Defining Human Language?

• Is human language an instinct or a learned behavior?
• Is it innate or acquired through specific learning?
• Is there anything about human language that makes it especially “controllable?”
Reflex Vs Instinct Vs Learned Behavior

- **Reflex**: An innate action or reaction that is a response to a stimulus
  - Occurs without conscious thought and can’t be controlled
  - Examples: Closing eyes in response to a bright light, jerking knee when it is tapped
 Reflex Vs Instinct Vs Learned Behavior

• **Instinct**: A complex patterns of behavior performed without prior experience; innate
  • Performed without conscious thought and can’t be controlled
  • Examples: Shrinking from pain, sucking, grasping, making a face with sour taste, fear of snakes
Reflex Vs Instinct Vs Learned Behavior

• **Learned behavior:** A change in behavior that results from experience;

  • Conscious and able to be controlled

  • Animals: Dogs learning to heel; roll over, lie down on command.

  • Humans: Driving a car; riding a bike; playing tennis; playing bridge
Instinct Vs Reflex Vs Learned Behavior - Language

• We, as humans, have an innate cognitive ability to acquire language BUT

• We have to be exposed to language to acquire it - no instruction needed

• Language is subject to conscious thought, change, AND control

• Which leads us to Verbal Hygiene.
“Verbal Hygiene”
The Everyday Act Of Controlling Language
What Is Hygiene?

- **Hygiene** refers to a set of things we do to **control / preserve** cleanliness and health.

- Hygiene “practices” vary; what is considered necessary (or acceptable) in one community might not be acceptable in another.

- Is **Verbal Hygiene** about keeping language “clean” and “healthy?”
Verbal Hygiene

“A struggle to control language by defining its nature.”

Verbal Hygiene Explained

- Whenever we
  - comment about,
  - talk about,
  - argue about,
  - joke about,
  - or judge
- some aspect of language,
  ➡️ we are engaging in a type of verbal hygiene.
Verbal Hygiene

• When individuals or social institutions engage in “verbal hygiene,”

• the purpose is to alter or “control” some aspect of language (or something about the people whose language we are trying to control)
Verbal Hygiene

• According to Cameron, our impulse to “fix” language

• “... leads to a proliferation of norms defining what is good or bad, right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable.”

• People care passionately about these topics!

• Cameron’s experiences at Oxford

In 2004, Cameron was appointed Professor of Language and Communication in the English Faculty at Oxford University. Example about tuba players versus tubaists versus tubist.
Verbal Hygiene

• WNPR: Fresh Air - January 10, 2019 “To Hell With ‘Whom’ (And More On The Inexorable Evolution Of Language) - Jonathan McNicol

http://www.wnpr.org/post/hell-whom-and-more-inexorable-evolution-language?fbclid=IwAR31o_6E5-jE6lE3en6zs8A4C-yWjtxewA3h5HtPD-TKkwTDm33py0ljZdM

GUESTS:
Lane Greene - Language columnist and editor at The Economist and the author of Talk on the Wild Side: The Untamable Nature of Language (2018) (@lanegreene)

Ben Zimmer - Linguist, lexicographer, and language columnist for The Wall Street Journal (@bgzimmer)
“Language is an untamable beast. You can decide that infinitives aren't to be split and that "whom" is the objective form of "who" and that "literally" literally means literally. But here's the thing: Language doesn't have to care one way or the other what nonsense you've decided.”

To quote our guest Lane Greene: “Language is not so much logical as it is useful. It is not composed; it is improvised. It is not well behaved; it is resourceful. It is not delicate; it is hardy. It is not threatened; it is self-renewing. It is not perfect. But it is amazing.”
Verbal Hygiene

• Listen to Sherlock Holmes correcting a suspect as he interviews him:
  • weren’t -> wasn’t,
  • learned -> taught,
  • (?) -> did it
  • no more -> any more
  • hung -> hanged

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=URK2qtoQEU
Verbal Hygiene

• Distinguish between:
  • Individual’s verbal hygiene
  • Social groups’ verbal hygiene
  • Institutional Verbal Hygiene (Institutional Prescriptivism, Language Policy/ Planning, Language Censorship, etc.)
Verbal Hygiene

• Verbal hygiene practices reveal our beliefs (ideologies) about language

• These are usually a smoke-screen for social judgements and tied to larger social values

• EXAMPLE: “Girls like to play hard-to-get so “no” doesn’t mean no.” Leads to courtroom defense of rape (Meaning of “no.”)
Examples: Everyday Verbal Hygiene

• Imitating or making fun of someone else’s speech
• Enforcing “grammar” rules – in your social circles
• Looking words up in the dictionary
• Checking on the spelling of a word
More Examples Of Verbal Hygiene

• Commenting positively on someone else’s speech
• Reading books that are intended to help you improve your public speaking skills
• Encouraging (or discouraging) “political correctness”
More Examples Of Verbal Hygiene

• Disparaging teenage speech
• Objecting to the lyrics in rap music
• Talking about the lack of “civility” in public discourse
• Objecting to what people call you
More Examples Of Verbal Hygiene

• Expressing concern about the effect of texting on literacy
• Using (or opposing) guidelines for non-sexist language
• Working to simplify legal English
• Working towards spelling reform
Attitudes About Language

• What attitudes do these activities reflect?
• Our ideas about language seem “natural” or normal to us.
• The humor in cartoons about language works because we share attitudes about language.
• [Cartoons shown in class have been deleted.]
Deborah Cameron On “Verbal Hygiene” (2012)

“In 1995 I argued that verbal hygiene – my term for the motley collection of discourses and practices through which people attempt to ‘clean up’ language and make its structure or its use conform more closely to their ideals of beauty, truth, efficiency, logic, correctness and civility – is not just an unnatural and futile enterprise rooted in a failure to appreciate how language works.
Cameron Quote Continued -

Rather verbal hygiene is a *product* of the way language works: it is an outgrowth of the capacity for metalinguistic reflexivity which makes human linguistic communication so uniquely flexible and nuanced.
That capacity fulfills important functions in everyday communication (enabling us, for instance, to correct errors and misunderstandings), but it cannot be restricted to those functions.
Cameron Quote Continued -

Its more elaborate forms exemplify a tendency seen throughout human history: reflection on what we observe in the world prompts the impulse to intervene in the world, take control of it, make it better. In relation to language, that impulse leads to a proliferation of norms defining what is good or bad, right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable.
Though their ostensible purpose is to regulate language, these norms may also express deeper anxieties which are not linguistic, but social, moral and political’ (Cameron, 2012, p. vii).
More About Verbal Hygiene

• Cameron’s adds to her 1995 definition:
  “A struggle to control language by defining its nature” (Cameron, 1995, p.8).

  “A product of the way language works: ... an outgrowth of the capacity for meta-linguistic reflexivity…
  (Cameron, 2012, p. vii)”
Meta-Language = Language That Refers To Itself

• Metalinguistic properties of language allow us to reflect and comment on what we observe in the word around us - and then to try to fix it!

• Controlling language would not be possible without the metalinguistic properties of human language
Meta-Language = Language That Refers To Itself

- This is a unique characteristic of human language.
- We can talk about talking = “meta-talk.”
- Not only do we talk about how people talk, we talk about the value of talk itself.
Idioms That Illustrate “Metatalk” - How We Talk About Language

• 50 Idioms About Talking
  • https://www.dailywritingtips.com/50-idioms-about-talking/

• Gift of gab: a propensity for talking
• He likes to hear himself talk
• Like talking to a brick wall.
• Speak out of turn: to say something inappropriate
Idioms That Illustrate “Metatalk” - How We Talk About Language

• Speak the same language: to be in agreement
• Talk a blue streak: to talk quickly and excessively
• Talk a mile a minute: to speak rapidly
• Talk big: to brag
• Talk dirty: to try to stimulate someone sexually by speaking provocatively
Idioms That Illustrate “Metatalk”
How We Talk About Language

• Talk down to: to speak condescendingly
• Talk (one’s) ear off: to talk to someone excessively
• Talk (one’s) head off: to talk excessively
• Talk in circles: to speak in a confusing or indirect manner
• Talk in riddles: to speak obscurely or with hints
Idioms That Illustrate “Metatalk”
How We Talk About Language

• Talk out of both sides of (one’s) mouth: to speak inconsistently about something
• Talk (something) over: see “talk (something) out”
• Talk sense: to speak reasonably
• Talk the talk and walk the walk: to act in accord with one’s stated beliefs or values
Idioms That Illustrate “Metatalk”
How We Talk About Language

• Talk through one’s hat: to speak insincerely, to talk nonsense, or to exaggerate
• Talk to hear (one’s) own voice: to talk excessively, in an egotistical manner
• Talk tough: to speak in an intimidating manner, or to bluster
• Talk turkey: to speak frankly and/or with resolve
Idioms That Illustrate “Metatalk”
How We Talk About Language

• Talk until (one) is blue in the face: to speak in an unsuccessful effort to persuade
• Talk (something) up: to promote something to draw attention to it
• Talk (one’s) way out of: to say something so as to evade blame or avoid responsibility
Verbal Hygiene And Language Norms

➡ What are some of your attitudes and values about how we speak?
➡ Do you expect the same sort of English at all times?
➡ In public and in private?
➡ With family and business associates?
Verbal Hygiene And Language Norms

➡ Do you expect (and accept) the same sort of language (English) from everyone?

➡ From women and men?

➡ Adults and children?

➡ Blacks, Whites

➡ Hispanic, Indian, Arab and Asian?

➡ Why or why not?
What Are Your Attitudes About The Following?

• Standard English
• Varieties of English different from your own
• Casual English versus Formal English
• Written English versus Spoken English
“Norms” About Language

• How can there be a “right” and “wrong” way to speak/ write/ talk if we are comparing native speakers of the same language?

• How (why) do ideas about grammar and language get mixed up with social values about “good and bad” people?
Attitudes About Language

• All of our examples reveal the sorts of norms and values that people have related to language
  → Our language attitudes and belief systems (=ideologies) seem normal and natural to us.
  → These ideas are shaped by the major social and political institutions that surround us.
The Force Of Social Institutions (And Institutional Verbal Hygiene)

- Schools, Universities, Educational Groups
- The Media (Print and Social Media)
- Entertainment Industry (Radio, TV, Film, Theater, Literature)
- Government
- Families
- Religious institutions
The Force Of Social Institutions (And Institutional Verbal Hygiene)

• These same institutions shape our ideas about:
  • medicine/ medical care
  • food / nutrition
  • beauty / style
  • etiquette
  • gender and sexuality
American Beliefs About Language

- Spelling is important
- Writing (arguing) in a linear fashion is good for expository writing
- Latin is good
- Language extinction is a problem
- Passive constructions are bad style
- Changing a story from one telling to another indicates something negative
More Examples Of Verbal Hygiene In Today’s World

• The international importance of English

• Training people to talk in professional settings: retail stores, corporate meetings, etc. (Customer Service call centers)
# Top languages by population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Native speakers in millions</th>
<th>% of world population (2007)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5,610</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Mandarin</td>
<td>935  (955)</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Spanish</td>
<td>390   (405)</td>
<td>5.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 English</td>
<td>365   (360)</td>
<td>5.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Hindi</td>
<td>295   (310)</td>
<td>4.46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Arabic</td>
<td>280   (295)</td>
<td>4.23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_languages_by_number_of_native_speakers#Top_languages_by_population
Consequences Of Verbal Hygiene?

- What is the effect on people of having their way of speaking devalued?
- What are the effects of verbal hygiene in general?
- Leads to language anxiety and linguistic insecurity
Verbal Hygiene And Everyday Life:

• Are there established “facts” about language?
• Opinion versus data
• Expertise versus sense of ownership
Institutionalized Verbal Hygiene:

Two examples

1. Publishers, editors, and required writing style
2. Language recommendations for women
Publishers and rules for writing

• The purpose of publishing guidelines is to create uniform and transparent writing.

• Focus is on spelling, punctuation, grammatical style, and clarity.
Editors’ and Publishers’ rules are an attempt:

- to impose order on writing
- to impose a particular set of rules on written language
Verbal Hygiene: Writing Style

- **Uniformity** may exclude new voices, new styles, new words.
- **Transparency** depends on one’s previous exposure to particular texts.
Verbal Hygiene: Writing Style

• Focus on style and clarity of meaning suggest a belief that
  • there is only one meaning conveyed by a set of words
  • there is a particular (best?) word or phrase to express each meaning
Books On Writing Style:
1918 (1959) → 1999 → 2017

The Elements of Style
WILLIAM STRUNK, JR.

The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage
REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

The Times Style Guide
... A guide to English usage
The Elements Of Style (1918)

- “A prescriptive American English writing guide.”

- **William Strunk Jr.** wrote the original in 1918. (Harcourt published it in 1920.) It contained:
  - eight "elementary rules of usage",
  - ten "elementary principles of composition",
  - "a few matters of form",
  - a list of 49 "words and expressions commonly misused",
  - a list of 57 "words often misspelled".
The Elements Of Style (1918)

• E. B. White expand and revised the book in 1959.
• This was the first edition of the so-called "Strunk & White."
• In 2011, *Time Magazine* named this book “one of the 100 best and most influential books written in English since 1923.

The New York Times Manual Of Style And Usage

• From Amazon: “For anyone who writes--a short story or a business plan, a book report or a news report--knotty choices of spelling, grammar, punctuation and word meaning lurk in every line: Lay or lie? Who or whom? None is or none are? Is touch-tone a trademark? Is Day-Glo? It's enough to send you for a Martini. (Or is that a martini?)”  https://www.amazon.com/dp/0812963881/ref=rdr_ext_tmb
"Uncover the rules, conventions and policies on spelling, grammar and usage followed by the journalists, contributors and editors working on the *Times* newspaper.

Assure or ensure? Affect or effect? Even the most accomplished writer will run up against these and many similar problems in the quest for clear, elegant and grammatical writing."
List Of More Study Guides:

- https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?search=Style+guides&title=Special%3ASearch&profile=advanced&fulltext=1&advancedSearch-current=%7B%22namespaces%22%3A%5B0%5D%7D&ns0=1
The Onion is an American digital media company and newspaper organization that publishes satirical articles on international, national, and local news. Based in Chicago, the company originated as a weekly print publication on August 29, 1988 in Madison, Wisconsin. Wikipedia
NEWS IN BRIEF - 4 Copy Editors Killed In Ongoing AP Style, Chicago Manual Gang Violence - 1/07/13

NEW YORK—Law enforcement officials confirmed Friday that four more copy editors were killed this week amid ongoing violence between two rival gangs divided by their loyalties to the The Associated Press Stylebook and The Chicago Manual Of Style. “At this time we have reason to believe the killings were gang-related and carried out by adherents of both the AP and Chicago styles, part of a vicious, bloody feud to establish control over the grammar and usage guidelines governing American English,” said FBI spokesman
Paul Holstein, showing reporters graffiti tags in which the word “anti-social” had been corrected to read “antisocial.” “The deadly territory dispute between these two organizations, as well as the notorious MLA Handbook gang, has claimed the lives of more than 63 publishing professionals this year alone.” Officials also stated that an innocent 35-year-old passerby who found himself caught up in a long-winded dispute over use of the serial, or Oxford, comma had died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.
Institutionalized Verbal Hygiene: Two Examples

1. Publishers, editors, and required writing style
2. Language recommendations for women

Next Week - More About Verbal Hygiene
Policing How Women Speak