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Folk Linguistics

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Dennis R. Preston*



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by

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Trends in Linguistics

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Editor

Werner Winter

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For Keith Denning – Linguist, colleague, mentor, friend

Foreword

One of the most exciting things that is happening in the academic world today is the small steps we are beginning to make towards destroying ... elitism. Although the trend for many years was toward ever-increasing degrees of specialization with concomitant scorn for all that was not specialized, such a position is less well received in today's world. (Shuy 1973:313)

This is a book of *stankos*, a term Leonard Bloomfield's family used to describe the language beliefs of nonlinguists.¹ It is no accident that it looks like a noun form of *stank*, for Bloomfield held the opinion of nonlinguists in low regard; many linguists have shared and continue to share that opinion.

We have sought out and even encouraged stankos, for we believe that what the folk believe about language deserves careful consideration. This is justified along several lines:

1. The study of folk beliefs about language is one of the ethnographies of a culture. In ethnobotany one wants to learn (at least) a culture's beliefs about the naming of, relationships among, and uses for plants. Ethnolinguistics should do the same, but the contrast between folk and scientific linguistics will be more complex than that between many other ethnosciences and their academic partners, particularly in a nonhomogeneous, post-modern society.

The role of language and its attendant beliefs ought to be set in the larger framework of the culture under investigation, for ethnolinguistics may not be just more complex than ethnobotany or ethnogeology, but more complex in subtle ways. If it is believed (and reported) that a certain plant is good for settling the stomach, it would be odd to find it seldom used for that purpose (unless some taboo restricted its use). A contrast between belief and use in language, however, is not an uncommon state of affairs; this apparent mismatch requires greater subtlety in combining an ethnolinguistics with a study of language in use.²

2. In the general area of applied linguistics, folk linguistics surely plays a most important role. When professionals want to have influence, they are, we believe, ill-advised to ignore popular belief, and, as we have discovered in our fieldwork for this book, popular belief about language is both ubiquitous and strong. It is surely as risky for a linguist to try to influence the public as it is for a doctor to try to

treat a population without knowing that *the sugar* is their local folk term for diabetes.

3. Finally, folk linguistic beliefs may help determine the shape of language itself. It would be unusual to discover that what nonlinguists believe about language has nothing to do with linguistic change; in one sense, of course, that has been a principal focus of investigation in the more than thirty year old tradition of quantitative (or "Labovian") sociolinguistics.

Penultimately, a word about the folk in this book. We use *folk* to refer to those who are not trained professionals in the area under investigation (although we would not for one moment deny the fact that professional linguists themselves are also a folk group, with their own rich set of beliefs). We definitely do not use *folk* to refer to rustic, ignorant, uneducated, backward, primitive, minority, isolated, marginalized, or lower status groups or individuals. That is an outdated use in folklore and an absolutely useless one for our purposes. We intend to study the texture of folk belief about language in a speech community, and we include the beliefs of respondents from a great variety of backgrounds. To do otherwise would be to assume that folklore and cultural anthropology are not doable where we live. We also adopt from modern folklore the notion that folk belief is simply belief, its folk character being no indication of its truth or falsity.

Finally, we hold to the notion that the study of folk behavior is dynamic as well as static. We have observed the routes the folk follow in thinking through problems about language as well as the contents of their prepackaged items and structures of belief.

Acknowledgments

The authors are first of all grateful to their colleagues who served as fieldworkers during the two-semester seminar in sociolinguistics and folk linguistics held at Eastern Michigan University during the 1987-88 academic year. Without their good contacts, thoughtful interviews, and careful transcriptions, this work could never have been done. Next in line come our respondents – all those who put up with the silly questions and demands of linguists; they have been patient and forthcoming. We hope only that our open-ended style of interviewing gave them some fun as well as us some profit.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the National Science Foundation (BNS-8711267) and the Graduate School and Office of Research Development of Eastern Michigan University; of course, they are not responsible for the conclusions reached here, only for the subvention of some of the time and wherewithal to reach them.

Our colleagues at Eastern Michigan University, The University of California at Santa Barbara, and Michigan State University have put up with folk linguistics for a long time. We thank them for their patience as well as their insights. We are especially grateful to Patricia M. Clancy of UCSB who gave us important advice for 4.1 (First-language acquisition.)

Werner Winter, the Editor of this series, read the manuscript for this book with great care. We are indebted to him for both substantive and stylistic suggestions.

Carol Preston read every word in this book. She is more than a little responsible for whatever clarity and stylistic panache it has; we will have to claim responsibility for the rest.

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Chapter 1

Table 1.1: Topics referred to in the conduct of the research (Preston 1986b)

Chapter 2

Table 2.1: Mean placement scores of the nine regional voices

Transcription conventions

1. [[simultaneous utterances (A and B start talking at the same time)

A: [[I used to party a lot when I was younger

B: [[I used to study linguistics until

2. [overlapping utterances (B begins to talk while A is talking)

A: I had a lot of trouble with morphology

B: [I see

3.] end of overlapping or simultaneous utterance (not used unless the duration of the overlap is not well represented by the physical size of the transcription)

A: I had a lot of trouble with - uh - morphology.

B: [] Oh! Did you really?

4. = linked or continuing utterances (no overlap, but no pause between utterances)

a. for different speakers

1) single

A: I like functionalism=

B: =No wonder.

2) more than one (in either first or second position)

A: I like functionalism=

B: =[No wonder.

C: =[So do I!

b. for the same speaker (a continuation device based only on page width limitations; see also 10. below)

A: I wanted to study a non-Indo-European language before=

B: { You did.

A: =starting my Ph.D.

5. Intervals

- a. - untimed (brief), within utterances (See also 6.j. below)

A: I thought - uh - I would go home.

- b. ((**pause**)) untimed (brief), between utterances

A: What do you think.

((**pause**))

B: Well. - I don't know.

- c. 1.0, 3.0, 0.5, etc... times within and between utterances (in tenths of a second)

6. Delivery

- a. : length (repeated to show greater length)

A: Way to go:.

B: Yeah. Way to go:..

- b. . falling ("final") intonation (followed by a noticeable pause, not based on grammatical considerations)

A: By the way.

- c. , continuing ("list") intonation (a slight rise or fall followed by a short pause, again, not based on grammatical considerations)

A: I saw Bill,

- d. ? rising ("question") intonation (followed by a noticeable pause, again not based on grammatical considerations)

A: He left?

- e. **CAPS** emphasis (emphatic or contrastive stress — "I" is underlined)

A: He LEFT?

- f. (hhh) breathe out and (.hhh) breathe in

A: (.hhh) Oh, thank you.

B: (hhh) That's a break.

- g. (()) noises, kinds of talk, comments

A: I used to ((cough)) smoke too much.
((telephone rings))

- h. ! animated talk

A: Look out for that rock!

- i. (h) breathiness (usually laughter)

A: I wou(h)ldn't do that.

- j. - abrupt cutoff (glottal stop, always attached to what precedes; N.B.: when - is used for pause [5.a above] it is never attached to what precedes)

A: Look ou-

7. () transcriber doubt

- a. a guess at the words in question

A: I (suppose I'm not)

- b. a guess at some part of the words in question

B: We all (t-)

- c. no guess at the words in question

A: ()

- d. two equally reasonable guesses at the words in question

A: I (spoke to Mark)
(suppose I'm not)

8. [] phonetic transcription

A: I saw the dog [dag]

9. ----- omitted material from the same conversation

A: I used to smoke too much.

A: My uncle Harry died of lung cancer.

10. Enumeration: In some conversations analyzed and cited here, “lines” are numbered each time there is a speaker change associated with a line change. These numbers, therefore, mark no grammatical or discoursal units of text. In the following, for example, 72 R and 74 R are part of the same utterance but have different numbers because they are interrupted by the beginning of the 73-75 D contribution, itself separated in the same way.

72 R: So it's h- it's hard for me to rem- think you know (of) Black=

[
73 D: Course you did cause your - =

74 R: =dialect.

75 D: =brothers, your brothers used it quite a bit. (#35)

11. Citation form: When the conversations collected for this study are cited, participants are identified by an initial following the number, if any (see above); the conversation itself is identified by a number in parentheses at the end of the quotation (see above). The appendix provides more complete identification of the participants and the conversational settings. Since initials may be repeated across (but not within) conversations, it will be important to note the conversation number to keep identities straight.

12. Spelling: When pronunciation is focused on, phonetic transcription is used; we particularly avoid (and deplore) the “folk respellings” employed in some conversation studies. In our opinion, they serve only to caricature respondents and/or detract from readability (Preston 1982b, 1983, 1985).

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