The effect of linguistics instruction on undergraduates’ linguistic attitudes

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Linguistic Society of America
Panel introducing Teaching Linguistics
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Linguistics and attitudinal assumptions

- Linguists make assumptions about language
  - There are several of these
    - One naturally occurring variety is not inherently better than another
    - No language or variety is more primitive than another
    - Language change is natural and doesn’t signal decline
  - Many of these are not widely held by non-linguists

- Linguists use some terms in unusual ways
  - (Un)grammatical
  - Dialect
Attempts to bridge the gap

› Books directed toward non-linguists
  › Laurie Bauer & Peter Trudgill’s *Language Myths*
  › Donna Jo Napoli’s *Language Matters*
  › Several books by David Crystal

› Some television programs and films
  › *Do You Speak American?*
  › *American Tongues*

› Introductory textbooks
  › William O’Grady *et al.*’s *Contemporary Linguistics*
  › The Ohio State University’s *Language Files*
Study site: University of Central Florida

- The university
  - Very large public doctoral-granting university
  - Over 50,000 students, ca. 85% undergraduate
  - Most students are from Florida, especially Central Florida
  - No linguistics department or linguistics major
  - Offers minors in linguistics and cognitive science

- Linguistics courses
  - Very few regularly offered linguistic courses
  - Most linguistics courses are based in the English Department
  - Some related courses offered in allied fields
  - Courses are often used for multiple purposes
Study site: University of Alaska Anchorage

› The university
  › Medium-sized public doctoral-granting university
  › About 14,000 students (main campus), ca. 93% undergraduate
  › Most students are from Alaska, especially Southcentral Alaska
  › No linguistics department or linguistics major
  › Offers minor in (English) linguistics

› Linguistics courses
  › Very few regularly offered linguistic courses
  › Most linguistics courses are based in the English Department
  › Some related courses offered in allied fields
  › Courses are often used for multiple purposes
The survey: Overview

› Given in my undergraduate classes since Fall 2006
  › University of Central Florida Fall 2006 to Spring 2009
  › University of Alaska Anchorage Fall 2009 to present
› Survey administered at beginning and end of semester
› Covers attitudes toward language
  › 23 questions based largely on chapters in *Language Myths*
  › Topics range from substantive (15) to pure opinion (8)
  › Questions presented electronically in random order
  › Ask for level of agreement with claims about language
  › Responses elicited on a 4-point Likert scale
  › Respondents could skip questions
› 564 responses collected to date
The survey: Substantive prompts

› 6 on grammaticality
  › 4 by example (singular they, object who, final preposition, it is me)
  › 2 direct (both double negatives, separating logic and grammar)
› 4 on acceptance of language varieties
  › 2 direct (regional varieties, ethnically marked varieties)
  › 1 on whether use of non-standard varieties stems from laziness
  › 1 on whether some languages have no grammar
› 2 on linguistic security (correctness, accent)
› 1 on official English
› 1 on English spelling
› 1 on language and thought
But there are problems

➤ Overall results
  ➤ Several significant changes in attitudes
  ➤ All changes move toward norms generally held by linguists
  ➤ Most changes have very small effects, some have small effects

➤ But there are problems
  ➤ This comes from a disparate set of classes
  ➤ Some classes were only offered once
  ➤ Some classes were only offered at one campus
Paring down the sample

› Comparable classes
  › Offered at both schools
  › Similar content in all sections
  › Enough responses to draw valid conclusions

› 3 class pairs fit these requirements
  › Principles of Linguistics (UCF)/Nature of Language (UAA)
  › Modern English Grammar (UCF)/Intermediate Grammar (UAA)
  › History of the English Language (both schools)

› Those classes include the majority of respondents (441)
Principles of Linguistics/Nature of Language

- Introductory survey of linguistic subfields
- Primary focus on theoretical linguistics
- No prerequisites
- Lower-division course (effectively)
- Multiple audiences, including general education
- 127 respondents
  - 115 responded to the initial survey
  - 108 responded to the final survey
  - 97 responded to both surveys
- “Intro to Linguistics”
Modern English Grammar/Intermediate Grammar

› Introduction to transformational grammar
› Cross-linguistic with a primary focus on English
› No/unenforced prerequisites
› Lower-division course (effectively)
› Multiple audiences, but largely aspiring English teachers
› 198 respondents
  › 184 responded to the initial survey
  › 145 responded to the final survey
  › 131 responded to both surveys
› “Intro to Syntax”
History of the English Language

- Overview of historical change in English
- Covers phonetics and historical reconstruction
- Minimal prerequisites
- Upper-division course
- Multiple audiences, but largely English majors
- 115 respondents
  - 110 responded to the initial survey
  - 86 responded to the final survey
  - 80 responded to both surveys
- “History of English”
Intro to Linguistics: Florida

Logic of double negatives
- More accepting
- Less accepting

Acceptance of regional varieties
- More accepting

Acceptance of ethnically marked varieties
- More accepting

Correctness of own English
- Less secure

Logic of English spelling
- Mixed responses

Average response

Initial response  Final response
1. Logic of double negatives
2. Acceptance of regional varieties
3. Acceptance of ethnically marked varieties
4. Correctness of own English
5. Logic of English spelling

Intro to Linguistics: Florida

Average response

Mixed responses

More accepting

Less accepting

More accepting

Less secure

Initial response  Final response
Intro to Linguistics: Alaska

- Logic of double negatives: More accepting
- Acceptance of regional varieties: More accepting
- Acceptance of ethnically marked varieties: More accepting
- Correctness of own English: More secure
- Logic of English spelling: More informed

Average response

Initial response
Final response
Intro to Syntax: Florida

- More accepting
- More accepting
- More accepting
- More accepting
- More accepting
- More opposition
- More opposition
- More informed

Singular they
Stranded preposition
Object who
Grammaticality of double negatives
Acceptance of ethnically marked varieties
Languages having no grammar
Official English
Correctness of own English

Initial response
Final response
Intro to Syntax: Florida

Average response

Singular they  More accepting
Stranded preposition  More accepting
Object who  More accepting
Grammaticality of double negatives  More accepting
Acceptance of ethnically marked varieties  More accepting
Languages having no grammar  More informed
Official English  More opposition
Correctness of own English  More secure

Initial response  Final response
Intro to Syntax: Alaska

- More accepting
- More accepting
- More accepting
- More accepting
- More informed
- More informed
- More informed
- More opposition
- More informed

Singular they
Stranded preposition
Object who
Grammaticality of double negatives
Acceptance of ethnically marked varieties
Non-standard lazy
Languages having no grammar
Official English
Correctness of own English

Average response

Initial response
Final response
Intro to Syntax: Alaska

More accepting

More informed

More opposition

More secure

Average response

Singular they
Stranded preposition
Object who
Grammaticality of double negatives
Acceptance of ethnically marked varieties
Non-standard lazy
Languages having no grammar
Official English
Correctness of own English

Initial response
Final response
History of English: Florida

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Initial Response</th>
<th>Final Response</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is me</td>
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</tbody>
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Average response
History of English: Alaska

Average response

- It is me: More accepting
- Singular they: More accepting
- Acceptance of regional varieties: More accepting
- Acceptance of ethnically marked varieties: More accepting

Initial response | Final response
So what?
So what?

- Undergraduates’ attitudes do change from coursework
  - These changes are nearly all quite small
    - No large-sized effects found
    - History of English led to fewer but larger effects
  - Changes are nearly all toward linguists’ norms

- Different attitudes are affected by different courses
  - Nearly all courses led to acceptance of nonstandard varieties
  - Grammaticality judgments most affected by direct instruction
    - May be a matter of defining terms
    - Unclear if social evaluations of specific nonstandard forms change
  - Global attitudes may be changed more by indirect instruction
Thank you