

Implicit and explicit language attitudes: mapping linguistic prejudice and attitude change in England", by Robert McKenzie and Andrew McNeil

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Review of:

Implicit and Explicit Language Attitudes: Mapping linguistic prejudice and attitude change in England.

Robert M. McKenzie and Andrew McNeil

Routledge

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By: Marco Tamburelli (Bangor University)

Understanding language attitudes can help us to gauge the vitality of a regional/minority language and, more directly, it can provide an insight into social stereotyping. Furthermore, the study of language attitudes feeds directly into our understanding of how linguistic dominance is established and maintained within societies, and as such it can provide valuable evidence on the extent and perhaps even the nature of linguistic discrimination. The approaches and methods used to investigate language attitudes have seen considerable developments in the last twenty years, with an increasing number of linguists learning and importing insights from recent advances in social psychology. Nevertheless, most of the work on the subject tends to be in the form of research outputs aimed at other researchers. In this book, McKenzie and McNeil bring together a range of issues central to the study, measurement and understanding of language attitudes. While the focus of their empirical studies is entirely on English dialects, the book engages with many theoretical and methodological concepts that are central to the study of language attitudes in general, particularly to the modernisation of linguistic attitudes as a field of study, and as such it is a valuable resource to anyone interested in the subject.

The book begins with an overview of variation between northern and southern English in England (chapter 1). While relatively short at less than nine pages, chapter 1 does a good job of contextualizing the empirical studies to be reported and discussed in later chapters. It provides a good historical overview of the dialects at issue, giving examples of phonological differences and presenting an extremely useful summary of the literature on English dialectology. The chapter-specific list of references, which follows every chapter in the book, works really well, making every chapter useful as a stand-alone item while also integrating well with the overall book.

Chapter 2 provides an excellent overview of the conceptualisation of attitudes and the historical development as well as theoretical content of attitudinal models. The authors engage in a thorough discussion of several issues that are instrumental to language attitude research,

such as the distinction between direct and indirect measures and the relation between implicit and explicit measurements. The chapter also provides a good historical grounding, covering the social psychological literature on attitudes first, before homing in on how the concepts have been applied and adapted for the study of language attitudes in particular and then narrowing the focus on language attitudes as specifically applied to variation in England. Therefore, this chapter is indispensable to anyone interested in language attitudes, regardless of the language varieties they might be working on. The clarity of exposition and the attention to historical developments make chapter 2 valuable to students and researchers alike, while also serving as excellent resource for the teaching of language attitudes both at undergraduate and postgraduate level.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology used by the authors to measure language attitudes in England. Hypotheses are clearly laid out and the explicit and implicit methods are described. Some interesting methodological points are also raised, particularly in relation to the use of interval vs continuous scales, a topic that has received considerable attention in social psychology but relatively little in linguistics. This chapter does contain one recurring imprecision, however, as the authors refer to some of their hypotheses as “predictions”. As this book is clearly a valuable teaching resource, this rare, but regrettably salient terminological slip is an unfortunate fly in an otherwise extremely well-prepared ointment.

Chapter 4 reports results of the implicit and explicit measurements in some detail. Descriptive statistics and internal reliability statistics are discussed first, followed by inferential statistics, which form the bulk of the chapter. A section is also dedicated to the relationship between implicit and explicit attitudes that emerged from the data. Throughout the presentation, the reader is reminded of what each statistical technique does and the scale on which it is scored, making chapter 4 another potentially useful teaching resource while also being a good results chapter in its own right. Some arguably inaccurate and potentially confusing statements are advanced, however, such as the claim that a t-test “examines whether the difference in mean scores between two groups is statistically significant”, which erroneously suggests that a “difference” can be somehow identified prior to statistical testing, while arguably it is the statistical test itself that identifies whether a difference is present.

Chapter 4 also provides what is perhaps the most innovative contribution of this book, namely quantitative analysis, and an in-depth discussion of the role of several social attributes in predicting language attitudes. Specifically, the authors moved beyond the usual variables such

as age and gender and investigated the role of regional affiliation and social dominance orientation. Considering social dominance orientation is particularly insightful, as it may allow the development of links between language attitudes and actual social / sociolinguistic behaviour, thus locating the study of language attitudes within a larger picture.

Chapter 5 does a good job of discussing and contextualising the results. The same issue with the concept of “difference” arises here, but it’s potentially less impactful as it is only mentioned in passing, e.g., in the statement “although the difference was not found to be significant”. Unfortunately, statements like this mean that caution needs to be exercised when using this book as a teaching resource.

I found the section on future research particularly insightful, and specifically the arguments in favour of more research on attitude change and persuasion. I wholeheartedly agree with the authors that linguistics lags behind social psychology in the investigation of attitude change, and that more research is needed in this area, not least in order to understand whether and how attitude measurements can serve as a barometer for sociolinguistic behaviour, (socio)linguistic change and shifting patterns of use.

Overall, I found this book to be very well structured, with clear aims and organised in very useful stand-alone chapters, each with its own specific reference list. It does a very good job of explaining the logic behind some popular implicit methods, specifically the Implicit Association Test (IAT: Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz, 1998), the scoring system it is based on, and what IAT results tell us about the conceptualisation of attitudes in general and of language attitudes in particular. It provides a good history of implicit measures from the social psychology literature, where the technique originated, followed by a thorough overview of how these measures have been adopted and adapted for the specific purpose of measuring attitudes towards languages and/or linguistic communities. This approach to the literature gives this book great potential as a teaching resource at all levels while also remaining a good reference book for more advanced researchers.

References

Greenwald, A. G., D. E. McGhee, and J. L. K. Schwartz. 1998. “Measuring Individual Differences in Implicit Cognition: The Implicit Association Test.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74 (6): 1464–1480. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.74.6.1464.