Controlling Language:
Who (or What) is in Control?

Fromm Institute - Winter Session 2019
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Responsive Prescriptivism

Language Reform
Language Reform and Social Movements

• Important examples of language reform (and language “re-appropriation”) emerged from:
  • Civil Rights Movement (1954 – 1968)
  • 2nd Wave Feminism (1960s, 1970s —>)
  • Americans with Disability Act (ADA) 1990
• Groups taking control of naming practices and how people refer to them
A Few Examples of Language Reform (= Language Change)

- *Flight attendant* (formerly *stewardess*)
- *Police officier* (formerly *policeman*)
- *Head / Chair* (formerly *chairman*)
- *Native American* (formerly *Indian*)
- *Disabled* (formerly *crippled/ handicapped*)
- *Gay* (formerly *homosexual*)
Changing Labels, Changing Names: Civil Rights - Winter, 1992


https://www.jstor.org/stable/2749204
Prescriptivism Defined:

• The deliberate, conscious, and explicit effort made by (institutional authorities) to regulate the way a language is used.

• The means by which various (language authorities) work to control language by dictating how a language (English) should be used.
Meaning, Words, and Reform

• Is language reform only about substituting one word for another - as in the previous examples?

• To understand language reform (a different way of controlling language), we need to understand more about words and meaning
Meaning, Words, and Reform

• Meaning is NOT intrinsically or permanently attached to words

• A few NON-POLITICAL examples to demonstrate!

• In human language, meanings are arbitrarily attached to the words *(that is the sounds)* that stand for them

• That is, there is no *necessary* connection between a sound and what it stands for
Meaning, Words, and Reform

CONSIDER THE WORD FOR THE ABSTRACT CONCEPT/ NUMBER “1”

one (English)  un (French)  odin один (Russian)  Yi 壹 (Chinese)  Wahid واحد (Arabic)  ek एक (Hindi)  énas ἕνας (Greek)

https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C5CHFA_enUS507US507&ei=UsRXXKT5DaaB0wLnz6PoCw&q=one+in+french&oq=one+in+french&gs_l=psy-ab.3..0i67j0i67j0i22i30l6.15075.17132..18528...0.0..0.101.1128.12j1......0....1..gws-wiz.......0i71j35i39j0i131j0i20i263j38.PS3Lnfq8q5g
Meaning, Words, and Reform

CONSIDER THE WORD FOR THE CONCRETE OBJECT

**book** (English)

- **livre** (French)
- **Shū** 书 (Chinese)
- **kitaab** किताब (Hindi)
- **Vivlío** Βιβλίο (Greek)

- **kniga книга** (Russian)
- **kitab** كتاب (Arabic)
Meaning, Words, and Reform

- What happens after a meaning is attached to a particular sound (word symbol)?
- Is the object (or concept) permanently fixed?
- Is the meaning itself permanently fixed?
- Can a different sound (word) later stand for the same idea or object?
- Can the same sound (word) acquire a different meaning?
Meaning, Words, and Reform

• *Book* (noun) - Old English *boc* "book, writing, any written document"

• Early Middle English – the meaning narrowed to "a written work of many pages fastened together or somehow bound"
Meaning, Words, and Reform

• 20th century - the meaning broadened - Could be many volumes (as in the encyclopedia “The Book of Knowledge” - 20 volumes) or even a “telephone book”

• The *word* (sound symbol) *book* has stayed the same but the meaning and the physical form of the object have changed with each new invention.
Meaning, Words, and Reform

• New inventions changed “books”
  • paper (105 AD)
  • the printing press (1440)
  • the typewriter (1867)
  • word-processing (1950s)
  • the internet (1983-1990)
• Now we have e-books and audio-books
Meaning, Words, and Reform

• Is it a “book” if you listen to it?

• Is it a “book” if you are in the process of writing it?

• Metaphoric uses of “book”
  • To read someone like a book
  • To do something by the book
  • Don’t judge a book by its cover
Meaning, Words, and Reform

- Another sort of example: **Kinship terms**
- Different languages and cultures describe relationships differently
  - *aunt / uncle*
  - Arabic has separate words for “mother’s brother” خال (Khāl) and “father’s brother” عم (‘Amm)
  - Also, different words for “father’s sister” خالة (Khala(h)) and ‘mother’s sister’ عمة (‘Amma(h))
Meaning, Words, and Reform

- Now a *semi-political* example:


- Hose, hosiery, nylons, stockings, panty hose, tights, leggings, liquid stockings

- Who was allowed to wear what, who decided, what has changed, why did things change, what did the changing styles represent?

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hose_(clothing)
Meaning, Words, and Reform

- We see there that are no permanent meanings associated with words.
- Not only do meanings and word choices change;
- habits change;
- objects change
- products change
Meaning, Words, and Reform

• AND -

• which people and events influence and control change

• also change!
Humpty Dumpty on Meaning: Who Is To Be Master?

• ‘And only one for birthday presents, you know. There’s glory for you!’

• ‘I don’t know what you mean by “glory”,’ Alice said.

• ‘Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. ‘Of course you don’t – till I tell you. I meant “there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!”’
Humpty Dumpty on Meaning: Who Is To Be Master?

• ‘But “glory” doesn’t mean “a nice knock-down argument”’, Alice objected.

• ‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.’
Humpty Dumpty on Meaning: Who Is To Be Master?

• ‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’

• ‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master—that’s all.’

Meaning, Words, and Reform

• Word meanings often change.

• There are definite patterns to the ways word meanings change

• Meanings change in 4 ways:
  • 1) improve,
  • 2) become negative,
  • 3) broaden,
  • 4) narrow
Meaning, Words, and Reform

• Ameliorate (Improve):

  • *nice* used to mean foolish, senseless - now ‘kind’

  • *sophisticated* meant ‘unnatural, contaminated’ - now has the sense of ‘urbane, discriminating’
Meaning, Words, and Reform

• Pejorate (Deteriorate)
  
  • *silly* used to mean happy - now ‘foolish’
  
  • *notorious* meant ‘well-known, commonly known’ - now has the meaning of being known for something negative
Meaning, Words, and Reform

• Broaden:
  • bookmark (in a book -> on a computer screen)
  • hardware (tools, equipment -> computer equipment)

• Narrow:
  • diaper (any cloth -> specific type of cloth for a baby)
  • food broadened as meat narrowed;
  • bird broadened as fowl narrowed
• *food* broadened as *meat* narrowed

Word field in Middle English

- meat
- food

meat = "food in general"
food = "provisions; item of food"

Word field in Modern English

- food
- meat

meat = "animal flesh"
food = "all types of nourishment"
- *bird* broadened as *fowl* narrowed

**Word field in Old English**
- *fowl* = "flying animal"
- *bird* = "young bird, fledgling"

**Word field in Middle/Modern English**
- *fowl* = "poultry"
- *bird* = "flying animal"
Meaning Is Socially Constructed

• What about words that have important social and/or political meaning?

• Meanings are usually determined (controlled) by the group in power - and reflect that group’s social values and attitudes

• In other words, meaning is socially constructed
Meaning Is Socially Constructed

• Special-interest groups, social movements, political parties, governments, corporations, etc. build meanings into the words they use

• Examples of socially constructed meanings:

• What does “American” mean?
  • North American? (USA or Canada?)
  • South American?
  • Un-American?
Meaning Is Socially Constructed

- Think about the words below? Who decides what these mean?
  - **race** - there is no biological factual basis for the meaning we associated with the term
  - **gender** - there is no biological factual basis for this term either
  - **marriage** - is this a legal term (whose laws?)
Meaning Is Socially Constructed

• When the meaning of words reflect the thinking of a dominant (or of a newly powerful group), the terms serve that group’s purposes and interests.

• If the group has enough influence, their meanings influence what people see as the norm, or as normal - or as deviant.

• The “norm” can change with social change
2nd Wave Feminism and Language Reform

• This topic provides examples of language reform that consist of MORE than just substituting different words for older forms

  1. Inclusive vocabulary (as in previous examples)

  2. New words (for old practices and experiences for which there was no name; new ideas)

  3. New titles / changed forms of address

  4. Structural change - 3rd personal singular pronouns
Inclusive Language That Emerged With 2nd Wave Feminism

- Inclusive vocabulary:
  - flight attendant (from airline stewardess)
  - server (waiter / waitress)
  - chair or department head (from chairman)
  - fire fighter (from fireman)
  - mail carrier (mailman)
  - bartender (barman or barmaid)
Inclusive Language That Emerged With 2nd Wave Feminism

- poet/ (poetess)
- actor (actor/ actress)
- doctor
- man -> human
  - manmade -> artificial (e.g. an artificial lake)
- man and wife -> husband and wife
New Words That Emerged With 2nd Wave Feminism

New words for old practices

new ideas/ new perspectives

- feminism:
  - ‘the radical notion that women are people’ (Marie Shear);
  - the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes;
  - organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests.
New Words That Emerged With 2nd Wave Feminism

- **sexism** - prejudice or discrimination based on sex especially: discrimination against women.

- **sexual harassment** - inappropriate sexual remarks or physical advances in a workplace or other professional or social situation.
New Words That Emerged With 2nd Wave Feminism

- *date (acquaintance) rape* - rape committed by someone the victim knows or has gone on a date with.
- [definition of rape]
- *gender* - social / psychological or cultural behaviors and characteristics that are not biological
New Terms of Address/ Titles That Emerged With 2nd Wave Feminism

- New titles:
  - *Mr., Miss, Mrs. Ms.* - History of *Ms*

- 1901. The first introduction of *Ms.* in *The Sunday Republican* (Springfield, Mass.) by an unnamed writer
New Terms of Address/ Titles That Emerged With 2nd Wave Feminism

The writer stated:

“There is a void in the English language which, with some diffidence, we undertake to fill ... Every one has been put in an embarrassing position by ignorance of the status of some woman. To call a maiden Mrs. is only a shade worse than to insult a matron with the inferior title Miss. Yet it is not always easy to know the facts.”
New Terms of Address/ Titles That Emerged With 2nd Wave Feminism

The writer went on:

“a more comprehensive term which does homage to the sex without expressing any views as to their domestic situation” (namely, Ms.) - “a tactfully ambiguous compromise between Miss and Mrs.”
New Terms of Address/ Titles That Emerged With 2nd Wave Feminism

• 1949, philologist Mario Pei wrote (*The Story of Language*) “feminists, who object to the distinction between *Mrs.* and *Miss* and its concomitant revelatory features, have often proposed that the two present-day titles be merged into a single one, ‘Miss’ (to be written ‘Ms.’).”

• 1969 Feminist activist Shelia Michaels reintroduced the term
New Terms of Address/ Titles That Emerged With 2nd Wave Feminism

• 1970 *Ms.* was adopted by 2nd wave feminists at time of Women’s Strike for Equality

• 1972 *Ms.* magazine was founded

• 1986 *The New York Times* announced that it would use *Ms.* as an honorific alongside *Miss* and *Mrs.*”
New Terms of Address/ Titles That Emerged With 2nd Wave Feminism

• Feminist innovations regularly get “redefined and often depoliticized” when people in the larger community use them.

• The parts of the meaning of words that are “ideologically” important remain: married/ single for women or male/ female distinction

New Terms of Address/ Titles That Emerged With 2nd Wave Feminism

• Changes in how women are addressed and referred to in public (and in private)
• The “girls” in the office
• Lady vs woman compared to gentleman vs man
  • Act like a lady
  • Act like a gentleman
  • Act like a man
  • Act like a woman
Additional Words To Consider: Compare These Sets of Terms:

- Sir / Ma’am
- tomboy and sissy
- career woman; career man
- lady and gentleman
- working mom; (working dad)
- stay-at-home-mom (stay-at-home-dad/ full-time dad)
- Lady president vs woman president vs man president
Additional Words To Consider:

- eligible bachelor
- paternity suit (DNA testing!)
- hen-pecked
- frigid
- maiden name

[https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/ambitious-frigid-and-frumpy-25-words-we-only-use-to-describe-wom/]
Structural Change: 3rd Personal Singular Pronoun and Feminism

- Structural language change
- The case of generic *he*
  - Someone left *his* book here.
- As compared to third-person singular gender-neutral *they*:
  - Someone left *their* book here.
• Some History about English Pronouns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>20th Century English</th>
<th>SUBJECT</th>
<th>OBJECT</th>
<th>POSSESSIVE ADJECTIVE</th>
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<td><strong>First Person</strong></td>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>me</td>
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<td>we</td>
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<td>our</td>
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<td>she, he, it, who</td>
<td>her, him, it, whom</td>
<td>her, his, its, whose</td>
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<td></td>
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<td><strong>Second Person</strong></td>
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<td>thee</td>
<td>thou</td>
<td>thy (thine)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>it, who(m)</td>
<td>its, whose</td>
<td>its, whose</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Personal Pronouns

- The World Atlas of Language Structures
- Gender Distinction in Independent Personal Pronouns
- https://wals.info/feature/44A#2/16.7/148.6
History of 3rd Person Pronouns

• The use of they from centuries ago:

  • Chaucer: “And whoso fyndeth hym out of swich blame, They wol come up”

  • Shakespeare: “God send everyone their heart’s desire.”

  • King James Bible: “So likewise shall my heauenly Father doe also vnto you, if yee from your hearts forgiue not euery one his brother their trespasses.” (Matt. 18:35)

• Also occurs in the works of Addison, Austen, Fielding, Chesterfield, Ruskin, and Scott
History of 3rd Person Pronouns

• 1850 - *He* officially became a generic pronoun by an Act of Parliament - “Words importing the masculine gender shall be deemed and taken to include females.”

• 1879: Female physicians are denied admission to the Massachusetts Medical Society on the basis that the bylaws used “he.”
History of English Pronouns


• Demonstrates that before the prescriptive grammar movement of the 18th century, singular ‘they’ was both accepted and widely used.

• Argues that the prescriptive grammarians' attack on singular ‘they’ was socially motivated and a case of androcentrism

• Review: agreement rule in English (and prescriptive rule with regard to *he*)
History of 3rd Person Pronouns

• Among the topics of language reform was a push to eliminate generic *he*

• A number of suggestions were made:
  
  • *Someone left his or her book on the table.*
  • *Someone left a book on the table.*
  • *Someone left their book on the table.*

• Linguist Mark Balhorn states: “*They* has been the default epicene (= gender-neutral) pronoun in English for some time and its statistical prominence relative to *he* in current published English is not innovation but ‘restoration.’”
MORE CHANGE: Singular Gender-Neutral *They*

• JAN. 8, 2015 - “In its 26th annual words of the year vote, the American Dialect Society voted for *they* used as a gender-neutral singular pronoun as the Word of the Year for 2015. *They* was recognized by the society for its emerging use as a pronoun to refer to a known person, often as a conscious choice by a person rejecting the traditional gender binary of *he* and *she*. 
Meet TV’s first gender non-binary character. Example of singular non-binary they as a reference for a known person. From the television series ‘Billions.’
Language Reform - Singular Gender-Neutral *They*

... it’s *Billions’* hyper-masculine perspective that makes [the] ... introduction of Taylor so mesmerizing. As played by Asia Kate Dillon (who like the character also does not identify as either gender) Taylor is a hyper-smart rising star intern at Axe Capital who disrupts hedge fund world with their unique presence (and yes “they” is the pronoun — as Taylor crisply informs a nonplussed Axelrod when they first meet).

*Entertainment on-line*, described the introduction of “james hibberd@jameshibberd February 19, 2017

http://ew.com/tv/2017/02/19/billions-non-binary-asia-kate-dillon/
Some Readings About They


History of 3rd Person Pronouns

• Captures our entire discussion of language control!

• History of the use of a form (they) being widely used

• Changed by an Act of Parliament (prescriptive grammar)

• Language reform from 2nd wave feminism

• Language reform from LGBTQ community
Sexuality, Sexual Identity, and Language Reform

• The gay community
• The LGBTQ community
  • Word substitutions
  • New words/New ideas
Sexuality, Sexual Identity, and Language Reform

- *Gay* originally meant "carefree" and "cheerful"

- In the 1960s (or much earlier), *gay* became the word of choice among homosexual men to describe their sexual orientation

- By the end of the 20th century: *gay* was used by most LGBT groups (and style guides) to refer to people with a same-sex sexual orientation
Sexuality, Sexual Identity, and Language Reform

• The term has broadened to be used as an adjective as in *the gay community*, etc.

• Around the same time, a new pejorative meaning emerged, especially among young speakers.

• “Oh, that’s so gay” meaning stupid, undesirable.

• *gay* is still used as a “term of primary potency” as in “a gay actor” (similar to “a women doctor”)

Sexuality, Sexual Identity, and Language Reform

• Similarly, *queer* used to mean "strange" or “peculiar"

• In the 19th century *queer* became a pejorative term for people with a same-sex sexual orientation
Sexuality, Sexual Identity, and Language Reform

• In the late 1980s, queer activists, began to reclaim/ re-appropriate the word

• Today, queer is a term for sexual and gender minorities who are not heterosexual or self-identified as either female or male (i.e., not cisgender)
Meaning, Labels, and Reform

- 21st Century - the word *queer* is expanding in its uses
- Now in universities, there are academic disciplines such as queer theory and queer studies
- The “queer” community argues against “binary” thinking:
  - *male* vs *female*
  - *heterosexual* vs *homosexual*
Meaning, Labels, and Reform

- New words/new ideas
  - heteronormativity
  - cis-gender (a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds to their birth sex)
  - vs
  - transgender (a person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond to their birth sex)
  - trans man and trans woman)
Verbal Hygiene and Political Correctness

- These examples of socially motivated language change/language reform
  Raise questions about who decides what terms are to be used
  What the terms mean (Who is to be the “master?”)
- Leads to a discussion of “Political Correctness”
Language Reform, Political Correctness, and Language Control

• Late 1980s - ORIGINALLY: Politically correct language was language intended to be non-offensive and inclusive for groups of people who were disadvantaged or who suffered discrimination

• Examples:
  • Special needs or mentally challenged but not retarded
  • Asian not Oriental
  • Hearing impaired or deaf but not deaf and dumb (perhaps mute)
  • Native American not Indian
Language Reform and Political Correctness

• May 1991 - commencement address at the University of Michigan, President George H.W. Bush

• “The notion of political correctness has ignited controversy across the land. And although the movement arises from the laudable desire to sweep away the debris of racism and sexism and hatred, it replaces old prejudice with new ones. It declares certain topics off-limits, certain expression off-limits, even certain gestures off-limits."
Language Reform and Political Correctness

- By the late 1990s, the term “politically correct” became pejorative and was sometimes equated with censorship.

- This meaning of PC came from conservative criticism of the “new left”.

- The change in emphasis is an important example of how language control travels from one group to another.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_correctness
Language Reform and Political Correctness:

- PC language mocked
  - womanhole cover
  - herstory
  - animal companions
Language Reform, Political Correctness, and Language Control

- By the 1990s, the conservative right not only objected but began to actively attack political correctness.

- Argued that PC language was a type of censorship and “mind-control.”
Language Reform, Political Correctness, and Language Control

- Argued that the goal of PC language was to manipulate language in order to influence people’s attitudes.

- Acted as if their language choices were less political and “value-neutral”.
Donald Trump on Political Correctness:

From one of the GOP debates in 2016

- “I think the big problem this country has is being politically correct. I’ve been challenged by so many people and I don’t, frankly, have time for total political correctness. And to be honest with you, this country doesn’t have time, either.”
Reasons for Negative Reaction to Politically Correct Language

- Desire to be “left alone” about language choices
- Discomfort with awareness of the effect that language can have on people
- Unhappy that their word choices have become politicized
- Political correctness highlights the fact that words (and language more generally) are not “neutral”
Reasons for Negative Reaction to Politically Correct Language

- The focus on specific words (by groups fighting for recognition) brings attention to several uncomfortable facts:
  - meaning is flexible (not fixed and not automatically shared by all)
  - words acquire meaning in a cultural context
  - there is a power dynamic about who decides what words mean
- We have come full circle back to Humpty Dumpty
Next Week - Another Type of Language Reform and Language Control

Language Planning and Policy