

LANGUAGE ATTITUDES AND SCOTTISH INFERIORITY

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In an earlier issue of **Scottish Affairs**, Cusick (1994) discusses the results of an experiment which apparently support the view that Scots see themselves as inferior to and less articulate than the English. Briefly, the participants in the experiment, all people who considered themselves Scottish, were asked to rank four short stories in order of preference. Some of the participants heard the stories being read, two by people with Scottish accents and two by people with English accents. Other participants both heard and read the stories. Whether the author was English or Scottish was not stated explicitly, although the written versions of the stories carried the author's name at the top of the first page. Two names were 'distinctively' Scottish and the other two names were 'distinctively' English. For the written stories the participants graded the Scottish names and English names almost equally, but for the stories that were heard on tape the English 'names' collected far more points than the Scottish 'names'. Asking whether the latter result reflects a feeling of inferiority or a distaste for Scottish accents, Cusick comments that if the latter is the case then it is worth asking why Scots hold this attitude.

The question is indeed worth asking, and Cusick's experiment too was original and well worth carrying out. There are, however, a number of additional points that should be taken into account by anyone intending to pick up the gauntlet. Are the language attitudes revealed by Cusick peculiar to Scots? Do her results jibe with the everyday language behaviour and language attitudes of Scots?

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ARE NEGATIVE LANGUAGE ATTITUDES PECULIARLY SCOTTISH?

The answer to the first question is straightforward - 'no'; for many years experiments elsewhere have produced similar results, similar in that during such experiments minority groups of speakers in this or that country have downgraded members of their groups. That is, they have listened to audio recordings of members of their group and members of other groups and have evaluated the former as inferior to the latter in various respects. The earliest experiment in the relevant literature is Lambert et al. (1960), which deals with attitudes towards speakers of Canadian English and Canadian French. Lambert and his colleagues developed the matched-guise technique, whereby the participants in the experiment were unaware that the speakers they were listening to on tape had each contributed two recordings, one in English and one in French. To cut a long and complex story short, the speakers were favourably evaluated in their English-Canadian guise with respect to qualities such as intelligence, dependability, and likeability, but were unfavourably evaluated in their French-Canadian guise.

Experiments based on the matched-guise technique have been used to investigate attitudes towards Spanish and American English in a Mexican American community in Chicago, attitudes among adult Muslims in Israel towards Arabic and Hebrew (both reported in Fasold 1984, pp.147-179), and reactions among speakers of standard English and Welsh English to public announcements spoken with Received Pronunciation (loosely, old-style 'BBC English') and with a Welsh-English pronunciation. (See Bourhis and Giles, 1976.) Large cities seem to have in common that their citizens who speak with the local accent have nothing good to say about it. In a famous sentence, Labov (1972, p.136) said that 'New York City, as a speech community, may be regarded as a sink of negative prestige', and similar comments could be made about Glasgow, Belfast, Birmingham, Newcastle and of course London. Giles and Powesland (1975) report an experiment in which a researcher gave talks on psychology to groups of 17 year olds in a school. One talk was delivered in Received Pronunciation (RP) and the other in a Birmingham accent. After each talk the audience was asked to write down all that they knew about psychology, and after the lecturer had left the room, his female research assistant asked the audience to say whether they thought the lecturer a suitable person to give talks to groups of senior school pupils on psychology. In his RP guise the lecturer was rated far more highly than in his Birmingham guise and also received far more written material from the pupils.

PROPERTIES OF SPEECH RELEVANT TO CUSICK'S EXPERIMENT

The few references given above make it clear that Cusick's results are consonant with a larger pattern - but the major point to be made in the remainder of this article is that the interpretation of the various experimental results is not straightforward. Before developing this point, we turn to the second question concerning the delicacy of Cusick's approach to language use. Cusick does not provide enough data for the question to be answered, but it is worthwhile indicating the points that are missing. We are told nothing about the speech of the speakers. Did the English speakers have RP accents? Or, for example, local London, Manchester or Newcastle accents? Or educated Manchester or Newcastle accents? Did the Scottish speakers have educated Glasgow or Edinburgh accents or local Glasgow or Edinburgh accents?

The general answers to these questions might be sufficient, but further questions can be asked. What kind of voice quality did the speakers have - very relevant, as general voice quality varies across the populations and there is a connection between the variation and social and geographical factors. What were the speakers' vowel systems? What kind of consonants did they have? What intonation patterns? The questions about vowels and consonants can be answered in a detailed fashion that would be inappropriate both here and in Cusick's paper, but it is worth pointing out that typically people who disapprove of a given pronunciation focus on particular features; that is, they react to certain shibboleths. The shibboleths are quite clear with respect to broad Scottish pronunciation.

Some twenty years ago I made a recording for a student studying for the MSc in Applied Linguistics at Edinburgh University. He was carrying out a matched-guise experiment with pupils in an Edinburgh primary school, and asked me to record the same text - an 'excerpt' from conversation composed by me - in a more Scottish voice and less Scottish voice. My everyday pronunciation has the vowel system described as Educated Scottish Standard English in Aitken (1984). The voice quality and intonation are middle-class West Lothian heavily influenced by 35 years in Edinburgh. To make my everyday voice less Scottish I removed or weakened the 'r' sound in words like 'car' and weakened it in words like 'round'. I changed the vowel in words such as 'road' and 'home' to a sound like the vowel that Malcolm Rifkind has in these words. For the more Scottish voice, I produced strong 'r' sounds - taps instead of approximants, in technical terms - and replaced some 't'

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sounds with glottal stops. A further change was to replace some instances of, for example, 'isn't' or 'is not' with 'isnae'. The less-Scottish voice was also accompanied by some occurrences of 'shall', whereas the more-Scottish voice produced only 'will'. These relatively minor adjustments were sufficient to persuade the groups of primary school pupils that in my less-Scottish guise I was capable of running a business or being a politician, whereas in my more-Scottish guise I was deemed not capable. On the other hand, in my more-Scottish guise I was judged trustworthy, reliable and friendly, but not in my less-Scottish guise.

INTERPRETING THE RESULTS OF THE EXPERIMENT

Language attitudes can be manipulated by small changes to key items - the trick is to find what the key items are for given varieties of a given language. There remains the central question of how the experimental results relate to the speakers and listeners in the real world. The evidence of television and radio is that many speakers of educated Scottish English are successful politicians, businessmen, lawyers, doctors, academics and bankers. There are also many successful Scottish actors and actresses. Some remain recognisably Scottish (such as Brian Cox) while others come in various guises, witness David Rintoul's transition from *Pride and Prejudice* to the *Thrie Estaits* and Dr Finlay. There is no evidence to show that on linguistic grounds Scots believe Scottish professional and business people to be incompetent or to be less capable than their English equivalents.

Milroy and Milroy (1985, p.18) point to another major problem: 'so-called unacceptable usage and low-status varieties of language certainly persist despite being publicly stigmatised'. The fact is that the experimental work on language attitudes cited above and in textbooks on sociolinguistics misses the fact that negative language attitudes travel in two directions: middle class to working class (to use convenient but inaccurate terms) but equally strongly working class to middle class. Moreover, the stigmatised features of low-status varieties serve as key signals of membership in certain large social groups and of solidarity among the members.

Milroy and Milroy deal with the problem of speakers of non-standard varieties of English who apparently claim, falsely, to use pronunciations that occur in standard English. These claims typically arise during 'Speaker-Report Tests' in which speakers who have already been recorded are asked to listen to different pronunciations of one and the same word and to say which

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one they use. The Milroys comment that, rather than assume that speakers lie, it is more fruitful to ask if the speakers understand the task or whether they take it to be a test of whether they know the 'correct' pronunciation. As the Milroys put it, 'they (do) not want to be thought ignorant'. (I encountered what I took to be the same reaction with a class of senior Sociology students with whom I was discussing points of syntax in Scottish English. The students were very reluctant to tell me what they had written on their pads, and when they did volunteer information, the examples could have come straight from a handbook on writing correct English.)

The term 'standard English' introduces another major element into the discussion. Ignoring the complex and not completely understood development of standard English, we will simply say that one variety of English is accepted as standard by the political, economic and educational elites in Britain. Certain patterns for the construction of words (morphology) and the construction of clauses and sentences (syntax) are codified and preserved by grammar books, and a certain (large) vocabulary is in principle separate from the pronunciation called 'Received Pronunciation' (RP). It, and approximations to it, are still the most frequent pronunciations to be heard on London-based television and radio programmes, certainly on news broadcasts, but throughout Britain many speakers use standard grammar and vocabulary but a pronunciation other than RP.

One central task of schools is to inculcate an understanding and mastery of standard English grammar and vocabulary, along with some acceptable pronunciation. In England what counts as an acceptable pronunciation may be RP itself or a standard local variety that can be considered as an accommodation between the local pronunciation and RP. In Scotland the standard pronunciation in most schools is Educated Scottish Standard English (which in turn has geographical varieties), while Northern Ireland has its own standard pronunciation. Many school pupils do not, or refuse to, master the standard pronunciation, but in Scotland, pupils recognise the standard pronunciation and are well aware of what pronunciations are to be heard most frequently on television. They are also aware of the pronunciation to be heard in doctors' surgeries, not to mention banks.

What this boils down to is that when assigned the task of comparing texts in different pronunciations, one of which is RP or an approximation to RP, people are unlikely to provide interesting answers. Either they will follow the linguistic precepts that they are exposed to at school or they will assume that they are being tested on their knowledge of what counts as 'correct' language

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in Britain, which leads back to their schooling and to their awareness of what they hear on television and radio. Furthermore, the more formal the setting (school and university premises count as very formal) the more powerful the operation of the precepts - whether the subjects apply the precepts in their own linguistic behaviour or not.

Cusick does not provide information about type of pronunciation (apart from the overly general labels 'English' and 'Scottish'). She provides no information about the setting in which her experiments were carried out. In the light of the preceding discussion two things are clear: in the absence of this information Cusick's results cannot be adequately assessed, and there are in any case grave doubts about the interpretation of the results of any experiments on language attitudes.

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