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Language Attitudes and the Role of Community Infrastructure: A Communication Ecology Model

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1. Introduction

Our views of others, including their supposed beliefs, capabilities, and social attributes, can be determined in part by inferences derived from our perceptions of their speech characteristics and language varieties. Indeed, overt responses and communications to speakers, as well as important social decisions regarding their prospects and welfare, can be mediated by our so-called "language attitudes." These, in turn, can influence our own self-presentations, as we attempt to shape others' reactions to us, and their attributions of us. Thus these attitudes contribute to our own enactment of different speech styles, dialects, creoles, and second languages in various contexts and phases of our lives. Not surprisingly, the role of language attitudes has been integral to the sociolinguistic description of many speech communities, and it is often a contributing factor in language planning and policies. Some fifteen years ago, we were invited to write an article for this journal reviewing this area of enquiry and took the opportunity to proffer a model of how people are socialized into forming their language attitudes (Bradac & Giles 1991; see also, Echeverria 2005). In the current contribution, we revisit the field and its empirical gains, introduce a new communication ecological model of language attitudes, and finally propose ways in which this approach can inform the language teaching process.

2. Language Attitudes: Past and Present

Since William Labov's and Wallace Lambert's pioneering work in this domain in the 1960s, there has been an array of integrative overviews over the years, the most recent including Bradac, Cargile & Hallett (2001), Giles & Billings (2004), and Bourhis & Maass (2005). Although different methods have been employed in different parts of the globe (e.g., via direct surveys, see Kioko & Muthwii 2003; Lai 2005; Lasagabaster 2005), we have been involved most with (and report here) those procedures that examine how listeners react to supposedly different speakers reading the same neutral passage of prose. Attitudes toward speakers are tapped by means of ratings scales, which usually involve the evaluative dimensions of

competence, solidarity, and dynamism. A favored method in this instance (given its advantage of experimental control) is the *matched-guise* technique (Lambert 1967): this utilizes "stimulus" speakers who can assume authentic versions of the dialects, languages, or speech variables under study, while keeping other extraneous variables constant (for discussions of its methodological and empirical limitations, see Ryan and Giles 1982, chapter 13; for a critique, see Garrett, Coupland & Williams 2003). Other types of studies (e.g., those addressing children's voices) adopt the procedure (called the verbal-guise procedure) of using different representatives of the targeted language varieties.

A fairly consistent, global finding is that standard-dialect or prestige varieties (and code-switches or shifts to them) confer advantages on speakers (e.g., Paltridge & Giles 1984; see Kristiansen 2001, for situations where more than one standard co-exists). Standard dialect speakers are stereotyped as relatively more competent and confident than their less prestigious-sounding counterparts; and their messages are perceived as having more qualitative substance and remembered better (e.g., Cairns & Dubiez 1976). It is interesting to note that listener-judges have often been prepared to record their language attitudes after hearing only about fifteen seconds of the stimulus (Williams 1976). Such findings appear to be socialized in complex ways early in childhood, and to persist into later life (Giles, Henwood, Coupland, Harriman & Coupland 1992), and they have been elicited when visual cues of the speakers are available via video recordings (Elwell, Brown & Rutter 1984). Moreover, the more different the "accented" variety is from the prestige form – with listeners being able to finely discriminate points along such a continuum – the lower, usually, are evaluations on competence traits (see Nesdale & Rooney 1996; Rodriguez, Cargile & Rich, in press). However, non-prestige speakers can also have "covert prestige" (see Garrett et al. 2003); they may then, although less consistently, be upgraded in terms of integrity, social attractiveness, and dynamism (Ladegaard 1998; Ohama, Gotay, Pagano, Boles & Craven 2000). Indeed, this phenomenon can be transformed into evaluative pride when the non-standard dialect is, for certain users, a valued symbol of membership in a social group (e.g., a class, ethnic group, or religion, see Bresnahan, Ohashi, Nebashi, Liu & Shearman 2002).

Standard varieties, such as R[eceived] P[ronunciation] English (Bishop, Coupland & Garrett 2005), appear to transcend national boundaries, and assume status across the Anglophone world (see, however, Bayard, Weatherall, Gallois & Pittam 2001) and beyond (e.g., in Japan: Chiba, Matsuura & Yamamoto 1995; Brazil: El-Dash & Busnardo 2001; and Denmark: Jarvella, Bang, Jakobsen & Mees 2001); naturally enough, different non-standard varieties within any culture can themselves be hierarchically organized (e.g., Kalin & Rayko 1980). Numerous studies have investigated individual and socio-demographic differences (e.g. ethnocentrism, cognitive complexity, age, gender, or cultural group

membership) among listener/judges (e.g., Brown & Cichocki 1995); they have demonstrated that the latter's cognitive schemata and mood shifts can mediate the effects thus far outlined (e.g., Cargile 2002). And although important contextual caveats abound (e.g., relating to socio-physical setting, language of investigator, or timing of evaluations; see Cargile 1997), the above profile has, for the most part, remained ubiquitous. It is when significant changes in socio-political history (e.g., Tong, Hong, Lee & Chin 1999) or message content (e.g., Giles, Williams, Mackie & Rosselli 1995; Levin, Giles & Garrett 1994) are evident that significant modifications to the general evaluative pattern emerge (see also, Dailey, Giles & Jansma 2004).

When we focus on vocal features other than strictly dialectal ones, *context* has compelling effects. For instance, a positive linear relationship has repeatedly been found between speech rate and perceived competence; but this effect can be obliterated when the rating task is taken out of its social vacuum. In this regard, Brown, Giles & Thakerar (1985) found that when listeners were allowed access to information that a male speaker was taped while helping a naive audience comprehend an unfamiliar topic, they evaluated him as just as intelligent and competent when he talked slowly as when he said the same thing much faster (in a typical monolog condition). Strictly non-dialectal characteristics such as lexical diversity, pausing, self-disclosure, pitch, or language intensity (which all have their own social meanings some of which are more or less power-related, see Hosman 1997) have also been manipulated orthogonally and with other social attributes of speakers (e.g., socioeconomic status). Findings emerging from the more ambitious experiments suggest that the differing cues may often act together in an evaluatively cumulative fashion (Bradac 1990). Thus the least favorable judgments have been rendered against a combination of non-standard accent, low lexical diversity, and a working-class background (Giles, Wilson & Conway 1981).

Albeit not always a simple transformational relationship (see Giles, Hewstone, Ryan & Johnson 1987), studies have shown a direct correspondence between reported language attitudes about a dialect group and actual behavioral responses to members of it (Kristiansen & Giles 1992). Indeed, the social consequences of language attitudes are considerable when it comes to applied domains (e.g., Fuertes, Potere & Ramirez 2002; Purnell, Isdardi & Baugh 1999). For instance in Britain, Dixon, Mahoney & Cocks (2002) asked raters, using the matched-guise technique, to evaluate an audiotaped interrogation by police officers with a criminal suspect who was pleading his innocence. They found that the Birmingham-accented suspect was rated significantly more guilty – and especially so when it related to a blue-collar crime (*viz.*, armed robbery) – than an RP-sounding suspect.

In sum, the above overview of language attitudes research indicates that listeners can very quickly stereotype another's personal and social attributes on the basis of language and dialect cues and in ways that appear to have crucial effects on important social decisions made about them. In a recent article about accents posing problems in garnering technical support in the

USA, Bertolucci (2006) claimed that "Dell customers were particularly vocal this year about reps with thick accents: 43 percent of Dell desktop and notebook owners reported that the rep they talked to did not speak clearly and intelligibly" (p. 103).

In recent years, there has been evidence of a movement away from the traditional research paradigm toward more concern for both theory development and precise linguistic specifications of the speech stimuli utilized (see Milroy & Preston 1999; Ryan, Giles & Bradac 1994). In addition, some interesting new directions have been forged recently into how: (a) attention, goals, and schemas are processed informationally alongside language features (Bradac et al. 2001; Cargile 2002); (b) others' language varieties can shape judges' construals of their own social identities (Cargile & Giles 1997); and (c) speakers' narrative contents and styles interact with dialect in the evaluative process (Garrett et al. 2003). In what follows, we suggest another potentially exciting area for new language attitude discoveries that appeals to research and thinking into an area totally removed from it, namely communication infrastructure theory.

3. Communication Infrastructure Theory

This framework looks at individual members of particular speech communities/minority groups as embedded within a local communication infrastructure (Ball-Rokeach, Kim & Matei 2001). Communication infrastructure theory has been developed and refined through multiple method, theoretically driven research conducted by the Metamorphosis Project, housed at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. Over the last seven years, Metamorphosis has conducted research in ten distinct new and old immigrant communities within metropolitan Los Angeles, on a large range of issues related to communication in everyday life, including, but not limited to, issues of family communication, civic engagement (Kim, Jung & Ball-Rokeach, *in press*), work-home connections, media connectedness (Loges & Jung 2001; Matei & Ball-Rokeach 2003), and intergroup relations (Kim 2003).

Communication infrastructure can be understood as the social architecture of a local area; local spaces are "built up" in different ways, meaning that people will gather information in ways peculiar to that space. The theory includes a wide variety of ways in which people gather information on their social world, ranging from the interpersonal networks of family, friends, and neighbors, to institutional and a wide variety of media sources. The particular features of the local environment, and how these community-level characteristics constrain or enable communicative activity in the local space, are considered central. Language attitudes are conceived as being (re)formulated within a particular local space. Communication infrastructure does not challenge the universal elements of language stereotypes but, rather, insists on examining the local variation that exists alongside these larger patterns.

The model introduced below brings with it consideration of multiple levels of analysis and a number of variables that past research has found central to processes of language attitude development and change. As with any theoretical formulation, this model has to balance between including enough variables to make interesting predictions, but not being so inclusive that the theory becomes purely descriptive. Clearly, it is not possible to account for every factor in a local environment that might affect people's language attitudes. However, a multiple level approach allows for *slicing* through layers depending on one's primary focus. This process, and how it directly translates into classroom applications, will be discussed later in this paper. The goal, then, is to present an inclusive but parsimonious model of language attitude processes that is useful for language teachers and academic researchers alike.

4. A Communication Ecology Model of Language Attitudes

Figure 1 illustrates the complementary functions of the social process model of language attitudes as presented in Cargile, Giles, Ryan & Bradac (1994)¹ and communication infrastructure theory (Ball-Rokeach et al. 2001). Both models take multiple levels of analysis into consideration, although the levels of primary focus do differ. The value of combining these two approaches lies precisely at the points where they "zip up" together, interlocking their strengths to provide a holistic approach to studying language attitudes. The social process model details the micro level of individual interaction that communication infrastructure theory has not elaborated, and communication infrastructure, in turn, elaborates the larger social and cultural factors affecting the immediate context in which a particular interaction occurs.

It is important to note that the levels of analysis presented here are *embedded* within each other, and that the relationships between levels are dialogic, not unidirectional. Therefore, individuals' attitudes and behaviors are not just affected by interpersonal relationships, available media and institutional resources, and local community features; the local context is also affected by changes that individuals can effect on their local space and interpersonal ties. Language attitudes, therefore, should not be understood as statically passed down through socialization processes but, rather, as an ongoing (re)negotiation that occurs inter- and intra-individually, against a backdrop of local features and resources.

¹ See Cargile and Bradac (2001) as well as Bradac, Cargile, and Hallett (2001) for a more elaborated version of this model. We elected to use the more concise (albeit earlier) version of the social process model, because many of the larger level processes elaborated in the 2001 version are covered by communication infrastructure's formulation of these factors. Further, the more parsimonious version was deemed a better fit for the current project because, for the sake of manageability, there were less terms to make equivalent between the two theories.

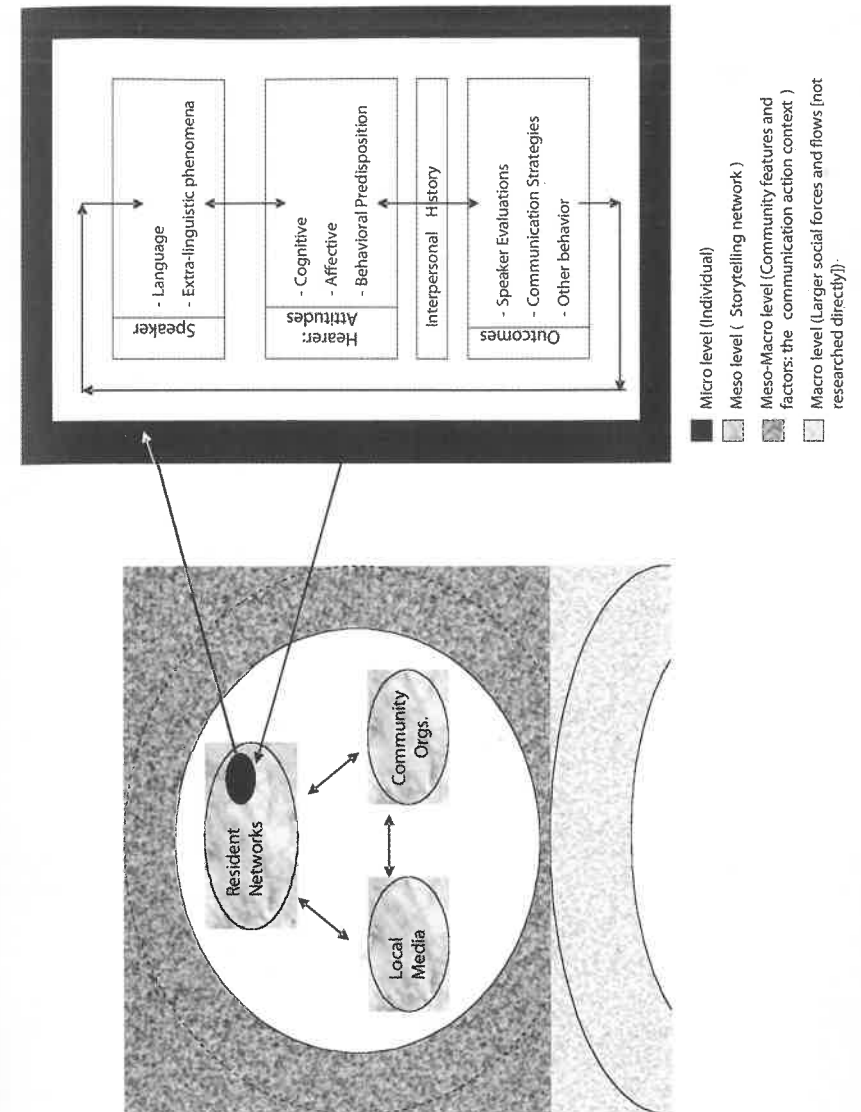


Figure 1: A Communication Ecology Model of Language Attitudes.

The micro level: Individual variation and processes

The individual (micro level) is shown here as embedded in the meso level of local interpersonal networks. These networks of family, friends, and other ingroup members are the primary sources and reinforcers of language

attitudes. Socialization of youth into group beliefs and attitudes is the backdrop against which intergroup interactions occur. A hearer's evaluation of a speaker's language and extra-linguistic cues, such as accent and gestures, will be heavily influenced by (a) the hearer's existing language attitudes and socialization, and (b) the immediate and larger social contexts in which that interaction occurs (i.e., meso and meso-macro level factors). Hearers selectively collect their impressions of a speaker's communication in ways that reinforce: their own interpersonal history with that group, and/or reflect the collective history of their ingroup, including others' experiences, beliefs, and knowledge collected from mediated, institutional and other local sources.

As Cargile & Bradac (2001) and others have indicated, interpersonal as well as *intergroup* histories (see Harwood & Giles 2005) and past experiences, are essential contextual factors in the judgments that hearers make in interactions. However, it is crucial to recognize that history encompasses more than an individual's personally-lived experiences with a particular outgroup. Indeed, people can have strongly-held language attitudes toward groups with which they have never had any personal contact; information gathered from media, various social institutions, and trusted others through vicarious experiences (see Rosenbaum, Shuck, Costello, Hawkins & Ring 2005), can and do serve as mediated experiences that are integrated into that person's interactions, beliefs, and attitudes. More commonly, history is an amalgam of personally lived and mediated experiences with particular groups or individuals, giving rise to intergroup perceptions and attitudes.

Information gathered within the local communicative environment is not universally misrepresentative, nor is it universally accurate.³ Rather, the ways in which people gather information about their social world is flexible, integrated, and, ultimately, subject to individual selective processing of information that fits within their belief systems and own experiences. The "diagnostic tools" (Bradac & Giles 1991) that individuals develop from this information-gathering process forms the basis for attitudes to language, accent, and dialect, which are activated in a particular interaction.

The meso level: Interpersonal networks, local media, and community organizations

The context of an interpersonal interaction is termed the "immediate social situation" in Cargile et al.'s formulation (1994, p. 214). Communication

³ In an ideal world, the information garnered from neighbors and friends (i.e., other residents), local media, and community organizations, would present accurate information about local and larger events. However, research by media scholars over the last couple of decades indicate that media coverage, coupled with interpersonal interaction, are often at least partial culprits for misperceptions that individuals bring to interactions with outgroup members (Matei, Ball-Rokeach & Qiu 2001).

infrastructure theory conceives of the immediate social situation, and what Cargile et al. refer to as "perceived cultural factors" as an interlinked, dual level set of factors (see Figure 1).

First, at the meso level, the immediate social situation is conceived as a triumvirate of: (1) interpersonal networks of local residents, family, and friends; (2) local media sources; and (3) community-based organizations/institutional information resources. The degree to which these three nodes of the *storytelling network* are integrated can affect language attitudes with the information resources contained therein. These resources of information, mediated or interpersonal, may challenge existing attitudes, or might reconfirm them. The resources available within a local storytelling network may, of course, vary over time. This means that an event, or what Ball-Rokeach et al. (2001) call a "turning point" might change, challenge, or reinforce existing individual and group language attitudes, depending on the event and how it affects the range of available information resources, and the content of those communication channels. The experience of parents collaborating over common education concerns in a Los Angeles community, given below, is one such a turning event.

The meso-macro level: Understanding the unique effects of the local space

Second, at the meso-macro level, the *communication action context* accounts for the "perceived cultural factors" in Cargile et al.'s (1994) formulation, and provides background to understand why the "immediate social situation" takes the shape that it does. The communication action context comprises the local features that can constrain or enable communication between or within the nodes of the storytelling network, and is a set of related feature types:

- The *physical makeup* of the urban grid (e.g., streets and freeways)
- The *relative presence of places that bring people together* (e.g., parks, quality grocery stores, and libraries).
- *Psychological features*, meaning the degree to which people feel free to engage each other (e.g., level of fear or comfort).
- *Sociocultural characteristics* that facilitate (or hinder) communication, such as the degree of class, ethnic, and cultural similarity in a local community, and inclinations toward individualism or collectivism.
- *Economic features*, such as the time and resources available to engage in conversation with others in the community.
- *Technological features*, including access to communication technologies (e.g., Internet connections, types of new and old local media available to residents of an area), as well as characteristics of available transportation systems (e.g., individual cars, bus system, and subway system), which can also affect how much daily contact individuals have with other residents in their communities.

Although these features seem, at a glance, purely descriptive of the conditions of urban life, it is in their very banality that their power lies. The communication infrastructure, and how it shapes and affects individual interactions, is seldom made visible. And yet, when these features are considered *collectively*, their true impact on interaction becomes apparent (Star & Ruhleder 1996).

If local residents do not have time and/or access to safe places to interact and exchange information gleaned from local resources (such as local media, personal networks, and community organizations), communication and access to new information resources may be constrained, and language attitudes may fossilize over time to become deeply-held beliefs. Likewise, feelings of fear and comfort can and do affect who individuals are most likely to interact with. For example, if children are raised with the belief that group X are people with violent temperaments and poor values, it is unlikely that these youth would voluntarily interact with members of Group X rather than ingroup members or other outgroups.

The communication action context is clearly comprised of a number of elements. How many elements are present and absent, how these elements are distributed in a local space, and how these elements are interrelated, all determine the character of a particular community's communication action context. Therefore, although two communities may be very similar to each other in a number of ways, there will be differences that make each environment unique. It is this uniqueness that accounts for the differences in attitudes and behaviors that can manifest in two communities that seem, on the surface, very similar to each other.

Given this uniqueness, it is essential to be able to identify key features in the communication action context, and to be able to research how they relate to each other. Since it is impossible to account for *all* the community features, how one considers this meso-macro level depends largely on what one is trying to study. The communication action context is conceived as a set of *layers*. The physical features will be one layer, psychological features another, and so on. To have a meaningful answer to the question of, for example, how language attitudes are affected by community features, one has to *slice* across layers, putting focus where it is appropriate.

In any study of language attitudes, psychological features will play a large role; feelings of fear and comfort, as mentioned previously, will affect who people choose to interact with (and who to avoid) in the first place as well as what ethnically-related media to select and which to ignore (Abrams & Giles, in press). The physical features, likewise, will be important. If there are spaces in which members of different groups have to interact out of necessity, for example, in shared schools or sports facilities, the possibility of spontaneous (and positive) intergroup communication increases. In communities, however, where groups occupy different parts

of the community, use different facilities, and attend different schools, language attitudes are likely to remain unchallenged and unchanged by dint of a lack of interaction.

Hence, in order to slice across layers and affect changes in language attitudes, one might choose to focus on (1) measuring feelings of intergroup fear and comfort levels, and try to untangle reasons for those impressions, and (2) work to increase or augment local spaces in which those groups might interact, and (3) in contexts where groups do interact, emphasize subjects that highlight common ground rather than difference. One real-life example of this was accomplished at a school in Los Angeles, where new immigrant parents of different national origins who had had little prior contact, came together to protest the overcrowding of the local high school, and petition the county for resources to build another school. A naturally-occurring event, collectively perceived as requiring action from parents, provided a context in which intergroup differences were less important than their common and superordinate concerns as parents.³ Communication infrastructure does not suggest that such an event inevitably results in improved intergroup relations. (Relatedly, see research and theory on intergroup contact; for example, Goto & Chan 2005; Pettigrew & Tropp 2000; Wright, Brody & Aron 2005.) Rather, this event would provide an *opportunity* for intergroup relations, at an individual or at a group level, to be re-evaluated to some degree.

The macro level: Accounting for larger forces

The local area cannot, of course, be considered in a vacuum of time and space. There are forces, both current and historical, that can shape the ways that language attitudes are formulated and/or maintained in a local space. The macro level would include factors greater than those at the community level, such as immigration flows, national laws/policies, relative social power of a language or ethnic group, and historical events that can all affect language attitudes and interpersonal interaction. These are not ignored in either the social process model of language attitudes or in communication infrastructure formulations, but rather, these forces are kept in mind for inclusion at the communication action context level, since these larger factors inevitably affect the shape and form of features at the local level in ways that are important to acknowledge, if not study directly.

³ The parent group was ultimately successful in lobbying the school district, and has since harnessed their collective strength to organize a local election to recall a corrupt city government in March, 2003. Although no formal study was conducted to assess language attitude change, it seems safe to assume that the multiple successful efforts of this collective, contrasted with their previous non-interaction patterns, indicate positive language attitude change.

5. From Theory to Practice: Practical Suggestions for the Language Teacher

How does one take the strengths of the foregoing and apply it to the challenges of teaching? First, the local community context can provide essential clues to language attitudes. The model presented above suggests ways for teachers to engage in background research before beginning teaching.

(1) If the community in which one is teaching is not one's own, a morning spent walking the neighborhood and picking up flyers, newspapers, etc., and other free media can be an informative starting point. The types of events, activities, and stories told in local papers can tell a story about a place, or, in many cases, the stories that are *not* told, and the events *not* taking place, can be equally telling. This self-conducted tour can reveal the character of a place:

- What groups live here? What is the history of intergroup interaction? Is one group more settled or established than others, and if so, what has the reaction been to the demographic shift?
- Does the area have visible resources and meeting/greeting places, where people can engage fellow residents in spontaneous conversation?
- What organizations are visible, in terms of service provision, and local neighborhood organizations like homeowner's associations or parent-teacher organizations? Which language or ethnic groups are represented in such organizations? (See construct of and research on "ethnolinguistic vitality", for example, Abrams, Eveland & Giles 2003.)

(2) Meeting students' families is another way to better understand socialization patterns and language attitudes. In the United States, bilingual educators who have visited students' families in their homes (particularly when those students are part of stigmatized language groups), have seen their efforts rewarded with improved classroom performance (Crawford 1999; Perogoy & Boyle 2001). These suggestions mirror the "funds of knowledge" (Moll 1992) approach to second language teaching, which urges teachers to identify nontraditional resources in their students' community and home, and to harness these strengths in classroom teaching (Rueda, Monozó & Arzubiaga 2003).

(3) Moving from the community into the classroom, the model presented here would recommend classroom assignments that urge students to think critically about the interpersonal, organizational and mediated communication that affect their language attitudes.

(3a) Language itself can be a teacher. As Bradac & Giles (1991) suggested, having students use language to think and talk about language use, could constitute a type of meta-linguistic training. Critical evaluation of stigmatized and valued forms of language with the goal of increasing tolerance of language diversity could serve as an intervention strategy.

Having children unpack their "interpersonal and intergroup histories" with a particular outgroup to interrogate the roots of their experiences and assumptions, could result in some reformulation of previously unexamined language attitudes.

(3b) Multimedia interventions could be similarly effective. Discussing character portrayals from films and other sources of popular images can provide an entry point for students to discuss language attitudes and variation in ways that are not directly personal. The rapidly expanding range of available media literacy curricula (see, for example, those available online at the Center for Media Literacy: <http://www.medialit.org>) can be useful tools for such interventions, since they provide frameworks for age-appropriate critical analyses of a wide range of media forms.

The earlier discussion on slicing through layers of the communication action context could be a model for activities that present their language attitudes as being affected by multiple sources and processes. For example, examining how a stigmatized language or ethnic group is covered in the local and/or mass media, as opposed to a more valued language group, can be used to interrogate relative levels of fear and comfort with outgroups (i.e., psychological features of the communication action context, see again, Abrams & Giles, in press).

(3c) The lessons learned from evaluating community "funds of knowledge" can also become useful classroom tools. First, acknowledging and integrating the lessons learned from various students' families effectively validates their families' linguistic experiences – which, for students of a minority language group, can be a profoundly unusual experience.

6. Epilogue

Language teachers have long been aware that many variables play into students' successful acquisition of a second language. Factors such as natural ability, age (Crawford 1999), ease of "transferability" (Thonis 1994) from the primary language to the second (Lopez 1996) are all significant contributors to successful acquisition. Less immediately apparent, but equally critical, are the sets of language attitudes students and instructors bring to a learning experience (Gardner 1995; see also, Gill 1994). The key to successful language instruction is understanding how and why students evaluate language variations (such as accent and physical gestures), and consequently make judgments of an individual speaker, and of their language, ethnic, or cultural group and at the outset, we briefly reviewed recent work in the language attitudes domain.

To understand how students' language attitudes are formed and reinforced, one could employ a number of theoretical positions. In this article, we have stressed the importance of considering multiple levels and influences that can affect language attitudes. Toward that end, we introduced a model that built upon communication infrastructure theory (Ball-

Rokeach et al. 2001) and Cargile et al.'s (1994) social process framework. As a means of showing the pragmatic significance of our communication ecology model, we recommend drawing upon local community features that can facilitate students' consideration of their experiences, both lived as well as mediated through other people, media, and organizations, as locally constituted experiences. Students' recognition of the specificity of their own experiences and recognition of language attitudes as locally produced and adaptable, rather than universal truths, can facilitate pathways to destabilizing language attitudes that may have negative social and personal consequences for second language learners, and to modify these attitudes to produce more beneficial learning outcomes. It is our hope that the communication ecology model will not only guide pedagogical practices that can be evaluatively monitored, but also lead to innovative research in its own right.

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SHEILA ROWBOTHAM

Women and Utopia

I have a wonderful postcard of a speaker at Hyde Park Corner in London with a placard round his neck declaring 'UTOPIA COULD BE THE ANSWER TO SOME OF YOUR PROBLEMS. LET ME EXPLAIN.' It is easy to be wry about utopias and one of its most common usages is derisory: to be utopian is to be ludicrous and unpractical. The contempt is tinged with a sense of danger; utopian dreamers take us up dead ends or worse towards trouble. In pronouncing on utopia I have several little Jiminy Crickets on my shoulder. On the left there is Engels muttering about strategy and scientific socialism, along with the British radical William Hazlitt reminding me how Robert Owen's schemes were 'tolerated because they are remote, visionary, inapplicable'.¹ On the right I have Edmund Burke reflecting furiously and a liberal John Maynard Keynes insisting, 'We can never know enough to make the chance worth taking'.² Utopians, of course, by definition have considered, for various reasons that the chance is worth taking.

Keeping all these sceptical whispers in mind, I propose to focus not on the utopianism of answers but on the more exploratory approach towards utopianism outlined by E.P. Thompson in the Postscript he did to his biography on William Morris. He argues that Morris' utopianism challenged habitual conceptions of the everyday by presenting 'a vocabulary of desire'³ - a recognition largely muted in both marxism and social democracy. Utopianism in this sense is about navigating the journey into what might be and becoming aware that the answers are not fixed but an ongoing search, rather as Ursula le Guin does in her science fantasy. Utopianism then need not be schematic and prescriptive, it can also propose other ways of imagining, conceiving and thinking about the world. Not only is such an approach less easy for the Jiminy Crickets to dismiss, it is a vital element in any project of social transformation.

A most pressing dilemma which recurs in efforts to transform social existence is the question of what to do with the here and now. Those utopians who seek an absolute break with the old immoral world gain a freedom of movement but can easily tumble into the dangers of isolation or intolerable autocracy. At the other extreme those who pin their hopes on existing human qualities can end up in romantic idealism and conservative nostalgia for an imagined state of lost innocence. In a recent article on George Orwell Terry Eagleton compared him to Raymond Williams and E.P.Thompson as seeking an alternative 'immanent in the present'.⁴ I want to stretch Eagleton's phrase to include forms of political practice as well as