Ἐχεις μοι εἰπεῖν, ὥς Ὀώκρατες, ἄρα διδακτὸν ἢ ἀρετή; ἢ οὔ διδακτὸν ἀλλ’ ἁσκητὸν; ἢ οὔτε ἁσκητὸν οὔτε μαθητὸν, ἀλλὰ φύσει παραγίγνεται τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἢ ἀλλω τινὶ τρόπῳ

A National and International Interdisciplinary Forum for Scholars, Academics, Researchers and Educators from a wide range of fields related to Educational Studies

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ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PUPILS’ ATTITUDES TOWARDS
GEOGRAPHICAL VARIATION IN POPULAR CULTURE TEXTS:
EVIDENCE FROM GREEK DATA

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Abstract

The aim of the present study is to explore the metapragmatic stereotypes of elementary school pupils towards geographical varieties, using as stimulus a TV commercial, in order to understand how they perceive and define these varieties. Specifically, we look into the children’s beliefs on the overt and covert prestige of geographical varieties and dialect speakers, that is, on the acceptability that varieties and their speakers may have within and outside their social space (Trudgill 1974). The research findings indicate that the children of our sample associate varieties to specific geographical and communicative context and specific social groups. Pupils therefore appear to follow the dominant metapragmatic stereotypes of strictly bounded language varieties, and don’t seem to challenge the assumption of distinct and autonomous varieties.

Keywords: elementary school pupils, attitudes, geographical varieties, popular culture texts, “matched-guise” technique

1. Linguistic attitudes and metapragmatic stereotypes

Dialectology and traditional sociolinguistics lay particular emphasis on language

---

1 Project implemented under the Operational Program ‘Education and Lifelong Learning’ and co-funded by the European Union (European Social Fund) and national resources. We would like to thank our colleague B. Tsakona, for her very helpful suggestions.
structure, arguing that languages and language varieties constitute a set of fixed linguistic rules and conventions. This resulted in strict linguistic boundaries and the connection of languages and language varieties to geographical and/or social contexts. In other words, according to this particular theoretical approach, the language variety used by a speaker reflects the place of origin and the social group to which this person belongs (Hudson 1996: 22).

However, recent decades have witnessed a tendency to challenge the positions of the above theoretical approach. The idea of discrete, bounded and autonomous languages and language varieties is no longer viewed as natural. Language varieties are not defined as fixed entities, affiliated to a specific geographical area or social group (Blommaert & Rampton 2011: 3-4). Essentially, each speaker is able to construct, shape and compose a personal language style through specific linguistic choices, depending on the identity the speaker aims to construct in each communicative situation. It is therefore impossible (or at least very difficult) to bound a language variety or to draw conclusions about the socio-cultural characteristics of an individual based on the language variety used (Johnstone 2009: 159-160).

In the context of denaturalizing the existence of established linguistic structures, emphasis is placed on critical approaches in terms of what the speakers themselves define as language or language variety and how specific linguistic choices come to be seen as language varieties. The concept of language is viewed as an ideological construct, shaped under the influence of social, political and historical factors (Blommaert 2006: 512). Contemporary sociolinguistic research therefore focuses not on the geographical and/or social boundaries of a variety, but on the speakers’ beliefs about the function and geographical and/or social framework of a variety. The study of the speakers’ linguistic attitudes is therefore particularly emphasized (see, among others: Baker 1992: 10-11; Kakridi-Ferrari 2007).

Linguistic attitudes are shaped by views about the nature and characteristics of various languages; they relate to prejudices and stereotypes regarding how various language elements function. To use the terms of anthropologists Silverstein (1993) and Agha (2007), we could say that linguistic attitudes stem from language ideologies or metapragmatic stereotypes shaped by speakers regarding various linguistic phenomena. According to Agha (2007: 150-151, 154), these stereotypes constitute the speakers’ internalized assessment models for language varieties and their use. So, based on metapragmatic stereotypes, speakers express attitudes and evaluative judgments of how specific linguistic choices function. These stereotypes arise from language use and assessment, circulate socially, and affect interactions between speakers of a language community. The process by means of which particular language forms become ideologically invested with particular social meanings and/or identities is called enregisterment (Agha 2003; 2007: 55, 61-64: see also Johnstone 2009).

Speakers, taking specific metapragmatic stereotypes into account, either express their views on various language elements directly, describing them as “right”, “wrong”, “appropriate”, “inappropriate”, “common”, “unusual” and so on, or express their evaluative judgments indirectly, associating specific language elements with particular social characteristics and/or communicative situations. For example, according to sociolinguistics research findings, speakers associate the use of geographical varieties mostly with manual labor workers (see Halliday & Hasan 1985: 42). Essentially, the
speakers’ beliefs prescribe how language elements are grouped and assessed, recording them as language varieties. In other words, the speakers’ metapragmatic stereotypes are decisive in shaping the boundaries of a language variety.

Speakers shape their linguistic beliefs under the strong influence of language ideologies circulating in their community. In Greece, as in most western nation-states, the promotion of linguistic homogenization and the marginalization of linguistic variety were (and remain) a dominant metapragmatic stereotype. Linguistic homogeneity and monolingualism are based on the idea that languages and language varieties are strictly bounded systems, used in specific, also bounded, social formations (Blommaert & Rampton 2011: 1, 4). Specific institutions of power, like the media and education, play a decisive role in achieving linguistic homogeneity. Since media depictions of sociolinguistic diversity underlie particular assumptions about the social meaning of language, the media function as “metapragmatic activity” (Agha 2003). Specifically, the discourse of the media often dictates expected linguistic behavior through the alignment of television characters with linguistic homogeneity and the respective metapragmatic stereotypes (Stuart-Smith 2006: 141, 148). In fact, in the Greek media, television characters who do not follow the dominant language ideology are often humorously targeted (see Archakis et al. 2014; Pavlou 1997).

In this context, the present paper attempts to determine how speakers, functioning within specific metapragmatic stereotypes, shape their linguistic attitudes, assess a language variety and delimit the acceptability of its use.

2. Linguistic attitudes towards geographical varieties: Research findings

Early sociolinguistic research already placed particular emphasis on studying the attitudes of speakers towards the geographical variety they used or towards the geographical varieties of other communities. These studies showed that their participants associated the use of geographical varieties with a rural environment (see, indicatively, Diercks 2002: 63; Inoue 1999: 154-156; Preston 2003).

In Greece, numerous studies have addressed linguistic attitudes towards geographical varieties, particularly the Cypriot dialect. The findings of these studies have a lot in common with observed linguistic attitudes of speakers worldwide. More specifically, in Greece, speakers predominantly associate geographical varieties with a rural and informal environment and the variety used in urban areas and institutionalized communication circumstances with the Standard Modern Greek (SMG) (Papas 2008; Pladi 2001). It should be noted that the use of geographical varieties in these circumstances is often assessed positively, since in the minds of speakers it relates to strengthening social ties between speakers, solidarity, and a feeling of belonging to a social group (Kourdis 2007: 88, 130-131; Pladi 2001). Greek speakers seem to display a negative attitude towards using geographical varieties in formal communication circumstances, either characterizing it as “incorrect” or simply by showing a preference for the standard language (Papas 2008; Pladi 2001; Stamou, Maroniti & Griva 2015). In fact, the use of geographical varieties in formal communicational circumstances may entail a disadvantage for the career and social advancement of the dialect speaker, as it is interpreted as lack of education (Kourdis 2007: 88-89; Papas 2008).
In Cyprus, speakers display similar linguistic attitudes, as the Cypriot dialect is associated with rural and informal environments (Papapavlou 1998; Pavlou 1997). Ioannidou’s research findings are particularly interesting (see, indicatively, Ioannidou 2009); she found that the presence of the dialect in the educational framework of Cyprus was very strong, but its use related mostly to ‘informal’ communicative circumstances in schools, regarding the organization of the classroom and informal conversations and comments, not the ‘main teaching’. In the communicative circumstances of the main teaching, the language used was the standard, as it was directly connected to formality. Educators seem to be ‘tolerant’ towards the use of the Cypriot dialect, which “tolerance” essentially amounts to a symbolic devaluation (Tsipakou 2007). In Cyprus, the state encourages education in SMG, because it provides a powerful means of connecting Greek Cypriots to Greece, establishing a framework of linguistic homogenization. This language policy has been decisive in shaping the linguistic attitudes of pupils; studies where the sample consisted of Cypriot preschool (Kounnapi 2006) and elementary school pupils (Pavlou 1999) reveal the participants’ negative attitude towards the Cypriot dialect.

The present study focuses on the dominant metapragmatic stereotypes of elementary school pupils on geographical diversity. Taking into account the findings of previous research, we investigate the children’s beliefs on the overt and covert prestige of geographical varieties and dialect speakers.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data selection

As a stimulus for eliciting the children’s attitudes we chose to use TV popular culture texts. We selected texts that are well-liked by pupils of the fifth and sixth grade (see Fterniati et al. 2013), so as to ensure that the pupils would have had extensive exposure to the language varieties represented in these texts. In this way, we wanted to make sure that the pupils would express linguistic attitudes towards the represented language varieties, as the lack of experience/exposure to these texts could lead to a lack of linguistic attitudes.

Specifically, in order to study the pupils’ linguistic attitudes to geographical diversity, we utilized excerpts from a popular television commercial by a major mobile phone company (Vodafone), which had been broadcasted in Greek television in 2011-2012. The commercial is set in a hypothetical regional place, presumably a village, and represents the romance between two young dialect speakers, Kitsos and Tassoula, along with the presentation and promotion of mobile telephone gadgets. The variety used by the characters of the commercial is not a distinct geographical variety, but reflects a generic rural speaker in northern Greece, with elements of northern vocalism, where unstressed mid vowels [e] and [o] are raised to [i] and [u], and unstressed high vowels [i] and [u] are typically deleted (see Kontosopoulos 2008: 92-108). Due to the protagonists are presented as drawing upon the semantic fields of computing and mobile technology, the geographical variety is represented as incongruous, inappropriate, deviant and laughable (see also Archakis et al. 2014).
3.2 Sample selection and research instrument for the detection of linguistic attitudes

The study was conducted in May 2013 in four state elementary schools in the wider region of Achaia. A total of 96 fifth and sixth graders were selected (11-12 years old).

During the research, the pupils watched three television excerpts, approximately 2 minutes long each, one of which was the commercial by Vodafone, featuring Kitsos and Tassoula. In order to collect our research data, we administered an anonymous questionnaire. The pupils’ questionnaire included closed questions, some of which are analyzed in the present paper.

Apart from the above questions, in order to reveal and record the children’s linguistic attitudes to geographical diversity, we implemented a modified version of the “matched-guise” technique, which has been used extensively in language attitudes research (see Giles & Powesland 1975). The classic version of the “matched-guise” technique utilizes a number of speakers/researchers, who are competent users of the languages or language varieties under study. The speakers are recorded reading the same text aloud, adapted in the languages or language varieties under study. The participants listen to the recorded texts, which alternate in a sequence that does not allow participants to recognize the same speaker reading the text in a language or variety different to the one initially used. In this way, participants are under the impression that the number of speakers they listened to is greater than it actually is. They are then called to assess the speakers in terms of various characteristics, such as intelligence, social class, education, etc., unaware that in many cases the speaker is the same. Consequently, if the same speaker is rated differently when using different linguistic guises, it can be concluded that the determining factor of the assessment is the speaker’s language variety and the listener’s attitude towards it.

The present study implemented a modified version of the “matched-guise” technique, since the stimulus utilized did not consist of recordings of the same speaker in different varieties, but of the Vodafone commercial, starring Kitsos and Tassoula. Having watched this commercial, pupils were asked to evaluate dialect speech, using a four-point scale (1 = Not at all, 2 = A little, 3 = A lot, 4 = Definitely) to assess seventeen different characteristics, regarding mental ability, habits, attitudes, behaviors to others (e.g. insignificant, outdated, weird, funny, friendly, important, intelligent, pleasant). Essentially, the pupils’ assessments of dialect speech imply their evaluation of the dialect speakers themselves.

3.3 Statistical Analysis

The statistical analysis of the data was conducted using the statistical software SPSS 20.0. In order to analyze the research data that we collected by the modified version of the “matched-guise” technique, we implemented the Factor Analysis statistical test. This test uses algorithms to compare the similarities presented by the pupils’ questionnaire answers in terms of evaluative assessments, and groups these assessments. Essentially, the algorithms group the variables/assessments that have the same or/and similar values in the pupils’ questionnaires.
4. Findings

This section presents the findings of part of our research, revealing the metapragmatic stereotypes that are dominant in the views of elementary school pupils, in terms of geographical diversity. We aim to determine the children’s beliefs on the overt and covert prestige of geographical varieties and dialect speakers.

In the present study, the results of the data analysis using Factor Analysis led to the creation of four groups, which we analyze in order to interpret the children’s linguistic attitudes. Each group consists of evaluative assessments that relate to each other, according to the children’s answers (see Table 1).

Table 1: Evaluative assessments of geographical variety and dialect speakers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluative assessment</th>
<th>1st category: Overt prestige (acceptability in formal social settings)</th>
<th>2nd category: Personal integrity (within a community)</th>
<th>3rd category: Humorous stigmatization</th>
<th>4th category: Speakers’ social prestige (within a community)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Indifferent</td>
<td>.825</td>
<td>-.025</td>
<td>-.047</td>
<td>-.139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insignificant</td>
<td>.788</td>
<td>-.007</td>
<td>.134</td>
<td>-.134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incongruous</td>
<td>.743</td>
<td>-.115</td>
<td>-.040</td>
<td>.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unappealing</td>
<td>.733</td>
<td>-.179</td>
<td>.319</td>
<td>.050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useless</td>
<td>.698</td>
<td>-.242</td>
<td>.176</td>
<td>-.052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdated</td>
<td>.590</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.209</td>
<td>.223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligent</td>
<td>-.226</td>
<td>.802</td>
<td>.135</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>-.098</td>
<td>.783</td>
<td>-.196</td>
<td>.224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beautiful</td>
<td>-.033</td>
<td>.646</td>
<td>-.069</td>
<td>.179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funny</td>
<td>.026</td>
<td>-.002</td>
<td>.800</td>
<td>.213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weird</td>
<td>.190</td>
<td>.091</td>
<td>.697</td>
<td>-.092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stupid</td>
<td>.293</td>
<td>-.186</td>
<td>.545</td>
<td>-.130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect</td>
<td>.341</td>
<td>-.395</td>
<td>.488</td>
<td>-.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly</td>
<td>-.201</td>
<td>.287</td>
<td>-.092</td>
<td>.765</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rustic</td>
<td>.202</td>
<td>-.176</td>
<td>.082</td>
<td>.702</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheerful</td>
<td>-.013</td>
<td>.298</td>
<td>.060</td>
<td>.687</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nice</td>
<td>-.046</td>
<td>.377</td>
<td>.135</td>
<td>.457</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Interestingly, numerous studies on linguistic attitudes, implementing the “matched-guise” technique, have systematically grouped the participants’ assessments into three categories: (1) competence, (2) personal integrity/reliability, and (3) social prestige/attractiveness (see Preston 2003; Ryan & Giles 1982). In fact, the assessments grouped in the competence category related to the standard linguistic variety, while the assessments grouped in the social prestige and personal integrity categories have
mostly been associated with the use of geographical varieties (see above). In the present research, the Factor Analysis showed that the pupils grouped their evaluative assessments into four categories, three of which were very similar to the above categories.

The first category presents similarities to the assessments grouped into the competence category and relates to the standard linguistic variety (ibid). In the present study, this category, as it emerges from the children’s answers, includes assessments that denote the lack of overt prestige of geographical varieties that is the lack of acceptability in formal social settings. This category includes terms such as indifferent, insignificant, incongruous, useless, and outdated, attributing negative characteristics to both the geographical variety and dialect speakers. It should be noted that these perceptions, which devalue geographical varieties and their speakers, already start to develop in the speakers’ childhood (see also Kounnapi 2006; Pavlou 1999).

The pupils’ answers also shape two different assessment categories, which systematically emerge in previous studies on linguistic attitudes (see Preston 2003; Ryan & Giles 1982) and relate to the dialect speakers’ personal integrity/reliability (2nd category) and their social prestige (4th category). Specifically, the second category includes assessments as: intelligent, important, and beautiful, denoting that the pupils attribute quite a positive evaluation on the personality of speakers who use a geographical variety, while the fourth category is shaped by various assessments (including friendly, nice, and cheerful), revealing the children’s beliefs on the speakers’ social prestige. It should be noted that the children included the assessment rustic in the fourth category. The specific evaluative assessment could have both negative (e.g. rube, unlearned) and positive (e.g. traditional bread, namely, healthy, tasty, fresh) connotations. Associating this evaluation with the others of 4th category (friendly, cheerful, nice), it is clear that this term takes positive connotation. So, the combinational interpretation of the social characteristics of the 4th category reveals that the students possibly associate the use of geographical varieties with the strong social bonds often found in rural environments. In other words, the second and fourth categories reveal the children’s belief that the geographical variety entails a covert prestige, due to its connotations of proximity and solidarity, features often displayed by closed communities in rural areas (Trudgill 1974).

Although the first category of negative evaluative assessments seems to logically contradict the pupils’ positive assessments in the 2nd and 4th categories, it should be noted that this specific distinction appears systematically in several studies on linguistic attitudes (see Preston 2003; Ryan & Giles 1982), depending on whether it is assessed in the context of a specific dialect-speaking social group or according to the values that are acceptable to formal social contexts.

In the present research, apart from the three assessment categories that appear systematically in numerous studies on linguistic attitudes, the Factor Analysis identified an extra category (see Table 1, 3rd category), including assessments as funny, weird, stupid, incorrect. We feel that these assessments reflect the children’s beliefs for the humorous stigmatization of the geographical varieties and dialect speakers. Specifically, the classification of funny and weird in a common category reveals that children associate deviation with humor, contrasting it to what is socially expected and acceptable (see, indicatively, Attardo 1994). Pupils seem to perceive the representation
of nonstandard varieties in our stimulus as incompatible, and therefore funny. This category also includes the assessments *stupid* and *incorrect*. In other words, pupils probably feel that the representation of the geographical variation on television aims to make viewers laugh through the devaluation of dialect speakers and the humorous stigmatization of the dialectal varieties (see also Archakis et al. 2014; Pavlou 1997).

To sum up, a dominant belief of the pupils is that geographical varieties entail no overt prestige and are negatively evaluated in formal social settings (1st category). The children’s negative linguistic attitudes to geographical varieties and their belief that these varieties lack overt prestige demonstrates that pupils are influenced by the metapragmatic stereotypes of linguistic homogeneity, through which the dominance of the standard language is promoted and the use of language varieties is devalued. In fact, according to their answers, pupils seem to believe that geographical varieties are targeted and humorously stigmatized in their television representation (3rd category). Their answers show that children in the last grades of elementary school are already influenced by metapragmatic stereotypes reproduced by Greek media, aiming to promote the standard linguistic variety and stigmatize geographical varieties (Archakis et al. 2014).

Moreover, influenced by metapragmatic stereotypes promoting the strict delimitation of varieties to specific communicative contexts, pupils seem to shape different linguistic attitudes on the covert prestige of a geographical variety and its dialect speakers. Specifically, children evaluate dialect speakers positively, both as individuals (2nd category) and as social beings (4th category), when they use the geographical variety in the context of their dialect community.

5. Discussion – Conclusions

Over the past decades, theoretical approaches challenging the existence of fixed and rigid linguistic structures prompted the review of how speakers themselves define linguistic variety and how specific linguistic choices end up being perceived as language varieties. In other words, sociolinguistic research focuses not on the geographical and/or social boundaries of a variety, but on the speakers’ beliefs on the geographical and/or social context of specific language elements, which are perceived as varieties. Emphasis is therefore placed on the speakers’ linguistic attitudes, which stem from metapragmatic stereotypes, i.e. the speakers’ internalized models for evaluating the use of specific language elements. In this context, we studied how elementary school pupils perceive and define nonstandard geographical varieties. Our aim was to reveal the children’s beliefs on the overt and covert prestige of geographical varieties and dialect speakers.

These findings show that our pupils follow the dominant metapragmatic stereotypes that promote language varieties as strictly bounded systems. So, pupils don’t seem to challenge the assumption of distinct and autonomous varieties. Essentially, the children of our sample define language varieties as elements that correspond to specific geographical and communicative contexts, and to specific social categories. The dominance of this metapragmatic stereotype in the children’s beliefs can be analyzed in the following points:

1. Pupils attribute covert prestige to the geographical variety, positively assessing
dialect speakers within their local/rural community, both in terms of personality and as social beings. In contrast, when pupils consider geographical varieties isolated from their ‘natural’ environment, they assess them negatively and fail to attribute overt prestige.

2. Children humorously stigmatize the geographical variety.

We should not forget that the attitudes that we studied have evoked in the context of a specific and stigmatizing (though certainly hegemonic) media portrayal of geographical diversity, i.e. a commercial in which the dialectal differentiation is highly stigmatized. It is probable, that with a non-stigmatized stimulus, different attitudes would emerge. Nevertheless, the aim of our study was exactly that, i.e. to study how pupils react to a well-accepted media portrayal of geographical diversity. The pupils’ responses to the study we conducted on their attitudes show that children in the last grades of elementary school are already influenced by metapragmatic stereotypes and ideologies reproduced by Greek media, aiming to promote the standard linguistic variety and stigmatize geographical varieties (Archakis et al. 2014; Pavlou 1997).

We believe that such conclusions help promote the need for the development of critical literacy by pupils, so that they can be able to detect, instead of accepting uncritically, the metapragmatic stereotypes that are propagated by popular culture texts and that influence their linguistic attitudes (see also Stamou, Politis & Archakis 2016).

References


