MOOC

LINGUISTIC ASSERTIVENESS FOR MINORITIZED LANGUAGE SPEAKERS (ML)

LESSON 4, part 1 :

The silent speaker

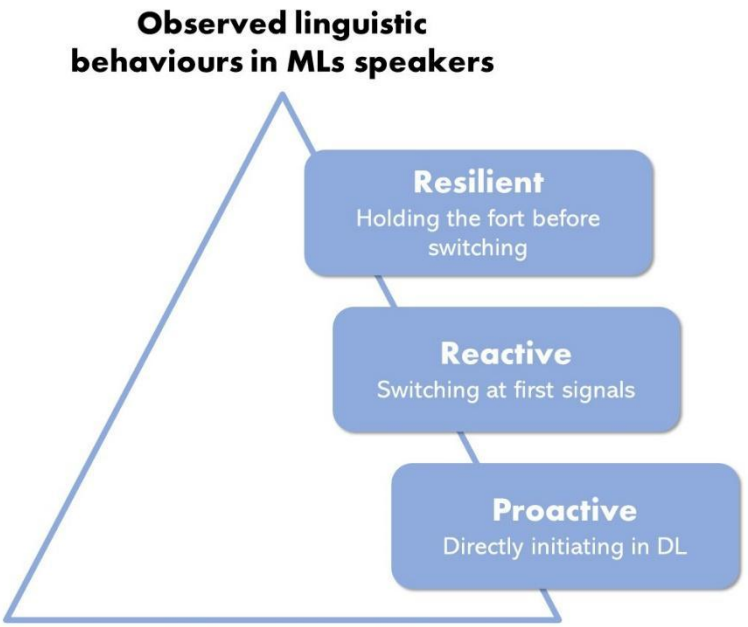
In the first part of this lesson we will learn more about the silent speaker and dive a bit deeper into the green layers of the traffic light code, which you already encountered in lesson 3.

1. Observed attitudes

There will be some ML speakers who rarely start a conversation with an unknown person in their language because they are not in the habit of doing so or because they feel unsafe or not confident to do so. They are hiding the fact they are speaking another language. You could call them silent speakers. The silent speakers are directly initiating a conversation in the DL.

Another part of ML speakers might start in their ML, but switch almost immediately into the DL when they notice the one they are talking to is not a ML speaker. They are reactively submissive.

And then there are ML speakers that hold the fort as long as they can, speaking the ML. But there are very few people that never switch into the DL.



Most verbal interactions we have are with friends, family, co-workers. They are special and difficult to classify.

When we have conversations with unknown people we can classify at which point we tend to abandon the ML and switch to the DL. We can use the traffic light code for that.

I generally switch to the DL when the interlocutor…

We already talked about the traffic light code in lesson 3, as a tool to analyse your own language behaviour. You may already know in which situations you switch and if you are proactively submissive, reactively submissive or resilient. Maybe it differs from situation to situation and it may also depend on how you are feeling. For a lot of ML speakers there is a lot to gain when it comes to using the ML in the green situations when approaching strangers.

That is why we will now focus on the green layers of the traffic light when speaking to unknown people.

2. The green layers of the traffic light code

1. Switching at first sight

In our head we have a certain image of what a ML speaker looks like, but the truth is: we don't know. Every person has the capacity to learn and speak a language, no matter what they look like. There is no reason to change into the DL if we don't know yet if someone is an ML speaker or not. If you let go of that image in your head and your own prejudices and assumptions, you could be pleasantly surprised!

2. Shows poor understanding

On many occasions ML speakers switch into the DL when their interlocutor shows poor understanding. For instance when the interlocutor says 'what', or 'sorry', or looks puzzled. In many situations it can be just that. They had trouble understanding you because of some noise, because they were distracted or because they weren't expecting to hear the ML and have to 'tune in'. It doesn't mean the interlocutor isn't a ML speaker or that he doesn't understand the ML. Not all ML speakers have excellent hearing. 😉

3. Not a native speaker / you ‘know’ the person you are talking to isn’t a ML speaker

Somehow you think that you are speaking to some-one that is not a ML speaker by the way he speaks your language. But again, you don’t really know. This person might come from a different region and have another accent or is learning the language. Or maybe your interlocutor is a hesitant, submissive ML-speaker that isn’t used to speaking the ML in this particular situation. Speaking with an accent or speaking hesitantly doesn’t mean the person doesn’t speak your language or doesn’t want to speak your language. If someone is learning the language it actually would be really rude not to speak back in the ML. That person is making an effort to speak in the ML and responding in the DL is not very respectful. It might give the learner the feeling that you think he isn’t able to learn the language or that you think he should not belong to your language community.

In all three green layers we run the risk of ML speakers speaking to each other in the DL. The only way to identify each other is by speaking the ML. We can’t identify other ML speakers any other way. If we don’t identify other ML speakers and end up speaking in the DL, the language will become unnecessary and in the end will die.