A language ideological perspective on willingness to communicate

Nicholas Subtirelu*

Department of Applied Linguistics and ESL, Georgia State University, P.O. Box 4099, Atlanta, GA 30302-4099, USA

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The author argues that theoretical and empirical accounts of willingness to communicate (WTC) would benefit from consideration of the linguistic anthropological concept of language ideology. In particular, within WTC models, experiences with second language (L2) communication are conceptualized as a key aspect of L2 users' perceptions of their communicative competence, itself an important aspect of WTC. The relationship between these communicative experiences and L2 users' self-evaluations of their L2 is mediated by language ideology. This argument is supported by interview data from longitudinal case studies demonstrating participants' radically different interpretations of the same or similar communicative events mediated by two different language ideologies – deficit and lingua franca ideologies. Ideological assumptions lead participants working with a deficit ideology to interpret certain communicative events as evidence of their own linguistic deficiency suggesting negative effects for their WTC. However, the same or similar events were interpreted radically differently by one participant drawing on a lingua franca ideology. Finally, these findings suggest the need for critical pedagogical approaches to language education that interrogate deficit language ideologies in an attempt to promote WTC.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I propose a connection between (a) the construct of willingness to communicate (WTC) as described in second language acquisition (SLA) literature primarily by MacIntyre and his associates and (b) the linguistic anthropological concept of language ideology. First, I describe how WTC is theoretically intriguing to a broad audience of scholars in that it offers an attempt to blend trait-based and situation-based as well as cognitive and social variables. I then introduce language ideology, arguing that it offers a substantive contribution to research on WTC. I then present the empirical study serving as the basis of these arguments. In this study, I examined the connection between language ideology and WTC using longitudinal case studies that looked at intensive English program (IEP) students' conceptions of their second language (L2) English. Finally, I explore the implications of conceptualizing language ideology as a factor in WTC in both research on the topic as well as language teaching.

2. Willingness to communicate (WTC)

MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, and Noels (1998) adapted the concept of WTC, originally from first language (L1) communication research (e.g., McCroskey & Richmond, 1991) for research in SLA and applied linguistics. The authors lay out a

pyramid model of WTC. At the top of the pyramid is L2 use in a particular situation. Directly beneath, signifying its immediate impact on L2 use, is WTC, which the authors define as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (p. 547). WTC is in turn influenced by the desire to communicate with a particular interlocutor and the L2 user's situational self-confidence. MacIntyre et al. develop the model downward integrating a number of social psychological constructs such as motivation, attitudes, and personality.

The model's strength lies in its effective integration of diverse and important concepts. First, it integrates both situation-based and trait-based constructs. For example, the model includes the L2 user' self-confidence in communicating in a particular setting as well as a more stable and global self-confidence related to L2 use in general. It also integrates a situational desire to communicate with a particular interlocutor with a more stable and generalized motivation for communicating with members of the group associated with the L2. In addition, the model also integrates variables with both cognitive (i.e. individual) and social (i.e. group or societal) bases. For example, at the bottom layer of the pyramid, the model integrates both the individual L2 users' trait-like personality with societal-level relations between the individuals' in-group and the L2 group (i.e., L1 speakers of the target language).

Empirical research exploring the predictions of MacIntyre et al.'s WTC model has demonstrated the robustness of its predictions as well as the flexibility of the theories that underlie it. Of particular interest has been the finding that WTC predicts the frequency and amount of L2 communication in non-instructional contexts (MacIntyre, Baker, & Clément, 2001; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004). Because WTC is related to the use of the L2 in non-instructional settings, it is an important factor for theories of SLA and approaches to language pedagogy that promote active engagement in authentic L2 communication as a central and necessary aspect of language learning (e.g., communicative language teaching).

Indeed, MacIntyre et al. (1998) go so far as to suggest that the development of WTC in the L2 should be "the ultimate goal of the learning process" (p. 547). Increasing WTC would require better understanding the processes that underlie the "volitional process" (MacIntyre, 2007) of WTC. In this vein, a number of studies employing questionnaires and structural equation modeling or factor analysis have pointed to perceived L2 communicative competence or related constructs (e.g. L2 communication confidence) as the principal predictor of WTC (Clément, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003; Fushino, 2010; MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2003; Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Yashima, 2002; Yashima et al., 2004).

Owing to WTC's broad integration of diverse aspects of the L2 communicative situation, researchers have also utilized qualitative paradigms (usually involving mixed methods) leading to a closer examination of the moment-by-moment processes of WTC in particular communicative contexts (Cao, 2011; Cao & Philp, 2006; MacIntyre, Burns, & Jessome, 2011; MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011; de Saint Léger & Storch, 2009). For example, MacIntyre and Legatto (2011) propose that WTC can be conceptualized as a dynamic system and demonstrate how L2 users interacting with L1 users in their study were affected by momentary aspects of the communication, for example, struggling to retrieve lexical items.

The diversity of the research paradigms through which WTC has been explored strengthens our understanding of the construct by contributing complementary insights. On the one hand, large-scale, questionnaire-based studies have contributed generalizable findings about WTC as a relatively static trait. On the other hand, in-depth qualitative studies have contributed rich, contextual descriptions about WTC as a dynamic state. Nonetheless, despite the great insights into WTC as a trait and WTC as a state contributed independently by the two research paradigms, there has been less movement toward the integration of the cognitive and the social or the trait and the state envisioned by MacIntyre et al. (1998) in their early description of the construct. In particular, we still know very little about how L2 speakers' relatively static characteristics might contribute to their dynamic state WTC or vice-versa. In the next section, I suggest language ideology as one potential mediator between these levels of analysis.

3. Language ideology: a useful concept for WTC?

Language ideology is a central concept in linguistic anthropology referring broadly to the ways in which people and groups conceptualize language. For the purposes of this work, I define language ideology as the networks of beliefs that language users hold, either tacitly or overtly, about language and its assumed relation to other aspects in their environments, especially other individuals and social groups, which stem either from explicit teaching or implicit socialization. Owing to their connections between language and language users or social groups, language ideologies are intimately connected to macro-structures of power and privilege. In particular, language ideologies are often used as an interpretive lens to explain the ways in which language varies across social groups in a society and to draw connections between specific aspects of language and the identities, moral goodness, or worth of those using particular features of language (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). As such, language ideologies are often clearly politically interested either in that they rationalize or reproduce the power and privilege of dominant groups and individuals, by pointing to their language as in some way superior (and by extension suggesting their more general superiority) or in that they challenge this power and privilege. Furthermore, Kroskrity (2010) makes the intriguing observation that hegemonic language ideologies (i.e., those that rationalize the existent social order) tend to be more tacitly held than language ideologies that challenge the existent social order.

It is important to note that the term *ideology* is often used colloquially (as in "he's just spewing ideology") in a pejorative manner to mean irrational, unsupported political beliefs. Despite this widespread use, I argue that everyone by necessity has a language ideology including linguists and other language experts (Silverstein, 1996) and that all individuals' experiences with language are necessarily interpreted through the lens of their language ideologies. However, that is not to say that all language ideologies should necessarily be viewed as equal in moral or explanatory value, and I will return to this issue later.