

I don't understand this ugly language! - On the link between language attitudes and intelligibility

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This paper investigates the link between language attitudes and intelligibility. From previous research we know that there exists a relationship between how beautiful someone thinks a language is and how well (s)he understands that language (Delsing & Lundin Åkesson 2005; Schüppert, Hilton and Gooskens accepted). However, somewhat unclear remains which direction this relationship has. Some researchers claim that a positive attitude leads to a better intelligibility (Wolff 1959), while others claim that a low intelligibility leads to a negative attitude (Giles and Niedzielski 1998). More recently, Schüppert, Hilton and Gooskens (accepted) pointed out the need for further research on the causal relationship between language attitudes and intelligibility.

In this paper we investigate the link between language attitudes and mutual intelligibility between Danish, Dutch, English, German and Swedish. In order to do this we conducted a large web-based experiment in which until now 16.081 people participated. In this experiment participants first get an attitude test, followed by an intelligibility test. Thereafter they get another attitude test to measure their attitudes after the intelligibility test. This enables us to investigate the link between attitudes and intelligibility in both directions. In our experiment, intelligibility is assessed at the text and at the word level.

Preliminary results from Dutch participants tested in Danish, English, German and Swedish show that the link between attitudes and intelligibility actually works in both directions, i.e. a positive attitude leads to a better intelligibility, but a better intelligibility also leads to a more positive attitude. Strikingly, this mostly holds for intelligibility on the text level. We find only few significant correlations between language attitudes and intelligibility on the word level. In our presentation we will further elaborate on this topic by also showing results from Danish, English, German and Swedish participants tested in the languages included in our experiment.