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The following is a contribution to the JREF's ongoing blog series on skepticism and education. If you are an educator and would like to contribute to this series, please contact Bob Blaskiewicz .

Here I will consider approaches in an educational context to popular ideas about language that don't really make sense, to less well-known ideas that definitely don't, and to the ideas of 'real' linguists, which (we hope!) might!

Linguistics, which began in its modern form around 220 years ago, is the 'scientific' study of language: the concerted empirically-based attempt to understand how languages and the general phenomenon of human language work. It includes the study of language change in history (the oldest aspect and still, for many non-linguists, the least unfamiliar) and, since the early twentieth century, the study of how languages are structured and convey meaning at any given stage in their history. Linguistics is connected with the philosophy of language, and its more specific branches such as sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics are connected with sociology, psychology, etc. It is also of major use in the learning of languages, by way of providing a general understanding of language and a framework within which languages (students' own first languages and other languages which they are learning) can be fruitfully compared in many respects.

Even a very basic knowledge of linguistics is potentially of great use to everybody who is concerned with language – which effectively includes all people, considered as language learners or teachers, educationists, writers and broadcasters, the parents of children acquiring their first or other languages, citizens dealing with public language, readers and viewers, etc. And where (as in the state of Victoria in Australia) linguistics is studied in the last couple of years at high school, the benefits for tertiary studies, specifically, are very apparent.

Skeptical linguistics – a new branch of linguistics – is the critical study of fringe linguistics: non-mainstream (often 'fringe') claims or theories regarding language matters. These theories are of many kinds, and they are often presented as parts of wider fringe theories. For example, some writers claim that all civilisations are derived from one particular ancient civilisation (for instance, India), and that all languages are therefore derived from one particular ancient language (in this case, Sanskrit, the ancient language of northern India). Naïve theories of this kind are readily refuted by abundant linguistic evidence and argumentation. Unfortunately, however, they are accepted as true by many non-linguists, some of whom become committed to the associated world-views.

Those who accept or are tempted to accept such theories could gain from a basic understanding of linguistics; they would be less likely to be 'taken in' by claims of this kind.

An even more important benefit of thinking along skeptical-linguistic lines is an increasingly critical attitude to folk-linguistics: the ideas about language which are popular among non-linguists (people who know little or nothing about linguistics). This includes both one's own pre-existing folk-linguistic ideas and those of others. Folk-linguistic ideas and claims are not necessarily mistaken, or even confused. Some of them – for example, the better amateur findings about regional dialect/accent variation – are in fact accurate and indeed insightful. But they often require more careful or technical formulation in the light of linguists' findings and thinking. And in some cases they clearly are mistaken or confused, or at best dubious; some of them are in fact arguably damaging. Folk-linguistic notions cannot be treated as automatically valid.

In fact, the non-mainstream theories which I mentioned earlier can be seen as extreme manifestations of folk-linguistics. Most of the writers in question are people who may not know any linguistics but who think about language more than most people do, develop their own highly specific, seriously non-mainstream ideas about language, and take these ideas so seriously that they wish to persuade others of them and therefore publish on them.

The people who could gain most from a critical understanding of folk-linguistic (and fringe linguistic) notions, and of the opposed ideas of linguists, include beginning students of linguistics but also, and more crucially here, many language-learners (and perhaps some of their teachers).

The most obvious way in which folk-linguistics and 'real' linguistics differ is that the former is often *prescriptivist* and the latter *descriptivist*. A *prescriptivist* view condemns non-standard usage, even that of native speakers of the language in question, as 'wrong' or 'bad', and urges that its users be trained to use standard forms instead. This applies especially to urban working-class accents such as 'broad' New York, and to stigmatised grammatical forms such as English *ain't* (as in *She ain't coming*), often described simply as 'bad English'. There is an associated idea that native speakers of non-standard varieties which display forms such as *ain't* are linguistically 'deprived' or 'challenged'; and there is a further associated idea that language

use is in fact becoming ‘worse’ or ‘looser’ over time.

Many people also believe that ‘correct’ spelling is a matter of huge importance, and that children who cannot spell very well are therefore to be chastised. Some are even reluctant to admit that ‘correct’ spelling can sometimes vary among different communities using the same language. For example, British people in the USA who write *travelling* instead of American *traveling* are liable to be told that their spelling is ‘wrong’ – and *vice versa*.

Some people also talk as if all changes to the meanings of words are ‘bad’. Now there are special cases where changes to the meanings or uses of words are arguably confusing and/or have other problematic consequences; for instance, the now-common use of testament instead of testimony in expression such as *This is testament to her courage*, or, maybe still ‘worse’, the use of *disinterested* (traditionally meaning ‘unbiased’, ‘having no axe to grind’) to mean much the same as *uninterested*. A few changes may even be (in part) the result of ‘conspiracies’ on the part of groups of various kinds with their own agendas. But in most cases changes of meaning are simply part of normal linguistic change. For instance *nice* has meant both ‘imprecise’ and ‘precise’ in its time! And in any case it is difficult to resist linguistic changes effectively, even if they do appear to have problematic consequences. At most, one can try not to adopt the most problematic changes oneself and/or seek to discourage them in careful (written) usage.

In fact, some linguists actually focus in their work upon controversial cases in this area. For instance, some sociolinguists study (as social scientists) cases of disputed usage where the same forms (for example, *We have less students this year*) are considered standard by some and non-standard by others. And others study cases such as the meanings, uses and associations of words like *liberal* where such differences can be crucial in the discussion of political and cultural issues.

Students could be asked to consider the issues raised here, and also all these and other such cases (grammar and accent features, more ‘buzz’ words such as *anarchist*, *atheist*, etc.). Those who are studying or already know other languages could include consideration of items from those languages and comparisons with English.

Other common (cross-culture) folk-linguistic ideas include the (false) belief that the oldest known languages and, especially, the languages of illiterate traditional tribal peoples in places such as the Amazon, who lack advanced technology, are much more 'primitive' than, say, European or classical languages and 'have no grammar'.

Instead of these descriptivist/folk-linguistic ideas, linguists would adopt the descriptivist view that the words, constructions, meanings, etc. found in languages are phenomena to be described and explained like other aspects of the world, not (except in truly special cases) condemned or discouraged. And they would challenge these prescriptivist and other folk-linguistic ideas on the basis of evidence and argumentation. For example, they would ask to know the criteria by which forms which are used naturally, regularly and systematically by native speakers of a language, with clear meanings, could possibly be judged 'wrong' or 'bad'. (Students could be asked to consider this very point.) And, in an educational context, they would be concerned at the negative psychological effects of making students feel that their fluent native-speaker English (etc.) is somehow inferior because it features certain specific forms rather than others.

This is not to say that linguists would refrain from teaching foreign learners how things are said or written in their new languages. Nor would they recommend that students be allowed to use clearly non-standard forms – or 'incorrect' spellings – in formal or important contexts such as public exams or job interviews. Developed, literate societies do need standard varieties; and, while linguists would argue that too much emphasis is often placed on these things, it is unrealistic and indeed culpably disingenuous to encourage young and relatively powerless members of such a society to jeopardise their life-chances either through acts of sociolinguistic bravado or simply because they are inadequately informed. But this is not the same as denigrating students' native usage as inherently 'wrong' or 'bad'.

To conclude: in general, linguists would suggest that it would be helpful if students were encouraged to adopt critical and scientific/logical approaches to matters of language.

Mark Newbrook was born and raised in Wirral near Liverpool in North-West England, where he now lives. He spent many years as a professor and researcher in linguistics in

Singapore, Hong Kong and Australia, specialising in variationist historical dialectology and associated attitudinal matters. While in Australia, Mark combined his professional activities with his broad based interest in skepticism to become one of the few 'skeptical linguists' around; he was linguistics consultant to Australian Skeptics and now occupies similar roles in the equivalent British organisations. He has authored several books and many articles and reviews on various aspects of linguistics; and he has recently completed the first-ever general skeptical survey work on fringe linguistics (forthcoming). He blogs regularly at Skeptical Humanities .