

# Why are people judged by the way they speak?

Attitude refers to people's settled way of thinking and feeling about various matters (e.g. issues, people and events). Language attitudes are beliefs, opinions and prejudices that people have about language. These attitudes can significantly affect people's linguistic behaviour; for example, people can feel strongly about some linguistic features and try to avoid them in their language use. This worksheet looks at language attitudes and how the way people speak can influence how they are perceived and evaluated by others. In particular, it focuses on attitudes to language change. We will discuss where attitudes to language come from, why people have such strong opinions on language and why there is a link between language and our impression of a person.



## Key terms

standard language

attitude

language change

ideology

## Task 1

In 2017, the new British National Corpus (BNC2014), representing current informal British English, was released jointly by Lancaster University and Cambridge University Press. Following the corpus creation, the linguists behind its compilation publicly discussed some of the changes they had noticed in our spoken language since the 1990s (when the original British National Corpus was released). Among these changes was the higher use of 'like' and 'so' at the start of sentences and an increased use of split infinitives ('to boldly go' instead of 'to go boldly'). The comment below was sent in as a response to an interview on BBC Breakfast from September 2017 in which these language changes were discussed and illustrates the attitudes some people have about language change.

Discuss with your group or with your partner whether you agree or disagree with the statement.

*"As a person who was always brought up to speak properly and grammatically, I was absolutely shocked to read of your pronouncement that starting a sentence with 'so' or 'like' have become part of modern English. According to you, this is the way people speak and is a part of normal everyday speech. Well it is WRONG and people like you should be saying so and encouraging the public to speak properly. I suppose the next thing will be that "Hi there you guys" is quite correct? You set absolutely no example at all. I am sick and tired of hearing terrible English and pronunciation on the radio and television. I also hate the way people pronounce the letter "a" in the northern way, rather than a long "a". Correct and clear speech is so important and sounds lovely. I await your comments."*

## Task 2

Look again at the statement above. The writer uses a range of adjectives and adverbs to express their attitude to language. Make a list of these adjectives and adverbs.

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### Task 3

Now think about where these attitudes come from. Reflect on the following questions:

- Who decides what the above adjectives and adverbs mean when we talk about language?
- Where do the rules of what is proper and grammatical come from?
- How do these rules relate to how language is spoken?

### Task 4

Let us look at one of the trends in current language use mentioned in the BBC interview, the increase in the use of split infinitive. In BNClab, search for the split infinitive using the following search term:

(to) (ADVERB) (VERB) – This will search for any occurrence of ‘to’ followed by any adverb and then by any verb, finding examples of split infinitives in corpus data.

There are over a thousand occurrences of this pattern, split infinitive, in BNClab – we are now going to explore them in more detail.

a. First look at the Usage button and select Concordance to see examples of split infinitives. When looking at the examples, what is your own attitude towards split infinitive? Do you find it incorrect? Do you use it often in your own speech or do you try to avoid it? How about your writing? Discuss these questions with a partner or a small group.

b. Go to the Gender button and check the following trends:

- Is the feature really on the increase?
- If yes, who is driving the change, men or women?

c. Go to the Social class button and check how split infinitive is used by different social groups.

- Is there a difference by users from different social classes?
- If yes, how would you explain the difference? What factors may play a role? (e.g. level of education)

### Research bite

#### Do you agree?



When we first meet a new person, we usually pay attention to that person's characteristics: Are they particularly tall? How are they dressed? Do they like dogs? All of these first impressions help us make up our minds about that person. The way that a person speaks is one of these characteristics, as Prof Miriam Meyerhoff, a prominent sociolinguist, notes:

“We draw very powerful inferences about people from the way they talk. Our attitudes to different varieties of a language colour the way we perceive the individuals that use those varieties. Sometimes that works to people's advantage; sometimes to their disadvantage” (2011:58).

In a study in 1999, American linguists Purnell, Idsardi and Baugh tested these inferences and what effect an accent might have on a person's perceived personality. They had a single speaker emulate three different accents when they called various landlords to arrange appointments: Standard American English, Chicano English, and African American English. Calls in Standard American English resulted in roughly 70% of appointments, while the two other accents only made it to roughly 30%.

Imagine yourself on a bus or train overhearing a conversation from someone behind you who is speaking loudly on the phone with someone else. By the end of the phone call, how much information have you gathered about that person just by the way they speak (age, social background, conversation context, etc)? Think of all the various pieces of information that we could learn about a person and discuss this with others in your group.

Meyerhoff, M. (2011). *Introducing Sociolinguistics*. 2nd Edition. London/New York: Routledge.

Purnell, T.; Idsardi, W.; Baugh, J. (1999). Perceptual and Phonetic Experiments on American English Dialect Identification. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*. 18/1, pp. 10-30.

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