

How can a conservative language user be identified? – an approach via implicit and explicit language attitude

Introduction. Leading groups in sound change processes can be defined based on their age, gender, or social status [1]. Additionally, language attitude is often mentioned as a potential factor for sound change, but this aspect has been studied to a smaller extent. One possible reason is that language attitude is difficult to measure reliably. When filling in a questionnaire, participants might try to satisfy the expectations of the researcher rather than show their real attitude. Another problem is that explicit and implicit (unconscious) attitude [3] often diverge. At the same time, in some cases it is desirable to categorise participants as conservative and liberal language users. In sound change processes that seem to have ended before their completion, investigation of the degree of conservatism can provide information about the current state of the process. It is possible that the initial and the potentially final state of the process will coexist in the language and function as a social marker.

Such an uncompleted sound change process is the neutralisation process of vowel quantity in unstressed high vowels in Hungarian. The process might have been triggered by a weakened perception for spectral differences between long and short vowels that are most obvious for low and least for high short–long vowel pairs. [2] found that old listeners relied to spectral differences for unstressed high and mid vowels to a larger extent than young participants.

Experiment. Implicit attitude was measured based on a set of concatenated 34 spontaneous utterances. The data set contained 19 utterances with substandard linguistic forms and 7 disfluencies (functioning as distractors). Native Hungarian participants listened to the chain of the sentences and were asked to press a button if they hear something that is incorrect. The categorisation of implicit attitude was performed based on the number of spotted stigmatised forms. For explicit attitude, a questionnaire containing 6 assumptions such as “People used to speak more correctly in former times” was used. Degree of agreement was given on a 5 point scale.

F1 and F2 of unstressed /o/ and /u/ were manipulated from the least (= long) to the most (= short) centralised vowel quality in 9 steps, while duration was constant. Target words were embedded in carrier sentences. 13 young and 12 old listeners participated in a forced choice identification experiment in which they had to decide whether they heard the sentence with the short or the corresponding long vowel. The dependent variable was the steepness of GLMM-based logistic regression curves for each subject.

Results: A repeated measures MANOVA showed a weak effect of implicit language attitude on vowel quantity perception based on tenseness ($p = 0.055$). Age and explicit attitude had no effect. The missing impact of age suggests that the loss of perceptual distinction between long and short vowels is not an ongoing sound change process at present. However, the impact of implicit attitude on perception shows that the phenomenon does play a role as a social marker.

References

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