

**Children's language attitudes in a bidialectal setting:
Some methodological observations and preliminary findings**

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Περίληψη

Γλωσσικές στάσεις είναι οι γνώμες και οι απόψεις ενός ατόμου και, κατά συνέπεια, η συμπεριφορά που απορρέει από αυτές τις γνώμες ή απόψεις έναντι σε ένα γλωσσικό κώδικα και τους χρήστες αυτού του κώδικα. Σε αυτή τη μελέτη εξετάζονται οι γλωσσικές στάσεις παιδιών προσχολικής ηλικίας έναντι στην Κυπριακή Διάλεκτο (ΚΔ) και την Κοινή Νέα Ελληνική (ΚΝΕ) στην Κύπρο. Το κύριο ερώτημα το οποίο επιχειρεί να απαντήσει η μελέτη είναι κατά πόσο τα παιδιά προσχολικής ηλικίας συνδέουν τη χρήση της ΚΔ με κατώτερες κοινωνικο-οικονομικές τάξεις και τη χρήση της ΚΝΕ με ανώτερες κοινωνικο-οικονομικές τάξεις και κατά πόσο δείχνουν προτίμηση προς τους δύο αυτούς κώδικες. Η μελέτη πραγματεύεται επίσης μεθοδολογικά προβλήματα έρευνας με αντικείμενο τις γλωσσικές στάσεις.

Introduction

This pilot study focuses on language attitudes of young children in a bidialectal setting and attempts to investigate young bidialectal speakers' attitudes towards the linguistic varieties that they and other members of their speech community use. The principal aim is to reveal the subjects' judgement on the linguistic varieties they themselves speak and thereby understanding what the speakers believe about themselves. An additional goal of the study is to evaluate the degree to which children's attitudes reflect those of the adult members of their speech community.*

Language attitudes

Language attitudes are the views and beliefs of an individual or a group about languages and language varieties (including his/her own), as well as beliefs about the members of a speech community which make use of a given linguistic code. People adopt language attitudes about linguistic codes to which they are exposed. Linguistic codes can be the languages of neighboring nations, languages in multilingual and multidialectal settings, languages people learn as additional languages, and/or dialects which are spoken in a certain region by a certain social or age group, etc. All these different linguistic settings have been the focus of numerous language attitudes studies

such as Gardner and Lambert (1972), Fishman (1972), Bernstein (1972), Labov (1965), Trudgill (1975), Dillard (1973), and many others.

Children's language attitudes

For a long time, language attitude studies among children were very limited. This can be partly attributed to the fact that there was evidence that language users do not exhibit full sensitivity to socially significant dialectal features until they reach the age of 19 or 20 (Labov 1966). An additional claim put forward by Labov (1965) stated that children first become aware of the social significance of their dialect characteristics when they become adolescents. However, later research showed that children can discriminate between linguistic varieties at the very young age of 3:6 (Rosenthal 1974). Aboud (1976) claims that children recognize the social dimension of language at the age of five or six. Mercer's (1975) study indicates that children acquire linguistic awareness around five. However, more important than the ability to distinguish between languages is the acquisition of language attitudes among children. Studies such as Rosenthal (1974), Day (1980), Cremona and Bates (1977), Ramirez et al. (1978) and Schneiderman (1976) have shown children, either in a multilingual or multidialectal setting, acquire certain attitudes towards languages and dialects to which they are exposed. These attitudes are consonant with those of the adult members of their speech community.

It is necessary to discuss the studies by Rosenthal (1974) and Cremona and Bates (1977) in more detail because the former offers the methodological model of the current study and the latter represents a dialect/standard variety setting which is very similar to the setting of the current study. The settings, however, are not completely identical because the two Italian dialects in the Cremona and Bates study are spoken within one country, Italy. In the setting of the current study, one of the two varieties under investigation is the official language of another country, Greece. This fact makes the situation more complicated and probably influences the language attitudes of the Cypriot speech community.

The Rosenthal study

This study dealt with preschool children's awareness of the differences between two varieties of English: Vernacular Black English (VBE) and Standard (American) English (SAE). Her subjects were 136 monolingual children, ages 3:6 through 5:11, representing two populations. Population A consisted of white upper-class SAE speaking children from an urban-suburban setting. Population B consisted of lower-class black VBE-speaking children from a rural setting. Since the current study makes extensive use of Rosenthal's methodology and instrument, these will be described in the methodology section of the current study. Rosenthal showed that the subjects had

already formed attitudes towards the two varieties of English. They associated SAE with higher socio-economic status and BEV with lower socio-economic status. Even though both populations agreed that the SAE was of higher quality and status, they had different preferences. The lower-class black children showed less preference to the SAE speaker than did white children. Rosenthal's study was a very important step in the field. However, it suffers from some methodological problems and the statistical treatment of the data was inadequate.

The Cremona and Bates study

This study is the most relevant to the current one because it involves a standard language, Standard Italian, and a regional variety, Valmontonese, spoken by a given speech community in Italy. The subjects of the study used the dialect almost exclusively in their homes, their ages ranged from 6-10 and represented all grades of elementary school. The findings of the study, similar to those of Day's (1980) study, showed that children speaking a non-standard dialect enter school with preference or at least a neutral attitude towards their speech code, but as they grow older, tend to acquire the language attitudes of the dominant culture. One of the drawbacks of the study is that, in my opinion, the method of determining the children's attitudes was too direct. The subjects listened to eight pairs of sentences, spoken once in standard Italian and once in Valmontonese, and had to say which speaker spoke better and why. The deficiency of such direct methods has been repeatedly cited in the literature (Fasold 1984).

The Linguistic situation in Cyprus

Cyprus is an independent island republic in the Eastern Mediterranean. The composition of the population according to ethnic background is: 80% Greek 18% Turkish, and 2% Armenian, Maronites, Lebanese, etc. The speech community on which the study focuses is the Greek Cypriot speech community and the two linguistic varieties considered are the Cypriot Greek Dialect (henceforth **CG**) and Standard Modern Greek (henceforth **SMG**). The clearest distinctions between the two codes are mostly in phonology and lexicon, with fewer differences in morphology and minor differences in syntax.

Language attitudes in the Cypriot speech community

Studies on language attitudes and other sociolinguistic aspects of CG are very limited. Almost all have been conducted during the last five years, mainly as a result of the establishment of the University of Cyprus. The only study that has a clear language attitudes focus was Papapavlou (1996) which investigated Greek Cypriots' attitudes towards CG by employing the matched-guise technique. The subjects evaluated the qualities of several speakers using CG on one occasion and SMG on another. The

subjects had to fill a table that included twelve traits such as sincerity, kindness, intelligence, sense of humor, etc. The results showed that the speakers using SMG were rated more favorably than the speakers using CG. The results of this study are indirectly confirmed by a number of sociolinguistic studies focusing mainly on the issue of language and identity. All studies point to the ambivalence of Cypriot Greeks towards their "Homeric" and simultaneously used "village" dialect (Panayiotou 1996).

After making reference to the most pertinent studies on children's language attitudes and delimiting the linguistic situation in Cyprus, we can now turn to the current study.

THE STUDY

Subjects

For the pilot study, 40 children (20 boys and 20 girls) from two nursery schools were interviewed. Their ages ranged from 4.5 to 5.7. School A (from now on Upper Class School {UC}), which is situated in the center of Nicosia, the capital, is very popular among upper class people. There is a waiting list for entry to this school. The lowest monthly tuition with fees in this school is \$160, which is at least 50% higher than the general average tuition cost in Cyprus. School B (from now on the Lower Middle Class School {LMC}) is situated in a semi-rural area not far from Nicosia and is attended by the local children. It has no special reputation and charges between \$40-50 a month for tuition and fees. The average salary of the subject parents in the UC school was \$34.000- 40.000 and for those in the LMC school, \$16.000 - 22.000.

Instrument and procedure

The instrument used was developed following the principles put forward by Rosenthal (1974) with the necessary linguistic adjustments for Greek. It consisted of three tasks (carried out through eight subtasks) and its aim was to determine whether preschool children discriminate, categorize, and express certain language attitudes towards CG and SMG.

Task 1 investigated the same/different discrimination ability of the subjects and consisted of five subtasks:

Subtask 1: Pictorial differences: Measured the same/different discrimination on the concrete level of pictures.

Subtask 2: Greek-English: Measured same/different discrimination between sentence pairs in two languages.

Subtask 3: Grammar: Measured grammatical differences between sentence pairs in CG and /or SMG.

Subtask 4: Phonology: Measured phonological differences between sentence pairs in CG and /or SMG.

Subtask 5: Right/Wrong: Assessed the presence or absence of evaluative concepts regarding CG and SMG only on the basis of linguistic variables.

The sentences in CG and SMG were recordings of a ten-year-old bidialectal girl. By using one speaker for the sentences in CG and SMG we can assume that the judgements were made only on the basis of the variables and not the voice quality of the speaker.

Moreover, the sentences, when different, differed to various degrees. Sentences differ in one, two, three or even four phonological or grammatical aspects. The number of instances in which the sentences differ is indicated by an equivalent number of asterisks at the end of the second sentence.

Task 2 (subtask 6) measured children's ability to categorize speakers by social class on the basis of their speech. The subjects were asked to listen to eight speech samples and were then shown eight pairs of pictures (one of a "rich" and one of a "poor" boy or girl). The children were asked to guess who they thought was talking. Two ten-year old bidialectal speakers (one boy and one girl) were used for the speech samples in this task.

Task 3 measured children's attitudes and evaluation of the CG and SMG. This was accomplished by the use of two "Magic Boxes". These were two identical cardboard boxes with funny yellow faces. On the top of the boxes was a smaller box with a gift inside it. A tape recorder was hidden in each box - one with prerecorded speech in CG and the other with prerecorded speech in SMG. The recordings were on issues of interest to children such as school, gifts, toys, etc. The subjects listened to the two boxes and were asked some questions. For subtask 7, the children were told that they could take a gift from one of the two boxes and were asked the following questions:

- 1) Which box has nicer presents?
- 2) Which box sounds nicer?
- 3) Which box talks better?
- 4) Which box do you like better?
- 5) Which box do you want to take your present from? Why?

For subtask 8 the children were told that they would give a gift to one of the two boxes and were asked the following questions:

- 1) Which box wants the present more?
- 2) Which box needs it more?
- 3) Which box sounds nicer?
- 4) Which box do you want to give the gift to? Why?

The subtasks were carried out in the same order as in Rosenthal's study i.e.: subtask 7, subtask 1, subtask 2, subtask 3, subtask 4, subtask 5, subtask 6 and subtask 8.

METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

What is CG?

The pilot study revealed a series of methodological problems. The three major ones are discussed in detail in the following section.

The initial problem was the difficulty of deciding what the two codes being investigated were. At first thought this should not have been difficult because the two codes under investigation were CG and SMG. We accept that SMG is the variety that is used in the media and education, with some exceptions as shown by Pavlou (1992) in both Greece and Cyprus. However, defining CG is very difficult. So far there have been no studies identifying and describing the make-up of CG or delineating its various levels. Papapavlou and Pavlou (1998) have identified, in a recent study, at least six levels of CG. Levels 1 and 6 represent the **basilect** (the most remote variety from the prestige variety) and **acrolect** (the prestige variety) parts of the continuum. Still there are four different varieties representing **mesolects**. The question then became: Which one should have been chosen for this study? The final choice was based on the intuition of the researcher, who is a native speaker of CG and proficient in the SMG dialect, and after consultation with other linguists.

How do we define "rich" and "poor"?

The second methodological problem was the difficulty in defining the social classes under investigation. How should the Lower Middle Class and Upper Class be represented? What are the signs of wealth or poverty that could help us decide the class a speaker belongs to? In Rosenthal's study, things were literally "black and white", i.e. there were clearly defined facial features that could be unambiguously associated with the speaker's race. In the current study, it was very difficult to designate goods, commodities, modern amenities or services which would have the function of the facial characteristics in the Rosenthal study. The possession of commodities (such as expensive cars, a big house with a swimming pool, expensive toys, etc.) would render a person a member of a social class. By the same token, a person's inability to afford those commodities would exclude this person from the same social class. The difficulty in designating such class-distinguishing commodities may be present in many societies, but I believe it is more conspicuous in contemporary Cypriot society. Despite its political problems, Cyprus has managed to create a very thriving economy. The prosperity Cypriots enjoy today is difficult for many to comprehend since it has occurred so quickly and the majority of Cypriots have not had time to properly digest and deal with the country's economic growth. As a result, there may be very wealthy people who do not feel the need to show off their wealth and, at the same time, there may be people who buy extremely expensive cars through bank credit in order to create the appearance of wealth. In other words, a person who is driving a "Mercedes" is not necessarily rich

and a person who is driving a cheaper car is not necessarily poor. However, a person who is driving a "Mercedes" is *considered to be* rich and a person who is driving a cheaper car is *considered to be* less wealthy. This last presumption serves to justify the use of commodities to mark social class in this study.

The following class-distinguishing commodities were used for this study: big expensive car, big house with a swimming pool, bedroom full of toys, expensive toys, and designer clothes. Later in the discussion of the results we will assess the effectiveness of the chosen class-distinguishing commodities.

How to speak to children?

A methodological problem identified by Ryan (1979) is that the language (CG or SMG in this case) used during the administration of the tasks may affect the subjects' evaluations of the language varieties under investigation. During the administration of the tasks for the current study, another related problem was encountered. Not only is the code chosen to address the children potentially important, so is the wording the researcher uses. In Task 5, the children were asked to listen to an utterance and say whether the utterance was "correct" or "wrong". Many children did not understand what we meant by "correct" or "wrong". When we tried to explain, we realized that the children had the notion of correct and wrong in terms of language, but most of them were accustomed to refer to this dichotomy using a variety of terms. In other words, children have been socialized in their family and school environments to talk about language in different ways. Children used a number of dichotomies. According to the children who participated in the study the characterizations of how someone can speak are:

<i>well or bad</i>	<i>like a villager or not like a villager</i>
<i>politely or non politely</i>	<i>like a good child or like a bad child</i>
<i>correctly or in a wrong way</i>	

This variety of characterizations has caused confusion among the children at times and the researcher's effort to clarify what was meant by "wrong" and "right" may have sometimes lead the subjects to give answers they did not originally intend to give.

Preliminary Findings

Given the above mentioned methodological problems and the small number of subjects we will only speak of preliminary findings and some indications of the data.

In Task 1, the children were asked to take a gift from the magic boxes. In general the two groups behaved similarly with the LMC showing a slight preference to the SMG speaker. The subjects gave the following reasons for their choices. Those who chose the SMG speaker said that the box "spoke better", "had a nicer voice", "spoke in a nicer

way", and other similar comments. A subject who chose to take a gift from the CG speaker said he did so because he understood him better.

In the pictorial similarity task, the two groups reacted in the same way. In Task 3 (discriminating between two languages, Greek and English), the UC group did much better because English is part of their curriculum. This is not the case for the LMC school. Another observation was that when the two comparison sentences were both in Greek, all subjects indicated that these sentences were the same. However, when both sentences were in English (ex. 7), a number of subjects from the LMC group said the sentences were not the same. Probably, they confused the terms "similar/different" with "familiar/unfamiliar".

In Tasks 4 and 5, it was clear from the data that the more different the two sentences were, the more easily they were identified as such by the subjects. That was an expected finding. What was not expected was that not only were the number of differences between the two sentences crucial in making a judgement, but also the position of the variable. The closer to the end of the sentence the difference was, the more likely it was for the subject to identify it.

In Task 6, the subjects had to categorize the speakers according to their language. It was expected that they would associate SMG with UC and CG with LMC. This was not the case. There was no clear pattern in the subjects' association of language variety and social class. As explained earlier, the reason for this could be the fact that the commodities appearing in the pictures can now be possessed by anyone who has money regardless of their class membership.

In Task 7, the children had to listen to a sentence and decide if the sentence was right or wrong. Regardless of the methodological problem of this task as mentioned above, there were cases (ex. 9 and 10) where the subjects agreed that the sentence was correct or wrong. This can be attributed to the density of the dialectal features. There were three dialectal allophones in the sentence.

The results of Task 8 (children giving a gift to one of the magic boxes) were very similar to task one. No significant indications of preference were identified.

Conclusion

This pilot study showed that preschool children in a bidialectal setting do have language attitudes. However, they are difficult to assess because we first have to clearly define the varieties involved, define and represent the social classes accurately, and, finally, decide on the language code and content of the instructions given to the subjects as this may have a direct impact on the results. This study will be continued.

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