

Language Attitudes: Part 2

Many different languages are spoken throughout Europe. These languages derive from the Indo-European language family. The Indo-European language family is one of the largest in the world and can be found throughout Europe and Asia. A branch of the Indo-European language family is the Germanic language family. The Germanic language family is made up of three branches, West Germanic, North Germanic and East Germanic. Of the three branches, West Germanic is the largest. The most widespread languages of the West Germanic family are German, English and Dutch (Ethnologue).

German is the official language of 6 different countries which include Germany, Austria, Belgium, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg and Switzerland. It is also used in the South Tyrol Province of Northern Italy, several communes in Poland, as well as 9 different municipalities in Brazil (Ethnologue 2016). There are around 95 million native speakers of the German language, according to Ulrich Ammon in “Die Stellung der deutschen Sprache in der Welt”. This makes it the most prevalent native spoken language in the EU. German is the fourth most common foreign language in the United States. According to Eurostat data, it is the third most widely taught foreign language in the EU, the second most commonly used scientific language and the fourth most widely used language for websites.

Historically, there have been many negative attitudes towards the German language. This is mostly due to WWI and WWII. Anti-German sentiment was so widespread that it was common for local and state governments to change street names if they were of German origin. Diane Durante in *Outdoor Monuments of Manhattan: A Historical Guide* reveals to us how Wilson Avenue in Brooklyn used to actually be named Hamburg Avenue. Some towns were totally renamed because the original name had German origin. People got so caught up in the

hysteria that German books were actually removed from libraries and in some cases, burned. Many schools stopped teaching German language classes and in some cases, German was banned all together from schools and public places. But WWII was so long ago that anti-German sentiment in the US is currently pretty much non-existent.

In the US, the general perception of the German language is that it is a very cold and hard language. This could be because of the way German words sound, harsh. But German engineering has become synonymous with high quality and high precision. This perpetuates the stereotype of Germans being very precise, punctual people with little to no humor. On top of that, the media often depicts Germans as scientists, mad or not. In the cinematic masterpiece “Die Hard with a Vengeance”, the Germans were the ones who stole all the gold from the federal reserve though precise, calculated planning. No monkey business.

Unbeknownst to some, language attitudes exist among the Germans themselves. Although not as strong as they once were, they started after the fall of the Berlin wall with the unification of Germany. Germany was physically divided into East Germany and West Germany in 1948 for various political reasons. The people were completely cut off from each other so naturally, they developed slightly different ways of speaking and thinking. East Germany was under communist rule and preferred structured, traditional German. West Germany had heavy influences from western culture and was more open to developing new words and expressions (Cranz 2015).

Language attitudes exist in many different places for many different reasons. Contributing factors include geographic location, political unrest, culture, socioeconomic class, education, and stereotypes perpetuated by mainstream media. Through all of this it is important to remain unbiased and not give into widely accepted attitudes or false perceptions.

Research of sociolinguistics has surfaced how language attitudes can indeed promote various forms of discrimination. In the years following WWI and WWII we saw much anti-German sentiment in various forms of discrimination. Many German Americans had nothing to do with the wars at all but still suffered the same fate. Unfortunately, history is repeating itself today as we speak. In the years following 9/11 we have seen much discrimination against anyone who speaks a language that is thought to be of middle eastern background. The media only perpetuates this by consistently connecting people of middle eastern background with terrorism.

The completion of this assignment has challenged my views about the role of perception harboring attitudes towards speakers of different languages or dialects. Before the completion of this assignment I lacked any view on language attitudes. It wasn't something I ever thought about. This might be because I'm a born and raised New Yorker and I just expect different people to speak differently. I now realize that language and dialect can be a huge source for discrimination. It is imperative for society to move forward and discern no correlation between language and intelligence or level of education. If society as a whole can get past this barrier, then the world would most definitely be a much better place.

Works Cited

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