Lithuanian Language Ideals

How the Idea of the Best Language Changed

Summary

This book deals with 'language ideals' in the Lithuanian speech community – the idea of the 'best Lithuanian' and its manifestations in public usage. As in any other standardised speech community, people's ideas of language cannot escape reproduction of ready-made evaluative schemes offered by standard language ideology. Yet the standard language itself is a very fuzzy concept. Scholars say that it is an *idea of the best language* that is the point of reference for grading all language varieties used in a community. The grading determines the direction of language change – those varieties that are regarded as 'lower' decline in use or are pushed into their protected reserves while the 'best language' spreads and gets entrenched in the public sphere. They also say that different levels of consciousness produce *different* ideas of the best language – one set of values stems from people's *consciously* held attitudes towards language, whereas *subconscious evaluations* of people talking in different accents may be based on very different social values. Also, spoken mass media takes part in the processes of language evaluation and change, shaping the idea of what the best language sounds like. Moreover, language ideals are not stable. What a community perceives as the 'best language' can change over time. The research question is thus how these processes work in Lithuania.

These questions lurked in the back of our minds for quite some time before an invitation came from Copenhagen University professor Tore Kristiansen to join the informal research network SLICE (*Standard Language Ideology in Contemporary Europe*), uniting several European speech communities. It resulted in the research project 'Lithuanian Language: Ideals, Ideologies and Identity Shifts' (2010–2013), financed by the Research Council of Lithuania. In the project we looked five decades back and worked in two directions: (1) to understand the ideas of language normalization specific to Lithuania and the construction of *standard language ideology* by Lithuanian

language planners; and (2) to investigate *language ideals* that influence thinking about language among Lithuanian language users, their evaluations of language variation and language use in broadcasting.

After the end of the project, we continued to improve research instruments and to analyse the collected data, raising new research questions and working on publishing the results. 2016 saw publication of the first volume: 'Lithuanian Language Ideology: A History of Ideas, Power and Standardisation' (ed. by Loreta Vaicekauskienė and Nerijus Šepetys). A year later 'Lithuanian Language Ideals' appeared. At the centre of this book is the community itself, with its ideas about the best Lithuanian and its language choices. *Thinking* about language is represented by high school students from all regions of Lithuania; *speaking* is represented by people that appeared on the air on Lithuanian radio and television during the five decades. Students assessed which language and which speakers they liked most, while in the media we looked after how the identities and speech styles of public speakers changed from Soviet times. Research is based on the assumption that the rising status of Vilnius and increasingly informal media might emerge as norm centres that seriously compete with the imposed standard and thus change the notion of the 'best' Lithuanian language. Young people have the possibility, at least in theory, to either choose the local regional identity, to follow the instructions in textbooks imposing the standard language, or to look at the capital city Vilnius or media speech models. The media also chooses between different social identities and styles. We are interested in these choices because the ways of speaking people invest with high values today pinpoint the possible direction towards which the dominant language norm of the future will be moving. Participation in the SLICE network not only opened international perspective to test cognitive and social theories of language variation and change with Lithuanian data, but also inspired us to apply new research instruments, some of them previously unfamiliar to Lithuanian sociolinguistics.

The book consists of three parts. The first part presents the theoretical and methodological foundation of our research: it reviews the understanding of standard language and language correctness in contemporary linguistics and discusses the relationship between the attitudes to the best language held by people and language change, as well as the role of mass media in these processes. After presenting the research instruments used in the study, the book turns to *attitudes* of language users and language *use* in the media. The second part deals with the ideas of the best language

in the Lithuanian speech community: it describes research on high school students' attitudes towards different ways of speaking in Lithuanian, conducted from 2012 to 2016 in all major regions of Lithuania. Here we will see what social values students attach to the regional dialects and non-dialectal variation, including different accents of Vilnius speech. The third part shows how language ideals manifest in the spoken media. It presents a series of studies based on a historical/diachronic/retrospective Lithuanian broadcast language corpus. The research shows how, in accordance with the changing conditions in the media, the identities of media personalities and the 'best language' itself changed over fifty years.

The first chapter **On the Ideal of Language, Standard and Change** (written by Laima Nevinskaitė, Lithuanian Language Research Institute), Giedrius Subačius (University of Illinois at Chicago and Lithuanian Language Research Institute) and Loreta Vaicekauskienė (Lithuanian Language Research Institute) discusses language as a *natural* and *social* phenomenon. After considering why it is so difficult to define language, what factual and ideological features it is attributed, the authors turn to a discussion of what (or rather, what definitely does *not*) characterises standard language. One of the most distinctive qualities of it is the idea of the best language. Historically it is also defined by efforts of language unification in a community. This chapter also gives an overview of the history of the Lithuanian standard language in terms of a theoretical typological approach from the birth of the idea of a unified *Lithuanian* language (documented for the first time in 1885). Lithuanian normativists still perceive the standard language as a set of restrictive rules, although correctness is the intrinsic quality of language that applies to all ways of natural speech. The nature of written language rules is somewhat different, yet, in general, linguistics tends not to apply the concept of 'incorrectness'. Researchers emphasise that the total standardisation of language is not possible, since different social and cultural identities are associated with different 'best' languages. The 'best' language for the prestigious public sphere is, beside others, offered by radio and television. So far there is little empirical evidence of the media's *direct* influence on language change – it is not likely that people would copy pronunciation or ways of talking from TV and radio. However, the media undoubtedly affects understanding about what language is good and legitimate to use in public. The chapter ends with an overview of theories discussing language variation and change, which demonstrates how changes of language relate to subjective factors, when speakers consciously or subconsciously evaluate socially meaningful language differences.

The second and third chapters present the research methods used in the studies in the book. The second chapter, **How We Investigated the Ideas of Best Language** (Loreta Vaicekauskienė and Ramunė Čičirkaitė, Lithuanian Language Research Institute), describes the methodology of the research on attitudes: speaker evaluation experiments and group discussions including various tasks for assessing language varieties and speakers. Experiments adopted a methodology developed by the Copenhagen school, whose main idea is controlling subjects' awareness (not revealing to them that the experiment is about language) to derive *subconscious* attitudes towards people talking in different speech varieties. Two large scale experiments were conducted with school students. In each of them the judges listened to recordings of differently accentuated Lithuanian: one investigation included regional dialects, standard speech, and the speech of the capital Vilnius, whereas in the other different accents of Vilnius speech were investigated. The recordings were short, on the same topic and very similar content-wise, and they were played in mixed order. Then students had to fill in questionnaires where they had to evaluate each of the speakers according to certain personal characteristics and their suitability for certain professions. In one of the studies, after the actual goal of the research was revealed to the subjects, they were asked to rate different labels of the Lithuanian speech varieties and to assess the geographical affiliation of speakers' as well as how standard the voices sounded to them. After a comprehensive description of experimental design, as well as procedures and linguistic features of the voice recordings that were used for both investigations, the chapter presents the methodology of group discussions with students on speech variation in the contemporary Lithuanian community. One of the aims of these discussions, which centred on characteristics of different varieties of Lithuanian and their speakers, was to elicit stereotypical, well-established community attitudes. Alongside discussion, an original task was used: the students received a stack of cards with various personal characteristics written on them and had to construct social portraits of typical speakers of different speech varieties.

Another research instrument – less inventive but highly significant for research on spoken Lithuanian and very time consuming to prepare – was the *Corpus of Lithuanian Broadcasting Language 1960–2010*. In the third chapter, **How We Studied Language Ideals in Public Usage**, Laima Nevinskaitė describes its design and compilation. The corpus was designed by ourselves for our own research needs, so the selection of TV and radio recordings (in

total 63 hours or 360,000 words) was balanced to represent analytically important stages of Lithuanian broadcast media development (Soviet, transitional, and contemporary) and genre groups (talk programmes, information programmes, and magazine programmes/features/documentaries). Transcripts were coded to indicate relevant characteristics of speech and speakers to enable their automatic search and frequency calculation. The possibility of using the same representative corpus for comparison of how public social identities and speech styles changed over time is greatly important for a group project.

The second part of the book embarks on a search for the ideas of 'best' language in the Lithuanian language community. The fourth chapter by Meilutė Ramonienė (Vilnius University), **Standard Language and Dialect: Differences in Social Values**, uses data collected in group discussions organised in nine regional centres of Lithuania and shows how students' attitudes directly reflect the language standardisation ideology that prevails in the Lithuanian education system: they attribute lower social value to regional dialects, see the domains of dialect use as rather strictly limited to private communication, and associate dialect speakers with rural and old-fashioned life-styles. Nevertheless, although dialect use is not associated with higher status and social power, the stereotype of a typical dialect speaker also includes characteristics important for personal communication such as *sincerity*, *warmth*, and *friendliness*. The author ends the chapter with a hope that resistance to standardisation is still possible because of the dialects' significance to local identities.

This question is further investigated by contrasting data on *conscious* attitudes with the results of experiments for *subconscious* speaker evaluation. In the fifth chapter, **Two Levels of Consciousness, Two Best Languages, One Standard**, Loreta Vaicekauskienė compares attitudes towards three language varieties and their speakers (language spoken in regional cities, standard language and Vilnius speech) and discovers that the regional dialect as a symbolic embodiment of local patriotism acts only at the superficial, reported level. In the top ten list of varieties of Lithuanian compiled from 1700 responses from school students, the local regional dialect emerges as the 'most liked' variety. However, it is unanimously downgraded when the students are not aware that the research is about language. It is likely that the recordings of voices speaking in different varieties trigger negative stereotypes connected to dialectal accent and students produce a value system that is turned upside down: the regional dialect voices sound *least*

intelligent, trustworthy, nice etc., whereas non-dialectal voices receive high evaluations. *Together* they fill the idea of the one best language, only with a difference in style: voices of standard Lithuanian are associated with a formal personality, while Vilnius voices are associated with a dynamic, informal style. An important finding was the effect of social meanings associated with Vilnius and influence of gender (both of speaker and judges) on evaluations of voices. The general conclusion of this chapter is related with the future development of Lithuanian: if covert social positivity is indeed the driver of language change, the use of dialect will eventually decline even more, at least in public where regional dialects have to compete with the standard varieties.

As we saw so far, the Vilnius accent is well received despite its official downgrading. Ramunė Čičirkaitė provides an explanation. In the sixth chapter, **Social Meanings of Vilnius Speech Variants**, she describes speaker evaluation experiments with voices including Vilnius speech variation itself and conducted in Vilnius schools with Lithuanian and Russian as languages of instruction. At the centre of the study was the so-called lengthening of short vowels in stressed word stem and ending. Although Lithuanian gate-keepers stigmatise the 'lengthening' as indexing low status and originating from ethnic minority speech, it seems that Vilnius school students subconsciously perceive this pronunciation feature as a highly valuable characteristic of Vilnius speech. Voices whose speech displayed lengthening of vowels in both word stem and ending were associated with big city or capital city style, high social status, and social power. They were attributed the highest degree of such traits as *educated*, *successful*, *youthful*, and *with a good job*. However, such speech variation receives higher evaluations under one condition – they must not have a non-Lithuanian accent. In evaluations of recordings of speakers of Slavic origin (e.g. Russians, Poles), the same vowel 'lengthening' did not have any positive social associations. It was downgraded both by Lithuanian and partly also by Russian judges and also lost the attribute *urban dweller*.

Our findings confirm that *social values* associated with different ways of speaking are neither an immanent characteristic of the language itself, nor a representation of the real facts, but are instead a reflection of social meaning making processes in the community. As we see, nowadays young people highly value association with the capital Vilnius and the personality styles attributed to Vilnius – *dynamic*, *youthful*, and *urban*. These attitudes take shape through a variety of experiences – among others, with the

ways of speaking on radio and television. That is how broadcasting unifies the idea of language standard in a community. But what linguistic features does it include? We have to move to the studio to continue our search for the 'best' language.

The period of restoration of Lithuanian independence witnessed dramatic changes in the public sphere. Right before our eyes, mass media developed a new identity and brought new styles of speaking on air. These changes are investigated in the third part of the book. It starts with the introductory chapter **Speakers in the Media and Changes in Public Speaking** by Laima Nevinskaitė. The author first provides a panoramic overview of core media ideologies and its operating principles in the Soviet period and later on, and then analyses the changes in speaker types in broadcasting. Early in the last decade of the 20th century there was a turning point for radio and television in all of Western Europe when the monopoly of public broadcasters was finally ended by commercial broadcasters. Lithuania in that time experienced a transition from a public sphere subdued to the Soviet authorities to democratic, critical, censorship-free media institutions, which also opened the gate to media changes from the West. Analysis of speaker types in the media provides a solid basis for interpretation of *structural* and *stylistic* changes in public speech and discourse. The dominant monologue-mode of the Soviet period was personified by news readers and announcers, while the contemporary prevalence of dialogue is represented by the quantitatively and symbolically greater role of talk show hosts. Other speaker roles – experts, celebrities, *vox populi* and 'heroes' – also exemplify the transition from stiff monologue to dialogic, authentic, informal broadcasting talk. All these changes are inextricably linked to the fundamental distinction between written-like, prepared in advance, and spontaneous speech.

Thus we observe an increasing informalisation in Lithuanian broadcasting due to the processes that take place all over Europe and are referred to as conversationalisation, vernacularisation or colloquialisation by media researchers. The remaining chapters report the transition from 'correct and standard' to lively and authentic discourse in the media, asking, among other things, what forms of speech and speaking indicate informal public style; how are social identities manipulated by bringing the informal, colloquial indexical features into the public sphere; how much of the textbook standard remains in broadcast media?

One of the key indicators of the changing relationship between speakers is forms of address, analysed in the eighth chapter, **Shift in Forms**

of Address in the Media by Jurgita Girčienė (Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences; Vilnius University). The Soviet media allowed only the most formal forms of address: *Jūs* (polite second person plural) *with family name* together with *draugas* (comrade) – an address form used in the whole Soviet Union and introduced in Lithuania from 1940, prohibiting the traditional *ponas* (Mister). A couple of years before independence, with the increasing freedom of speech and changing practices in public communication, modes of address started changing too. The polite plural *Jūs* was still the prevailing form of address, but *draugas* started disappearing, and *Jūs with family name* was supplemented by *Jūs with first name*. This transitional period often saw explicit metalinguistic discussions about what forms of address the interlocutors should choose. Finally, the public sphere accepted the most informal Lithuanian address form *Tu* (you, second person singular). It is combined with *the first name*, which in the 21st century became the most typical form of address: the first name can go together with the respectful *gerbiamasis* ('respected') or the restored *ponas* (Mister), or with polite plural *Jūs*. Addressing by *the first name and Jūs* combines the formality common for public communication with the needs for a more informal style felt in the increasingly democratised society and media. This probably explains why, except on the most formal programmes, this variant of address form became established as the norm of address in broadcasting, even in conversations between unacquainted persons.

These dramatic changes in forms of address indicate a breakthrough in public social relationships. Ironically, public communication became friendlier with the disappearance of 'comrade'. An increased variety of communicative situations leads to a larger variety of language choices, 'wooden' language becomes livelier, and the non-standard, authentic identity of speakers calls for more informal, more colourful words. This change is portrayed in the ninth chapter, **Informal Lexis on the Air** by Giedrius Tamaševičius (Lithuanian Language Research Institute). Data shows that in today's media informal words are twice as frequent and more varied than in the Soviet period: while dialectal words (mainly old borrowings from Polish or German) were common for all periods, contemporary media also include more Lithuanian colloquial lexis and recent borrowings or slang of Russian and English origin. Ordinary people happen to use non-purified everyday lexis as a part of their natural speech, while talk show hosts seem to deliberately choose non-standard words in order to attract the attention of the audience, to create stylistic allusions, or to stylise other

people. Contemporary celebrities participate in constructing the appearance of private communication – the amount of informal words from their lips increases by almost five times. (In contrast, Soviet media in general avoided personal topics). Although the overall numbers of informal words still are rather small (on average, two to three words in eight minutes, though very unevenly distributed along different genres), that is enough to create the impression of informal style. Constructed informality is a good illustration of mass media's intention to establish a public speaker's identity as an authentic, friendly person and eventually develops a more democratic standard of the 'best language'. The author ends his chapter with a forecast for the future development of media in the digital age: the internet will inevitably accommodate even more language variation in public, as the conditions of fierce competition for attention will force its participants to seek ways to be noticed and appreciated.

With the tenth chapter, **Fight for Turn. Overlaps and Interruptions** (Laima Nevinskaitė), we turn from language as the expression of social identity to everyday communication style brought into the public by the contemporary media. However, differently than in the company of friends, public speakers have to compete for turn. This kind of discourse illustrates formation of a dialogue-based public sphere that ceases to be a monologue channel for representation of state ideology, though, on the other hand, it approaches the line where it becomes difficult to be heard. During the five decades the frequency of episodes of speaking at the same time (i.e. overlaps and interruptions) continuously increased together with the variety of situations and functions of such talk: in the Soviet period they happened for neutral or collaborative reasons, the transitory period saw the first uses of interruptions for competitive reasons, and in today's media they are often used as a device of power. It goes together with the changing communicative behaviour of programme participants – the active (non-neutral) role of programme hosts and attempts of the programme guests to take turns themselves without waiting for an invitation from the host. The frequency and nature of overlaps and interruptions depend on programme genre, the personality of the host, and even channel type (they are more frequent in programmes from commercial broadcasters). The changes are also reflected in meta-discourse – although overlaps and interruptions occur more often, speakers apologise for interrupting less than before, thus overlapping talk becomes, in a way, a norm. In terms of the language itself it means more difficult conditions to talk, a need to react quickly, more efforts needed to

finish one's turn, and, consequently, less attention to language form. The content of the discussion becomes more important than the norms of the 'correct' language.

Conformity to the purified norm is at the centre of the eleventh and final chapter, **Pronunciation Standard in the Media: What It Is and How It Changed?** by Ramunė Čičirkaitė. She used PRAAT software to investigate the main pronunciation feature that can indicate the relationship between the textbook standard, journalists' norm and Vilnius speech norm and their prevalence in the media: long vowels /i:/, /u:/, /e:/, /o:/, /æ:/ and /a:/ in *unstressed* positions. Lithuanian language planners define their 'shortening' and 'un-tenseness' as a pronunciation error and require correct pronunciation. The author compared 'standard' vowel characteristics obtained in laboratory settings with the pronunciation of journalists. The study shows that the desired uniformity of pronunciation has never been achieved on air in Lithuanian. Even newsreaders who read a prepared text do not produce this 'prestigious' model of pronunciation. A discrepancy between textbook and real-life pronunciation was observed already in the data of the Soviet period, while later on, with the systemic changes in the public sphere and speaking conditions in the media, journalists' pronunciation moved even further away from the textbook model. Vowel tenseness and particularly length decreased significantly to an extent that the difference could be detected by ear. The *actual* phonetic features (in the speech of journalists in the Soviet and contemporary periods, as well as in Vilnius speech) are closer to each other than to the *ideal* norm. We can say that the more journalists were drifting away from the standard, the more they were getting closer to Vilnius pronunciation. It means that language change is driven by social meanings created by speakers themselves, not imposed from outside. Thus we return back to what we started with – the social motivation of language choices and the capital's role in shaping the idea of the best language.

In the Lithuanian context this study is novel in its consideration of the role of capital Vilnius speech, traditionally downgraded by the norm-setters, in Lithuanian language change and variation. Not to mention the introduction of the two levels of consciousness to the methodologies of attitude collection. Investigations on the competition of different varieties of Lithuanian reveal a very strong position of Vilnius speech – its pronunciation model proves to be more significant than the textbook model. The idea of Vilnius speech as the potential form contributor to language standard is a turning point in Lithuanian linguistics. No less noteworthy is the scale

and complexity of the conducted research, inclusion of speech varieties of regional cities, as well as diachronic research of media language.

Conscious and subconscious attitudes collected from almost two thousand students, hundreds of thousands of words of public spoken language compiled into a corpus, an overview of five decades of language and speaking in public is an impressive work. It is significant not only because Lithuanian sociolinguistics has never before taken such a long sight back and forward – and not because it had so few research instruments for a systematic comparison before. It is because the study laid foundations for further studies, both deeper and wider, both Lithuanian and international, which will include Lithuanian data into a broader European perspective.

Lietuvių kalbos idealai

Kaip keitėsi geriausios kalbos idėja

Sudarė Loreta Vaicekauskienė