LANGUAGE ATTITUDES: THE ROLE OF MOTIVATED INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

Howard Giles is Professor of Communication at the University of California, Santa Barbara, USA. He is founding Editor and co-Editor of the *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* and *the Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*. Giles was past President of International Communication Association and the International Association of Language and Social Psychology. His research interests encompass intergroup communication in intergenerational, police-civilian, and other settings

ABSTRACT

Wallace Lambert was a pioneer of language attitudes in terms of method, empiricism, and theory. In this paper, his original paradigm and the more recent work and theory it has spawned is discussed and elaborated. Drawing upon the motivated theory of information management, a new model of language attitudes is introduced.

(USA) INGROUPER: *"Where you from, then?"*
(Apparent) OUTGROUPER [confidently smiling]: *"Santa Barbara, California"*
INGROUPER: [indicating somewhat perplexed]: *"No, I meant where you really from?"*
OUTGROUPER [indicating despair]: *"Yeh, I'm really from Santa Barbara!"*
INGROUPER: [somewhat agitated] *"No, you have an accent, where did you originally come from?"*
OUTGROUPER [somewhat reluctantly]: *"OK, Wales, but I have been in the States for over 22 years"*
INGROUPER: [somewhat surprised and confused]: *"Oh?!"*
OUTGROUPER [somewhat assertive]: *"Actually, it's you who have the accent, buddy!"*
INGROUPER [somewhat indignant]: *"What? I don't have an accent!"*
OUTGROUPER [somewhat arrogantly]: *"I'm a professor of Communication, believe me, I study this kind of thing and you, like everyone else, does have an accent!"*

The legacy of Wallace E. Lambert spans many diverse fields from the neurological to the social and linguistic - and his impact in each of them has, of course, been profound (see Reynolds, 1991; Vaid, Paivio, Gardner, & Genesee, 2010). It is upon one of these fields – language attitudes – that this contribution focuses (see Lambert, 1967). In a recent tribute, Taylor (in press) noted that Lambert "introduced the ingenious matched-guise technique to investigate evaluative reactions to speech style. This led to an appreciation for how language and accent, like physical appearance, are an important basis for prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination (Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner, & Fillenbaum, 1960)". For these reasons, Lambert is regarded as one of the foremost cross-disciplinary pioneers in the study of language attitudes and the father of the social psychology of language more generally. After an introduction to the original, seminal matched-guise technique (MGT) study, and the more recent research and theory that was triggered by it, a new perspective on information regulation and sense-making is proposed that stems from Lambert's legacy. During the unfolding of this essay, the prefaced scenario will be drawn upon for theoretical effect.

BACKGROUND: VOICE, ACCENT, AND THE MATCHED-GUISE TECHNIQUE

The way people talk conveys a great deal about who they are, including their age, sex, ethnicity, and physical size (e.g., Lass, Hughes, Bowyer, Waters, & Bourne, 1976). As McGlone and Giles (in press) commented in their review of language attitudes research, "speakers' identities are encoded in their voices. Listeners hearing their speech can, without training, do a remarkable job of decoding this identifying information. For example, Ellis (1967) asked undergraduates to judge speakers' socioeconomic status (SES) after listening to recordings of a standard passage being read. The correlation between judged and actual SES (as measured by the Index of Status Characteristics) was +0.80. Hence, many texts make the point that the Latin origins of the word *personality* refers to *sounding through*. In this sense, another's voice can be a prime window (or echo) for interpreting their psychological state. Nonetheless, there

is also a longstanding literature showing that others' voices are potent cues for listeners to apply social stereotypes (e.g., Ko, Judd, & Stapel, 2009; Scherer, 1979) that have little to do with their actual social characteristics.

Pre-dating most of this work, Lambert et al.'s (1960) devising of the MGT was built on the following theoretical premise: perceived language features → social categorization → trait attributions. Indeed, when it comes to speakers' speech styles, there has been a longstanding consensus that such features provide listeners with an intergroup frame for interpreting the situation (Giles, Reid, & Harwood, 2010); that is, voice tells us more of speakers' social identities than their personal identities (see Giles & Ryan, 1982; Ryan, Hewstone, & Giles, 1984). Studies employing the MGT present listeners with audio-recordings of purportedly neutral passages of prose (see Giles & Coupland, 1991) read by bilingual or bidialectal individuals who can authentically adopt various guises of the language varieties under study. By using the same speakers to render these guises, other extraneous vocal variables (e.g., speech rate) that naturally vary between speakers are controlled, and researchers are, thereby, able to attribute response differences primarily to the guises being contrasted.

In their initial study, Lambert et al. (1960) compared the evaluative reactions of undergraduates in Montreal to English and French versions of a short passage read by four bilingual speakers. Each listener heard all eight recordings, but was not told that they would hear each voice twice; in addition, the recordings were presented in an order that maximized the interval between successive presentations of the English and French guises of each speaker. Under these circumstances, listeners believed they were hearing eight different speakers. The listeners rated each of the recordings on scales reflecting a variety of speaker personality and physical traits, namely, the evaluative factors of competence and social attractiveness (see also, Mulac, 1975; Zahn & Hopper, 1985). Results indicated that the listeners, who themselves were bilingual, assigned higher ratings overall to speakers' English guises than their French guises, regardless of whether their own primary language was English or French, and particularly on traits relating to socioeconomic success, such as intelligence and ambition (see Tajfel, 1959). That the native French listeners accorded even more negative attributions to French than English guises suggested a sense of "linguistic insecurity" among this group (see Genesee & Holobrow, 1989). Lambert et al. attributed the English speakers' advantage to the higher representation of speakers of that language in positions of social and economic power in Montreal.

In lauding the broad impact of this as well as follow-up investigations by Lambert elsewhere, Giles and Coupland (1991) noted that "the original study spawned an enormous number of studies world-wide… and assisted in laying down the foundations for a distinctive Canadian social psychology" (p. 23). Indeed, work in this tradition flourished in the 1970s and 1980s, was rendered relatively silent in the 1990s through the early 2000s, yet quite recently has had a resurgence in interest (e.g., Grondelaers, van Hout, & Steegs, 2010, Gluzek & Dovidio, 2010a; Heaton & Nygaard, in press). Of all the vocal cues investigated in the MGT genre (e.g., pitch and lexical diversity), accents have since received the most empirical attention. That people have, or rather are attributed as having, a so-called "accent" (see opening scenario) has been a social issue and concern in everyday parlance, popular culture, and in many professional contexts for a very long time. A recent web-search (02/25/2011) on "reactions to people's accents," for instance, triggered well over three million hits. The international diversity of these websites is itself intriguing, ranging from how accents can "hold you back" and are unsuitable for classroom teaching, to those offering programs to eliminate them, to those on YouTube with video-clips of comedians taking others to task for "having accents" and other speech styles. Put another way, how one speaks and its social meanings, together with the reactions and decisions they garner, is an incontestable *communicative* issue, and one to be developed in what follows below.

MGT's listener-judges readily form and access their language attitudes after minimal exposure to the accents being compared, suggesting that these attitudes derive from schemas about relationships among language, dialect, ethnicity, and social class acquired very early in life (Bradac & Giles, 1991; Floccia, Bulter, Giard, & Goslin, 2009). Indeed, Nazzi, Juscyk, and Johnson (2000) observed that children as young as five months old are already sensitive to dialectical variations and, by the age of five, accents can be as potent in children's social appraisals as sex and skin color (e.g., Kinzler, Shutts, DeJesus, & Spelke, 2009). Relatedly, and referring to their own empirical work with adults, Rakić, Steffens, and Mummendey (2011) found that "it was rather irrelevant for participants what targets looked like; it mainly mattered whether they were speaking with an accent or not. In this case it was almost as if participants became blind to the visual category information in the presence of more meaningful auditory category information" (p. 24; see also, Freeman & Ambady, 2011).

A considerable portion of the experimental work on social evaluations of accents has been devoted to speakers who occupy positions along a standard-nonstandardness continuum (see Ryan, Giles, & Sebastian, 1982). Examples of standard varieties would be British Received Pronunciation (R.P., commonly referred to as "the Queen's or BBC English"), Parisian French, and Castilian Spanish, whereas nonstandard speakers would be those identified from lower socioeconomic strata who spoke more regional or nonnative varieties of these languages (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010a); for a discussion of the complexity of such distinctions, see Edwards and Jacobsen (1987) and Kristiansen (2001).

Generally, standard language varieties grant people access to political, economic, and educational forums and opportunities, while nonstandard language varieties impart stigma upon speakers of them (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010b).

Research using the MGT (as well as other elicitation procedures, see Ryan, Giles, and Hewstone, 1988) has found that speakers of *non*standard language varieties – and especially those with broader accents (Gluszek, Newheiser, & Dovidio, 2011) – are perceived to be at a social disadvantage vis-a-vis their standard counterparts on a number of levels (for overviews, see Giles & Billings, 2004; Giles & Marlow, 2011; Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010b); for example, they are downgraded on:

- competence (e.g., intelligence, ambition, and confidence) as well as dynamism (e.g., lively, enthusiastic, and talkative) traits;
- their suitability for employment in high status jobs;
- effectiveness as teachers;
- declared guilty when under suspicion of committing a crime;
- the perceived quality of the message content and its level of comprehensibility being downgraded as well. Indeed, Lev-Ari and Keysar (2010) argue, and for some rather provocatively, that non-native speakers are downgraded not so much because of social prejudice but, rather, due to the cognitive load expended in making their messages comprehensible and credible.

Although there is some evidence that status-related contexts (e.g., classroom settings) accentuate these findings, the profile of negative evaluations seems to accrue across differing social contexts studied, and nonstandard speakers have also been shown to induce less behavioral cooperation from others.

On the other hand, nonstandard speakers have been upgraded, albeit not always consistently, on traits of social attractiveness and benevolence, such as friendliness (e.g., Luhman, 1991). Moreover, male nonstandard speakers have been perceived as more masculine and considered more skilled at manual labor tasks (Giles, Henwood, Coupland, Harriman, & Coupland, 1992). In this sense, nonstandard accents can have covert prestige for some of its speakers when in-group identity and loyalty are salient (Ryan, 1979; Marlow & Giles, 2008). When this effect has emerged, it could be aligned with Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick's (2008) content stereotype model that contends that stigmatized groups' (e.g., elderly, obese, physically challenged) lack of attributed competence can be compensated for by elevated attributions of warmth; work in this tradition has, to date, focused on ratings of the conceptual labels of different social groups (e.g., Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). However, in a meta-analysis of language attitude studies where the necessary statistical information was reported in the published reports, Fuertes, Gottdiener, Martin, Gilbert, & Giles (under review) found that, in general, standard speakers – and more so in the USA than Britain – are upgraded on all traits of competence, dynamism, *and* even social attractiveness. Perhaps future research will explore the notion that when actual voices or videotaped features of stigmatized groups are portrayed, the warmth dimension fades away and, at best, is "compensated for" by certain types of raters with pity and or sympathy.

PRIOR THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENTS

In their 1991 chapter, Giles and Coupland noted that, in the 1980s, there was a concern about a proliferation of MGT studies that were merely descriptive. Perhaps as a reaction to this a-theoretical stance, models emerged at that time that were concerned about specifying the underlying socio-structural conditions and prevailing intergroup dynamics that shaped language attitudes in different culture settings (e.g., Ryan,et al., 1982, 1984). In addition, a concern for *process* was becoming evident. For example, attention was directed at how language attitudes were invoked by listeners to reduce interpersonal uncertainty about speakers and, thereby, guided their subsequent impression management strategies (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1990). More interactively then, language attitudes were considered as effectively mediating self-presentational and accommodative practices towards speakers (Street & Hopper, 1982; Giles & Street, 1985), but they could also be maladaptive as in contributing to misattributions and miscommunication outcomes (Hewstone & Giles, 1986). Subsequently, models were developed that explored language attitudes as being integral to the processing of information in real life encounters, with a consideration of the roles of such variables as the perceived interpersonal history existing between speaker and listener (Cargile & Bradac, 2001; Cargile, Giles, Ryan, & Bradac, 1994; Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010b).

Giles and Coupland (1991) presented their own model of the MGT, pointing to the fact that forming language attitudes can be a constructive, interpretive process. In expanding and elaborating on this position as well as building upon the communication ecology model (see Giles, Katz, & Myers, 2006), Giles and Marlow (2011), they argued for a dynamic model of language attitudes that was:

> *... much more than [about] anonymous reports on questionnaires, produced on demand about unknown speakers in socially sterile, task-oriented settings. Rather, they can also ... feature more creatively as cogent elements within stories told, arguments rendered, and personas performed. In any case, language attitudes typically fulfill vital personal, rhetorical, and social needs whose origins are borne out of past, yet evolving, community. (pp. 182-183)*

Space precludes a detailed exposition of this complex model of interlocking processes, however, one central element of it - sense-making - is that people endeavor "to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs" (Weick, 1993, p. 635). In other words, it appeals to the ways in which people try and make sense of their interactions, relationships, and the communicative styles of others based on expectations and pre-conceived notions (Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Dillard, Solomon, & Palmer, 1999); a process that can have positive relational outcomes, particularly in times of stress (e.g., Trees & Koenig Kellas, 2009).

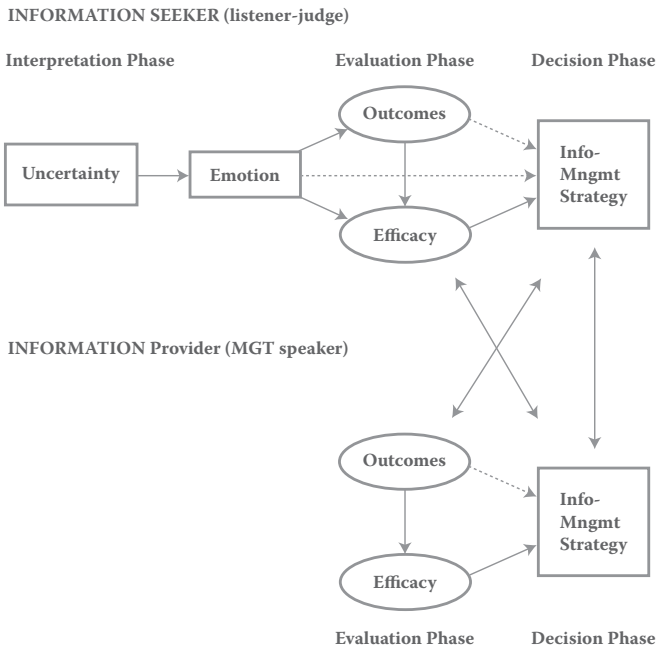
TOWARDS A MODEL OF UNCERTAINTY MANAGEMENT AND THAT OF SENSE-MAKING IN LANGUAGE ATTITUDES SITUATIONS

The opening dialogue prefacing this paper conveyed a ubiquitous conversational event routinely endured by this author – the outgrouper – and doubtless by countless others. It has a number of constituent features that go beyond the traditional MGT paradigm of assessing language attitudes.

First, language attitudes can be a discursive ongoing event in social life and not merely a reactive pencil-and-paper task under controlled conditions. The ingrouper here positions themselves as linguistically dissimilar from the outgrouper who happens to be a naturalized citizen of long-standing. Second, such a linguistic conundrum can be open to prolonged negotiation, overt comment, and sometimes interrogation: at the outset, the outgrouper does not feel the need to explain themselves as anything but "American" and, later, the ingrouper contends they (erroneously) do not have "an accent." Third, the ingrouper (as indicated by the nonverbal signals) is expressively and emotively involved in sense-making: how can this person be a real American? Moreover, and in the language of The Theory of Motivated Information Management (TMIM, Afifi, 2009; Afifif & Morse, 2009) - a framework for exploring information regulation – the ingrouper has an "uncertainty gap." In other words, the ingrouper perhaps ponders why this outgrouper has not converged towards sounding like a "proper American", and/or may wonder why this outgrouper has held on his heritage pronunciations seemingly so tenaciously? Is it because the latter does not identify with American values, and even brings them implicitly into question?! Fourth, the ingrouper feels, by being confronted and questioned about the integrity of their parlance, that the outgrouper is inherently criticizing them – a recipient process that is not infrequently experienced by nonstandard speakers (Marlow, 2010; Marlow & Giles, 2010).

Developing these ideas further in ways that might theoretically enhance future studies, we call now more directly on the TMIM as a useful heuristic for exploring language attitudes enacted in situations where uncertainty gaps are evident and that require information management and sense-making. TMIM describes information management as a process that unfolds over three stages: interpretation, evaluation, and decision-making (see Figure 1, after Afifi & Weiner, 2004, p. 172; Fowler & Afifi, in press). In the interpretation phase, people become aware of a difference between thelevel of uncertainty they have about a topic, or in our case, the relationship between accent usage and social origins, and the level of uncertainty they would like to have; our ingrouper certainly experiences something like this, as indicated above (perhaps, in addition, quickly musing about accent diversity and national identity). This uncertainty discrepancy is linearly associated with anxiety (or other emotions alluded to in the dialogue) which is a partial mediator of the relationship between the uncertainty, discrepancy and the information-management process (see Fowler & Afifi, in press). Perhaps surprisingly, the role of *affect* in language attitudes studies and theories has not always been a prominent ingredient, yet certainly should feature more systematically (see Cargile et al., 1994).

Figure 1 : The revised theory of motivated information management in language attitudes context (after Afifi & Weiner, 2004; Fowler & Afifi, in press).



Once in the evaluation phase, people assess a range of options open to them by considering the outcomes that a search for information – or, alternatively, a deliberate avoidance of it – may yield (outcome assessments), and their ability or self-efficacy to gain the information they seek or not. Clearly, our outgrouper exuded self-efficacy by unexpectedly trumping the ingrouper's initial feelings of being in command of the conversation by alleging his professional expertise. TMIM predicts a positive relationship between efficacy judgments and outcome assessments, with the strength of the relationship determined by the valence of the outcome expectancies. The ultimate meta-communicative decision as to whether or not to exchange views about each other's accent usages, and if so, how, would then follow. The position being advanced here – as is apparent from Figure 1 – is that the language attitudes paradigm can involve parallel processing by both speaker and listener-judge who can reciprocally assume each of these roles. (To date, empirical research on TMIM has focused, unilaterally, on one side of the equation, namely the information-seeker.)

Obviously, further theoretical refinements and elaborations are in order for this current position, as well as its integration with extant models (e.g., Giles & Marlow, 2011), to flourish as a more robust theoretical frame for language attitudes. However, this motivated information management model of language attitudes implicates new variables and processes that can fruitfully be applied in future empirical research.

CONCLUSIONS

In the foregoing, a necessarily selective overview of language attitudes research and theory has been provided. Gratifyingly, work in this tradition is now back in vogue (even in premier social psychological forums) and is receiving a new lease of life with many new innovations being proferred (e.g., Kinzler, Corriveau, & Harris, 2011; Rakić, Steffens, and Mummendey, under review; Reid et al., under review). In closing, some features of the TMIM-inspired proposals espoused herein, which positions language attitudes in a more communicative frame, include the following:

- Language attitudes can be ecologically-richer than that caricatured in the original, albeit, seminal MGT study.
- Our stance reaffirms the importance of emotions in language attitudes by alluding to the mediating roles of disrespect, shame, disgust, anger, and so forth.
- It affords communicative self-efficacy (as well as the different kinds of it, see Fowler & Afifi, in press) a central role in the language attitudes process.
- Emphasis has been given to language attitudes situations being oftentimes negotiative ones involving interpretive, sense-making processes. This can lead to decisions about establishing a dialogue about same, criticizing (or praising) the others' communicative practices, or withholding or avoiding such discourse, and so forth.

In all due time, discrimination against certain kinds of accents and other speech styles in the work place, classroom, and other institutions of our social life will, justifiably, be legally outlawed and decried more globally and accent tolerance commonplace (see http://humanaccents.com/feedback.php). The crafting of the MGT and Lambert's follow-up investigations will likely be recognized as the historical stimulus for such actions. Whether he would agree with all the theoretical nuances being proposed over the years, or even all of the directions and critiques (e.g., Grondelaers, van Hout, & Steegs, 2010) the study of language attitudes has undertaken, we will never really know. Nonetheless, and assuredly, he would resonate to the vibrant, creative panoply of work he has propelled.

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