LESSON 2: WHY CAN SPEAKING A MINORITISED LANGUAGE BE STRESSFUL?

As ML speakers, we can sometimes feel that using our language in certain situations can be disadvantageous. It is common that we feel stress when having to choose if we stick to our language —running the danger of not being understood and being reprimanded for it— or switching to the DL —increasing the probability of feeling discomfort for having given up an opportunity to use our language—.

The atypical situation of the ML can provoke a considerable amount of stress in the speaker when ...

Having to choose between <u>two unpleasant options</u>:

- **Sticking to the ML language**.
  - RISK → danger of not being understood and/or being reprimanded for it.
- **Switching to the DL language**.

  - RISK → feeling discomfort for having given up an opportunity to use the ML language

In almost every interaction with a DL speaker a ML speaker will have to choose, and that increases the probability of experiencing a certain amount of stress. This situation of having to choose between two unpleasant alternatives and experiencing the feeling of having little options can be linked to a psychological term known with the name of '**learned helplessness**'. This will be explained a little further on in this same lesson.

Faced with these **risk-risk situations**, in which it seems that there is no successful exit, ML speakers may end up adopting the position of quietude. In similar future situations, it is likely that we display an attitude of passivity to avoid this unpleasant situation of having to be worried that we will not be understood or we will be misjudged. Therefore, we will adopt a position of what we call **linguistic submissiveness**.

The truth is that it is very unlikely that DL speakers encounter a situation like this. In that sense, we might think that having less options can be more advantageous. But since when is having more skills a disadvantage? Being able to choose is always advantageous and this is the windfall that we ML speakers have. In contrast to DL speakers, who are in such a limited situation that they cannot choose, ML speakers have **the advantage of being able to choose**. In this context, we might say that we are in a superior condition and that should make us feel proud and a sense of consecution.

Learned Helplessness

Have you ever thought that you could not do something, that it was impossible, that nothing you did was going to change the situation? This feeling that manifests itself when we begin to feel that we are **incapable of modifying a situation** through our behaviour is called 'learned helplessness'. It implies the feeling that our behaviours or our actions do not influence the obtained result, and any effort made to control them is useless. Learned helplessness leads us to avoid situations or not wanting to face them, because of the simple fact of feeling that our actions will not modify a specific situation.

ML speakers can suffer from learned helplessness, which often leads to subordinate and submissive behaviours. This feeling of helplessness comes because, on the one hand, if we change to the dominant language, we feel that we are perhaps doing something out of social pressure and not with total comfort; and, on the other hand, if we do not change the language and stick with ours, then the chances that we will have to deal with confrontational situations increase: people will ask us why we do that, the conversation might drift into linguistic issues without being this our priority, etc.

Also, it has to be taken into account that the ML-speakers are the only ones who can switch languages and thus, all the pressure is on them. The DL-speakers, on the other side, are supposed to know only their own language, which would relieve them from any pressure.

What can we do to change this situation? Can helplessness be unlearned?

Learned helplessness is a behaviour, and just like any behaviour it was acquired. Therefore, it can be eliminated, re-learned or **modified**. A good way to combat this feeling of helplessness is to **relearn different strategies** that help us feel capable of dealing with the complicated situations which arise from maintaining the minority language.

These strategies are summarized in the adoption of an **assertive linguistic attitude**, expressing our position of wanting to maintain the language in a clear, safe and not aggressive nor passive way.

Reinforcements, punishments and linguistic habits

In addition to that, we can also better understand this phenomena of linguistic submissiveness by applying the knowledge of operant conditioning and the

acquisition of behaviors through **reinforcements and punishments** (see Table 1).

Historically, using the DL has been:
- Positively reinforced → kind attention.
- Negatively reinforced → avoidance of discomfort.

Historically, using the ML has been:
- Positively punished → unfairly judged.
- Negatively punished → disregarded.

Table 1. Theoretical background: OPERANT CONDITIONING

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT	POSITIVE PUNISHMENT
Increases the probability of occurrence of a behaviour by offering a reward when the behaviour is exhibited. *Example*: "The owner of a dog offers a treat when relieves itself in the proper place"	Decreases the probability of occurrence of a behaviour by applying an aversive stimulus when the behaviour is exhibited. *Example*: "A mother reprimands a child for lying"
NEGATIVE REINFORCEMENT	NEGATIVE PUNISHMENT
Increases the probability of occurrence of a behaviour by stopping, removing, or avoiding a negative outcome or aversive stimulus. *Example*: "A teacher eliminates homework that night if the children study hard and achieve a lot in class"	Decreases the probability of occurrence of a behaviour by removing a pleasant stimulus. *Example*: "A mother removes mobile phone from a teenager for bad grades"

Why is speaking your language important?

When communicating through the DL, for fear of not being understood, we are perpetrating the situation of abnormality of the ML, since it is the DL language the one which is more spoken. Then, we will feel that ML is little spoken and that it is unlikely that we will be understood. Consequently, we will probably choose not to use the ML, for fear of not being understood.

By gaining confidence to use the ML and becoming linguistically assertive, we are **breaking this cycle** and recovering the possibility of contributing to ML speakers being understood in a variety of contexts. But being linguistically assertive is not only beneficial for the collective of ML speakers as a group, as it betters the social situation of the language, but it also has individual advantages. These advantages were covered in Lesson 1.
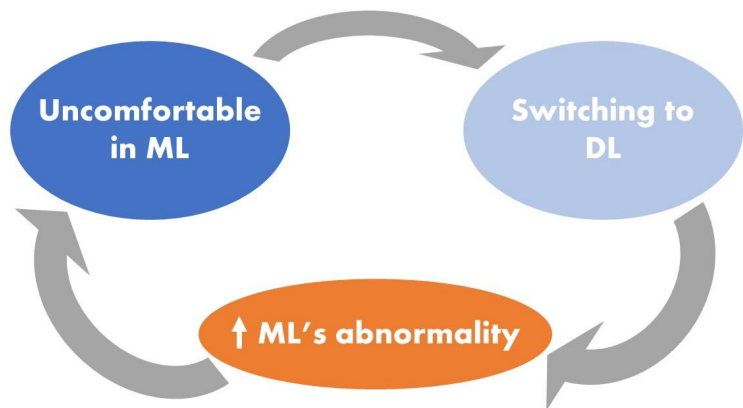
Test yourself!

You can find the mid lesson-test for lesson 2 here.