

10 'The most beautiful language is French'

We use language in many ways: as a practical tool, to communicate ideas; as a social tool, to maintain relationships and mark our identity; as an artistic tool, in poetry, prose, drama, songs, and so on. For many people, using a particular language, or using language in particular ways, goes right to the heart of who they consider themselves to be. Small wonder, then, that so many people have strong opinions about language.

Within a particular language, people argue about whether it's better to use this word or that word, about whether it's okay to use a particular grammatical construction, about how the language should be written, about how to construct a poem or a speech or a contract. Considering languages as wholes, it's common to find claims that a specific language (or dialect of a language) is especially logical, or primitive, or poetic, or spiritual. Ideas like these have been used to argue that certain languages are particularly fit (or unfit) for specific uses, such as science or art.

In this chapter, we will focus on aesthetic judgments of languages: the idea that a language itself (not just an artistic use of that language) can be beautiful or ugly. Along the way, we'll touch on similar descriptions of languages as especially pleasant, clear, or logical – essentially, any kind of broad, hand-wavy judgment about a language or dialect as a whole. We will explore the factors that inform these judgments: To what extent are they a reaction to intrinsic properties of the language itself? To what extent are they related to the language's historical and cultural associations? To what extent are they affected by our beliefs about the people who speak the language?

10.1 Non-linguists' evaluations of dialects

We will begin by investigating what people believe about the dialects of their native language. Traditionally, the field of *dialectology* has involved linguists traveling to different areas and recording the range of variation within a single language. The goal is to document, as accurately as possible, what the dialects of a language are and how they differ from each other. For this reason, dialectologists focus on recording the speech of actual speakers of each dialect, rather

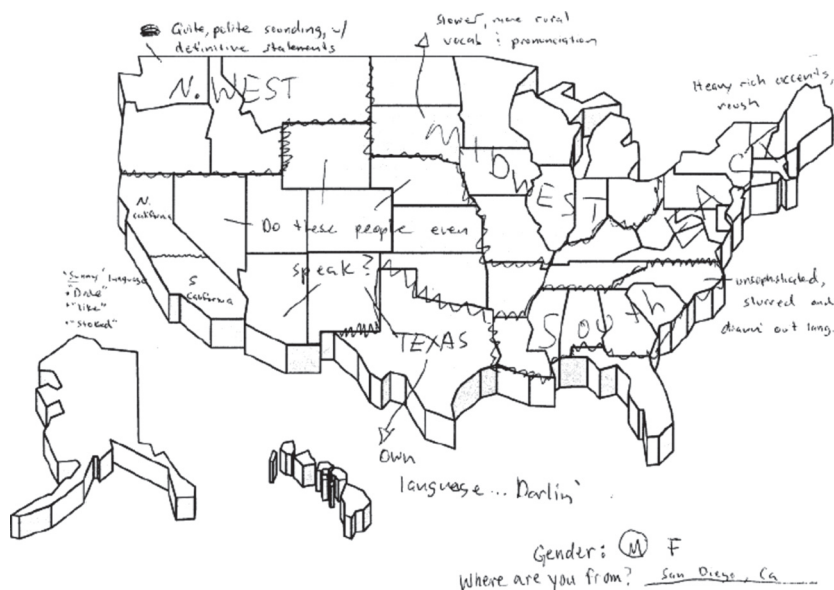


Figure 10.1 U.S. dialects as perceived by a college student from California. Carmen Fought, California students' perceptions of, you know, regions and dialects? *Handbook of Perceptual Dialectology* Vol. 2, Daniel Long and Dennis R. Preston, eds., 2002, Figure 8.4. Reprinted by permission of John Benjamins Publishing Company.

than relying on speakers of other dialects to describe the situation: popular beliefs are often inaccurate.

More recently, though, a number of linguists have argued that studying people's beliefs about other dialects is actually worthwhile – not because it tells us something about those other dialects, but because it helps us understand attitudes about language. The emerging field of *perceptual dialectology* explores these attitudes and attempts to understand where they come from.

10.1.1 *Spontaneous evaluation of dialects in a descriptive task*

One technique in perceptual dialectology is to give people a blank map and ask them to show where various dialects of their native language are spoken. Figure 10.1 shows a map like this, which was drawn by a college student from California.

Like many respondents, this student identified a number of major dialect regions and gave them geographic labels: *south*, *east*, *midwest*, and so on.

These responses are fairly typical in the United States: almost everyone draws a dialect region for the south(-east), and the midwest is often separated as its own region. This respondent has labeled the entire northeast as a single region; it's also common for subjects to draw more detail in this area (for example, labeling New York City and Boston as having distinctive varieties). Respondents are frequently unsure how to treat the American west; this student has apparently given up and asks *Do these people even speak?*

What's more interesting for our purposes is the fact that even though this is a purely descriptive task – respondents were asked to draw boundaries that separate regions where people speak differently, and to describe how that speech differs if they have any impressions about this – this respondent has spontaneously included evaluative comments on the map. Speakers in the northwest are *quite polite sounding, w/ definitive statements*; the dialect of the south is *unpolished, slurred and drawn out long*; southern Californians use *'sunny' language*. It seems that judgments like these, with charged words like *polite* and *unpolished*, are an integral part of how this respondent thinks about regional variants of English. Nor is this an isolated example; many subjects in these experiments spontaneously describe regional dialects in ways that are evaluative as well as purely descriptive.

The first thing we learn from this task, then, is that linguistic variation isn't socially neutral. Where there are differences in speech, it seems almost inevitable that people will have opinions about how good or bad the different varieties are. Beliefs about which kinds of language are better or worse than others appear to be a fundamental part of how humans 'do' language, no matter how much linguists may argue that all languages are equally valuable.

The other thought-provoking aspect of this task is that it gives us important clues about where these beliefs come from. Many descriptions provided on these maps apparently relate to the way dialects sound: words like *drawl* and *twang* are common in labels of the American South, for example. However, many others seem to refer just as much to the people living in those regions as they do to their language: perceptual dialectology studies document people using terms like *hillbilly*, *cowboy*, *surfer*, *Ivy League*, and so on. Here we have a hint that impressions about a dialect may be based less on personal experience with the sound of that dialect, and more on stereotypes about the people who speak it.

10.1.2 *The most pleasant dialect is my own*

Another technique in perceptual dialectology is to ask people to rate the speech of various regions according to some criterion. These regions are usually chosen according to convenient political boundaries – for example, US states. One

common task is for subjects to rate these areas according to how 'pleasant' that region's dialect is; these ratings give us some idea of people's aesthetic reactions to dialectal variation.

Figure 10.2 shows how the speech of various states was rated by two groups of subjects, one from Nevada and one from Tennessee. On these maps, states in darker colors were rated as more pleasant and states in lighter colors as less pleasant. The Nevada group rated Nevada and Colorado as the states with the most pleasant variety of English; several west-coast states were highly rated too, but other areas of the country were perceived as far less pleasant – notably the south, New Jersey, and New York City. The worst-rated states were Arkansas and Alabama.

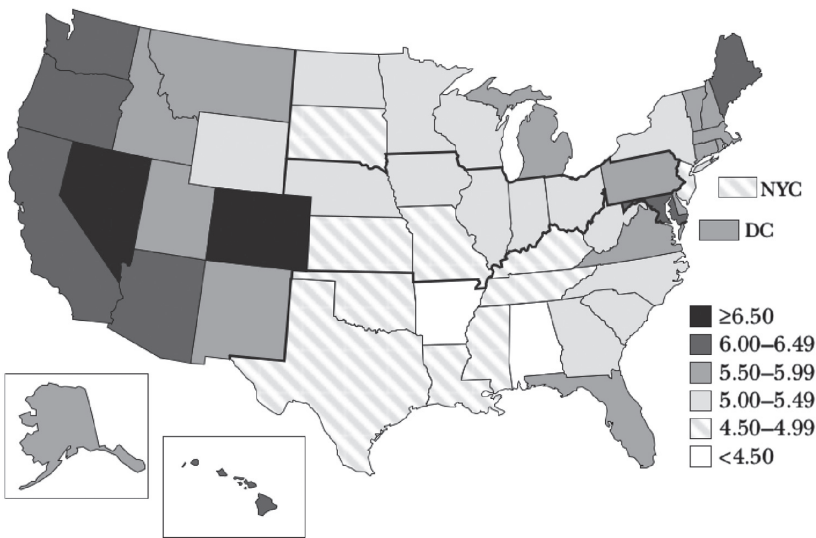
The map for the Tennessee group is strikingly different. For these raters, Tennessee was one of the states with the most pleasant English. We don't see the same widespread negative ratings across the south that we saw for the Nevada group, although Arkansas and Alabama are still the states with the lowest ratings. One interpretation of this pattern is that Nevada and Tennessee speakers agree that certain southern accents are bad; the Tennessee speakers just happen to feel that *their* particular variety of southern English is actually quite pleasant.

Similar studies have been carried out around the world – in Japan, Brazil, Germany, and elsewhere – and one of the most consistent findings is that speakers typically rate their own dialects as very pleasant. (Preston 1998 reports that students in Alabama rate the English of Alabama as highly pleasant; clearly, what we have here is a disagreement about the aesthetic qualities of Southern English.) This isn't terribly surprising, and it underscores the fact that judgments about the beauty (or ugliness) of a dialect or language aren't made in a vacuum: they are linked to our beliefs about the people who speak those varieties, and of course our own dialect is likely to hold a special place in our hearts.

Another recurring finding is that raters often say that the standard dialect of their language is especially pleasant. There may be a number of reasons for this: the standard is often familiar (since it's the language of broadcast media), it is spoken by people in positions of power and influence, and it is associated with a powerful ideology that claims that the standard dialect is superior to non-standard varieties. Indeed, when subjects are asked to rate various regions in terms of how *correct* their speech is, they typically give high ratings to regions where they think the standard is spoken; speakers of a non-standard dialect will usually rate their own dialect as not very correct, even if they believe it's still very pleasant.

All these patterns should make us suspicious about that idea that some dialects are objectively more pleasant than others. This doesn't mean that the raters in these studies are lying or fooling themselves – far from it. Our

Nevada Raters' Pleasantness Means



Memphis Raters' Pleasantness Means by State

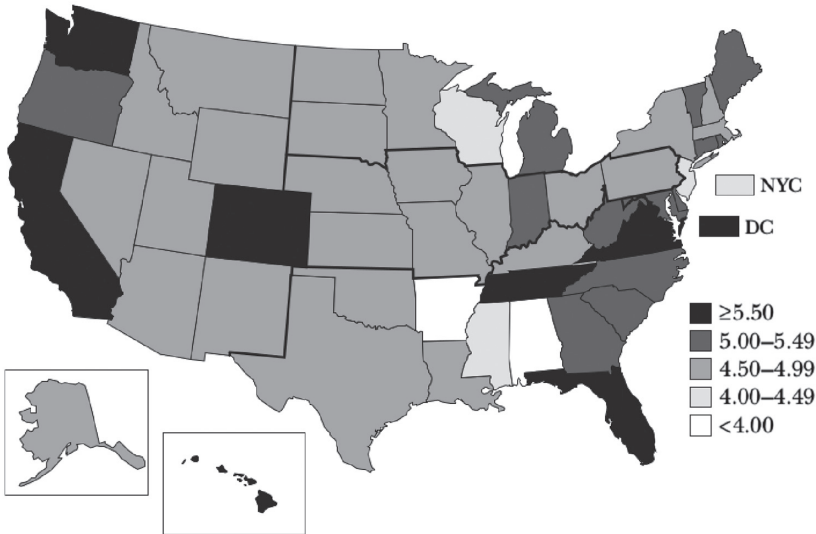


Figure 10.2 Nevada and Tennessee residents' ratings of the pleasantness of English spoken in U.S. states. Valerie Fridland and Kathryn Bartlett, Correctness, pleasantness, and degree of difference ratings across regions – use of Figures 6 and 3, in *American Speech*, Volume 81, No. 4, pp. 358–386. Copyright, 2006, the American Dialect Society. All rights reserved. Republished by permission of the copyright holder, and the present publisher, Duke University Press, www.dukeupress.edu.

reactions to various types of speech, and our judgments that they're pleasant or ugly, are very real; it would be naïve to pretend otherwise. Rather, studies like these help us understand where these reactions come from: apparently, it's impossible to separate our impressions about a kind of speech from our impressions about the people who use it.

10.2 Things that make a language beautiful (or ugly)

It seems, then, that our judgments about whether some variety of speech is beautiful or ugly are inextricably bound up with our ideas about the people who speak it; in fact, many of us are probably already aware of this on some level. But it's also common for people to argue that some languages are *inherently* beautiful or ugly, regardless of the people who speak them. In the next few sections, we'll examine several common claims along these lines. The question we're interested in is whether these 'objective' criteria are applied consistently, or whether they look more like *post hoc* justifications for reactions to a language that are based on something else entirely.

10.2.1 The sounds of language

Guttural consonants

In many parts of the world, French is a strong contender for the title of Most Beloved Language; it stands in stark contrast to German, which is widely despised as ugly and unpleasant. In fact, many people can articulate precisely *why* German is so ugly: sounds like the *ch* of *Bach* give German the unpleasant quality often described with words like *harsh* and *guttural*.

This *ch* sound, which is transcribed as [x] in the International Phonetic Alphabet, is a *voiceless velar fricative*. *Velar* means that the sound is produced by bringing the back part of the tongue near the soft palate, or velum; velar sounds in English include *k*, *g*, and *ng*. The sound is a *fricative* because the tongue doesn't make a complete closure at the velum: there's an opening that allows continuous airflow, but the opening is so narrow that the airflow becomes turbulent; this is what causes the characteristic 'hissing' sound of fricatives. English fricatives include sounds such as *f*, *v*, *s*, and *z*; by contrast, sounds like *k*, *g*, *t*, and *d* are *stops*, meaning that the tongue makes a complete seal that briefly blocks the airflow entirely. Finally, [x] is *voiceless* because the vocal folds don't vibrate while the sound is being produced: compare the voiceless sound *s* and the voiced *z*.

For many people, velar fricatives are inherently ugly sounds. This reaction typically extends to other fricatives produced in the back of the mouth, such as uvulars (where the tongue makes contact with the uvula) and pharyngeals (where the narrow opening for the fricative is made by the throat itself, behind

and below the tongue). In fact, in many German dialects, German *r* is a voiced uvular fricative, which makes things even worse. Similar accusations of being harsh and guttural have been leveled at Semitic languages such as Arabic and Hebrew, which have velar, uvular, and pharyngeal fricatives.

Further evidence for the widespread idea that these sounds are unpleasant comes from invented languages (also known as *constructed languages*, or *conlangs*) whose creators specifically wanted them to sound harsh or ugly. In fantasy and science fiction, it's common for writers to have certain groups speak a language that is supposed to sound unpleasant. The idea is to portray the group as primitive, hostile, or both; such languages frequently include velar fricatives. Klingon, the language invented by Marc Okrand for the war-like race of the same name in the *Star Trek* universe, has both voiced and voiceless velar fricatives. It also has a uvular affricate, a sound that begins with a stop-like closure and ends with a prolonged fricative-like period, as in the English affricate *ch*. George R. R. Martin's fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire* features the Dothraki, a race of fierce nomads whose language is described as harsh and guttural; David Peterson, who developed the Dothraki language for the associated television series, duly included [x] in its consonant inventory. In J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, the language spoken by the evil being Sauron and his minions includes both voiced and voiceless velar fricatives. This language is so ugly that even the powerful wizard Gandalf is reluctant to speak it; Tolkien describes the effect it has when he finally does:

The change in the wizard's voice was astounding. Suddenly it became menacing, powerful, harsh as stone. A shadow seemed to pass over the high sun, and the porch for a moment grew dark. All trembled, and the Elves stopped their ears.

Tolkien (1954)

Taken together, all these examples suggest that velar, uvular, and pharyngeal fricatives evoke unpleasant associations. But before we conclude that [x] is an objectively ugly sound, it's worth considering just how consistent this reaction is. Does the presence of [x] inevitably make a language sound ugly?

Absolutely not. The Spanish sound represented by the letter *j* (and by *g* before *e* and *i*), which English speakers are often told to pronounce like an *h*, is actually [x] in many dialects. In addition, Spanish *g* is pronounced as a voiced velar fricative in certain contexts, particularly after vowels. Later stages of Ancient Greek had [x] too, and the sound is still present in modern Greek. But Spanish and Greek don't come in for anything like the abuse suffered by German. In fact, we can even find these sounds in widely admired languages. French, that paragon of beauty, pronounces its *r* sound as a voiced uvular fricative (or as voiceless, depending on the context). Quenya and Sindarin, the

beautiful and semi-magical languages spoken by elves in Tolkien's writings, both include [x].

What should we make of all this? Clearly, many people sincerely perceive velar fricatives as ugly sounds, and this idea can be used to great effect in fictional settings. But we aren't so sensitive to these sounds that we invariably find them unpleasant; we're happy to tolerate them in languages that are considered neutral or even beautiful. French and German have very similar pronunciations of *r*, but the former is praised and the latter is criticized: clearly, there's something going on here beyond the actual sounds of the two languages.

Indeed, when we look at the western languages that are commonly described as beautiful or ugly, it's easy to imagine other reasons these languages have the associations they do – reasons that have nothing to do with the way they sound. French, of course, spent centuries as the language of science and art in Europe; today it is still highly prestigious, associated with sophistication and romance. Greek is associated with the first philosophers and the intellectual foundations of western thought; it's also closely connected to the early years of Christianity. By contrast, many westerners still associate Germany primarily with Nazism, and many English speakers' only exposure to the German language is through movies about World War II. In this context, the argument that German is ugly because it has [x] starts to look like *post hoc* reasoning.

Pure vowels

In a book-length treatment of the wonders of the Italian language, Hales (2009) argues that Italian vowels are superior to those of English.

Even ordinary things...sound better in Italian. The reasons start with its vigorous *vocali*, or vowels, which look like their English counterparts but sound quite different. In my first formal class in Italian, the teacher had us look in a mirror as we mouthed a-e-i-o-u...with the vowels puffing our cheeks, tugging at our lips, and loosening our jaws.

An Italian *a* slides up from the throat into an ecstatic “aaaah.” Its *e* (pronounced like a hard English *a*) cheers like the hearty “ay” at the end of *hip-hip-hooray*. The *i* (which sounds like an English *e*) glides with the glee of the double *e* in *bee*. The *o* (an English *o* on steroids) is as perfectly round as the red circle Giotto painted in a single stroke for a pope demanding a sample of his work. The macho *u* (deeper, stronger, and longer than its English counterpart) lunges into the air like a penalty kick from Italy's world-champion soccer team. . . .

Hales (2009, 20–21)

Like most non-linguists writing about language, Hales describes these sounds using impressionistic, non-technical terms that have little to do with the way they're actually pronounced. It's very unlikely, of course, that the students

in Hales' Italian class were literally puffing out their cheeks when producing these vowels (try it!). Moreover, *both* English and Italian (like the vast majority of languages around the world) make distinctions among vowels that involve different positions of the lips: *rounded* vowels like *o* require the lips to be drawn together, while *unrounded* vowels like *a* require the lips to be apart.

As it turns out, the five-vowel system that Hales describes isn't unique to Italian; in fact, as documented by Schwartz et al. (1997), it's the single most common vowel system in the world, found in about 30% of all languages. Thus, although this system may be new and pleasing to an English speaker, that's not a good reason to crown Italian with the title of Most Beautiful Language. (To be fair, Hales doesn't explicitly say in her discussion of vowels that Italian is more beautiful than any other language, only that it's superior to English.)¹

When Hales refers to Italian vowels as 'vigorous' and 'emphatic', she may be referring to the fact that they don't reduce in unstressed syllables. In English, unstressed vowels frequently become schwa ([ə]), a short vowel with approximately the same sound as the vowel in *love* or *hut*. This is especially clear in pairs of words like *atom* and *atomic*. In *atom*, the stress is on the first syllable, and the vowel in the second syllable (written *o*) is pronounced as a schwa. In *atomic*, the stress has moved to the second syllable; now it's the first syllable (still written with *a*) that is pronounced as a schwa.

Italian vowels don't reduce in this way, and English speakers learning Italian (or other languages without this kind of vowel reduction, such as Spanish) have to learn to give every vowel its 'full value', regardless of whether the vowel is stressed or not. Students are sometimes told to be 'precise' and 'clear' when speaking languages like Italian, in contrast to the 'lazy' English way of speaking; it's easy to understand why an English speaker would find such a language aesthetically appealing. However, as with velar fricatives, the fact that a language has schwa doesn't automatically make it an ugly language. Our counterexample, once again, is French, where schwas are abundant and in many cases are dropped from pronunciation entirely (the ultimate in 'laziness'!).

As with consonants, we have little evidence that some vowel sounds are inherently more beautiful than others. Individuals may come to enjoy certain vowels, and it's a wonderful thing for people to be enthusiastic about particular languages, as Hales is about Italian. But these judgments seem to be based more on personal preference (as well as the exoticness of the language

¹ A further issue here is that standard Italian actually has *seven* vowels, not five – another *e*-like vowel and another *o*-like vowel. (These additional vowel differences aren't typically indicated in Italian spelling and are absent in some regional dialects, making them particularly difficult for non-native speakers to learn; many learners aren't told about them at all.) Again, this seven-vowel system is not unusual: of the seven-vowel languages in Schwartz et al.'s sample, about half have the Italian system.

in question and its positive cultural associations) than on systematic phonetic analysis or a cross-linguistic comparison of vowel inventories. What's ordinary and pedestrian in one language becomes beautiful in another.

10.2.2 Grammar: Morphology and syntax

Our last examples of praise for the inherent virtues of certain languages involve what most people associate with the term *grammar*: morphology (building words out of smaller pieces) and syntax (building sentences out of words). It's here, especially, that we find ideas about beauty that are closely linked to impressions of a language as elegant, logical, or precise.

For many English speakers, one of the most daunting parts of studying a language such as Spanish, German, or Finnish is learning how to handle a wide array of noun and verb endings. English has only a bare handful of suffixes of the type known as *inflectional* – roughly, markers of grammatical information such as number (*cat-s*) or tense (*walk-ed*). Many European languages have far more, with the result that a single verb can have dozens or even hundreds of forms. Not only are languages like these particularly exotic for English speakers, but the prestige of Latin and Greek (both highly inflected languages) has led to a long grammatical tradition in the west in which languages with inflectional morphology are highly prized.

Grammatical case, in particular, is sometimes claimed to make a language logical and precise. In a language with *case marking*, nouns take particular forms that indicate their grammatical role in the sentence: subject, object, etc. English marks case only on pronouns; thus, we say *I saw him* but *He saw me*: *I* and *he* are the forms used in subject position, while *him* and *me* appear in object position. In Latin, case is marked on all nouns; thus, it's possible for sentences with very different meanings, such as (1a) and (1b), to be distinguished by case marking alone, whereas the equivalent English sentences require a difference in word order.

- (1) a. *Puer puellam amat.*
 boy.NOM girl.ACC loves
 'The boy loves the girl.'
 b. *Puerum puella amat.*
 boy.ACC girl.NOM loves
 'The girl loves the boy.'

The subject of the verb is marked with *nominative* case (*puer* in example (1a) and *puella* in example (1b)), while the direct object is marked with *accusative* case (*puellam* and *puerum*, respectively). Latin-style case marking, it's sometimes argued, is elegant and precise because it requires the speaker to understand the role of a noun in the larger sentence in order to produce it

correctly. However, aside from the long-standing tradition of respect for Latin, it's not clear why indicating the role of a noun via case marking is inherently more precise than using word order for the same purpose. In addition, grammatical case doesn't always map precisely onto a single meaning or function; in Ancient Greek, for example, the dative case could be used for nouns as varied as the indirect object of a verb (*I gave it to him*), the beneficiary of an action or state (*It is better for him*), or the instrument by which an action is performed (*I cut it with a knife*).

Sanskrit has long played a role in India analogous to that of Latin in Europe, as a highly venerated language of scientific and religious tradition. Grammatical analysis of Sanskrit was foundational in Indian intellectual life for centuries; one of the most comprehensive analyses of any language ever produced is the work of the Sanskrit grammarian Pāṇini, who is believed to have lived in the fourth century BC. Pāṇini's work was fantastically detailed, as was that of the grammarians who followed him, and in many ways the Sanskrit grammatical tradition pioneered analytic techniques that weren't seen again in the west until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Western scholars who discovered the Indian tradition were impressed by the sophistication of what they found; one scholar famously argued that Sanskrit is 'more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either' (Jones 1824, 28).

One western acknowledgment of the Sanskrit grammatical tradition is found in Briggs (1985), who noted that the technical descriptions employed by Sanskrit grammarians are parallel to certain artificial intelligence programming techniques. Unfortunately, this paper in particular has led to wild reports along the lines of 'NASA is funding research on programming computers with the Sanskrit language' (Briggs was a NASA consultant). The problem here is that there's a difference between the level of attention given to a language and the inherent properties of the language itself. Sanskrit does have a complex morphological system, but there are plenty of equally complex languages that simply happen to lack Sanskrit's tradition of sophisticated analysis. The most thoroughly studied language in modern linguistics is English, which has practically no inflectional morphology to speak of; not surprisingly, then, grammatical analysis of English has focused instead on rules of word order within a sentence. But just because there are sophisticated analyses of English grammar doesn't mean that English itself is more sophisticated than any other language; it's a historical accident that many linguists are English-speaking and therefore, understandably, tend to study their own language.

Once again, we're left with the strong impression that judgments about the beauty, complexity, and elegance of a language's grammar are *social* judgments: the more a language is associated with science, learning, and

high culture, the more everyone admires the structure of that language. A famous example is Antoine de Rivarol's 1784 essay *L'Universalité de la Langue Française* (*The Universality of the French Language*), which argues that French syntax contributes to its superiority over other languages:

What distinguishes our Language from ancient and modern languages is the order and construction of the sentence. This order must always be direct and necessarily clear. French first names the *subject* of speech, then the *verb*, which is the action, and at the end the *object* of the action: behold the Logic that is natural to all men; behold what constitutes common sense. . . .

[T]he syntax of French is incorruptible. This is the source of that admirable clarity, the eternal foundation of our Language: what is not clear is not French; what is not clear is still English, Italian, Greek, or Latin.

Rivarol, quoted in Leavitt (2011, 63)

The word order that Rivarol describes is precisely the same order found in English and many other languages; what's more, there is no evidence that the order subject–verb–object is especially logical. It seems much more likely that Rivarol was influenced by the prestige of his language: if this language is used in scientific discourse across Europe, surely it must be inherently superior to its competitors. It apparently didn't occur to Rivarol that French might have achieved its position just because it was the language of an influential nation. The arbitrariness of which languages are held in high or low prestige is sometimes easier to notice in communities that are removed from us in time or space; Thomason (2001) relates the following anecdote involving some of the indigenous languages of British Columbia:

The linguist William Poser, when collecting data from a Carrier elder in 1998, was given both a Carrier translation and a Babine translation for each item; his consultant commented that Poser really should know both Carrier and Babine in order to be properly educated.

Thomason (2001, 33)

10.3 Case study: Are some dialects more beautiful than others?

In one sense, the question of whether some languages or dialects are objectively more beautiful than others smacks of contradiction. Aesthetic judgments like these are often thought to sit squarely in the realm of personal opinion: you may find beautiful what I find ugly, and neither of us is necessarily incorrect. There's nothing wrong with being particularly fond of a specific language, but it's a matter of personal taste and the next person is not wrong to feel differently.

On the other hand, though, statements about the aesthetic value of particular languages and dialects often take on a decidedly non-subjective tone, sometimes in ways that have real-world consequences. Standard Italian is heavily influenced by the work of Dante Alighieri, who flouted the conventions of his time by writing in a vernacular language rather than Latin. If Dante chose to write in the most objectively beautiful dialect of Italian (as evidenced by the fine quality of his poetry), then maybe other dialects deserve to disappear. Similarly, minority languages around the world are endangered in part because their speakers have been told for generations that their language is ugly, primitive, and worthless; it's all too common to find people who are ashamed to speak their native language.

10.3.1 *Anecdotal evidence from language change and dialect variation*

The problem, as we've seen, is that aesthetic judgments like these are inextricably bound up with social realities. In the case of dialects, it's no coincidence that the variety of a language spoken by people in power tends to be the one that's considered beautiful, while the speech of stigmatized groups is often considered ugly. Logically, there are at least two explanations for this state of affairs. The first is that the prestige dialect of a language achieves its position because it's inherently better than other varieties; therefore, educated people with good taste will naturally want to speak it. This idea is known as the *inherent value hypothesis*. The second explanation, called the *imposed norm hypothesis*, is that the prestige dialect is no better or worse than any other dialect; it's considered better simply because it is spoken by people in positions of power and influence.

One piece of evidence in favor of the imposed norm hypothesis comes from the fact that societies in different times and places can have very different ideas about what sounds beautiful. For example, some dialects of English lack *r* in certain positions (roughly, in the last part of a syllable); many words that historically had *r*, and are still spelled that way, are pronounced without *r* in these dialects. In the United States, *r*-dropping is especially associated with parts of the South and with Boston – two regions whose speech is highly stigmatized. Since the Standard English of the United States preserves *r* in these contexts, *r*-dropping is seen as ugly and uneducated. But in Great Britain, *r*-dropping occurs in the highly prestigious variety known as Received Pronunciation.

We see something similar with the sound *h*. Many languages lose *h* over time; this change is so common, in fact, that it shows up regularly on lists of 'sound changes to watch for' provided to beginning students of historical linguistics. Some dialects of English in Great Britain have lost *h*; these dialects happen to have low prestige, such as the Cockney variety of

London. But *h* was also unstable in later varieties of Latin, and it has disappeared entirely in modern Romance languages such as Spanish and (once again) that paragon of linguistic virtue, French. The fact that losing *h* can be standard in one community and highly stigmatized in another suggests that whether or not we perceive a particular sound pattern as beautiful is strongly linked to our opinions about the people who are producing that pattern.²

10.3.2 *Athenian and Cretan Greek: Giles et al. (1974b)*

If it's impossible to separate our opinions about a way of speaking from what we believe about the people who speak that way, then the only way to get 'objective' aesthetic judgments is from people who don't know anything about the language varieties in question. In other words, if Received Pronunciation really is more aesthetically pleasing than a Cockney accent, then someone who knows no English should be able to listen to both varieties and reliably judge that Cockney is less beautiful.

Giles et al. (1974b) took exactly this approach in a study of Greek, comparing the prestigious Athenian dialect with the stigmatized Cretan dialect. The researchers played 30-second samples of various languages for a group of 46 British students, none of whom knew any Greek. Of the six samples that the subjects heard, two were some variety of Greek, either Athenian or Cretan. Both of the Greek samples were recorded by the same speaker, a woman who could speak both varieties.

For each recording, subjects were asked to identify what language was being spoken and rate the voice they heard on qualities such as 'intelligence' or 'toughness'. As summarized in Table 10.1, there is no evidence that the prestige variety is objectively more pleasing: the English-speaking subjects didn't assign significantly different ratings to Athenian and Cretan Greek on any of the six scales that Giles et al. used. (Interestingly, the large *t*-value for the ratings of the varieties' aesthetic properties shows that this difference came closer than any other to being statistically significant – but it's the *Cretan* dialect that shows a trend toward higher ratings!)

This study is a good beginning in evaluating the inherent value and imposed norm hypotheses, although it's incomplete in a number of respects. One limitation of the study, characteristic of its time, is the fact that all the subjects heard the six language samples in the same order. This is partly because the subjects were all tested together in a single group session, and perhaps partly because creating separate tape recordings with different orders would have

² Interestingly, Milroy (1983) argues that before the eighteenth century, loss of *h* was widespread in Great Britain and perceived as relatively neutral.

Table 10.1 *Mean ratings of the two Greek dialects. t-values test whether the Athenian and Cretan varieties received significantly different ratings; none did. Smaller numbers indicate greater presence of the relevant attribute (prestige, intelligence, etc.). Table 1 of Howard Giles, Richard Bourhis, Peter Trudgill, and Alan Lewis, ‘The imposed norm hypothesis: A validation,’ The Quarterly Journal of Speech, 60(4): 1974, 405–410.*

Greek Dialects	Evaluative Scales					
	Prestige	Aesthetic	Intelligent	Tough	Amusing	Sophisticated
Athenian	4.70	5.39	4.22	4.33	6.33	4.89
Cretan	4.61	4.96	4.20	4.46	6.61	4.74
t values (d.f. = 45)	0.28	1.45	0.08	0.19	0.47	0.87

been extremely time-consuming. (Today, of course, it’s trivial to administer tests on a computer, which can be programmed to deliver a different random order for each subject, assuming subjects are tested individually.) Randomizing the stimulus order is standard practice because of the danger of order effects: for example, did subjects recognize the language of the German sample, and if so, did they tend to assign higher ratings to Cretan Greek, which came next? (‘I’ll rate this language higher than the last one – *anything* sounds better than German.’)

10.3.3 *Wolof: Moreau et al. (2014)*

Moreau et al. (2014) conducted a similar study with Wolof, a language of Senegal. The researchers recorded 54 native speakers of Wolof, half of whom were highly educated and half of whom had not completed high school. After eliminating potentially identifying information, they played short samples of these recordings for two groups of students: 116 Senegalese students, all of whom spoke Wolof; and 59 students from various European universities, none of whom knew Wolof. The students were asked to identify whether each speaker had had a short or long education.

Both groups of students were right a little more than 60% of the time; Moreau et al. report that their performance was better than chance ($p < 0.001$ for both groups). Moreover, neither group of students performed significantly better than the other ($p = 0.706$). This second result is especially surprising; we might expect the Senegalese students, who understood the cultural context of the speakers and actually knew the language, to at least do better than the European students. Moreau et al. conclude that their results challenge the imposed norm hypothesis: if high-status ways of speaking are

completely arbitrary, then the European students (who lacked the relevant knowledge) shouldn't have been able to do any better than just guessing randomly.

Why did Giles et al. and Moreau et al. get such contradictory results? One possible explanation lies in the fact that these experiments tested subtly different things. Giles et al. had the two varieties of Greek recorded by the *same* speaker; Moreau et al. recorded *different* speakers of high-status and low-status Wolof. The obvious danger of Giles et al.'s approach (known as the *matched-guise* technique) is that the speaker might not be truly bidialectal, and that one or both of the recordings might therefore not be a good representation of the dialect. But its advantage is that it eliminates variation due to individual-level factors such as voice quality. In other words, maybe the students in Moreau et al.'s study weren't responding to the more 'beautiful' speech of educated Wolof speakers; instead, there might be more universal characteristics of vocal quality that tend to vary by socioeconomic status (a possibility that Moreau et al. themselves discuss).

Another relevant factor here is that even though Wolof is spoken somewhat differently by people with high and low levels of education, this difference doesn't exactly rise to the level of distinct 'dialects'. Thus, although Giles et al. were clearly testing listeners' evaluations of different dialects of the same language, Moreau et al. were testing much smaller status-related variations. Again, it's not clear what Moreau et al.'s results tell us about broader judgments of well-defined dialects as 'uneducated' or 'sloppy', independent of the level of education of the person actually speaking that dialect.

10.3.4 General conclusions

There are only a handful of 'pure' tests of the inherent value hypothesis that ask subjects to evaluate dialects of a language they don't speak at all. Most sociolinguistic research tends to focus on social factors that influence perceptions about language, rather than looking for judgments that are clearly *not* based on social factors. This is only natural, since sociolinguists by definition are interested in how language is influenced by its social context. Moreover, as linguists have discovered and documented the fascinating complexity that is found in every language studied to date, it's become axiomatic in the field that no language is better or worse than any other. Thus, most linguists simply don't believe that some languages are inherently more beautiful than others, which partly explains the paucity of research in this area.

None of this means that people are wrong to have aesthetic reactions to particular languages or dialects. It's abundantly clear that these kinds of reactions are extremely widespread, perhaps even universal; attempting to get everyone to like all languages equally well is probably a hopeless task. And there's

nothing wrong with having a particular interest in a specific language, as Hales does; or with having a special affinity for one's own dialect, as participants in perceptual dialectology research routinely do. The important thing to keep in mind is that beliefs like these are influenced by social factors, not just linguistic ones. There is no purely linguistic justification for condemning a particular dialect to extinction, no matter how much some people may dislike it; or for elevating one language above all others, no matter how ardent its supporters.

10.4 Summary

- Languages, and specific dialects of languages, are frequently judged aesthetically as 'beautiful', 'pleasing', 'ugly', etc.
- Speakers commonly consider their native dialect to be particularly pleasant; the standard dialect of a language is frequently idealized as pleasant, too.
- There seem to be no linguistic features that are universally considered beautiful or ugly. What is thought to be beautiful in one language may be judged ugly in another.
- People's aesthetic judgments about particular languages are inextricably bound up with beliefs about the people who speak those languages. The variety spoken by a prestigious group or a powerful individual tends to be valued more highly by virtue of those associations.
- A few experiments have asked subjects to evaluate various dialects of a language they do not speak. These studies provide little or no evidence that some dialects are objectively better-sounding than others.

For further reflection

- (1) Interview five people you know; ask them which dialects of English they find particularly pleasant or unpleasant, and why. Discuss the kinds of reasons your interviewees give to explain their reactions. How often do people refer to the way a dialect sounds, and what kinds of sounds do they mention? How often do people compare the dialect to a standard variety? How often do they explicitly mention associations with the people who speak that dialect?
- (2) There are a few additional studies on the inherent value and imposed norm hypotheses; these include Giles et al. (1974a), Brown and Lambert (1976), and Mays (1982). Read one of these studies and evaluate it. What exactly did the researchers do, and what did they conclude? Do you think their results support their conclusions?

Further reading

The classic book on perceptual dialectology is Preston (1989); Preston (1999) and Long and Preston (2002) collect papers in the field. Chapter 2 of Giles and Coupland (1991) summarizes a large body of research on the relationships between social and linguistic attitudes; see also Giles and Watson (2012) for a global overview. Chapters 11 and 17 of Bauer and Trudgill (1998) are brief discussions of popular judgments of languages and dialects.

The World Atlas of Language Structures (<http://wals.info/>) is an excellent resource for exploring how common particular linguistic features are and how they are distributed across the globe.

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