

Evaluating and Improving High School Students' Folk Perceptions of Dialects

Although most sociolinguists consider dissemination of information to non-linguists an essential aspect of sociolinguistic engagement, they have achieved little success reaching audiences outside university settings. Reaching primary school children, who have not yet developed entrenched sociolinguistic ideologies, is challenging due to the lack of linguistic tradition in mainstream education, the lack of linguistic training in teacher education, and the fact that linguists' academic duties largely keep them from working in public schools. For such a dialect awareness program to be effective, researchers must first assess how students view dialect diversity.

Despite increasing interest in the study of folk linguistics, there has been little investigation of when Americans develop folk attitudes and whether or not these belief systems are malleable. This study examines the folk attitudes of ninth grade students in North Carolina as measured by a psychometrically approved survey of twenty Likert-type statements and four free response questions about language. The attitudes and knowledge of the same group of 129 students was measured before and after students participated in a 450-minute unit on dialect diversity taught by their regular classroom teachers.

The data from these students are informative in a number of ways. First, folk attitudes and knowledge from the pre-instructional survey can be used to help linguists build a rationale for educators and administrators about the need for information about dialect diversity in the classroom. Second, these data also help linguists tailor their materials so that they target the students' gaps in language knowledge and prejudiced attitudes. Comparing data from the pre-instructional unit survey to the post instructional survey illustrates the extent to which knowledge and certain attitudes of students are entrenched or malleable. This information is crucial in demonstrating the effectiveness of a program and providing linguists with feedback by which they can improve dialect awareness materials.

In this paper, I will discuss the prevalent attitudes that exist among ninth grade students in North Carolina in aggregate as well as by classroom teacher, sex, and ethnicity. This is important because it illustrates the effect of the teacher as well as whether or not, for example, boys and girls have similar language attitudes before the unit and whether or not their attitudes are affected in a similar fashion following the instructional unit. I will demonstrate how fusing folk linguistic and variationist perspectives can make linguistic graffiti projects, particularly those involving education, more effective. I will also outline curricular strategies that proved effective in enabling teachers without linguistic training to teach this about dialect diversity as well as potential pitfalls that linguists should avoid when doing interdisciplinary work with classroom teachers.