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Is German the ugliest language in Europe?

An Empirical Study about the Aesthetic Perception of Languages

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If you are alive, you are likely to have at the very least once taken part in a conversation about the pleasantness or unpleasantness of different languages. What hides behind this popular topic from a scientific point of view? Does the fact that some languages seem to be consistently judged more harshly (e.g. German) or more positively (e.g. Italian) than others mean that they are intrinsically uglier or more pleasant? Is French naturally beautiful and Dutch naturally unpleasant? And why does German seem to always be on top of the ugly-list?

Based on this set of observations and taking into account previous research on the topic, the study examines how German is aesthetically perceived in the European area and what lies behind this perception from a linguistics point of view (which social components play which role; whether there is something inherent). The German language is viewed from the external perspective of non-speakers and non-native speakers of German depending, among other factors, on their mother tongue, while also taking into account the self-perception of native speakers.

The study addresses the abovementioned research questions by combining qualitative and quantitative research methods. On the one hand, various instances of the phenomenon of linguistic judgements (e.g. from social networks, literature, magazines/newspapers, TV shows, movies) were documented, compared with existing cultural standards, stereotypes and historical circumstances and categorized accordingly. On the other hand, a Europe-wide online survey was carried out with 2296 subjects and a special focus on the UK, Poland, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Germany and Austria. The data collection was followed by a statistical evaluation.

Respondents with Polish mother tongue expressed particularly negative opinions about the aesthetics of the German language compared to the others. Most positive opinions came from Latvian and English native speakers. The data reveals a picture of the German language as a "logical", "systematic", "hard", "angular" and rather "unmelodic" language. When asked directly/explicitly, however, a positive general opinion of German prevailed among the participants. Moreover, the data showed a clear connection between the perception of shapes and languages. For example, the German language was consistently associated with angular shapes, and the French language, on the other hand, with round shapes. This evidence speaks for a reassessment of the previously rather discarded *inherent value hypothesis* (vgl. Giles/Bourhis/Lewis/Trudgill 1974) and thus of the role of cognitive processes interacting with the socially constructed side of language perception in the formation of language attitudes.

This contribution is relevant to: 1) a better understanding of language-related cognition processes in general and a deeper awareness of their social implications and value; 2) the achievement of a better understanding of the social and political landscape of Europe and the perceived role of Germany through the indirect tool of research on language attitudes;

3) the determination of a methodological starting point for further surveys on the subject, which could form a basis for the future development of innovative methods, e.g. in the context of intercultural training or language didactics.

References

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