

The effect of sociolinguistics pedagogy on youth attitudes toward marginalized varieties of English

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Since the beginning of the empirical study of language attitudes (Lambert et al. 1960), sociolinguists have amply demonstrated that laypeople's attitudes toward linguistic varieties tend to mirror entrenched ideologies about the groups of people who speak them (Giles and Billings 2008). It is widely acknowledged that linguists have a particular responsibility to counter language ideologies that justify economic and sociopolitical oppression (Labov 1982). One key locus of intervention is through the teaching of linguistics to a broad population, especially to youth (e.g., Reaser 2006, 2007). As more linguists have recognized the importance of transmitting scholarly work to mainstream audiences, the need to empirically evaluate the effectiveness of linguistics-based academic outreach programs has become increasingly salient. This paper explores the question of whether participation in an innovative college-level sociocultural linguistics curriculum (Bucholtz et al. 2014) changed Mexican American high school students' attitudes toward marginalized, ethnoracially-associated varieties of English. While early research investigated the language attitudes of Latin@ youth (e.g., Carranza and Ryan 1975; Ryan and Carranza 1975), California's recent demographic shifts indicate the need for a fresh understanding of the linguistic ideologies and attitudes of Latin@s, the state's largest ethnic group as of the 2014 census. This study provides an updated picture of Mexican American youth's attitudes toward both standard and stigmatized varieties of English.

A standardized metric was employed to test 82 students' language attitudes before and after completion of the program in spring 2015 (Zahn and Hopper 1985), focusing on evaluations of African American English, Chicano English, and the Spanish-dominant English of adult second language learners, as well as the local White California English prestige variety. Language attitudes were indirectly measured using the verbal guise method (Ball and Giles 1982) and speakers were rated on 7-point semantic differential scales. Pre-test and post-test data were then subjected to Principal Components Analysis and t-tests for comparison.

The analysis yielded three key findings. First, students' attitudes towards AAE improved significantly between the pre-test and the post-test on two components: one representing social-intellectual status and "speaking competency", and one that measured "speakers' social power" (Zahn and Hopper 1985: 119), even rising from last to first rank on the latter variable. This striking shift demonstrates that language attitudes can indeed be transformed by participation in linguistics outreach programs, even among students who were not themselves speakers of AAE. Second, there were no significant differences in evaluations of speakers of Chicano English and White California English on either the pre-survey or the post-survey. This finding differs from a well-established pattern in previous studies in which Anglo speakers are evaluated more highly than Latin@ speakers, even by Latin@ raters (e.g., Carranza and Ryan 1975). Third, data show that even as attitudes towards the three ethnoracially marginalized varieties of English improved, students' positive evaluations of the normatively powerful variety, White California English, remained relatively stable. This study demonstrates that it is possible for sociolinguistic education to have a positive impact on attitudes toward marginalized varieties of English, including dialects that are not students' own.