

Tools and Technologies of Language Documentation
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Lecture-08

Lecture 08 : Language attitude and vitality

Hello everyone, you are attending the course, Tools and Technologies of Language Documentation offered by IIT Kharagpur and NPTEL. Today I will be delivering Lecture 8 of Module 2 which is Various Attributes of Language Documentation, and the title of today's lecture is Language Attitude and Vitality. So now you are familiar with both the terms 'language vitality' and 'language attitude'. We will try to link these two and try to understand the relationship between these two. So in today's class, we will initially talk about determinants of language attitude, then explore the influence of language attitudes, then try to understand what do we mean by overt and covert prestige, and finally, we will be talking about the relationship between language vitality and attitudes. So I will begin the class with this idea of good and bad language.

I am sure you are familiar with these terms and you have also heard people using these terms very often that please speak in good language, please use good language and do not use bad language. So this is not something which is very casual, rather it has a number of different consequences and the background is also an area where there is a complexity in terms of theoretical understanding. So if we think about language attitude, we will see that like attitudes toward languages reflect attitude of the users and the uses of language. So how a community member is looking at the language use of another community member, it is related to the attitude that the person has towards the community and their language.

So if they are using a marker like good language or bad language which we often do, we need to directly try to understand what kind of attitude is acting behind these terms. So here let me mention the example of the case of Danish. So there is a quote "Danish is not a language, but a throat disease". This quote was made by Norwegian respondent to a 1950s postal questionnaire. See this postal questionnaire tried to get some opinion from Scandinavian people and they tried to understand this relative aesthetic values of Norwegian, Danish and Swedish.

So if you ask why this person has made such a harsh comment, you have to understand the political and social scenario and we can understand that the speaker was talking about you know Danish with some kind of negative attitude. So in this overall survey, which use this questionnaire, we found that Swedish was first and Danish was at the bottom of the survey because the reason, I mean if you try to find out the reason, we will see that Sweden was the political leader of that point and Denmark which was the formal ruling power did not have much power at that point of time when the survey was done. But later when Denmark became a member of European economic community, it changed the attitude towards Danish language. So, we need to understand the social and political backdrop, where these users are having some kind of attitude either positive or negative attitudes toward the speakers of other languages. So, at this point if I ask you what are the determinants of language attitudes, we can say that yes it is determined by social and political factors as we have seen in the example of Danish.

And we will see that attitudes towards pidgins, creoles or any natural hybrids will be negative, because these are not having some kind of platform which is being supported by some institution. But if a creole is being supported by say if you remember the vitality status may be media, may be institutional resources, then it will be gaining some positive attitude. But this negative attitude towards languages will also lead to some kind of discrimination and there were also incidents of riots in India because of negative attitudes towards some languages. So if we think about the influences of language attitudes, we can again go back to the idea of language vitality that you have already discussed and give an example from the domain of education. So in classroom situations in case of schools, we see that negative attitudes towards languages affect the domain of education, the overall domain is affected.

If the teachers have a negative attitudes toward the students' language, if other students who speak dominant languages have a negative attitudes towards a students' language which is a non-dominant language, it will affect the domain of education. School will act as a platform which will initiate language shift. So I will give an example of Somalia at this point, where there were some debates regarding which script should be used for literacy. So this debate was there because Arabic was supported by people who were considering culture and cultural and religious significance, but Roman script, the script that we use for English was supported by people who wanted to consider the usefulness of the script and also access to technology. Some community members also proposed a kind of hybrid script to get rid of the debate, but finally, Roman script won.

So when we say that Roman script won, you can figure out that its usefulness and technology, which is more important than cultural and religious significance. So it is

some kind of attitude which is compelling the institution to accept one particular script, not the others. So we have to be careful while evaluating the attitudes of different speech communities. At this point, it is very important for you to know the difference between overt and covert prestige. So you have some idea about prestige right, it is a very slippery concept.

So you can say that standard varieties have overt prestige. So any kind of standard variety which owns power, which enjoys power, they will have overt prestige of course. And at times, speakers value their language, but do not disclose it to others which is strangers. What is happening in this case? This is something called covert prestige. So you have some kind of prestige inside your community, maybe at home domain, but when you are meeting a stranger, you do not disclose your linguistic identity.

So it is a problem. And if you think about speech rating scale, which I will explain later, speech rating scale can use some pointers in order to understand or test the language attitudes among the speakers of a community. And I will tell you that it is of course, related to the idea of vitality because I will tell you even in today's lecture how it is directly related to the assessment of vitality. And if we think about negative attitudes towards certain linguistic varieties, it may lead to educational disadvantage for children. At this point, I will also mention the Deficit Hypothesis by Bernstein.

I am sure some of you are familiar with this hypothesis, which says that some kind of deficit is there among the speakers who speak the non-standard languages. So it is a negative label which is given to the children of non-dominant languages because they do not have fluency in the target school language. So this is a classical example of negative attitude and there have been people working on these deficit hypothesis in classroom situation which is negative attitude again. So now if I ask you to consider the role of language attitudes and policies, we will go back to the vitality questions. I am sure you remember that we talked about attitude issues while discussing the factors of assessing language vitality for different languages.

So language attitudes are powerful for either promotion of a language or loss of a language. This is super important for all of us. And attitudes of the dominant speech community may promote the language of non-dominant speech community or it can abandon them. So, if the dominant speech community allows another non-dominant community to use their language in public domain, they have a positive attitude towards them, then the speakers will not shift to the dominant community speech. And if the community, the dominant community has a negative attitude, then shift will take place and the speakers of non-dominant languages will abandon their language.

So attitude will directly relate to language shift. So when we discussed about different factors of language shift, I am sure you remember that I briefly mentioned the idea of language attitude. So we are coming back to them again. So if you think about policies, we know that the government creates language policy of a country. So if a dominant group who is running the government has some kind of negative attitudes toward the non-dominant speech community, then it will affect the policy draft, it will affect the formulation of the policy.

Again the policy will be followed in domains like education, where some kind of disadvantage will be received by the children of that community and some kind of language shift will be initiated. So you have to understand this circular relationship between attitude, vitality and shift. So we have already discussed the following. I am sure you remember the difference between attitude from external agencies and attitude from community-internal perspectives. So we discussed them while talking about vitality.

So I am coming back to them again. So if government and institutional language attitude and policies like equal support, differentiated support, I am sure it is it rings a bell because you already talked about them, you already learnt about them. And we also talked about passive assimilation right, how a community is gradually being assimilated to a different speech community. But when we talk about attitudes of institutions, government, it is equally important for us to understand the community members attitude towards their own language, whether they are ashamed or proud of their language. So, we already talked about it, but here I am emphasizing on this topic again that we need to have an idea of attitude from both the directions.

We have to understand the governmental role and the role of the community member in order to think about the maintenance. So I will come to the conclusion part of this lecture, and I will tell you very briefly that in the next lecture that I will be giving, I will be talking about how to design a questionnaire to understand the language attitude of the community. So it can be qualitative, it can be quantitative, but if you want to have an detailed idea of the community's language attitude and if you want to create a questionnaire, there are some available questionnaires which can help you to understand the attitude of the target speech community and if you are a community member, you can also take help of the questionnaire to evaluate the situation. And another topic that I will be covering later is how attitudes shape the domain of education. So this is related to language shift, this is related to attitude and also, as you have seen this is related to the vitality.

So as I told you all these three concepts are related concepts. So I will come back to this in detail while talking about the domain of education and share some examples from our

work again. So I hope you enjoyed this brief lecture, here are the key references and thank you!