

The Matched Guise Technique: a Critical Approximation to a Classic Test for Formal Measurement of Language Attitudes

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Abstract

The study of language attitudes is of special importance for sociolinguistics; Formal measurements of these provide us with results that can be used to predict the linguistic behaviour of members of a given social group in terms of their use of linguistic varieties in bilingual and bidialectal situations.

Within the context of the methodology used in the study of language attitudes, this paper focuses on the description and bibliographical criticism of the renowned matched guise technique. Broadly-speaking, this technique involves asking interviewees to evaluate the personal qualities of speakers whose voices are recorded on tape, whereby *the same* speaker uses *different* linguistic varieties. This technique has been widely used in studies and research on language attitudes, in both international and Catalan sociolinguistics.¹

Summary

1. Introduction
2. Language attitudes and linguistic behaviour
3. Direct and indirect methods
4. The matched guise technique
5. Conclusions
6. Bibliography

1. Introduction

As stated above, the study of language attitudes is important for sociolinguistics because it can 'predict' a given linguistic behaviour: the choice of a particular language in multilingual communities, language loyalty, language prestige...

However, due to paradoxes of science, sociolinguistics has not undertaken serious research, using either theoretical or methodological approaches, on language attitudes, which are closely linked to the social psychology of language.² Moreover, the exchange of theoretical and methodological knowledge on language attitudes between these two disciplines has been meagre and insignificant, since sociolinguistics and the social psychology of language have followed parallel paths, except for when obligatory exchanges between the two disciplines have taken place (see Agheyisi & Fishman, 1970; Cooper & Fishman, 1974).³

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² Attitude is one of the basic concepts of social psychology; it can be defined as a "mental disposition towards something." Attitude indicates what we are prepared to do – internally, at least – and acts as a bridge between opinion and behaviour.

³ Data on language attitudes obtained from sociolinguistic studies could, for example, provide a good supply of tests to investigate both theories and the methodology of attitudes.

2. Language Attitudes and Linguistic Behaviour

A number of theories have been developed on the study of language attitudes.⁴ The two most important include: the *mentalist theory* and the *behaviourist theory*, which differ in their understanding of attitude.⁵ On the one hand, the mentalist approach sees language attitudes as being mental and neural states of disposition (Allport, 1967) that cannot be observed directly, but that can be inferred using the right stimuli; on the other hand, the behaviourist current considers attitudes to be behaviours or responses to a given situation (Agheyisi & Fishman, 1970).

Nevertheless, authors such as Bierbach (1988) conclude that the differences between these two schools of thought are minimal when it comes to empirical research.⁶

However, one aspect that does differentiate the two currents from a theoretical point of view is the multicomponential or unicomponential conception of language attitudes: for behaviourists, attitudes only have one component – the affective – while for mentalists, attitudes have three components: the affective, the conative and the cognitive. The studies of Lambert and his team (pioneers in the development and application of the matched guise technique) at McGill University, Canada, on the social psychology of language are based on the multicomponential theory.

The behaviourist approach has a serious scientific disadvantage because the affective component alone cannot predict verbal conduct (or anything else for that matter) (López Morales, 1989), whereas this is not the case with the mentalist approach. As mentalist conceptions are able to predict linguistic behaviour, they have become first choice for developing theoretical models on language attitudes.

3. Direct and indirect methods

Interest in the study of language attitudes as a sociolinguistics variable stems from the work of Lambert – already a classic – who, as we said earlier, along with his collaborators, used the matched guise technique (*indirect methodology*), in the context of Quebec. Texts recorded by bilinguals in French and English were evaluated by ‘judges’, whose L1 (first language) was French or English. The aim was to reveal the inclinations and preferences as to the *personality* of the latter – or, quite the opposite – aspects determined by the linguistic variety used each time by the speakers on tape (Lambert, 1960; 1967).⁷

This experimental methodology has received a series of criticisms which, in many cases, have been used to revise and make better use of the technique.

One of the methodological debates regarding the study of language attitudes is based on the use of direct and indirect methodology (Cooper & Fishman, 1974); the most representative example of the *direct* type of methodology is the use of questionnaires; for *indirect* types, a clear example might be the matched guise technique.

Indirect techniques such as the matched guise test permit a higher degree of introspection and ‘privacy’ for the person interviewed (Lambert, 1967), producing more ‘spontaneous’ and sincere responses. Direct questionnaires, on the other hand, introduce aspects with negative methodological connotations, such as: *i*) possible ambiguity in the formulation of direct and indirect questions; this can increase if terms such as ‘language’ and ‘dialect’ are used, the

⁴ Due to limitations of space, see Agheyisi & Fishman (1970: 137-140) for a brief explanation of theories of language attitudes.

⁵ We should also point out the ideocritical-sociological current, which sees the concept of language attitude as forming part of the ideological superstructure of a particular social formation: attitudes form part of our everyday knowledge of everyday objects (Berger-Luckman, 1967 in Schieben-Lange, 1973, pgs. 143-144).

⁶ The basic methodological differences between the two approaches are dealt with in the Direct and indirect methods section of this paper.

⁷ For a more detailed description of the test, see section 4. The matched guise.

latter traditionally having negative undertones; *ii*) the limitations of writing for answering this type of questionnaire, in comparison with the fluency and attention to detail permitted by spoken language.

However, the type of question used in direct and 'open' questionnaires also invites interviewees to freely express their attitudes towards the object in question (Agheyisi & Fishman, 1970). Generally speaking, though, the use of questionnaires, whether 'open' or 'closed' ('closed' questionnaires can be answered using 'yes' or 'no' or by choosing one of a series of 'scaled' answers) may be distortive because each question that is asked can be interpreted in different ways since it does not form part of a communicative context (Bierbach, 1988).

In our opinion, however, what makes indirect methodology more preferable, is that the use of questionnaires (direct methodology), particularly those that offer written responses to 'open' questions, involves choosing or deciding *rationally*. To avoid this distortion, more indirect methods have been sought, bearing in mind the *affective* component of language attitudes which are very often irrational and involve many prejudices (Bierbach, 1988).

Therefore, the use of indirect methodologies, such as the matched guise technique, aims to counterbalance the possible deficiencies of the methodological application of questionnaires, or direct methodology.⁸

4. The matched guise technique

As stated earlier, this technique involves asking interviewees to evaluate the *personal qualities* of speakers whose voices are recorded on tape, whereby *the same* speaker uses *different* linguistic varieties. Thus, the interviewees evaluate the *personal qualities* of the individuals recorded – without knowing that it is the same person – according to the linguistic variety used, and in line with the stereotypes and social prejudices of these linguistic varieties, which tend to be uniform. In order to explain the technique a little more, we will briefly run through the most relevant components before dealing with the methodological aspects that could be revised:

- i*) the variables of 'sex'; 'age'; 'L1', 'variety used in domestic relationships', etc. of the 'judges' evaluating the recorded 'voices' are taken into consideration;
- ii*) the variables of 'sex', 'age', 'voice' and 'linguistic variety' of the individuals recorded are taken into consideration.
- iii*) the stimulus material spoken in the linguistic variety that is recorded is studied from a strictly linguistic approach (phonetic, morphological, syntactic and lexical aspects) and from a stylistic point of view (formal, informal register...).
- iv*) the interviewees have no information about the 'voices'; that is, they do not know that the 'voices' speaking at least two different linguistic varieties are the same person and that these are *guises*; this is where the technique gets its name: *matched guise*.
- v*) there is total control over the variable 'voice', with the removal of all features of speed, volume, timbre, tone, etc. Nonetheless, the importance of this technique lies in manipulating the *linguistic features* of the oral stimulus material, rather than in manipulating the recorded voices.
- vi*) the length of the oral stimulus material recording is two minutes;
- vii*) the 'judges' or interviewees are asked to evaluate the personal qualities of the recorded individuals on the basis of their 'voices', as if they were evaluating the 'voice' of somebody they did not know during a telephone conversation.

⁸ This argument however, does not exclude the fact that studies could be carried out in this area using both direct and indirect methodology, as Fishman & Cooper suggest (1974). These authors also demonstrate that results obtained using direct methodology in the study of attitudes alone restricted to the field of psychology, are more reliable.

viii) a questionnaire allows the personality traits of the 'voices' evaluated to be attributed to the 'voices' (intelligence; leadership; physical attractiveness; social status, unpleasantness...).

Lambert himself (1967) notes that the interviewees usually enjoy taking part in this test because they regard it as a game. Most language attitude studies that have used the matched guise technique have been conducted at schools or colleges.

The results obtained using this technique confirm intuitions about *stereotyped prejudices* towards a given linguistic variety and, hence, towards the social (sub)group that uses that variety. They also confirm the fact that users of the least prestigious linguistic variety have a negative self-image.⁹

4.1. Criticism and the matched guise technique

4.1.1 (Non-)existent stereotypes

Lambert (Gardner & Lambert, 1972) points out some of the limitations of his method:

i) firstly, he asks whether the attitude measurements that emerge are really what interviewees believe or what they think they should express in public about their opinions;

ii) secondly, Lambert questions whether the recording encourages the use of stereotypes, which produces other associations reflected in the data obtained.

On this last point, Hudson (1979: 205) considers that the matched guise technique can reveal stereotypes that do not actually exist, since interviewees can judge according to data in the questionnaire and not using their own opinions.

4.1.2. The experimental nature of the technique

Another aspect of this technique with negative connotations are its *experimental* features: the matched guise technique is usually used with groups in classrooms or laboratories and has thus been qualified as *artificial* or not very 'natural'; Robinson (1978) also believes that experimental situations, by their nature, force individuals to provide an answer.

Moreover, the use of oral stimulus material created for the experiment has increased scepticism about obtaining significant results with this technique (Tajfel, 1962; Lee, 1971; Robinson, 1972). Lee (1971) even suggests that repeating the message can mean that 'judges' focus on the linguistic features of the varieties used more than they would in a normal and unconditioned situation.

4.1.3. The monostylistic presupposition of the varieties used

Moreover, this technique presupposes that the linguistic varieties evaluated have only one functional style (Agheyisi & Fishman, 1970). Thus, it is unable to explain the social meaning of speakers' multistylistic capacity in different contexts or degrees of knowledge of the linguistic varieties evaluated. One possible methodological solution for this false presupposition was developed in Kimple's study (1968) using the *mirror image* technique.¹⁰

⁹ These statements may be contrasted with some of the results and data from language attitude studies (interdialectal, Catalan-Spanish) carried out in Catalan sociolinguistics: Ros (1979); Pueyo (1980); Boix (1985); Woolard (1992); Solís (1996); Villaverde (1998).

¹⁰ This involves recording different conversations in formal and informal contexts with with bilingual individuals (it would also be possible with bidialectal individuals), who interchange their roles and also take part in these conversations using different degrees of knowledge of the varieties used. On the basis of these recordings, the "judges" have to decide which role each recorded individual is acting out, their job status, where the conversation takes place, the topic of conversation and whether the varieties used are appropriate for the context.

5. Conclusions

Now that we have dealt briefly with the main issues concerning use of the matched guise technique in language attitude studies, we can point out the following aspects:

- i)* the use of a direct or indirect methodology, which has caused a debate.
- ii)* the possible appearance of stereotypes regarding the recorded linguistic varieties that do not exist in practice;
- iii)* the experimental nature of the technique;
- iv)* criticism about the technique's monostylistic premise;

We shall now propose a number of solutions to try and counterbalance these methodological shortcomings.

As regards the first aspect (*i*), the use of indirect methodology like the matched guise technique obtains a greater degree of personal introspection. This also involves less rational and, hence, less conditioned, spontaneous and/or sincere responses.

Lambert (1967: 343-44) himself provides the solution to the second issue (*ii*), bearing in mind this possible methodological limitation:

"a technique has been developed that rather effectively calls out the stereotyped impressions that members of one ethnic linguistic group hold of another contrasting group. The type and strength of impressions depends on characteristics of speakers –their sex, age, the dialect they use, and very likely, the social-class background as this is revealed in speech style. The type of reaction and adjustments listeners must make to those who reveal, though in their speech style, their likely ethnic group allegiance is suggested by the traits that listeners use to indicate their impressions".

Finally, to counterbalance some of the deficiencies highlighted in sections *iii*) and *iv*) oral stimulus materials could be recorded (at least a few conversations at any rate), using bilingual texts (Catalan and Spanish, for example) or bidialectal texts (central and north-western dialects of Catalan) in a formal context (using the standard variety, e.g. a conversation in class between a student and a teacher about a book) and in an informal context (using the non-standard variety, e.g. a conversation between two friends about a mainstream film). Recording stylistically-contextualised material would enable us to make up for some of the more experimental features of the technique and allow a multistylistic evaluation of the individuals recorded.

A semi-structured interview with some of the interviewees, in conjunction with the technique, would allow:

- i)* discourse of interviewees on different aspects of our focus of interest; because this discourse is oral, it will be more detailed and spontaneous (or sincere), reinforcing this 'need' to obtain reliable data for the study of language attitudes.
- ii)* the use of situations of linguistic behaviour contextualised in *real* situations experienced by the interviewees, since a semi-structured interview would allow this;
- iii)* the introduction of everyday situations not experienced by the interviewee, that are of interest as regards linguistic behaviour: concerning the mass media, with a political personality,...

We could thus confirm or contrast the results of the questionnaire with the matched guise technique from a qualitative point of view, bearing in mind the conative component of language attitudes.

To sum up, the theoretical and methodological gaps in language attitude studies and the meagre contributions from sociolinguistics and the social psychology of language in this area, continue to foster the deficiencies in methodological application and development, which has clear repercussions on the reliability and significance of the data obtained in these studies.

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