

# On Linguistic Prejudice between Teachers and Students and its Implications for Teaching

## -- From the Perspective of Subjective Inequality

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### Abstract

As a communication tool, language is essentially equal, but language inequality exists in language use. Scholars and educators have conducted in-depth research mainly from the perspective of the classification of linguistic inequality, which can be divided into subjective inequality, strictly linguistic inequality and communicative inequality. However, there are few in-depth analyses of language prejudice between teachers and students from the perspective of subjective inequality. This paper analyzes phenomenon of linguistic prejudice between teachers and students, discusses its causes, and puts forward the corresponding pedagogical implications, in the hope that the relationships between students and teachers will be improved and a better learning atmosphere will be created.

### Keywords

Linguistic inequality; Linguistic prejudice; Subjective inequality; Pedagogical implications.

## 1. Introduction

Linguistic inequality is omnipresent, which has an important impact on people's life. Therefore, it is necessary to study the phenomenon of linguistic inequality. As for the domestic researches, many of which have studied the linguistic inequality in theory (Yuan Yining, 2005; He Qibing, 2010; Li Jie, 2014), which lay a solid foundation on other aspects of the research. The researches abroad mainly focus on methodology such as matched guise technique. There are few in-depth analyses of language prejudice between teachers and students from the perspective of subjective inequality. This study aims to analyze the linguistic prejudice from the perspective of subjective inequality and put forward implications for teachers.

## 2. Linguistic Inequality

### 2.1. Definition

In the modern era, the phenomenon of inequality is omnipresent. There is inequality between countries, nations, and also between people. Inequality also exists in the world of languages, where languages (including varieties of languages) are classified as superior and inferior, which means that language is not equal in the minds of some people. Linguistic inequality is a phenomenon that a kind of language that some speakers regard as advanced and others as backward, which is linguistic prejudice in its essence (Li Jie, 2014). Language is equal in nature, but there is inequality in language use. On the one hand, the doctrine of linguistic equality deflects attention from language as a source of social inequality. On the other hand, social class is a significant influence on language in most urban societies, and it is the social status that is

responsible for the difference between 'overt' and 'covert' prestige (Trugill, 1974/1983). Some linguistic items have overt prestige because of the high social class of the speakers in the social-class hierarchy. Since language is one of the most important means by which social inequality is disseminated from generation to generation, it can be concluded that the consequences of social inequality is the linguistic inequality.

## **2.2. Three Types of Linguistic Inequality**

Hudson (2000) defined language inequality as that some languages are considered to be excellent and superior to others. Based on this, he divided language inequality into three types, namely subjective inequality, strictly linguistic inequality and communicative inequality.

Communicative inequality is concerned with the knowledge of how to use linguistic items to communicate effectively, instead of concerning with the knowledge of linguistic items themselves. Strictly linguistic inequality has to something do with the language items one knows. The language a person uses is closely related to his/her social background. This kind of inequality caused by the use of language items reflecting the social background is strictly linguistic inequality.

Subjective inequality mainly refers to how people think about the words of others. Some people make instant judgments about a person's character and abilities simply from the way they speak. For example, when a student meets a English teacher with an accent for the first time, he may immediately assume that the teacher is incapable of teaching him, even though he has no idea of the teacher's competence. To this extent, languages with different varieties are regarded as the criteria for evaluation, which directly leads to subjective linguistic inequality. This paper mainly explores the language prejudice of teachers and students from the perspective of subjective inequality.

## **3. Linguistic Prejudice**

### **3.1. Definition**

Linguistic prejudice of teachers and students has been a practical social problems concerning with education. It is significant not only because the prejudices are disseminated through the society by means of education but teachers and other educators should be aware of the potential risk of this type of prejudice. Linguistic prejudice in teaching is somehow, not different from the prejudice in teaching in that the latter is usually referred to the different ways teachers treat students according to their own subjective experience or the satisfaction of specific value needs, that is, teachers bear the thoughts that they tend to like some students while they are indifferent to other students. However, we must bear the awareness that there are various sorts of teachers and students, and not all teachers would have linguistic prejudice or teaching prejudice to students. (Taylor, 1973; Edwards, 1994)

### **3.2. Teachers' Linguistic Prejudice on Students**

#### **3.2.1. The Characteristic of the Phenomenon**

Some school teachers have fixed speech stereotypes to students, and this set of stereotype is potentially the source of severe problem in teaching. Some teachers, esp. student teachers, have the inclination to evaluate students competence by their first impressions of them on speech-forms instead of other sources of information. Giles and Powesland (1973) conducted an experiment to investigate their impression to students. In this experiment, they asked a group of student teachers to assess eight hypothetical school students on the standards of intelligence, self-confidence, gentle, being privileged, enthusiastic as well as being an excellent student. The student teachers were given three types of information of the hypothetical students: a photograph, a tape-recorded sample of speech and a sample of school-work. The result of the

experiment shows that the sample of speech take priority over other given information, which reveals the fact that teachers prefer speech-form as the first impression on students to other impressions. Basically speaking, it is a deeply-rooted stereotype of teacher's linguistic prejudice to students.

However, we should have the knowledge that not all teachers judge students on the basis of the standardness of their speech. And according to Giles and Powesland (1975), what has been shown is that teachers who are oriented to speech standardness of students pay more heed to students' linguistic competence. As for those who are fluency-oriented, the students' communicative competence will be improved.

### **3.2.2. Potential Consequences of the Phenomenon**

Some teachers usually evaluate students dialects or accents by forming the unfavorable first impression. This leads to a problem of self-fulfilling prophecy to students. They have to behave well in classes though the teacher have already formed a negative expectation on them. It is proved that if the teachers bear high expectations on students, they will treat those students well so as to make them produce good performance (Rosenthal et al., 1968). This has something to do with the pygmalion effect, which refers to the change of students' thought and behavior caused by the expectation composed of teachers' concern, trust and encouragement (Wen Weiping, 2001). Similarly, negative expectations from the teachers will lead to negative performance by the students to some extent.

Additionally, teacher's prejudice may escalate to reinforce any negative prejudice on students. It is a wrong assumption that teacher's major role is to correct students' non-standard accents or dialects without considering their individuality. All in all, prejudice on students may cause the students' self-image being more negative or make them lack of self-confidence, which will affect their performance on study or their future life.

### **3.2.3. Possible Causes of the Phenomenon**

From above, the phenomenon of teachers' linguistic prejudice on students and its potential consequences are clearly stated. Since everything occurs with various reasons, we should now explore why this kind of prejudice take place from teachers.

First of all, from the perspective of subjective aspects, the primacy effect is one of the reasons of teachers' linguistic prejudice on students. Primacy effect refers to the information acquired first, which plays an important role in the image of a person. The first impression of the students in the teachers' mind predominantly determines some teachers' opinion of the students (He Wenting, 2007). Moreover, teachers' prejudice can be also attributed to students' tone when they talk with their teachers. Some students do not pay much attention to politeness and decency of speech, which will inevitably leave the teacher unfavorable impression on them.

From the objective aspect, the growth environment as well as academic atmosphere around the students are significant factors among the cause of teacher's prejudice on pupils. The distinctions among students such as those who are from rural and urban areas, the social background and their characters, influence the way some teachers treat them.

## **3.3. Students' Linguistic Prejudice on Teachers**

### **3.3.1. The Characteristic of the Phenomenon**

In addition to teacher's linguistic prejudice on students, there also exists linguistic prejudice of students. Although the adult set of prejudice has not established until adolescence, it still begins at early age (Giles and Bradac, 1994). Cairns et al. (1976) conducted a test using matched guise technique. He asked students to listen to recordings of different accents made by the same person in different accents to test their attitudes towards different accents. The results show that students pay more attention to sounds that are similar or identical to their own, and memorize more of those sounds because they evoke a sense of belonging. It also implied that

the teacher's accent may affect the children's willingness to be influenced by what she/he says, and even their ability to remember it.

### 3.3.2. Possible Causes of the Phenomenon

From the experiments above, we find that students are more likely to trust the person with a similar accent to their own, and they are more likely to adopt the opinions of these people. For example, some students come from the same place as the teacher and they share similar accent, which will virtually narrow the distance between them and the teacher. Furthermore, psychological effects can also lead to the linguistic prejudice. Some students prefer to be taught by younger teachers or student teachers. When students are attracted to these teachers, the probability of linguistic prejudice is greatly reduced.

## 4. Pedagogical Implications

The phenomenon of linguistic prejudice of teachers and students, which are potential sources of serious problems in the education process, are somehow inevitable for various reasons. However, we should at least minimize the risk to optimize the relationship between teachers and students.

First, as teachers, we should have a clear understanding of the nature of this phenomenon. Teachers are the guides and initiators of the classroom activities as well as the whole education process. We should be sensitive to our own prejudices and to those of students, and to rectify this kind of phenomenon. For example, in Chinese school, the teachers should speak the mandarin in classes as standard as possible.

Second, we should pay more attention to students' psychological states. Due to objective or subjective reasons, students have different learning foundation. As a teacher, we should not comment on a student only by language, but also find the advantages of each student, especially for the students in adolescence, whose thinking, emotions and behavior being unstable, sensitive, and fragile. What's more, they are desperate for attention. Therefore, we should care for them in terms of psychological development.

Additionally, teachers should strengthen the communication with students. The education process is essentially a process of communication. This kind of communication is not one-way or one-dimensional, but should be criss-cross. If this kind of communication is not adequate, the understanding to students is not comprehensive thus the judgment will also be prejudiced. We should not understand students' psychological development just in theory. Talking or communicating with students is also a practical way to achieve the goal since there's dichotomy in students' psychological development of different age groups.

## 5. Conclusion

In the teaching process, language itself is taught, used and judged, and language inequality exists in it. There is no gainsaying that language prejudice may be accompanied by subjective and objective factors. However, as a teacher, we should try our best to avoid the bias brought by language and devote our love and attention to students and our work. In this way, the phenomenon of linguistic inequality will be eliminated. Given the research on the phenomenon of linguistic inequality between teachers and students is limited, it is hoped that more scholars could pay attention to this kind of research.

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