

BAD LANGUAGE

*Lars Andersson
and
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BASIL BLACKWELL

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藏书章

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INTRODUCTION:
WHO GIVES A DAMN?

THIS IS A book about language. Who gives a damn about language? Well, you should and everybody should.

Everyone knows that what is being said is important. Answering a question by *yes* instead of *no* makes a big difference – a *yes* should be a *yes* and a *no* should be a *no*. But, over and above this, there are other things. *What* you say is important, but so is *how* you say it.

Listen to what the Bible has to say about it.

And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay; Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand.

Judges 12:5–6

This shows that language is important. It can even be a question of life and death.

The story from the Bible is an old one, but history repeats itself. There are many *shibboleths* in the language of today. All the sounds, words and constructions discussed in this book are potential shibboleths, i.e. features of language which can be used to identify the speaker as being a certain type of human being – good or bad, educated or uneducated, caring or arrogant, old or young, clever or stupid, English or American, black or white. These identifications do not have to be questions of keeping track of friends and enemies, but they can be.

Introduction: Who Gives a Damn?

What we intend to write about in this book are all those things (sounds, words and phrases) that may be dangerous to use. Language contains explosive items which should be handled with care. The right choice of words may give you the job you want; the wrong choice may keep you out of work.

The purpose of our book is at least twofold. On the one hand, we want to point to where some of the dangers of language use are to be found, where the shibboleths are. We hope that this will keep some readers out of trouble. On the other hand, we want to make a plea for a better understanding of certain linguistic realities. It is our hope that, after reading this book, at least some people will not be as harsh in their linguistic judgements as they have been.

There is enormous variation on every level of language. If modern research in linguistics (particularly sociolinguistics) has shown anything, it is this. And, where there is variation, there is evaluation. We evaluate the variants offered by our language as right or wrong, high or low, good or bad, nice or ugly, and so on.

The more conscious we are about certain types of variation, the more value judgements we connect with them. We have to be aware of the fact that other people may notice all kinds of peculiarities in our own use of language.

WE GIVE A DAMN

We think that questions of language attitudes and evaluation of different language varieties are important. We are glad to have this opportunity to express our views on the subject. At the same time it should be clear that the contents of this book are not merely based on thinking and believing. We build our conclusions and the language ideology expressed in the book on empirical grounds, research, and argumentation.

On the other hand, it is not always enough simply to present the facts. At times we think it is our obligation to state our own

Accent leads to receptionist's dismissal

By our Correspondent

Miss Sylvia Turnbull, aged 21, who recently moved to Folkestone from Scotland with her parents, has been dismissed after a month in her new job as an estate agent's receptionist – because according to her employer, people could not understand her accent. Yesterday she described her dismissal as 'silly prejudice' and added that her employer's son-in-law, who worked in the same office, was also Scottish.

Miss Turnbull's mother said Sylvia had a 'pure Scots accent' which was 'a joy to listen to', and that everyone knew what she was saying. The dismissal was a 'slap in the face'.

Mr Evelyn, principal of the estate agency, in Guildhall Street, Folkestone, said: 'It is true that I dismissed Miss Turnbull because of her accent. She speaks very broadly and I, my staff and clients couldn't understand her. My son-in-law's accent has softened with the years'

From the Guardian

personal view on different matters. When we do, it will be signalled by some kind of 'we think' phrase.

The following lines are taken from Philip Howard's book *The State of Language*.

I am not an academic linguist: it is tiresome that we have not yet invented a satisfactory name for the professional students of linguistics. In any case the academics of English faculties have mostly retreated into their private fortress of structuralism. From outside we hear confused and incomprehensible shouts. It is a tragic paradox that, of all academic disciplines, English should have become so impenetrable to those outside the fortress.

Introduction: Who Gives a Damn?

We call ourselves linguists. Since we do our teaching and research at universities, we should probably be classified as academic linguists. However, we do not want to remain secluded inside our private fortress of linguistic theory. We have heard a number of confused and incomprehensible shouts from the outside. But more often we hear very good questions being asked. Here are some examples:

Are people's vocabularies smaller today than before?

Is English changing faster today than it did before?

Is English getting better or worse?

These questions are not normally considered in university linguistic programmes. The reason is, of course, that the questions are either too hard or too trivial, or both. There are no known research procedures which would give us answers to them, at least not conclusive answers.

PARENTS SHOULD GIVE A DAMN

It is easy enough for parents to criticize the language of their children, their loved ones. It is harder to do something about it. Prohibitions and restrictions will not usually help. And there are reasons why it is hard for them to correct the language of their children.

Let us take swearing as an example. In a Swedish questionnaire study, it was found that 75 per cent of the grown-ups disliked swearing and wanted their children to avoid it. However, 75 per cent of them swore themselves. This being the case, it is not hard to understand why it may be difficult to get the message of non-swearing through.

A question of fundamental interest is how parents (and, of course, other people as well) can have such strange views. Why should they dislike things in language which even they use them-

selves? We think that one very important reason for this is people's constant association of linguistic features with different groups in society.

Parents may have a picture of the world where there are good children and bad children. The good ones are polite, clever and speak nicely. The bad ones are the other way around, and they swear. Of course, you want your own children to be in the group of good children, and on this point we are in perfect agreement. But this picture of life is obviously much too simple.

The important thing for all of us, parents and human beings, to understand is how these attitudes towards language work. Every single person, we think, can list a few things which they dislike in other people's use of language. It may be certain words or certain pronunciations, or even specific grammatical constructions. We all have our favourite elements to hate in language. But, think about it for a while! Why do we dislike this or that aspect of language? Very often, we would say, it is not the language we dislike, but rather the people that we associate it with.

We recommend the reader to do the following. List your pet hates in language. When this is done, figure out why you dislike those particular expressions. If we are correct, you will end up with judgements about human beings as often as with judgements about language.

We – and now we express ourselves as human beings rather than as linguists – happen to dislike the old-fashioned and very posh 'Received Pronunciation' accent. But, of course, it is not really the actual sounds we dislike. Rather it is some of the people who (stereotypically) use this accent. We do not love them as much as we love everyone else.

In this book we mention quite a lot of things in language which people often dislike. We shall try to describe and explain them linguistically. By doing this, we hope to show that there is nothing linguistically strange at all about many of them. They are often bad just because people have decided to regard them as bad.

TEACHERS SHOULD GIVE A DAMN

Teachers are often worried about the bad language of their pupils. This is only natural and, of course, it must be the duty of the school to point out that certain types of language use are not very appropriate in some situations of life.

We should say that there are three different educational policies towards the things we call bad language. Let us call them

- 1 Elimination
- 2 Stylistic (situational) differentiation
- 3 Approval

We shall return to the educational consequences at the end of the book. Here we will only point out that it is not easy to figure out what the best policy is, and the policy must not be the same for all types of bad language. In many cases, we think stylistic or situational differentiation is the best choice. We would take this stand in relation to slang, swearing, expressions such as *sort of*, *ain't*, double negation and many other aspects of language use. In other cases, our stand will be one of approval, e.g. for using prepositions at the end of sentences or *hopefully* at the beginning of them.

WHAT IS SO DAMNED GOOD ABOUT BAD LANGUAGE?

Why should people use what others or even they themselves regard as bad language? Why should we write a book about it? Why not just try to get rid of it, once and for all?

If the things called bad language were all bad and nothing but bad, people would stop using them and eventually they would disappear. The persistence of slang, swearing and all the rest calls for some kind of explanation. There must be some positive values connected with all this bad language. Within sociolinguistics this kind of positive value is usually called *covert prestige*.

Introduction: Who Gives a Damn?

The language of the BBC has *prestige*; voices with accents like this are associated with power, education and wealth. These things are highly valued and this explains why so many people strive to acquire the official language.

On the other hand, so-called bad language is often associated with toughness and strength. These latter properties are also highly valued among quite a number of people.

If someone wants to show both that he can afford to drive a Mercedes *and* that he is a tough guy, then he should learn how to switch between the language varieties connected with prestige and covert prestige.

All this gives us, we think, good reasons for writing a book about those features of language which people (all, some or a few) regard as bad language.

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GOOD OR BAD?

