Words and Change: the Science, History and Mystery of Language in Action

“Only before God and linguists are all languages equal,” Bill Mackey (1978)

“How can 'proper English' be a dialect?” anonymous Fromm student (2013)

All living languages are in a constant state of change because their speakers’ lives are in constant state of change. But all languages don’t change at the same rate or in the same way, a relatively heterogeneous language/culture such as English, whose speakers are much involved in world affairs, tends to change more (and more rapidly) than isolated languages--such as those found in remote reaches of Papua New Guinea. The latter tend to modify more slowly because they have less contact with agents of change. Nevertheless, variation is a universal trait of living languages.

As linguist Nicole Mahoney points out, “Frequently the needs of speakers drive language change. New Technologies, industries, products and experiences simply require new words.” As the needs of speakers change, the rate and style of variation may alter as well: computer lingo is becoming universal – speakers of Swahili and Navajo and Turkish are reported to now text some English abbreviations or acronyms such as 2F4U (Too fast for you) or NOYB (None of your business). In English, old words and expressions such as “chill, hook-up, buzz, get down, tweet,” etc., take on new meanings and uses. And new words such as “hangry” (malevolence due to low blood sugar) or “emoji” (cutesy graphics that punctuate online writing) or “uninrabbitable” (forbidden to leporidae) continue to be created. Whether they last is another question.

This illustrates the remarkable plasticity of human language; we can invent ways to talk about anything. To do that, each of us speaks an idiolect (“No two individuals speak in exactly the same way,” as Mahoney explains.) Our vocabulary and phrases depend on where and when we live, our age, education level, social status and various other minor factors. Victoria Fromkin and Robert Rodman, also linguists, assert that language “is vigorous and dynamic and constantly changing. All languages and dialects are expressive, complete, and logical, as much so as they were 200 or 2000 years ago. If sentences are muddled, it is not because of the language but because of the speakers.” We can certainly screw it up from utterance to utterance, but the language seems to endure.

The language educator, Harvey A. Daniels, offers nine other revealing ideas about language that may function as an introduction to our course.

1. Children learn their native language swiftly, efficiently, and largely without instruction.

2. Language operates by rules.
3. All languages have three major components: a sound system, a vocabulary, and a system of grammar (Signing works much the same.)

4. Everyone speaks a dialect

5. Speakers of all languages employ a range of styles and a set of sub-dialects or jargons

6. Language change is normal

7. Languages are intimately related to the societies and individuals who use them

8. Value judgments about different languages or dialects are matters of taste

9. Writing is a derivative of speech.

This class will, in any case, examine those assertions and others, with emphasis on change and variety, suggesting that with time, usages and meanings alter and that this has always been so. What is it that so bothers some people about the way the younger generation speaks? Could it be essentially the same kinds of things that bothered our parents’ generation about our youthful language usage?

In 1908, philologist Thomas Lowesbury cautioned, “There seems to have been in every period of the past…a distinct apprehension in the minds of…many worthy persons that the English tongue is always in a condition approaching collapse and that arduous efforts must be put forth…to save it from destruction.” In this class we’ll spend less time on saving it than on figuring out what if anything needs to be saved.

Popular critic Edwin Newman thought plenty needed to be protected: “Language is in decline…we would be better off if we spoke and wrote with exactness and grace, and if we preserved, rather than destroyed, the value of our language.” Of course he was viewing language as a social banner not a communication tool. Linguist John Paul Gee suggests that “language serves more to signal social relationships and identities than as a neutral code for the exchange of information.”

Among topics we hope to cover (Not necessarily in this order) in this class: 1. Nine ideas about language; 2. A brief history of English; 3. What are words, where do they come from and how do they mean? 4. What are sentences and how do they mean (grammars)? 5. Grammar “errors” and assorted bugaboos (other people’s mistakes!); 6. Semantics & General Semantics; 7. What is language for?

Recommended (not required) reading: A Little Book of Language by David Crystal (a linguistic overview); Common Errors in English Usage by Paul Brians (a usage guide)

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