

## LECTURE 2: SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES

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[**ideology**: A system of ideas or way of thinking pertaining to a class or individual, esp. as the basis of some economic or political theory or system, regarded as justifying actions and *esp. to be maintained irrespective of events* (Shorter Oxford Dictionary – my italics.)]

### 1. STANDARDIZATION

**Standardization consists of the imposition of uniformity upon a class of objects.**

This description does not imply that a standard language is necessarily *the highest prestige variety or the most correct variety*. It associates language standardization with standardization of other things, such as weights and measures, electric plugs, even cans of tomato soup. In all these, the desideratum is **uniformity** or invariance, and, in this way, standardization is **functional**.

### 2. AN UNSTANDARDIZED UNIVERSE

#### 2.1 Unstandardized weights and measures

(a) Until the nineteenth century, the Scottish mile had measured 5,952 feet, the Irish mile 6,720 feet, and the English mile 5,280 feet. The yard measure had been fixed in every reign by the King's girth. (Norman Davies, *The Isles: a History*. Macmillan, 1999).

(b) (Germany, c. 1550) "Andreas Ryff, a merchant... is ... troubled by the nuisances of the times; as he travels he is stopped approximately once every ten miles to pay a customs toll; between Basle and Cologne he pays thirty-one levies ... Each community he visits has its own money, its own rules and regulations, its own law and order. In the area around Baden alone there are 112 different measures of length, 92 different square measures, 65 different dry measures, 163 different measures for cereals and 123 for liquids, 63 special measures for liquor, and 80 different pound weights" (Robert L Heilbroner, *The worldly philosophers* (7th ed.). New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999, 22).

#### 2.2 Unstandardized language situations

(a) (on Pacific languages) "One of the things I found most puzzling was that in some areas the people seem to have no conception of what their language is and no sense of belonging to a linguistic community" (George Grace, *More on 'aberrant languages'*. Paper presented at the Sixth International Conference on Austronesian linguistics, 1991, 15).

(b) The Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English records immense variation in Middle English spelling, including, for example, about 500 different spellings of the word *through*, mostly from the period 1300-1500. Even within one text there can be much variability. The linguistic situation in English around 1300 is comparable to the economic situation described in #2.1(b).

### 3. THE PROCESS OF LANGUAGE STANDARDIZATION

3.1 The chief linguistic consequence of successful standardization is a high degree of uniformity in language structure.

3.2 Standardization is brought about by inhibiting linguistic variability and change.

3.3 Standardization is implemented and promoted primarily through written forms of language and normally spreads from these into more formal registers of spoken usage.

3.4 Standardization is first adopted for administrative functions and is imposed by groups who have political/economic power.

3.4 Standardization is maintained and advanced by the promotion of an ideology of correctness in the community.

3.5 The chief aim of language standardization is to achieve 'functional elaboration', i.e., to render the language usable in a variety of elaborated functions, largely in written or formal usage.

3.6 (The drive towards standardization of English) "But what I have most at Heart is, that some Method should be thought on for *ascertaining* and *fixing* our language for ever... For I am of Opinion, that it is better a Language should not be wholly perfect, than that it should be perpetually changing ... (Jonathan Swift, *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1712). reprinted in W.F. Bolton, *The English Language*, CUP, 1QA966,116-117).

#### 4. THE STANDARD LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY

**4.1 Correctness:** If there are two or more variants of, say, the same grammatical form, then only one of these can be the 'correct' form. There is enforcement of the standard from within the educational system and through the media and official documents.

**4.2 Prestige:** Some varieties of language are considered to carry high prestige, whereas others are believed to carry low prestige. Prestige is attributed by human beings to the varieties of language used by particular groups - it is not primarily a property of a variety of language. Standard varieties normally acquire prestige in so far as powerful social groups believe it to be in their interests to use standard varieties.

**4.3 Legitimacy:** This is conferred on a variety of a language during the process of standardization. It has the effect of rendering other varieties illegitimate. The lawfulness of the standard is greatly enhanced and supported by giving it a respectable history.

**4.4 Economic value:** All these things mean that the standard variety acquires a value: it can bring about benefits to the speaker, and is therefore thought to be worth acquiring.

#### 5. A STANDARD LANGUAGE CULTURE

In standard language cultures the standard language is believed to be the same thing as the language as a whole. There is a consciousness among speakers of a 'correct', or canonical, form of the language. Language is seen as a **cultural** phenomenon analogous to art, religion or law, rather than a mental or cognitive phenomenon. As it is felt to have an existence outside of the speaker, it is by implication **not** the inalienable possession of the native speaker: its correct forms are pre-determined and must be acquired by speakers.

##### 5.1 Common sense:

It is **common sense** that some forms are right and others wrong. An utterance such as *I seen it* is obviously wrong, and *I saw it* is equally obviously correct. This is common sense: everybody knows it, it is part of the culture to know it, and if you think otherwise you are an outsider - you are not a participant in the common culture.

(a) "Bad grammar is acceptable for schoolchildren, an official report recommended yesterday. And last night it engulfed Education Secretary Kenneth Baker in a furious row" (*London Daily Mail*, November 11, 1988).

(b) "Common sense is winning out. Common sense is back in fashion. Standards of English must improve" (Kenneth Baker, British Secretary of State for Education, 1988).

Adverse judgements on persons who use language 'incorrectly' are thought to be **purely linguistic** judgements - if they turn out to be discriminatory in terms of race or social class, that is not the point. It is believed that it is open to everyone to learn to speak the language correctly, and if they do not do this, it is their own fault as individuals: after all, there are plenty of models of 'good' speech that they can learn from.

### **5.2 The apocalyptic view (language always in decline):**

"It should not be forgotten that care and decision have operated in the development of a language. There is not much of a future for any language if it is left exclusively in the hands of the careless and the ignorant Or worse, in the hands of those powerful minorities -who exploit degraded forms of language for their own ends" (Bernard Richards, Oxford, quoted in the *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, January 25, 1998).

### **5.3 The literary canon:**

Fortunately, at the present time, the great majority of the English Dialects are of very little importance as representatives of English speech, and for our present purpose we can afford to let them go, except in so far as they throw light upon the growth of those forms of our language which are the main objects of our solicitude, namely the language of Literature and Received Standard Spoken English (H. C. Wyld, *A short history of English*, 3rd ed., 1927, 16).

[In this view, the history of English is almost exclusively the history of standard English and is entwined with literary history. Urban varieties, being ignorant or careless attempts to imitate the

standard, have no histories of their own; thus, they are illegitimate forms and can be ignored in linguistic description.]

### **5.4 The centrality of the standard ideology:**

"And it should be obvious that, once debate is focused on linguistic issues in terms of The Standard versus whatever purportedly polar opposites, then the fact that the situation is conceptualized in terms of The Standard indicates ... its hegemonic domination over the field of controversy, no matter what position is taken with respect to it" (Michael Silverstein, Monoglot "standard" in America: standardization and metaphors of linguistic hegemony. In *The matrix of language*, edited by Donald Brenneis and Ronald K. S. Macaulay. Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1996, p.284).

[In a standard language culture 'the Standard' dominates our thinking about language, whether we are linguistic 'scientists' or just ordinary people.]

### 5.5 Language and nation:

(a) "It is evident that unity of speech is essential to the unity of a people. Community of language is a stronger bond than identity of religion or government, and contemporaneous nations of one speech, however formally separated by differences of creed or of political organisation, are essentially one in culture, one in tendency, one in influence" (George P Marsh, cited from *Lectures on the English Language*, ed. W Smith. London, John Murray 1865,153).

(b) "... eyes should be opened to the Unity of English, that in English literature there is an unbroken succession of authors, from the reign of Alfred to that of Victoria, and that the English which we speak now is absolutely one in its essence, with the language that was spoken in the days when the English first invaded the island and defeated and overwhelmed its British inhabitants" (Walter W. Skeat (1873), cited in Tony Crowley, *Standard English and the politics of language*. University of Illinois Press, 1989,48).

### 5.6 The pure language:

(a) "Though English thus received vast additions to its vocabulary, it still remained essentially a German [sic] tongue ... The English language is not the result of a mixture of Anglo-Saxon and French, as it is sometimes represented to be; and indeed a mixed language, in the strict sense of the term, may be pronounced an impossibility" (W. Smith, in Marsh, 1865, 37).

[English is here given a lineage or pedigree: it is a genuine Germanic language, not a hybrid or a mongrel (this contradicts the views of many contemporaries, e.g. William Barnes, who considered it to be a 'mongrel speech').]

(b)"... it is by no means easy to discriminate, at all times, between positive corruptions, which tend to the deterioration of a tongue ... and changes which belong to the character of speech, as a living semi-organism connatural with man or constitutive of him, and so participating in his mutations ... Mere corruptions ... which arise from extraneous or accidental causes, may be detected, exposed and, if not healed, at least prevented from spreading beyond their source and infecting a whole nation. To pillory such offences ... to detect and expose the moral obliquity which too often lurks beneath them, is the sacred duty of every scholar..." (Marsh, 458).

[The ideology dictates that the language must be ancient, pure (English cannot be a 'mixed' language) and historically continuous: there should have been no break in the transmission of the language from generation to generation.]

Jim Milroy, June 2004