The impact of dialect contact on language attitudes

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Decades of research in folk linguistics (e.g. Niedzielski and Preston 2000) have documented non-linguists’ conceptions of the speech world around them. This line of research has consistently found that some ways of speaking are preferred over others and that disapproval of stigmatized varieties is often expressed in hateful and occasionally violent terms. Such attitudes are, of course, reflections of broader societal prejudices against the speakers of the stigmatized varieties. Moreover, it is clear that judgments are often made about the speech of a given group absent any direct experience with a member of that group. We might expect that the influence of stereotypes – linguistic and otherwise – would diminish with improved contact among groups.

This study tests that expectation by examining language attitudes in a site of intense dialect contact, the campus of a large state university in the Midwestern US. We use data from a series of perceptual dialectological surveys to construct an apparent-time window onto the development of attitudes over the course of college life. We gathered responses to three different survey instruments from roughly 1,000 students total. The surveys incorporated different tasks including mapping perceived dialect regions and rating dialects in terms of pleasantness and correctness. One survey contained open-ended items exploring students’ own experiences with dialect diversity in the university setting.

Some of our results mirror patterns found in previous research on other regions; e.g. devaluation of rural and “Southern” speech as well as AAVE. More troubling is the apparent-time picture, where we see a hardening of attitudes over the course of one’s college career; along with biology, psychology, history, and their other academic subjects many students seem to learning how better to discriminate. Dialects/locales that are favored by students in their first years at school are ranked even higher by those in the third and fourth years while dialects that are disfavored by younger students show even stronger disfavor among older students. These results stand in clear conflict with the institution’s stated goals of welcoming diversity and promoting tolerance, and we explore this contradiction in the broader context of the role of educational system in language standardization.

Reference