language attitude, which seeks to provide an answer to the question "What accounts for differential changes in the social organization of language use and behaviour toward language?" (Fishman 1972: 2-3). Attitude is a vital concept in social psychology as Allport claims that it is 'social psychology's most distinctive and indispensible concept' (cited in Eiser 1986: 9) and therefore it is necessary to discuss various problems and issues related to attitude in social psychology.

Sociolinguistics has to enter into the psychological aspects of individuals that lead to specific attitudinal reactions towards particular languages. Before relating attitude to language behaviour, the first and foremost concern is to define attitude. However, there is no general consensus among psychologists over its definition because it has been seen differently by different social psychologists. The range of issues incorporated under the heading of attitude varies in terms of the approaches adopted for defining it. The social psychologists have been constantly modifying the definition of attitude and its relationship with the other social and psychological theories.

What is Attitude?

In a review of the history of attitude, Fleming (1967) claims that it 'crept into the English language around 1700 as a jargon term for artists to describe body position in a painting' and gradually its use was extended throughout the world of art and drama

(cited in Kahle 1984: 1). In drama, the word was used to imply 'a phoniness characteristic of actors and actresses pretending to be something rather than their "real" selves' (ibid.). Thus, it implied certain adaptation of special postures depending on the requirement of the assigned roles in drama. Baker (1992) also provides a similar account:

Attitude originally meant a posture or pose in painting or drama, as in 'adopt an attitude of innocence'. Derived from the Latin word 'aptitude' and the Italian 'atto' (Latin = *actus*), its root meaning, however, appears to be 'aptitude for action'. That is, having a tendency towards certain actions. (Baker 1992: 11)

The sense in which the term attitude was used during the first quarter of the 18th century can also be deduced from Allport's definition in which he says that attitude is 'a mental and neural state of readiness, organised through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related' (Allport 1935, quoted in Krosnick, Judd and Witten brink 2005: 22). It is clear in this definition that individuals perceive various objects of society and gain experience that is influenced by the disposition commonly shared by all members of society. There is complex interaction among various socio-cultural aspects and the shared knowledge about these aspects and one's response to a social object or phenomenon depends on this interaction.

Thurstone (1931) is of the opinion that attitude is 'affected for or against psychological object' and thus emphasises the positive and negative evaluation of a socio-psychological object (quoted in Garrett 2010: 19). Allport, following the similar lines, defines attitude more clearly as 'learned disposition to think, feel and behave toward a person (or object) in a particular way' (Allport 1954, quoted in ibid.). Here, Allport includes in his definition elements of thought and behaviour apart from the affective component, which Thurstone talks about in his definition. Sarnoff (1920) defines attitude as 'a disposition to react favourably or unfavourably to a class of objects' (quoted in Garrett 2007: 116).

Attitude is thus shaped through socio-cultural conditions which the individual members of a speech community are aware of. In the definition above, an individual's perception of socio-cultural conditions and social structure has been taken into account. Also, the definition suggests an element of evaluation that leads a person to evaluate a social object favourably or unfavourably. The members of a society generally share a common socio-cultural perspective. However, whether attitudes can lead to behaviour or not has always been a major issue of contention among social psychologists. Katz and Stotland (1959) give an operational definition of attitude – 'a tendency or predisposition to evaluate an object or symbol of that object in a certain way' (quoted in Kahle 1984: 4). This definition does not necessarily imply any behaviour as

such, but the use of the term "predisposition" here needs to be critically discussed as some psychologists do not believe it to be a precondition for attitude. Bem (1972), in his self perception theory of attitude, even goes on to refute the notion of attitude as a "predisposition". He maintains that an individual himself identifies his attitude through observing his own action and behaviour. If attitudes are recognisable only after one has observed one's behaviour, it means that they do not lead to behaviour. Thus, an attitude is not a predisposition, but a "postdisposition" resulting from observation of one's own behaviour (cited in Baker 1992: 11; Kahle 1984: 4).

The question of whether attitude is a predisposition or a postdisposition, whether attitude and behaviour are related to each other is still a very vague and debatable matter to be answered. However, there is no denying the fact that attitude is a mental phenomenon, even if it is called a postdisposition. It is only through one's experience and mental processing of information about an object that one frames positive or negative attitude towards that object. Even Bem's theory of self-perception indicates to a sort of introspection that a person goes through while observing his own behaviour.

Oppenheim includes in his elaboration of attitude elements of cognition, abstraction and behaviour, maintaining that it is a psychological construct: 'It is an inner component of mental life which expresses itself, directly or

indirectly, through much more obvious processes as stereotypes, beliefs, verbal statements or reactions, ideas and opinions, ...' (Oppenheim 1982, quoted in Garret 2010: 19). The most significant point that Oppenheim maintains is that attitude can only be inferred from manifestations of an individual's emotions in various forms such as statements, reactions, ideas and opinions, as it is a psychological construct. Since it is a construct, it cannot be observed but can be inferred from the mental and emotional phenomena which he emphasises in his definition. The knowledge and experience of the social objects and assimilation of the experiences into minimal abstraction have been emphasised by the other social psychologists also, such as Piaget (1952) and Kahle, Kulka and Klingel (1980).

In Piaget's point of view, attitude is one of the social cognitions and therefore it should be seen in relation to how other social cognitions work and how individuals adapt themselves to social environment with the help of these cognitions: '[T]here is adaptation when the organism is transformed by the environment and when this variation results in an increase in the inter-changes between the environment and itself which are favourable to preservation' (Piaget 1952, quoted in Kahle 1984: 4). In the process of interaction, which is the first function of cognition, the individual and the environment influences each other and finally the individual come to terms with it by assimilating new information. The assimilation of new information with the existing knowledge forms a range of experiences about the social world and its objects. The second function of cognition is to reduce these experiences to minimal abstraction, that is, 'to reduce the infinite number of stimuli [new information] that constantly impinge on a person to a manageable number of abstract propositions [about the objects of the social world]' (Kahle 1984: 5). Having discussed various definitions of attitude, this paper is based on the following generalisation about attitude:

An individual collects all bits and pieces of information about an object and has capacity to process them to form various sets of experience. These sets are converted into abstract generalisations, through interaction between an individual and the environment (or the specific objects of environment), to form attitude. Therefore, one's attitude plays a crucial role in determining one's behaviour, evaluation of an object and action directly or indirectly. This generalisation is also supported by the multicomponent model of attitude proposed by Rokeach, which assumes that attitude is a compound of a system of beliefs that are further composed of cognitive, affective and behavioural components (Rokeach 1968, cited in Agheyisi and Fishman 2009: 79-80)

Dimensions of Language Attitude

All sorts of verbal communication demands use of one or the other language and human beings use it as a tool for expressing themselves, achieving their interpersonal and social

goals of various kinds and expressing solidarity with or difference from others, etc. Therefore, language is essentially a social phenomenon in nature and influenced by social and psychological aspects of the people, who use it for a variety of purposes.

There are two dimensions of language attitude, which have been prominent since the 1959 volume of Gardner and Lambert, on the role of language attitudes in second language learning. Here, we find and adequate treatment of these dimensions, specifically in terms of language learning. The first dimension is instrumental attitudes and the second is integrative attitudes. Instrumental attitude is related to utilitarian purposes and it is characterised by 'a desire to gain social recognition and economic advantages through knowledge of a foreign language' (Gardner and Lambert 1972: 14). On the other hand, integrative attitude is related to the desire for affiliation as it is characterised by 'a desire to be like representative members of the other language community' (ibid.). No study of language policy and planning can be successful without taking into account the social-psychological aspects of language(s). Language attitude studies provide an important insight into 'status, value and importance of a language' (Baker 2006: 211). Thus, language attitude studies have profound significance in a variety of areas including language planning and policy, minority languages, second and foreign language acquisition and bilingualism. The relevance of

language attitude research can be summarised as follows:

- Language attitude as area of study forms the core of sociology of language, as the study of perceptions about various speech communities under the rubric of attitudes is of great importance in the sociology and social psychology of language.

- It provides adequate explanations for sociolinguistic phenomena in terms of socio-psychological processes, such as language variation, language change, language decay and language death, etc.

- It plays a major role in language planning and implementation of language policy.

- A successful methodology for second language teaching/learning involves consideration of language attitude of learners, for example, Krashen lays emphasis on language attitudes of learners in the "active filter" hypothesis of his "monitor model" (cited in Harley 2001: 147).

Techniques for Collecting the Data

The oldest technique of the data collection is the interview technique. The focus here is on the unstructured interview, which is usually used in the qualitative research. The qualitative interview can be further divided broadly into two main types – the unstructured interview and the semi-structured interview. Here, it should be clear that '[R]esearches sometimes employ the term 'qualitative interview'

to encapsulate these two types of interview' (Bryman 2008: 436).

The term 'unstructured interview' can be defined as having 'a list of topics or issues, often called an **interview guide**… [and] the style of questioning is usually informal. The phrasing and sequencing of questions will vary from interview to interview' (ibid: 196). The semi-structured interview lies somewhere between unstructured and the structured interview. It focuses on defined answered, 'leaving time for further development … including more open-ended questions' (Walliman 2005: 285). The semi-structured interview, according to Bryman, provides an interviewer an opportunity to have 'some latitude to ask further questions in response to what are seen as significant replies' (2008: 196).

The unstructured and the semi-structured interviews in collecting the qualitative data and can be of great help in exploring the language attitude of individuals of particular speech communities. The qualitative interviews may be helpful in a national-level research on language attitude in order to adequately guide language maintenance and language planning. It is crucial to note that such interviews can be 'particularly effective for attitude assessment, when used to complement the observational method' (Agheyisi and Fishman 2009: 92).

The quantification of the data, which is an essential element of the structured interview and survey questionnaire techniques, cannot be helpful in delving deeper in the attitude of the

people towards language, which is a complex socio-psychological phenomenon. Defining the structured interview, Punch (2005) says that '[I]n structured interviews the respondent is asked a series of pre-established questions, preset response categories' (170). Bryman points out that in a structured interview '[Q]uestions are usually very specific and very often offer the interviewee a fixed range of answers' (2009: 193). Since the choice of answers is restricted in accordance with what the interviewer wants to know, the interviewee cannot deviate from it to give elaborate answers, and thereby making the task of measuring data possible. The nature of questions in this type of interview is, thus, similar to that of the self-completion questionnaire (survey questionnaire).

One of the important measurement techniques in the language attitude is the semantic differential instrument, which was developed in the 1950s by Charles Osgood and his associates at the University of Illinois (Bernard 2000: 303). In this technique, the respondent is not asked to give any opinion statement, as in the unstructured interview or open ended questionnaire. Instead, 'the actual names or terms of reference' are used and respondents are asked to evaluate them in terms of paired adjectives on a continuum of a 7-point scale developed by Osgood et al. (Agheyisi and Fishman 2009: 88 & 89). In fact, this is an instrument or scale with a questionnaire to measure the attitude or evaluational reactions of respondents.

According to Punch (2005), 'the semantic differential asks the people to

respond to different concepts using rating scales running between bipolar adjective pairs… to get affective responses, focusing on the evaluative dimensions' (100). In my opinion, the limitation of this technique is that respondents' awareness of the target concept due to direct questions may prevent respondents from evaluating the concept exactly the way they think. And, thus, the researcher may not be able to capture the actual affective component of attitude towards a particular language. Closed-ended questions facilitate data collection more easily in comparison to open-ended questions, but whether it can get to know the actual, private attitude of the respondents or not is doubtful and debatable.

All the research techniques used in the language attitude research can broadly be summarised under three research approaches – the societal treatment approach, the direct approach and the indirect approach. The present paper is an attempt to reinforce the significance of societal treatment approach that includes participant observation method of collecting data, considering the nature of language attitude as a complex of the cognitive, the behavioural and the affective. Participant observation is a 'technique of data collection in which the sociolinguist either becomes a member of the group being investigated or is already a member of that group' (Llamas, Mullany, et. *al.* 2007: 225).The societal treatment approach is a 'broad category that typically includes observational (e.g. **ethnographic**) studies, or the analysis

of various sources within the public domain – for example, the discourse of government or educational policy documents, employment and consumer advertisements, novels, television programmes, cartoons, style and etiquette books (Garrett 2007: 116). However, this method of data collection has 'tended to receive insufficient foregrounding in contemporary mainstream reviews of language attitudes research' (ibid.).

Conclusion

The language attitude researches in the Indian context so far have used the survey questionnaire technique to collect the data (e.g. Kailash Aggarwal, 1988; Sukhdev Singh, 2006). In my opinion, the survey questionnaire is of a little help while aiming to elicit the actual language attitude of the respondents, because the response with predefined set of options cannot judge the attitude in a complex linguistic and social scenario pervasive across India – a linguistic setting in which there is always a difference between the social and global expectations on the one hand and the sense of belongingness to rich and diverse Indian culture on the other.

The participant observation method provides a researcher an opportunity to make qualitative observations, which are obviously informal in nature, on a speech community without making the respondents socially conscious. The more the respondents are natural, the more accurate attitudinal response can be obtained. In the later phase of research, a researcher can use qualitative interview focusing

especially on those issues that need deeper and wider understanding. Such terms of reference can be obtained in the informal observation of the group or community. Thus a combination of participant observation method and qualitative interview will help researcher to capture the inner-most attitude in a more effective way.

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