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

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Language Policy as Censorship

• Government policies that outlaw (or forbid the use of) a language can result in the “death” of the language

• This is known as linguistic genocide

• Distinguish linguistic genocide from the loss of a language that results from the genocide of the people who speak the language
Examples of Languages Censored Through Language Policy

• Cajun English and French were banned in southern Louisiana, until about the early 1970s.

• The Catalan language in Spain (which is now having a huge resurgence)

• Ukraine banned Greek. (Greek had been an official minority language in Ukraine where there was a Greek diaspora community)
Examples of Languages Censored Through Language Policy

• Russia (the Soviet Union) banned everything but Russian: Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Georgian, Armenian, Azeri and all the other languages

• Japan tried to ban Korean (by large Korean population) and impose Japanese

• In Singapore, English was preferred to Singlish (an English-based creole language - Malaysian, Chinese and English)
Examples of Languages Censored Through Language Policy

• The use of Kurdish was forbidden in Turkey after 1980 military coup until 1991

• In many places, at one time or another, the use of sign languages of the deaf was banned

• http://listverse.com/2010/02/26/10-modern-cases-of-linguistic-genocide/
Welsh - Banned and Restored

• Cymraeg, (Welsh) may be as much as 4000 years old - one of the oldest living languages in Europe

• Welsh comes from the Celtic language - spoken by the ancient Britons

• Through recorded history, Welsh has been spoken in Wales
Welsh - Banned and Restored

• When the English took over Wales, Welsh was banned

• 1535 – 1542: “The Laws in Wales Acts” made English the only language allowed in public

• By 1911 Welsh was a minority language (spoken by 43.5 % of the population)
Welsh - Banned and Restored

• Early 1960s: grass-roots movement to restore use of Welsh

• 1992 / 1993: “The Welsh Language Bill” made Welsh equal to English in all public places

• Today: there are two official languages in Wales – English and Welsh.

• Today, between 20 - 25% of the population of Wales speak Welsh
Measuring Types of Language Censorship

- **Extreme** wide-reaching: Governments outlawing languages
- **Medium** (“Word”) censorship: Broadcast industry; School Boards; Publishing industry (Children’s literature)
- **Narrow**: Families, e.g., forbidding the use of certain words at home
Types of Language Censorship

- Government censorship
- Broadcast / media censorship
- Prescriptivism and “Language Police”
- Politically correct language
- Taboo words and topics vs censored
Questions About Language Censorship

- What does it mean to censor language?
- Is it the same as controlling language?
- What are the purposes of censoring language? (*Whose* purposes are they?)
- Does censoring language serve the intended purpose?
Questions About Language Censorship

• Should languages ever be censored?
• Should any part of a language be censored?
• Should certain words be censored? Or certain types of language?
• Who should decide? Who should do the censoring?
Defining Censorship: Is This Really About Language?

- Definition of censorship
  - the suppression or prohibition of any parts of books, films, news, etc. that are considered obscene, politically unacceptable, or a threat to security.

- Our discussion is **linguistic** - about words - **not** a discussion about laws or the content of books
Language Censorship by Institution

- Government (NOT referring to different types of information censorship around the world)
- Religious institutions
- Educational institutions
- Broadcast / Entertainment Industry
- Media (print and social media)
- Families
Language Censorship: Government

• Do you think censoring language is a violation of the first amendment?

• Under the law, there are nine general categories of speech that are NOT protected under the First Amendment
Speech Not Protected by 1st Amendment

- Obscenity
- Fighting words (words which "by their very utterance, inflict injury or tend to incite an immediate breach of the peace.")
- Defamation (including libel and slander)
- Child pornography
- Perjury
- Blackmail
- Incitement to imminent lawless action
- True threats
- Solicitations to commit crimes
Language Censorship: Government

• **Hate speech is not regulated** (= speech that attacks a person or group based on race, religion, ethnic or national origin, sex, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc.)

• **2017 - The U.S. Supreme Court ruled** that hate speech is legally protected under the First Amendment
Language Censorship: Government

- **Treasonous speech** is **not** regulated (unless used to incite others to violence)

- **BUT**

- **Plagiarism** (of copyrighted material) **IS** regulated (using someone else’s words)
Language Censorship - Religious Institutions

• Most examples are related to the content of what is said more than the specific words

• Also true of religious censorship

• Different for different religious but generally: Blasphemy is defined as “the act or offense of speaking sacrilegiously about a god or sacred things”

• In some religions, the name of god cannot be uttered (= taboo)
Language Censorship - Educational Institutions


- Banning or Censoring books

- Distinguish between:
  - Banning past books
  - Changing the words (rewriting) of existing or previously published books
  - Reforming (policing?) future books
Language Censorship - Educational Institutions

• Should language be censored in order to protect children from certain types of language - certain topics?

• Language of sexuality?

• Language associated with violence?

• Does exposure to “offensive” language harm children?
“He was a mighty good African American man of color and celebrant of Kwanzaa, Jim was,” said Huckleberry.
Language Censorship - Educational Institutions

• “The goal of the language police is not just to stop us [our children] from using objectionable words but to stop us from having objectionable thoughts.” …” (Ravitch, 2003:158)

• Guarding / Censoring:
  • What teachers can talk about
  • What children can say
  • What topics are covered in texts
  • What literature can be read
Language Censorship - Educational Institutions

• Is it possible that it is the censoring of language that harms children?

• Opinions on children and censorship are difficult to change

• As attitudes change, language use associated with various topics also changes
  
  • For example, words related to sexual reproduction used to be taboo. With “Sex Ed” this has changed
Language Censorship - Broadcast and Entertainment Industry

• What can and cannot be said on the air

• Indecency (protected by the 1st amendment for adults) is distinguished from Obscenity (=pornography) which is not protected
Language Censorship - Broadcast and Entertainment Industry

- Broadcast Decency Enforcement Act of 2005
- The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) defined indecency in the broadcast industries as:
  - “language or material that, in context, depicts or describes, in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium, sexual or excretory organs or activities.”
Language Censorship - Broadcast and Entertainment Industry

• The seven dirty words are seven English-language words that American comedian George Carlin first listed in 1972 in his monologue "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television"

• The original seven words are:
  • shit
  • piss
  • fuck
  • cunt
  • cocksucker
  • motherfucker
  • tits
Language Censorship - Broadcast and Entertainment Industry

- Obscene language is one of the factors that is considered in Movie ratings:
  - General
  - Parental Guidance
  - PG-13
  - R

- Not just words but context in which the words are used. Is the context sexual or is it just a “sexual” word that is being used?
Language Censorship - Print and Social Media

• Decisions about what to print / what to display (what can be used) are made by:
  • corporate board policies
  • publishers
  • local and federal governments
Language Censorship - Families

- Obscene ("bad") language (again) receives the most attention when it comes to family-based censorship.

- Goes back to "taboo" topics:
  - Most taboo topics in US society are:
    - sex
    - bodily functions
    - religious beliefs (being an atheist is taboo!)
Controlling/ Censoring Language and Controlling Thought

- Distinguish censoring language with culturally taboo topics
- Taboo topics are things we know about, think about but are not supposed to “talk” about
  - Incest
  - Sex
  - Bodily functions
  - Until recently - child abuse/ sexual abuse
Controlling/ Censoring Language and Controlling Thought

- *Categories* of words (expressions) that people or organizations often try to censor are:
  - “Bad” grammar
  - Slang
  - Obscenities (related to taboo topics)
  - Language related to sexuality
  - Politically charged language
  - Religious language
Controlling/ Censoring Language and Controlling Thought

- Is censoring or controlling language related to controlling thought?
- Relation between language and thought
- Policing Language (Children’s literature)
Censoring Language and Controlling Thought

• People think that if words aren’t used, the words (and ideas) might disappear

• Does outlawing (or censoring) words change how people think?

• Language reform suggests that it can (new words for new ideas)
Explaining Language Censorship

- Language allows us to organize the universe around us
- Does the language we speak influence or restrict how we think?
- Sapir-Whorf hypothesis
Language Censorship and Politically Correct Language

- Review discussion of “politically correct” language
- What is its purpose?
- Are suggestions for politically correct language:
  - about language?
  - about social policy?
  - about censorship?
Language Censorship and Politically Correct Language

- Definitions from two on-line dictionaries:
  - “the avoidance, often considered as taken to extremes, of forms of expression or action that are perceived to exclude, marginalize, or insult groups of people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against.”
  - “conforming to a belief that language and practices which could offend political sensibilities (as in matters of sex or race) should be eliminated”
Language Censorship and Politically Correct Language

What do you think of:

- Bias-free speech codes?
- Non-sexist language guidelines?
- Language reform in relation to social movements?
Language Censorship and Politically Correct Language

• Critique of politically correct language is that it is a type of censorship.
• But this is not about language.
• The objection is that politically correct stances “manipulate language and shape attitudes.”
• BUT those who object also want to shape attitudes.
Language Censorship and Political Language

• Consider these examples of the language surrounding political conflict:

• Are these examples of language censorship or using language for persuasion?

• right to life / pro-choice
• family values / non-traditional family
• gun rights/ gun control
• deregulating / removing protections
Language, Censorship, and Change

Language like social life, is not static or fixed.

• “..we need to ask, case by case, what is really offensive, what is appropriate verbal license, when informality is useful, and whose sensitivities have a right to be respected.”

Battistella, (2005:100)
Language Control
And Language Change
REMEMBER FROM FIRST DAY OF CLASS:

- We will observe two surprising facts:
  1. Whenever people and institutions try to control language (even attempts to stop language from changing), the efforts ultimately contribute to
  - Language change (and changes in the way we use language)
“The modification of forms of LANGUAGE over a period of time and/or physical distance.”

Changes can affect any part of a language.

Change can take place in pronunciation, orthography, grammar, usage or vocabulary.
Language Change - Defined:

- Language change is always taking place.
- English has undergone more dramatic change than many other major European languages.
- OLD ENGLISH or ANGLO-SAXON is not accessible to the modern English speaker.
When people notice changes in the language around them, their reactions are often negative. There are often conscious attempts to stop language from changing. Attempts to control language are often the result of trying to stop language from changing.
FROM FIRST DAY OF CLASS:

• We will observe two surprising facts:

2. When people and institutions try to control language, they think they are acting on issues pertaining to language. In fact, they are often motivated by

• Beliefs, ideologies, or assumptions that have broad social significance
Controlling Language

- These beliefs, ideologies, and assumptions are:
  - About language use, language form, and communication
  - ALSO about people, social groups, and political topics that are difficult to comment on or criticize directly
Controlling Language

In this course we examined a variety of linguistic phenomena that are related to “controlling language” and explored the interplay among these forces.
Additional Topics Related to Language Control

• Language Practices that Take Control of Us:
  • emailing, texting, tweeting, blogging, cable news, sound-bites, world news in 20 minutes

• Language of Propaganda:
  • political slogans, “framing,” Trump
Bibliography:

- 1995. *Verbal Hygiene*. (Reissued 2012.) Deborah Cameron